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THE FORGOTTEN TERRACOTTA WARRIORS OF JURONG

— p. 04 —

Director's Note

It's a good bet that not many people remember Tang Dynasty City but at one point in the 1990s, it was a big thing in the press. A unique combination of theme park and movie studio, it promised to transport people back to the golden age of China's Tang dynasty. Sadly, it failed to move anyone to visit the theme park itself and had to shut down, but it was a brave attempt at doing something different.

Speaking of doing something different, it's interesting to see that non-fiction graphic works are gaining ground in Singapore. I'm glad that Singaporean creators are finding new ways to tell Singapore stories.

One Singapore story that hasn't really been told is about our various neighbourhoods. We tend to take these for granted, and except for old estates, we assume that the newer ones don't have much of a history. That's not true, of course. A spanking new town like Sengkang – once known as Kangkar – has a pretty interesting past based around a fisheries port that used to be there.

Changi, on the other hand, is a place that a lot of people think they know about, especially when it comes to the war. Mention Changi and you'll think of Changi Prison, Changi Chapel and Museum, and the prisoners-of-war incarcerated there during the Japanese Occupation, but few people will think of concerts. Our piece on musically inclined civilian internees in Changi spills the tea on how they held regular concerts there and will hopefully give you a new perspective on an old story.

Tea, by the way, is also the focus of one of our stories. Chugging bubble tea is a modern fad, but tea-drinking has much older roots. If you read our piece, you'll find a fascinating story about how tea culture in Singapore has changed over the decades.

These are just some of the highlights in the latest issue of *BiblioAsia*. We shed (red)light on the history of Geylang, we have a piece on the evolution of Singapore's coat of arms and we have Lee Kuan Yew's account of the days leading up to 9 August 1965, as he himself experienced it. The last two are particularly good reads for National Day!

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On the cover
Replicas of Emperor Qin Shi Huang's terracotta warriors at Tang Dynasty City, 2000. *Source: The Straits Times © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.*

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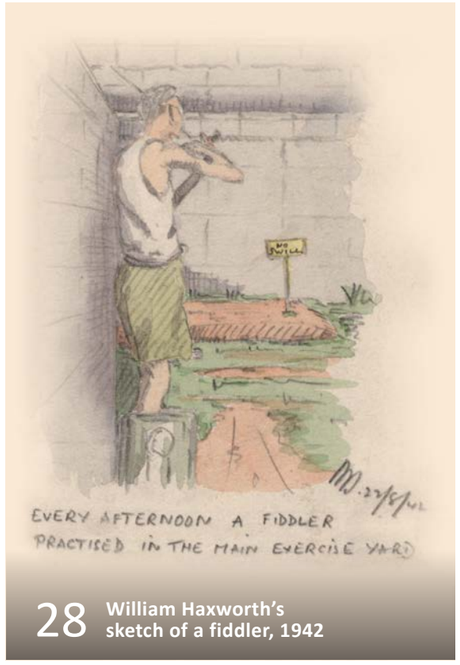

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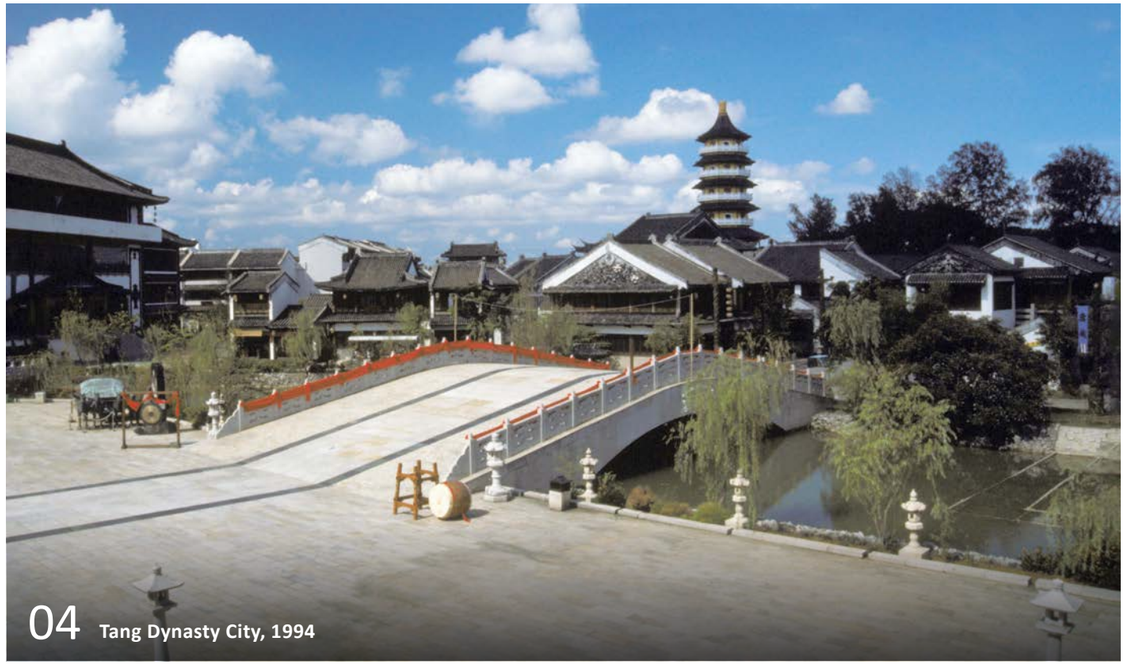
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Image credits, clockwise from top left: W.R.M. Haxworth Collection, National Archives of Singapore; Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, National Archives of Singapore; Jimmy Yap; National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board; Tea Chapter; The College of Arms.

Replicas such as the Wild Goose Pagoda and Zhao Zhou Bridge were central to the park's efforts to recreate the aesthetic of Chang'an, 1994. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 19990001380 - 0059).*

An Ancient Chinese City in Jurong

Flying swordsmen, terracotta warriors and famous TV stars once captivated visitors at the former Tang Dynasty City.

By Lim Tin Seng

Lim Tin Seng is a Senior Librarian with the National Library Singapore. He is the co-editor of *Roots: Tracing Family Histories – A Resource Guide* (2013), *Harmony and Development: ASEAN-China Relations* (2009) and *China's New Social Policy: Initiatives for a Harmonious Society* (2010). He writes regularly for *BiblioAsia*.

On a sweltering afternoon on 12 January 1992, thousands of visitors flocked to the western end of Singapore to watch swashbuckling heroes rescue fair maidens from danger. There, adjacent to the serene Jurong Lake on the former site of Jurong Drive-In Cinema stood the massive, grey-brick ramparts of Tang Dynasty Village, a 12-hectare project that aimed to replicate the ancient imperial city of Chang'an (modern day Xi'an) in Singapore. (Chang'an was the capital city of the Tang dynasty, 618–907.)[1]

Dubbed "Singapore's own Disneyland" by the *Straits Times*, the theme park-cum-movie studio – which was the size of 17 football fields – greeted eager visitors with replicas of landmarks from the old Chinese capital. These included the Daming Palace (the former home of 17 emperors), the Zhao Zhou Bridge (an arch bridge spanning the Jiao River in Heibei) and the Wild Goose Pagoda (a Buddhist pagoda to house sutras and figurines).[2]

Singapore's "Hollywood" Ambitions

Tang Dynasty Village was the brainchild of Hong Kong tycoon Deacon Chiu Te-ken, chairman of Asia Television (ATV) and founder of investment firm Far East Consortium. His vision came at a time when major players like Shaw Brothers and Cathay Organisation had moved away from film production to focus on other aspects such as cinema distribution and broadcasting.[3]

The groundbreaking ceremony for Tang Dynasty Village led by Philip Yeo, chairman of the Economic Development Board (extreme left), on 21 February 1989. Deacon Chiu, chairman of Asia Television and founder of Far East Consortium, is on the extreme right. *Source: Lianhe Zaobao © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.*

Chiu envisioned establishing not just one but three movie studios within the theme park, with the intention of jointly producing Chinese serials with the then Singapore Broadcasting Corporation (SBC). He was confident that Singapore would have the necessary talent to support a Chinese movie industry like Hong Kong. "You have got to begin somewhere. Of course there are risks, like when I first started a cinema in the New Territories [in Hong Kong] and they all said nobody will go, but gradually people did," he told the *Straits Times*. The movie studio concept was a primary factor that helped him secure the 1988 tender by the Jurong Town Corporation to develop the site.[4]

According to Philip Yeo, chairman of the Economic Development Board, the joint venture between SBC and ATV would "set the stage for the growth of [Singapore's] indigenous movie industry". The goal was to acquire both physical infrastructure and technical expertise in related specialised fields. "For the successful development of a movie industry, support industries such as film-processing labs, sound studios and post-production houses would have to be set up," he said.[5]

At the time, in the 1980s, Singapore had "no local film industry to speak of" except for several small production houses that worked mainly on advertising commercials and commissioned documentaries. There was also a severe shortage of technical expertise as "only a handful of Singaporeans [were] equipped to stand behind a movie camera or direct a film". "Becoming a film centre," the *Business Times* noted, "would mean rare jobs and training opportunities, a certain amount of technology transfer and potentially more business for the hotel and tourist industries."[6]

Chiu was fully aware of the financial risks of his investment in Jurong. His strategy was to integrate entertainment and the movie studios into a sprawling theme park.[7]

Terracotta warriors and performers at Tang Dynasty Village, c. 1990s. *Collection of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.*

Visitors to the theme park in its early days, 1993. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 19990001380 - 0002).*

An Architectural Grandeur

Chiu spared no expense to recreate the city of Chang'an. "Details are very important," he said. "I want the Tang Dynasty Village to be the best Chinese theme park in the world, so everything must be perfect."[8]

Construction was a massive undertaking that relied heavily on traditional Chinese craftsmanship and genuine building materials. The project required shipping millions of items from China, including granite slabs, slates, glazed roof tiles and jade-coloured eaves to ensure that the buildings looked "as authentic as possible".[9]

The quest for realism even extended to the landscape, with flora native to China such as willow trees being transplanted here to mimic the scenery of a typical Tang-era village. To create the famous underground tomb of Emperor Qin Shi Huang's terracotta army, replica life-size figures of chariots, horses and foot soldiers were imported.[10]

Given the meticulous attention to detail and the logistical strain of acquiring specialised materials from overseas, the project's budget ballooned from $50 million to $70 million by 1989 before reaching a staggering $90 million by the time its gates opened in 1992.[11]

Marketing Blitz

As early as August 1989, a representative of the park joined a trade mission to the United States led by the Singapore Tourist Promotion Board (today's Singapore Tourism Board). By the end of 1991, the park was marketing itself in travel fairs in Europe, Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Southeast Asian countries. Chiu had high expectations for the theme park. He aimed to recoup his investment within seven years as well as attract at least one million visitors annually, increasing by 5 percent each year.[12]

To entice visitors to spend more than a day in the park, Chiu revealed in December 1989 that he was planning to add a 250-room hotel within the theme park, though this did not materialise in the end.[13] And what would a theme park be without retail shops? In 1991, department store Metro announced that it would be setting up an 8,000 sq ft shop in the park to sell high-end items such as porcelain, paintings, silk wear, and wood and bronze carvings, which opened in January 1992.[14]

To promote the filmmaking facilities, Chiu set up Tang Dynasty Village Motion Pictures in June 1989 and announced his intention to make at least three movies a year "depending on the type of scripts we receive". Filmmakers were

approached, with Eric Tsang, a well-known Hong Kong actor and director, among the first to respond. "Singapore is the next best place to start a movie industry. There is a Chinese community here, so no problems getting extras. Films made here can be marketed to both China and Taiwan. And there is practically no competition here because we would be the pioneers," he said.[15]

In July 1989, SBC announced that it would film its new sword-fighting serial, *Legend of a Beauty*, in Tang Dynasty Village. Starring Hong Kong actress Michelle Yim alongside local stars such as Chen Liping and Chen Tianwen, the production was a milestone as it was one of the first local serials to cast a prominent foreign artiste in a lead role.[16]

Off to a Flying Start

Tang Dynasty Village opened to much fanfare on 12 January 1992 with 5,000 visitors, beating the record of 4,000 held by Haw Par Villa in 1991.[17] (Tang Dynasty Village was renamed Tang Dynasty City the following month.[18])

The "flying" swordsmen stunt show was a crowd favourite, 1999. *Source: The Straits Times © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.*

Visitors were entertained by stunt and dance troupes from China, artisans demonstrating the making of Chinese pottery, ceramics and woodcarvings, and reenactments depicting both imperial court life and the everyday struggles of people in the Tang dynasty. These included a mock trial where an offender was beaten by court officials as well as the scene of an emperor welcoming the return of a victorious general.[19]

These daily performances won praises from visitors who paid a $15 entrance fee for adults and $10 for children, which many found "steep" since some attractions were not yet opened. For most, the highlight was the "flying" swordsmen stunt show. Crowds gasped as heroes battled in midair, skimming the surface of the river effortlessly and gliding through the sky, suspended by cable. "It's better than a *gongfu* movie, and there are no nets below, too," said insurance agent John Joseph.[20]

"The costumes, loud gongs and drums make me feel as if I've stepped back in time," said teacher C. Goh. For housewife Alita Abdullah, "It's like being in ancient China!" Even guest of honour Lim Boon Heng, Senior Minister of State for Trade and Industry, joined in the festivities. Picking up a pole used in the mock trial, he quipped: "I'm sure Professor Jayakumar [Minister for Law and Home Affairs] would be interested in taking a look at this!" Jokes aside, Lim said that the "village testified to the effectiveness of the Hong Kong-Singapore twinning concept". "It is the result of the merger of the best talent from both cities."[21]

In September 1992, the well-known Hong Kong filmmaker and actor Raymond Wong revealed that he would be filming one of his upcoming movies at the theme park in November. Titled *Hua Tian Xi Shi* (*All's Well, Ends Well Too*), the comedy flick starred some of the biggest Hong Kong artistes at the time such as Sam Hui, Ricky Hui, Leslie Cheung and Rosamund Kwan.[22]

After this movie, Wong filmed another in 1993: a spoof of the Chinese classic *Water Margin* titled *Shui Hu Xiao Zhuan* (*Laughter of the Water Margins*). Apart from Sam Hui and Ricky Hui from the first movie, the second also featured big names like Teresa Mo and Lydia Sum.[23]

But It Did Not End Well

While the high-profile movies and grand opening generated significant media buzz and publicity, these failed to translate into a steady stream of visitors. In its first year, Tang Dynasty City attracted only 800,000 visitors, falling short of its one-million annual target. From there, the numbers entered a steep year-on-year decline, plummeting to just 400,000 visitors by 1995, three years after opening. This was a far cry from other more popular attractions in Singapore at the time, such as the Singapore Zoo, Sentosa's Underwater World and the Jurong Bird Park, which were all drawing over one million visitors annually.[24]

By October 1993, the *Business Times* reported that the park had already registered a $2 million loss during its opening year, prompting the paper to question if the park could remain sustainable since it appeared to have "more concrete than charm". "Everything looked good on paper but when they materialised, the parks were a disappointment most of the time," said tour operator Matthew Pillay. "They had various activities when they started which later fizzled out. The parks eventually became run-of-the-mill."[25]

Clarence Cheung, general manager of Tang Dynasty City, believed that the dismal visitor numbers stemmed from Singaporeans' preference for shopping and eating instead of Chinese theme parks. "We didn't get as many locals in the first year as we had hoped for," he said. Cheung surmised that Singaporeans have little knowledge of China and are less appreciative of things Chinese, and hoped to change this mindset through educational public talks. He added that the entrance fees were lower than those charged by theme parks in other countries. "It's not the $15 that matters to Singaporeans but what they get out of the $15," he said. "So we have to make sure they get value for their money."[26]

This struggle also extended to the park's aspiration to become the "Hollywood" of Singapore. Following Raymond Wong's films, major productions at the site became increasingly rare although SBC did utilise the park to promote the serial, *The Great Conspiracy*, in 1993. The site was also reportedly shortlisted in 1996 as a filming location for the Malayalam film, *Varnappakittu*, and was eventually used for *House of Harmony* in 2004, a joint Singapore-Germany production starring Hong Kong actress Maggie Q and local actress Fann Wong.[27]

A primary factor that impeded the city's success as a film studio was its architectural inflexibility.

(Top) The pair of stone lions at the entrance of Tang Dynasty City. Photo was taken in 2000, a year after its closure, when the lions were put up for auction. *Source: The Straits Times © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.*

(Above) Replicas of traditional Chinese houses, 1993. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 19990001379 - 0101).*

The Chang'an-style buildings were too historically specific, offering a narrow aesthetic that was suitable only for movies set within that singular era. Furthermore, the site lacked the comprehensive ecosystem required by major filmmakers. It could not provide essential production and broadcast infrastructure such as film-processing labs, sound stages, or even onsite accommodation for cast and crew. Without these integrated facilities, the park remained nothing but a picturesque backdrop rather than a functional, self-sustaining movie studio.[28]

Even the park owners recognised that its concept was not working. Dennis Chiu, the son of Deacon Chiu and the park's managing director,

A reenactment of a court trial in ancient China, 1993. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 19990001379 - 0118).*

admitted that it was "not doing well" and required urgent diversification. He pinpointed that the problem could be the fact that the park was too "faithful to the original and became a one-track theme park". Although the reception was initially "overwhelming", it quickly became irrelevant when China opened its doors to the world shortly after. "Since people could go to China to see the real thing, they did not feel the urge to see Tang Dynasty City, which was just a replica," he said.[29]

In 1995, to breathe new life into the park, admission fees were waived during the evening and new offerings were introduced to transform the experience. These included food pushcarts, restaurants, a bar, a karaoke lounge, a Cantopop discotheque and a 1920s Shanghai-style cinema that screened classical Chinese movies. The park's shows were also revamped to encourage audience participation, while exhibits were redesigned to include special effects.[30]

In 1996, when the Underground Palace featuring 2,000 terracotta warriors opened, it featured a film show about the life of Qin Shi Huang, a laser game where visitors could shoot down life-size monsters and demons, and even earthquake effects.[31]

However, these attempts could not turn the tide. By December 1996, Admiralty Investment Holdings had acquired a 65 percent stake in the park for $47 million. The new owners planned to enhance the Chinese theme of the park by building a Chinese-style hotel; organising more cultural events, street shows and martial arts performances; bringing in exotic foods from different parts of China; and holding classes in traditional Chinese arts and crafts. "Visitors must feel that they are whisked 1,300 years back into an ancient Chinese city with people in period costumes and activities of that time," said Bernard Kwek, chief executive of Admiralty Investment Holdings. To attract more Singaporeans and incentivise them to make repeat visits, admission fees for locals were reduced from $15 to $12. There were even plans to make the hotel a "one-stop traditional Chinese wedding centre" where couples could wed in a traditional Chinese ceremony.[32]

These efforts did little to improve the woes of the park. The situation was exacerbated by the onset of the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, which caused major disruptions to the economy and a sharp drop in tourism. In August 1999, Admiralty was forced into judicial management with $62 million in debt. A month later, on 22 September, the shutters came down permanently on Tang Dynasty City: it barely lasted eight years.[33]

Becoming an Urban Memory

For nearly a decade thereafter, the 12-hectare site sat in a state of disrepair and was described as "an eyesore" and "a waste of space and money". Discussions to revive the site, which included a Shaolin-themed resort, did not materialise. Eventually, the theme park was demolished in 2009.[34]

Today, the site of the former Tang Dynasty City is entering a new chapter. As part of the Jurong Lake District, it is being developed into a housing estate by the Housing and Development Board. While the grey bricks and terracotta warriors are no more, the legacy of Tang Dynasty City is preserved in the ephemera and photograph collections of the National Library (https://www.nlb.gov.sg/main/nlonline) and National Archives of Singapore (https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/) as well as in the collective memory of a generation of Singaporeans who once visited the theme park. ♦

Replicas of Emperor Qin Shi Huang's terracotta warriors were highlights of the theme park. Photo was taken in 2000, a year after its closure, when they were put up for auction. *Source: The Straits Times © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.*

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FROM COMICS TO CULTURE
GRAPHIC NON-FICTION IN SINGAPORE

Graphic non-fiction has become increasingly mainstream in recent years thanks to a growing community of local writers and illustrators who are pushing the boundaries of their craft.

By Felix Cheong

Felix Cheong is the bestselling author of 32 books, including nine graphic novels. Conferred the Young Artist Award in 2000 by the National Arts Council, Felix has been invited to writers' festivals all over the world. He holds a masters in creative writing and is currently a university adjunct lecturer.

Comics in Singapore have long been associated with adventure stories featuring superheroes such as Pluto-man and Captain V, the zany antics of Mr Kiasu or the *manhua* (漫画; Chinese-language comics) series produced by Asiapac Books that draw on Chinese *wuxia* (swordfighting) classics and mythology.[1] In recent years, however, a quieter, more reflective form has been gaining ground: graphic non-fiction, often defined as long-form non-fiction stories told through sequential art. These works not only combine illustration and text to tell real-life stories, but also delve into historical events and figures. They show that comics can do more than merely entertain – they can also inform, provoke and preserve memory.

This growth in the production and consumption of graphic non-fiction is part of a worldwide phenomenon. In 2024, sales of comics and graphic novels in the United States and Canada reached around US$1.94 billion, an increase of 4 percent from US$1.87 billion in 2023. A 2024 article in the *New York Times* highlighted that one in four books sold in France was a graphic novel, which included non-fiction works published by journalists and historians.[2] Locally, the Singapore Book Awards and the Singapore Literature Prize now have a category just for comics and graphic novels.

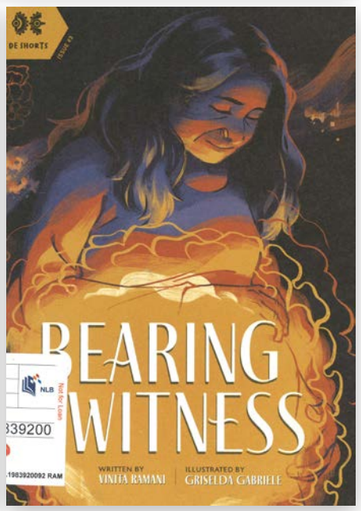
University presses are jumping on the bandwagon too, publishing graphic history books to appeal to a wider readership.[3] Even something as dense as the 448-page Mueller Report – an investigation conducted by special counsel Robert S. Mueller into Russian interference in the 2016 US Presidential Election – has been surprisingly adapted into two graphic non-fiction books, by the *Washington Post* in 2019, and Shannon Wheeler and Steve Duin in 2020.[4]

(Facing page and below) This book by Felix Cheong focuses on the years between 1959 and 1966 when Finance Minister Goh Keng Swee set up Jurong Industrial Park. *Images reproduced from Felix Cheong, Goh Keng Swee: A Singaporean for All Seasons (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Editions, 2023). (From National Library Singapore, call no. RSING 959.5705092 CHE).*

The main reason for this publishing trend: accessibility. In an age when people are reading less, the graphic novel form – with its multimodal interplay of visuals and text – is more appealing and helps readers to process and digest complex information faster. This was why when Singapore's Ministry of Foreign Affairs wanted to commemorate Singapore's 60th anniversary of independence in 2025, it commissioned Nutgraf Books to come up with a book that blends comics from Cheah Sinann and prose instead of the usual coffee table tome. Edited by Peh Shing Huei, *Not So Little Red Dot: 60 Years of Singapore's Diplomacy* debuted in the *Straits Times* bestsellers list at number one.[5]

(Below) Weng Pixin weaves together stories of five generations of women from her family tree. *Images reproduced from Weng Pixin, Let's Not Talk Anymore (Montréal, Québec: Drawn & Quarterly, 2021). (From National Library Singapore, call no. RSING 741.595957 PIX).*

(Bottom) Vinita Ramani retells her and her family's experience with the pregnancy loss of her second child. *Images reproduced from Vinita Ramani, Bearing Witness (Singapore: Difference Engine, 2022). (From National Library Singapore, call no. RSING 362.1983920092 RAM).*



The corpus of graphic non-fiction books published in Singapore has been growing over the years. Some revisit historical events, drawing on archival sources or oral histories; others turn inward, chronicling personal experiences; still others use comics to report and document changing social norms. What follows is a working typology of three categories of graphic non-fiction, with a few representative examples. This list is by no means exhaustive.

Graphic Memoir

A graphic memoir is similar to a written memoir, except that the narrative is rendered in comic form, often written and illustrated by the artist himself. This is probably the most accessible mode, since creators largely draw on their life experiences, providing sharp insights that resonate immediately with readers. Two illustrators are prominent in this subgenre.

Andrew Tan is a freelance illustrator and an Eisner-nominated comic artist who writes under the pseudonym Drewscape. While his 2012 book, *Monsters, Miracles & Mayonnaise* (Epigram Books) has some autobiographical elements, it is occasionally fictional, with touches of magic realism. *The Ollie Comics: Diary of a First-Time Dad* (Drewscape, 2017) is more in the vein of a traditional memoir. In a series of short comics, often funny and relatable, Tan recounts the trials and tribulations of being a first-time father, such as doing night feeds and changing diapers.[6]

What if you chronicle almost everything that happens to you, no matter how significant or minor it is? This was what the 2011 National Arts Council's Young Artist award recipient, Troy Chin, set out to do in nine volumes of *The Resident Tourist* (Math Paper Press, 2007–17). Be it his time in national service, dealing with his family, the demands of his job or love life, Chin was ever ready to record it in his trademark deadpan humour. Navel-gazing? Perhaps. Honest? Definitely. Little wonder he has confessed to losing friends as a result of his bare-all approach.[7]

Of late, more female-centric graphic memoirs have also found their way into the bookstore. There is the very moving *Bearing Witness* by Vinita Ramani, with artwork by Griselda Gabriele (Difference Engine, 2022), in which Ramani delves deep into the trauma of losing her second child.[8]

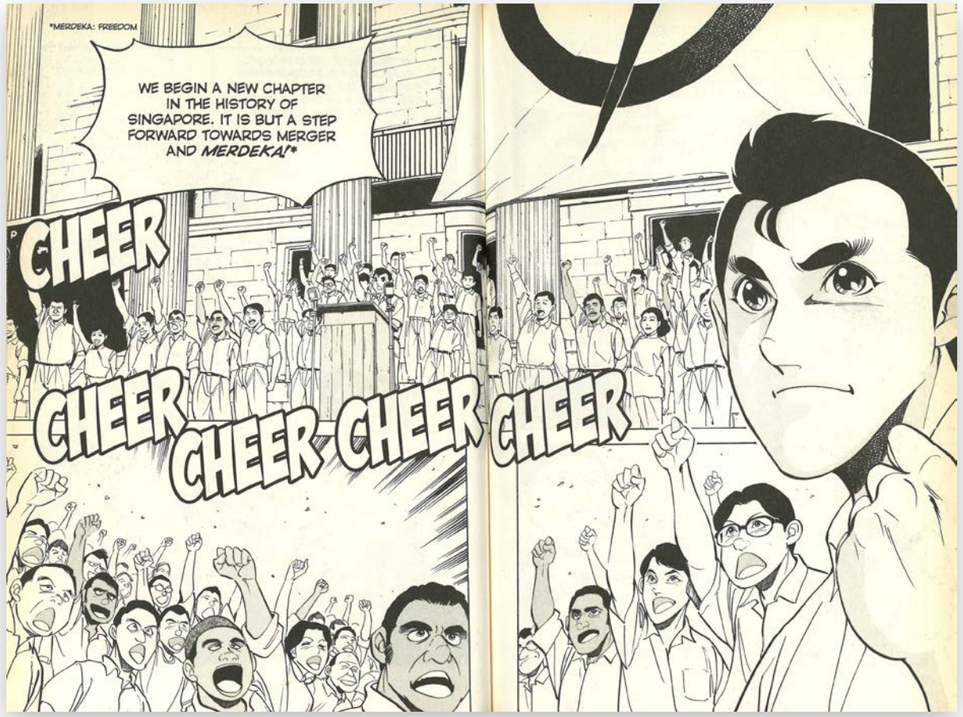
In *Let's Not Talk Anymore* (Drawn & Quarterly, 2021), Weng Pixin weaves together stories of five generations of women from her family tree (including herself and a fictional future daughter).[9] On the lighter side, there is *How to Date a Dozen Men* (Epigram Books, 2023), which chronicles Gen-Z writer-illustrator Samara Gan's (mis)adventures in the dating game.[10]

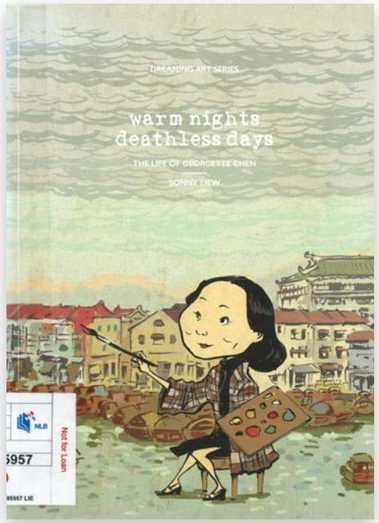
Other notable titles in this subgenre include Joseph Chiang's *Chronicles of a Circuit Breaker* (Epigram Books, 2021) and Asher Ong's *BMT Sketchbook* (Landmark Books, 2023). Chiang documents life during the two months between April and June 2020 when Singapore entered a "circuit breaker" as a result of Covid-19. Ong's book, winner of the Best Illustrated Non-Fiction Title at the Singapore Book Awards 2025, captures the experiences and moments of his Basic Military Training (BMT) on Pulau Tekong.[11]

Graphic Biography

Another strand of graphic non-fiction adapts the scope and ambition of biography, depicting real lives (or lives inspired by real contexts) in graphic novel form. This might sometimes involve

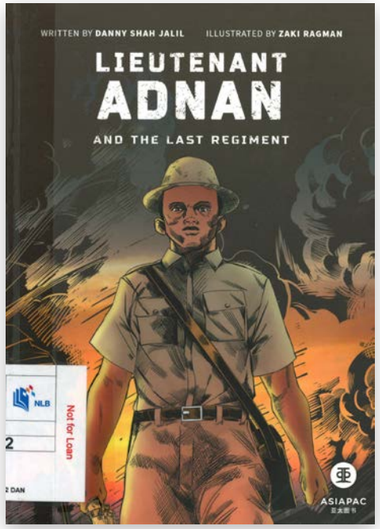
This graphic biography of the first prime minister of Singapore Lee Kuan Yew is drawn in manga style (Japanese comics). *Image reproduced from Yoshio Nabeta and Toshiki Takii, Lee Kuan Yew: Road to Independence (Singapore: Shogakukan Asia Pte Ltd, 2017). (From National Library Singapore, call no. RSING 959.5705092 NAB).*





(Left) This comic celebrates the legacy of one of Singapore's most prominent pioneering artists Georgette Chen. It is illustrated in a soft, milky palette. *Images reproduced from Sonny Liew, Warm Nights, Deathless Days: The Life of Georgette Chen (Singapore: National Gallery Singapore, 2014). (From National Library Singapore, call no. RSING 741.595957 LIE).*

(Below left) The contributions of Lieutenant Adnan Saidi of the Malay Regiment during the Japanese Occupation are captured in this comic. *Images reproduced from Danny Shah Jalil and Zaki Ragman, Lieutenant Adnan and the Last Regiment (Singapore: Asiapac Books Pte Ltd, 2017). (From National Library Singapore, call no. RSING 355.0092 DAN).*



including *Lim Bo Seng: Singapore's Best-Known War Hero* (1998); *Stamford Raffles: Founder of Modern Singapore* (2002); and *Tan Kah Kee: Entrepreneur Par Excellence* (2023).[12]

While the quality of the writing is uneven, often just by-the-numbers checkpoints of the person's life, there are exceptions such as the other two books: *Lieutenant Adnan and the Last Regiment* (2017) and *Elizabeth Choy: Her Story* (2020), both written by Danny Shah Jalil and illustrated by Zaki Ragman. They attempt to get under the skin of the person and narrate the story from their perspective, giving it an interiority, a depth of subjectivity often missing from a third-person standpoint. Adnan Saidi and the Malay Regiment fought the Japanese soldiers on Bukit Chandu and were captured and tortured, while Elizabeth Choy suffered 200 days of starvation and torture for her suspected involvement in the Double Tenth Incident.[13] The incident refers to the arrest and torture on 10 October 1943 of 57 civilians and Changi camp internees whom the Japanese suspected of being responsible for the damage of seven Japanese shipping vessels in Singapore waters; 15 died.

Founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew takes the spotlight among post-independence personalities with at least four known graphic biographies (not counting various children's picture books) about his life. Interestingly, three of these volumes, all published by Shogakukan Asia, were authored by Japanese writer Yoshio Nabeta. He collaborated with artist Yoshihide Fujiwara on *The LKY Story: Lee Kuan Yew, the Man Who Shaped a Nation* (2016) and, a year later, adapted it into a children's version with artist Toshiki Takii in two volumes: *Lee Kuan Yew: Growing Up* (2017) and *Lee Kuan Yew: Road to Independence* (2017). The art style is thus very much manga (Japanese comics). As Fujiwara explained, "it is quite normal to do this kind of manga [in Japan] to portray historical events or the biographies of famous people".[14]

Lee's right-hand man, Finance Minister Goh Keng Swee, has his own graphic biography too. *Goh Keng Swee: A Singaporean for All Seasons* (Marshall Cavendish, 2023) was written by me and illustrated by Cheah Sinann. Instead of taking a cradle-to-grave chronology of his life, we telescoped the timeline to seven crucial years between 1959 and 1966 when he set up Jurong Industrial Park (once described as "Goh's Folly" by naysayers who didn't think it would succeed).[15]

Beyond the portraiture of founding statesmen, two other graphic biographies worth mentioning are about artists: Sonny Liew's *Warm Nights, Deathless Days: The Life of Georgette Chen* (National Gallery Singapore, 2014) and *Drawn to Satire: Sketches of Cartoonists in Singapore* (Pause Narratives, 2023), a homage to pioneering cartoonists lovingly put together by artist Koh Hong Teng and writer Lim Cheng Tju.[16]

Over the next decade, I am sure more graphic biographies will be published, especially those of other founding fathers such as E.W. Barker, S. Rajaratnam, Toh Chin Chye, Othman Wok, Lim Kim San and Ong Pang Boon.

Graphic Medicine

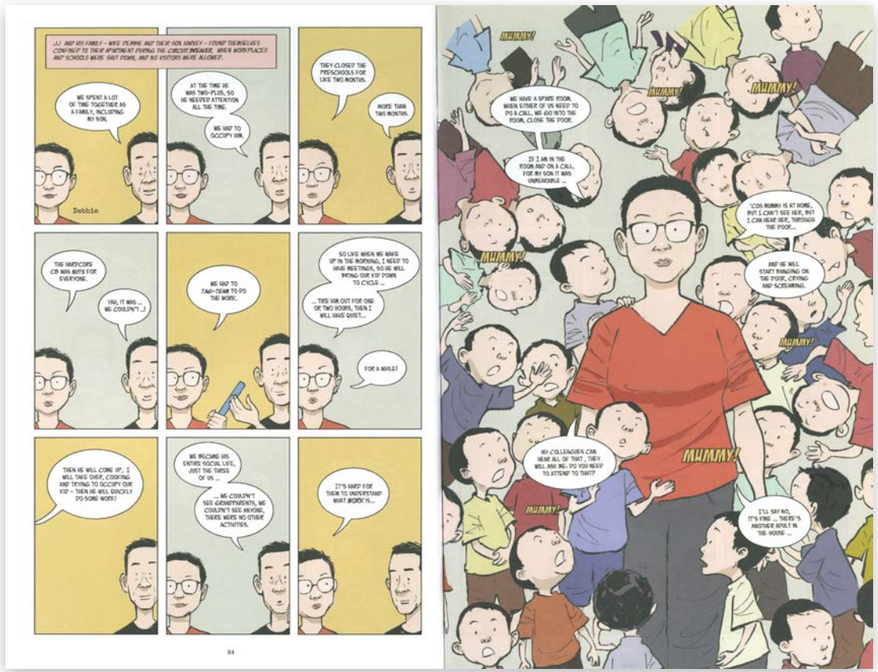
Graphic medicine is increasingly being recognised as a comics subgenre in its own right. A term coined by Ian Williams, himself a comics creator with three books to his name, it refers to comics that are at "the intersection between the medium of comics and the discourse of healthcare".[17] This sounds like a wide scope and it certainly is, as the subgenre covers a smorgasbord of topics, ranging from Covid-19 and mental health to the lives of healthcare workers and stories of patients.

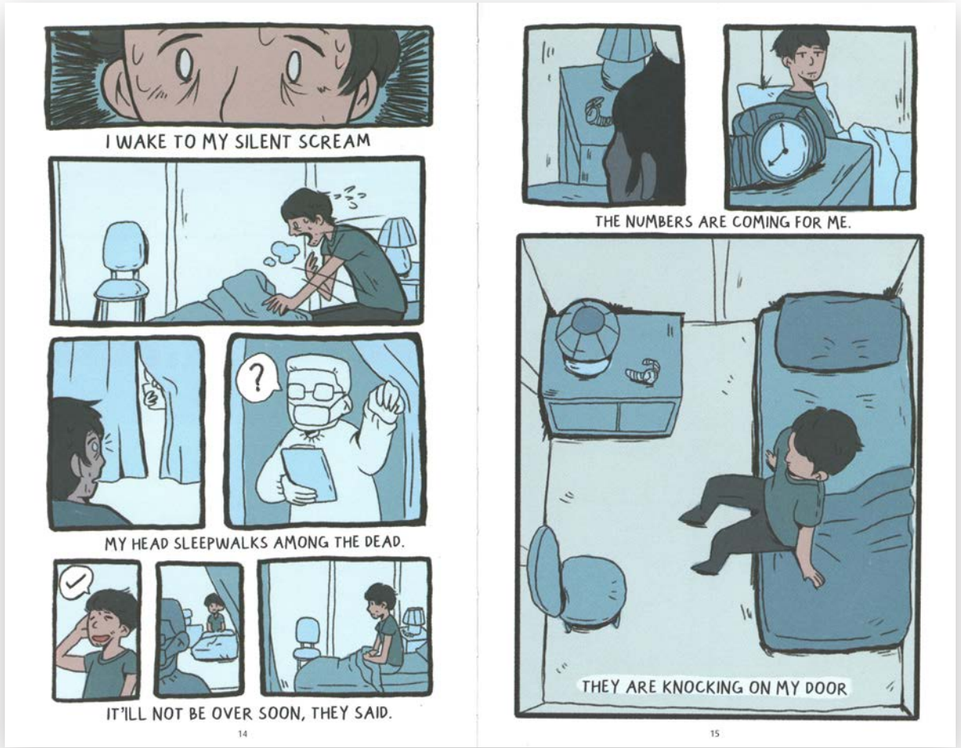
That defining period of the 21st century has not one but two books dedicated to Covid-19. While these may read somewhat dated now, they stand as testament to a time when the world came to a standstill for months.

In the Year of the Virus (Marshall Cavendish, 2020) – a slim volume of poetry comics – was written by me and illustrated by Eko as a meditation on how the pandemic had impacted and transformed lives.[18]

The Pandemic Cookbook: Some Voices and Dishes in the Years of a Novel Coronavirus (Epigram Books, 2022) – based on interviews with frontline workers, journalists, policymakers and academics

This comic revisits checkpoints of the pandemic, from the circuit breaker to social distancing rules. It was shortlisted for the Singapore Literature Prize 2024 in the inaugural Comics/Graphic Novel category. *Images reproduced from Hsu Li Yang and Sonny Liew, The Pandemic Cookbook: Some Voices and Dishes in the Years of a Novel Coronoavirus (Singapore: Epigram Books, 2022). (From National Library Singapore, call no. RSING 614.592 HSU).*





This comic by Felix Cheong, illustrated by Eko, encapsulates how the Covid-19 pandemic had impacted and transformed lives. *Images reproduced from Felix Cheong and Eko, In the Year of the Virus (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Editions, 2020). (From National Library Singapore, call no. RSING S821 CHE).*

– is the mother of all Covid-19 books. Cowritten with infectious disease doctor Hsu Li Yang, Sonny Liew revisits checkpoints of the pandemic period, from the circuit breaker to social distancing rules. It was shortlisted for the Singapore Literature Prize 2024 in the inaugural Comics/Graphic Novel category.[19]

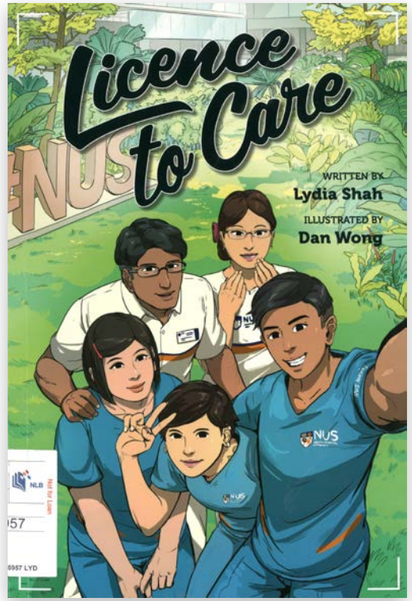
With the Singapore government making mental wellbeing a priority in its national agenda in 2024,[20] graphic non-fiction books addressing mental health issues have also come to the fore. Chief among them is a book written by Institute of Mental Health professionals Daniel Fung, Ong Say How and Shirlyn Goh. *The Stress Wars: How Many Psychiatrists Does It Take to Raise a Child?* (Marshall Cavendish, 2021) offers guidance for families on how to manage the mental health of children.[21]

The last category narrates the experiences of patients and frontline workers. *White Coat Tales* (Epigram Books, 2021) by Suffian Hakim and Eugene Lim follows the lives of five freshies in their first year of medical school, while *Licence to Care* (Epigram Books, 2022) by Lydia Shah and Dan Wong takes the same approach with three trainee nurses.[22]

These comics show how graphic non-fiction need not be dry or strictly documentary. By blending fact and fiction, they lead the reader to emotional truths about place, identity and memory.

Still a Work in Progress

Despite these developments, the graphic non-fiction scene in Singapore remains nascent. There are several reasons why the form has not achieved full mainstream penetration. First, publishing costs are high, which can stymie production volume and the frequency of publication.



This comic book documents the lives of trainee nurses. *Images reproduced from Lydia Shah and Dan Wong, Licence to Care (Singapore: Epigram Books, 2022). (From National Library Singapore, call no. RSING 741.595957 LYD).*

Second, there is limited public awareness and demand for local graphic non-fiction. Although a few notable works have gained acclaim and traction, the audience for this genre of comics remains small. Third, some readers still expect comics to be escapist and light reading, which can make graphic non-fiction comics harder to market or appreciate.

Still, given these constraints, the field remains wide open. With the growing recognition of comics as serious literary work in Singapore, there is potential for more support from entities such as the National Arts Council, libraries, heritage bodies and education institutions. ♦

NOTES

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Sengkang

From Fisheries Port to Integrated Town

Where the river once provided livelihoods, Sengkang has grown into a modern township that weaves together heritage, green spaces, integrated transport and excellent amenities to form a vibrant community.
By Darren Seow

Flats in Sengkang reflected on the surface of Sungei Pinang canal, 2026. Kangkar wholesale fish market used to be located at the end of Upper Serangoon Road. The road has since been extended and this point where the road goes over Sungei Pinang canal is close to where the old market once stood. *Photo by Jimmy Yap.*

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If you go to the end of Upper Serangoon Road today, you will reach a point where the canalised Sungei Pinang branches off from the Serangoon River. Tall, modern glass-clad apartments line either side of the road, affording residents a pleasant view of the area.

About four decades ago, things looked very different. Back in the early 1980s, Upper Serangoon Road was about 400 m shorter than what it is today and the spot where the road met the river was a bustling base for some 90 local offshore fishing boats and 16 fish merchants.

Each morning, fishermen would deposit their catch and buyers would bid for fish to be resold in markets around Singapore. This place was no mere wet market either – the Kangkar wholesale fish market in Kangkar Village handled 40 tonnes of fish each day. ["Kangkar" is derived from the Chinese term *gang jiao* (港脚), which means "foot of the port".]

The Old Kangkar Fish Market

In June 1983, the *Straits Times* newspaper painted a vivid picture of a typical morning there. "Four a.m., and a tide of pungent fish rolls into a quiet little village at the end of Upper Serangoon Road. Wet crates are flung on the pitted concrete pier and tipped over – fish, some still flapping feebly, and crushed ice, vaporising, slide with a hiss onto the ground. Wet rubber boots squelch around the floor. Wet hands hook Salter scales on ropes hanging from the cross beams of the roof. Wet rattan trays with high curving handles loaded with fish are shoved into rows."[1]

Fishing boats docked at Kangkar Village, 1983. The fishermen would unload their catch from 4 am, which were sold by their agents in the wholesale fish market. *Source: The Straits Times © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.*

By 4.30 am, a different tide would come in. Fishmongers and food-stall operators would arrive in "battered trucks and cars parked any which way, to buy fish, prawns, shrimps, crabs, cuttlefish, squid, clams and oysters".[2]

According to the *Straits Times*, the market operated on what was described as a "very loose" auction. "Sellers call out prices of items that are not moving, then nimbly run them up or down from movement to movement, following the trend of demand. If two buyers want a particular tray of goods, they have to outbid each other." The sellers paid the fishermen after deducting a commission of between 6 and 8 percent. Kangkar market was all business, the article noted. "Outsiders get snubbed, for they tend to misread the delicate bargaining signals or do not understand the lingua franca, which is predominantly Teochew."[3]

This, however, was a snapshot of a place on the verge of change. The government was building a new market some 5 km away; the $11.7-million Punggol Fishing Port and Wholesale Fish Market would be larger and offer facilities such as taps, stalls selling crushed ice and actual designated parking lots. Instead of attap huts, there would be proper offices for businesses. In April 1984, after six decades of operations, the Kangkar market was closed; by 1986, the remaining few hundred villagers had been resettled, marking the end of an era.[4] (Punggol Fishing Port was replaced by Senoko Fishery Port in 1997 which was, in turn, closed in 2024. Jurong Fishery Port is now the only such port in operation in Singapore.[5])

Even after they had been resettled and Kangkar Village largely abandoned, some of the former inhabitants of the village would still make their way back to their old homes, at least for a while. "This is our clubhouse. So we still come back here for breakfast and we cook some of our meals here just as we used to before," said former resident Loh Kiam Chung. Although no one lived in the old house anymore, the three-walled kitchen was still stocked with everything one would need to make porridge and coffee.[6]

Other former villagers continued to turn up in the morning to buy fish and vegetables from a mobile market. The *Straits Times* reported that the women, who were in their 60s and 70s, would walk from their new home to buy from the hawker at Kangkar because "according to one, the fish in other places is never as fresh as what they can get here".[7]

Modern Developments

There was only so long, however, that these old timers could hang out at their old haunts. The area around Kangkar would eventually be turned into the modern township of Sengkang, which means "prosperous harbour" (*sheng gang*; 盛港) in Chinese, reflecting the area's rich maritime history. By the 1980s, the government had cleared most of the area, leaving the land largely unused. Individuals illegally staked out parcels of land, leasing them to businesses such as automobile machine shops and small furniture workshops.[8]

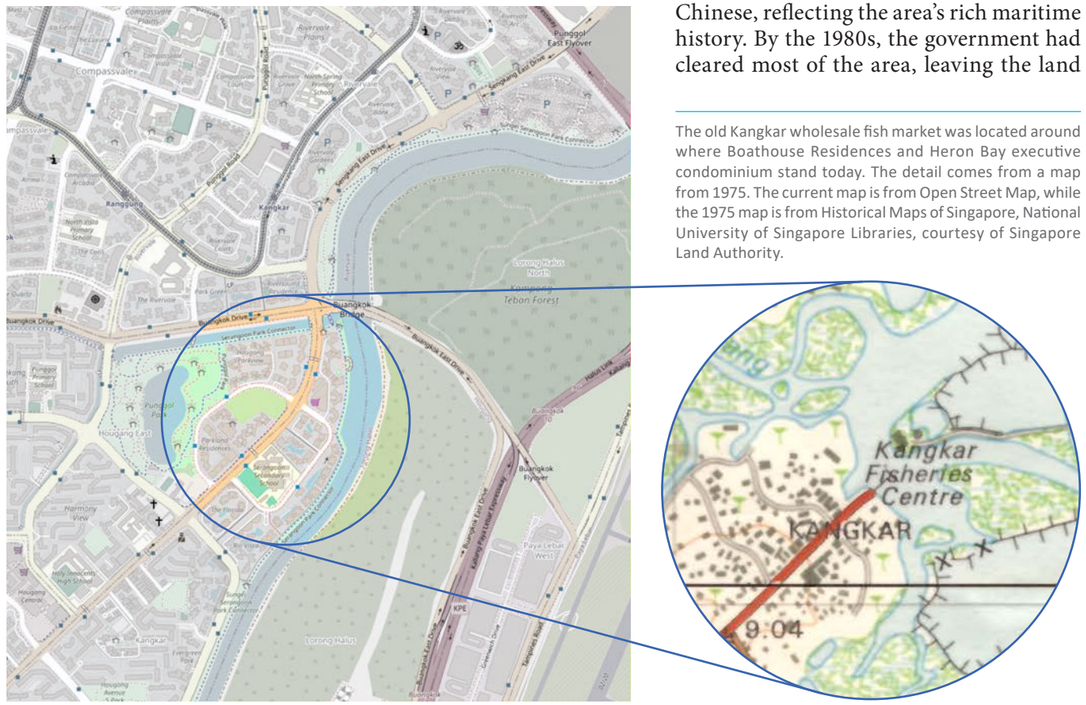
The 1990s marked a turning point. The government resumed clearing land, and by the mid-1990s, Sengkang had embarked on its journey as a housing estate. In 1997, the Housing and Development Board (HDB) completed the first flats in Rivervale, one of the neighbourhoods in Sengkang, building nearly 6,000 flats within a year.[9]

However, the rapid development brought challenges. Sengkang's roads and facilities struggled to keep pace with the growing number of residents. Michael Lim, Member of Parliament for Pasir Ris-Punggol Group Representation Constituency, recalled: "At first, units were sprouting up at the rate of almost 1,000 a month. Residents were pouring in, but the facilities weren't there to support them."[10]

The transport infrastructure was also inadequate in the early days. With Punggol Road as the only exit, residents needed 30 minutes just to leave Sengkang. "Quite a number of households have been moving in, but nothing has been done to improve the traffic situation," Sengkang resident Neo Kim Guan, an associate engineer, grumbled to the *Straits Times*. "During peak hours, cars can stretch from one end of Punggol Road to the Tampines Expressway," he added.[11]

By 2003, the situation had improved with four major routes out of the estate, two flyovers connecting it to the Tampines Expressway and new public transport facilities, including the Northeast Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) and Light Rapid Transit (LRT) lines. Sengkang by then had become a vibrant town with modern infrastructure and recreational facilities, home to some 115,000 residents in more than 36,000 housing units.[12]

In the next two decades, Sengkang grew even more, extending its boundaries to Seletar and Punggol to the north, Pasir Ris and Paya Lebar to the east, Hougang and Serangoon to the south, and Yishun and Ang Mo Kio to the west. In 2025, more than 267,600 residents were living in Sengkang, making it one of Singapore's five planning areas with populations exceeding 250,000.[13]



The old Kangkar wholesale fish market was located around where Boathouse Residences and Heron Bay executive condominium stand today. The detail comes from a map from 1975. The current map is from Open Street Map, while the 1975 map is from Historical Maps of Singapore, National University of Singapore Libraries, courtesy of Singapore Land Authority.

(Top right) Fishmongers and wholesalers at a fish auction at the Kangkar wholesale fish market, 1983. *Source: The Straits Times © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.*

(Right) Fishermen unloading their catch at Kangkar market, undated. *Collection of the National Library Singapore.*

Retaining Links to the Sea

In developing Sengkang, HDB planners sought to preserve elements of its past. In 1994, the HDB formed a 10-member team led by senior architect Cheong Kin Man to conceptualise the new town, drawing inspiration from the area's history. "Bounded by Sungei Serangoon on the east and sliced through on the west by Sungei Punggol, Sengkang is blessed with two rivers," Cheong noted. "It is not a coastal town like Punggol 21 or has a resort feel like Pasir Ris. In the past, the rivers were used to transport harvests from the plantations. It's this history that gives Sengkang its unique identity."[14]

The HDB embedded marine elements into the urban infrastructure. With the theme "Town of the Seafarer" reflecting Sengkang's ties to the sea, marine motifs such as stylised fish heads, bones, fins and hooks were installed around the estate, giving it a recognisable character. In Rivervale, for instance, footpaths are adorned with concrete fish imprints and fish-scale cobblestones.[15]

Other interesting features include three-storey-high columns at the base of housing blocks, which resemble the stilts of fishing villages, while multistorey car parks display net-like parapets reminiscent of fishing nets. Mosaic murals of sea creatures are used to decorate void decks, and public art emphasises the seafaring aesthetic. Sengkang Sculpture Park also showcases sculptures of fishermen, boats and marine life that evoke the area's history.[16]

Placenames in the town – Compassvale, Anchorvale and Rivervale – also echo Sengkang's links with the sea and the area's history. While the major roads in the area have a generic nautical theme, the LRT stations have names that reflect Sengkang's heritage. Kangkar station harks back to the area's previous name, while Cheng Lim and Renjong stations are named after the now-expunged Cheng Lim Farmway and Lorong Renjong.[17]

Other stations were named after natural elements that used to be common in the area: Kupang station is named after a type of clam, Rumbia station's name comes from the Sagu Rumbia plant, once common in swamps, while Bakau station refers to the Bakau mangrove tree that was valued for its strength and durability. Embedding these names in maps, street signs and neighbourhoods ensures that Sengkang's heritage is not forgotten.[18]

Integrated Town Planning

Beyond aesthetics, Sengkang also stands out for the way the whole town was planned. "In the planning of Sengkang Town, land use assignment, transport facilities and infrastructure development would be highly integrated," said HDB chairman Hsuan Owyang. The *Straits Times* reported in 2000 that "the town is one of the first planned with a mixed commercial-cum-residential development in the town centre that is also integrated with transport facilities".[19]

(Top left) Whale sculpture at Sengkang Sculpture Park, 2026. *Photo by Darren Seow.*

(Left) Block 102 Rivervale Walk, 2026. Fish-eye and tail motifs on the columns reflect Sengkang's history as a fishing village. *Photo by Darren Seow.*

Sengkang Floating Wetland, 2026. Part of PUB's Active, Beautiful, Clean Waters programme, the wetland turns Punggol Reservoir into a scenic waterscape that supports birds, fish and other wildlife. *Photo by Darren Seow.*

Sengkang is served by two integrated transport hubs – one in Sengkang itself and the other in Buangkok – where bus interchanges connect to MRT stations and nearby developments. At the town centre, the bus interchange is seamlessly integrated with Sengkang MRT and LRT stations, Compass Heights residences and Compass One shopping mall.[20]

The Sengkang LRT system was designed and built alongside the town's development. The 10.7-kilometre-long network comprises 14 stations across east and west loops. Stations are located near residential blocks, ensuring residents walk no more than 400 m to the nearest stop.[21]

The integrated concept is carried through to the amenities and facilities. Anchorvale Village serves as both a residential and commercial hub. Its two 15-storey HDB blocks are integrated with three levels of retail, offering easy access to a hawker centre, supermarket, eateries and shops, while community spaces – including a plaza, play park and roof garden – encourage resident interaction.[22]

Similarly, Fernvale Community Club and Fernvale Hawker Centre & Market bring together key amenities within a five-storey complex. The lifestyle hub houses recreational spaces that include a jogging track, badminton courts, a gymnasium, a childcare centre and a playground.[23]

Waterways and Riverine Recreation

The waterways that bound Sengkang to the east and west have also been used to enhance the town's greenery and liveability. The 26-kilometre-long North Eastern Riverine Loop follows the banks of Sungei Punggol and Sungei Serangoon, linking four parks: Sengkang Riverside Park, Punggol Park, Punggol Waterway Park and Punggol Point Park.[24] These rivers are part of the Punggol-Serangoon Reservoir Scheme, completed in 2011.

Opened in 2008, the 21-hectare Sengkang Riverside Park also forms part of the Park Connector Network's Round Island Route.[25] The park, with the Punggol River running through it, has a man-made wetland that collects and filters rainwater through its aquatic plants, doubling as a wildlife habitat. National water agency PUB awarded the Active, Beautiful, Clean Waters Certification to the park, showing how water resource protection can be integrated sustainably with urban planning.[26]

In addition, there is the 2,400-square-metre Sengkang Floating Wetland in Punggol Reservoir. Completed in 2010, this floating structure connects Anchorvale Community Club and Sengkang Sports Complex on one bank with Sengkang Riverside Park on the other. Special plants are cultivated on the floating wetland, their roots extending into the

water to absorb nutrients. The wetland improves water quality and provides a habitat for birds, fish and other wildlife. Visitors can stroll across boardwalks to view the ecosystem up close.[27] It was Singapore's largest man-made floating wetland until 2021 when a 3,850-square-metre floating wetlands was constructed in Jurong Lake Gardens.[28]

Charting New Waters

More changes are afoot for Sengkang. The Urban Redevelopment Authority's (URA) Draft Master Plan 2025 outlines plans for a new integrated community hub near Sengkang MRT in the next 10 to 15 years. The hub will house sports, recreational, healthcare and retail facilities, designed to strengthen community bonds across all ages and interests.[29]

Meanwhile, a new residential estate is being planned in Fernvale North on an 18.9-hectare site bounded by Jalan Kayu, Fernvale Street, Sengkang West Drive and the Tampines Expressway. About the size of 25 football fields, it will be located near Kupang and Thanggam LRT stations as well as Sengkang Riverside Park. According to the URA, the proposed development will accommodate some 10,000 homes.[30]

Over the last three decades, urban planners have successfully weaved together Sengkang's history and its natural surroundings with integrated transport links and recreational facilities to create a vibrant and modern township that has become an attractive place to live in. Sengkang's transformation demonstrates how thoughtful planning can honour the past while embracing the future. ♦

Compass One shopping mall and Sengkang Community Club (right). The latter is built like the prow of a ship, reflecting the area's marine heritage, 2026. *Photo by Jimmy Yap.*

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Musical Evenings in Changi Internment Camp

In the early months of the Japanese Occupation, a music-loving Japanese camp commander played a supporting role in musical activities that became a source of comfort and solace for the civilian internees.

By Phan Ming Yen

On the evening of 22 May 1942, after listening for half an hour to a trio performance at the Changi civilian men's internment camp, the Japanese camp commander made a song request.[1]

Lieutenant Okasaki,[2] who oversaw Changi camp from March to September 1942, had asked for the Scottish folk song "Auld Lang Syne" – traditionally sung at the stroke of midnight on New Year's Eve to bid farewell to the old year, or played at funerals and graduations. Following the trio's performance, Okasaki congratulated the musicians.

Sketch of a fiddler who practises every afternoon in the main exercise yard by William Haxworth, 1942. Haxworth was the Chief Investigator of the War Risks Insurance Department of the Singapore Treasury when war broke out. He was interned first in Changi Prison and then in Sime Road Internment Camp. *W.R.M. Haxworth Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image No. 20060000330 - 0019).*

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Given that Japan was at war with Britain, the internees might have thought that a Japanese camp commander requesting a song from an enemy country to be unusual. A report of the concert made it to the camp's newspaper, the *Changi Guardian*,[3] under its "Do You Know…" column the following day. The account of the concert focused more on Okasaki's request than on the concert itself.

Four days later, on 26 May, in a performance given by the men for women internees,[4] the same trio of musicians included "Auld Lang Syne" in their repertoire. Okasaki was also at the concert and was reported to have taken a "close interest in the programme". With reference to "Auld Lang Syne", the *Changi Guardian* noted that Okasaki "graciously acknowledged the compliment extended by the Melody Trio" in playing his favourite song. Before he left the event, Okasaki gave the gathering "carte blanche to sing the National Anthem as 'loud as you like'".[5]

An Unusual Request

There are many questions arising from Okasaki's request for "Auld Lang Syne". How was his request communicated to the musicians at the concert on 22 May? Did he sing or hum the melody to the musicians, or did he mention the song by name? More importantly, why did he request this song, and how did he come to know of this song?

Until the mid-2000s, academic research on the experiences of Western civilians interned in Southeast Asia was few and far between. In her 2004 work, *The Internment of Western Civilians Under the Japanese 1941–1945*, historian Bernice Archer attributed this to Eurocentrism and how "war memories privileged masculine and battle experiences". Archer further noted that a Eurocentric view of World War II had resulted in the marginalisation of the experiences of these Western civilians.[6]

In a 2023 online article for Southeast Asia Library Group, writer Gautam Hazarika noted that former Changi prisoners-of-war (POWs) had published their memoirs in the mainstream press while only a "handful" of civilian internees did – and even then, many were through non-mainstream press with most being out of print. Hazarika concluded that "very little is known about the civilians".[7]

This lack of research is evident. While studies such as Sears Eldredge's *Captive Audiences/Captive Performers: Music and Theatre as Strategies for Survival on the Thailand-Burma Railway* and the chapter "On with the Motley: The Changi Concert Party" in *The Changi Book* provide insights into the function of entertainment for POWs, no similar works exist for civilian internees, whether within the men's or women's internment camps in Singapore.[8]

Sketch of a cell in Changi Prison by William Haxworth, 1942. Three or sometimes four men occupied a cell meant for one. *W.R.M. Haxworth Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image No. 20060000331 - 0042).*

As such, a closer study of these and other concerts potentially reveals how the occupier-occupied (or captor-captive) dynamic is more nuanced and multifaceted beyond the "good" and "bad" stereotypes. It also offers an opportunity to investigate how music functioned in an internment camp for both captor and captive.

Glow of the Fireflies

While there is no record in the *Changi Guardian* of whether "Auld Lang Syne" was sung or performed in an instrumental arrangement, the evidence suggests the latter. The musicians who formed the Melody Trio were British internees and all instrumentalists: Leo J. Farrell,[9] a musician from Kuala Lumpur, played the clarinet and saxophone; George J. Merrifield,[10] a prison officer, played the piano-accordion; and Sydney Alexander B. Ross,[11]

Gordon Van Hien conducting the Singapore Musical Society Orchestra, c. 1953. *Goh Soon Tioe Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image No. 20140000160 - 0210).*

a planter from Melaka, played the violin. No record thus far has been found of these musicians doubling up as vocalists in their performances.

It can also be conjectured that the Melody Trio's rendition of the song evoked different cultural experiences and memories for Okasaki than for the internees who were from "enemy countries" of Japan. Okasaki was likely listening to a song he had probably first come to know as "Hotaru no Hikari" (蛍の光; Glow of the Fireflies) when he was a student, sung to the tune of "Auld Lang Syne". The performance likely pleased Okasaki and he congratulated the musicians when it ended. He was not listening to "Auld Lang Syne" but "Hotaru no Hikari". If the trio had given a vocal performance of the work in its original language, English, Okasaki might have been taken by surprise and reacted differently.

"Hotaru no Hikari" – with lyrics by the poet and educator Chikai Inagaki – was often sung in Japan at school graduation ceremonies and commonly played at the end of the business day in department stores. It was introduced in 1881 in《小学唱歌集 初編》, the first elementary song book for schools.[12] At the time, music education – starting with singing – was deemed beneficial for society, and a singing education was considered to be a "means for moral education".[13]

This "Japanised" version encouraged students, who had successfully graduated after toiling in the night by the glow of fireflies, to serve the nation. This exhortation is found in the third and fourth stanzas of the song, which were often omitted from performances in the aftermath of World War II.[14] One of its lines goes: "Let no distance come between your hearts, but devote yourselves wholly to the country as one."[15]

Thus, on the evening of 22 May 1942, two different sets of lyrics – conveying separate meanings but sung to the same tune – were going through the minds of the audiences. For a moment, music that was familiar to both sides bound the occupier (Okasaki) and the occupied (the internees) in a shared physical space, albeit evoking distinct and disparate cultural memories on either side.

Pianos and a Musical Ensemble

Based on events after the two concerts, it appeared that these performances of "Auld Lang Syne" had indirect and far-reaching consequences in Changi camp for the next two years.

Given the lack of musical instruments at the time,[16] musical entertainment primarily comprised vocal performances, some exceptions possibly being those by the Melody Trio. When the internees were initially held at the Karikal Mahal mansion in Katong,[17] a committee had been set up to look at musical and entertainment activities given the number of pianists and singers among them. However, musical instruments were necessary for the proposals put forth and, as such, it was felt that "variety and singing are the only possibilities" until "equipment" was acquired.[18]

After the internees were moved to Changi, the highlight of such activities was a choir formed in late March 1942 and led by Gordon Garth Van Hien (or more commonly known as Gordon Van Hien). The *Changi Guardian* described the choir's debut on 18 April "an event in Changi history and is, without doubt, the outstanding cultural achievement so far".[19]

Van Hien had arrived in Singapore in 1938 as a chartered accountant with prior musical training in both the violin and piano while a student in Britain. He joined the Singapore Musical Society in 1940, quickly becoming its treasurer. Van Hien was scheduled to conduct the society's orchestra on 14 December 1941, but war with Japan broke

out on 8 December.[20] In early March, while still at Karikal Mahal, he had already been tasked to organise musical activities.[21]

On 28 May, two days after the concert for women internees, the *Changi Guardian* was hopeful that the camp would soon have its own orchestra. The "Nipponese authorities" had allowed Farrell to venture out of the camp to collect musical instruments belonging to the internees that had been left behind in their homes. On 30 May, the *Changi Guardian* reported that Farrell was "scampering up and down before descending on Singapore in a half¾ton [sic] lorry to collect any musical instruments he can lay his hands on to form a 10-piece (?) orchestra".[22]

It was also around the same time that pianos began to arrive at both the men's and women's camps. As George Lamb Peet, acting editor of the *Straits Times* and Director of Information in the Straits Settlements government before 1942 recalled, the Japanese had allowed them to "bring in three good pianos".[23]

On 19 May, the *Changi Guardian* reported that pianos had been presented to the men's and women's camps by "Nipponese authorities".[24] Another piano was presented by the Bishop of Singapore, John Leonard Wilson, to the camp. This piano was originally from the Mental Hospital (renamed Miyako Byoin during the Occupation) in Yio Chu Kang. The internees had sought permission from the camp authorities to transport the piano to Changi in an ambulance, which arrived on 22 May.[25]

On 30 May, the *Changi Guardian* jested that the three pianists in the camp – Van Hien, Robert Eisinger[26] and Dennis B. Soul[27] who formed the "Piano Sub-committee" – had the unenviable task of deciding who among the "several hundred pianists" would be deemed "competent" to give performances.[28] Whether or not the "several hundred pianists" was an exaggeration, it was certainly an indication of the number of musically inclined internees who sought some relief in musical activity.

Van Hien possibly gave the camp's first "piano recital" on 23 June 1942 when he presented a programme comprising works by Bach, Mozart and Chopin. This was music which the *Changi Guardian* felt was worthy of the Victoria Memorial Hall. Many were hopeful that this recital would be followed by more with "fortnightly recitals in the laundry", which would be "eagerly looked forward to".[29]

More importantly, however, the presence of a piano had uplifted the spirits of the internees, as noted by the *Changi Guardian*: "The advent of the pianoforte has made such an addition to the amenities of our prison life that at once the musical thermometer had risen. We are greatly indebted to those who have given themselves on our behalf in order that through their talents musically we should benefit aesthetically and spiritually."[30]

By 18 June, Farrell had made two trips out with Okasaki, collecting also any "stray" instruments to form an orchestra. Farrell returned with an accordion, two violins, two ukuleles and two mouth organs.[31] He had hoped to bring back a bass violin, a saxophone and another accordion.

The Camp Commander

Who was Okasaki, the camp commander who made time to accompany Farrell in securing musical instruments and also helped procure a cello for the musicians, expanding the Melody Trio into a quartet? [The new fourth member was Bob Kauff.][32]

While little documentation on Okasaki in English-language sources has been found by this author to date, his memory fares well in the memoirs of both male and female internees.

Okasaki reminded Sheila Allan – who turned 18 six months into her internment – of a peacock when he "struts up and down on inspection days", and she noted that his liking children was

William Haxworth's sketch of internees preparing programme posters and putting up a musical, 1942. *W.R.M. Haxworth Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image No. 20060000331 - 0025).*

something "in his favour". Upon his departure from the camp, Allan felt that his replacement would not be as "kindly disposed" towards the internees as he had been.[33]

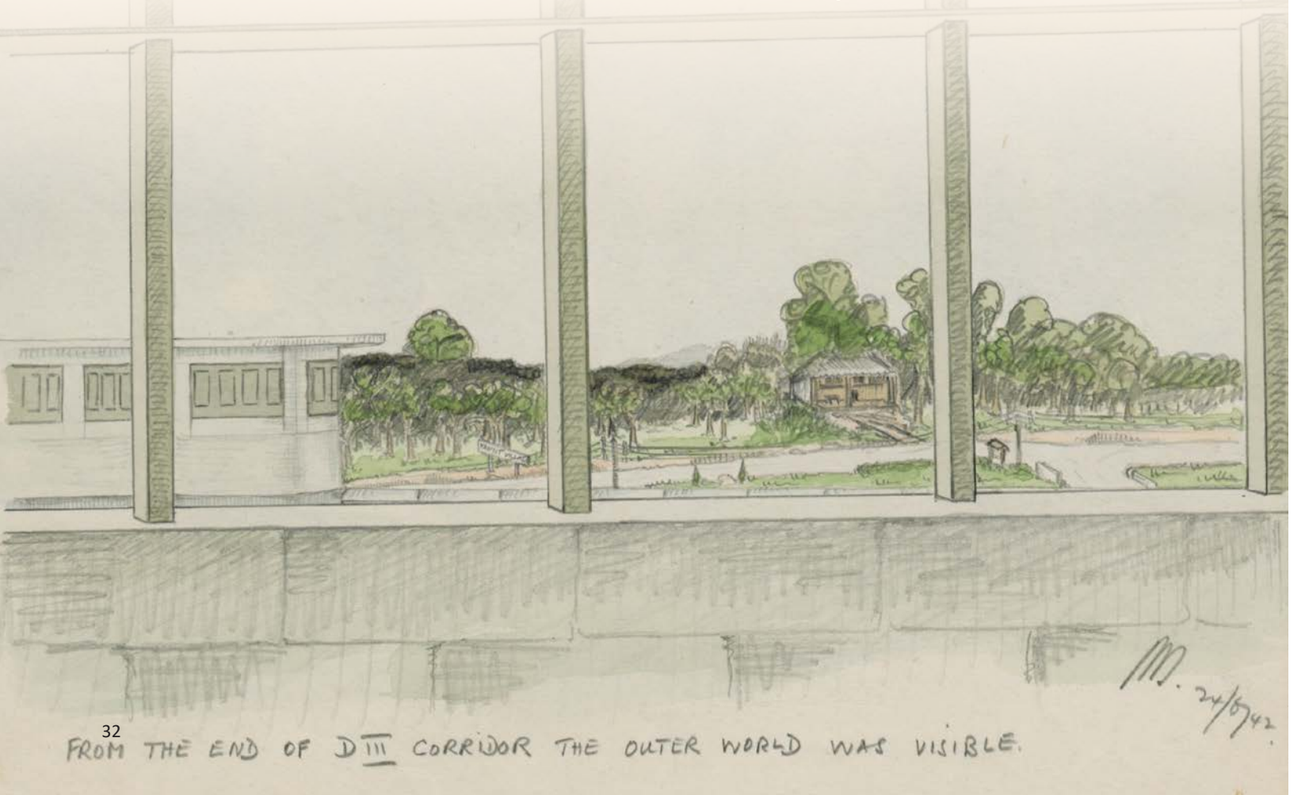
A report by the Japanese authorities after the war described Okasaki's management of the camp as "negative administration" in which "the internees were left to work out their own organisation" and there were no roll calls or routine inspection. The period was marked by insufficient supplies of food to "balance the diet" and the camp was on the verge of an outbreak of beri-beri until permission was granted to buy rice polishings. Furthermore, nothing was done to relieve congestion or improve living conditions, which worsened as more internees arrived. However, in the light of "later experiences", the report noted that the internees soon realised that the restraint shown by Okasaki and his deputy, Second Lieutenant Tokuda, was "a matter of surprise and gratitude".[34]

For American missionary Reverend Tyler Thompson, the formation of the camp orchestra was the most "surprising musical development", and it would not have been possible "without some Japanese initiative in the matter". He recalled Okasaki as the "most friendly of our various commanding officers".[35]

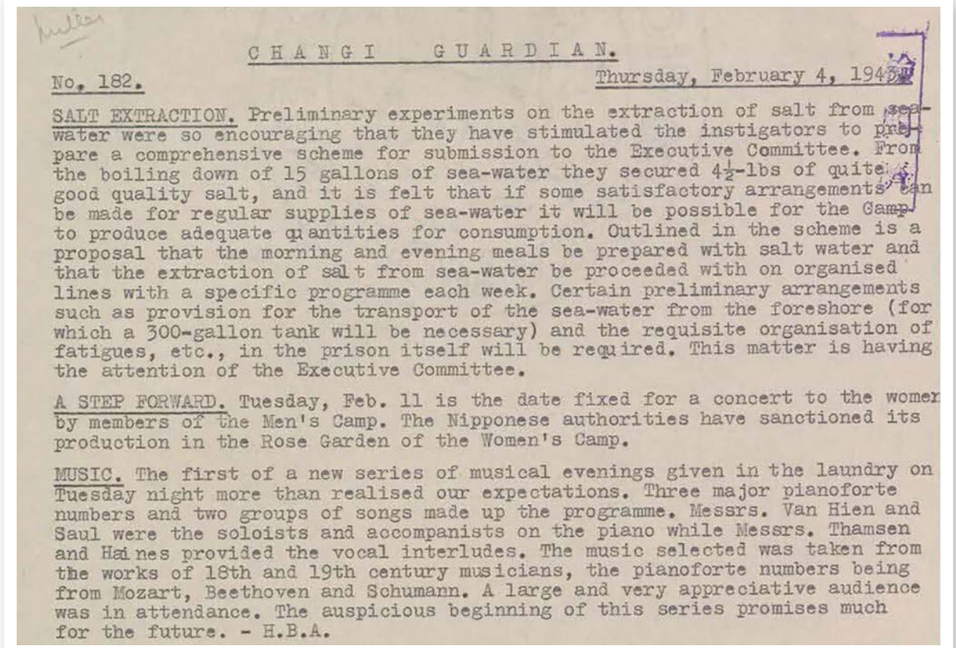
According to Thompson, when Okasaki had learnt that among the internees were a "number of professional dance band musicians", he had proposed to them: if he could use his influence to help obtain instruments, would the internees organise an orchestra and play "occasionally for him and his friends?" This was borne out by a report in the *Changi Guardian* that on 27 June 1942, the Melody Quartette comprising Farrell, Merrifield, Ross and Kauff, with Eisinger as pianist, had been "summoned out" to "play at the Nipponese Officers' Mess a little way down the road".[36]

Thompson's account is corroborated by Peet, who recalled that the internees were "fortunate in the quality and resources of music in the camp". Peet noted that Okasaki had taken a "personal interest in the creation of a camp orchestra" and had given the internees "facilities for getting instruments and music from town, so that we had a good camp orchestra".[37]

The *Changi Guardian*, though, provides a slightly different account regarding the genesis of the orchestra. It claimed that it was Farrell who "enlisted the interest of Lt Okasaki and thus progressively secured the instruments which made the band possible, building up from a duo to a trio then to quartette and finally to the full 12-man band". In any case, by early July 1942, Farrell and Merrifield were reported to be "deep in the throes of rehearsing their first production".[38]



Sketch of Changi Prison titled "From the End of DIII Corridor the Outer World Was Visible" by William Haxworth, 1942. Haxworth was the Chief Investigator of the War Risks Insurance Department of the Singapore Treasury when war broke out. He was interned first in Changi Prison and then in Sime Road Internment Camp. *W.R.M. Haxworth Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image No. 20060000330 - 0094).*



CHANGI GUARDIAN.

No. 182. Thursday, February 4, 1943

SALT EXTRACTION. Preliminary experiments on the extraction of salt from sea-water were so encouraging that they have stimulated the instigators to prepare a comprehensive scheme for submission to the Executive Committee. From the boiling down of 15 gallons of sea-water they secured 4½-lbs of quite good quality salt, and it is felt that if some satisfactory arrangements can be made for regular supplies of sea-water it will be possible for the Camp to produce adequate quantities for consumption. Outlined in the scheme is a proposal that the morning and evening meals be prepared with salt water and that the extraction of salt from sea-water be proceeded with on organised lines with a specific programme each week. Certain preliminary arrangements such as provision for the transport of the sea-water from the foreshore (for which a 300-gallon tank will be necessary) and the requisite organisation of fatigues, etc., in the prison itself will be required. This matter is having the attention of the Executive Committee.

A STEP FORWARD. Tuesday, Feb. 11 is the date fixed for a concert to the women by members of the Men's Camp. The Nipponese authorities have sanctioned its production in the Rose Garden of the Women's Camp.

MUSIC. The first of a new series of musical evenings given in the laundry on Tuesday night more than realised our expectations. Three major pianoforte numbers and two groups of songs made up the programme. Messrs. Van Hien and Saul were the soloists and accompanists on the piano while Messrs. Thamsen and Haines provided the vocal interludes. The music selected was taken from the works of 18th and 19th century musicians, the pianoforte numbers being from Mozart, Beethoven and Schumann. A large and very appreciative audience was in attendance. The auspicious beginning of this series promises much for the future. - H.B.A.

First report of "Musical Evenings" by the *Changi Guadian* on 4 February 1943. *Reproduced by kind permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library (RCMS 103/12/29).*

The camp orchestra made its debut in a production titled the "Changi Bandwagon" on 14 July in front of the women's camp with an audience that included Okasaki.[39] The programme comprised a variety of vocal and instrumental works – both popular and classical. It featured music from cultures around the world. The concert began by "leaving home" with "Auld Lang Syne" before embarking on a "world tour" with works such as "The Blue Danube" (Austria), the popular "Terang Bulan" (Bright Moon; Malaya)[40] and "Waltzing Matilda" (Australia).

The irony was not lost when the *Changi Guardian* wrote that Japan was represented by the "Nipponese love song" titled "Koa Koshin Kyoku". The song was most likely 興亜行進曲, or "March of the Revival of Asia", a Japanese patriotic song.[41]

For Thompson, the piano recitals, various instrumental ensembles and the camp orchestra "could not have been born save in that one brief period" and such musical activities continued "to play an important part in camp life up to the Double Tenth". This was a reference to the Double Tenth incident on 10 October 1943 when the Kempeitai (Japanese Military Police) raided the cells in Changi following Operation Jaywick, in which men from Special Operations Australia sank or damaged seven Japanese shipping vessels in Singapore waters. The Japanese suspected that the internees played a role in the incident, and later arrested, interrogated and tortured 57 civilian internees, 15 of whom died. After this, privileges such as concerts, plays and lectures were banned, and food rations cut.[42]

Musical Evenings

In 1943, amidst choral and orchestral concerts, Van Hien would take further advantage of the instruments that were available in organising a series of concerts which the *Changi Guardian* called "Musical Evenings". Launched in February that year, these concerts were held monthly and sometimes twice a month except in the months of March and April (for reasons unknown), and were well covered by the newspaper. That it devoted such space to the series was a testament to the significance of music in the daily lives of the internees.

From a glance at the programmes of individual concerts as derived from the reviews, it appeared that the piano was at the centre of this series, notwithstanding works which also featured the voice or other instruments such as the flute or violin. There were also concerts featuring works for two pianos.

A great diversity of music was performed, from classics by Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Chopin and Liszt to works by contemporary composers of the time, reflecting a sophisticated musical taste among musicians and audiences.

Sketch titled "Sights O' Changi" by William Haxworth, 1943. *W.R.M. Haxworth Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image No. 20060000330 - 0014).*

On two occasions, well-known works by the Russian composer Rachmaninoff were featured in July and September concerts,[43] the composer having only died months earlier in March. At the last of the "Musical Evenings", before the Double Tenth incident, Eisinger's performance of Anton Rubinstein's "Staccato Etude", a difficult work marked by relentlessly repeated chords, was delivered with such "arresting brilliance" that it reached "superlative heights in the camp's musical entertainment", the newspaper wrote.[44]

A Great Elevation to Troubled Spirits

Within the confines of Changi camp, the social structure and hierarchy of colonial society that existed in prewar Singapore were overturned.

Here were close to 2,800 internees in a prison complex meant for between 600 and 800 prisoners. The internees were from more than 20 countries deemed as "enemies" of Japan, and they ranged from civil servants, government servants to musicians and even a horse trainer.[45]

The Westerners, who were once accustomed to a life of comfort and distinction, now lived in overcrowded (three or even four persons were cramped in a cell 3 m long and 1.8 m wide) and unsanitary conditions, suffering from imbalanced diet, malnutrition, exposure to disease, and the fear of unpredictable behaviour from their captors, which at times resulted in physical violence and sometimes even death.

Musical activity – or any other form of entertainment – thus played an important role in camp life. Beyond providing distraction or momentary relief from the trauma of internment, entertainments were "opportunities for individual internees to explore and develop their perhaps latent… talent". Activities such as contributing to the newspapers, religious services, sporting events and entertainment "perpetuated Western culture and created a sense of continuity". It was a continuity that "served to underline the survival of Western culture which they used to negate, deny or suppress the difficult and radical changes that had taken place in their lives".[46]

It is perhaps no wonder, then, that the professional and amateur musicians in the camp took musical activities, especially those who performed at the "Musical Evenings", very seriously. Beyond just a provider of entertainment or positive distraction, music making helped an individual preserve his (or her) dignity, professionalism and civility in times of distress and oppressive circumstances when the proverbial centre could no longer hold.

Music indeed brought "a great elevation to troubled spirits" of the Changi internees, where, as Peet said, "life was so hard and empty and unsatisfying in many ways".[47] ♦

The author wishes to thank Keith Aldrich and Gautam Hazarika for the insights shared. Some parts of this article originated from a lecture-performance titled "1943: Musical Evenings at Changi", conceptualised, produced and written by the author. The work was presented by the author with Aaron Lee as narrator and co-dramaturg, and Natalie Ng as pianist and music-dramaturg, on 27 September 2025 at the National Library Building.

NOTES

1 "Do You Know… ," *Changi Guardian* No. 64, 23 May 1942, University of Cambridge Digital Library, https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-RCMS-00103-00012-00029/112.
2 The Japanese camp commander from 25 March to September 1942 was primarily identified by his last name Okazaki (sometimes spelt Okasaki in memoirs and in the *Changi Guardian*) in a report titled "The Internment of Civilians in Singapore by the Nipponese Authorities, February 1942 to August 1945," University of Cambridge Digital Library, https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-RCMS-00103-00012-00011/1.
3 The *Changi Guardian* was a newspaper produced by the civilian male internees in Changi during the Japanese Occupation of Singapore. The editors of the newspaper were Harry Miller, a chief reporter with the *Straits Times* before the Occupation, and Gus Harold Wade, an entomologist with the Medical Auxiliary Service.
4 Men were segregated from women and children in Changi camp. See Nakahara Michiko, "The Civilian Women's Internment Camp in Singapore: The World of *POW WOW*," in *New Perspectives on the Japanese Occupation in Malaya and Singapore, 1941–1945*, ed. Akashi Yoji and Yoshimura Mako (Singapore: NUS Press, 2008), 196. (From National Library Singapore, call no. RSING 940.5337 NEW-[WAR])
5 "Women Entertained," *Changi Guardian* No. 68, 28 May 1942, University of Cambridge Digital Library, https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-RCMS-00103-00012-00029/119.
6 Bernice Archer, *The Internment of Western Civilians Under the Japanese 1941–1945: A Patchwork of Internment* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008), 105–06. [NLB has the 2004 edition published by RoutledgeCurzon, call no. R 940.53170952 ARC-[WAR].]
7 Gautam Hazarika, "'We Published in Prison' – Unique Material on Newspapers Published by Male Civilian Internees in Wartime Singapore," Southeast Asia Library Group, 20 April 2023, https://southeastasianlibrarygroup.wordpress.com/2023/04/20/we-published-in-prison-unique-material-on-newspapers-published-by-male-civilian-internees-in-wartime-singapore/.
8 Sears A. Eldredge, "Captive Audiences/Captive Performers: Music and Theatre as Strategies for Survival on the Thailand-Burma Railway 1942–1945," Digital Commons @ Macalester, 2014, https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/captiveaudiences/; "On with the Motley: The Changi Concert Party," in *The Changi Book*, ed. Lachlan Grant (Sydney, Australia: NewSouth, 2015), 134–55. (From National Library Singapore, call no. RSING 940.547252 CHA-[WAR])
9 Farrell was referred to as "Len Farrell" in all *Changi Guardian* reports and also in the press. See "Musicians on a Tower," *Straits Budget*, 5 September 1946, 12. (From NewspaperSG). His name is recorded as "Farrell, Leo J." in "Changi and Sime Road Civilian Internment Camps: Nominal Rolls of Internees," University of Cambridge Digital Library, https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-RCMS-00103-00012-00022/249. See also "Accordeonist [sic]," *Changi Guardian* No. 6, 14 May 1942, University of Cambridge Digital Library, https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-RCMS-00103-00012-00029/20. The *Changi Guardian* reports that Farrell had with him a piano-accordion in Changi.
10 George J. Merrifield was a prison officer who was part of the Malayan Magic Circle. He also played the piano. See "Entertainment at Gunners' Camp," *Singapore Free Press*, 25 May 1940; Mary Heathcoutt, "'Dancing Through the Ages' a Big Success," *Singapore Free Press*, 18 December 1940. (From NewspaperSG), and "Changi and Sime Road Civilian Internment Camps: Nominal Rolls of Internees," University of Cambridge Digital Library, https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-RCMS-00103-00012-00022/278.
11 Sydney A.B. Ross was a planter from Melaka. See "Changi and Sime Road Civilian Internment Camps: Nominal Rolls of Internees," University of Cambridge Digital Library, https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-RCMS-00103-00012-00022/291.
12 A background on the "Japanisation" of "Auld Lang Syne" can be found in, "A Song Abroad," in M.J. Grant, *Auld Lang Syne: A Song and Its Culture* (Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2021), https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0231; https://books.openbookpublishers.com/10.11647/obp.0231/ch10.xhtml#_idTextAnchor164. Refer also to Sato Fujiwara's blog "「蝶々」「蛍の光」を作ったのは?〜日本近代音楽教育の黎明–私たちの教育のルーツをたどる" ["Who composed 'Cho Cho' and 'Hotaru no Hikari – the Dawn of Modern Music Education in Japan – Tracing the Roots of Our Education"] (blog), 4 November 2021, https://kotaenonai.org/blog/satolog/9455/; and the blog of Yokout, "魯迅と日暮里 (17) 帝国のフロンティアの拡大 (3) 蛍の光が歌えない" ["Lu Xun and Nippori (17) Expanding the Frontiers of Empire (3) I can't sing 'Hotaru no Hikari'"], 日暮里富士見坂を守る会 [Nippori Fujimizaka Preservation Society], https://fujimizaka.wordpress.com/2015/08/17/luxun-17/. The score can be found at the National Diet Library in Japan at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:NDL992051_%E5%B0%8F%E5%AD%A6%E5%94%B1%E6%AD%8C%E9%9B%86_%E5%88%9D%E7%B7%A8.pdf/. The 2 January 1942 issue of *The Japan Times and Advertiser* in Tokyo announced that the Board of Information of Japan had banned "any kind of American and British music". But exceptions were made for "Japanised songs like 'Hotaru-no-Hikari' based on 'Auld Lang Syne'."
13 Margaret Mehl, *Music and the Making of Modern Japan: Joining the Global Concert* (Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2024), 154, https://www.openbookpublishers.com/books/10.11647/obp.0374.
14 Yokout, "魯迅と日暮里 (17) 帝国のフロンティアの拡大 (3) 蛍の光が歌えない."
15 This translation is by Mark Jewel. Copyright (c) 2018 by The Liberal Arts Research Center, School of Political Science and Economics, Waseda University cited in Grant, *Auld Lang Syne: A Song and Its Culture.*
16 One possibility for the lack of musical instruments in Changi up till that point was that the internees carried only what they could with them. See Iskander Mydin and Rachel Eng, *Changi Chapel and Museum: Remembering the Internees and Legacies of Changi* (Singapore: National Museum of Singapore, 2021), 70. (From National Library Singapore, call no. RSING 940.547252 ISK); and George L. Peet, *Within Changi's Walls: A Record of Civilian Internment in World War II* (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Editions, 2011), 10. (From National Library Online)
17 William L. Gibson, "Karikal Mahal: The Lost Palace of a Fallen Cattle King," *BiblioAsia* 16, no. 3 (October–December 2020): 48–53.
18 "Entertainment," *Karikal Chronicle* No. 12, 4 March 1942, University of Cambridge Digital Library, https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-RCMS-00103-00012-00029/13.
19 "Choristers Debut," *Changi Guardian* No. 9, 20 March 1942, University of Cambridge Digital Library, https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-RCMS-00103-00012-00029/25; "Songbirds," *Changi Guardian* No. 38, 23 April 1942, University of Cambridge Digital Library, https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-RCMS-00103-00012-00029/68.
20 "Gordon Van Hien: Lessons a Bore," *Straits Times* 14 November 1952. (From NewspaperSG). Gordon Van Hien played an important role in the music scene of postwar Singapore, becoming chairman of the Singapore Musical Society and in 1955 received an MBE (Member of the Order of the British Empire) for his musical activities during his internment.
21 "Entertainments", *Karikal Chronicle* No. 10, 2 March 1942, University of Cambridge Digital Library, https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-RCMS-00103-00012-00029/11.
22 "We Hear," *Changi Guardian* No. 69, 30 May 1942, University of Cambridge Digital Library, https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-RCMS-00103-00012-00029/121.
23 Peet, *Within Changi's Walls*, 94.
24 "Official Gazette," *Changi Guardian* No. 60, 19 May 1942, University of Cambridge Digital Library, https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-RCMS-00103-00012-00029/104.
25 Leader article in *Changi Guardian*, No. 56, 14 May 1942, University of Cambridge Digital Library, https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-RCMS-00103-00012-00029/96; Joshua Chia Yeong Jia, "Institute of Mental Health," *Singapore Infopedia.* National Library Singapore. Article published 2008; "Do You Know…," *Changi Guardian* No. 64, 23 May 1942.
26 Robert Eisinger arrived in Singapore on 19 September 1938. See "Musicians Who Fled from Nazis," *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 26 September 1938. (From NewspaperSG). Eisinger's nationality was stated as "Pole" in "Changi and Sime Road Civilian Internment Camps: Nominal Rolls of Internees," University of Cambridge Digital Library, https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-RCMS-00103-00012-00022/63.
27 Dennis B. Soul was a banker, an amateur organist and choir conductor.
28 "We Hear."
29 "Music in Camp," *Changi Guardian* No. 83, 25 June 1942, University of Cambridge Digital Library, https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-RCMS-00103-00012-00029/142.
30 "Music in Camp."
31 "Musical Notes," *Changi Guardian,* No. 80, 18 June 1942, National Archives of Singapore.
32 "It's a Quartette Now!" *Changi Guardian* No. 84, 27 June 1942, University of Cambridge Digital Library, https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-RCMS-00103-00012-00029/144. Bob Kauff was a musician with the Dan Hopkins' Band at Raffles Hotel before the war. See "Musicians Who Will Join 'The Circus Comes to Town'," *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser,* 11 July 1939, 5. (From NewspaperSG)
33 Sheila Allan, *Diary of a Girl in Changi, 1941–1945* (Pymble, N.S.W.: Kangaroo Press, 2004), 48. (From National Library Singapore, call no. RSING 940.547252092 ALL-[WAR])
34 "The Internment of Civilians in Singapore by the Nipponese Authorities, February 1942 to August 1945."
35 Tyler Thompson, *Freedom in Internment: Under Japanese Rule in Singapore, 1942–1945* (Singapore: Kefford Press, 1990),119. (From National Library Singapore, call no. RSING 940.547252092 THO-[WAR])
36 Thompson, *Freedom in Internment*, 119; "Do You Know…?" *Changi Guardian* No. 85, 30 June 1942, University of Cambridge Digital Library, https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-RCMS-00103-00012-00029/145.
37 Peet, *Within Changi's Walls*, 93–94.
38 "Orchestral Affairs," *Changi Guardian* No. 100, 1 August 1942, University of Cambridge Digital Library, https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-RCMS-00103-00012-00029/171; "Do You Know…?" *Changi Guardian* No. 87, 4 July 1942, University of Cambridge Digital Library, https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-RCMS-00103-00012-00029/148.
39 "Changi Bandwagon," *Changi Guardian* No. 92, 16 July 1942, University of Cambridge Digital Library, https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-RCMS-00103-00012-00029/157.
40 See Saidah Rastam, *Rosalie and Other Love Songs* (Petaling Jaya, Malaysia: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre, 2017), 5–33. (From National Library Singapore, call no. RSING 782.42095951 SAI-[ART]) for origins of the melody of "Terang Bulan".
41 "Changi Bandwagon."
42 Thompson, *Freedom in Internment*, 119; Wong Heng, "Double Tenth Incident," *Singapore Infopedia*. National Library Singapore. Article published January 2021; "Double Tenth," University of Cambridge Digital Library, https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-RCMS-00103-00015-00006/1.
43 See "Flute and Piano," *Changi Guardian* No. 233, 2 July 1943, University of Cambridge Digital Library, https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-RCMS-00103-00012-00029/385; and "Musical Recital," *Changi Guardian* No. 257, 24 September 1943, University of Cambridge Digital Library, https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-RCMS-00103-00012-00029/421. Based upon preceding programmes of "Musical Evenings" organised by Gordon Van Hien, this author conjectures that concerts reported under headings such as "Flute and Piano" or similar ones such as "Musical Concert", were part of the "Musical Evenings" series.
44 "Musical Evenings," *Changi Guardian* No. 261, 6 October 1943, University of Cambridge Digital Library, https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-RCMS-00103-00012-00029/426.
45 Iskandar Mydin and Eng, *Changi Chapel and Museum*, 70.
46 Archer, *The Internment of Western Civilians Under the Japanese 1941–1945*, 107.
47 Peet, *Within Changi's Walls*, 94.

THE LIONS OF THE LION CITY

HOW HERALDRY SHAPED SINGAPORE'S IDENTITY

In Singapore, a creature that never lived on the island became one of its most recognisable symbols – moving from legend and empire into national identity. This paradox opens a complex symbolic history in which heraldry is not mere ornament, but a visual archive of power.

By Adriana Patricia Manea (Ghemes)

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In Singapore, where there have never been real lions, but where their image has spanned centuries, empires and even political regimes, this apparent contradiction reveals how heraldry works.[1] The Singapore lion is not a zoological representation. It is a conventional, codified sign, a form of visual authority. Heraldry does not reproduce the world as it is; it orders it, transforms it into a symbol and makes it memorable.

In the case of Singapore, this transformation has been particularly profound. Over the last centuries, the Singapore identity has been transmitted not only through language, institutions or historical memory, but also through symbols. And heraldry was one of the channels through which this continuity took shape.

The Secret Language of Heraldry

To truly understand this narrative, we must first understand the "language" of heraldry.[2] Today it may seem like a niche discipline, perhaps even outdated, but for centuries heraldry was considered part of a "refined education".[3] It was, in essence, a system of identification and authority.

The coat of arms functioned as a visual identity card for individuals, families, territories and, later, entire empires. As European powers expanded, this language travelled with them. Colonial administrations exported not only institutions and trade networks but also forms of representation, including heraldic traditions overseen by institutions such as the College of Arms in London – the institution responsible for granting, registering and verifying official coats of arms.[4]

In the colonies, heraldry was not simply copied from the European model – it was adapted. And Singapore is one of the most interesting examples precisely because its heraldic imagery brought together two traditions: the Southeast Asian legend of the "Lion City" and the British imperial vocabulary.

(Facing page) The coat of arms of the Colony of Singapore in the *Colony of Singapore Annual Report 1952. Image reproduced from Flags and Coats of Arms of Singapore (n.p.: n.p., 1933–65). Collection of the National Library Singapore (Accession no. B34448861E; call no. RRARE 959.5703 BLA).*

A Lion Born of Legend

In Singapore's official heraldry, the lion draws its power from two major sources: the legend of Sang Nila Utama[5] and the British legacy. The legend endowed the lion with a founding aura. It linked it to the idea of a privileged beginning, the promise of a destiny and a symbolic genealogy that transcended the island's mere geography. The name Siṃhapura (सिंहपुर) – "City of the Lion" – as well as forms such as Siṃhanagara (सिंहनगर) and Siṃhadvīpa (सिंहद्वीप), "Fortress of the Lion" and "Island of the Lion" respectively, functioned not merely as names, but as concentrated narratives of origin, legitimacy and rank.

Of course, the animal described in the Malay chronicles should not necessarily be confused with a real lion. In the European heraldic imagination, it might have corresponded more to a heraldic "tiger".[6] Heraldic power relies on symbolic legibility over naturalism. Singapore's lion transitioned from legend to shields, enduring not as a "zoological error", but as a versatile symbol adopted by British heraldry while retaining local significance.

In Southeast Asia, the lion signalled prestige and royal authority. City names like Singburi in Thailand and Simhapura in Vietnam prove the symbol's regional circulation as a sign of power, even where lions never existed.

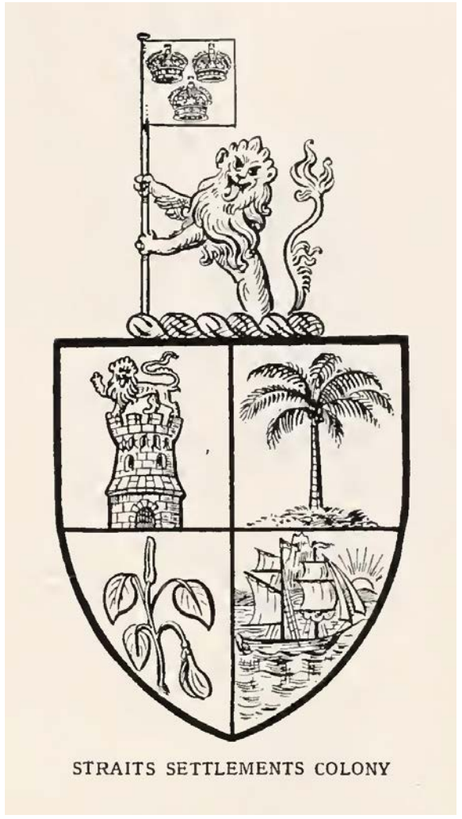
The British Brought the Lions

Although legend gave Singapore the lion, the British imperial era provided the heraldic framework through which this symbol could be formalised, whether we are referring to land lions or sea lions (also known as merlions).[7]

The first heraldic image of a "lion" associated, in a broad sense, with Singapore was the coat of arms of the Old East India Company.[8] There, the supporters of its coat of arms[9] – the sea lions, or merlions – can be seen as distant precursors of the symbol that would, much later, become the modern Merlion of Singapore.

In 1826, seven years after Stamford Raffles (representing the new East India Company) established a trading post on Singapore, the island joined Penang and Melaka in forming the Straits Settlements under the authority of the EIC. Its administration would change several times until 1 April 1867 when it became a crown colony, administered directly by the Colonial Office in London.[10]

Such a change also called for an appropriate heraldic representation. On 13 November 1867, the Secretary of State for the Colonies issued the first official seal of the Straits Settlements. It featured the British Royal Coat of Arms, flanked by three smaller shields representing the three territories. But this coat of arms did not yet have full heraldic status.[11]



The coat of arms of the Straits Settlements, 1911. Singapore, with the lion and tower, was represented by the upper left quadrant in the shield. *Image reproduced from Arthur Charles Fox-Davies, The Book of Public Arms: A Complete Encyclopaedia of All Royal, Territorial, Municipal, Corporate, Official, and Impersonal Arms (London: T.C. & E.C. Jack, 1915), 757.*

Consequently, the tower with the passant guardant lion for Singapore,[12] the betel palm for Penang and the kruing branch for Melaka could not be officially used on buildings, coins or other symbols of authority. Recognition only came about 44 years later, on 25 March 1911, when the College of Arms granted by Royal Warrant[13] the coat of arms of the Straits Settlements: a quartered shield and a simple crest, without supporters or a motto.[14] This was in use until the dissolution of the Straits Settlements on 1 April 1946.

For Singapore, the design was already of the "armes parlantes" type: the tower suggested the fortress or the city, while the lion referred both to the place name and to the imagery of British power. An important detail is the half-lion in the crest. In British heraldic tradition, such a design often signified a derived status, a visual dependence on imperial sovereignty.

Heraldry in Everyday Life

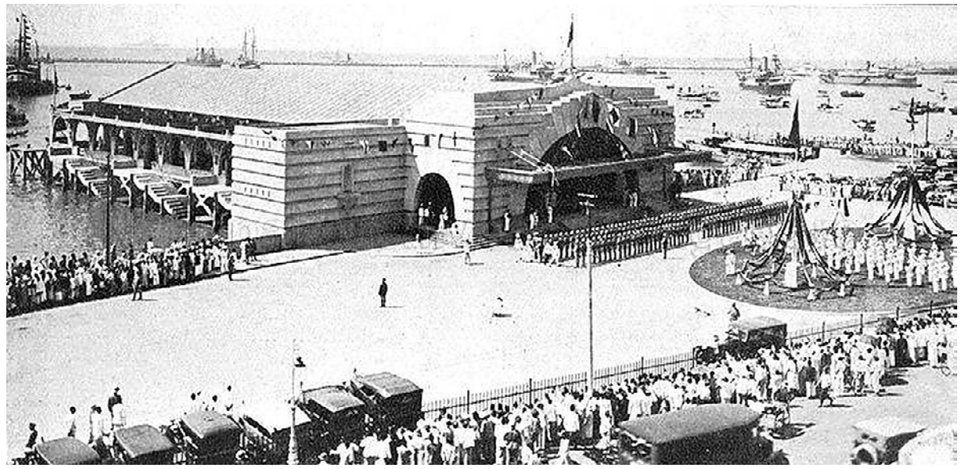
An official coat of arms does not remain on paper. For the Straits Settlements, heraldry became a form of "inscribing authority in space". The coat of arms was not mere decoration, but a tangible and visual representation of power.

This is clearly evident in the case of the old Tanjong Pagar Railway Station, inaugurated on 2 May 1932 by Governor Cecil Clementi, and Clifford Pier, inaugurated by the same governor on 3 June 1933, where the coat of arms was prominently displayed. Both were strategic hubs of the imperial infrastructure, connecting points between land and sea, and between Singapore and the wider network of the British Empire in Southeast Asia.

At the railway station, the official emblem highlighted the station's role as the southern terminus of a network – a symbolic link between the "southern tip of Asia" and London. At Clifford Pier, once the main landing point for sea passengers to Singapore, the coat of arms marked the entrance to a space under the authority of the British Crown.

In a "city of lions" without lions, one of the most surprising questions is in fact how many lions there really are – and, above all, whether they carry their tails properly. There is, however, a detail that is almost an enigma for the heraldic eye: the lions on the coats of arms on these buildings have their tails curled inward. This may indicate either that the craftsmen did not strictly follow the specifications of the 1911 Royal Warrant, or that they did not have a sufficiently precise grasp of heraldic conventions.

The coat of arms of the Straits Settlements inside the former Tanjong Pagar Railway Station, 2011. *Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image No. 20110000664 - 0076).*



(Above) Clifford Pier on the day of its opening, 3 June 1933. *Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image No. 19980001445 - 0037).*

(Left) The coat of arms of the Straits Settlements on the facade of Fullerton Bay Hotel, the former Clifford Pier, July 2023. *Photo by Dr Adriana Patricia Manea (Ghemes).*

(Right) A silver spoon engraved with the coat of arms of the Straits Settlements, early–mid 20th century. *Collection of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.*

During the interwar period, heraldry moved beyond the solemnity of public buildings and entered the material culture of the urban elite. Besides buildings, the Straits Settlements coat of arms was also featured on Christmas cards,[15] and engraved on silver jewellery boxes[16] and silver teaspoons.[17] The coat of arms was not an abstract entity, but had become a part of everyday colonial social life.

The Heraldic Redesign of the Colony of Singapore (1946–48)

The dissolution of the Straits Settlements on 1 April 1946 and Singapore's transformation into a separate crown colony brought about a major constitutional and heraldic change, resulting in a new coat of arms, but still continuing British heraldic practice.

The creation of this new arms was a rigorous process, documented in correspondence between the government of the Colony of Singapore, the Colonial Office and the College of Arms in London.[18] By February 1947, the Colonial Office was already recommending that Singapore's quadrant in the old coat of arms of the Straits Settlements become the new coat of arms of the separate colony. The proposal was accepted locally and then discussed in London where Sir Algar Howard, Garter King of Arms, gave his support.

Discussions continued into 1948. Finally, on 13 September 1948, Singapore received its own coat of arms by Royal Warrant,[19] signed by King George VI.[20] But even after the signing of the Royal Warrant on 13 September 1948, there was a delay between the legal enactment and the actual arrival of the documents in the colony, as noted by the *Straits Times* in November 1948.[21]

There is often confusion between this Royal Warrant of the Coat of Arms of the Colony of Singapore[22] and the Letter Patent[23] by which arms were granted to the municipality of Singapore. The distinction is important. Royal Warrants were issued directly by the monarch and signed by him, whereas Letters Patent were issued and signed by the Kings of Arms (heads of the heralds).

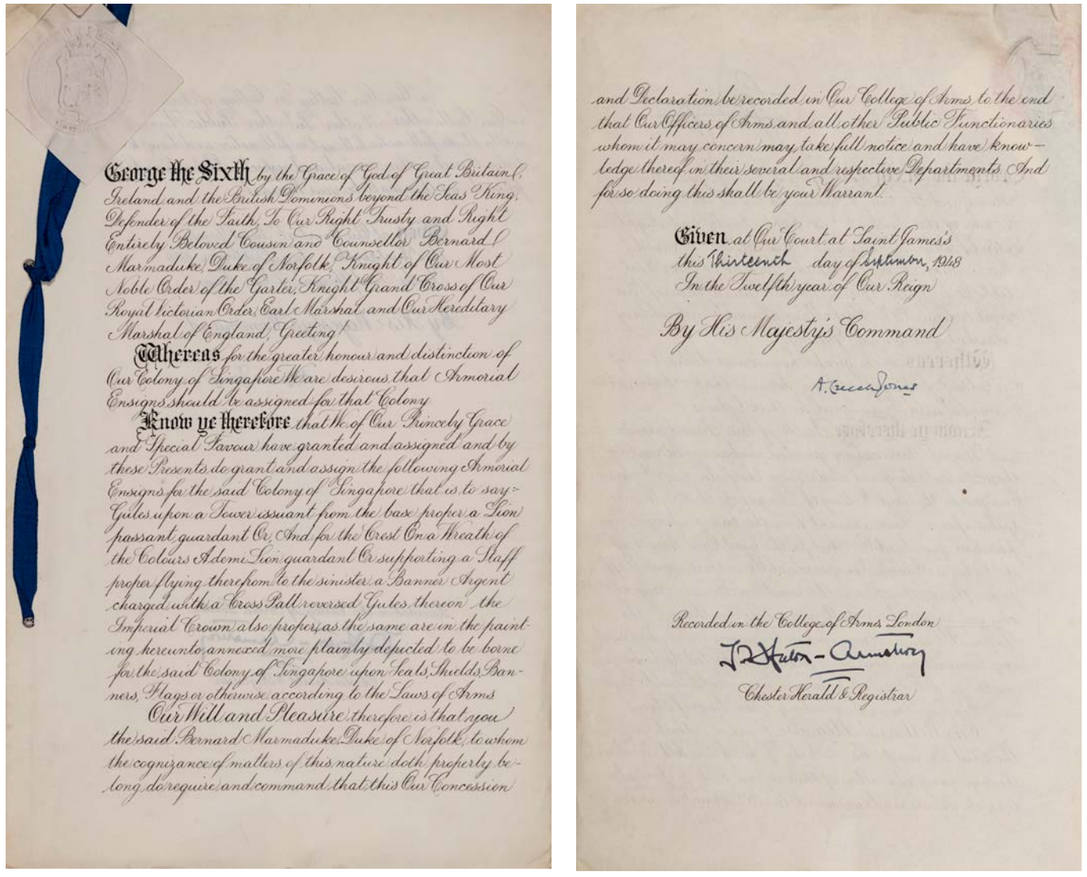
Research at the College of Arms reveals that Singapore's new coat of arms followed a rigorous British process of symbolic reconfiguration. Rather than

creating a new identity from scratch, the Singapore elements from the old Straits Settlements' arms – the tower and lion – were isolated and amplified. This maintained imperial continuity while still reflecting the colony's new autonomous constitutional status within the British Empire.

In Singapore's new coat of arms, the gold lion passant guardant, perched on the tower, no longer occupied just a section of a quartered shield; it now filled the entire shield. The crest maintained continuity with the old composition, but in an individualised form. Heraldically and politically, the new colony asserted its administrative autonomy without severing its visual connection to the previous regime.

(Right) The coat of arms of the Colony of Singapore as depicted in the Royal Warrant signed by King George VI on 13 September 1948. The registered copy is held at the College of Arms in London. *Image reproduced from College of Arms, MS Garter House, D/C/3, Royal Warrant of Arms for Singapore, 13 September 1948, I. 81, pp. 224–25.*

(Below) The original Royal Warrant granting a coat of arms to the Colony of Singapore, signed by King George VI on 13 September 1948 (the monarch's signature has been digitally removed here). The registered copy is held at the College of Arms in London. *Images reproduced from College of Arms, MS Garter House, D/C/3, Royal Warrant of Arms for Singapore, 13 September 1948, I. 81, pp. 224–25.*



George the Sixth by the Grace of God of Great Britain Ireland and the British Dominions beyond the Seas King Defender of the Faith To Our Right Trusty and Right Entirely Beloved Cousin and Counsellor Bernard Marmaduke Duke of Norfolk Knight of Our Most Noble Order of the Garter Knight Grand Cross of Our Royal Victorian Order Earl Marshal and Our Hereditary Marshal of England Greeting

Whereas for the greater honour and distinction of Our Colony of Singapore We are desirous that Armorial Ensigns should be assigned for that Colony

Know ye therefore that We of Our Princely Grace and Special Favour have granted and assigned and by these Presents do grant and assign the following Armorial Ensigns for the said Colony of Singapore that is to say- Gules upon a Tower issuant from the base proper a Lion passant guardant Or And for the Crest On a Wreath of the Colours A demi Lion guardant Or supporting a Staff proper flying therefrom to the sinister a Banner Argent charged with a Cross Patté reversed Gules thereon the Imperial Crown also proper as the same are in the painting hereunto annexed more plainly depicted to be borne for the said Colony of Singapore upon Seals Shields Banners Flags or otherwise according to the Laws of Arms

Our Will and Pleasure therefore is that you the said Bernard Marmaduke Duke of Norfolk to whom the cognizance of matters of this nature doth properly belong do require and command that this Our Concession and Declaration be recorded in Our College of Arms to the end that Our Officers of Arms and all other Public Functionaries whom it may concern may take full notice and have knowledge thereof in their several and respective Departments And for so doing this shall be your Warrant

Given at Our Court at Saint James's this Thirteenth day of September 1948 In the Twelfth year of Our Reign

By His Majesty's Command

A. Cecil Jones

Recorded in the College of Arms London

J. P. Heaton-Armstrong

Chester Herald & Registrar

(Above) The coat of arms of the Colony of Singapore sculpted by Rodolfo Nolli, 1948–55. *Lina Brunner Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image No. 19980001358 - 0067).*

(Right) The coat of arms of the Colony of Singapore on the facade of the former Bukit Timah Fire Station at 260 Upper Bukit Timah Road, 26 December 2023. *Photo by Dr Adriana Patricia Manea (Ghemes).*

The text of the Royal Warrant established that "Armorial Ensigns" were to be granted for "the greater honour and distinction" of the Colony of Singapore. A subtle technical detail is also significant: although the text did not explicitly mention the colour of the lions' tongue and claws, heraldic conventions dictate that the lion on the shield has claws and a blue tongue, while the one on the crest has a red tongue.

We are pleased to present, for the first time, the full text of the Royal Warrant of Arms, and the image and depiction of the coat of arms for the Colony of Singapore (see images on p. 40).

At present, physical traces of the Singapore Colony coat of arms are scarce. The documents in the Rare Materials Collection of the National Library of Singapore include only a few examples of official stationery (printed in the *Singapore Annual Report*, 1949 and 1952) illustrating stylistic variations of the same composition, most likely created by two different artists (but outside the College of Arms, either in the United Kingdom or in Singapore), as the lion and the tower are stylised quite differently.[24]

On buildings, there was once the relief sculpture created by the Italian sculptor Rodolfo Nolli titled "Coat of Arms of the Colony of Singapore", which no longer exists today.[25] The one on the facade of the former Bukit Timah Fire Station on Upper Bukit Timah Road has been preserved.[26]

Self-government and State Coat of Arms (1959)

The year 1959 was not merely a time of constitutional reorganisation. It was also a time of careful recalibration of the visual language of authority. With Singapore's attainment of internal self-government on 3 June 1959, heraldry ceased to be an appendage of the colonial order and became a direct expression of local authority.

The decisive moment came on 11 November 1959 when the Legislative Assembly passed the Singapore State Arms and Flag and National Anthem Bill.[27] During the debates, the new coat of arms was presented as a synthesis of heraldic tradition and local identity. "I think we have a great deal to rejoice over in having struck a simple, striking symbol which has, with the blessings which all parties have given it today, every reason to endure as the emblems of state which will evoke unity and loyalty in our people," said then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew.[28]

On 3 December 1959, on the occasion of Yusof Ishak's inauguration as the first Malayan-born Yang di-Pertuan Negara (Head of State), the new emblems were officially unveiled at City Hall.[29] The new coat of arms of Singapore, or state crest, was no longer designed by the College of Arms; along with the state flag, it was designed by a committee headed by then Deputy Prime Minister Toh Chin Chye.[30]

The coat of arms of the Republic of Singapore. *Image reproduced from Flags and Coats of Arms of Singapore (n.p.: n.p., 1933–65). Collection of the National Library Singapore (Accession no. B34448861E; call no. RRARE 959.5703 BLA).*

The official description of the coat of arms of Singapore reads:

> "The State Arms of Singapore shall consist of a shield on which is emblazoned a white crescent moon and five white stars on a red background. Supporting the shield shall be a lion on the left and a tiger on the right. Below the shield shall be a banner with the words 'Majulah Singapura' written on it. The colour red symbolises universal brotherhood and equality of man, and the colour white signifies pervading and everlasting purity and virtue. The crescent represents a young country on the rise in its ideals of establishing democracy, peace, progress, justice and equality, as indicated by the five stars. The lion represents Singapore and the tiger this island's links with the Federation of Malaya."[31]

The motto "Majulah Singapura" ("Onward Singapore") is, in turn, essential because it is also the title of Singapore's national anthem.[32] In colonial heraldry, mottos often invoked legitimacy through the Crown or providence. Here, however, the motto mobilises and acts as a rallying call. The fact that it is in Malay, not in Latin or English, speaks volumes about the symbol's new focal point.

The red shield shifts the focus from colonial memory to a new identity. The colour red is symbolic of universal brotherhood and equality of man, while white signifies pervading and everlasting purity and virtue. The crescent represents a young country on the ascent in its ideals of establishing democracy, peace, progress, justice and equality as indicated by the five stars. The supporters are among the most inspired iconographic solutions in the entire heraldic history of Singapore. The lion continues the mythological lineage of the Lion City and the tiger introduces a geopolitical dimension, evoking historical ties with Malaya. The relationship between the two animals is not one of hierarchy, but of balance.

And yet, the formal structure of the new arms remains deeply rooted in Western heraldry. The shield organises the whole, the supporters lend it stability and prestige, and the motto frames it in an internationally recognisable form. The change was not in the heraldic language itself, but in the political meaning that this language carried.

An Enduring Symbol

Viewed as a whole, Singapore's heraldic history is not merely a succession of arms. It is a visual genealogy of authority. The separate Colony of Singapore gave it a more independent form. And the self-governing state, and later the sovereign nation, transformed this legacy into one of independence and sovereignty.

What remains constant, of course, is the lion. But not the same lion. Its role has changed each time. It was first part of a composite colonial entity. It then became the emblem of a distinct colony. Finally, it established itself as a marker of identity for an independent nation. In fact, the question – how many lions are there in Singapore's heraldry? – has a more nuanced answer than it seems: there are as many lions as there have been regimes of meaning that the island has undergone.

Singapore's heraldry essentially functions as a visual archive of its history. The lion, absent from reality, has become ubiquitous in representation precisely because it has successfully embodied and expressed the various political changes. An animal absent from the landscape, yet extraordinarily present in memory, in architecture, in the language of the state and in the way the city presents itself to the world. Singapore did not simply inherit the lion. It reinterpreted it ceaselessly – until it made it its own.

There is no doubt that the lion will remain a symbol of Singapore for a long time to come. ♦

This research has benefited from the direct support of highly prestigious institutions and specialists in the fields of heraldry and documentary heritage, whose contributions have been essential to the conduct and in-depth analysis of this study.

First and foremost, special thanks are due to Dr Dominic C.D. Ingram, Chester Herald of Arms, and Dr James Lloyd, Archivist of the College of Arms in London, for their generosity and constant support in facilitating access to fundamental heraldic sources, as well as for the expert guidance they so generously provided throughout the research. Thanks to the direct support of the College of Arms, it was possible to identify and study a unique collection of documents of remarkable value, which have contributed substantially to filling in an important part of Singapore's history.

My gratitude also goes to Gladys Low, Deputy Director, Singapore and Southeast Asia Collections at the National Library Singapore, and Heirwin Mohd Nasir, Head Library Officer at the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library, for the support provided over many years in identifying and consulting relevant archival materials in Singapore.

NOTES

1 Heraldry may be defined as an auxiliary science of history and, at the same time, as a normative system that regulates the design, description, grant, use and visual representation of coats of arms, including studying their origin, evolution, composition and interpretation.

2 When experts describe a coat of arms and the main part called the "shield", they use specific rules to ensure that every symbol or figure on the shield, as well as every colour and enamel, is properly identified. Accuracy is so vital that even a tiny mistake can change the entire meaning of a symbol and the description of the coat of arms. For example, a lion depicted without a tail is technically termed "diffamed". In the harsh world of medieval honour, a diffamed lion was a sign of disgrace, or "heraldic shame" – literally a lion that had lost its dignity on the shield. See James Parker, *A Glossary of Terms Used in Heraldry* (Oxford and London: James Parker, 1894), XXVI, Internet Archive, https://archive.org/details/aglossarytermsu08parkgoog/page/n5/mode/2up.

3 Frederick Curtis, *Heraldry Simplified: A Popular Treatise on the Subject of Heraldry Together with a Glossary of Technical Terms, and Nearly Two Hundred Drawings* (New York: Dodge Publishing Company, 1899), 11.

4 The College of Arms in London is the traditional heraldic authority of England. Within the context of the British Empire, the coats of arms of the colonies were not merely decorative designs, but official emblems that had to be approved in accordance with British heraldic rules, after which a Royal Warrant was issued for that coat of arms.

5 For more details, see Derek Heng, "Sang Nila Utama: Separating Myth from Reality," *BiblioAsia* 16, no. 2 (July–September 2020): 58–64.

6 Classifying a large feline as a heraldic "tiger" rather than a "lion" was used to represent exotic animals unknown to Europeans, as their resemblance was relatively close; medieval heralds often invented features for animals "from the East", just as Temasek/Singapore was perceived.

7 Sea lions, or merlions, are hybrid creatures, with the upper body of a lion and the tail of a fish. These figures were not mere decorative whims. They articulated, in heraldic language, the identity of a maritime and imperial empire: the lion represented British political might, while the fish tail signified control of the sea lanes, overseas expansion and the projection of power across the oceans. In this sense, the sea lion became a symbol of British commercial dominance and naval vocation.

8 This refers to the heraldic composition of the Old British East India Company's coat of arms. We will detail the heraldry of the imperial period in the second part of this article. The Old East India Company was incorporated by Queen Elizabeth on 31 December 1600 as the Governor and Company of Merchants of London Trading into the East Indies. A rival enterprise, the English Company Trading to the East Indies, was established by King William III on 5 September 1698 to compete against the original company. In 1708–1709, the two were merged to form one single entity called the United Company of Merchants of England Trading to the East Indies, more commonly known as the Honourable East India Company or the British East India Company.

9 The supporters of the coat of arms (in heraldic terminology) are the figures placed on either side of the shield (the central part of the coat of arms or blazon), as if they were supporting or guarding it. Supporters can be real or fantastical animals, characters or other symbolic beings, and their role is to enhance the meaning and prestige of the coat of arms.

10 Jaime Koh, "Straits Settlements," *Singapore Infopedia*. National Library Singapore. Article published 29 July 2014.

11 Walter Makepeace, Gilbert E. Brooke and Roland St. John Braddell, *One Hundred Years of Singapore: Being Some Account of the Capital of the Straits Settlements from Its Foundation by Sir Stamford Raffles on February 6, 1819, to February 6, 1919* (London: John Murray, 1921), 571. (From National Library Singapore, call no. RCLOS 959.51 MAK-[RFL])

12 A lion passant guardant is a lion shown walking towards dexter, in the heraldic sense, with its body in profile, supported on three limbs and with the right forepaw raised; its head is guardant, meaning turned to face the observer and looking directly at the viewer.

13 The original Royal Warrant conferring the Coat of Arms of the Straits Settlements in that year is preserved at the College of Arms, Garter House, G. 12, pp. 189–92. Royal Warrants of Arms are registered with the College, which (sometimes) also preserves the original (as is the case with Singapore).

14 Arthur Charles Fox-Davies, *The Book of Public Arms: A Complete Encyclopaedia of All Royal, Territorial, Municipal, Corporate, Official, and Impersonal Arms* (London: T. C. & E. C. Jack, 1915), 757, Internet Archive, https://archive.org/details/bookofpublicarms00foxd/page/n7/mode/2up.

15 The Christmas cards were sold by John Little and Co., Ltd. in its stores in Singapore, Penang, Kuala Lumpur and Ipoh. See for instance "Page 8 Advertisements Column 1," *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 29 November 1928, 8; and "Page 10 Advertisements Column 1," *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 25 October 1930, 10. (From NewspaperSG)

16 The jewellery box, described as a casket in the advertisement, was on display for sale at K.M. Oli Mohamed's store at 3 High Street. Besides the coat of arms, it was also decorated with images of St Andrew's Cathedral and Victoria Memorial Hall. See "Page 12 Advertisements Column 1," *Malaya Tribune*, 14 February 1930, 12. (From NewspaperSG)

17 National Heritage Board, "Decorative Silver Spoon with Straits Settlements Coat of Arms," Roots, last updated 15 October 2020, https://www.roots.gov.sg/Collection-Landing/listing/1271026.

18 College of Arms, Garter House, D/C/3, Singapore file, correspondence between the Colonial Office, the Government of the Colony of Singapore and the College of Arms, 18 February 1947– 13 September 1948.

19 The monarch grants coats of arms directly by Royal Warrant to other members of the royal family and to his or her own territories. Royal Warrants of Arms are registered with the College of Arms in London, which (sometimes) also retains the original, as in the case of this new coat of arms. The original Royal Warrant (Garter House, D/C/3, Royal Warrant granting the coat of arms to the Colony of Singapore, September 13, 1948) by which the Coat of Arms of the Colony of Singapore was conferred is kept in London, in a file containing all related correspondence, identified following research conducted with the support of the College of Arms in London. The registered copy of the document is in the College of Arms (under archive reference I. 81, pp. 224–25).

20 The images of the Royal Warrant that we are publishing here for the first time comply with the conditions imposed by the King of Arms of the Garter, who requested the removal of King George VI's signature from the image, specifying that this measure was taken as a precaution.

21 "Singapore Waits for New Arms," *Straits Times*, 21 November 1948, 3. (From NewspaperSG)

22 Royal Warrant (Garter House, D/C/3, Royal Warrant granting the coat of arms to the Colony of Singapore, 13 September 1948) by which the Coat of Arms of the Colony of Singapore was conferred.

23 The original Letter Patent/Grant of Arms for the City of Singapore (the basis on which arms were granted to the municipality of Singapore) is in the collection of the National Museum of Singapore. A digitised copy of this Letter Patent is found in the records of the National Archives of Singapore where it is listed as "Royal Warrant Assigning Armorial Ensigns for the City of Singapore," 9 April 1948, document. (From National Archives of Singapore, media - image No. 20200000135 – 0001). Letter Patents are registered with the College of Arms, but the originals are sent to the recipients as in the case of the municipality of Singapore.

24 *Flags and Coats of Arms of Singapore* (n.p.: n.p., 1933–1965). (From National Library Singapore, call no. RRARE 959.5703 BLA)

25 The National Archives of Singapore has a photo of the sculpture. See "Coat of Arms of the Colony of Singapore, Sculpted by Italian Sculptor Rodolfo Nolli," 1948–1955, photograph. (From Lina Brunner Collection, National Archives of Singapore, media - image no. 19980001358 - 0067)

26 This writer Dr Adriana Patricia Manea (Ghemes) took a picture of the coat of arms on 26 December 2023.

27 "Singapore Gets Its 'Symbols of Self-respect'," *Straits Times*, 12 November 1959, 11. (From NewspaperSG)

28 Singapore Legislative Assembly, "Singapore State Arms and Flag and National Anthem Bill," vol. 11 of *Debates: Official Report*, 11 November 1959, cols. 740–41. (Singapore: Legislative Assembly, 1959–1965). (From National Library Singapore, call no. RCLOS 328.5957 SIN-[HWE]

29 "Singapore Rejoices," *Straits Times*, 4 December 1959, 1. (From NewspaperSG)

30 "No Conflict, Clear-cut Symbol of Unity," *Straits Times*, 9 August 1981, 13. (From NewspaperSG); "National Coat of Arms," National Heritage Board, last updated 14 March 2025, https://www.nhb.gov.sg/what-we-do/our-work/community-engagement/education/resources/national-symbols/national-coat-of-arms.

31 *Flags and Coats of Arms of Singapore*.

32 Republic of Singapore, "National Symbols Act 2022," No. 29 of 2022, Government Gazette Acts Supplement, 7 October 2022, Singapore Statutes Online, https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act/NSA2022?WholeDoc=1.

The Perfect Brew

SINGAPORE'S CHINESE TEA CULTURE

Singapore's Chinese tea heritage tells a story where traditional practices, community and adaptive innovation have shaped an evolving yet enduring cultural legacy.

By Ng Yun Ling

Teawares and tea accessories at Tea Chapter, 2026. *Photo by Ng Yun Ling.*

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Today, if you come across a long and winding queue in a shopping mall in Singapore, it is likely for the latest bubble tea outlet or modern tea beverage chain to hit our shores. From herbal milk teas at Amacha (阿嬤茶语) in Chinatown to tea-inspired cocktails at the modern restaurant-bar Synthesis, novelty teas are embraced by Gen Z and millennials, who often feature them on social media.

But before bubble tea arrived here in 1992, drinking Chinese tea meant visiting an artisanal teahouse to experience the fine art of tea brewing. Here, one could sip tea from dainty teacups, listen to live Chinese classical music from a *guzheng* or *pipa*, admire paintings on the wall and even indulge in Chinese calligraphy – all in a cosy and relaxing ambience to meet up with friends over a tête-à-tête.[1]

Early Tearooms and Teahouse Restaurants

Early tearooms and teahouse restaurants, which first opened in Singapore in the late 19th century, were social hubs woven into everyday life. Tearooms, known as *cha shi* or *cha sat* in Cantonese (茶室), were casual local establishments offering tea and confectionery akin to a coffeeshop. In a letter to the *Straits Times* in 1993, reader Chan Kwee Sung wrote that early tearooms or "no-frill" teahouses "flourished once in Singapore, not to cater to the genteel but to the *hoi polloi* of the Chinese community for whom that early morning cuppa and a *dian xin* breakfast were the first essentials of the day".[2]

Tong Heng Traditional Cantonese Pastries (東興) was one such tearoom established in 1935 at 33 Smith Street, where they started selling their signature diamond-shaped egg tarts, traditional omelette toast (similar to French toast but made with lard) and other Cantonese pastries. Just across from Tong Heng was the famed Lai Chun Yuen Opera House, whose avid fans often bought pastries and snacks from Tong Heng as gifts for their favourite performers.

"During those days, whenever there's a performance, Tong Heng can operate till 3 am. It's not unusual for fans to order our omelette toast for the artistes," said Ana Fong, its fourth-generation successor. Today, Tong Heng has branches on South Bridge Road and in Jurong Point shopping mall.[3]

Teahouse restaurants, known as *cha lou* (茶楼), were multistorey upscale establishments that served tea with *dim sum* and light refreshments. Typically, teahouse restaurants began operations at 3 am or 4 am, allowing customers to indulge in unhurried conversations over brewed tea for one to two hours before daybreak.[4] At night, bigger teahouse restaurants took on a different identity by transforming into banquet halls, where gatherings and weddings took place.[5]

There were also teahouses in rural areas such as Peck San Tea Pavilion (碧山茶亭) in Kampong San Teng (碧山亭). The residents were mostly descendants of early Cantonese, Teochew and Hokkien immigrants. Nearby the tea pavilion were amenities such as an open-air theatre, reflecting the rich communal culture of the local community.[6]

The Artisanal Teahouse Experience

From the 1980s onwards, Chinese tea art, or *zhonghua chayi* (中华茶艺), became popular in China and Taiwan. Artisanal teahouses, known as *chayi guan* (茶艺馆), were curated venues where visitors could experience the refined art of brewing tea, which involved warming the teacup, boiling the water and soaking the tea leaves. Tea art prioritises small-batch production, experimental techniques as well as the tea brewer's personal interpretation of traditional methods of tea brewing. The tea brewer makes intentional micro-adjustments to parameters like leaf-to-water ratio, water temperature, infusion time and choice of teaware so that their own sensory preferences and aesthetic are reflected in the brew.

The development of tea art in Singapore took shape through the establishment of several teahouses, starting with Tea Chapter (茶渊) on Neil Road in 1989. Here, "[t]ea drinkers enjoy sipping brews in dainty cups amidst a quiet and traditional ambience – rattan screens separating the cane tables and chairs on wooden floors, and piped soft Chinese classical music," the *Straits Times* reported.[7]

According to Lee Kim Eng, manager of Tea Chapter, "tea is appreciated like wine". "But the quality of tea, unlike wine, is determined by the brewer. No two cups of tea will taste alike. He or she can control the strength and flavour through the standing time given for infusion as well as setting the water temperature."[8]

Other teahouses opened in succession, including Green Bamboo Tea House (绿竹村), Chinese Tea House (新加坡茶馆), Sanyang Tea Palace (三阳茶宫) and Liu Xiang Teacraft (留香茶艺坊).[9] These teahouses often occupy conserved shophouses or intimate upper-storey spaces, with specially curated tea rooms for retreat and quiet conversation. Many teahouses position themselves as custodians of Chinese tea heritage, using traditional teaware and emphasising brewing as a craft through guided tasting and appreciation sessions. These teahouses stand apart from the city's ubiquitous fast-food outlets, trendy cafes, lively bars and discos, providing a more culturally authentic and contemplative space.

Compared to alcohol and soft drinks, tea offers health benefits. "Many people are very health-conscious and tea, without additives of preservatives, is a natural choice," said Lee, who was also co-partner of Cha Xiang teahouse (茶香) on Sago Street. Agreeing, publishing company executive Edmund Chong began visiting teahouses instead of lounges and coffeeshops. "I like the relaxed atmosphere of [Cha Xiang]. I bring my clients here because tea-drinking is healthier and costs less than going to lounges," he said.[10]

Besides working adults, students were also frequent patrons of teahouses as these were "ideal [places] for doing homework, writing, reading or studying". "This is my third time here in [Tea Chapter], and I've visited all the teahouses in Singapore," said 17-year-old college student Song Qingyuan. "A friend took me to the tea house at North Bridge Centre after my O levels and I liked it. I started reading up on tea as well."[11]

The art of drinking and brewing tea led to the creation of exquisite tea accessories, such as teapots and teacups, which became prized collectors' items. The trend of collecting Chinese teapots began in Taiwan and Hong Kong in the late 1980s before reaching Singapore. Teapots are treasured for their high quality clay as well as skilled craftsmanship, with those by renowned artisans fetching a premium. "More collectors in Singapore are buying expensive Chinese teapots, and some are willing to pay up to $300,000 for one," Lee Chee Keong, chairman of the Tea Cultural Society (Singapore), told the *Straits Times* in 1994.[12]

At these teahouses, tea connoisseurs would select their preferred teapots or bring along their personal teaware. Oriental Tea House was one of the many establishments that retailed premium *yixing zisha* teapots (宜兴紫砂壶), handcrafted from a rare mineral-rich clay known for retaining the aroma and depth of brewed tea over time. After purchase, these pieces, along with other fine tea sets, were entrusted to the care of the teahouses for their owners' subsequent visits.[13]

An enamelled Yixing (宜兴) teapot featuring a phoenix and floral motifs, late 19th–early 20th centuries. Introduced during the mid-Ming dynasty for the literati, Yixing teawares were admired for their heat-absorbing properties, which kept tea warm and improved the strong aroma and taste of Chinese tea. *Collection of the Asian Civilisations Museum.*

A tin canister for storing Chinese tea leaves, mid-20th century. *Collection of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.*

My Cup of Tea

Over time, tea drinking evolved from a formal ritual to a refined lifestyle choice, embraced by the wider public. The formation of the Tea Cultural Society in 1992 further strengthened this movement, providing a platform for tea professionals to connect, collaborate and promote the appreciation of tea culture across all segments of society. The society brought together 40 teahouse operators, tea sellers and community centre tea clubs.[14] Members of the society also joined study tours abroad to learn new tea brewing practices and immerse in tea culture.

Premium and specialty teas became more accessible to Singapore in the 1990s. "Like wine, some types of tea leaves appreciate with time," said Lee Chee Keong, chairman of the Tea Cultural Society and owner of Liu Hsiang Teacraft.[15] At the time, the market price of tea cakes ranged from $10,000 to $25,000 for 300 g, which was approximately $30 for a cup of brewed tea. These were mainly *pu er* tea leaves that had been compressed under high pressure and then underwent fermentation, allowing the tea to develop more complex flavours with age.

However, with more tea establishments opening in the 1990s, there was increased competition and they had to look at ways to reinvent their business models. Tea Chapter, for instance, held talks by well-known writers and introduced cultural performances such as harmonica and *guzheng* recitals.[16] The Reading Mill on the fourth floor of Bras Basah Complex was co-located with a Chinese bookstore for customers to read while sipping tea.[17] Teahouses such as Sam Yong Tea Palace on Jalan Senang and Tea Pavilion on Sago Street incorporated karaoke facilities to attract a wider clientele and sustain their businesses, while

Oriental Tea House included liquor and soft drinks in their menu.[18]

Unlike traditional karaoke lounges, karaoke teahouses were smoke-free and suitable for families as there were no hostesses. Cha Xuan No Memories (茶轩) teahouse on Bukit Pasoh Road had private rooms of varying sizes to accommodate different groups of customers, offering discount packages at different hours of the day, including special promotions for students. Chinese Town Karaoke Tea House & Restaurant on Kreta Ayer Road served Chinese tea alongside Indonesian coffee, and staged performances by Indonesian dancers as well as those by a song, dance and opera troupe from China.[19]

Also in the early 1990s, the age-old ritual of tea brewing in traditional teahouses gave way to a wave of "bubble" teahouses, which emerged across Taiwan to cater to the younger crowd. At these modern teahouses, hot tea was cooled with ice and shaken like cocktails to create a foam and then served in a cocktail glass.[20] Later, tapioca balls, or "pearls", were also added to the drink.

This innovation soon reached Singapore, and in 1992, Bubble Tea Garden opened in Marina Square, serving beverages with names such as "Pearl Red Bubble Tea", "Yam Shake" and "Honey Egg Yolk", which had frothy tops.[21] By 2002, there were more than 5,000 bubble tea shops in Singapore. This fad died down just a year later when many had to shutter.

Bubble tea, however, has since made a comeback in Singapore with popular brands like LiHO, KOI Thé and HeyTea to name a few. Besides the regular pearls, unusual toppings such as aloe vera, konjac jelly and cheese have been introduced to discerning customers, who could even customise the sugar levels and temperature settings.[22]

Of late, Singapore's tea scene has become more vibrant with the arrival of modern tea chains such as CHAGEE (霸王茶姬) and CHICHA San Chen (吃茶三千), which offer healthier tea options and high-quality ingredients.

Queen Elizabeth II and the Duke of Edinburgh experiencing the traditional way of preparing Chinese tea at Tea Chapter, 1989. *Courtesy of Tea Chapter.*

Early Tea Trade Networks

Another aspect of the tea business is the tea import and export business. Tea, of course, was an important export commodity for China, and firms in Singapore played an important role in the supply chain.

Before the 1920s, the China tea trade in Singapore was dominated by the Teochews from the Chaoshan region (comprising the cities of Chaozhou, Jieyang and Shantou), who exported Fujian oolong tea from the port of Shantou on the eastern coast of Guangdong province. This trade dynamic shifted with the large-scale influx of Anxi merchants (a prominent subgroup of the Hokkien community) from Fujian province to Singapore, who began exporting tea from Xiamen and establishing a robust Fujianese merchant network.[23]

In the early 20th century, political instability and economic disruption in Fujian created a climate of uncertainty, leading merchants to seek business opportunities in more stable environments beyond their homeland. Singapore was a conducive destination due to its advantageous geographical position, free port status and an entrepôt under the British. Notably, Singapore was positioned at the intersection of maritime routes that connected the United Kingdom to Southeast Asia and also served as a node in intra-Asian trade networks.[24]

In Singapore, Anxi merchants either managed branches of established family enterprises based in Fujian or founded new businesses to tap into the growing regional tea trade. Early tea shops were focused on importing and selling two oolong cultivars that were in demand: *tieguanyin* from Anxi (安溪铁观音), which is representative of Southern Fujian oolong tea (闽南乌龙茶), and *shuixian* (Shui Hsien) from the Wuyi Mountains (武夷水仙), a Northern Fujian oolong tea (闽北乌龙茶). Anxi *tieguanyin* is a bright golden tea with a delicate aroma that carries through several brews, while Wuyi *shuixian* is a deep amber infusion with a caramel-like flavour and a smooth, robust texture that is richer in leaves from mature tea plants.[25]

In 1928, tea merchants in Singapore established the Singapore Chinese Tea Importers and Exporters Association (SCTIEA), which had close ties with the Singapore Ann Kway Association whose members came from Ann Kway (Anxi) in Fujian.[26]

The tea association coordinated trade policies, enforced quality standards and strengthened business ties across Southeast Asia, solidifying Singapore's position as a crucial centre in the Fujian-Singapore tea commerce network.[27] As Fujian's tea trade faced competition from Ceylon, India, Japan and Taiwan, Singapore's market provided essential support that sustained Fujianese merchant networks up till the late 1950s.

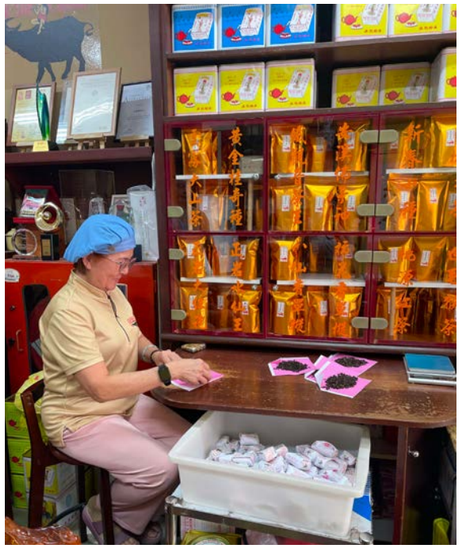
After 1949, Singapore tea merchants expanded beyond Fujian tea, seeking lower-cost alternatives from Taiwan and other regions due to changes in supply and pricing. They adapted to new markets by diversifying their business, no longer focusing on a single tea cultivar.

By the 1960s, more than 100 tea rooms and tea enterprises were involved in the Chinese tea trade in Singapore. Post-independence, some tea merchants in Singapore obtained citizenship and expanded their businesses. When China opened to international trade in 1982, these tea merchants resumed trade and rebuilt direct links with Chinese producers, integrating into global supply chains and adapting to new market demands.[28]

Not a Storm in a Teacup

Apart from the import-export trade, there were also tea shops known as *cha zhuang* (茶庄) that reprocessed and repackaged tea imported into Singapore. These shops had their own distinctive collection of specialty teas. Blending tea leaves in handwoven bamboo sieves and roasting them over charcoal was the earliest method used by local tea shops, a craft refined through experience and guided by the senses rather than fixed formulas.

At Pek Sin Choon Tea Merchant, tea leaves continue to be packed by hand in the shop's signature pink paper, 2026. *Photo by Ng Yun Ling.*



Tian Xiang Tea Merchant (天香茶庄) was one of the first few Teochew-owned tea shops in Singapore. The original shop was located at the junction of New Bridge Road and Circular Road around 1900 before relocating to Merchant Road in 1920.[29] The shop had a corner where customers could sample different types of tea prepared using the traditional *gongfu cha* (功夫茶) method (literally "tea made with effort"; the art of brewing tea with skill involving many quick infusions so that the tea evolves in flavour, aroma and texture over time). This was a meticulous Teochew ritual using the brazier, *zisha* (紫砂) teapot and small teacups.[30] "For decades, the shop had been a meeting place for the Chaozhou [Teochew] community of traders, clerks, labourers and others," the *Straits Times* reported in 1984. But just two years later, on 23 June 1986, Tian Xiang Tea Merchant closed down.[31]

This was a craft that took decades to master, and each tea shop zealously guarded its trade secrets for achieving the ideal roast. Once the oven was set up, workers would tend to it for a full 24-hour shift in a high-temperature room.[32] Few people were inclined to carry on with the craft as it was laborious and skill intensive.

Pek Sin Choon Tea Merchant (白新春茶庄) and Guan Chong Bee Tea Merchant (源崇美茶庄) are two of the early Fujianese establishments founded during the 1920s that continue to thrive today. Pek Sin Choon developed high-quality yet affordable teas to pair with *bak kut teh* (literally "meat bone tea"; a pork rib dish cooked in broth), which was traditionally served with a free cup of tea made from lower-grade leaves. They were the exclusive suppliers of *bu zhi xiang* tea (不知香; meaning "Renowned Unknown Fragrance"), which has a rich, roasted depth with a persistent and sweet aftertaste. This tea is a local Nanyang adaptation of a traditional Chinese oolong (Southeast Asia was known as Nanyang, or "South Seas", in the 19th to mid-20th centuries).[33]

Guan Chong Bee faced early challenges, but eventually prospered and became one of Singapore's best-known tea establishments involved in the regional tea trade. In the 1970s, the tea merchant turned to electric tea roasting, which allowed it to accurately control the temperature and timing of tea brewing.[34]

By the mid-1980s, advancements in technology played a role in accelerating tea production when tea merchants started to incorporate mechanised blending and packaging. Ong Hui Sing, the chairman of Ong Sam Yong Tea Merchants, a tea packaging factory, told the *Straits Times* in 1984: "Tea was once a small home business. But it has become an international enterprise."[35]

Today, Singapore's tea trade has evolved from family-run ventures to a structured and global industry, with Singapore positioned as a regional trading and re-export hub. Tea is imported mainly from China, Morocco, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan and then re-exported to neighbouring markets. At the same time, tea is also supplied domestically to wholesalers, brands and cafes in Singapore. Flavoured and specialty teas account for an increasing share of value and volume.[36] In addition, local companies are also going beyond Chinese tea. TWG Tea sources tea leaves from around the world, which are then blended, packaged and sold in its boutiques across Asia, Europe, the Middle East and North America.[37]

Traditional tea merchants in Singapore have shifted from solely retail-front businesses to hybrid roles as small-scale wholesalers, blenders and private-label suppliers to meet the growing demand for bespoke blends and novelty teas. However, they have remained faithful to their origins.

Pek Sin Choon, which traces its history back to 1910, has retained its traditional pink paper packaging along with the use of recycled metal tins for their Nanyang tea blends. According to fourth-generation owner Kenry Peh, they started using pink wrapping paper during the Japanese Occupation when resources had run out and paper had to be sourced from a Chinese medicinal hall. After the war, it was kept and became a lasting symbol of continuity and appreciation for times of peace. As a supplier of tea leaves to many *bak kut teh* shops in Singapore, fans of the dish will be able to enjoy their comfort food paired with a cup of piping hot tea for years to come.[38] ♦

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BEYOND THE RED LIGHT

GEYLANG AND ITS STORIED LORONGS

Geylang and its infamous side lanes have a rich history that is often overshadowed by its reputation as a red-light district.

By Andrea Kee

Bustling Geylang Road with its shophouses, eateries and vibrant nightlife, 2026. *Photo by Jimmy Yap.*

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Mention Geylang today and images of seedy back lanes hosting shady vice activities come to mind. At the same time, it is also a magnet for foodies, drawn to iconic Geylang dishes like fresh frog porridge and beef *kway teow*.

Situated at the city fringe, Geylang is bound by Guillemard Road, Sims Avenue, Lorong 1 Geylang and Paya Lebar Road, and was developed into a commercial and residential district at the turn of the 20th century. The Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) gazetted it as a conservation area in October 1991, recognising the shophouses constructed between the 1910s and 1950s for their architectural and cultural value, the low-rise bungalows with Malay, European and Chinese influences, and the compound houses with their eclectic designs.[1]

Beyond its colourful built heritage and relatively recent seedy reputation, bustling Geylang Road and its lorongs – a series of lanes branching off from both sides of Geylang Road – are replete with lesser-known stories about Singapore's earliest inhabitants, kampong life on stilts, crime-infested swamps and community ties that bind.

A police post in Geylang, late 19th century. *Collection of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.*

Becoming Geylang

One of the earliest written records of Geylang appears in Captain James Franklin and Lieutenant Philip Jackson's "Plan of the British Settlement of Singapore", first published in 1828. The map marked out a river, "R. Gilang", which when transposed onto modern maps, coincides with the location of Geylang River.[2]

The origin of the placename is unclear. Some sources suggest that it came from the Orang Kallang, an indigenous seafaring tribe (*orang laut*) that settled on houseboats in Kallang Basin formed from the confluence of the Kallang, Geylang and Rochor rivers.[3] Interestingly, the Kallang River is also said to be named after these inhabitants.[4] Another possible origin is the Malay word *kilang*, meaning "press", "mill" or "factory" – a reference to the coconut plantations and agricultural processing works that once covered the area.[5]

The sandy soil here proved suitable for the cultivation of coconut trees. From the early 1820s, European planters such as Francis Bernard, brother-in-law of the first Resident of Singapore William Farquhar, ventured eastward, purchasing land from Siglap Road to the Geylang River and from Geylang Road to the southern shore to establish plantations. By the 1840s, coconut trees covered most land between the Kallang and Geylang rivers. During this period, the British also constructed Geylang Road, setting the scene for further development.[6]

At the turn of the 20th century, two distinct parts of Geylang began to emerge. The eastern part was occupied mainly by the Malay communities who farmed the land. This section of Geylang would eventually develop into present-day Geylang Serai. Chinese immigrants settled in the western part and established small businesses in the lorongs.[7]

This period also saw a building boom with shophouses, terrace houses and bungalows appearing along Geylang Road and its side lanes. New means of motorised transport – such as the electric tramway and trolley bus service – and municipal support enabled middle-class Chinese and Eurasian communities to leave the congested urban centre and build homes in Geylang.[8] By the 1920s and 1930s, the area had become a city-fringe residential suburb.[9]

Life in the Lorongs and Its Boundaries

While most residents living in shophouses along Geylang Road and in houses lining the side lanes lived in relative comfort, life at the northern boundaries, where squatter colonies and kampongs existed, was starkly different. A 1959–1960 survey by Maris Stella Vocational School students found at least a hundred families living door-to-door in attap huts between Lorongs 27 and 29A. This part of Geylang was considered a slum and had no running electricity, gas or water supply.[10]

In September 1950, a police manhunt for two Chinese gunmen in the area bordered by Aljunied Road and Sims Avenue, likely at the end of Geylang Lorong 25, uncovered a squatter colony that the *Singapore Free Press* described as "a rabbit's warren of hovels unparallelled anywhere else in the Colony". A reporter and his cameraman, who had accompanied the police, got lost in the maze of attap huts and had to be rescued.[11]

(Above) Having a bath using public taps in Geylang Lorong 1, 1956. *Source: The Straits Times © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.*

(Left) Attap houses on stilts at Geylang Lorong 3, before 1967. *Collection of the National Library Singapore.*

Before the reclamation of Kallang Basin in the 1960s,[12] some of these side roads stretched beyond the confines of solid land into the swamps and streams of the Kallang River. Here, attap huts clustered together, some raised on stilts to avoid the rising tides of the swampy terrain.

One main settlement in the area was Kampong Kuchai (also known as Kampong Koo Chye or Kampong Koo Chuan[13]), a village on stilts situated at the end of Lorong 3 where present-day Boon Keng is located. This predominantly Malay village housed some descendants of the *orang laut* who were originally settled in Tanjong Rhu until the Second World War. Over time, a sizable Chinese population also began to call the kampong home, with only a muddy creek separating the two communities.[14]

Chia Soon Ann, the manager of Garrick Theatre and South-East Asia Film Company (which were owned and established by his brother-in-law Lim Chong Pang, a prominent businessman), grew up in a house built over a river in Kallang Basin, near the head of the Kallang River where Lorong 3 and Lorong 17 intersected. He recalled that living over water made it challenging for him to stay out late to play with friends. "[O]ur means of access [home] was by calling for a boat which usually came through my father or one of my brothers or sisters. And one day when I was returning from school after playing football, I was late. When I called for the boat, the boat refused to come because my mother wanted to teach me a lesson for coming home late, so I had to put my books on my head and [swim] across the river."[15]

Lorong 3 was connected to Lorong 17 via an island of sand on which stood a sago factory, tanneries, brickworks, vegetable farms and fish ponds. At Lorong 17 was Kampong Sar Kong, home to a Cantonese community that lived and worked mainly as brickmakers and bricklayers, using the mud from the tidal basin to make bricks.[16] According to Chia, "the best bricks were from that area".[17]

Danger in the Lorongs

As early as the 1920s, Chinese secret societies began operating in Geylang's side lanes. Chia recalled labourers from the nearby factories joining these gangs for protection. "They think that… the law and order cannot control, cannot help them…. so they joined the secret society [sic] to protect themselves… when they have trouble, they will seek out the leader of the gang to talk terms with the other side."[18]

With the increase in secret societies, opium dens and even violent crimes became commonplace. The murky tidal basin proved conducive for dumping dead bodies when gang fights turned deadly. Chia's family experienced this firsthand at their prawn pond one day. "When we open[ed] the mill to catch prawns, we found a body in the net… we threw everything away… [the police] couldn't catch the murderer." According to Chia, people were silenced by the intimidation of the triads and gangsters. "[They would say] 'If you tell the police, we will murder you, or some trouble will befall your family'."[19]

A February 1970 *Straits Times* article described Kallang Basin as a "smuggler's creek, a home of gang

(Above) Residents of Kampong Koo Chye hosing down an attap house in flames, 1958. *Source: The Straits Times © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.*

(Left) A fire post lookout tower at Geylang Lorong 29 used by volunteers to spot the first signs of fire in their neighbourhood. *Image reproduced from Joan Hon, 100 Years of the Singapore Fire Service (Singapore: Times Books International, 1988), 76. (From National Library Singapore, call no. RSING 363.378095957 HON).*

chieftains, moonshiners and farmers who eked out a living rearing pigs and poultry in attap colonies on stilts". Opium was smuggled into Singapore through the swamps, and drums of *samsu*, a type of illegally home-brewed rice wine, were buried in the mud to evade detection by authorities.[20]

So fearsome was its reputation that even police officers feared venturing into the kampongs and squatter huts over the waters. Eric Charles Pemberton Paglar, a census officer in the 1950s, recalled the notoriety of Kampong Minyak in Lorong 1: "[W]hen you go in there, sometimes people don't come out. That was the reputation that place had… I remember once they had to bring the Gurkhas in there before [the police] could enter."[21]

Another layer of danger that Geylang's kampong dwellers faced was the ever-looming threat of fires, which could quickly raze through the closely packed attap houses. As a precaution, like in other urban kampongs, residents of densely populated Lorong 23 formed their own 45-member firefighting unit who all underwent training with the Singapore Fire Brigade. Villagers also pooled resources to build a fire watch tower in their kampong.[22]

The Happy School building at No. 67 and 69 Geylang Lorong 14. *Image reproduced from王振春 Wang Zhenchun, 根的系列之二 [The Roots Series II] (新加坡: 胜友书局, 1990), 145. (From National Library Singapore, call no. RCLOS 959.57 WZC).*

Kampong residents had good reason for caution. In the panic of escaping a fire that broke out in July 1953 at Geylang Lorong 3, widow Lim Kui Chan "instinctively grabbed her iron first and waded through the knee-high mud with her children to safety." As a washer woman, the clothes iron was her only thought, but in the chaos she left behind her lifesavings. In another heartbreaking story, grandmother Sim Guat had to choose between saving her four-year-old grandson or $2,000 worth of jewellery. "What else could I do but save my grandson. He is my treasure, and I had first to get him out of the house," she said.[23]

In April 1958, another large fire – noted by the *Straits Times* as "Singapore's worst since the war" – razed Kampong Koo Chye in Lorong 3, leaving 2,050 people homeless and at least five dead.[24] In the aftermath of the fire, the Singapore Improvement Trust (SIT) acquired seven acres of the Lorong 3 fire site and began construction of 192 low-cost terrace houses for the homeless. The houses were eventually completed by the Housing and Development Board (HDB) in 1960, with 196 out of 329 affected families applying for the new houses.[25]

Some families had earlier opted to be settled in SIT flats in Kallang and Queenstown, while others chose cash relief in lieu of housing. In 2020, these terrace houses became the first residential units to be returned to the government due to the expiration of their leases.[26]

The fires in Geylang, along with others in Singapore's overcrowded kampongs (most notably in Bukit Ho Swee in May 1961), underscored the need for new public housing across the island. In the 1960s, Kallang Basin underwent land reclamation to convert the swampy areas into land that could support new flats, industries and businesses.[27] Geylang's kampong residents were resettled in new housing estates nearby and around Singapore.

Community Spirit

Community ties sometimes strengthen under the pressures of such disasters. After just one year, the volunteers' fire station in Lorong 27, set up in 1961, had evolved into a communal meeting place and a Mutual Benefit Association formed under the same roof. They later became known as the Geylang Villagers' Association. The association supported residents with funeral arrangements and even settled family disputes. It also formed its own Teochew opera troupe, which staged a series of charity shows at the Victoria Theatre in 1980 to raise funds for the Geylang East Home for the Aged and the Kuan In Welfare Society in Telok Kurau.[28]

Geylang's kampong residents also set up schools for less well-off families. At Lorong 17's Kampong Sar Kong, the Mun San Fook Tuck Chee temple was not only a place of worship but also the kampong's social centre. Besides a volunteer firefighting squad, it established a vigilante corps, the Sar Kong Athletic Association and the Mong Yang Chinese School. The small school operated from a room on the right side of the temple with fees kept low to be affordable. In 1962, the school was renovated with donations from kampong residents and alumni totalling over $4,300.[29]

The Happy Charity School was another Chinese-medium school for impoverished children with a unique origin story that students themselves did not know. "I always thought that the school was named 'Happy School' due to its proximity to Happy World. I never knew it was due to the cabaret girls from Happy World," said former student Tan Chwee Thiam.[30]

The school was founded in 1946 by cabaret dancers from the nearby Happy World Amusement Park, led by He Yan Na, chairperson of the Happy World Dance Troupe, and fellow dancer Xu Qian Hong. Concerned that children were roaming Geylang's streets when they should have been in school, He rallied her fellow cabaret girls to raise money to set up a free school.[31]

It first operated out of a rented shophouse in Geylang Lorong 14 before moving to two shophouses along the same lane. Tan recalled that the school did not look like the other schools near his home, which had fields, as it only had five classrooms. But his parents were of the view that "even though the school's premises were simple in comparison to other government schools of the time…, the teachers and principal were good".[32]

As operating costs rose, the school imposed school fees by 1950, which were kept low at a monthly fee between $2.50 and $3.50, and was renamed "Happy School". With the growing emphasis on English education in the 1960s and 1970s, enrolment numbers at Happy School and other Chinese-medium schools began to dwindle. In 1979, Happy School closed its doors and donated approximately $400,000 earned from the sale of the school building to 11 schools and grassroots organisations, including the Geylang West Senior Citizens' Recreation Centre.[33]

Becoming a Red-light District

Geylang and its lorongs were not known for vice activities until 1959 – ironically due to anti-vice raids in existing red-light districts concentrated in the city area.[34]

In August 1959, the government launched an island-wide campaign to "stamp out organised prostitution". Frequent raids took place in known red-light districts such as Desker Road and Johore Road. Vice operators then dispersed to the "thickly-populated residential areas in the suburbs" of Serangoon, Tiong Bahru, Katong and Geylang. By November that year, the authorities found that approximately 100 residential homes in Geylang and Katong had been converted into brothels. To avoid detection, operators moved into these houses posing as husband and wife and claimed that the sex workers moving in with them were their daughters. Pirate taxi drivers solicited customers and ferried them to the brothels.[35]

Despite crackdowns, the use of Geylang's private homes as brothels persisted into the 1990s, and by 1998, Geylang was noted as a Designated Red-Light Area.[36] The late-night activities of the sex trade raised concerns among residents.

A letter from R. Tan to the *Straits Times*, published on 5 January 1971, implored the police to act on the excessive noise at night created by brothel customers in Lorong 24 Geylang, which was interrupting his sleep. "Nightly a continuous stream of pirate taxis and other cars come to pick up call-girls. These drivers deliberately sound their high-pitch horns several times to announce their arrival, shattering the peace of the vicinity."[37]

Residents were most alarmed when sex workers began to encroach into residential spaces. In August 1971, some residents urged the anti-vice branch of the Criminal Investigation Department to step up the frequency of raids on brothels in Lorongs 18 and 20 "in the wake of growing 'boldness' by prostitutes in soliciting their business", who were "standing in their balconies in very compromising positions". Residents also sent copies of the letter to the Prime Minister's Office, their Member of Parliament (MP), the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau as well as the *Straits Times*. Raids were subsequently conducted, resulting in the arrest of several sex workers.[38]

A similar outcry occurred in 1987, this time in Lorongs 10 and 12. Residents and visitors to the Buddhist temple, Jamiyah Islamic Centre and sports stadium in the vicinity were "irked" by sex workers publicly soliciting in the streets. An official from the Jamiyah Islamic Centre told the *Straits Times* that "it is very embarrassing because visitors to the centre were sometimes approached by callgirls". He added that their presence also "set a bad influence" on the youth visiting the centre.[39]

The issue of sex workers "spilling over" from Geylang's known red-light areas and into residential neighbourhoods persisted. In 2007 and 2008, MP for Marine Parade Fatimah Lateef came up with a plan to "ring-fence" residential areas from vice activity by installing more streetlamps.

Westerhout Road in Geylang, 2026. Prominent house numbers are a subtle form of marketing in Geylang. *Photo by Jimmy Yap.*

By April 2008, these were installed in the back lanes of Lorongs 24, 24A, 34 and 36, with plans for more in the lanes between Lorongs 20 and 44. After two years and 96 new streetlamps, she noted that the situation had improved. "The streetwalkers and foreign workers who used to congregate in the backlanes are gone. Even littering has been reduced," she said.[40]

An Ever-changing Urban Landscape

In the 1990s, Geylang's urban environment and identity underwent significant changes when a wave of new private property developments swept through the area. Developers acquired affordable plots of land where old houses stood, demolished them and built new condominiums and budget hotels in their place.[41]

Clan associations that had been affected by redevelopment and rising property prices at their original premises also began moving into Geylang after the URA rezoned a 50-hectare area as a "hub of growth for cultural activities by clans and other civic groups". This space now contains the largest concentration of clan associations in Singapore, including the Huang Clan Association and the 168-year-old Char Yong (Dabu) Association.[42]

A similar phenomenon happened in 2009, but this time it was Chinese temples moving into the neighbourhood. "They're popping up everywhere, like kopitiam. I have never seen so many temples here in my life," longtime Geylang resident Khoo Hiang Lee told the *Straits Times*.[43]

A hotel in Geylang, 2026. Some hotels in Geylang offer hourly room rates. *Photo by Jimmy Yap.*

It might have seemed odd that places of worship were moving into a red-light district, but many temple owners and devotees told reporters that they were not bothered about sharing the neighbourhood with sex workers since most temples closed in the evenings. "We don't see them, they don't see us. It works," said Wu Ser Hock, a volunteer at the Gan Tian Da Di Temple on Lorong Bachok.[44]

In 2015, the URA rezoned the 14-hectare stretch from Lorongs 4 to 22 from residential/institution to commercial/institution use.[45] This meant that no new residential projects could be developed along this stretch, in hopes of "better manag[ing] issues that had been arising from conflicting uses in the locale".[46] The new residential projects that were approved before the change were the last tranche of residential buildings developed in the area. As a result, Geylang saw a sharp decline in new private residential project launches in the ensuing years. According to a *CNA* report, an average of 2.9 projects were launched between 2017 and 2024 – an almost 70 percent drop from the average of 10.25 projects between 2008 and 2015.[47]

However, in recent years, change has been sweeping through Geylang yet again. The stigma of a red-light district still lingers, with complaints about noise and other disturbances, but residents and shop owners have noticed fewer sex workers in the streets. Instead, high-rise condominiums surround the few old houses that still remain, and owners of old shophouses must struggle with the decision of either investing in the maintenance of their ageing buildings or selling to a growing pool of eager buyers.[48]

Just as Geylang has transformed from a riverine village to a thriving residential suburb, its urban landscape continues to evolve till now, and one day it might finally shed its reputation as a red-light district. But whether gentrification will completely change Geylang, as it did for the former red-light areas of Keong Saik Road and Bugis Street, remains to be seen. ♦

Frog porridge is a popular dish in Geylang, 2026. *Photo by Jimmy Yap.*

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THE DAYS LEADING TO SEPARATION

IN LEE KUAN YEW'S OWN WORDS

The final agreement that separated Singapore from Malaysia had to be negotiated with great secrecy. After it was signed, senior leaders in Singapore had to be persuaded that there was no other solution.

This is an extract from the book, *The Albatross File: Inside Separation*, edited by Susan Sim. It is a transcript of an oral history interview that Tan Kay Chew conducted with Lee Kuan Yew in his office at the Istana between 5 and 22 May 1982.[1] In it, Lee talks about the days immediately before Singapore became independent on 9 August 1965.

Lee had gone up to Cameron Highlands in early August with his family, ostensibly to rest before the Federal Parliament was scheduled to meet.[2] In reality, he was waiting for Finance Minister Goh Keng Swee and Law Minister Eddie Barker to iron out the final points of the Separation agreement with their Malaysian counterparts. This had to be done in secret because if the British had gotten wind of what was happening, they would have found a way to stop it. There were also other forces within both Singapore and Malaysia that would have objected strongly to the Separation had they known it was in the offing. Separation had to be presented to the world as a fait accompli.

Here, Lee presents his perspective of this key event. He also describes how he and Goh subsequently had to convince the rest of the leadership of the People's Action Party to accept that Singapore had to separate from Malaysia.

Prime Minister of Singapore Lee Kuan Yew (second from right) holding a television press conference to announce the separation of Singapore from Malaysia on 9 August 1965. Tearing up, Lee called it a "moment of anguish". *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image No. 19980002854 - 0006).*

> So I went up to Cameron Highlands – rested, played golf, played with the children, brought the three of them out, walked around, and waited for my telephone call.
>
> I am not sure whether the call was on 5 August… but I got to Kuala Lumpur on 6 August. I left my family at Cluny Lodge [in Cameron Highlands]. [I] travelled overnight quietly so that my movements would not be noticed by anybody. Because this was nearing the crucial period where either the Tunku [Malaysian Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman] did what he wanted or the Tunku… changed his mind, in which case it's off. But in any case, if it was going to come off, then there must be no leakage.
>
> I met Goh and Eddie Barker; they had arrived before me at Temasek House. Documents were there, ready. I looked at them. And they went off that afternoon to meet Razak [Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister Abdul Razak Hussein] and Ismail [Malaysian Minister of Internal Security and Home Affairs Ismail Abdul Rahman] and Kadir Yusof [Malaysian Attorney General Abdul Kadir Yusof] [at Razak's office].
>
> And it went on for hours! I waited at Temasek House. According to Eddie Barker's recollection, from the office, they adjourned to Razak's house… and had dinner and waited until all the documents were typed, because Siew Sin [Malaysian Minister of Finance Tan Siew Sin] wanted some amendments – that all the guarantees the Central Government had given for International Monetary Fund or World Bank loans to Singapore would be reassumed by the Singapore Government and no longer the responsibility of the Federal Government. So that was drafted. [Barker] spoke to me on the phone and I said, "yes, of course".
>
> And, again according to Eddie Barker, Razak's stenographer was so unaccustomed to these legal documents, they were getting nowhere because the typing was so slow and they had to type it on Razak's note paper. So Wong Chooi Sen [cabinet secretary] and Teo Ban Hock [Lee's personal assistant], who had gone up to KL with Eddie, were waiting outside Razak's office and were summoned to do the typing. And they[3] did the typing probably from the afternoon right up till after dinner. I think it must have gone on till about past midnight, according to Eddie Barker's recollection. In his recollection, they were all drunk, waiting for the documents to be prepared to sign. … And he was the only one who was still *compos mentis* and wanting to read the document before he signed it. And Razak said, "No, it's your own typist. Sign it!" So he signed it, without reading it. As he said, "Sign *buta*" [sign blind]. When he came back [to Temasek House] and read it, he was relieved that there was no mistake. He gave me the documents, and according to him, I thanked him and said: "We've pulled off a bloodless coup!"
>
> Because once we had those documents signed, even if they did not go through Parliament with their three readings, those signatures, that agreement and the declaration, would change the whole texture of our relationship.
>
> I knew that, well, we had gone thus far and my problem was now to meet the Tunku. I saw him the following day, 7 August.[4] I think I waited for quite some time in his sitting room whilst he was in his dining room. There's a sort of glass door between the two [rooms] – both air-conditioned – at his Residency. And then he came out, sat with me alone, must have taken about 30 to 40 minutes. And I put it to him: "Look, we have spent years to bring about Malaysia. The best part of my adult life was to work towards Malaysia. From 1954 to 1963. We have only had less than two years. Do you really want to break it up? Don't you think it's wiser to go back to our original plan, which the British stopped, which was a looser federation or a confederation?"
>
> But there's a decisive quality about the Tunku when he makes up his mind, the exact opposite of Razak. When he's made up his mind, there's no reopening of the subject. He said: "No, I'm past that. There is no other way now. I've made up my mind. You go your own way, we go our own way. We can be friends again. So long as you are in any way connected with us, we will find it difficult to be friends because we are involved in your affairs and you will be involved in our affairs."
>
> And the finality – conveyed not only in his voice but in his manner – was so conclusive that I did not try to push my point of view: that he should really consider the rearrangements [that we had discussed earlier]. So I dropped the matter altogether. I had prepared myself for a long session with him. Once I saw that something had happened, in his mind this was over, I said: "Right, my problem now is with Toh [Deputy Prime Minister Toh Chin Chye], Rajaratnam [Minister for Culture S. Rajaratnam], Ong Pang Boon [Minister for Education], Yong Nyuk Lin [Minster for Health] – all those Singapore ministers whose families are in the Federation."
>
> So that night when Eddie came back with Keng Swee to Temasek House with the documents signed, I spoke to Toh and asked him to get a car and drive up. I spoke to the Istana operator, who was a very good man – we gave him a medal [later], he was really first-class. I arranged with the Istana operator to get hold of the driver at that time of night to pick up Toh and drive him up, so that he would be [in KL] first thing tomorrow morning [i.e. morning of 7 August].
>
> Then I spoke to Rajaratnam and said, "you come up by air first thing tomorrow morning".[5] I did not want both of them to come up together: first, because it might arouse speculation that something was up; second, the two of them, coming up together, would reinforce each other and stiffen their resolve against any rearrangements. And this was not a rearrangement, this was a break-up! So there was going to be very stiff resistance from the two of them. So I thought [better to] have them come up separately.

(Left) Malaysian Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman, 1961. This is a cropped portion of a larger photograph. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image No. 20120000290 - 0056).*

(Middle) Singapore Minister for Law and National Development E.W. Barker attending the Malaysian Solidarity Convention at the National Theatre, 1965. This is a cropped portion of a larger photograph. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore Media - Image No. 19980002891 - 0067).*

(Right) Singapore Minister for Finance Goh Keng Swee, 1965. This is a cropped portion of a larger photograph. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore Media - Image No. 19980000608 - 0051).*

(From left) Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, Malaysian Acting Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak Hussein, Malaysian Finance Minister Tan Siew Sin, and Malaysian Agriculture and Cooperatives Minister Khir Johari at a press conference on 22 July 1964 to address the racial riots that erupted the day before. The unrest was a precursor that led to Singapore's separation from Malaysia. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 19980000395 - 0057).*

Singapore Minister for Foreign Affairs S. Rajaratnam speaking to reporters at the press conference on the separation of Singapore from Malaysia, 12 August 1965. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore Media - Image No. 19980000615 - 0019).*

Toh arrived first. He arrived by car as Eddie Barker was about to leave. Eddie Barker left by the back door to avoid giving Toh the impression that, you know, there had been a Singapore-born ministers' faction.

Toh was upset, disturbed and most reluctant to sign. I showed him the documents, explained to him. Then Rajaratnam arrived shortly afterwards. Goh was there too. We sat down, talked to him.

And for hours, they contemplated this awful decision. Toh was sitting at the desk for part of the time, at the foot of the steps going upstairs, just outside the dining room. And on the verandah outside the sitting room was Rajaratnam, puffing away with his cigarettes. I'd stopped smoking by then and [the smoke] bothered me, so he was sitting outside puffing away, determined to go on regardless.

I told Toh: "Look, why not see the Tunku? You don't believe me, I mean, the old boy says he can't hold the situation. You better see him because I have seen him and I've come to the conclusion this is beyond argument."

So I went to see the Tunku and said: "Look, I've got two ministers. They are not going to sign. They are absolutely adamant. Their families are here. They want to see you." He said: "No, I don't want to see them. Nothing more to discuss. You tell them." I said: "No, I've told them! At the least you must write to them. Then they will take your word for it if they've got your own handwriting."[6] So he went to his desk and wrote this letter to Toh. Said: "Here, give him this. There's no need to discuss anything. It's finished."[7]

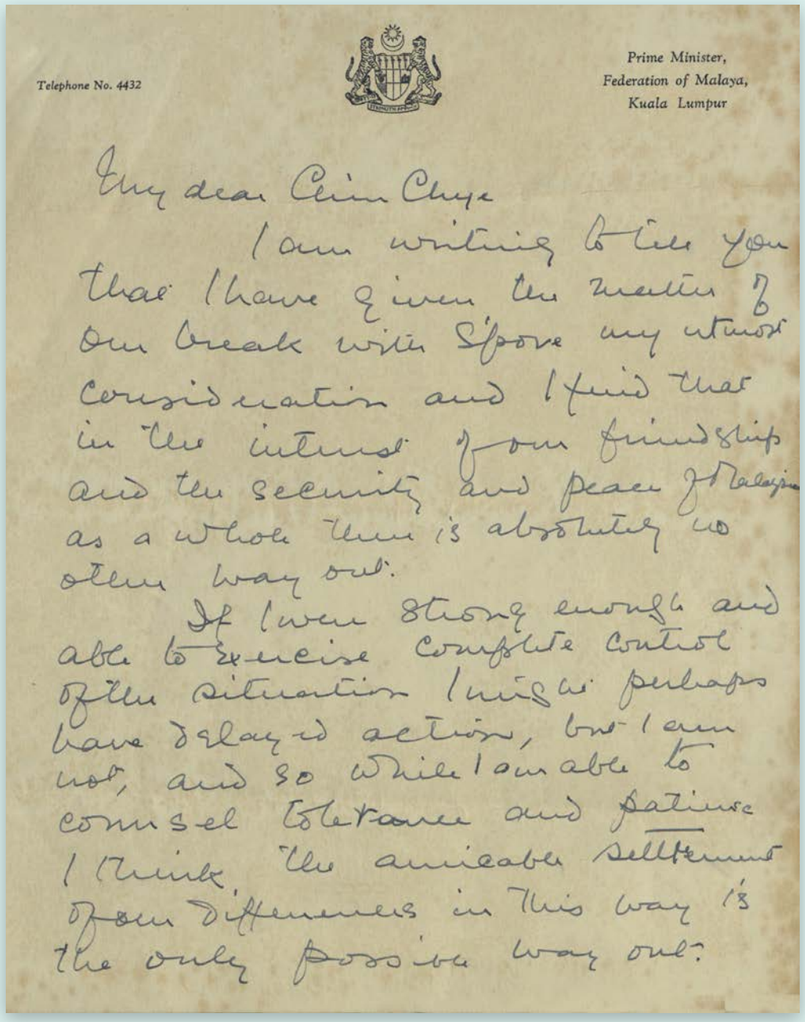
This was in the afternoon [of 7 August]. Gave [the Tunku's letter] to Toh, and then only he realised that this was [the] breaking point. And I told him that if he did not accept Separation and he wanted to go on, then I would not go through with it because there'd be a split in the Singapore leadership and confusion amongst our followers, both in Singapore and in Malaysia.[8] I would be prepared to abide by their decision not to sign, not to break, but they would take the responsibility. They would lead the Malaysian Solidarity [Convention] movement.[9]

I think that clinched the argument because they knew that then blood would be on their hands. And [Toh] signed, then Rajaratnam signed. Then I faced the problem of getting Ong Pang Boon, who was still in Singapore.[10] I didn't want all of them up because then there'd be too strong a Malaysia-born ministerial faction. And I did not want to take a commercial flight in case I ran into British, Australian or New Zealand diplomats and others. I explained the problem to the Tunku, and they arranged for [a] Royal Malaysian Air Force plane to fly me down to Singapore on Sunday morning [8 August]. I arranged to meet [the other Singapore ministers] at Sri Temasek by lunchtime.

Meanwhile, of course, my family had caught up with me. They had come down by road [from Cameron Highlands on August 7] and they all had to sleep on the floor [in Temasek House] because other ministers were there occupying other bedrooms. So I told them on Sunday, they'd go down by road. I took the plane. They'd arrive late on Sunday evening. Monday [9 August], 10 am, was [the] Separation Day announcement, so I wanted them back here [in Singapore], not on the road, in case riots broke out or disorders took place.

I got back. The Singapore ministers like Jek [Minister for Labour Jek Yeun Thong], Othman Wok [Minister for Social Affairs], they had no

First page of a note from Malaysian Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman to Deputy Prime Minister Toh Chin Chye explaining that "in the interest of our friendship and the security and peace of Malaysia as a whole, there is absolutely no other way out". *Cabinet Office Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*



Telephone No. 4432

Prime Minister,
Federation of Malaya,
Kuala Lumpur

My dear Chin Chye

I am writing to tell you that I have given the matter of our break with S'pore my utmost consideration and I find that in the interest of our friendship and the security and peace of Malaysia as a whole there is absolutely no other way out.

If I were strong enough and able to exercise complete control of the situation I might perhaps have delayed action, but I am not, and so while I am able to counsel tolerance and patience I think the amicable settlement of our differences in this way is the only possible way out.

emotional problems. They were not jubilant or relieved, they were just, "well, if this is the way it has to be, so be it". They signed it. Yong Nyuk Lin [also signed]. He was less involved emotionally, I think, because his family had moved down from Seremban to Singapore.

Ong was the last to sign.[11] He was extremely upset, very reluctant. But he saw Rajaratnam's signature, Toh's. I said, "well, there was no other way, otherwise they would not have signed". So finally, he signed.

By that time, it was late Sunday afternoon. And we got all these documents. I had Stanley Stewart [the Permanent Secretary in the Prime Minister's Office] standing by, and the Government printers, they were all at work, locked up incommunicado, to get all these documents ready for a special Gazette at 10am [on] Monday, 9 August 1965. I gave [the documents] to Stanley Stewart.

That night, I slept at Sri Temasek. My wife and children [had] arrived late afternoon. Spent a fitful night tossing and turning because it was very upsetting, we were letting down so many people. Then came Monday morning after a very restless night. I [had got up] three, four times in the night, making notes for contingencies. ... And 10 am, 9 August, [the announcement] went out. I decided not to announce it myself, just announce it by Gazette and by radio, but that I would hold a press conference [later] and explain. …

And it was the most painful press conference I've had in my life because it was really an admission of defeat. What we tried to do, bringing Malaysia about, had failed in less than two years after more than 13 years of effort, from 1950 to 1963… in two years we'd given it up. And we were also letting down all our… not just political partners in the [Malaysian] Solidarity Convention, but a lot of people who had their hopes raised of a different kind of future, because of our participation in Malaysia and the kind of Malaysia we were prepared to fight for. And we had to abandon [them] because there would have been bloodshed. And I think there would have been. The Tunku could not hold his Ultras back.

(Left) Singapore Minster for Education Ong Pang Boon, 1965. This is a cropped portion of a larger photograph. *Raffles Institution Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore Media - Image No. 19980005062 - 0005).*

(Below) Deputy Prime Minister Toh Chin Chye (second from left) at the press conference on the separation of Singapore from Malaysia, 12 August 1965. On the extreme left is future president of Singapore Devan Nair. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore Media - Image No. 19980000615 - 0027).*

ALBATROSS EXHIBITION AND BOOK

The Albatross File is a secret file kept by Minister for Finance Goh Keng Swee, documenting the secret talks that led to Singapore's separation from Malaysia. It contains Cabinet papers, memorandums as well as Goh's handwritten notes of his discussions with Malaysian leaders in the tense days, weeks and months leading to Singapore's independence on 9 August 1965. The original Albatross File has been in the custody of the National Archives of Singapore since 1996.

In conjunction with newly declassified documents and oral history accounts, a permanent exhibition, *The Albatross File: Singapore's Independence Declassified*, and a book edited by Susan Sim, *The Albatross File: Inside Separation* (National Archives of Singapore and Straits Times Press, 2025), were launched in December 2025.

Jointly organised by the National Library Board and the Ministry of Digital Development and Information, the exhibition on Level 10 of the National Library Building aims to deepen visitors' understanding of Singapore's journey to independence through interactive storytelling, historical replays and first-person narratives of Singapore's founding fathers.

The book contains essays on merger and separation, documents from the Albatross File and other key documents relating to separation, as well as oral history interviews of key players involved. It is available for reference at the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library (call no. RSING 959.5705 ALB) and for loan at selected public libraries (call no. SING 959.5705 ALB). It is also available for sale at physical and online bookshops.

NOTES

1 Susan Sim, ed., *The Albatross File: Inside Separation* (Singapore: National Archives of Singapore and Straits Times Press, 2025), 386–462. (From National Library of Singapore, call no. RSING 959.5705 ALB)

2 Lee went on a week's leave in Cameron Highlands from 2 August to 8 August. The Federal Parliament was to convene in Kuala Lumpur on 9 August 1965. See "Lee on Holiday", *Straits Times*, 4 August 1965, 1. (From NewspaperSG)

3 In his oral history interview, Barker said he had called Wong Chooi Sen at Temasek House for assistance, and Wong showed up with a typewriter and Lee's personal assistant, Teo Ban Hock, who typed the final version of the Separation documents. Wong had earlier helped Barker type his drafts in Singapore.

4 Lee's diary had an entry for 9.30 am on Saturday, 7 August 1965, that was in shorthand and included the letters, "KL".

5 In an interview with the *Straits Times* in 1990 for the paper's 25th anniversary feature on Singapore's Separation from Malaysia, Rajaratnam said he had telephoned Othman Wok (Minister for Social Affairs) after Lee's call. In the same article, Othman recalled Rajaratnam asking him to drive both of them and a bodyguard up to Kuala Lumpur. See Leslie Fong, ed., *Singapore 25 Years: A Straits Times Special, National Day, 9 August 1990* (Singapore: Straits Times Press, 1990), 9–10. (From National Library Singapore, call no. RSING 959.57 SIN-[HIS])

6 Australian High Commissioner Tom Critchley, who was trying to put together a chronology of the developments leading to Singapore's Separation, wrote in a diplomatic cable to his government on 16 August 1965 that the Tunku had recounted to him a conversation with Lee where Lee had said that he was having trouble persuading Toh and Rajaratnam to agree to Separation. "Lee said it was Goh that mattered and that if he had to choose he would be prepared to do without Toh and Rajaratnam," Critchley reported. The Tunku had agreed to write his letter to Toh after Lee assured the Tunku that the letter would convince Toh and Rajaratnam to sign the Separation Agreement (Cablegram 315, Critchley to Canberra, 16 August 1965).

7 See Document A on pp. 242–44 of the *Albatross File*.

8 Lee was apparently still concerned the Singapore leadership might split 24 hours after the Proclamation of Independence, telling British Deputy High Commissioner Frank Mills, who filed a report to London on 10 August 1965, that "he was still worried about the solidarity of the PAP [People's Action Party] Cabinet, particularly Toh and Rajaratnam". Mills reported Lee saying that Separation was the "negation of the first article in PAP's original constitution which called for re-integration of Singapore and Malaya and there was still risk they [Toh and Rajaratnam] would abandon Goh Keng Swee and himself as men of no principle for advocating [Separation]. If any did [leave the government,] he could not hold [his] position in Singapore. .... Toh had already offered to resign, and might do so again" (Telegram 215 from Singapore Deputy High Commissioner to Commonwealth Relations Office, 10 August 1965, PREM 13/589).

9 According to Rajaratnam's biographer, Irene Ng, who interviewed Lee in 2005, Lee had, on 7 August 1965, said to Toh: "Look, the Tunku won't see you, but if you don't trust my judgement – that really I think he will not be able to hold the situation – then I will become your deputy and you become prime minister and you take full responsibility for what I am sure must be a deliberate build-up towards a bloodbath." Toh signed the Separation Agreement shortly after, followed by Rajaratnam. See Irene Ng, "S Rajaratnam on the 1965 Separation: 'My Dreams Were Shattered'," *Straits Times*, 13 July 2024, https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/s-rajaratnam-on-the-1965-separation-my-dreams-were-shattered.

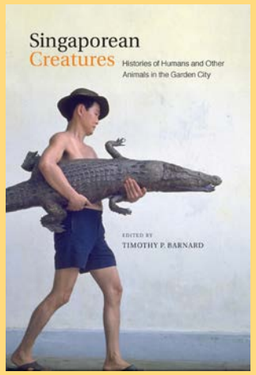
10 Ong was already in Kuala Lumpur that weekend to organise a Malaysian Solidarity Convention meeting. In his memoirs, Lee wrote that Toh had helped persuade Ong to sign the document. Ong would thus have signed the Separation Agreement in Kuala Lumpur as he did not return to Singapore till after it became independent.

11 Ong may have been the last to sign among the seven Singapore ministers who were in Kuala Lumpur on 7 August – after Goh, Barker, Othman Wok, Toh, Rajaratnam and Lee himself.

SHOULD OTTERS GET A SINGAPORE PASSPORT?

In a *BiblioAsia Podcast* episode, editor-in-chief Jimmy Yap interviews environmental historian Timothy P. Barnard, who tells us how migrant animals such as otters came to be in Singapore and what makes them Singaporean.

Timothy P. Barnard is an associate professor in the department of history at the National University of Singapore, specialising in the environmental and cultural history of Southeast Asia. He is the editor of the book, *Singaporean Creatures: Histories of Humans and Other Animals in the Garden City* (NUS Press, 2024).



(Top) Otters in Singapore. *Photo by Max Khoo.*

(Far left) Timothy P. Barnard. *Photo by Jimmy Yap.*

(Left) Published by NUS Press, 2024. *Collection of the National Library Singapore (Call no. RSING 304.2095957 SIN).*

Tim

The otters are interesting because they are a species that was extinct, or they were not found in Singapore. They were present here and then they disappeared for several decades, often due to pollution of water, urbanisation and such issues. They made their comeback over the last 10, 15 or 20 years because of, as you said, the rewilding of Singapore, kind of the replanting, the greening. They're almost a result of things such as the cleaning up of waters, the Singapore River, forested areas.

And so, our current otter population migrated from Malaysia via Pulau Ubin and other places on the northern shores of Singapore. Then they multiplied. And as they created families, these families would get too big, and they would break off and create more families. We now have hundreds of otters in Singapore today.

Inuka and his mother Sheba. Inuka was born on 26 December 1990. He was less than a year old in this photo. *Courtesy of Mandai Wildlife Group.*

Now, they're cute. They've become a mascot. You see them everywhere, and people love encountering them. I see them as a bit nasty because they do kick out members of the family, and they do wander around. They do raid koi ponds and things like that. They're definitely not tame animals. They can create a little bit of havoc in society. And therefore, I find them very interesting because they are migrants, but they're returning migrants, if you will. They are creatures that are adorable in some respects, but they also have a nasty edge. They definitely deserve their own chapter in a future edition of the book, but we'll see if we can get someone to write that.

Jimmy

I just saw a video on my Facebook page of two otter gangs, like, duking it out in a river.

Tim

There you go. Creating havoc.

Jimmy

I mean, otters are really an example of wild animals. But most of our wild animals that we encounter actually end up being in the zoo. Some of these zoo animals end up being very popular with Singaporeans, right? So, you have Inuka the polar bear and Ah Meng the orangutan, and when they died, there was this outpouring of grief. At the same time, I think that a group of people in Singapore have become more ambiguous about zoos.

Tim

Well, they have. The interesting thing to me about the zoo – and there is a chapter on it [in *Singaporean Creatures*] by Choo Ruizhi, which I think is very good. And he documents essentially the origins of the zoo and even zoos prior to our current zoo, up through the death of Inuka and what that meant for society and how there was an outpouring of grief.

And what I find very interesting in the chapter is that the zoo was essentially founded by the Tourist Promotion Board working along with PUB [Public Utilities Board], because it's up there where the reservoirs are and the central catchment area and such. And so, I would have never imagined that, until this was explained to me, it was created almost as a calculated tourist attraction. Like we needed something in Singapore for the tourists to go see and they built the zoo in the mid-'70s. And it became very popular, particularly among Singaporeans. You know, not even tourists, if you will, but Singaporeans would go there.

You have various iconic animals throughout the '80s and '90s that many of us are familiar with. It's also interesting how certain creatures are adopted and beloved in Singaporean society. I don't want to anger panda fans out there, but I believe that Inuka and Ah Meng had a certain place in the hearts of Singaporeans, much more than those pandas that I don't even know if they're still there.

But the thing is, even in the chapter, there's an explanation of a panther named Twiggy that escaped before the zoo even opened and was wild and running around the central catchment area for a year or two before it was found and killed. But that also led to an outpouring of grief from the public.

And so, the public has adopted animals you wouldn't think they might adopt as kind of their own. And each one of them is not from Singapore. You know, the panther was from Thailand. Ah Meng was a former pet that had been given up in the '70s, but an orangutan from Sumatra or Borneo. Inuka was born in Singapore.

Jimmy

The only true Singaporean creature.

Tim

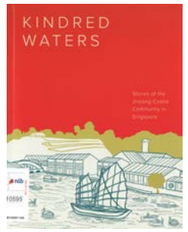
It was a polar bear. It's interesting how you have migrant animals and how they've adapted, you know, and it's almost hard to determine which ones will be the popular ones in this regard, or which ones people will somehow take note of. I mean, you can still go to the zoo and buy little Inuka stuffed animals, years after the passing of the bear. ♦

Scan the QR code to listen to the full episode on *BiblioAsia Podcast*, "What Makes an Animal Singaporean?"

Check out the book, *Singaporean Creatures: Histories of Humans and Other Animals in the Garden City* (Call no. RSING 304.2095957 SIN).

New Books ON SINGAPORE HISTORY

Kindred Waters: Stories of the Jinjiang Coolie Community in Singapore

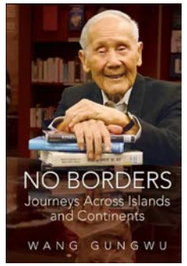


By Toh Lam Huat, Peng Lee Er and Lim Jen Erh

Singapore Chin Kang Huay Kuan (2025), 173 pages
Call no. RSING 305.895105957 KIN

Published by the Singapore Chin Kang Huay Kuan, this English edition chronicles the lives and contributions of migrants from Jinjiang county in Fujian, China, who came to Singapore in search of work and a better life. Living in coolie dormitories, many of these migrants worked as labourers in sawmills, boat yards and at the docks. The clan association was founded in 1918 to support Jinjiang migrants. It published the Chinese edition in 2019 from which this volume was translated.

No Borders: Journeys Across Islands and Continents

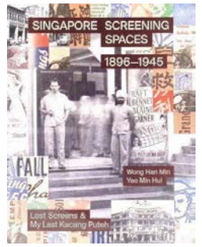


By Wang Gungwu

World Scientific Publishing (2026), 316 pages
Call no. RSING 950.04950092 WAN

Eminent historian Professor Wang Gungwu is internationally renowned for his knowledge of Chinese culture and civilisation. Weaving personal anecdotes and experiences, he tells his life story from his time spent in Malaya, London, Australia, Hong Kong and Singapore. He was vice-chancellor of the University of Hong Kong from 1986 to 1995. He has been University Professor of the National University of Singapore since 2007 and Emeritus Professor at the Australian National University since 1988.

Singapore Screening Spaces (1896–1945): Lost Screens & My Last Kacang Puteh

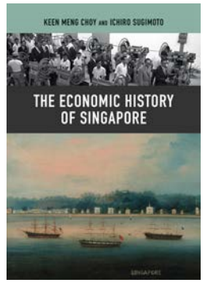


By Wong Han Min and Yeo Min Hui

Pagesetters Services (2026), 225 pages
Call no. RSING 791.43095957 WON

Film researchers Wong Han Min and Yeo Min Hui trace almost 50 years of Singapore's film exhibition spaces – from 1896 when the first travelling cinema appeared in Singapore to 1945 when cinemas reopened after the Japanese Occupation. Using materials from an extensive private collection, the authors uncover the early history of Singapore's cinemas, including the movers and shakers who helped shape the local film industry.

The Economic History of Singapore

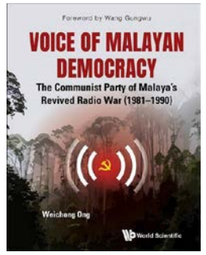


By Keen Meng Choy and Ichiro Sugimoto

NUS Press (2026), 485 pages
Call no. RSING 330.95957 CHO

This volume charts Singapore's transformation from a 14th-century entrepôt to a colonial port city in the 19th and 20th centuries and, today, a global hub for trade, finance and innovation. Using archival sources, statistical data and historical accounts, it examines various key drivers, from the rise of the tin and rubber trades to export-led industrialisation, and the shift to a knowledge- and innovation-based economy.

Voice of Malayan Democracy: The Communist Party of Malaya's Revived Radio War

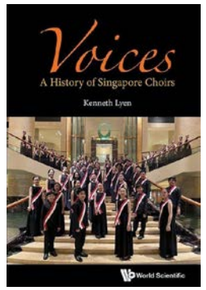


By Weichong Ong

World Scientific Publishing (2026), 518 pages
Call no. RSING 322.4209595 ONG

Find out why the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) persisted in its armed struggle during the Second Emergency (1968–89) and the Cold War. After the Malayan Emergency (1948–60), the CPM continued its efforts from southern Thailand where it established the Voice of Malayan Democracy (VMD), a clandestine radio station. Operating between 1981 and 1990, it replaced the Voice of Malayan Revolution station based in Hunan, China, which stopped broadcasting in 1981.

Voices: A History of Singapore Choirs



By Kenneth Lyen

World Scientific Publishing (2026), 173 pages
Call no. RSING 782.5095957 LYE

This is a chronicle of Singapore choirs from the early 20th century to the present that have made an impact in our history as well as notable individuals who have contributed to Singapore's choral scene. Choirs range from small chamber ensembles to acapella singing groups, and include non-English, English-language, school and university choirs. Also highlighted are the choirs' different singing styles, their repertoire and groups that integrate choral music with dance.

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