

# biblioasia

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## *MAD DOGS* and *ENGLISHMEN*

The Rabies Outbreak in 19th-century Singapore

— p. 04 —





# FOTOALBUM SINGAPUR

Uncover scenes from Singapore's diverse past in *Fotoalbum Singapur*, a 19th-century album of photographs from the National Library's Rare Materials Collection. Taken by the renowned photography studio G. R. Lambert & Co., which was also the official photographer for the King of Siam, *Fotoalbum Singapur* is a black-and-white retrospective of the diverse communities that made up early Singapore.



**From the Stacks** is a web series featuring rare materials of historical significance in the National Library Singapore's collection.

## Director's Note

These are challenging times. As I write this note, a "circuit breaker" is in place to reduce the rise of Covid-19 infections in Singapore. Schools, libraries and many businesses are closed and the majority of us are working from home: social distancing is now the new normal.

What gives me some comfort is that throughout history, humankind has faced other fatal infectious diseases and ultimately prevailed. In our cover story, Timothy P. Barnard looks at the deadly rabies outbreak in late 19th-century Singapore. Rabies caused a great scare here and led to the culling of over 22,000 dogs, but eventually it was eradicated from our shores.

While rabies was no longer a problem in Singapore by the 20th century, another disease continued to spark much fear – leprosy. Although not as deadly, many sufferers became horribly disfigured after getting infected and were shunned by society. Danielle Lim recounts the story of the setting up of the Leper Asylum, later renamed Trafalgar Home, and the lives of the residents there.

This issue is not merely about disease though. Annabel Teh Gallop of The British Library reveals why a close study of the beautiful and ornate markings of Malay seals of the 19th century is warranted. Like seals, the humble postcard also benefits from close examination. Stephanie Pee's article on postcards from the National Library's Lim Shao Bin Collection explains how these picture postcards give us an insight into Singapore's Japanese community before the outbreak of World War II.

Old postcards and photographs are fascinating because they offer a snapshot of the past. This is the value of a collection of architectural photos of Singapore taken by Marjorie Doggett in the mid-1950s. Edward Stokes' essay on this pioneering photographer looks at her life and work.

Part of the value of an old photograph is that it preserves a glimpse of a place that no longer exists. However, oftentimes these places still exist, but their character has changed so much that they become unrecognisable. This was the experience of Charmaine Leung, who writes about growing up on Keong Saik Road in the 1970s and 80s.

From Keong Saik Road in the Chinatown area, we turn our attention to the north of the island. Royal Air Force Seletar was Britain's largest airbase in the Far East, and among other things, was also home to an active theatre company. Suriati Sani takes us behind the curtains to see the high-flying RAF Seletar Theatre Club at work.

To round off your reading, don't miss Kevin Y.L. Tan's comprehensive and fascinating account of Song Ong Siang, author of the landmark *One Hundred Years' History of the Chinese in Singapore* (first published in 1923, and recently reissued by the National Library); Seow Peck Ngiam's essay on Major-General Feng Yee, who represented China at the Japanese surrender ceremony in Singapore; and Shereen Tay's account of Singapore's move to the metric system. Finally, Mazelan Anuar and Faridah Ibrahim give us the inside story on our latest exhibition, "The News Gallery: Beyond Headlines".

I hope these articles will entertain and connect you with our fascinating history. Stay home, stay safe and happy reading.

**Tan Huism**  
Director  
National Library

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**On the cover**

Imported as status symbols, purebred dogs ended up sparking a rabies scare in 19th-century Singapore. An 1879 watercolour painting by John Edmund Taylor. *Image reproduced from Sketches in the Malay Archipelago: Album of Watercolours and Photographs Made and Collected by J.E. Taylor. Wellcome Collection. Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0).*

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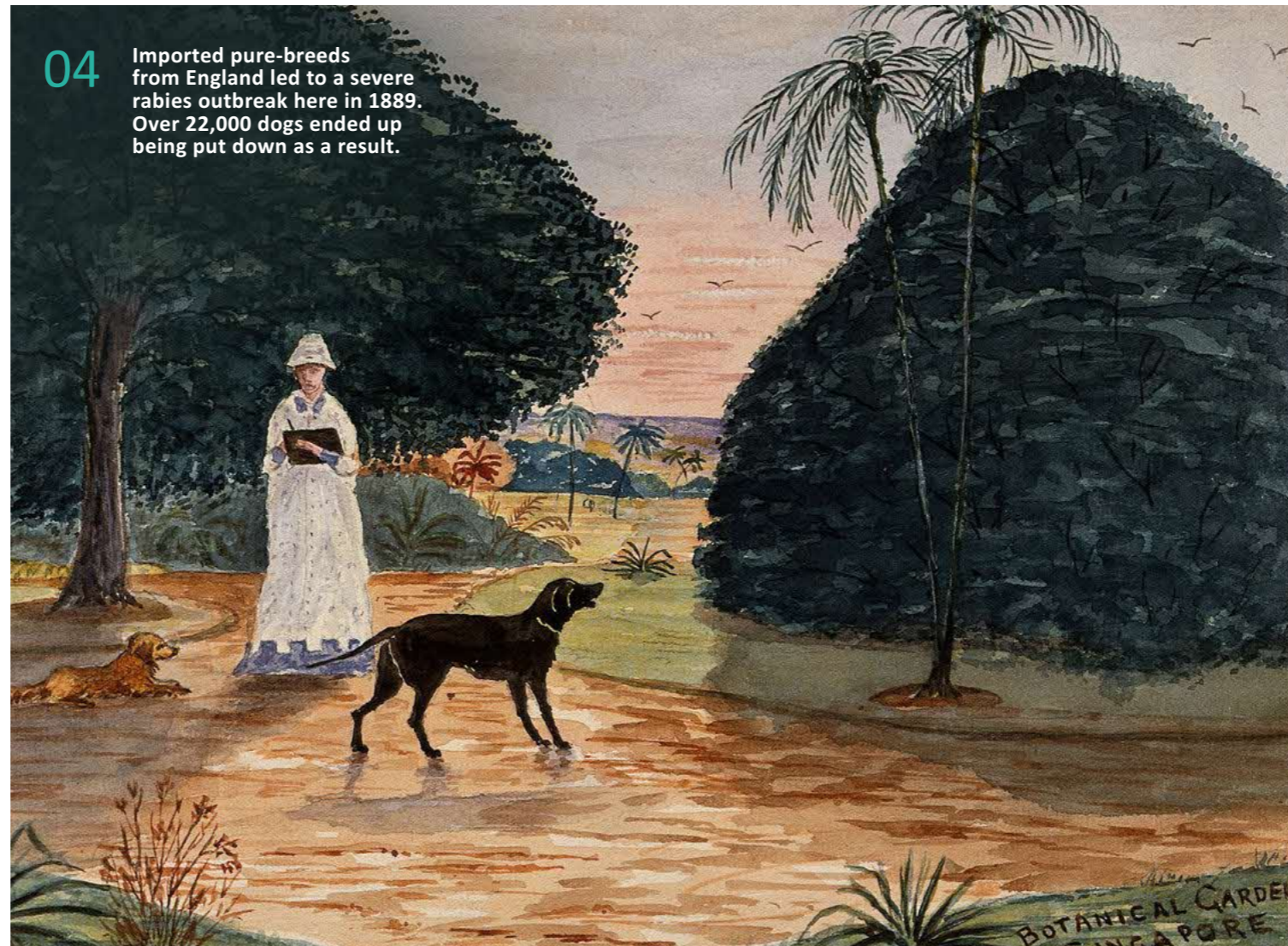
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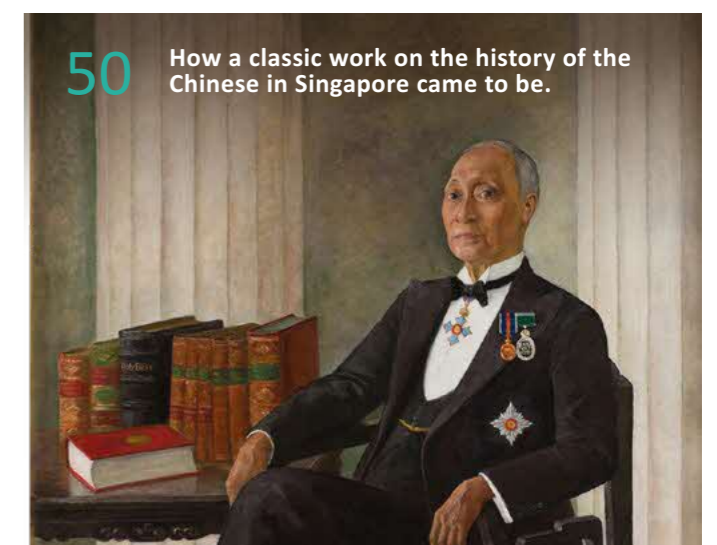
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# MAD DOGS and ENGLISHMEN

## — Rabies in 19th-century Singapore —

Fears of the deadly disease here led to more than 22,000 dogs being killed during the 1890s.

**Timothy P. Barnard** sniffs out the details of this long-forgotten episode.



(Facing page) An 1879 watercolour painting by John Edmund Taylor of a European woman with her pet dogs at the Singapore Botanic Gardens. Throughout the 1890s, no dogs were allowed into Singapore due to an outbreak of rabies among the pet dog population. Image reproduced from *Sketches in the Malay Archipelago: Album of Watercolours and Photographs Made and Collected by J.E. Taylor*. Wellcome Collection. Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0).

all the islands of the Archipelago in the half-domestic state in which it is seen in every country of the East". He added, "it is the same prick-eared cur as in other Asiatic countries, varying a good deal in colour – not much in shape and size – never owned – never become wild, but always the common scavenger in every town and village".<sup>4</sup>

Most dogs in early colonial Singapore roamed in packs about the town, making them "one of the greatest nuisances in the settlement". The "wretched creatures" would follow the "dust carts" that collected rubbish, or tag along with soldiers who were carrying out their duties. A letter published in *The Singapore Free Press* in January 1843 complained that "every morning when the guard is relieved at the Court house a swarm of Pariah dogs come out with the soldiers, and attack the passing natives and many times throw them down and bite them, and tear their cloths off, and the sepoy appears to enjoy [sic] it, although he says they take the dogs off when they see them going to extremities...".<sup>5</sup> In August 1844, an irate member of the public wrote that "when the sepoy exchange guard at the Court House they are invariably followed by about 30 dogs and these are a complete nuisance to the neighbourhood".<sup>6</sup>

The annoyance created by these stray dogs was so great that as early as April 1833, the authorities had issued a notice that read: "All dogs found running loose about the streets between the 8th and 18th... will be destroyed."<sup>7</sup> This was the beginning of an approach used throughout the world to control canines: with extreme malice, stray dogs were to be culled.

The culling exercises typically occurred four times a year over three or four days, although extra sessions could be arranged if needed. Despite regular culling, however, mongrels were still found on the streets of Singapore well into the 1880s. The small consolation was that while the stray dogs were a significant public nuisance, cases of rabies were few and far between. But all this was to change with the arrival of the steamship *Oxfordshire* in April 1884.

### Tainted Pure Breds

When the *Oxfordshire* pulled into the harbour of Singapore, it carried on board "some twenty or thirty well bred dogs", including terriers, bulldogs, greyhounds and poodles. These animals were ferried ashore, along with English potatoes, and auctioned off on 7 April at Commercial Square (present-day Raffles Place).<sup>8</sup>

In contrast to the semi-feral native mongrels, these imported dogs were the result of breeding and eugenics, the fruits of a movement that had begun a few decades earlier in England: the creation of a canine sub-species with desired characteristics and were deemed to be "pure". These greyhounds and terriers were symbols of social divisions and distinctions. To own one of these living examples of imperial superiority characterised its human master as a member of the elite of a rapidly changing and industrialising society.

The residents of Singapore who successfully secured a four-legged friend that fateful day in April, however, had no inkling of what was to come. During the journey to Singapore, one or two of the dogs that showed symptoms of rabies had to be culled. Over the next few years, these "fancy dogs" sparked an outbreak of rabies that led to increased restrictions and regulations as well as further domestication of the common pet in Singapore. Ultimately, these imported animals would lead to changes in the way Singapore regulated and domesticated dogs.<sup>9</sup>

About a month after the *Oxfordshire* docked, rabies began appearing among the local canine population. It was reported that there had been "a few peculiar cases of mania" among the dogs in the military encampment near the Botanic Gardens. But this was only the beginning: in quick succession, three Europeans died of hydrophobia.<sup>10</sup>

### A Mad Dog in Singapore.

#### A MAN AND A BOY BITTEN.

ABOUT 3 o'clock yesterday afternoon a Chinaman and a Chinese boy were attacked in Pekin Street in a vicious manner by a pariah dog suffering from rabies. It appears that the brute first set upon the lad and commenced to bite pieces out of the little fellow's legs. The lad turned round and endeavoured to beat off the dog, but whilst so doing the animal knocked him into the sewer way running by the side of the street, and then sat upon his body, and again started to worry and bite. Just at this time a Chinaman came up and pulled the dog away from the boy. The savage brute had no sooner regained its feet than it flew at the Chinaman's face and fastened its teeth on to his nose, ultimately pulling a portion of the flesh. Another Chinaman then came upon the scene, and dealt the dog a fatal blow with a chopper. The injured persons were immediately sent to the hospital and placed

*The Straits Times* reporting the attack on the blacksmith and his son by a rabid dog on Pekin Street. *The Straits Times Weekly Issue*, 9 September 1889, p. 2.

The initial response to the rabies outbreak was to simply cull mongrels, a practice that had existed for decades in Singapore. Although efforts were ramped up in July 1884 to limit the stray dog population, rabies persisted. In mid-August, the authorities announced that they would begin a month of dog-killing on 25 August. "All dogs at large and not wearing either a collar and chain or a muzzle" would be killed.<sup>11</sup> The culling was subsequently extended, continuing well into 1885.

When cases of rabies persisted, particularly in residential areas where people kept dogs as pets, the authorities began to realise that the disease was endemic among the well-bred pets. To deal with the problem, starting from mid-1885, the direct importation of dogs into Singapore was prohibited and all pet

The blacksmith's son was one of the first victims. It was about three in the afternoon and the boy was playing outside his father's shop in Pekin Street when a rabid dog suddenly appeared. The dog went after the boy, biting "pieces out of the little fellow's legs." While fighting off the animal, the boy fell into a sewer drain, taking the dog with him. When the boy's father rushed to help, the dog "flew at the Chinaman's face and fastened its teeth on his nose, ultimately pulling a portion of the flesh". The pair were ultimately saved by a passerby who killed the dog with a chopper.<sup>1</sup>

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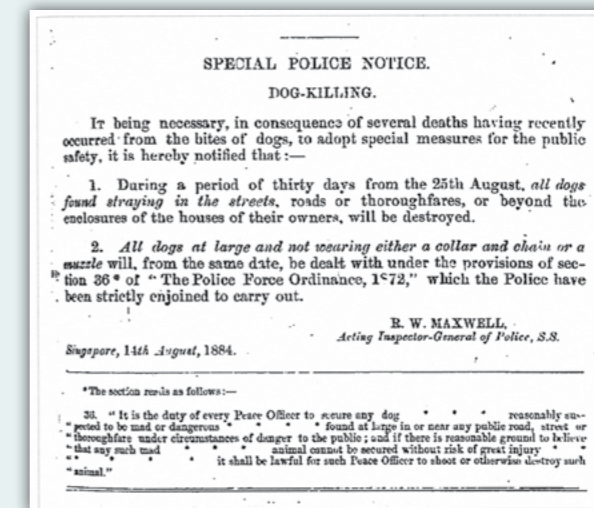
Although the boy survived the initial attack, which took place in early September 1889, he fell seriously ill about a month later, and his last hours were "simply agonizing to witness", according to *The Straits Times*. "He was attacked with periodical convulsions, when he would call for water, but on water being brought to him, he would draw back and bark after the fashion of a dog, and so his agony continued until death put an end to his sufferings."<sup>2</sup>

This horrific incident marked the beginnings of the "Hydrophobia Scare of 1889" as it came to be known in Singapore,<sup>3</sup> which saw calls for all dogs to be quarantined on St John's Island for six months or be killed. And although blame was initially laid at the paws of the numerous strays wandering around Singapore,

the source of the rabies outbreak was actually a shipment of pure-bred dogs that had arrived from England five years earlier. It was only in 1899, 10 years after the outbreak, that rabies was completely eradicated from Singapore. This was only achieved, though, by putting down more than 22,000 dogs over the course of a decade.

### Dogs in Early Singapore

Although archaeologists have yet to find any fossilised canine remains in Singapore's acidic soil, it is likely that dogs roamed the ancient settlement of Temasek as far back as the 13th century. Dogs were certainly present in early colonial societies throughout Southeast Asia. As John Crawford, the second Resident of Singapore, wrote, "the dog is found in



A police notice dated 14 August 1884 listing the measures adopted by the police in light of several deaths arising from dog bites. With effect from 25 August, all stray dogs would be killed and dogs not wearing either a collar and chain or a muzzle would be dealt with. *Special Police Notice: Dog-killing. (1884, August 14).* *Government Gazette. C0276/15: Government Notification, No. 345, p. 871.*

dogs had to be confined within houses or at least chained up in compounds, while orders were issued “to kill all dogs, day and night”.<sup>12</sup>

### Barking Up the Wrong Tree

Rabies persisted in Singapore for the remainder of the 1880s despite quarantine provisions and increased efforts at exterminating stray mongrels. The disease had, unfortunately, become endemic among the pet dog population on the island, and these precious animals

were under the protection of wealthy residents who were reluctant to address the root of the problem. A reminder of this conundrum occurred in December 1886 when a Chinese man went to the Central Police Station and requested to be sent to the hospital. He died shortly thereafter from hydrophobia. Several weeks earlier, “a small dog belonging to one of the European police” had bitten the man.<sup>13</sup>

Even though public dog culling had become the norm, rabies remained entrenched among the pets of the elite. Thus the government imposed a dog tax, with its associated licensing and registration.<sup>14</sup> The main goal of the tax, which came into effect in December 1888, was to force residents to declare their responsibilities. Under the new directives, every dog in Singapore had to be “registered by the Commissioners of the Municipality within which the dog is kept”.

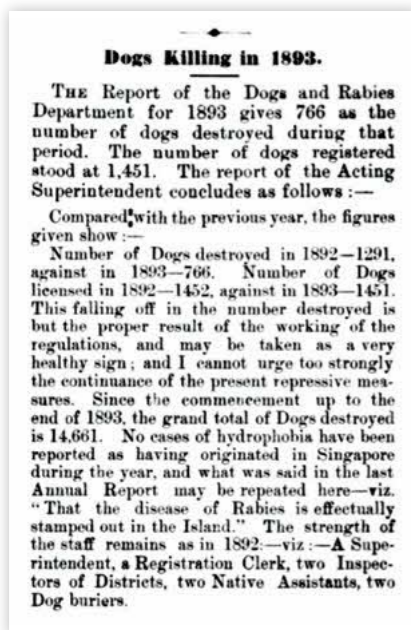
For an annual fee of \$1 within the Municipality and 50 cents in rural areas, residents received a “metal label bearing the registered number of

the dog in respect of which the tax is paid”. The government also maintained a record containing the name of the owner, along with other information that identified the animal. Any dog found without a collar and identification number would be “destroyed, impounded or dealt with”. In the first month of implementation, 201 dogs were registered; by the end of 1889, the figure had reached 3,664.<sup>15</sup>

Unfortunately, the attack on the blacksmith and his son in September 1889 exposed the limitations of this approach. The rabid canine in question had been registered – No. 183 – and the owner was a Tah Wah Liang who lived at 148 Kampong Bugis.<sup>16</sup> After the boy died, several other people also contracted the disease in similar attacks. This was the beginning of the greatest rabies outbreak in Singapore’s history: the Hydrophobia Scare of 1889. Because preventive measures had not adequately addressed the core issue – the presence of the disease among dogs owned by the rich – panic began to seep into society.

(Left) The Dogs and Rabies Department reported that 766 dogs were culled in 1893, compared with 1,291 the year before. The reduction in the number of dogs killed was attributed to the new regulations that had been introduced. No cases of hydrophobia were reported for the year 1893. *The Straits Times*, 5 April 1894, p. 3.

(Below) A stray dog sniffing the goods of a hawker. From as early as the 1830s, stray dogs had roamed the town of Singapore in packs, creating a nuisance for some. The authorities carried out dog-culling exercises to control the canine population. *Courtesy of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board, Singapore.*



### WHAT IS RABIES?

Rabies is caused by a virus. Unlike most viruses which travel through the bloodstream, *Rabies lyssavirus* moves through the nerves and does so slowly. It enters the body through a bite, or breaks in the skin. Once it enters a nerve, the virus usually proceeds at a pace of only a few centimetres a day until it reaches the brain. It then begins replicating itself in the brain, causing inflammation of the organ and destroying nerve cells in the process, leading to a warping of normal behavior while stimulating aggression. If any other mammal is bitten during these periods of aggression, the disease could spread.<sup>1</sup>

Rabies has been present for millennia, having been reported in ancient Mesopotamia and India. In an age when the source of most diseases was thought to result from “bad air”, it was one of the few whose real origins were understood: it came from the bite of an animal.<sup>2</sup>

Although it is most closely associated with dogs, almost all mammals can catch rabies, which refers to the disease in animals; in the 19th century, humans were said to have caught “hydrophobia”. Meaning the fear of water, hydrophobia refers to a particular symptom where the victims recoil violently when offered water, although they may be thirsty.<sup>3</sup>

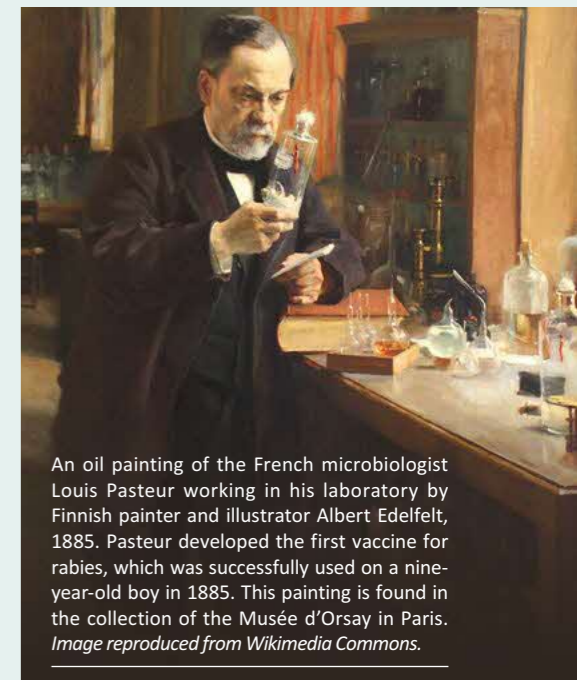
The disease begins to manifest itself after one to three months with a fever and nerve tingling at the site of the bite. Violent spasms, uncontrolled excitement, paralysis of random limbs, confusion and a loss of consciousness follow. The carrier of the virus will then violently attack others, often followed by periods of lucidity.

Rabies created a tremendous amount of anxiety and fear throughout the world in the 19th century, and the conquest of the disease was a scientific triumph in an era when there were great advances in the knowledge of diseases and germ theory.

Much of the credit was due to the pioneering French microbiologist Louis Pasteur, who began experiments to develop a vaccine in 1880.

Four years later, Pasteur announced that he had found a treatment involving a modified rabies virus of reduced virulence. He then turned his attention to the development of a treatment for hydrophobia and, in 1885, used graduated doses of the vaccine to save the life of a young boy named Joseph Meister. The development of the rabies vaccine was a global sensation.<sup>4</sup>

It was around this time that the disease entered Singapore.<sup>5</sup> In the late 1880s, the Legislative Council considered making the rabies vaccine in Singapore, but the high cost and the difficulties involved in operating vaccine-making facilities were a deterrent.<sup>6</sup>



An oil painting of the French microbiologist Louis Pasteur working in his laboratory by Finnish painter and illustrator Albert Edelfelt, 1885. Pasteur developed the first vaccine for rabies, which was successfully used on a nine-year-old boy in 1885. This painting is found in the collection of the Musée d'Orsay in Paris. *Image reproduced from Wikimedia Commons.*

### NOTES

- 1 Wasick & Murphy. (2012). *Rabid: A cultural history of the world's most diabolical virus* (pp. 3–5). New York: Penguin Books. (Call no.: 614.563 WAS-[HEA])
- 2 Wasick & Murphy, 2012, pp. 17–31.
- 3 Wasick & Murphy, 2012, pp. 8–10.
- 4 CO275/39: Report on Hydrophobia, pp. C76–79. Retrieved from NUS Libraries; Pemberton, N., & Worboys, M. (2007). *Rabies in Britain: Dogs, disease and culture, 1800–2000* (pp. 102–132). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. (Not available in NLB holdings); Wasick & Murphy, 2012, pp. 119–148.
- 5 CO275/39: Report on Hydrophobia, pp. C76–79. Retrieved from NUS Libraries; Pemberton & Worboys, 2007, pp. 102–132; Wasick & Murphy, 2012, pp. 119–148.
- 6 This is covered in a series of letters requesting the purchase of equipment and other materials found in CO273/164; CO275/39: Report on Hydrophobia, pp. C79–80. Retrieved from NUS Libraries.

### Drastic Measures

Soon after the death of the blacksmith and his son, the Legislative Council met in October 1889 to discuss whether increased regulation was the best way to resolve the situation. The main proposal under consideration called for a reminder that all dogs be registered as well as “compulsory muzzling under a penalty of non-compliance”. At the same time, the Municipal Commissioners formed a Hydrophobia Committee, which released a report in January 1890.<sup>17</sup>

The committee supported a combination of “extirpation and quarantine”, but were reluctant to enforce both measures. As a compromise, they advocated a combination of drastic measures, including the continued culling of stray dogs and muzzling as well as registration, higher taxation, strict control and

a restriction on the number of dogs allowed in each residence.<sup>18</sup>

The ideal quantity was two dogs per household. “This number is in most cases sufficient for protection purposes, and if any additional dog be licensed it should be on special conditions.”<sup>19</sup> The Municipal Commission arranged for the registration of all dogs on the island to take place at police stations and at the main Municipal Office, while active groups of civil servants roamed the island to exterminate stray dogs.

In March 1891, the Legislative Council met to finalise the new regulations and ultimately passed the Singapore Dog Ordinance of 1891. Under the legislation, every canine in Singapore had to be registered and muzzled at all times when outdoors. Owners were required to bring their dogs to the

Municipal Office to obtain the licence. If they were unable to do so, they had to provide a full description of the dog “written in English” to be “handed to the registering officer”. The officer would “properly affix” the badge “bearing the registered number for the current year” to the dog’s collar. Each owner would then receive a printed receipt and licence “in which shall be entered a description of the dog”. Any individual harbouring an unregistered dog was subject to a fine of \$10.<sup>20</sup>

The solution after several years of rabies outbreaks was thus to register, muzzle, destroy and ban. The decision to muzzle dogs was seen as a compromise, as the cost of quarantining dogs would have been borne by the owners, which would put it beyond the reach of many. “On the other hand, muzzling does not

cost much, and every man, be he rich or poor, if he so desires, can save his dog."<sup>21</sup> In addition, the government would provide the first muzzle free-of-charge.

Before the muzzles could arrive, however, a new wave of government-approved dog cullings had commenced under the leadership of three more dog inspectors hired to carry out the task. It was a period in which "the Dog exterminators seem

to breathe vengeance against the canine tribe. No mercy is shown to poor doggie, and not the ghost of a chance is ever given him to escape the deadly missile."<sup>22</sup>

At times, the dog-culling campaign went too far. There was a public outcry over the killing of a dog belonging to a person named Sahat on 24 August 1891. The dog inspector, A. Cheeseman, killed the dog in the verandah of Sahat's home

on Serangoon Road, despite protests from the lady of the house. *The Straits Times* reported the incident:

"A dog having been shot, while it was attached by a very short chain to the verandah pillar of a compound house; and while a woman and children were weeping within a few feet of it; and while the woman was praying for the favorite's life, and offering to muzzle the dog, with the muzzle that they had removed to feed it."<sup>23</sup>

Keeping dogs was popular with the local population of Singapore as well, as these two photos from the early 20th century show. *Lee Brothers Studio Collection*, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (left) and courtesy of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board (right).



## NOTES

- 1 A mad dog in Singapore. (1889, September 9). *The Straits Times Weekly Issue*, p. 2. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 2 Hydrophobia in Singapore. (1889, October 7). *The Straits Times Weekly Issue*, p. 2. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 3 Technically, rabies is the disease in animals while hydrophobia – the fear of water – historically refers to the disease in humans caused by rabies. The term "hydrophobia" is derived from one of the symptoms in humans affected by the virus. During the 20th century, it became more common to call the disease in both animals and humans "rabies".
- 4 Crawford, J. (1856). *A descriptive dictionary of the Indian Islands and adjacent countries* (p. 121). London: Bradbury and Evans. Retrieved from BookSG; Mikhail, A. (2015, May). A dog-eat-dog empire: Violence and affection on the streets of Ottoman Cairo. *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 35 (1): 76–95, p. 87. Retrieved from ResearchGate.
- 5 Untitled. (1843, January 5). *The Singapore Free Press and*

*Mercantile Advertiser*, p. 3. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

- 6 Correspondence. (1844, August 8). *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, p. 2. Retrieved from NewspaperSG
- 7 Notice. (1833, April 4). *Singapore Chronicle and Commercial Register*, p. 1. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 8 The Singapore Debating Society: Hydrophobia in Singapore. (1889, October 15). *The Straits Times Weekly Issue*, p. 6. Retrieved from NewspaperSG; Notebook volume 3 (p. 123) (1891–1896). HNR/3/2/3. Papers of Henry Nicholas Ridley, Director of Gardens and Forests, Straits Settlements. Retrieved from Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, Library and Archives.
- 9 CO275/39: Report of Committee Appointed to Enquire into the Question of Rabies in Singapore, Papers Laid before the Legislative Council, No. 4 (1890), p. C19. Retrieved from National Archives of Singapore; Page 2 Advertisements Column 4: Sale of English dogs. (1884, April 4). *The Straits Times*, p. 2. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
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C19. Retrieved from National Archives of Singapore; Untitled. (1885, February 10). *The Straits Times*, p. 2. Retrieved from NewspaperSG; Royal Botanic Gardens Kew, Henry Nicholas Ridley Collection, HNR/3/2/3: Notebooks, Vol. 3, p. 123.

- 11 Hydrophobia. (1884, July 30). *The Straits Times Weekly Issue*, p. 6. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 12 CO273/246/4381: Report on the Suppression of Rabies, (1899), p. 224; Prevention of disease. (1886, November 13). *The Straits Times*, p. 2. Retrieved from NewspaperSG; CO276/17: Ordinance No. XIX of 1886, (1886), pp. 2139–42; CO276/16: Government Notification, No. 341, 1885, pp. 1048–9.
- 13 Occasional reports of a similar nature appeared periodically in the newspapers. See Notes. (1886, December 4). *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, p. 331. Retrieved from NewspaperSG; CO276/18: Government Notification, No. 69, 1887, p. 186.
- 14 CO276/18: Government Notification, No. 69, 1887, p. 186; *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 4 Dec 1886, p. 331.
- 15 CO276/19: Government Notification, No. 582 (1888), p. 2023; CO276/19: Government Notification, No. 583 (1888), p. 2024; CO276/19: Government Notification,

By March 1892, according to *The Daily Advertiser*, "it is positively a wonder that there are any more dogs left to kill" in Singapore, which led government officials to begin considering whether the regulations on muzzling, registration and importation of canines were still necessary.<sup>24</sup> After meeting with the Executive Council, the decision was made to extend the dog regulations for another year, although the issuance of free muzzles was discontinued in April 1892. There was also a reduction in the number of personnel in the Rabies Suppression Unit. Enforcement in the Municipality shifted to regulation and monitoring, with dog inspectors issuing 94 summonses in 1892, 77 of which were orders to pay fines.<sup>25</sup>

## Rabies Eventually Eliminated

By early 1893, it appeared that rabies in Singapore had been contained. In January, the government published an assessment of the measures it had taken and trumpeted their effectiveness. There were no reported cases of hydrophobia for the entire year of 1892; the last case had been the death of a Chua Kim Soon in October 1891.

The absence of rabies cases for the next two years resulted in the promulgation of the Singapore Dogs Orders 1893. The new regulations revoked the need for a muzzle within the Municipality, although all dogs still had to be registered and wear a collar with an identifying tag. Any dog without such a collar could be culled. The ban on the importation of dogs continued.<sup>26</sup>

In 1894, funding for the Department for the Suppression of Rabies was dropped from the budget. The police assumed responsibility for licensing and

- 20 No. 280 (1888), pp. 953–4; CO273/246/4381: Report on the Suppression of Rabies (1899), p. 225; CO276/19: Government Notification, No. 752 (1888), p. 2539; NA425: MPMC: 16 Jan 1888, p. 1411; 1 Aug 1888, p. 1491. Retrieved from National Archives of Singapore.
- 16 *The Straits Times Weekly Issue*, 9 Sep 1889, p. 2.
- 17 The prevention of hydrophobia. (1889, November 13). *The Straits Times*, p. 2; The prevention of hydrophobia. (1889, October 5). *The Straits Times*, p. 3. Retrieved from NewspaperSG
- 18 Report on rabies. (1890, January 25). *The Straits Times*, p. 2. Retrieved from NewspaperSG; CO275/39: Report of Committee Appointed to Enquire into the Question of Rabies in Singapore, pp. C24–5. Retrieved from National Archives of Singapore.
- 19 CO275/39: Report of Committee Appointed to Enquire into the Question of Rabies in Singapore, p. C23; NA425: MPMC: 26 Mar. 1890, p. 1682. Both retrieved from National Archives of Singapore.
- 20 CO276/22: Government Notification, No. 120, pp. 360–1; The Legislative Council. (1891, February 25). *The Straits Times Weekly Issue*, p. 4. Retrieved from NewspaperSG; NA425: MPMC: 1 Apr. 1891, pp. 1853–4. Retrieved from National Archives of Singapore.

other related activities, particularly those taking place outside the Municipality. By 1896, the authorities were ready to further ease some of the other restrictions as there had not been a reported case of rabies in Singapore since 1891. G. Owen, the Superintendent of Rabies Suppression, announced that there was "no danger of the disease again showing itself", and proclaimed that throughout the island, "with the exception of an occasional unhealthy looking dog, the present classes of native dogs on the Island are strong and healthy looking and cared for".<sup>27</sup>

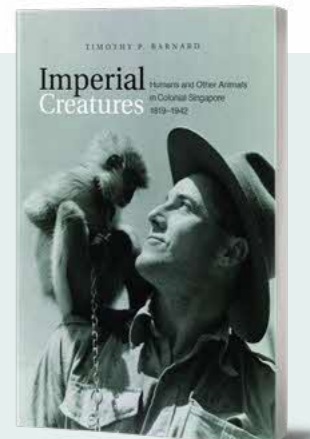
The suppression of rabies was a triumph for the Municipal Commission as well as the Straits Settlements government. Government programmes had rid the island of a scourge and brought under control the canine nuisance that had plagued the residents for decades.

During the 1890s, over 22,000 dogs were killed in Singapore according to government records, while the number of registered dogs in the Municipality was fewer than 3,000. The only drawback, according to the government report, was that pedigree dogs – such as fox terriers, spaniels and setters – had "greatly degenerated from lack of new stock and hardly a pure bred dog is now to be met with". By 1899, the Chief Medical Officer was able to announce that "rabies has been completely stamped out of the Island of Singapore". This occurred three years before the disease was eradicated in Britain.<sup>28</sup>

To start the new century, Superintendent Owen asked to return to England on home leave. The government approved the sabbatical and used his absence to ease many of the strict regulations relating to dogs. Beginning in August 1900, dog owners could attach

the registration badge to their pet's collar without the presence of a government official. More importantly, canines were now allowed ashore from ships as long as they went directly to the quarantine station for animals that had been established on St John's Island. The dog owner would pay the fees for the period of upkeep and inspection.<sup>29</sup>

This established the quarantine and importation rules for dogs, which remained for the rest of the colonial period in Singapore. Dogs were allowed once again, but only if they were monitored, registered and controlled – as well as tolerated – by colonial society. ♦



This essay is based on a chapter in Timothy P. Barnard's *Imperial Creatures: Humans and other Animals in Colonial Singapore, 1849–1942* (2019), which retails at major bookshops. It is also available for reference at the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library and for loan at selected public libraries (Call nos.: RSING 304.2095957 BAR and SING 304.2095957 BAR).

- 21 Government action re hydrophobia. (1891, March 10). *The Daily Advertiser*, p. 2. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 22 NA425: MPMC: 24 Jun 1891, p. 1884. Retrieved from National Archives of Singapore; *The Daily Advertiser*, 10 Mar 1891, p. 2; Random notes. (1891, July 4). *The Daily Advertiser*, p. 2; Dog statistics. (1891, November 10). *The Straits Times Weekly Issue*, p. 2. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 23 The municipal dog-killing. (1891, October 7). *The Straits Times Weekly Issue*, p. 8. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 24 Local and general. (1892, August 8). *The Daily Advertiser*, p. 3. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 25 CO276/26: Report on the Work of Suppression of Rabies; CO276/24: Government Notification, No. 159 (1892), p. 1043; Municipal Commission. (1892, March 31). *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, p. 3; The dog regulations. (1892, April 4). *The Daily Advertiser*, p. 3; Suppression of rabies. (1892, March 21). *The Daily Advertiser*, p. 3; The Municipal Commission. (1892, March 4). *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, p. 2; CO273/246/4381: Report on the Suppression of Rabies, (1899), p. 228.
- 26 H.E.'s veto in municipal affairs. (1893, March 28).
- 27 *The Straits Times Weekly Issue*, p. 2. Retrieved from NewspaperSG; CO276/24: Government Notification, No. 163 (1893), pp. 578–9; CO273/246/4381: Report on the Suppression of Rabies, (1899), p. 228; NA 426: MPMC: 15 Feb 1893, p. 2158; 15 Mar 1893, pp. 2169–70.
- 28 CO276/28: Government Notification, No. 275 (1894), p. 734; Unlicensed dogs. (1895, January 8). *The Mid-Day Herald*, p. 2; Official report of the Legislative Council Meeting. (1896, April 24). *The Mid-Day Herald*, p. 2. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 28 Poon, S.W. (2014, March). Dogs and British colonialism: The contested ban on eating dogs in colonial Hong Kong. *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 42 (2): 308–328, p. 316. Retrieved from ResearchGate; Pemberton, N., & Worboys, M. (2007). *Rabies in Britain: Dogs, disease and culture, 1800–2000* (p. 1). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. (Not available in NLB holdings); CO273/246/4381: Report on the Suppression of Rabies, (1899), pp. 230–1.
- 29 NA427: MPMC: 20 Jun 1900, p. 3885; 15 Aug 1900, pp. 3931–3.

[All other Colonial Office (CO) reports and Minutes of the Proceeding of the Municipal Commissioners (MPMC) can be accessed at NUS Libraries.]

# LEPROSY

## A STORY OF SUFFERING BUT ALSO OF HOPE

People struck with leprosy were shunned and forced to live in isolation at the Trafalgar Home in Yio Chu Kang. **Danielle Lim** tracks the history of this disfiguring disease in Singapore.



Leprosy is a disease that has perhaps left the longest trail of illness and suffering in human history. The disease is mentioned in an ancient Chinese medical treatise, *Neijing* (内经; *Yellow Emperor's Classic of Internal Medicine*), as early as 250 BCE.<sup>1</sup> Leprosy is the result of an infection caused by the bacteria *Mycobacterium leprae*. It is a chronic, infectious, disfiguring disease that has historically caused its sufferers to be shunned by society. Known and feared for thousands of years, it was only in the late 1940s that a cure for the disease became available.

According to estimates by the World Health Organization, there were around 10 to 12 million leprosy cases globally between the mid-1960s and the mid-1980s.<sup>2</sup> In 2010, the number of new cases dropped to 228,474.<sup>3</sup> What is not known, however, is the cumulative total number of people who have suffered leprosy's chronic course of incurable disfigurement and social exile over the centuries.

In Singapore, a total of 8,500 leprosy patients were registered between 1951

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(Above) Trafalgar Home in Yio Chu Kang – which was shuttered in 1993 – was surrounded by high walls and barbed wire to prevent residents from escaping. *Courtesy of Loh Kah Seng.*

(Facing page) Minister for Health Yong Nyuk Lin (second from left) visiting Trafalgar Home and interacting with residents, 1964. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

and 1995.<sup>4</sup> Here, as in other parts of the world, leprosy carries a social stigma. Those who contracted the disease were ostracised by family and friends and banished from society. They lived as outcasts, people whom the community feared. It was only after a cure was discovered that sufferers could return to society, though not all of them chose to.

The segregation of leprosy sufferers in colonies and asylums was a common worldwide practice. In July 1897, the Lepers' Ordinance was passed in the Straits Settlements empowering the authorities to detain leprosy sufferers indefinitely in asylums in order to prevent the spread of the disease.<sup>5</sup> Prior to this, there was no law requiring compulsory segregation.

In the early 1900s, male lepers in Singapore were housed in rudimentary leprosariums in the city fringes and beyond, while females were warded in Kandang Kerbau Hospital. It was only in 1918 that a dedicated camp for male patients was established on McNair Road. In 1926, a small centre with four wards for female patients was constructed on the Trafalgar rubber estate off Yio Chu Kang Road. Four years later, a new male camp was built adjacent

to the centre for females, and both sites became known collectively as the Singapore Leper Asylum.

Up to the 1920s, inmates of the asylum had to wear uniforms bearing the letter "L". In the 1930s, the asylum's gates were manned by security guards armed with rifles to prevent residents from escaping and infecting the rest of the population. The asylum was renamed Trafalgar Home in 1950.<sup>6</sup>

### Trafalgar Home

In mid-20th century Singapore, there were three diseases known as the "three brothers". Mental illness was considered the mildest and hence the little brother while tuberculosis was known as the second brother. The most feared was leprosy, known as the eldest brother.

So intense was the fear of leprosy that it was common for public buses to drive past the bus stop nearest to Trafalgar Home without stopping to pick up those waiting there. Nurses working at the home had to walk to the next bus stop to get a ride home.

It was no coincidence that Trafalgar Home was situated in a remote area in

Yio Chu Kang, beside the old Woodbridge Hospital for patients with mental illnesses. With its high walls and barbed wire, the home could easily be mistaken for a prison.

Upon entering, one would encounter the home's general office. Behind the office was the occupational therapy room where residents wove baskets and made items such as handbags and clothes, some of which were sold. Further inside was the female infirmary, followed by the community hall and then the male infirmary. The girls' dormitory was above the female infirmary; similarly, the male dormitory was located above the male infirmary. There was also a chapel on the grounds.

Trafalgar Home was based on the concept of an "open village" with room for expansion. More than 60 semi-detached cottages, which could accommodate two adults each, were built on one end of the compound on the same side as the female infirmary. Each cottage had a kitchen, two cupboards, two bedside lockers and two beds. At one point, Trafalgar's grounds occupied some 125 acres.<sup>7</sup>

Before World War II, nursing duties were performed mainly by the residents themselves as professional medical and nursing staff were reluctant to work in leprosariums. From the end of the Japanese Occupation until the mid-1960s, the Roman Catholic nuns of the Franciscan

Missionaries of the Divine Motherhood (FMDM) order carried out most of the nursing duties at Trafalgar Home.

When the nuns left, they were replaced by local female nurses, many of whom approached their duties with dread and trepidation. One of the nurses admitted that when she was offered food prepared by the residents, she was so scared that she did not dare eat it. Another said she would immediately soak her clothes in Dettol when she returned home from work.<sup>8</sup> As with other leper asylums throughout the world, the residents were mindful of such fears; they kept a respectful distance from healthy people and refrained from physical contact.

The home's able-bodied residents worked and contributed to the daily running of the home as patient-workers. Some trained as nursing aides or hospital attendants, assisting in the medical care of fellow patients, while others became teaching aides and helped out at the school within the grounds. Others handled the cooking chores in the kitchen, did the laundry, carried out clerical duties in the office and wove baskets in the occupational therapy room. Such tasks made the residents feel useful and also enabled them to earn a small allowance.

A small farm on the grounds allowed residents to grow vegetables to supplement their rations. Social gatherings such as club nights on Fridays were organised, during which treats of orange juice were eagerly anticipated. At these activities, friendships were formed and occasionally love blossomed. At times, fights broke out, especially when gambling and alcohol consumption had taken place. For the children of Trafalgar Home, the highlight was the annual Christmas party. Residents were also involved in sports and participated in extra-curricular groups such as Boy Scouts and Girl Guides.

Because *Mycobacterium leprae* attacks the nerves and muscles, many patients suffered intense pain as the

(Above left) The semi-detached cottages on the grounds of Trafalgar Home, 1952. Housing two adults, each unit was equipped with a kitchen, two cupboards, two bedside lockers and two beds. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

(Left) Residents of Trafalgar Home weaving baskets and other items in the occupational therapy room, 1963. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



## LIVING WITH LEPROSY

Here are firsthand accounts from former residents of Trafalgar Home as well as a nurse and a social worker.

### This hand began to be clawed...

"My body was aching but I still went to work... After it passed, I had to endure a bit, and after a long time, it would be over. I also didn't take medicine. But my hands began to have red patches. Red, like it has been scalded by boiling water... when the day was very hot, my body felt very cold... very slowly, this hand began to be clawed, every day the joints couldn't flex."<sup>1</sup>

*Tan Teow Meng ignored the initial signs of the disease and worked as a coffee shop assistant until he was admitted to Trafalgar Home in 1974, where he was a resident for about 20 years.*

### I think of myself as a living death

"No visitors were allowed to come in. It was surrounded by walls. I was just like a prisoner... I felt very sad, and I thought that there is no medicine to cure us... I think of myself as a living death, surrounded by walls and kept inside, with no medicine."<sup>2</sup>

*Joseph Tan was admitted into the Singapore Leper Asylum (later renamed Trafalgar Home) in 1933 at the age of 11.*

### After a long time... your flesh becomes like metal

"The injection was on the arm or sometimes on my buttock. The needle was thick but when it went in, it got bent. After many injections, the skin there became like metal. The needle became bent like a snake. Every week, there were three injections. After the injection, the medicine remained in the arm and couldn't diffuse. It was not watery, it was like milk. It was thick like white milk. After a long time, month, years, your flesh becomes like metal."<sup>3</sup>

*Kuang Wee Kee was admitted into Trafalgar Home in 1949 when he was 19 years old. The Japanese Occupation had deprived him of the opportunity to seek immediate treatment.*



If left untreated, leprosy is a debilitating and disfiguring disease that causes intense pain to sufferers as the disease progresses. It affects the nerves, skin, eyes and respiratory tract. The nerve damage can result in the crippling of hands and feet, with fingers and toes sometimes requiring amputation. Photo from iStock.

### The rotten sweet potato spoils the yam

"One person got leprosy and people will be afraid of the whole family. They said that you all have this horrible disease. Right? They may not show it openly but they will be afraid in their heart. You understand? The person will suffer. My brothers and sisters will also suffer... It was like that. We didn't do anything. The rotten sweet potato spoils the yam. You understand? The sweet potato is rotten, the yam is not rotten, but because of the sweet potato, the yam will also be affected."<sup>4</sup>

*Kuang Wee Kee.*

### If you took the bus, people would complain

"Some of them had ulcers and they wore bandages. Last time, many people complained about them. You couldn't blame the bus [driver] for not allowing you to board. When the bus conductor saw you like this, he would ask you to wait for the next bus. It was not that they didn't want to take you. If you took the bus, people would complain to the bus company. They told the bus conductor to tell you to take the next bus. So you... understand... [why] they didn't want you to take the bus."<sup>5</sup>

*Kuang Wee Kee.*

### Tell them she has gone to Penang

"I was in charge of the youth club in Trafalgar... the mother came crying with the child. She said the neighbours know.

I said, 'Tell them she has gone to Penang for further education, don't tell them that your daughter is here'.<sup>6</sup>

*Louis Kandiah was a male nurse in Tan Tock Seng Hospital before he was transferred to Trafalgar Home in the 1950s. He worked there until he retired.*

### Leprosy is not really an infectious disease

"Leprosy is not really an infectious disease. I have seen couples marry each other and they have children. None of the children has leprosy. They were brought up by parents who have leprosy."<sup>7</sup>

*Joyce Fung Yong Siang began working in Trafalgar Home in 1973. She was a senior social worker there from 1976 to 1981.*

## NOTES

- Loh, K.S. (2009). *Making and unmaking the asylum: Leprosy and modernity in Singapore and Malaysia* (p. 37). Petaling Jaya: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre. (Call no.: RSING 614.54609595 LOH)
- Loh, 2009, p. 57.
- Loh, 2009, p. 66. [Note: Before dapson was used to treat leprosy, the main form of treatment was an injection of chaulmugra oil extracted from the seeds of the *Hydnocarpus wightiana*, a tropical tree indigenous to India and Southeast Asia.]
- Loh, 2009, p. 83.
- Loh, 2009, p. 90.
- Lim, K.C. (Interviewer). (1987, September 30). *Oral history interview with Louis Kandiah* [Recording accession no. 000822, reel 3 of 8]. Retrieved from National Archives of Singapore website.
- Lee, P. (Interviewer). (2000, July 12). *Oral history interview with Joyce Fung Yong Siang*. [Recording accession no. 002354, reel 5 of 6]. Retrieved from National Archives of Singapore website.

disease progressed. Steroids such as prednisolone relieved the pain, but these were prescribed very sparingly by doctors who were only too aware of the dangers of steroid addiction. Some patients would obtain the medication and sell it to other patients who were in great pain and desperate for relief.

### Lorong Buangkok School

Of the 1,358 cases of leprosy registered in Singapore between 1962 and 1967, 150 were under 15 years of age.<sup>9</sup> The children admitted to Trafalgar Home lived in dormitories and studied at Lorong Buangkok School, which had been set up in 1947 to cater to children with leprosy.<sup>10</sup>

At the school, which was renamed Lorong Buangkok Government English



Minister for Health A.J. Braga (third from left) visiting Lorong Buangkok School for children with leprosy in 1955. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

### LEPROSY AND ITS CURE

Leprosy is a long-term infection caused by the bacillus, *Mycobacterium leprae*. It was first discovered by the Norwegian physician Gerhard Armauer Hansen in 1873, which is why leprosy is also known as “Hansen’s disease”. It is the first bacterium to be identified as causing disease in humans.<sup>1</sup>

Primarily affecting the skin, nerves, eyes and respiratory tract, the progression of the disease can lead to a loss of sensation, skin ulcers, nerve damage, muscle weakness and atrophy as well as permanent disabilities. Chronic ulcers sometimes resulted in the necessary amputation of limbs, which is why leprosy is often viewed as a mutilating disease that causes fingers and toes to “drop off”. Facial palsy, blindness, claw-hands and foot-drop are common permanent disabilities associated with the disease.

*Mycobacterium leprae* is slow-growing with an incubation period of about five years. Although transmitted via contact with fluids from the nose and mouth of people with the disease, leprosy is not highly infectious, contrary to popular belief.<sup>2</sup> The onset of the disease can be insidious however, and the first signs often appear on the skin as lesions or raised, red patches. As the disease advances, the damage to the nerves and muscles can result in much pain.

### Sulfa Drugs as a Cure

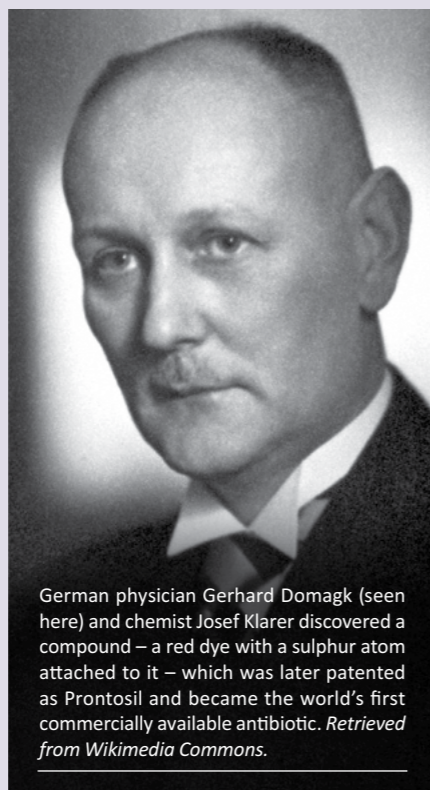
From the 1920s to the 1930s, in a laboratory in Germany, a doctor and a chemist

tested one chemical after another in a bid to find a cure for bacterial infections. The physician, Gerhard Domagk, had fought in World War I and had witnessed the suffering and deaths of thousands of soldiers due to bacterial infections such as cholera, typhoid fever, gas gangrene and tuberculosis. After the war, he dedicated his life to finding a way to eradicate bacteria that invaded the human body.

Domagk and the chemist Josef Klarer tested many chemicals from the late 1920s. Following years of failures and endless research, they finally discovered a com-

pound – a red dye with a sulphur atom attached to it – that produced results. After being injected with this compound, bacteria-infected mice became free from infection. The compound was later patented as Prontosil and became the world’s first commercially available antibiotic.<sup>3</sup> It was the first in the class of drugs called sulphonamides, also known as sulfa drugs, that were effective antibiotics. This drug marked a new era in medicine and in the treatment of bacterial infections.<sup>4</sup>

Dapsone is a sulfa drug that was subsequently found to be effective against leprosy. However, the use of dapsone gave rise to a drug-resistant variant of the bacteria, which is why a multi-drug therapy consisting of dapsone and two other antibiotics, rifampicin and clofazimine, eventually became the standard treatment for leprosy. In Singapore, treatment by dapsone began in the 1950s.



German physician Gerhard Domagk (seen here) and chemist Josef Klarer discovered a compound – a red dye with a sulphur atom attached to it – which was later patented as Prontosil and became the world’s first commercially available antibiotic. Retrieved from Wikimedia Commons.

### NOTES

- 1 World Health Organization. (2019, September 10). *Leprosy: Keyfacts*. Retrieved from World Health Organization website.
- 2 World Health Organization, 10 Sep 2019.
- 3 While Alexander Fleming had discovered penicillin in 1928, before Gerhard Domagk’s discovery of Prontosil, the latter antibiotic was produced commercially before penicillin. It was only in the early 1940s that penicillin could be manufactured in industrial quantities. For the treatment of leprosy, the sulfa drug dapsone was found to be effective.
- 4 Hager, T. (2006). *The demon under the microscope: From battlefield hospitals to Nazi labs, one doctor’s heroic search for the world’s first miracle drug* (pp. 1–5). New York: Three Rivers Press. Retrieved from NLB Overdrive. (Electronic book)

School in 1958, lessons were taught by the Catholic FMDM nuns, trained teachers as well as educated residents who became teaching aides. Many of the teachers were themselves patients of the home, educators who had qualified as teachers prior to contracting the disease.

School was a major part of life for most of the children in Trafalgar Home. They would wake up at seven in the morning, put on the school’s blue and white uniform, and walk the half-kilometre from their dormitories to the school. The school catered to children from Primary One until Secondary Four.

The children of Trafalgar Home came from varied backgrounds: some were from poor families with little prior education while others had previously attended established schools with high academic standards. The nuns and teachers did what they could to provide education for this diverse group of children. Some students even managed to take their Senior Cambridge Certificate examination at the school.

### Life After Leprosy

In the 1930s, researchers discovered sulfa drugs – a class of antibiotics – that led to the development of dapsone, which kills the bacteria that causes leprosy. Doctors eventually developed a multi-drug therapy consisting of dapsone and two other drugs, rifampicin and clofazimine, that became

the standard treatment for leprosy. At last, there was a cure for the disease. In Singapore, treatment by dapsone began in the 1950s.

The Leprosy Act, which mandated the segregation of infectious cases of leprosy, was repealed in 1976 and replaced by the Infectious Diseases Act. With the repeal, the remaining institutions with compulsory segregation were progressively shut down. Trafalgar Home was eventually closed in 1993.<sup>11</sup> Today, leprosy is managed by the National Skin Centre, while other infectious diseases come under the purview of the National Centre for Infectious Diseases.

With the closure of Trafalgar Home, some residents decided to move to the Singapore Leprosy Relief Association Home in Buangkok. Although cured, they had lived in Trafalgar Home for so many years that they no longer had a home to return to. Some were left with deformed limbs and did not want to go back to a society that might not accept them as they were.

The rest, upon recovery, attempted to return to a normal life. But the process of social reintegration was far from easy. Some had lost contact with their loved ones while others were turned away by their families. Some women also discovered that their husbands had left them and remarried. Because of the stigma, many lied when neighbours and friends asked about their

long absence. Former patients thus felt a deep ambivalence when they were discharged: although now free to integrate back into society, they did not know if they would be welcomed.

While there were difficulties, many of those who were cured managed to rejoin mainstream society. They went on to carve out successful careers as teachers, nurses, clerks and in the army. Many also contributed economically and socially to a newly independent Singapore in its formative years.

Today, the National Skin Centre in Singapore treats about 10 to 15 new leprosy patients each year. Although a handful are Singaporeans, the majority are migrant workers from countries like Indonesia, the Philippines, India, Bangladesh and Myanmar.<sup>12</sup>

The illness remains a problem in some countries. In India, for example, alarm bells rang when the Central Leprosy Division of the health ministry reported 135,485 new leprosy cases in 2017.<sup>13</sup> One of the reasons for the resurgence of the disease could be the reluctance to seek treatment due to fear.

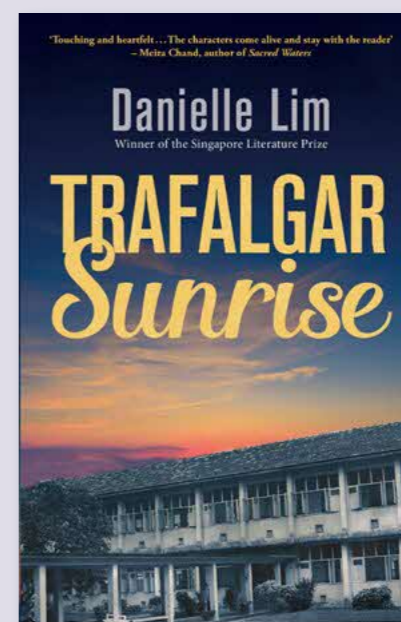
With multi-drug therapy providing an effective cure, leprosy is no longer the dreaded disease it once was. Yet while treatment is available, the deep-seated fear and social stigma remain as strong as ever. ♦

### NOTES

- 1 Khong, K.Y. (1969, September). Leprosy in Singapore: A survey of this disease between the years 1962–1967. *Singapore Medical Journal*, 10 (3), 194–197, p. 194. Retrieved from Singapore Medical Journal website.
- 2 Noordeen, S.K., Bravo, L.L., & Sundaresan, T.K. (1992). Estimated number of leprosy cases in the world. *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*, 70 (1), 7–10. Retrieved from World Health Organization website.
- 3 World Health Organization. (2011). *Weekly epidemiological record no. 36, 86, 389–400*. Retrieved from World Health Organization website.
- 4 Seow, C.S. (1995). Leprosy - An update for clinicians [Bulletin for Medical Practitioners, National Skin Centre]. Retrieved from National Skin Centre website.
- 5 Loh, K.S. (2009). *Making and unmaking the asylum: Leprosy and modernity in Singapore and Malaysia* (p. 21). Petaling Jaya: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre. (Call no.: RSING 614.54609595 LOH)
- 6 Loh, 2009, p. 21.
- 7 Loh, 2009, pp. 53–54.
- 8 Loh, 2009, p. 59.
- 9 Khong, Sep 1969, p. 194.
- 10 Loh, 2009, p. 56.
- 11 Infectious carriers can be arrested. (1976, September 9). *New Nation*, p. 2; Chan, C. (2005, February 5). Where leprosy patients were isolated. *The Straits Times*, p. 16; Retrieved from NewspaperSG; Loh, 2009, pp. 25–26.
- 12 Shaffiq, A (2015, February 21). Former leprosy patients at Silra Home look forward to visitors during Chinese New Year. *The New Paper*. Retrieved from The New Paper website.
- 13 Menon, R. (2019, January 4). Leprosy is making a comeback In India, but the govt wants to deny it. *The Wire*. Retrieved from The Wire website.

In *Trafalgar Sunrise* (2018), ward sister Grace Hwang battles alongside fellow healthcare workers in Singapore during the SARS outbreak in 2003. In the thick of it, she looks back at her teenage years in Trafalgar Home, a leper asylum where Alice, her best friend, was forced to give her newborn up for adoption. With Alice now in the last stages of cancer, Grace attempts to reunite the mother with her long-lost daughter before time runs out.

*Trafalgar Sunrise* is Danielle Lim’s first work of fiction. Her book is based on accounts by former residents of Trafalgar Home and nurses who fought the SARS outbreak. The book is available for reference at the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library and for loan at selected public libraries (Call nos.: RSING S823 LIM and SING LIM) as well as for digital loan on nlb.overdrive.com. It also retails at major bookshops in Singapore.



# Malay Seals — from — Singapore

Malay seals of the 19th century hold important information says **Annabel Teh Gallop**.

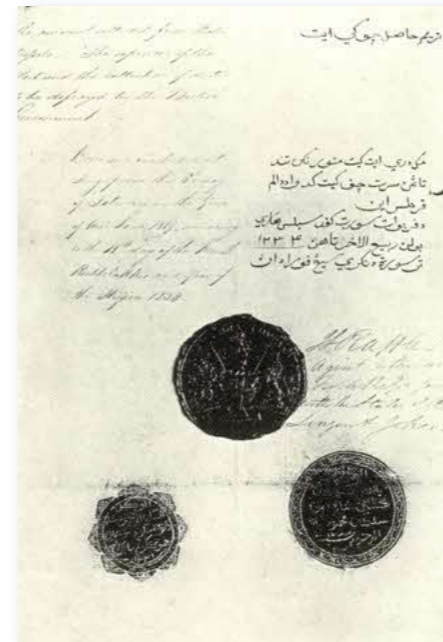
Malay seals – defined as seals from Southeast Asia, or used by Southeast Asians, with inscriptions in Arabic script – have been found everywhere in the Malay Archipelago. As small but highly visible and symbolic emblems of their owners, Malay seals were designed to portray the image of the self that the seal holder wished to project, but they were also no less strongly shaped by the prevailing cultural, religious and artistic norms of their time. These multiple layers of identity – both consciously

and subconsciously revealed in seals – are recorded, explored and interpreted in a new catalogue of Malay seals.

*Malay Seals from the Islamic World of Southeast Asia* – published in Singapore by NUS Press in association with The British Library,<sup>1</sup> and in Indonesia by Lontar Foundation – presents 2,168 Malay seals sourced from more than 70 public institutions and 60 private collections worldwide. The seals were retrieved mainly from impressions stamped in lampblack (a material obtained from candles or oil lamps), ink or wax on manuscript letters, treaties and other documents. In addition, around 300 silver, brass and stone seal matrices (the objects used to make the impression) are also documented.

The seals featured in the book originate from the present-day territories of Malaysia, Brunei, Singapore, Indonesia and the southern regions of Thailand, Cambodia and the Philippines, and date from the second half of the 16th century to the early 20th century. The concise and precise inscriptions on these seals, over half of which are dated, constitute a treasure trove of data that can throw light on myriad aspects of the history of the Malay world.

The catalogue is arranged geographically by clusters of kingdoms – sweeping broadly from west to east across Southeast Asia – from Aceh on the northern tip of Sumatra to Mindanao in the southern Philippines. Many of these clusters map easily onto modern



A black and white reproduction of the last page of the treaty signed on 6 February 1819. The bilingual treaty – in English and Malay in Jawi script – shows the signature of Stamford Raffles and his red wax seal (top), and the seal impressions of Temenggung Abdul Rahman (left) and Sultan Husain Syah (right) stamped in lampblack. Image reproduced from Buckley, C.B. (1902). *An Anecdotal History of Old Times in Singapore* (vol. I; Frontispiece). Singapore: Fraser & Neave, Limited. Collection of the National Library, Singapore (Accession no.: B02966444B)

political and administrative boundaries, but the chapter labelled “Johor, Riau, Lingga and Singapore”, which features 134 seals, proved harder to organise coherently than that of any other Malay state because of the uniquely complex history of the polity.

### A Succession Dispute and the Arrival of Stamford Raffles

In 1811, Sultan Mahmud Syah III of the Johor-Riau empire died suddenly, without naming a successor (see text-box overleaf for a fuller account of the politics of the Johor Sultanate). As his oldest son Tengku Husain (also known as Tengku Long) was in Pahang getting married at the time, a faction in the court installed the Sultan’s younger son, Tengku Abdul Rahman, as the new sultan. This act was not recognised by the most senior ministers – the Bendahara in Pahang and the Temenggung in Johor – or by Sultan Mahmud’s widow, who held the sacred regalia. She favoured Tengku Husain and by refusing to hand over the royal regalia, prevented Tengku Abdul Rahman from being ceremonially installed.

Into this scene of fractious stalemate arrived Stamford Raffles in January 1819. Seeking a new port for the East India Company, he adroitly came to an arrangement with Temenggung Abdul Rahman of Johor (who was based in Singapore). Tengku Husain was brought from Riau to Singapore and swiftly installed as a rival sultan of Johor on the morning of 6 February 1819. Thus enthroned and empowered, Husain signed a treaty that very afternoon, together with the Temenggung, granting the British permission to establish a trading post in Singapore.

As the whereabouts of the original treaty of 6 February 1819 are unknown, all that remains today is an old photograph published in 1902 on the frontispiece of Charles Burton Buckley’s *An Anecdotal History of Old Times in Singapore* which mentions that the treaty was “found among the Records in Johore”. The image shows the last page of the bilingual treaty, in English and Malay in Jawi script,<sup>2</sup> with the red wax seal of Raffles, and the seal impressions of Sultan Husain Syah and Temenggung Abdul Rahman stamped in lampblack.<sup>3</sup>

An eyewitness account of the sealing of the treaty was given by J.G.F. Crawford, captain of the survey ship *Investigator*, who served under Raffles:

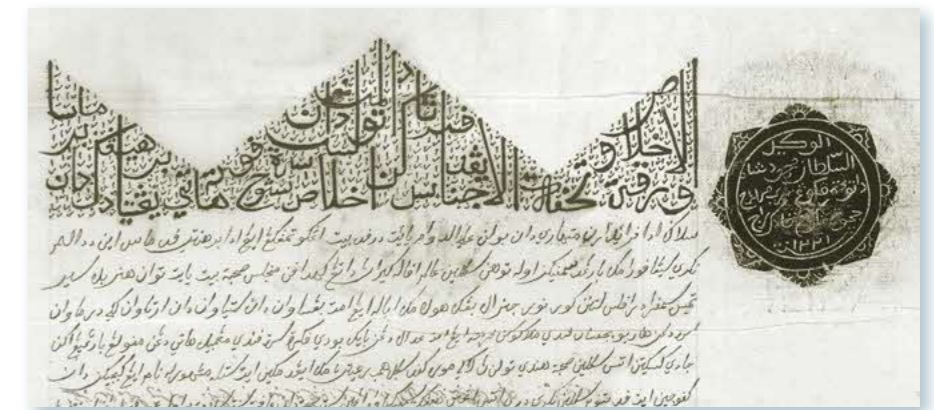
“Their mode of sealing is peculiar. The seal, about three inches in diameter, is made of silver, on which is deeply and admirably well engraved the name and rank of the proprietor; that is held over a candle which heats and blackens it with smoke. It then is pressed on the paper, over a soft cushion. It leaves a beautiful, clear impression of the characters, but which, I should suppose, would not last long without the greatest care being taken to prevent any friction over the soot.”<sup>4</sup>

A closer look at these two exemplars of Malay sigillography (the study of seals) illustrates the rich nuggets of historical data that Malay seals can yield upon scrutiny and study.

The Temenggung’s seal is inscribed *al-wakil al-Sultan Mahmud Syah Datuk Temenggung Seri Maharaja cucu Temenggung Paduka Raja sanat 1221*. This is translated into English as “The deputy of the Sultan Mahmud Syah, Datuk Temenggung Seri Maharaja, grandson of Temenggung Paduka Raja, the year 1221” (1806/7). The year on a Malay seal usually refers to the date of appointment. Hence, this is the seal granted by Sultan Mahmud Syah to the Temenggung following his installation as Datuk Temenggung Seri Maharaja in 1806, or 1221 in the Islamic calendar. It is notable that the pedigree on the seal names his grandfather rather than his father, reflecting the fact that while his father did not hold the office of Temenggung, his grandfather indubitably did.

The petalled floral shape is typical of Malay seals, recalling the lotus blossom; the eight petals reflect a deep-seated Malay attachment to the cosmographical significance of multiples of four. Temenggung Abdul Rahman used this seal all his life and it is shown below impressed on a letter to Raffles in 1824. As is well known, all of Raffles’ possessions and correspondence from his second period of service in Southeast Asia were lost in the wreck of the *Fame* on his voyage homewards on 2 February 1824. However, this letter from the Temenggung is dated 23 August 1824 and must therefore have been sent to Raffles when he was already back in London.

Letter from Temenggung Abdul Rahman of Johor (featuring his seal) to T.S. Raffles in Bengkulu, 27 Zulhijah 1239 (23 August 1824). British Library, MSS Eur D.742/1, f. 148 (cat. 879 in Gallop 2019).



Sultan Husain's seal, on the other hand, opens with the most common expression of piety found on Malay seals: *al-wāthiq billāh al-Sultan Husain Syah ibn Sultan Mahmud Syah al-marhum sanat 1234*, which means "He who trusts in God, the Sultan Husain Syah, son of the late Sultan Mahmud Syah, the year 1234" (1818/9). In order for it to be used for the treaty signing on the afternoon of 6 February 1819, the silver seal must have been made at very short notice, namely in the brief interval between Raffles' preliminary agreement with Temenggung Abdul Rahman on 30 January, and Husain's installation as sultan in Singapore a week later, on the morning of 6 February. It was therefore most probably made in Singapore by a silversmith in the Temenggung's entourage.

### Seals of Malay Nobles

In many parts of the Islamic world, from Istanbul to Cairo, seals were used at all levels of society, from sultans to slaves. In the Malay world however, seals were a royal prerogative and the use of seals was restricted to court circles. The clearest proof of this accepted convention was that even the famous writer Munsyi Abdullah (born Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir), who was renowned as a seal designer, did not have his own seal. His last will and testament, drawn up before he embarked on his Haj pilgrimage in 1856 – and recently exhibited in the National Library of Singapore's exhibition "On Paper: Singapore Before 1867" – is not sealed. Thus, the story of Malay seals from Singapore is essentially a study of the seals of Sultan Husain Syah and his



Seal of Sultan Husain Syah in a letter to William Farquhar in Singapore, undated. Library of Congress, MS Jawi 12, no. 41 (cat. 983 in Gallop 2019).

short-lived line, until superseded in the second half of the 19th century by the seals of the British colonial government.

Among the seals of Sultan Husain Syah's descendants, that of his oldest son, Tengku Abdul Jalil, is of special significance because it is the earliest dated example of lithography in Singapore. The seal appears on a letter written in Jawi from Thomas Church, the Resident Councillor of Singapore, in 1838. The letter urged the Malay chiefs to send their children for instruction at the Singapore Institution (subsequently renamed Raffles Institution in 1868).

The seal is round, with the inscription in the middle – *Menyatakan surat Tengku Abdul Jalil sanat 1249*, which means "Signifying a document from Tengku Abdul Jalil, the year 1249" (1833/4) – surmounted by a crown and framed by a shield-shaped looped cord; such borrowings from the iconographic vocabulary of European



The seal of Tengku Abdul Jalil, lithographed on a typeset printed Malay letter from Thomas Church, Resident Councillor of Singapore, 1838. The British Library, 14629.c.42 (3) (cat. 985 in Gallop 2019).

### THE POLITICS OF THE JOHOR SULTANATE

The kingdom of Johor was established following the fall of Melaka to the Portuguese in 1511 when Mahmud Syah (also spelled as Shah), the exiled sultan, and his court fled southwards and took refuge along the Johor River. In 1699, Mahmud Syah II – the despotic last sultan of Johor who was descended from the Melaka royal line – was murdered by his nobles while being borne to the mosque on a dais (hence his posthumous title Marhum Mangkat Dijulang, which means "The late one who died as he was being carried aloft").

As Mahmud Syah II had died without an heir, Bendahara Abdul Jalil, who was the most senior minister at the time, was proclaimed Sultan Abdul Jalil Riayat Syah IV of Johor. But he was in turn unseated by a Minangkabau prince, Raja Kecil of Siak, who claimed to be a posthumous son of Mahmud Syah II. Raja Kecil installed himself as Sultan Abdul Jalil Rahmat Syah of Johor and arranged for the killing of his predecessor.

In 1721, the son of Abdul Jalil Riayat Syah IV, Raja Sulaiman, accepted help from the Bugis to drive out Raja Kecil and, in return, the Bugis gained a permanent foothold in Johor.

Thenceforth, there were two seats of power within the sultanate of Johor,

both located in the Riau Archipelago: the Malay sultan based on the island of Lingga as well as the Bugis viceroy, or Yang Dipertuan Muda, on the island of Penyengat. Two of the great officers of state advising the sultan – the Bendahara in Pahang and the Temenggung in Johor – effectively held sway within their own fiefdoms.

The last sultan able to lay claim to jurisdiction over the great kingdom of "Johor and Pahang and Riau and Lingga" was Mahmud Syah III. He reigned for over 50 years but died in January 1811 without naming which of his two sons – by different wives – was to succeed him.

As the older son Tengku Husain was away in Pahang fulfilling his father's instruction to marry the daughter of the Bendahara, the powerful Bugis faction led by the Yang Dipertuan Muda, Raja Jafar, seized the opportunity to install the younger son, Tengku Abdul Rahman, who happened to be Raja Jafar's nephew. This unilateral action was neither recognised by the Bendahara and Temenggung nor by Sultan Mahmud's primary consort, Tengku Puteri, who refused to hand over the sacred regalia.

This was the succession dispute that Stamford Raffles took advantage of in 1819. Raffles installed Tengku Husain as sultan and the latter, thus empowered, signed a treaty with Raffles allowing a trading post to be set up on the island of Singapore.

heraldry can be seen in some Malay seals since the 17th century.

Church's initiative had little success. The Malay nobles were reluctant to have their children educated in a British establishment although "[f]ive hundred copies [of the letter] were printed and placarded over Singapore and Kampong Glam, and sent to no less than thirty different places round the coast and Borneo and Celebes by the nakhodas [captains] of trading vessels, but it led to no result".<sup>5</sup>

Another seal in the catalogue from the line of Sultan Husain Syah is that of his successor. Following his death in 1835, Sultan Husain Syah was succeeded not by Tengku Abdul Jalil, whose mother Cik Wak was a commoner, but by Tengku Ali, the oldest son of his fourth wife, Tengku Perabu. She was of royal descent, being the granddaughter of Sultan Daud of Terengganu. At the time of his father's death, Tengku Ali was just 11 years old. It was only in 1840, when he turned 17, that he was recognised as the legitimate successor to his father's properties by the colonial government in Singapore.

Sultan Ali Iskandar Syah's red ink seal, dating from 1840, is inscribed thus: *al-wāthiq billāh al-Malik al-Mannān al-Sultan Ali Iskandar Syah ibn al-Sultan Husain Syah al-malik Johor sanat 1256*, which means "He who trusts in God, the King, the Ever-Bestowing One, the Sultan Ali Iskandar Syah, son of the Sultan Husain Syah, the king of Johor, the year 1256" (1840/1).

Although Sultan Ali Iskandar's seal inscription grandiloquently describes him as "the king of Johor", this claim was short-lived for in 1855, he agreed to relinquish sovereign power to Temenggung Daeng Ibrahim of Johor in return for a pension as well as jurisdiction over the small district of Kesang-Muar. The seal he issued to his senior minister in Muar,



Encik Bujal, bears the inscription *al-wakil wa-al-wazir al-Sultan Ali Bujal bin Saadat sanat 1275*, or "The deputy and the vizier of the Sultan Ali, Bujal, son of Saadat, the year 1275" (1858/9). The use of the term *al-wakil* recalls the seals granted by Sultan Ali's grandfather, Sultan Mahmud Syah III, to his own officers of state.

### Seals Used by Women

Of the more than 2,000 seals recorded in the catalogue, only 17 belonged to women. The seal of Tengku Perabu – fourth wife of Sultan Husain Syah and the mother of Sultan Ali Iskandar Syah – is one of these. Her seal is a simple circle with an incised border and is inscribed: *Tengku Perabu isteri Sultan Husain bin Mahamud Singkapura*, or "Tengku Perabu, wife of Sultan Husain, son of Mahamud, Singkapura". The terse composition, and non-standard spelling of *Mahamud* and *Singkapura*, suggest a less-than-accomplished scribe.

Tengku Perabu's seal is found on a letter from Baboo Ramasamy, a school teacher in Singapore who had been granted a power of attorney by Sultan Ali in 1868. The letter, which claims authority in the name of Sultan Ali and his second son (and later nominated successor) Tengku Besar, is addressed to the Bendahara of Pahang and complains about boundary issues. Although undated, the letter mentions that the Governor of the Straits Settlements, Harry St George Ord, and the Chief Justice, Peter Benson Maxwell, had just left for Europe, which would place the letter around 1871.

Some insight into the character of Baboo Ramasamy is perhaps best

revealed in a letter some two decades later, reproduced in *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser (Weekly)* on 28 September 1897. The letter is addressed to the editor of *The Bangkok Times* by "Baboo Ramasamay, now resident in Bangkok", and signed "Baboo Ramsamy, Ex-Regent of Muar and Kesang and Lawful Heir to the Kingdom of Johore and its dependencies".

In the course of a series of rhetorical questions defending the claims of the line of Sultan Husain Syah against the wiles of the Bendahara of Pahang and the Temenggung of Johor, Baboo Ramasamy raises his own case:

"Was I not in H[er] B[rittanic] M[ajesty]'s Court at Malacca, publicly adopted by H.M. Sultan Tunku Purboo (widow and Dowager of H.M. the late Sultan Mahmood Hoosainshah Malik Al Johore and Ceder of the Island of Singapore to the East India Company) as her adopted son for ever and ever? Did Her Majesty not install me as the heir-at-law to the Kingdom of Johore and its dependencies, empowering me to put the Kingdom of Johore into proper order?... Did Her Majesty not command her son H.H. Sultan Allee to make over to me the territory of Muar and Kesang? Did H.H. Sultan Allee make over to me the territory and remain three days in the presence of the Punghulus and inhabitants?... Did I not reign over the said territory from 1868 to 1877 at a cost of more than 17,000 dollars?"<sup>6</sup>

(Below left) Red ink seal impression of Sultan Ali Iskandar Syah, from a letter to Orfeur Cavenagh, Governor of the Straits Settlements, 30 May 1861. The British Library, MSS Eur. G.38/III, f. 115c (cat. 984 in Gallop 2019).

(Below) The silver seal matrix of Encik Bujal, official of Sultan Ali, exhibited in the Malay Heritage Centre in 2012 (cat. 991 in Gallop 2019).





Seal of Tengku Perabu, wife of Sultan Husain Syah and mother of Sultan Ali Iskandar Syah, stamped on a letter from Baboo Ramasamy to the Bendahara of Pahang, ca. 1871. Leiden University Library, KITLV Or. 171 (1) (cat. 988 in Gallop 2019).

Although Tengku Perabu is not mentioned in Baboo Ramasamy's letter to the Bendahara of Pahang, he evidently had access to her seal which he used to support his claim of acting in the name of her son and grandson. In view of the unconventional wording and spelling on her seal, Tengku Perabu's "adopted son for ever and ever" and his personal motivations may indeed have been the driving force behind its very creation.

### Malay Seals of Arabs

One of the most intriguing seals from Singapore belonged to a Hadhrami<sup>7</sup> merchant and ship owner, Syed Safi bin Ali al-Habshi. On 3 December 1865, he wrote to the Yang Dipertuan Muda of Riau, Raja Muhammad Yusuf, announcing his imminent appointment as Turkish consul:

*"Paduka ayahda memaklumkan hal pada tahun ini paduka ayahda dapat perintah nanti sedikit hari lagi boleh dijadikan konsul."*<sup>8</sup>

[Your eminent father (i.e. Syed Safi) informs you that this year your eminent father received a command that in a few days' time he may be appointed as consul.]

The letter, written in Jawi script and bearing the Syed's seal, was most likely intercepted by the Dutch authorities or passed on to them by Raja Muhammad Yusuf. The document must have caused

considerable concern as it was forwarded immediately to the Governor-General in Batavia by Elisa Netscher, the Dutch Resident in Riau.

A second letter from Syed Safi to Raja Muhammad Yusuf, written in Singapore on 6 January 1866 and bearing an even bigger and grander seal, was similarly sent to Batavia. Both letters are now held in the National Archives of Indonesia.

The two seals are of a calligraphic calibre not usually encountered in South-east Asia and were, therefore, most likely made in Istanbul or elsewhere in the Ottoman realm. The larger one is inscribed in Arabic, with no fewer than four Qur'anic quotations:

*"Min al-wāthiq bi-Rabbih al-Ghani khādīm al-shar' al-sharīf al-wafī wa-al-dawlat al-'aliyat al-'Uthmāniyah wa-al-dīn al-Hanafī al-Sayyid al-Sāfī bin 'Alī bin Muhammad bin Ahmad al-Habshī 'Alawī 'afā Allāh anhu sanat 1282 // bismillāh al-Rahmān al-Rahīm nasr min Allāh wa-fath qarīb hasbunā Allāh wa-ni'ma al-Wakīl ni'ma al-Mawlā wa-ni'ma al-Nasīr ghufrānaka rabbanā wa-ilayka al-masīr."*<sup>9</sup>

[From he who trusts in his Lord, the Independent One, the servant of the noble and complete Law, of the masters and government of the Ottoman dynasty, and of the upright monotheistic faith, al-Sayyid al-Sāfī bin 'Alī bin Muhammad bin Ahmad al-Habshī 'Alawī, may God forgive him, the year 1282 (1865/6) // "In the name of God, Most Gracious, Most Merciful" (Qur'an 27:30); "Help from God and a speedy victory" (Qur'an



Seal of Syed Safi bin Ali al-Habshi, on a letter to Yang Dipertuan Muda Raja Muhammad Yusuf in Pulau Penyengat, 6 January 1866; at 100 mm in diameter, this is the largest Malay seal in the catalogue. Arsip Nasional Republik Indonesia, Riouw 119 (cat. 1001 in Gallop 2019).

61:13); "For us God suffices, and He is the best disposer of affairs" (Qur'an 3:173); "The Best to protect and the Best to help" (Qur'an 8:40); "(we seek) Your forgiveness, our Lord, and to You is the end of all journeys" (Qur'an 2:285).]

The first Ottoman consul in Singapore was Syed Abdullah bin Omar Aljunied, a Hadhrami Arab who was appointed on 31 December 1864. However, after only a few months in the post, he died in Mecca en route to Istanbul to pay his respects to the sultan. Although Syed Abdullah had named his brother Syed Junaid as vice-consul before he left, the latter was not confirmed as the new consul by the Ottoman authorities until 1882.

It is possible that in the period following Syed Abdullah's death, there may have been some jockeying among Hadhrami notables in Singapore for the post of consul with Syed Safi being one of the contenders. However there is no mention of Syed Safi in official Ottoman documents and the only known mention of him appears in *The Straits Times* on 2 February 1861. The newspaper reported that Syed Safi, the owner of the ship *Kangaroo* that was used to transport pilgrims to the Hijaz, had tried to circumvent official limits on capacity by sending numerous extra passengers by *tongkang* (small cargo boats) to Karimun island, from where they could embark the ship lying outside of British jurisdiction.<sup>10</sup> In any case, it seems as if Syed Safi's ambitions of representing the Ottoman government in Singapore, as embodied in the beautiful seals he pre-emptively commissioned, were not to be realised.

### British Malay Seals

The presence of an inscription in Arabic script is such a defining characteristic of seals used by Muslims all over the world that it tends to mask the fact that similar seals were also used by myriad other groups and ethnicities, including Christians in Ethiopia and Syria, Samaritans in Palestine, Hindu subjects of the Mughal emperor, European scholars of Arabic and Persian studies, and British officials of the East India Company, including in Southeast Asia.

The earliest known of these British Malay seals is that of Francis Light (1740–94) who, on behalf of the East India Company, negotiated with the Sultan of Kedah to establish a trading settlement in Penang in 1786. With the expansion of British colonial rule across the Malay Peninsula, seals with Jawi inscriptions – occasionally accompanied by elements in English – continued to be used by senior British officials.



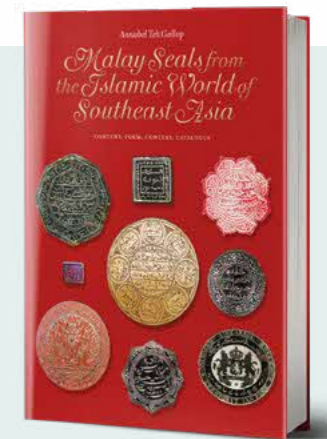
Malay seal of the British Governor of the Straits Settlements, on a letter from the Acting Governor to Sultan Sulaiman of Terengganu, 11 June 1925. Arkib Negara Malaysia Terengganu [1985] (cat. 998 in Gallop 2019).

In 1811, Raffles had a Malay seal made for Lord Minto, Governor-General of Bengal. There is no evidence, though, that Raffles himself ever used a Malay seal. A point of difference in usage can be noted: while traditional Malay seals can be characterised as personal official seals – each seal was issued in the name of an individual post holder – British Malay seals were seals of office and could be used by any incumbent.

At least four Malay seals used from 1883 to 1927 by British governors of the Straits Settlements in Singapore are documented in the catalogue. Shown below is the seal used by at least three governors – Arthur Young (1911–20), Laurence Guillemard (1920–7) and Hugh Clifford (1927–30) – inscribed in Malay and English: *Yang terutama Gabenor dan Komandar in Cif Singapura Pulau Pinang dan Melaka serta Labuan dan Hai Komisiner bagi negeri2 Melayu // Governor & Commander-in-Chief, S.S.*

& Labuan, High Commissioner for the Malay States.

Traditional Malay seals were generally personal official seals. Behind the office of state named on each seal was an individual, whose predilections might be glimpsed in the form of name, family pedigree, date of accession to office and religious sentiment that they chose to have inscribed, as well as in the aesthetic choices affecting shape and decoration. However, with the introduction around the beginning of the 20th century of European-style seals of office – designed to be used by successive incumbents of a post – personal preferences began receding from view and we are merely left with the anonymising cloak of administrative authority. ♦



Annabel Teh Gallop's *Malay Seals from the Islamic World of Southeast Asia* (2019) is published in Singapore by NUS Press in association with The British Library. The catalogue is available for reference at the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library (Call no.: RSING 737.60959 GAL). It also retails at major bookshops in Singapore and overseas.

### NOTES

- Gallop, A.T. (2019). *Malay seals from the Islamic world of Southeast Asia: Content, form, context, catalogue*. Singapore: NUS Press in association with The British Library. (Call no.: RSING 737.60959 GAL)
- Jawi is the modified Arabic script used to write the Malay language before it became displaced in popular use by a romanised script known as Rumi.
- Buckley, C.B. (1902). *An anecdotal history of old times in Singapore (Vol. 1, Frontispiece)*. Singapore: Fraser & Neave, Limited. (Accession no.: B02966444B). Retrieved from BookSG.
- How Singapore was founded: Signing of the treaty on February 6, 1819. (1937, October 25). *The Straits Times*, p. 10. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- Buckley, 1902, p. 132.
- The Johore claimant. (1897, September 28). *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser (Weekly)*, p. 4. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- The Hadhramis inhabit the Hadhramaut region in Yemen. Hadhrami Arabs began migrating to Southeast Asia in great numbers from the mid-18th century onwards. The majority of Arabs in Singapore are descended from the Hadhramis.
- National Archives of Indonesia, Riouw 119. Letter in Malay from al-Sayyid al-Safi bin 'Ali al-Habshi to Yang Dipertuan Muda Raja Muhammad Yusuf ibn al-marhum Raja Ali in Riau, 14 Rejab 1282 (3 December 1865).
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# History Through POSTCARDS

One postcard may not say much, but a collection of postcards can speak volumes. **Stephanie Pee** tells us what *Postcard Impressions of Early 20th-century Singapore* has to say.



**Stephanie Pee** is an Assistant Manager with the Publishing department at the National Library, Singapore. She edits publications produced by the National Library and manages book projects.

These days, when we want to chat with friends and family living abroad, we just pick up our smartphones. The ability to communicate cheaply and easily with someone who lives thousands of kilometres away is something that we take for granted.

This was not the case even 30 years back, let alone 100 years ago. And while early 20th-century Singapore did have telephone and telegraph links with the rest of the world, most people could only afford to communicate using letters and postcards.

Postcards, in particular, were popular. Although space was limited and the messages written were exposed for all to see, postcards were affordable and, more importantly, allowed the sender to share images of distant lands. Very quickly, people began collecting them and, over time, old postcards have become a valuable source of information about the past.

The first official postcards in Singapore were issued by the Straits Settlements government in 1879.<sup>1</sup> By the 1900s, the sale of private picture postcards had become a profitable business, with many international and local publishing firms entering the market.<sup>2</sup> Other factors that contributed to this growth include the affordability and availability of such privately printed picture postcards, and the inexpensive postal rates for postcards in 1905.

(Above left) This undated postcard features a group of villagers in traditional Malay attire. Japanese travellers would send postcards featuring scenes such as this back home as a way of sharing their experiences abroad. In this card, the writer conveys his general greetings and notes that he is fine in Singapore. *Accession no.: B29626253B\_0047.*

(Left) Scenes such as this gave recipients an idea of what Singapore was like. Addressed to Mr J. Takeda in Tokyo, this postcard features the Central Police Station on South Bridge Road (left) as well as the vessel S.S. *Sanuki Maru* of the Nippon Yusen Kaisha (bottom right). The sender says that he has arrived in Singapore and is awaiting his ship to Java. He also notes that the steamy temperature on board the ship (86–88°F or 30–31°C) is similar to Singapore's weather. *Postmarked 22 October 1907. Publisher: Nippon Yusen Kaisha. Accession no.: B32413805D\_0093.*



This postcard was posted from the warship *Asama* by Major Ōhashi Kyōzō and mailed to an address in Aichi prefecture. Being a military postcard, it did not require a postage stamp. The postcard shows a tropical sunset and two coconut trees set within a frame. The motif of the coconut tree was frequently used to evoke the exotic South Seas (Nanyō, or Nanyang) after the Japanese colonisation of Taiwan in 1895. The postcard was produced in commemoration of the Japanese Navy's overseas training voyage from 1934 to 1935, which included Singapore (written in *katakana* characters) as a stopover. *Postmarked 1 January 1935. Printed by Tokyo Shibaura Asahi Printing Company. Accession no.: B32413808G\_0026.*



Produced to mark the fall of Singapore in February 1942, this postcard features three different commemorative postmarks and postage stamps. A Japanese stamp collector had intentionally visited the post office on three separate occasions to collect these postmarks. From the left: the first anniversary of the Pacific War (dated 8 December 1942); the fall of Singapore (dated 20 February 1942 at Nagoya); and the second anniversary of the Pacific War (dated 8 December 1943). *Dated 1942 and 1943. Accession no.: B32413808G\_0030.*

A selection of some 160 Japanese postcards from the National Library's Lim Shao Bin Collection – spanning the early 20th century to the 1940s – was recently published in the hardcover book *Postcard Impressions of Early 20th-century Singapore*. These comprise postcards featuring Japanese subject matter; postcards produced in Japan or by Japanese photographic studios, printers and stationers based in Singapore or Malaya; and postcards bearing messages written in Japanese.

The postcards printed in Singapore feature scenes and activities of a bygone era: tranquil beaches, old buildings that have since been demolished, rubber plantations, fishing villages as well as flora and fauna. The brief messages on the postcards written by early Japanese residents in Singapore offer a glimpse into their daily lives here.

*Postcard Impressions of Early 20th-century Singapore* looks at three different categories of postcards: those with maps featuring Singapore; those that show how Singapore was perceived by Japanese travellers; and those that illustrate characteristics of the pre-war Japanese community here.

**Mapping the World**  
Maps and shipping routes were frequently featured on postcards issued by Japanese shipping companies, such as Nippon Yusen Kaisha, whose vessels often carried both passengers and cargo. These postcards depict maps that traced important transnational shipping routes, indicating their dates of arrival at different ports-of-call, including Singapore.

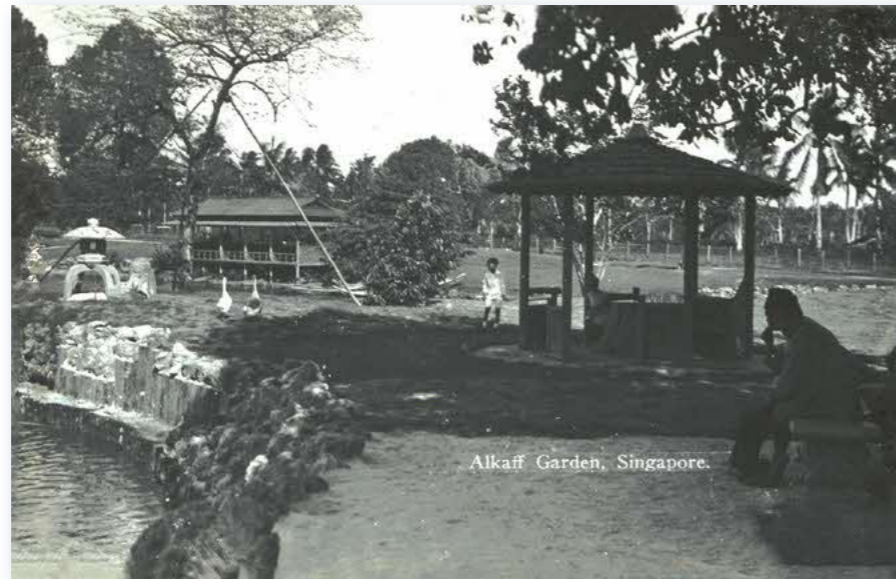
These postcards also conveyed information to potential customers about

a company's major shipping routes and schedules, and enabled families of travellers to track their loved ones' journeys. The postcards generally point to Singapore as an important port along major international shipping routes.

Japanese economic migrants were another group of travellers who made use of postcards to communicate with families back home. In the 19th century, the Japanese government encouraged migration as a means of managing its growing population and alleviating the pressures faced by its domestic economy. These people made their way to destinations such as the United States, Canada, Europe and even Brazil. Migrants headed for these countries often stopped over in Singapore and took the opportunity to send a postcard home.

Included in the book are postcards issued by the Imperial Japanese Navy.

Alkaff Gardens was built in 1930 in the style of a Japanese park, and was a popular destination among locals and Japanese tourists. The garden had a Japanese teahouse that served “refreshments all day and night until 12 o'clock”. The picture on this undated postcard is also featured in an advertisement for Alkaff Gardens published in the 31 May 1930 issue of the *Malayan Saturday Post*, suggesting that the postcard had been specially commissioned to publicise the garden. On the far left of the picture is a traditional Japanese lantern made of stone called a *tōrō*. The garden, which was located near the former Bidadari Cemetery, closed in December 1941 in preparation for war. Cedar Girls’ Secondary School currently occupies the site. Accession no.: B32413806E\_0002.



Alkaff Garden, Singapore.



This undated postcard features a Japanese woman, likely a *karayuki-san*, in her kimono. *Karayuki-san*, or Japanese prostitutes, sometimes posed for a fee at the request of photographers in Singapore. Accession no.: B32440324K\_0076.

Singapore was an important port-of-call for training voyages, which honed the technical skills of rookie cadets by exposing them to conditions in the Pacific Ocean as well as to raise public awareness of the Nanyō (South Seas, or Nanyang).<sup>3</sup> These training voyages also signalled Japan’s increasing knowledge of current political developments unfolding beyond its shores.

In addition, the book features commemorative postcards marking the fall of Singapore in February 1942. These were issued by the Imperial Japanese postal service, which also came up with special postmarks and postage stamps.

### Early Japanese Tourists

Early Japanese tourists to Singapore only had a few reliable sources to turn to for travel information: word-of-mouth from family and friends, published writings by other travellers (such as travel guidebooks) and, of course, postcards sent by acquaintances who had been on similar journeys.

These postcards provided their recipients with an inkling of life in Singapore as well as ideas of places to visit, sights to see and foods to savour. These scenes fostered perceptions of Singapore as a romantic, tropical destination worthy of a visit, which in turn fuelled the sale of such memorabilia.

Recurring images featured on postcards include fishing villages on Pulau Brani, tree-lined beaches, street views and buildings such as St Andrew’s Cathedral.

Idyllic fishing villages were very likely the first scenes that greeted travellers when they set foot on Singapore.<sup>4</sup> The sight was a great source of fascination to Japanese travellers, and was frequently mentioned in their written and illustrated accounts of the island.<sup>5</sup>

### Early Japanese Community

The early Japanese community in Singapore comprised traders, businessmen, professionals and sex workers known as *karayuki-san*. The postcards in the



Featuring the Nihonbashi Broadway in Tokyo, this postcard was sent by Fukujima Tōsaku to Ejiri Koichirō, the proprietor of the pharmacy, K. Ejiri & Co., in Singapore. Fukujima had visited Ejiri in Singapore. On the reverse of the postcard (left) is a stock message to inform those who had hosted Fukujima during his travels that he had returned safely to Japan and to thank them for their kind hospitality. Dated April 1923. Accession no.: B32413805D\_0100.

### ABOUT THE LIM SHAO BIN COLLECTION

The postcards in the book are from a collection donated by researcher and collector Lim Shao Bin to the National Library Board.<sup>1</sup>

Lim began collecting Japanese historical materials on Singapore and Southeast Asia when he was living in Japan in the 1980s. Between 2016 and 2020, he donated more than 1,500 items to the National Library Board, which had been painstakingly amassed over a 30-year period.<sup>2</sup>

The collection represents a rich resource for the study of the pre-war Japanese community in Singapore as well as Japan’s military expansion and subsequent occupation of Southeast Asia during World War II. It comprises maps, newspapers, postcards, books, periodicals, primary documents and ephemera dating from the 1860s to the 2000s. Notable items include Japanese wartime maps and some of the earliest locally published Japanese guides on Singapore – *Harada’s Guide* (1919) and *Shingapōru Gaiyō* (1923).

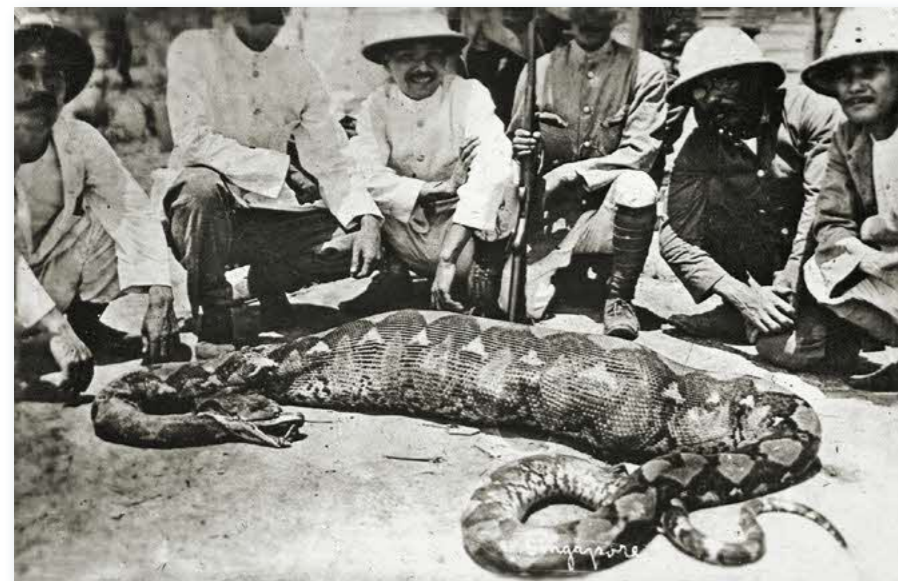
Lim donated these rare materials to encourage research and scholarship

into an important period of Singapore’s multifaceted history.

### NOTES

- 1 For more information on the collection, see Lee, G. (2018, Jul–Sep). Japan in Southeast Asia: The Lim Shao Bin Collection. *BiblioAsia*, 14 (2). Retrieved from BiblioAsia website.
- 2 Lim Shao Bin is the editor of *Images of Singapore from the Japanese Perspective (1868–1941)*, which contains over 1,000 images from postcards, maps and photo albums that trace shifting Japanese perspectives of Singapore. See Lim, T.W. & Lim, S.B. (2004). *Images of Singapore from the Japanese perspective (1868–1941)*. Singapore: The Japanese Cultural Society. (Call no.: RSING 959.57 IMA-[HIS])

A small herd of cattle in a river, possibly the Rochor River, that once flowed in the vicinity of Selegie and Rochor Canal roads. Accession no.: B32413805D\_0171.



The photo featured on this undated postcard is part of a series of four photographs titled "A Big Snake Swallowing a Deer". The photos depict the snake with its distended belly, its capture and the subsequent release of the deer from its stomach. Postcards like this suggest that there was a market for such exotica in Singapore. Accession no.: B32413807F\_0146.

book provide us with a sense of their lives here.

Part of the Lim Shao Bin Collection includes a set of postcards documenting the correspondence between businessman Ejiri Koichirō and his friend Tajika Shōjiro, spanning a decade across various countries. These postcards give us an idea of how early migrants adapted to life in Singapore. Some of the postcards exchanged between the two men are featured in the book.

One group of Japanese migrants who received particular attention in postcards are the *karayuki-san*. Many of

these women were from the poor, rural regions of Kyushu island and had been sold or kidnapped, and subsequently forced into the sex trade overseas. While often ostracised or looked down upon, they played an important role in Japan's economic and social fabric as their presence supported fledgling local Japanese businesses (and in turn the wider Japanese economy). The women even responded to disaster relief efforts in Japan by sending home much-needed funds and supplies.

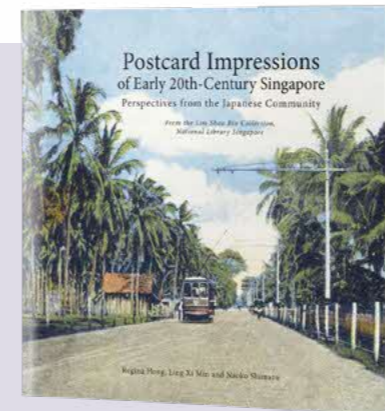
Some postcards featured the *karayuki-san* posing provocatively in their kimonos, which reinforced the image of

Singapore "as a centre of romanticism, exoticism, and easy sex".<sup>6</sup> Regardless whether the women were indeed *karayuki-san* or whether they were even living in Singapore, the fact that these postcards were bought and used suggests that the women formed part of the impressions that early travellers held of Singapore.

As not much has been written about the pre-war Japanese community in Singapore, these postcards provide insights into the lives of these migrants and their social networks, and also offer new perspectives of Singapore society in the early 20th century. ♦



*Sampans* and serene fishing villages off Pulau Brani were sights early visitors to Singapore might have seen as they arrived on the island. This postcard was addressed to someone in Russia but appears not to have been sent. Publisher: Wilson & Co. for Hotel de l'Europe & Orchard Road, Singapore. Accession no.: B32413807F\_0004.



*Postcard Impressions of Early 20th-century Singapore: Perspectives from the Japanese Community*, researched and written by Regina Hong, Ling Xi Min and Professor Naoko Shimazu, is co-published by the National Library, Singapore, and Marshall Cavendish International (Asia). The book is available for reference at the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library and for loan at selected public libraries (Call nos.: RSING 959.57 HON-[HIS] and SING 959.57 HON-[HIS]). It also retails at major bookshops in Singapore.



This postcard featuring the Botanic Gardens was addressed to T. Matsuki in Tokyo. The brief message on the front of the postcard says that the sender is writing from "far away" and that the picture is of Singapore. Postmarked 15 March 1906 (Singapore); 19 March 1906 (Hong Kong); 24 March 1906 (Tokyo). Accession no.: B32440324K\_0011.

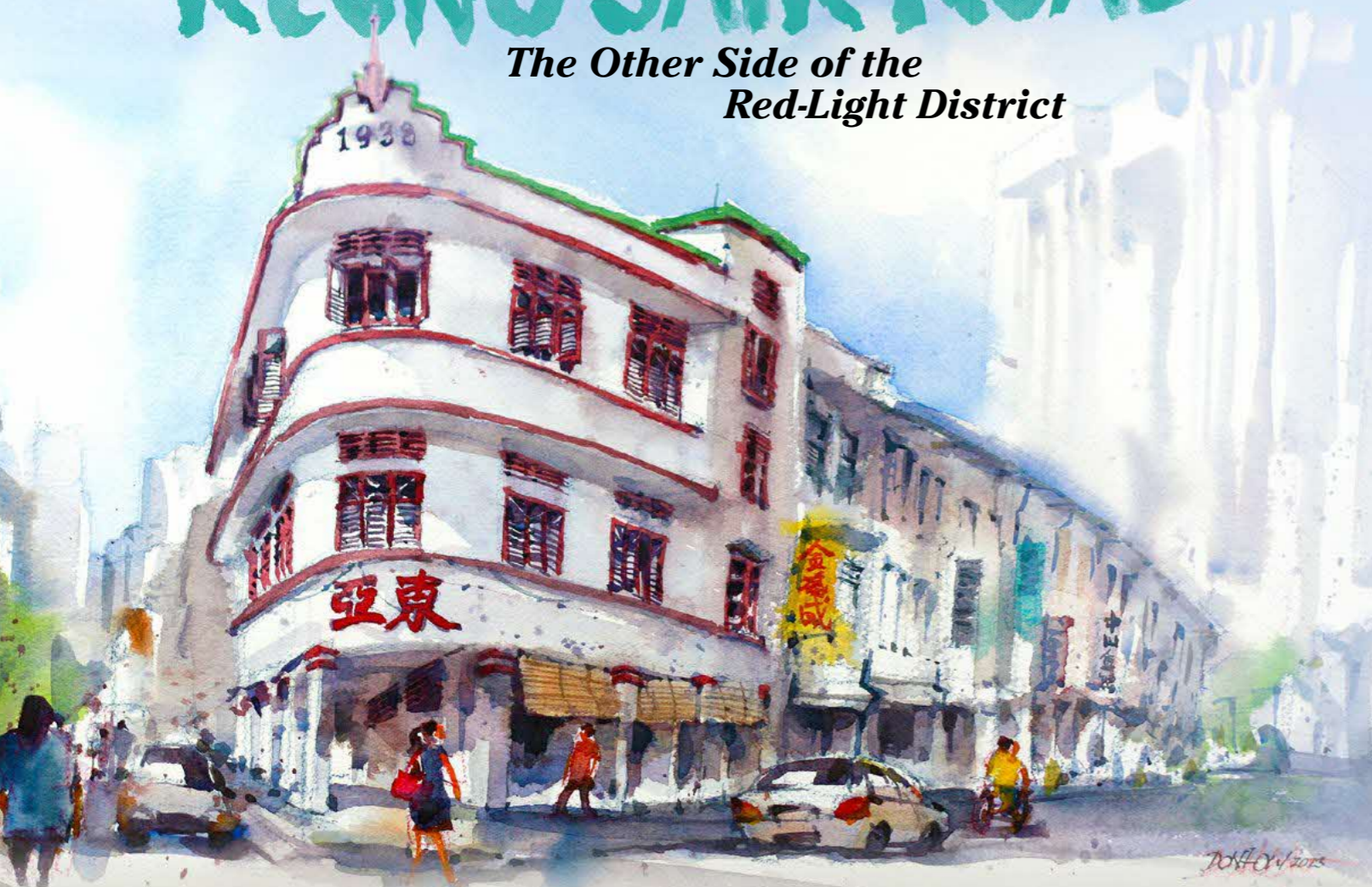
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- Cheah, J. S. (2006). *Singapore: 500 early postcards* (p. 8). Singapore: Editions Didier Millet. (Call no.: RSING 769.566095957 CHE)
- National Archives. (1986). *Singapore historical postcards from the National Archives Collection* (p. 8). Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Editions. (Call no.: RSING 769.95957 SIN)
- Schencking, J.C. (1999, October). The Imperial Japanese Navy and the constructed consciousness of a South Seas destiny, 1872–1921., *Modern Asian Studies*, 33 (4), 769–796, pp. 772–73. Retrieved from JSTOR via NLB's eResources website.
- Nishihara suggests that Pulau Brani was likely the model for the water villages depicted in the works

- Shikō Imamura's (今村紫紅) *Scrolls of Tropical Countries (Morning Scroll) (熱国之巻 (朝之巻))* [Nekkoku no Maki (Asa no Maki)], which was designated as an important cultural property in Japan, indicating that the sight of Pulau Brani likely constituted one of the key Japanese perspectives of Singapore. 西原大輔 [Daisuke Nishihara]. (2017). 日本人のシンガポール体験：幕末明治から日本占領下・戦後まで [Nihonjin no Shingapōru Taiken: Bakumatsumeiji kara nihonsenryōka sengo made] (p. 88). Kyoto, Japan: Jinbun Shoin. (Not available in NLB holdings)
- Nishihara, 2017, p. 88.
- Warren, J. (1993). *Ah ku and karayuki-san: Prostitution in Singapore* (p. 252). Singapore: NUS Press. (Call no.: RSING 306.74095957 WAR)

# KEONG SAIK ROAD

*The Other Side of the  
Red-Light District*



Charmaine Leung relives the sights and sounds of Keong Saik Road – where she lived in the 1970s and 80s – and says it has more to offer than its former notoriety.

If I were to think of Keong Saik as a person, it would be a woman. In particular, I see an elderly lady who is hardworking, loyal and reliable, tirelessly working to provide for her family and her employers.

This image, long entrenched in my mind, is an impression very much influenced by Auyong Foon – someone I called “grandaunt”. Auyong Foon was not a relative but a dear friend of my

grandmother’s, and I was fortunate to have spent my formative years in her company – an experience I treasure immensely. She was my favourite grandaunt and I fondly addressed her as Foon Yee Por (“Yee Por” is a Cantonese term used to address female contemporaries of one’s grandmother).

## The Indomitable Majie

Both Foon Yee Por and my grandmother were *majie* (妈姐) – a term referring to Chinese women who journeyed to Southeast Asia in search of a better life in the 1930s, working mainly as domestic servants in the homes of wealthy families.<sup>1</sup>

These Cantonese women, from the Pearl River Delta in Guangdong province,

left behind their elderly parents and younger siblings to find work in Nanyang<sup>2</sup> and Hong Kong. They formed a group of early Chinese immigrants who helped lay the foundations for Chinese culture and community in Singapore.

In Singapore, the *majie* congregated mainly in Chinatown. Their lives, employment and recreational activities extended to the outskirts of Chinatown to include Keong Saik Road, Bukit Pasoh Road, Tanjong Pagar Road and Cantonment Road, as well as other parts of Singapore.

Many of these unmarried women were in their 20s. Once they arrived in Singapore, they banded together, forming a tight-knit group. They established clan associations, known as *kongsi*



(Above) A *majie* and her adopted daughter. *Majie* were Cantonese women from the Pearl River Delta region in China’s Guangdong province, who journeyed to Southeast Asia in the 1930s to work mainly as domestic servants for wealthy families. Courtesy of Charmaine Leung.

(Above right) *Majie* took vows of celibacy. Image shows a ritual called *sor hei* (梳起; literally “comb up”) in which the women styled their hair into a neat bun at the back of their head. Photo by Yip Cheong Fun. Courtesy of Andrew Yip.

(Facing page) The iconic Tong Ah Eating House at the junction of Keong Saik and Teck Lim roads. Watercolour painting by Don Low, 2014. Courtesy of Don Low.



(公司), and pooled their resources to rent accommodations called *kongsi fong* (公司房). The women also took care of each other and depended on one another for moral, psychological and financial support. Those who arrived earlier would write letters to inform their friends and families back home about work opportunities in Singapore.

Many of these hardworking and independent *majie* took vows of celibacy, pledging to remain unmarried for life. This ceremonial vow included a ritual known as *sor hei* in Cantonese (梳起; literally “comb up”) that involved styling their hair into a neat bun at the back of their head. For the *majie*, this hairstyle became an expression of their social maturity and celibate status, in contrast to girly styles such as plaiting their hair into two braids. Once the *majie* reached her 40s, it was common to adopt young daughters so that she would have someone to depend on in her old age.

My Foon Yee Por has since passed away and many of the *majie* known to my family are no longer around. Singapore probably has a handful of surviving *majie* left. Before long, they too will pass on. But they have certainly left behind many stories of old Keong Saik Road, and Foon Yee Por and her community form an indelible part of Singapore’s history and heritage today.

## Wine, Women and Song

Keong Saik Road did not start off as a red-light district, although it was next to the notorious Smith Street, which was lined with brothels servicing workers and labourers.

Its beginnings were more wholesome. In the 1930s, many clan associations and wholesalers set up offices on Keong Saik Road. Because it was a place for business meetings and gatherings, there was a strong demand for post-meeting entertainment. This led to the birth of clan associations-cum-entertainment

houses in the Keong Saik area which, in turn, saw the emergence of a culture where wealthy men indulged in food, alcohol, gambling, opium-smoking and entertainment by women.

Located on Keong Saik Road and Bukit Pasoh Road, the entertainment houses were premium set-ups aimed at the well-heeled. At these establishments, female singers and musicians, such as the *pipa tsai* (Cantonese for “little *pipa* player”),<sup>3</sup> entertained men with song and music. Over time, this entertainment provided by such women led to the transformation of Keong Saik Road into a red-light district, complete with opium dens.

It was in the offices, clan associations and entertainment houses on Keong Saik Road that many *majie* found work as domestic helpers and cleaners. These early Chinese migrants brought with them many cultural and religious practices that are still being observed today such as “Beat the little people” (see text box overleaf).

Nestled among the shophouses is Zhun Ti Gong (or Cundhi Gong) – a Chinese temple dedicated to Guanyin, the Goddess of Mercy – located at 13 Keong Saik Road. An ornate structure with a roof featuring decorative beams and adorned with intricate motifs of dragons, peacocks, phoenixes and flowers, the temple has witnessed many *sor hei* ceremonies held by the *majie*.

Today, this temple is especially popular with former residents of Chinatown. While many of these elderly devotees have since moved to newer housing estates with their children, many still return with younger family members to offer their prayers on the first and 15th days of the lunar month.



The Zhun Ti Gong Temple (or Cundhi Gong) at 13 Keong Saik Road, 2000. Built in 1928, the temple played an important role in the lives of *majie*. Many of the *sor hei* ceremonies by the *majie* took place at the temple. Courtesy of Charmaine Leung.

## The Indian Community

Apart from the predominantly Cantonese-speaking Chinese community who lived and worked on Keong Saik Road, a small community of Indians also called it their home.

Keong Saik Road was home to a shophouse occupied by Indian coolies. Many were young bachelors working in Singapore, but some were older men who had left their families in India in search of greener pastures in Singapore.

I remember an Indian man in his 30s living there who operated a "mama shop"<sup>14</sup> just across the street. He spoke fluent Cantonese and always sold candy to kids at a discount, even giving them extra treats. He allowed children to hang around his shop, letting them admire the wide array of colourful merchandise that included toy swords, badminton rackets and magazines.

The shophouse where the Indian coolies lived was close to the Sri Layan Sithi Vinayagar Temple at 73 Keong Saik Road. During the Thaipusam festival that takes place between 14 January and 14 February each year, Keong Saik Road becomes a hive of activity. The Sri Layan Sithi Vinayagar Temple plays an important role in the run-up to Thaipusam. On the eve of the festival, at about 6 am, a silver chariot from the Sri Thendayuthapani Temple on Tank Road makes it way to the Sri Layan Sithi Vinayagar Temple during a procession known as Punar Pusam. The chariot bears Lord Murugan, the Hindu god of war, and it stays at the Sri Layan Sithi Vinayagar



Devotees at the Sri Layan Sithi Vinayagar Temple welcoming the silver chariot bearing Lord Murugan that has just arrived from the Sri Thendayuthapani Temple. The annual procession is called Punar Pusam and takes place the day before Thaipusam. Courtesy of the Chettiars' Temple Society - Sri Thendayuthapani Temple.

Temple until evening when the chariot and the procession return to the temple on Tank Road.<sup>5</sup>

## A Bustling Neighbourhood

In the 1970s and 1980s, the Keong Saik area also had businesses that co-existed with the brothels. Next to the Hindu temple was a seamstress whom the ladies of Keong Saik patronised to have their clothes tailored, while a nearby dentist looked after the dental health of residents.

Sim San Loke Hup Athletic Association was at No. 65, very close to the Indian dormitory. This was a place where young Chinese men learned and practised martial arts, and sometimes performed lion and

dragon dances for the Keong Saik community during the Lunar New Year and other special occasions. The association is currently located at 85-B.

Besides the "mama shop", there were two other provision shops on Keong Saik Road. One was situated across the road from the Indian dormitory, and the other was at the other end of the street, closer to Neil Road. There were no lack of options for dry provisions at Keong Saik, and residents only went to the wet markets of Chinatown to buy fresh produce.

At least two businesses provided specialised services for those who wanted to stay connected with China: a Chinese calligraphy shop offered letter-writing

## BEAT THE LITTLE PEOPLE

An interesting practice that was popular among the Chinese community of Keong Saik Road and Chinatown was to go to a wall near the Sri Layan Sithi Vinayagar Temple to "beat the little people" (打小人; *da xiao ren* in Mandarin). The term "little people" in the Chinese language is synonymous with evil people and negativity.

The ritual involved using either a clog or a shoe to repeatedly hit human-shaped paper figurines that symbolised the negativity in one's life. An auspicious piece of red paper would be placed on top of the beaten figurines and the figurines pasted on the wall. Incense was then offered.

The Chinese believed that the ritual was effective in warding off evil and dispelling negativity in one's life. It was commonly observed among the Cantonese communities of Hong Kong

and Guangdong. It usually took place at road intersections, under bridges, and at the foot of a hill or mountain as these places were generally perceived to have bad *fengshui* and thus prone to the influence of evil spirits.



Women "beating the little people" on Keong Saik Road, 1950s. The Cantonese believe that the ritual would ward off evil and banish negativity in one's life. In the background is the Sri Layan Sithi Vinayagar Temple before it was renovated into the current structure. Photo by Yip Cheong Fun. Courtesy of Andrew Yip.

services for the illiterate who wanted to write home, and a sundries shop imported goods directly from China for those who yearned for special items and produce that were only available from their hometowns.

Located near Keong Saik Road was a factory called Yip Choy Sun (叶彩新), a family-run business that produced a variety of handmade paper boxes. It operated on the ground floor of 6 Jiak Chuan Road.<sup>6</sup> The factory was busiest during the Mid-Autumn Festival when it produced thousands of boxes for Tai Chong Kok (大中国), a traditional bakery in Chinatown that was popular for its mooncakes. Yip Choy Sun operated at full capacity to meet the orders for mooncake boxes and because it was not uncommon to receive last-minute orders, the entire family would pitch in to get the orders out. The family moved out of the Keong Saik area when the patriarch passed away in October 1997.

A well-loved icon of Keong Saik Road, then and now, is the famous Tong Ah Eating House, formerly located in the distinctive red-and-white three-storey building situated on the triangular plot of land at the junction of Keong Saik and Teck Lim roads. The coffee shop was opened in 1939, the same year that the building was completed. Favoured by the residents of Keong Saik, Tong Ah was packed every morning. One of the most sought-after breakfast items was buttered toast topped with *kaya*.<sup>7</sup>

In 2013, the coffee shop moved across the street to number 35. The Chinese characters 東亞 (Tong Ah) remain inscribed on the facade of the former location. The *kaya* toast set – comprising buttered toast slathered with homemade *kaya* and paired with two soft-boiled eggs drizzled with soya sauce and a dash of pepper, all accompanied by hot coffee or tea – remains popular.

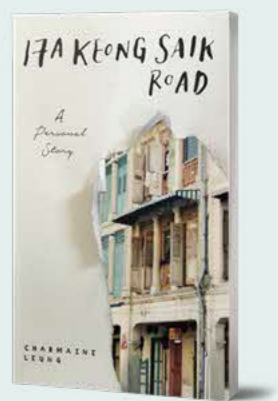
## Keong Saik Road Today

To the uninitiated, Keong Saik Road may be just another street in Singapore. But for those who are interested in the history of our country, Keong Saik is part of Singapore's heritage, offering a glimpse into the lives of early Chinese immigrants. The eclectic mix of communities and businesses at the Keong Saik Road of yesteryear has given the place a unique identity.

Keong Saik Road is now a trendy neighbourhood offering contemporary wine and dine options in restored shophouses, attracting many tourists who are often seen on the street posing for photographs. (Keong Saik's international profile was raised after it was voted one of the top four travel sights in Asia by Lonely Planet in 2017). For me, Keong Saik Road is the first home I knew.

As I stroll along the Keong Saik area today, what I encounter now is very different from what I remember. On a recent visit, I walked past fancy restaurants and ultra-modern boutique hotels stylishly designed to attract a new generation of visitors. The community there is no longer the one I had been familiar with.

Although newness brings excitement, if we are not deliberate in preserving the spirit of our heritage beyond its physical structures, we may one day lose the intangible beauty of our past and heritage completely. I am grateful for the privilege to have lived in an iconic part of Singapore's past and to have experienced the old Keong Saik Road and its community. As one of Singapore's daughters, I can only hope that I have done my part in helping to preserve a little of Singapore's heritage in my sharing about a street that was once my home. ♦



Charmaine Leung grew up on Keong Saik Road in the 1970s and 80s as the daughter of a brothel operator. After having lived overseas for almost 20 years, Charmaine returned to Singapore and discovered a vastly different Keong Saik Road.

The unspoken family shame that shrouded much of her young life – and the changes she witnessed upon her return – prompted her to pen a memoir of her childhood years.

Leung's book, *17A Keong Saik Road* (2017) is available for reference at the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library and for loan at selected public libraries (Call nos.: RSING 959.57004951 LEU and SING 959.57004951 LEU) as well as for digital loan on [nlb.overdrive.com](http://nlb.overdrive.com). The book also retails at major bookshops and [ethosbooks.com.sg](http://ethosbooks.com.sg).

## NOTES

- 1 See Loo, J. (2017, Oct–Dec). A lifetime of labour: Cantonese amahs in Singapore. *BiblioAsia*, 13 (3): 2–9. Retrieved from BiblioAsia website.
- 2 Nanyang, which means "South Seas" in Mandarin, refers to Southeast Asia.
- 3 The *pipa*, or Chinese lute, is a pear-shaped four-stringed musical instrument made of wood. *Pipa sai* were girls trained to play various musical instruments and sing to entertain men in clubs and brothels in Singapore. In some instances, the girls were forced into prostitution.
- 4 A "mama shop" or "mamak shop" (from Tamil word *mama* meaning "uncle" or "elder") is a convenience store or sundry shop selling a wide variety of goods and provisions.
- 5 The Punar Pusam procession takes place the day before Thaipusam, which is an annual festival dedicated to Lord Subramaniam, also known as Lord Murugan, the Hindu god of war. During Thaipusam in Singapore, devotees will carry a *kavadi* (which means "burden" or "load") from the Sri Srinivasan Perumal Temple on Serangoon Road to the Sri Thendayuthapani Temple on Tank Road. For more information about Thaipusam, see National Library Board. (2016). *Thaipusam* written by Bonny Tan. Retrieved from Singapore Infopedia website. For more information on Punar Pusam, see Ng, M. (2017, Oct–Dec). Micro India: The Chettiars of Market Street. *BiblioAsia*, 13 (3): 10–17. Retrieved from BiblioAsia website.
- 6 Jiak Chuan Road – named after Tan Jiak Chuan, grandson of the philanthropist Tan Kim Seng – links Keong Saik Road to Teck Lim Road. It is home to several budget hotels and eateries today. The road was formerly part of the Keong Saik Road red-light district.
- 7 *Kaya* is a type of jam made from coconut, eggs and sugar, and is typically spread on toast. It is popular in Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia.

Shophouses on Keong Saik Road, 1997. Joanne Lee Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.





# MARJORIE DOGGETT

## Photographer of Singapore

Edward Stokes reflects on *Characters of Light* by Marjorie Doggett, first published in 1957, and on his own recent book, *Marjorie Doggett's Singapore*, which portrays her life and work here.

Edward Stokes is an Australian photographer and writer. He has a special interest in the photographic history of Asia. The founder and publisher of The Photographic Heritage Foundation, Edward's many books about Hong Kong and Australia have been widely praised for blending photographs with illuminating historical texts. He was educated at Magdalen College, Oxford.

In 1957, a slender book titled *Characters of Light: A Guide to the Buildings of Singapore* was published.<sup>1</sup> The book had been photographed and written by Marjorie Doggett, a 36-year-old English woman living in Singapore.<sup>2</sup>

The production was modest: 92 pages on low-quality wood-free paper, and in a relatively small format. With 79 photos accompanied by short captions, the work presents a loosely arranged selection of local buildings. However, in the coming years, the book would have a significant impact on the burgeoning awareness of local heritage, and the value of preserving the best of the city's architecture from an earlier era.<sup>3</sup>

**(Facing page)** Montage showing the important logbook that Marjorie Doggett used to document her negatives (featuring two pages from the year 1955). The three portraits are of Marjorie at different stages of her life. The camera pictured—a medium-format Rolleicord—is similar to the one that Marjorie used to capture the images of Singapore for her 1957 photo book, *Characters of Light*.

**(Right)** There are two editions of *Characters of Light*. The first in 1957 (left) features the Cathedral of the Good Shepherd on the cover. The cover of the second edition (right), published in 1985, shows "Joshua", a mansion in Katong that was built around 1890.

Significantly, Marjorie Doggett's photos are the first seriously published visual record of Singapore's urban landscape to have superbly captured many of the island's grand structures as well as its more modest vernacular buildings. In the Urban Redevelopment Authority's book, *Conserving the Past, Creating the Future: Urban Heritage in Singapore* (2011), geographer Lily Kong noted that Marjorie's book "sought to record the beauty of the pre-war buildings at a time of impending change" and was an early example of a "stirring consciousness of the value of Singapore's architectural heritage and historic districts".<sup>4</sup>

Besides being the first photo book on Singapore's buildings, *Characters of Light* is also notable because it was rare at the time for women to produce photo books, particularly outside the publishing centres of the United States, Britain and continental Europe. In Asia, the few women who did create photo books were virtually unknown, with Marjorie Doggett blazing the path.

### Her Early Years

Born in 1921, Marjorie Joyce Millest grew up in Sutton, a large town located south of London. She was introduced to photography by a local chemist, who also taught her the basic skills in film development and printing.

In April 1940, Marjorie, then 19, began to compile her first photographic record:

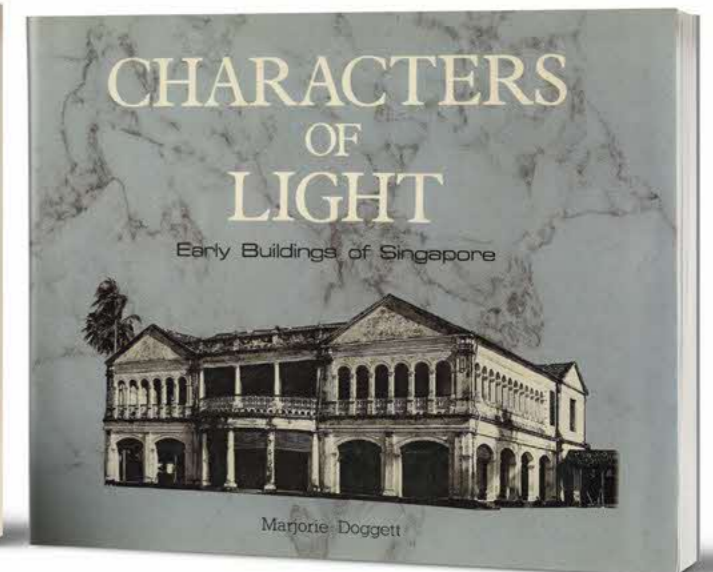
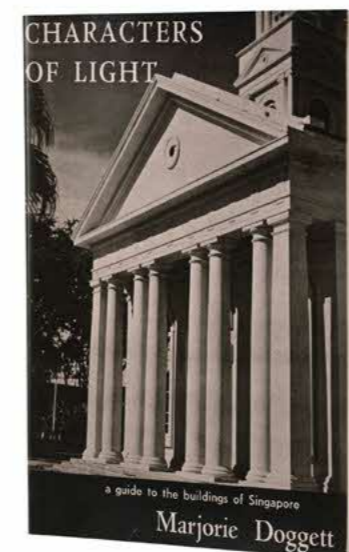
an album comprising her favourite town and landscape photos of England, images taken by a keen, self-taught amateur.

Almost seven years after starting work on this album, Marjorie, who had trained as a nurse and midwife during World War II, arrived in Singapore with her then fiancé Victor Doggett. Victor was two years her senior and had served in Singapore with the Royal Air Force from 1945 to 1946. After his return to Britain, demobilisation and subsequent reunion with Marjorie, the couple began planning for their future.

In January 1947, the young couple left England on the RMS *Andes* and arrived in Singapore on 9 February after a three-week journey.

Victor had hoped to set up a business in Singapore importing war surplus materials from Britain but the plans fell through. Thankfully he soon found a new vocation—teaching music. Over time, the income from The Music Studio that he opened would enable Marjorie to give up her job as a post-natal advisor for Nestlé and pursue her passion.

In the 1950s, Marjorie set out to create a photographic record of Singapore's urban setting. In this, she was advised and urged on by two architects, Lincoln Page and T.H.H. Hancock, and a curator at the Raffles Museum, the polymath and photographer Dr Carl Alexander Gibson-Hill. Later, her energetic and equally demanding publisher Donald Moore took the lead.



### Characters of Light

Marjorie shot most of the photographs in *Characters of Light* in 1955 and 1956, using a medium-format Rolleicord camera mounted on a tripod. She then developed the photos using a bedroom in her home on Amber Road as an improvised darkroom. The room was blacked out so that the prints could be developed and then washed in the nearby bathroom. Her son Nicholas recalls that she would “develop and print in the mornings, then open all the windows and doors to ventilate the bedroom”.<sup>5</sup>

### THE MARJORIE DOGGETT COLLECTION AT THE NAS

Besides *Characters of Light*, the key source for this essay and *Marjorie Doggett's Singapore* is the Marjorie Doggett Collection at the National Archives of Singapore (NAS) – a treasure trove of photos and documents. Marjorie Doggett's care and discipline in keeping her photographic and other records effectively, if unknowingly, built the collection.

The Marjorie Doggett Collection was donated to the NAS by her son, Nicholas Doggett. This was advised by The Photographic Heritage Founda-

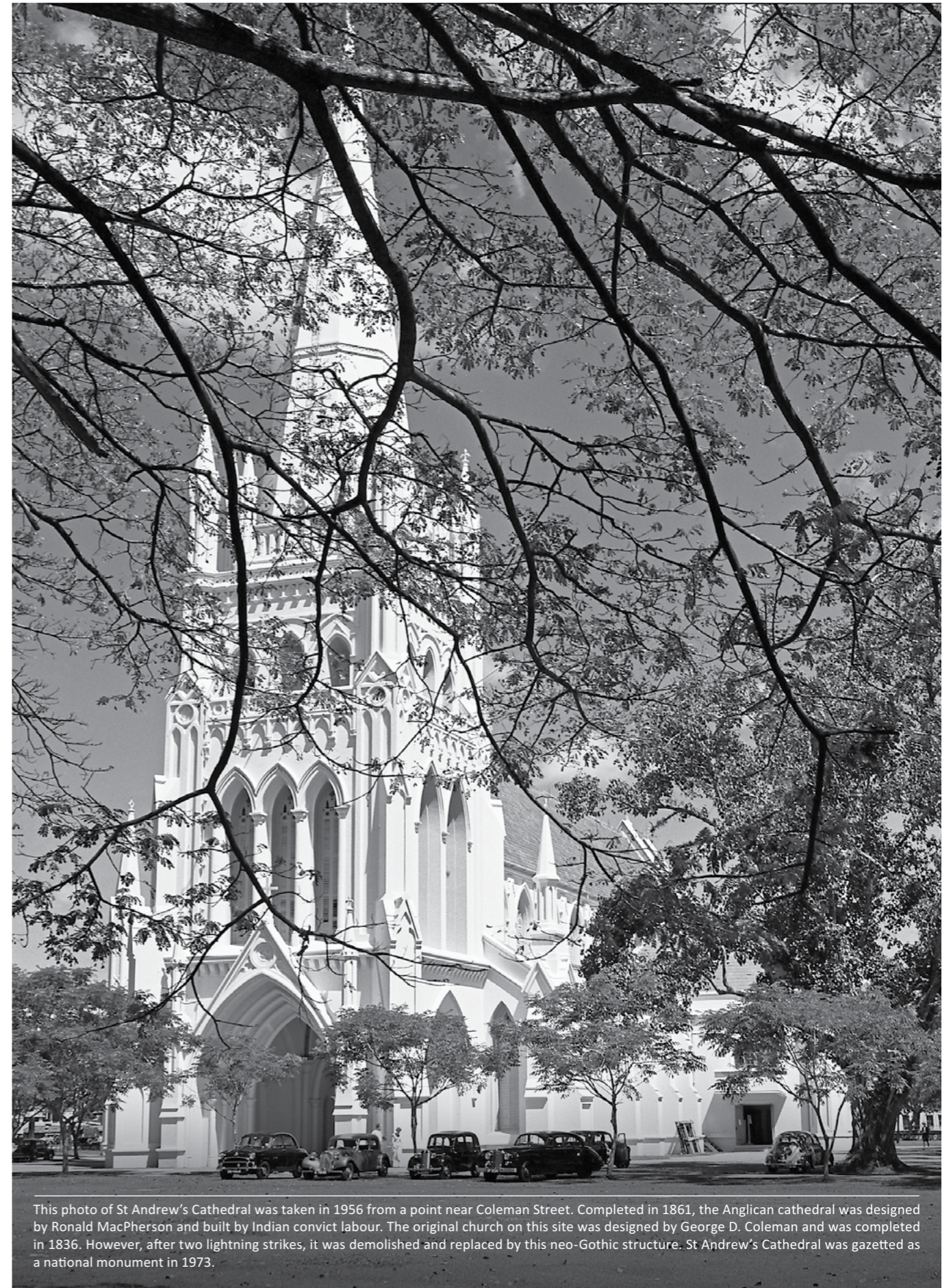
tion which encourages its partners to donate such materials to public archives. The items are now being catalogued by the NAS and will be available for public access in 2022. Two Doggett oral history recordings are also held by the NAS. These are the recollections of Victor Doggett, recorded in June 1990 with Daniel Chew, for the archives' Oral History Centre; and the memories of Nick Doggett, primarily concerning his parents, recorded in November 2018 by Edward Stokes. The former is available online at [www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/](http://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/).

Marjorie foresaw the risks to heritage conservation that such progress would inevitably bring.

In addition to being a pioneering work, *Characters of Light* also stands out for Marjorie's in-depth research into her subjects. Virtually alone among photographers of the time, she enriched her photographs with thoroughly researched and detailed captions. Thus, in later years, the book came to be valued by advocates for architectural conservation. Marjorie's steady gaze made *Characters of Light* almost unique. Indeed, it was the aesthetic quality *and* the usefulness of the publication that helped mould her legacy.

After it was published, *The Straits Times* wrote that *Characters of Light* was “exactly the book of its kind that unknowingly we have been waiting for”.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile the *Sunday Standard* described the book as a “highly distinguished picture chronicle with clarity and simplicity”. The paper also suggested that, perhaps, Penang and Melaka should consider asking Marjorie to record their buildings as well.<sup>8</sup>

Marjorie and Victor Doggett at their Amber Road home in 1956, a year before the publication of *Characters of Light*.



This photo of St Andrew's Cathedral was taken in 1956 from a point near Coleman Street. Completed in 1861, the Anglican cathedral was designed by Ronald MacPherson and built by Indian convict labour. The original church on this site was designed by George D. Coleman and was completed in 1836. However, after two lightning strikes, it was demolished and replaced by this neo-Gothic structure. St Andrew's Cathedral was gazetted as a national monument in 1973.



Taken in 1957 from Clifford Pier, Marjorie Doggett frames the Fullerton Building within one of the arches of the pier. The Fullerton Building was designed by government architects Major Percy Hubert Keys and Frank Dowdeswell. It was completed in 1928 and became synonymous with the General Post Office, a major and long-time tenant. Other tenants occupied the building for a time until its reopening in 2001 as The Fullerton Hotel Singapore. The restoration saw its Palladian-style architecture and grand Doric columns preserved and the introduction of modern interiors. In 2015, the building was gazetted as a national monument.

### Later Life and Legacy

Marjorie Doggett had taken her photographs none too soon. Between 1947, when she and Victor arrived in Singapore, and 1961 when they became citizens, the population had doubled. The overcrowding that the colonial government's urban redevelopment office, the Singapore Improvement Trust, had sought to remedy, albeit with insufficient finances and speed, was a primary – if not central – concern of the People's Action Party, which formed the government in 1959. From then onwards, the pace of urban redevelopment escalated dramatically.

Following the 1966 Land Acquisition Act, Marjorie took a leading role in various architectural heritage debates. Noting Singapore's recent achievements, in 1968 she wrote with genuine sympathy to *The Straits Times* concerning the planned demolition of the former Raffles Institution building in Bras Basah. Notwithstanding the anti-British sentiments of the time, Margaret foresaw that later generations of Singaporeans would come to cherish the city's colonial-era buildings. She ended the letter with these words: "Our city will be poor indeed if, amongst

all its dynamic modern environment and recreational activity, there is no place for the thinkers and 'dreamers of dreams'."<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, the school building was torn down in 1972.

By the mid-1980s however, while Marjorie continued to maintain an interest in the preservation of historic buildings, her main focus was animal welfare work. She was a founding member of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in 1954 (today known as the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, Singapore). In 1982, she became an advisor to the World Society for the Protection of Animals and the secretary of the International Primate Protection League.

Marjorie and her family also made countless butterfly collecting trips to Malaysia. By the 1990s, the trips had resulted in a Lepidoptera collection of significant value. Today, this collection is held by the Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum.

Her husband Victor, who taught music and was also a music journalist and critic, died in 2005. Marjorie herself passed away peacefully at home on 15 August 2010 at the age of 89. Her son Nicholas was with her, as was Fina, her

The former Raffles Institution in Bras Basah, 1955. The building was originally designed by Lieutenant Philip Jackson with later extensions designed by George D. Coleman. It was demolished in 1972 and the site is currently occupied by the Raffles City complex. In 1968, Marjorie Doggett wrote to *The Straits Times* unsuccessfully calling for the school building to be preserved.



loyal helper. Seven years later, in recognition of her contributions to animal welfare, Marjorie was inducted into the Singapore Women's Hall of Fame.

### How "Marjorie Doggett's Singapore" Came to Be

I first seriously studied *Characters of Light* at the National Library of Singapore. From its pages, photo after photo leapt up of 1950s Singapore, though with poor reproduction. The potential was intriguing. Might her negatives still exist? If so, what was their quality like? And, equally important, what was their present physical condition? And what about her life story? Did any personal or perhaps professional records exist? My photographer's instinct – that no one with Marjorie's method and dedication would lose or abandon her negatives – urged me on.

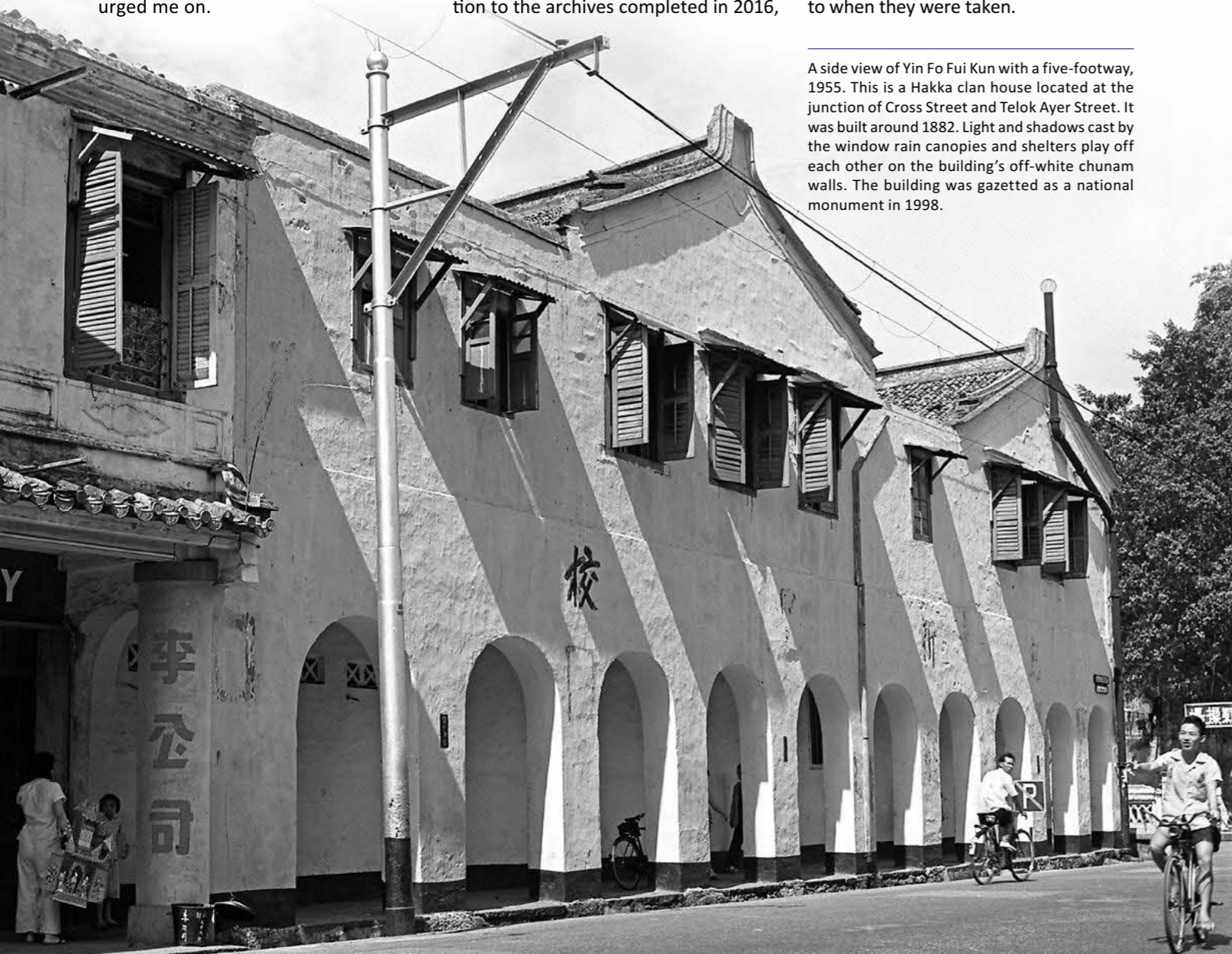
Soon after, I sought out Marjorie's son Nick by telephone and we met in January 2011. Nick told me that his mother's photographs and documents were safely stored in his home. My first visit to Nick's Changi bungalow in July 2011 was a poignant moment. In handling negatives, prints and documents unseen for decades, I saw first-hand the depth and breadth of Marjorie's work. Sorting through boxes dating back to the 1950s, Singapore, as it then was, came to life. The image quality in the negatives and prints was vastly superior to the reproductions found in the 1957 and the 1985 editions of *Characters of Light*.

Nick and I developed a shared resolve: to create a record of Marjorie's life and work in book form and to have her materials donated to the National Archives of Singapore. With the donation to the archives completed in 2016,

the next goal was to prepare and publish *Marjorie Doggett's Singapore*.

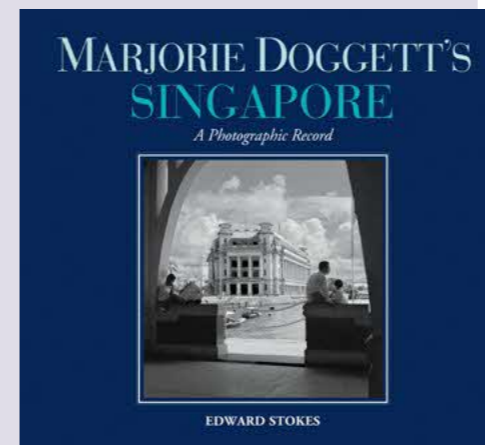
The selection of photos and documentary research for the book were carried out between late 2017 and 2018. In a small room at the National Library, I spent three months immersed in the materials: negatives, prints, photo notebooks, letters, diaries, newspaper cuttings, invitations and much more. But one particular item was of exceptional value; indeed it became a virtual bible for much of my research. From 1952 until the early 1970s, Marjorie kept a logbook of her negatives. It records, with method and care almost beyond imagination, every photograph that she took during those years. Each is meticulously identified by year and place. By checking off the original negatives, we know that not once did Marjorie err. Thus, her photos can be given precise years as to when they were taken.

A side view of Yin Fo Fui Kun with a five-footway, 1955. This is a Hakka clan house located at the junction of Cross Street and Telok Ayer Street. It was built around 1882. Light and shadows cast by the window rain canopies and shelters play off each other on the building's off-white chunam walls. The building was gazetted as a national monument in 1998.



The heart of *Marjorie Doggett's Singapore* are the photographs from *Characters of Light*, categorised and rearranged into completely different sections from the earlier editions. The book is also accompanied by a number of previously unpublished photographs, both taken by her, as well as photographs of her and her family. In putting together this book, I hope to introduce readers to Marjorie Doggett's life and work, and to Singapore in the 1950s. ♦

All photos by and of Marjorie Doggett © National Archives of Singapore.



### MARJORIE DOGGETT'S SINGAPORE

*Marjorie Doggett's Singapore: A Photographic Record* was published in November 2019. It was originated by The Photographic Heritage Foundation and co-published with Ridge Books, an imprint of NUS Press. The work was supported by funding from Ng Teng Fong Charitable Foundation.

The book and this essay were put together based on the Marjorie Doggett Collection held by the National Archives of Singapore. The photos in the collection portray Marjorie Doggett's life and work, as well as Singapore's urban setting and architecture in the 1950s.

*Marjorie Doggett's Singapore* is available for reference at the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library and for loan at selected public libraries (Call nos.: RSING 959.5704 DOG-[HIS] and SING 959.5704 DOG-[HIS]). It also retails at major bookshops in Singapore.



Marjorie Doggett in the late 1990s with the family's mongrel Wurst (front) and a neighbour's dog. In 1954, she became a founding member of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. In some ways, Marjorie's advocacy work for animal rights has eclipsed her career as a photographer.

### NOTES

- 1 The Marjorie Doggett Collection, with negatives, prints and documents, provided the primary research foundation for *Marjorie Doggett's Singapore* and this essay. The materials were arranged in detail by Edward Stokes for his research needs. However, as the collection is currently being formally catalogued by the National Archives of Singapore, it is not possible here to give specific text references.
- 2 Doggett, M. (1957). *Characters of light: A guide to the buildings of Singapore*. Singapore: Donald Moore. (Call no.: RCLOS 725.4095957 DOG)
- 3 *Characters of Light* was reissued in 1985 as an expanded edition by Times Books International with 138 pages and 107 photos. It used glossy paper and kept most of the images featured in the 1957 publication, with the addition of 38 new photos. The captions were lengthened as well. Notably, given Singapore's urban transformation since 1957, Marjorie Doggett's texts made stronger comments on heritage and architectural preservation. See Doggett, M. (1985). *Characters of light: Early buildings of Singapore*. Singapore: Times Books International. (Call no.: RSING 722.4095957 DOG)
- 4 Kong, L. (2011). *Conserving the past, creating the future: Urban heritage in Singapore* (p. 30). Singapore: Urban Redevelopment Authority. (Call no.: RSING 363.69095957 KON)
- 5 Stokes, E. (2019). *Marjorie Doggett's Singapore: A photographic record* (p. 25). Singapore: Ridge Books: The Photographic Heritage Foundation. (Call no.: RSING 959.5704 DOG-[HIS])
- 6 Teo, S.E., & Savage, V.R. (1991). Singapore landscape: A historical overview of housing image (p. 336). In E.C.T. Chew & E. Lee (Eds), *A history of Singapore*. Singapore: Oxford University Press. (Call no.: RSING 959.57 HIS-[HIS])
- 7 Enduring epitaphs. (1957, June 3). *The Straits Times*, p. 8. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 8 A picture chronicle of S'pore buildings. (1957, June 30). *Sunday Standard*, p. 23. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 9 Doggett, M. (1968, July 13). Preserving Singapore history. *The Straits Times*, p. 10. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

# THE THESPIANS OF RAF SELETAR



The RAF Seletar Theatre Club was a highly regarded amateur drama group in Singapore for more than 20 years. **Suriati Sani** provides a snapshot of the club's history.

**Suriati Sani** is an Assistant Archivist with the National Archives of Singapore where she handles reference enquiries and helps researchers navigate archival materials. This essay combines her interests in history and theatre arts.

Seletar Airport and the land around it is now a part of the Seletar Aerospace Park, an industrial hub focused on aerospace activities. Before this, it was called Seletar Airbase and was used by the Republic of Singapore Air Force (RSAF). The RSAF, in turn, inherited the airbase from the British. Between 1928 and 1971, it was known as Royal Air Force (RAF) Seletar – Britain's largest airbase in the Far East.

RAF Seletar airbase was a self-contained town with homes, shops and recreational facilities. On their day off, the people who lived and worked in the airbase would hang out together. Some of them joined clubs based around a common interest like cycling, rowing and golf. While most of the clubs were outdoor-oriented, there was at least one club whose activities were decidedly indoors – the RAF Seletar Theatre Club.

Set up in 1949, the club ran for two decades and staged over 100 productions until the curtains descended for the final time in 1970. The club, which saw a fire devastating its in-house theatre only a few years after its construction, successfully nurtured talented writers and actors despite its short but eventful history, and went on to take part in the first drama festival held in Singapore.<sup>1</sup>

## RAF Seletar Theatre Club

The RAF Seletar Theatre Club was set up on 22 August 1949 to provide RAF personnel with live entertainment. Club members put up plays, revues and pantomimes on-site or as part of a touring company to other airbases and military sites in Singapore. The club also arranged for theatre groups from visiting units or services to perform in Seletar airbase.<sup>2</sup>

Membership to the theatre club was opened to all service personnel and their family members stationed at Seletar. The monthly membership fee was \$2 for male personnel, \$1 for servicewomen and \$2.50 for their spouses. On average, the club staged a new play every two months while play-reading sessions were held weekly. Although it was billed as a "working" club, the theatre committee also organised regular social events, dances and outings to various theatres in Singapore for its members.<sup>3</sup>

In the beginning, the club faced typical teething issues such as the lack of funds, resources and facilities. One

of the main challenges was the transitory nature of servicemen stationed at the airbase. "The main difficulty which Service amateur groups have to face is that of the constant movement of their members," noted the programme booklet for the 1955 production of *Lover's Leap*. "Fortunately, Seletar Theatre Club has never suffered seriously enough in this direction to become inactive, but they have always done their utmost to encourage actors, or would be actors, carpenters, painters, dress-makers and anybody interested, to come forward and join the 'family'." New members were always welcome, the programme noted.<sup>4</sup>

Some of these challenges were resolved when the inaugural theatre committee decided to open a clubhouse equipped with a bar, a rehearsal room and proper furnishings. "From that decision came the result that most members would spend the greater percentage of their spare time and interest whilst in Singapore, at the Theatre Club, living in almost a 'family' atmosphere."<sup>5</sup>

(Below) The main entrance of RAF Seletar airbase, 1930s. RAFSA Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

(Facing page) Seletar Theatre Club's production of *Meet Mr. Callaghan* in October 1954. RAFSA Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.





(Above) Lady Wheeler (centre), wife of the Commander of Britain's Far East Air Force Air Marshal Neil Wheeler, and Mrs Maisner (left), wife of Station Commander and Group Captain Alec Maisner, visiting the RAF Seletar Theatre Club in 1971. They were briefed by R. J. Thompson. RAFA Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



(Left) Pam Ayres in a scene from *The Poker Secession*, 1968. Retrieved from Seletar Theatre Club website.

The club got its wish when its clubhouse was officially opened on 17 November 1949. It took over an old Nissen hut<sup>6</sup> that was previously part of the Malcolm Club, a well-patronised social club at Seletar airbase.<sup>7</sup>

Rehearsals and preparations were held in the dilapidated Nissen hut while productions were staged at the Astra Cinema located beside the clubhouse. Unfortunately, the club lost this space in

shop and storage space, as well as new stage lighting and fans for ventilation.<sup>9</sup>

In July 1963, the club completed a major reconstruction of the theatre's stage and proscenium, which were closely modelled after the Mermaid Theatre in London. The new theatre was reportedly the first of its kind in the Far East. Unfortunately, disaster struck barely a month later on 6 August. At around 3 pm, a fire broke out in a backstage storeroom that almost completely gutted the theatre. Nothing was left but the walls. The stage auditorium, workshop, foyer and lighting box were destroyed, leaving only the clubroom and dressing rooms intact.<sup>10</sup> Noted *The Straits Times*:

"By a completely undeserved piece of misfortune, the RAF Seletar Theatre Club has just lost its excellent bijou theatre at the RAF base in a disastrous fire which left almost nothing but the walls. Very little of the club's properties and wardrobe was saved, and the hard-working amateurs now face the tremendous task of starting all over again the building up of a theatre which had taken them nearly a decade of hard work."<sup>11</sup>

Despite the setback, the club did not give up. Members used a temporary stage at the Junior RAF School in Seletar airbase to present Tennessee Williams' *Orpheus Descending* at the 1963 Inter-Services Drama Festival. The club also performed *The Laboratory* and *The Dear Departed* in February 1964 on that same stage to raise funds for a new theatre. This money – along with the insurance payout, donations from the Nuffield Foundation<sup>12</sup> and funds from other service stations – was used to construct a new theatre which opened in June 1964.

### A Crucible

During the two decades of its existence, the Seletar Theatre Club staged a total of 118 productions. As a result, the club was also a crucible for talent, giving aspiring actors, writers, producers, directors and backstage crew a platform to hone their craft on a regular basis.

Pam Ayres, a writer, poet, broadcaster and entertainer, is one of those who attributes her success to the RAF Seletar Theatre Club.

Ayres joined the Women's Royal Air Force (WRAF) in April 1965 and was

posted to RAF Brampton in Huntingdonshire, England. She was later deployed to RAF Seletar where she worked as an air photography plotter at the Joint Air Reconnaissance Intelligence Centre, Far East (JARIC FE).<sup>13</sup>

Ayres found Singapore to be an eye-opener. The Singapore River back then was "evil-looking" as it "rolled black, viscous and stinking under the bridge", while in the city there were "eating stalls to sit at and *Nasi Goreng* to tackle with chopsticks. There were beggars, prostitutes and transsexuals. It was a long way from eating a paper-wrapped sausage at 6.22 am waiting for the bus to Bicester".<sup>14</sup>

Ayres joined the Seletar Theatre Club and appeared in several productions.<sup>15</sup> She noted that it was the Friday night get-togethers at the club that kickstarted her writing career. She said:

"On these occasions members of the club would get up on stage to do an impromptu 'turn'. I wanted to do a turn as well, but I could find nothing to declaim which corresponded with my own sense of humour or that, saddled with my country accent, I could put over in a way that worked."<sup>16</sup>

This spurred Ayres to start writing her own material, leading to her first poem titled "Foolish Brother Luke" about a shaky love affair; this was the first of many poems she would eventually write and perform.<sup>17</sup>

Ayres left the WRAF in 1969 and received her big break in 1974 when she was asked to read her poem "The Battery Hen" on BBC Radio. It was an instant hit with the audience, who called the radio station to ask for copies of her poems. In 1976, Ayres published her first book of verses, *Some of Me Poems*, and in 1978, her second book, *Thoughts of a Late-Night Knitter*. Together, the two publications have sold almost two million copies.<sup>18</sup>

Ayres, who lives in England today, performed in the Royal Variety show at the London Palladium in 1977 and starred in a 13-part series on British television.<sup>19</sup>

A less well-known actor associated with the club is Julianna Goss (née Francis). Goss trained as an actress at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA) in London before enlisting in the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF) during World War II. She started out as

a mechanic but later became a member of the wartime entertainment troupe that toured military bases.

In the WAAF, she met and married Ken Goss, an engine fitter, and became a service wife. They moved to Singapore when Ken was posted to RAF Seletar in 1960. She joined the RAF Seletar Theatre Club and used her RADA credentials to conduct classes. She also acted in and produced several major productions, such as *Charley's Aunt*, *Roar like a Dove* and Archibald MacLeish's *J.B.*, which was the winner of the Inter-Services Drama Festival in 1962.<sup>20</sup>

After three years in Singapore, the Gosses left on 19 April 1963 when Ken was posted to RAF Lyneham in Wiltshire, England. At RAF Lyneham, Goss joined the Lyneham Stage Club where she managed to persuade successive station commanders to agree to a purpose-built theatre for the club. It was constructed in 1969 and named The New Theatre. Following her death in 1977, the theatre was renamed Julianna Goss Theatre in her honour. The club continued to stage three shows a year until its closure in 2012 when the RAF withdrew from Lyneham.<sup>21</sup>

RAF Seletar Theatre Club's pantomime performance, 1960s. RAFA Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



## NOËL COWARD'S SELETAR CONNECTION

The renowned playwright Noël Coward, known for his plays such as *Present Laughter*, *Design for Living*, *Hay Fever* and *Blithe Spirit*, was associated with RAF Seletar although not with the RAF Seletar Theatre Club.

While on a stopover in Singapore in 1930, Coward ended up extending his stay for several weeks after his travelling partner fell ill. During his stay, Coward became acquainted with Air Commodore S.W. Smith, Air Officer Commanding Far East, and the commodore's wife.<sup>1</sup>

Despite being on holiday "as a complete rest from the strain of continually catering for other people's amusement",<sup>2</sup> the pull of the theatre proved too strong. When the opportunity came for him to take to the stage, Coward seized it.

A visiting English theatrical group was in Singapore to perform R.C. Sheriff's *Journey's End*. However, when the lead actor lost his voice at the last minute, Coward agreed to replace him as a favour to the theatre company.<sup>3</sup>

He had just five days to prepare for his role as Captain Stanhope in the three-night performance that ran at the Victoria Theatre from 2 to 4 April. The near sold-out shows received mixed reviews though, with some critics saying that Coward was miscast in the role while others felt he gave an almost flawless and rich portrayal of the character.<sup>4</sup>

One critic was the wife of Sir Cecil Clementi, the British Governor, although her beef with him did not involve his acting ability. At a dinner with the governor and Lady Clementi, the latter rebuked Coward for his involvement in the play as she felt the play was critical of British soldiers during World War I.<sup>5</sup>

Coward also had a brief cameo in the company's production of *When Knights Were Bold* as one of the ladies-in-waiting, before leaving Singapore on 6 April 1930 to continue on his trip around the Far East.<sup>6</sup>

In 1935, Coward visited Singapore twice. As part of an extensive world tour travelling from Hollywood in America to Japan and China, he arrived in Singapore from Hong Kong on 22 April 1935.<sup>7</sup> He

stayed for a week in a house in RAF Seletar before leaving for Java on 29 April.<sup>8</sup>

Coward made another stopover in Singapore on 19 May, where he again stayed at RAF Seletar, before setting sail for Europe on 24 May.<sup>9</sup> Alas, his two sojourns in 1935 did not involve any impromptu turns on the stage.

### NOTES

- 1 A famous visitor. (1930, March 22). *The Malaya Tribune*, p. 8; Notes of the day. (1930, November 26). *The Straits Times*, p. 10; Noel Coward and the censors. (1930, March 22). *The Straits Times*, p. 12. Mr Noel Coward here. (1935, April 23). *The Malaya Tribune*, p. 11. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 2 Mr Noel Coward. (1930, March 26). *The Malaya Tribune*, p. 8. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 3 Noel Coward in *Journey's End*. (1930, April 3). *The Straits Times*, p. 12. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 4 The Quaints. (1930, March 30). *The Malaya Tribune*, p. 8; Mr Noel Coward. (1930, April 3). *The Malaya Tribune*, p. 8. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 5 Coward, N. (2007). *The letters of Noel Coward* (pp. 174–175). New York: Alfred A. Knopf. (Call no.: 822.912 COW)
- 6 Victoria Theatre. (1930, April 7). *The Straits Times*, p. 12. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 7 No yachting for Noel Coward. (1935, April 23). *The Straits Times*, p. 12; *The Malaya Tribune*, 23 Apr 1935, p. 11. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 8 Shorrick, N. (1968). *Lion in the sky* (p. 43). Singapore: Federal Publications. (Call no.: RSING 358.4095957 SHO); *The Malaya Tribune*, 23 Apr 1935, p. 11; Chat aboard. (1935, April 29). *The Straits Times*, p. 6. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 9 Noel Coward. (1935, May 19). *The Sunday Tribune* (Singapore), p. 1; Social & personal. (1935, May 25). *The Straits Times*, p. 13. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

Noël Coward (back row, fifth from the right) at the RAF Seletar Yacht Club with RAF personnel in 1935. RAFFSA Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



## Award-winning Feats

The club's offerings were a class act, clinching the first prize in the Inter-Services Drama Festival not once but three times – for its productions of Archibald MacLeish's Pulitzer Prize-winning play *J.B.* in 1962, Keith Waterhouse's *Billy Liar* in 1966 and Trevor Peacock's *Collapse of Stout Party* in 1967.

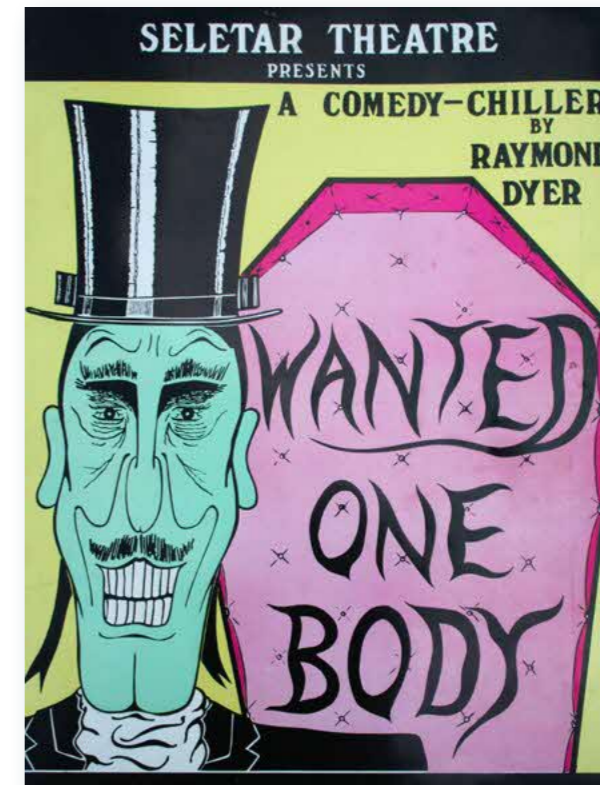
In 1969, the Far East Land Forces organised the first open Festival of Drama in which all English-language dramatic societies in Singapore were eligible to take part. (The Inter-Services Drama Festival, which first started running in 1961, had only been open to British services group). Plays for the Festival of Drama were presented in one-act performances – each lasting between 30 and 50 minutes – on any topic, although themes on societal issues or relating to Singapore were preferred.<sup>22</sup>

The week-long festival, which was held at the Cultural Centre Theatre in Canning Rise, was organised to promote friendly rivalry, goodwill and understanding among amateur theatre groups in Singapore. The plays were judged on the performance of the actors, production presentation and efficiency of the crew in erecting and dismantling the sets.<sup>23</sup>

RAF Seletar Theatre Club's production of Ladislav Fodor's *The Vigil* was the first-prize winner at the inaugural festival, while second place went to Theatre World Association's original local play *This Time Different*. Rowcroft Theatre Club's *Sganarelle* by Moliere rounded up the top three.<sup>24</sup>

### NOTES

- 1 Singapore's air base. (1928, February 17). *The Straits Times*, p. 9. Retrieved from NewspaperSG; Shorrick, N. (1968). *Lion in the sky* (p. 26). Singapore: Federal Publications. (Call no.: RSING 358.4095957 SHO); Taylor, D. (2002). *Seletar: Crowning glory* (p. 177). West Sussex: Woodfield Pub. (Call no.: RSING 358.40095957 TAY)
- 2 Seletar Theatre Club. (2020). Retrieved from the RAF Seletar Theatre Club website.
- 3 Seletar Theatre Club, 2020.
- 4 Seletar Theatre Club, 2020.
- 5 Seletar Theatre Club, 2020.
- 6 A Nissen hut is a prefabricated semi-circular structure made out of corrugated steel usually used by the military as temporary housing.
- 7 Seletar Theatre Club, 2020.
- 8 Seletar Theatre Club, 2020; Stage door. (1955, September 17). *Singapore Standard*, p. 10. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 9 Seletar Theatre Club, 2020.
- 10 Seletar Theatre Club, 2020; Taylor, 2002, p. 167; The theatre. (1963, July 7). *The Straits Times*, p. 9; The theatre. (1963, August 11). *The Straits Times*, p. 9. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 11 The theatre. (1963, August 11). *The Straits Times*, p. 9.
- 12 Based in London, the Nuffield Foundation is a charitable trust established in 1943 to improve social well-being.
- 13 Cowley, D. (1979, October 27). Meet England's queen



(Above) The souvenir programme for Juliana Goss' production of Archibald MacLeish's *J.B.*, winner of the Inter-Services Drama Festival in 1962. Retrieved from Seletar Theatre Club website.

(Left) Programme booklet for *Wanted One Body*, a Seletar Theatre Club production in August 1967 starring Pam Ayres. RAFFSA Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

In 1970, during a meeting involving participating groups, it was decided that such events should be organised by Singaporeans and that the Festival of Drama would take on a non-competitive format. Unfortunately, the initial enthusiasm generated by the meeting ultimately fizzled out and, coupled with financial problems, the festival ended up not being staged that year.<sup>25</sup>

The second edition of the Festival of Drama was organised by the University of Singapore Society in 1971.<sup>26</sup> The Seletar Theatre Club did not participate as it had been shuttered the year before. The club closed its doors for the last time on 30 October 1970. Interestingly, for its final curtain call, the club staged Noël Coward's *Blithe Spirit*. ♦

of comic verse. *The Straits Times*, p. 12. Retrieved from NewspaperSG; Ayres, P. (1998). *With these hands: A collection of work* (p. 5). Orion Publishing Co. (Not available in NLB holdings)

- 14 Ayres, 1998, p. 6.
- 15 Seletar Theatre Club, 2020.
- 16 Ayres, 1998, p. 6.
- 17 Ayres, 1998, p. 6.
- 18 Ayres, 1998, p. 7; *The Straits Times*, 27 Oct 1979, p. 12.
- 19 *The Straits Times*, 27 Oct 1979, p. 12; Clef, V. (1981, January 27). Sparkling items provide something for everyone. *The Straits Times*, p. 4. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 20 RAF Seletar Theatre Club. (n.d.). *Juliana (Julie) Goss*. Retrieved from the RAF Seletar Theatre Club website.
- 21 Seletar Theatre Club, 2020; The Royal Air Force Theatrical Association. (May/June 2012). *Noises Off*. *The RAFTA Newsletter*. Retrieved from RAFTA website.
- 22 Plans to make festival of drama annual event. (1969, May 29). *The Straits Times*, p. 8; First open drama festival makes its impact. (1969, November 12). *The Straits Times*, p. 11. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 23 *The Straits Times*, 12 Nov 1969, p. 11.
- 24 Seletar's 'Vigil' wins top award in festival. (1969, November 17). *The Straits Times*, p. 6. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 25 Local drama groups inactive. (1971, January 29). *The Straits Times*, p. 7. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 26 8 amateur clubs rehearsing for festival of drama. (1971, February 24). *The Straits Times*, p. 6. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

## THE RAFFSA COLLECTION AT THE NAS

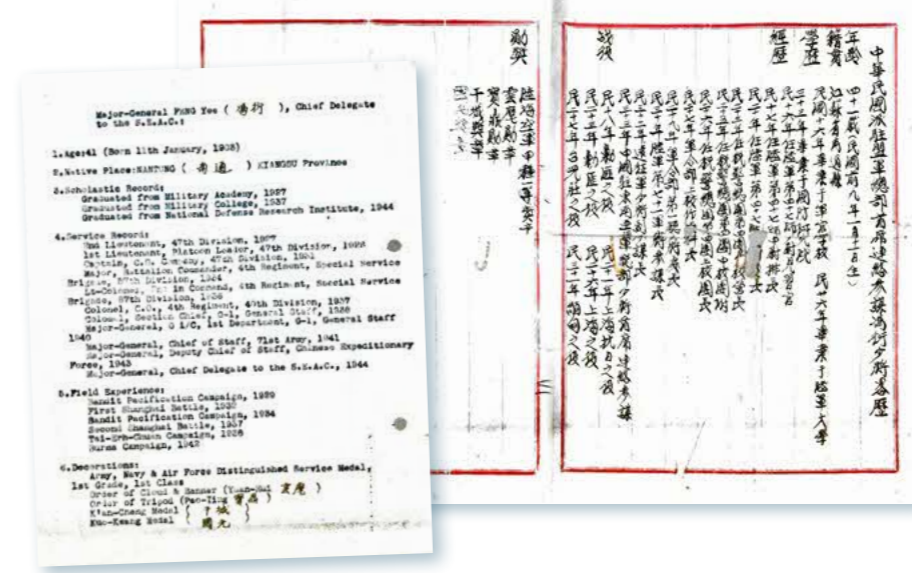
The Royal Air Force Seletar Association (RAFFSA) ([www.raffseletar.co.uk](http://www.raffseletar.co.uk)), based in the United Kingdom, was formed in late 1997 with the objective of reuniting an estimated 80,000 to 100,000 personnel who had served at RAF Seletar from 1928 to 1971, and to keep their memories alive.

The association donated approximately 4,300 items comprising photographs, posters, slides, booklets and documents to the National Archives of Singapore in 2016. To access the RAFFSA Collection, visit [www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/](http://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/)

# WITNESS TO HISTORY

Major-General Feng Yee was China's representative at the Japanese surrender ceremony held in Singapore in September 1945. **Seow Peck Ngiam** provides highlights of his military life and contributions.

**Seow Peck Ngiam** is a Senior Librarian with the National Library, Singapore. Her main responsibilities include developing the Chinese Collection, and providing research and reference services. She is interested in the history of the Chinese community in Singapore.



Major-General Feng Yee's handwritten résumé in Chinese, along with the accompanying English translation in typescript, regarding his appointment as Chief Delegate to the South East Asia Command in 1944. Documents of Major-General Feng Yee (冯衍将军珍藏资料). *Collection of the National Library, Singapore* (Accession no.: B34450839C).

On 12 September 1945, one of the darkest chapters of Singapore's history officially came to a close when the Japanese formally surrendered to the Allies in Singapore. The ceremony took place 10 days after General Douglas MacArthur, Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers, formally accepted Japan's surrender in a similar event held onboard the USS *Missouri* in Tokyo Bay.<sup>1</sup>

In Singapore, the surrender ceremony was held in the Council Chamber of the Municipal Building, later renamed City Hall.<sup>2</sup> General Seishiro Itagaki of Japan's Seventh Area Army signed the surrender document on behalf of Japan while the Allies were represented by Louis Mountbatten, Supreme Allied Commander of the South East Asia Command (SEAC).<sup>3</sup>

The proceedings were solemn, but there was a moment mid-way when Japanese feathers were ruffled. This happened when China's representative to the SEAC, Major-General Feng Yee (冯衍) (1908–47)<sup>4</sup> whipped out a camera and pointed it at the Japanese delegation. This action was particularly noticeable because Feng was seated in the first row, directly facing them. In an entry in Mountbatten's personal diary, he records:

"The representative of the great Republic of China, Major-General Feng Yee, produced in the middle of the Ceremony a Leica camera which he actually proceeded to focus on the Japanese in turn. The Japanese delegates looked absolutely furious..."<sup>5</sup>

In March 2019, 74 years after that event, the National Library of Singapore received a donation of 82 items from Feng's family.<sup>6</sup> The items are mainly documents in Chinese that date between 1937 and 1946. They consist of Feng's military accreditations and appointments, his military correspondence and letters, working papers and newspaper clippings. Among the materials donated were four photographs, though none of the surrender ceremony in Singapore. One of the photos shows Feng in Singapore. The photo is not dated so it is unclear exactly when it was taken. Feng had visited Singapore twice: in May 1941 when he was part of a Chinese military mission and toured British military facilities,<sup>7</sup> and in September 1945 to attend the surrender ceremony.

Taken together, these materials document China's contributions to the Allied

(Facing page top) Portrait of Major-General Feng Yee, taken in the 1940s. Documents of Major-General Feng Yee (冯衍将军珍藏资料). *Collection of the National Library, Singapore* (Accession no.: B34450839C).

(Facing page bottom) Major-General Feng Yee is seated third from the extreme right in the photo, holding his Leica camera during the Japanese Surrender Ceremony held in the Municipal Building on 12 September 1945. Image reproduced from Mountbatten, L. (1979). *Mountbatten: Eighty Years in Pictures* (p. 161). London: Macmillan. (Call no.: RSING 941.0820924 MOU)

operations against the Japanese during World War II. In addition, they provide insights into Feng's military life and his contributions as the Chief Delegate to the SEAC.

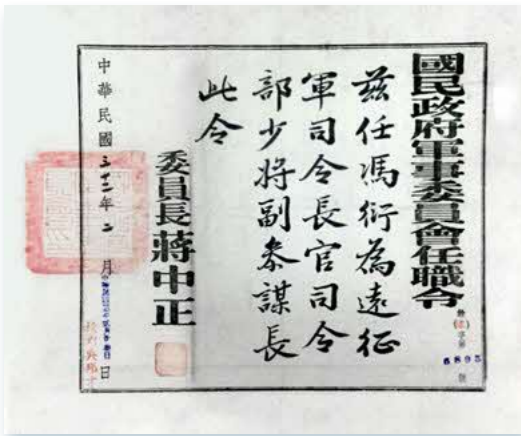
Because of his role with the SEAC and this connection with Singapore, Feng's family decided to donate these materials to the National Library. Through the donation, Feng's personal documents and letters will be made publicly available to researchers.

## Early Military Career

Born on 11 January 1908 in Nantong, Jiangsu province (江苏省南通县) in China, Feng graduated from the Central Military Academy in Nanking (Nanjing) (南京中央军校)<sup>8</sup> in 1927 and was posted to the 47th Division as second lieutenant. The following year, he was promoted to first lieutenant and became a platoon leader.

Feng had been involved in China's resistance against the Japanese since the 1930s. In 1934, he served in the 4th Regiment in the "taxation police regiment", a special service brigade which was part of the 87th Division. In September 1937, this division came under the newly formed 71st Army. Shortly after, the 71st Army was regrouped with several other armies to form the 9th Army Corps to fight in the three-month-long Battle of Shanghai (13 August–26 November 1937) which took place at the beginning of the Second Sino-Japanese war.<sup>9</sup> In December 1937, Feng graduated from the Military College in Nanking.<sup>10</sup> The next year, Feng was involved in the Battle of Taierzhuang (24 March–7 April 1938), where China scored its first victory over the Japanese and dealt a significant blow to the Japanese military.

Feng distinguished himself in battle and in 1941, he was promoted to Major-General, Chief of Staff of the 71st Army. In May 1942, the 71st Army was one of the troops deployed as reinforcements for the Chinese Expeditionary Force (中国远征军) which had been recalled back to Yunnan, China.<sup>11</sup> The force had earlier been dispatched to Burma and India to support Allied efforts against the Imperial Japanese Army as well as to protect the land routes that were critical for transporting essential war supplies to China.<sup>12</sup> In 1943, the 71st Army was absorbed into the 11th Army Corps, which together with other corps and divisions, became part of the Chinese Expeditionary Force.<sup>13</sup> In the same year, Feng was appointed Deputy Chief of Staff<sup>14</sup> in the headquarters of the Commander-in-Chief of the Chinese Expeditionary Force.



Certificate of Major-General Feng Yee's appointment in February 1943 as the Deputy Chief of Staff in the headquarters of the Commander-in-Chief of the Chinese Expeditionary Force. Documents of Major-General Feng Yee (冯衍将军珍藏资料). Collection of the National Library, Singapore (Accession no.: B34450839C).

### Appointment to the South East Asia Command

In August 1943, the British and Americans formed the SEAC with Louis Mountbatten as Supreme Allied Commander. His job was to oversee the operations of Allied forces in Southeast Asia against the Japanese in Burma, Malaya, Sumatra, Ceylon, Siam and French Indochina.<sup>15</sup> To cultivate good relations, Mountbatten personally paid a visit to Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, Supreme Commander of Allied forces in the China war zone in Chungking (Chongqing) in October 1943, after the latter had assumed office.<sup>16</sup>

During the trip, the two men decided to better coordinate efforts between the Southeast Asia and China war theatres. Following this, Feng was appointed Chief Delegate to lead a Chinese Military Mission based at the SEAC's headquarters in Kandy, Ceylon (Sri Lanka). He had recently graduated from the National Defence Research Institute (国防研究) in Chungking in 1944 before being deployed to this mission.<sup>17</sup> The mission's objective was twofold: to improve communications between China and the SEAC, and to coordinate Allied operations in Southeast Asia, especially when it involved China.<sup>18</sup>

While Feng was not in a frontline posting, he was almost killed because of his job. Feng and his team were inspecting the Victoria Dock in Bombay (Mumbai) on 14 April 1944 when a fire set off two huge explosions on board the freighter SS *Fort Stikine*.<sup>19</sup> The explosion is said to be one of the worst fire-related disasters in Indian history. It claimed between 800 and 1,300 lives, rendered 80,000 people homeless and also destroyed 13 other

ships in the vicinity.<sup>20</sup> Fortunately, Feng escaped with only minor injuries, though some in his party were not so fortunate.<sup>21</sup>

As the liaison between the SEAC and China, Feng accompanied Mountbatten to China in March 1945 as the latter attempted to persuade Chiang Kai-shek to leave Chinese troops in northern Burma. Chiang was planning to withdraw all Chinese forces and a joint US-China brigade with attendant aircraft from northern Burma back to China. He wanted to re-organise these forces and mobilise them to recapture Hunan and Kwangsi (Guangxi) provinces from the Japanese. These provinces were important because they dominated the bulk of China's rice production.<sup>22</sup>

A Chinese withdrawal from Burma, however, could potentially derail British plans to capture Rangoon (Yangon). The SEAC had captured the city of Meiktila in central Burma in March 1945 and needed the help of Chinese forces to hold back the Japanese. The route to the south would then be free for British forces to advance to Rangoon in southern Burma. The British also depended heavily on the air transport squadrons of the American air force to transport war supplies and troops, and could not afford for these planes to be diverted to transport Chinese forces back to China.<sup>23</sup>

Mountbatten and Feng arrived in Chungking on 8 March 1945. Mountbatten hoped to persuade Chiang to change his mind but the generalissimo was not to be

swayed. Notwithstanding this setback, Mountbatten later managed to get the Americans to agree that US transport squadrons would leave Burma only after the capture of Rangoon, or on 1 June 1945, whichever came first. The SEAC managed to capture Rangoon in May that year.<sup>24</sup>

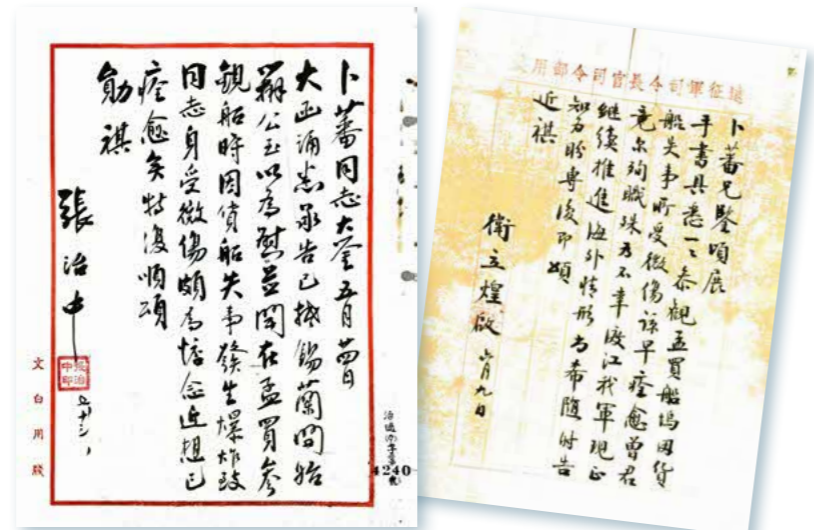
### Post-1945

After the war, Feng returned to China and in August 1946, he was appointed Deputy Director in the office of the Minister for National Defence based in Nanking. In June the following year, he moved on to the Land and Building Division in the same ministry and was promoted to Lieutenant-General a month later.<sup>25</sup> However, just when things appeared to be going well, disaster struck.

On 23 November 1947, Feng left Nanking and transited in Shanghai for an official trip to Linhai city in Zhejiang province. Travelling by sea on his way back, the rough waves left Feng nauseated and vomiting profusely, which led to bleeding in his stomach. As soon as the ship docked at Haimen, a city in Jiangsu province, he was rushed to hospital but doctors there could not stanch the bleeding. Feng decided to continue his journey back to Shanghai but by the time he arrived at a hospital in the city, he had lost a lot of blood. Three days later, on 3 December 1947, Feng died at the age of 39.<sup>26</sup> He was buried in his hometown of Nantong.<sup>27</sup>

(Below left) Letter from General Zhang Zhizhong, Commander-in-Chief during the Battle of Shanghai in 1937, to Major-General Feng Yee, dated 13 July (likely 1944). General Zhang asked after Feng's well-being as the latter had suffered minor injuries in the Bombay docks explosion on 14 April 1944. Documents of Major-General Feng Yee (冯衍将军珍藏资料). Collection of the National Library, Singapore (Accession no.: B34450839C).

(Below right) A letter dated 9 June (likely 1944) from Wei Lihuang, Commander of the Chinese Expeditionary Force. He expressed concern about Major-General Feng Yee's injuries sustained during the Bombay docks explosion on 14 April 1944. Documents of Major-General Feng Yee (冯衍将军珍藏资料). Collection of the National Library, Singapore (Accession no.: B34450839C).



### The Family Man

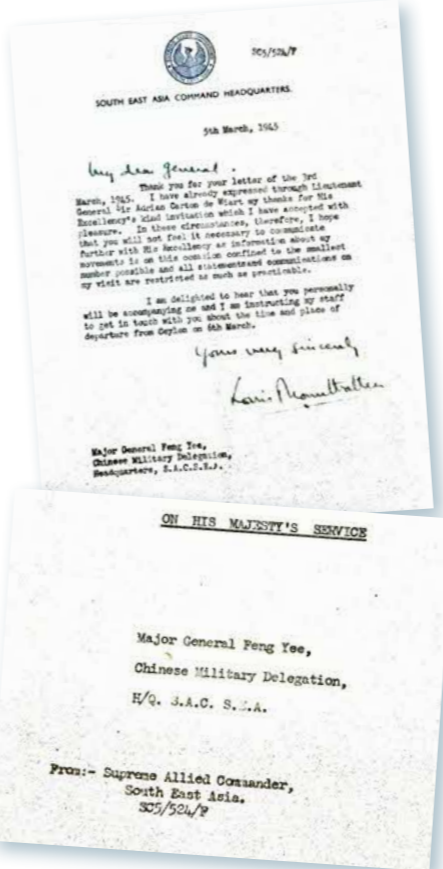
Feng died leaving behind two wives who, between them, bore six children. Feng's first wife was Madam Lu Yun Ruo, with whom he had a daughter. During the chaotic period when the Chinese army retreated to Chungking from Nanking, Feng became separated from his wife and with the ongoing war, they could not find each other.

Although Feng subsequently remarried, he never stopped looking for Madam Lu and his efforts finally paid off. He brought her back to Chungking and she was accepted by his second family. The daughter he had with Madam Lu died of an illness at the age of 16.

Feng had a son and four daughters with his second wife, Madam Han Pei Chun. According to the youngest daughter Patsy, he valued family time very much. Because Feng was devoted to his work in the army and often travelled overseas, he made sure he doted on his children whenever he was home.

After Feng's death in 1947, the family followed the Chinese Nationalist Party (Kuomintang) when it retreated to Taiwan during the civil war in China in 1949. His

Letter dated 5 March 1945 from Louis Mountbatten to Feng – with the accompanying envelope – regarding their impending trip to China. Documents of Major-General Feng Yee (冯衍将军珍藏资料). Collection of the National Library, Singapore (Accession no.: B34450839C).



Major-General Feng Yee with his second daughter Xiangzhong (湘钟) on his right and third daughter Xuanzhong (漩钟) on his left. Documents of Major-General Feng Yee (冯衍将军珍藏资料). Collection of the National Library, Singapore (Accession no.: B34450839C).

two wives settled down in Taiwan and brought up the children together. Today, Feng's descendants – which include 11 grandchildren and great-grandchildren – live in Taiwan, the United States and Hong Kong. ♦

### NOTES

- The Instrument of Surrender was signed by Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers General Douglas MacArthur on behalf of the Allied Powers as well as representatives from the United States, Britain, Australia, Canada, China, France, the Netherlands, Russia and New Zealand. Japanese Foreign Minister Mamoru Shigemitsu and General Yoshijiro Umezumi of the Imperial General Headquarters signed on behalf of Japan.
- The Municipal Building was renamed City Hall in 1951. Together with the former Supreme Court building, it became the National Gallery Singapore in 2015.
- Mountbatten, L. (1988). *Personal diary of Admiral the Lord Louis Mountbatten, Supreme Allied Commander, South-East Asia, 1943–1946* (pp. 246–248). London: Collins. (Call no.: RSING 941.0820924 MOU); Cohen, D., & Totani, Y. (2018). *The Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal: Law, history, and jurisprudence* (p. 121). Cambridge, UK; New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press. (Call no.: R 341.690268 COH)
- Singapore Tourist Promotion Board. (1975). *Historical research on the Surrender Ceremony at City Hall on 12th September 1945* (p. 7). Singapore: Singapore Tourist Promotion Board. (Call no.: RSING 940.5425 HIS-[WAR]); 冯家诤 [Obituary of Feng family]. (1947, December 3). 南方中央日报 [Southern Central Daily]. In 冯衍将军珍藏资料 [Documents of Major-General Feng Yee]. Collection of the National Library, Singapore. (Accession no.: B34450839C)
- Mountbatten, 1988, p. 249.
- 冯家诤, 3 Dec 1947.
- 中国军事考察团在新加坡 [Chinese Military Mission in Malaya]. (1941). 良友 [The Young Companion], 167, 8; (Call no.: R Chinese 059.951YC); 冯衍少将演词. (1945, September 12). 星洲日报总汇报 [Sin Chew Jit Poh Union Times], p. 1. In 冯衍将军珍藏资料 [Documents of Major-General Feng Yee]. Collection of the National Library, Singapore. (Accession no.: B34450839C)
- 华人百科 [Encyclopaedia of Chinese]. 冯衍 [Feng Yee]. Retrieved from 华人百科 website.
- 曹剑浪 [Cao, J.L.]. (2004). 国民党军简史上册 [Brief history of Kuomintang Army volume one] (pp. 176, 295). 北京: 解放军出版社 (Call no.: R 951.082 CJL). The Battle of Shanghai (13 August to 26 November 1937) was fought between the National Revolutionary Army of the Republic of China and the Imperial Japanese Army at the beginning of the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–45). The battle took place over three phases and was described as one of the largest and bloodiest battles of the entire war, resulting in heavy military as well as civilian casualties.
- 陆军大学校证书 [Certificate of Military College]. (1937, December 25). In 冯衍将军珍藏资料 [Documents of Major-General Feng Yee]. Collection of the National Library, Singapore. (Accession no.: B34450839C)
- 曹剑浪, 2004, pp. 625, 713.
- Diamond, J. (2014). *Stilwell and the Chindits: The Allied campaign for Northern Burma, 1943–1944: Rare photographs from wartime archives* (p. 23). England: Pen & Sword Military. (Call no.: RSEA 940.5425910222 DIA-[WAR])
- 曹剑浪, 2004, p. 845.
- 国民政府军事委员会任职令 [Appointment order by the Military Commission]. (1943, February 23). In 冯衍将军珍藏资料 [Documents of Major-General Feng Yee]. Collection of the National Library, Singapore. (Accession no.: B34450839C)



15 Mountbatten, L. (1951). *Report to the Combined Chiefs of Staff by the Supreme Allied Commander, South-East Asia, 1943–1945, Vice Admiral the Earl Mountbatten of Burma* (p. 3). London: Her Majesty Stationery Office. (Call no.: RSEA 940.5425 ALL-[WAR])

16 Mountbatten, 1951, p. 4.  
17 国防研究院第一期结业研究员出国研究及分派服务表 [List of National Defence Research Institute's first batch of graduated researchers for overseas study and their service locations]. (Undated). Major-General Feng Yee (冯衍), Chief Delegate to the S.E.A.C (Resume). In 冯衍将军珍藏资料 [Documents of Major-General Feng Yee]. Collection of the National Library, Singapore. (Accession no.: B34450839C)

18 Mountbatten, 1951, pp. 4–5; Mountbatten, L. (1969). *Post surrender tasks: Section E of 'The report to the Combined Chiefs of Staff'* (p. 321). London: Her Majesty Stationery Office. (Call no.: RSEA 940.5425 ALL-[WAR])

19 The Bombay docks explosion on 14 April 1944 occurred when the freighter SS *Fort Stikine* moored at Victoria Dock caught fire and was destroyed in two massive explosions. The cargo ship was carrying close to 1,400 tons of explosives, including torpedoes, flares, mines, shells and ammunition. Also on board were 8,700 bales of raw cotton, 1,000 barrels of lubricating oil, crates of gold bars and a mixed cargo of fish manure, resin, rice, scrap iron, sulphur and timber.

20 Pezarkar, L. (2018, May 20). The explosion that shook Bombay in 1944. Retrieved from Live History India website.

21 Mountbatten, 1969, p. 321.

22 Pearson, M. (2010). *End game Burma 1945: Slim's master stroke, Meiktila 1945* (p. 52). South Yorkshire: Pen & Sword Military (Call no.: RSEA 940.5425 PEA-[WAR])

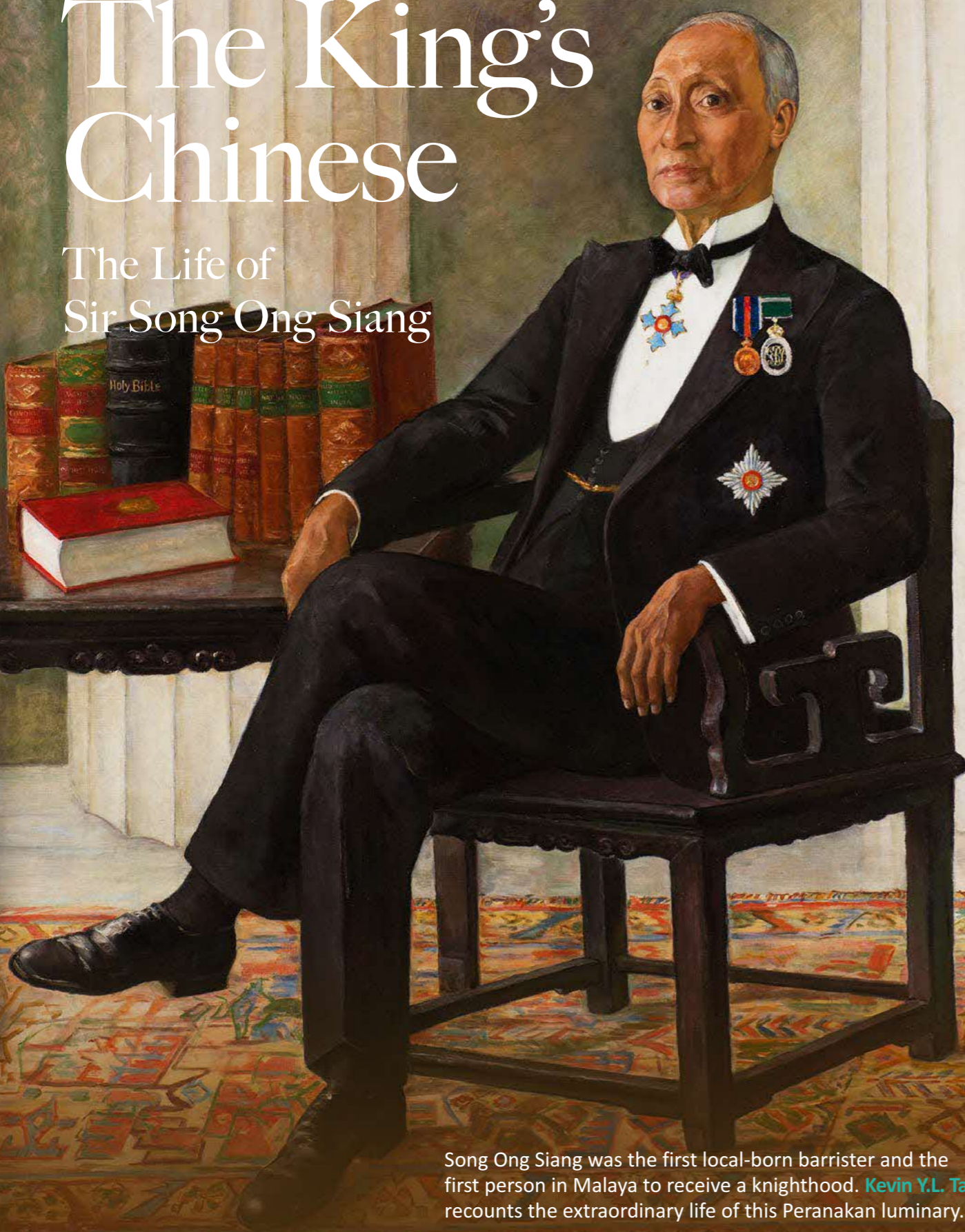
23 Young, E.M. (2004). *Meiktila 1945: The battle to liberate Burma* (p. 68). Oxford: Osprey. (Call no.: R 940.542591 YOU-[WAR])

24 Pearson, 2010, pp. 51–54; Mountbatten, 1951, pp. 7, 132, 134.

25 国防训令 令本部本部土地及建策司 [Order of National Defence Ministry. By order of this ministry, Land and Building Division]. (1947, July 21). In 冯衍将军珍藏资料 [Documents of Major-General Feng Yee]. Collection of the National Library, Singapore. (Accession no.: B34450839C)  
26 由冯衍逝世谈到医药改进问题 [A discussion on the issues in improving medical science arising from Feng Yee's demise]. (1948, March 3). 平民医药周报 [People Medical Weekly], p. 3. (Not available in NLB holdings)  
27 冯衍和白崇禧 [Feng Yee and Bai Chongxi]. (2014). 江海晚报多媒体数字版 [Jianghai Wanbao multimedia digital edition]. Retrieved from Jianghai Wanbao website.

# The King's Chinese

The Life of  
Sir Song Ong Siang



Song Ong Siang was the first local-born barrister and the first person in Malaya to receive a knighthood. Kevin Y.L. Tan recounts the extraordinary life of this Peranakan luminary.

**Dr Kevin Y.L. Tan** is Adjunct Professor at the Faculty of Law, National University of Singapore, and at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University. He specialises in Constitutional and Administrative Law, International Law and International Human Rights. He has written and edited over 50 books on the law, history and politics of Singapore.

Ever since it was first published in 1923, Song Ong Siang's (1871–1941) *One Hundred Years' History of the Chinese in Singapore*<sup>1</sup> has been the standard reference text on some of Singapore's early Chinese personalities and their contributions. Although containing a number of errors and not academically referenced with footnotes, the book is nevertheless used as a primary source of information and was reprinted in facsimile form twice, in 1967 and 1984.<sup>2</sup> Although now almost 100 years old, the book is important enough that an annotated version was published online in 2016 and in print earlier this year by the National Library Board and World Scientific Publishing.

Given its significance, it is remarkable to think that if not for a series of events, this book might never have come into being at all: Song was not the person originally identified to write the book; in fact, it was not meant to be a book in the first place but a small part of a larger book. And even after completing all the research and writing – an effort that took more than three years – financial issues threatened to scuttle its publication. Fortunately, all the obstacles were eventually overcome, and the book finally saw light of day – much later than planned, much longer than expected but much richer than it would have been otherwise.

*One Hundred Years' History of the Chinese in Singapore* sprang from an effort to commemorate the centenary of Singapore's founding with a book. The editors of what would be a two-volume anthology entitled *One Hundred Years of Singapore*<sup>3</sup> originally thought that the book should have two or three chapters on the

history of the Chinese in Singapore and that these chapters should be written by a Chinese.<sup>4</sup> They had initially approached Dr Lim Boon Keng, but he was too busy and recommended Song instead.

No sooner had Song embarked on the work when he realised “the futility of attempting to write a historical review or a general survey of the subject which would be of any real value to the readers”.<sup>5</sup> It was like, as Song said, “trying to make bricks without straw” and he decided that he would instead “compile a chronological history of the Chinese in Singapore”, along the lines of Charles Burton Buckley's *An Anecdotal History of Old Times in Singapore* published in 1902.<sup>6</sup>

Song saw himself as a compiler rather than an author. “I do not claim originality,” he wrote. His aim, he said, was “to be just a faithful recorder” of events. The work involved in writing this book took Song and his two research assistants over three years. They were also assisted by members of the Straits Chinese Reading Club – especially Lim Seng Kiang, Tay Ah Bee, Cheang Peng Moh, Tan Kim Moh and Lee Peng Yam – who devoted “their Saturday afternoons, for many months, at the Raffles Library, poring over” back issues of local English-language newspapers.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to scouring old newspapers, Song also asked a number of individuals – most notably William Makepeace, John Anderson (of Guthrie & Co), and the Reverends J.A. Bethune Cook and William Murray – to provide character sketches

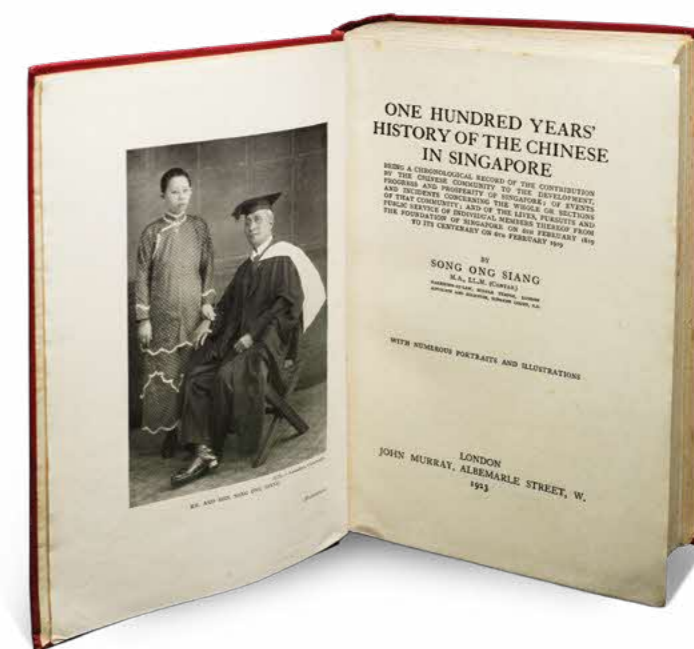
of individuals to be featured in the book.

The two-volume *One Hundred Years of Singapore* was published by John Murray of London in 1921, but at the time, Song's book was not ready. It was only in September 1922, while on holiday in Europe,<sup>8</sup> that Song went to England to persuade the publisher John Murray to publish his manuscript. As Song was unable to underwrite the cost, he tried to fund its publication through subscriptions. However, the response was poor and Song wrote to inform Reverend William Murray, one of his assistants, that there was a likelihood the book would not be published.<sup>9</sup>

Murray then penned an open letter to the editor of *The Straits Times*, urging him to make the book a reality. It is not clear what happened after this but the book was eventually published by November 1923.<sup>10</sup> Each copy was sold for \$12, which was more than a month's wages for most Chinese in Singapore at the time.

*The Singapore Free Press* published a long, glowing review of the book and opined that every “European house of business should possess a copy”. It added, rather presciently, that it would make a “unique gift” to “the present generation of Chinese and to generations yet to be born”.<sup>11</sup> A review in the *Birmingham Post* – republished in *The Singapore Free Press* in January 1924 – was less laudatory, calling the book “not so much history as the raw material for history”.<sup>12</sup>

For a “compilation” of this scale – focused as it was on the elite, wealthy,



**(Facing page)** A painting of Song Ong Siang by J. Wentscher, 1936. Courtesy of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

**(Right)** The title page of Song Ong Siang's *One Hundred Years' History of the Chinese in Singapore* (1923). The frontispiece features a photo of Song and his wife, Helen Yeo Hee Neo, after he was conferred the Knight Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (KBE) in 1936. The photo was taken by Hills & Saunders in Cambridge during their European vacation. Collection of the National Library, Singapore. (Accession no.: B20048226B).

Song Hoot Kiam, father of Song Ong Siang. Hoot Kiam Road in Singapore is named after him. Image reproduced from Song, O.S. (1923). *One Hundred Years' History of the Chinese in Singapore* (p. 78). London: John Murray. Collection of the National Library, Singapore. (Accession no.: B20048226B).



English-educated Straits Chinese community<sup>13</sup> – the book has survived remarkably well. As historian Paul Wheatley noted in his review of the 1969 reprint, the book is about affluent Chinese with similar backgrounds to Song's, and "there is practically nothing about the tens of thousands of coolies who pulled the *rickshas*, laboured in the gambier *bangsals*, worked on building construction, or served in the shops in Singapore".<sup>14</sup>

That said, social historian James Warren noted that while one had to search through the index carefully "for the fragments of the life stories of 'faceless' coolies who did the difficult [and] dirty work of building and binding a nation", Song nonetheless "encyclopaedically records more information about ordinary Chinese in Singapore than most earlier works in Chinese".<sup>15</sup>

In 2016, I completed an annotated e-book version of this work,<sup>16</sup> which was subsequently released in print in March this year. As Song did not offer detailed references to his sources in his book, the annotations attempted to trace the sources Song used and reference them for the modern reader. With the help of two other editors and a team of researchers, we verified facts, especially dates and details, and made notes of discrepancies and errors, all of which are recorded in the footnotes. These annotations will hopefully enhance the book's value as a research tool and reference work for future generations of researchers and readers.

### An Unconventional Prelude

If all that Song had achieved was to produce this seminal work, his reputation would be secure. But Song was much more than just the compiler of *One Hundred Years' History of the Chinese in Singapore*. He was a man of great talent and intelligence – the first local-born barrister and lawyer, and the first person in Malaya to be knighted. Song was also a prominent leader of the Straits Chinese community and the Presbyterian Church on Prinsep Street.

Although we do not know when Song's forebears first arrived in Malaya from Fujian province in China,<sup>17</sup> Walter Makepeace, who wrote the foreword to Song's book, mentioned that Song was a fifth-generation Straits Chinese.<sup>18</sup> Song's father, Song Hoot Kiam, was born in 1830 and had studied in Melaka, Singapore and Hong Kong before receiving an education in Scotland where the plan was to groom him to become a missionary who would later serve in China.

This was not to be. On returning to Singapore in 1849, Hoot Kiam briefly joined the Singapore Institution Free

School (later Raffles Institution), and then became a cashier with the Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company (P&O) for 42 years until his retirement in 1895. In 1870, upon the death of his first wife, Hoot Kiam, then 40, married Phan Fung Lean, who hailed from a Christian family in Penang. Their first child, Song Ong Siang, was born on 14 June 1871. Song had at least one elder half-brother, Song Ong Boo, from his father's first marriage, of which practically nothing is known, and a younger brother, Song Ong Joo. In 1878, Song entered Raffles Institution (RI),<sup>19</sup> which, at the time, provided both primary and secondary education.

When he was 12, Song was awarded the Guthrie Scholarship – given out to the top Chinese pupil of the year, the *Dux*

A group of Queen's Scholars. Back row from left: James Aitken (1886), Charles Spence Angus (1886), P.V.S. Locke (1887) and Dunstan Alfred Aeria (1888). Seated on the ground: Lim Boon Keng on the left (1887) and Song Ong Siang on the right (1888). Photo by the Straits Photographic Studio in Singapore. Image reproduced from Song, O.S. (1923). *One Hundred Years' History of the Chinese in Singapore* (p. 224). London: John Murray. Collection of the National Library, Singapore. (Accession no.: B20048226B).



(or leader) – for the first time in 1883. In all, he won the scholarship a record five times at RI. Beyond his academic talents, Song's leadership abilities were apparent and he was made Head Boy (or Head Prefect) in 1886.<sup>20</sup>

That year, when he was just 15, Song sat for the High Scholarship examination. This scholarship (renamed the Queen's Scholarship in 1890) had been initiated by Cecil Clementi Smith, Governor of the Straits Settlements, who held the view that promising local boys be given the opportunity to complete their studies in England. Smith persuaded the government to set aside £400 annually for two Higher Scholarships.

Song topped the list of examinees while J.A. dos Remedios came in second, followed by Charles Spence Angus and James Aitken. Song and dos Remedios were disqualified as Song was underaged and dos Remedios was not a British subject by birth. Instead, Angus and Aitken – both also RI students – were awarded the scholarship. Song and dos Remedios did, however, win the Local Government Scholarships of \$180 and \$120 respectively in 1886.<sup>21</sup>

A year later, Song topped the cohort yet again but was again disqualified for being underaged since he was not yet 16 at the time of the examination. In 1888, Song topped the examination a third time and was finally awarded the scholarship. He had initially wanted to study medicine as he was much impressed and inspired by Lim Boon Keng's accounts of life as a medical undergraduate at the University of Edinburgh (Lim had been awarded the scholarship in 1887, in place of the disqualified Song).

However, Song changed his mind after reading about the exploits of Chan-Toon, the brilliant Burmese law student who bagged all eight principal prizes at Middle Temple. With his £200 scholarship money, Song headed for Middle Temple in London. Right up to the 20th century, one could qualify as a lawyer without a university degree. All an aspiring student needed was to read at one of the four Inns of Court<sup>22</sup> and pass the Bar examinations. This was precisely what Song planned to do.

After arriving in England in 1888, Song met up with his former RI principal, Richmond William Hullett, who arranged for an old friend, W. Douglas Edwards – a property law expert – to tutor Song for a fee of five guineas<sup>23</sup> a month. This fee came out of Song's monthly allowance



Members of Prinsep Street Church, c. 1920s. Song Ong Siang is in a dark jacket in the middle of the front row (with his wife on his right). Prinsep Street Presbyterian Church Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

of just over £16. As Song had to pay tax on his scholarship and remit £5 a month to the Crown Agents who provided the advance of £150 for his Middle Temple entrance fee, he was left with very little to live on. Relief came from the first prize of 100 guineas that he had won in 1889 for Constitutional Law and Private International Law at Middle Temple. A year later, he won another 100 guinea-prize for Jurisprudence and Roman Law.

With these additional funds, Song decided he could read for a law degree and enrolled at Downing College at the University of Cambridge in 1890. There, he received an honourable mention in the Whewell Scholarship competition in International Law and topped the Second Class of Part I of the Law Tripos in 1892.

But Song won no further prizes after this and his financial position became precarious. His former RI schoolmate, Robert Frederick McNair Scott, urged his father, Thomas Scott (of Guthrie & Co), to provide Song with some financial assistance. In June 1893, Song graduated with Second Class in Part II of the Law Tripos, and in the same month was called to the English Bar at Middle Temple.<sup>24</sup>

### Return to the Colony

Song returned to Singapore in October 1893 and immediately became active in the local scene. Like his father, Song

worshipped regularly at the Straits Chinese Presbyterian Church (the former Malay Chapel; present-day Prinsep Street Presbyterian Church) and soon took on the role of a voluntary preacher. At the end of 1893, the 22-year-old Song was elected President of the Chinese Christian Association which his father Hoot Kiam had founded in 1889.<sup>25</sup> Song served in this capacity until his death almost 50 years later.

Song was later appointed Secretary of the Deacons' Court and succeeded his father as one of the church's three Elders when Hoot Kiam passed away on 7 October 1900.<sup>26</sup> Between 1908 and 1916, Song also edited the church's monthly magazine, *Prinsep Street Church Messenger*.<sup>27</sup> Song preached regularly in Malaya and was a much-loved and honoured member of the church.

In March 1930, Song laid the foundation stone for the church's new building, which opened in February 1931.<sup>28</sup> He served the church faithfully and conducted services until a few months before his death in 1941.

### His Life as a Lawyer

On 20 March 1894, William John Napier, who later became Attorney-General of the Straits Settlements, moved a petition for Song to be called to the Singapore Bar. One week later, Song was admitted to the

Singapore Bar, the first Chinese barrister to do so.<sup>29</sup>

Song reconnected with his former Raffles classmate, James Aitken, and together they established the law firm of Aitken & Ong Siang.<sup>30</sup> It was a successful partnership, and both senior partners appeared regularly in court representing clients in all sorts of cases, including criminal matters. It appears that much of Song's own practice concerned Chancery work (which deals with trusts, probate, real property and tax).<sup>31</sup>

On top of his work at the law firm, Song was also Assistant Editor of the *Straits Settlements Law Reports* from 1894 to 1899.

During Aitken's absence from Singapore between 1914 and 1919, Song ran Aitken & Ong Siang single-handedly.<sup>32</sup> Following Aitken's death in 1928, Song became the doyen of the Singapore Bar. When he died in September 1941, his wife petitioned to appoint C.H. Koh as receiver and manager to carry on the affairs of the firm until the end of 1941 when the firm was dissolved.<sup>33</sup>



## Advancing Singapore's Straits Chinese Community

Beyond his legal and church work, Song was active in many other civic organisations and causes. In July 1894, Song and his brother-in-law Tan Boon Chin started a daily newspaper in Romanised Malay called *Bintang Timor* ("Star of the East"). Unfortunately, this enterprise ran into financial difficulties and lasted less than a year.<sup>34</sup>

Undaunted, Song teamed up with Lim Boon Keng to start *The Straits Chinese Magazine: A Quarterly Journal of Oriental and Occidental Culture* in March 1897; the inaugural issue sold 800 copies.<sup>35</sup> This was the first English-language magazine published by the Straits-born and targeted at the educated Straits-born community who needed "a medium for the discussion of political, social and other matters affecting the Straits people generally".<sup>36</sup> The magazine was in circulation until December 1907 when it folded due to the "lack of financial support".<sup>37</sup>

Song, Lim Boon Keng and two other senior Straits Chinese notables – Tan Jiak Kim and Seah Liang Seah – founded the Straits Chinese British Association (SCBA; predecessor of today's Peranakan Association) on 17 August 1900. Tan Jiak Kim was elected the first President of the association, with Song as Secretary.<sup>38</sup> By establishing the SCBA, the Straits Chinese would now have a voice as they demonstrated their loyalty to the British Crown. Thus they became known as the "King's Chinese", distinct from the rest of their Chinese kin in their dress, language and attitudes.

Song also helped establish the first Chinese Company of the Singapore Volunteer Infantry in November 1901 and was appointed Sergeant of B Company. In August 1902, he was among the seven volunteers selected to represent the Company in the Straits Contingent at the coronation of King Edward VII in London. Song eventually rose to the rank of Captain.<sup>39</sup>

During World War I, Song mobilised Chinese volunteers "to do Guard duty at various strategical posts on the island".<sup>40</sup> For his services in the Volunteer Infantry, Song was awarded the Volunteer Long Service Medal in 1922 and the Volunteer Officer's Decoration in 1924.

Song was also a strong advocate of the welfare of women in Singapore. Through his influence as a member of the 1926 Chinese Marriage Committee, he pushed for reforms that resulted in the Civil Marriage Ordinance of 1941 which imposed monogamy on non-Muslim marriages registered under the law.<sup>41</sup> He also founded the Singapore Chinese Girls' School in 1899 with Lim Boon Keng and other prominent Chinese leaders.<sup>42</sup>

In November 1919, Song was appointed Acting Chinese Unofficial Member of the Straits Settlements Legislative Council for two months, and then again from February to August 1921. When Lim Boon Keng left Singapore for China in October 1921 to become the President of Amoy University, Song replaced him as Unofficial Member of the Legislative Council. Except for a two-year break, Song held this post until his retirement in October 1927.<sup>43</sup>

## Other Public Contributions

Song was also President of the Straits Chinese Literary Association and the Old Boys' Association of Raffles Institution, as well as Honorary Member of the Rotary Club.

He also served on the Raffles Museum and Library Committee and the Governor's Straits Chinese Consultative

(Above left) The plaque mounted on the facade of the Prinsep Street church states that the foundation stone was laid by Song Ong Siang on 5 March 1930. Like his father, Song was a much-loved and honoured member of the church. Today, the church is known as the Prinsep Street Presbyterian Church. *National Library Board, Singapore.*

(Left) The Prinsep Street Presbyterian Church with its distinctive red-brick facade and a sloping roof with a belfry at the front, 2003. The church was previously known as the Straits Chinese Church. *National Library Board, Singapore.*

Committee. He was instrumental in establishing the Hullett Memento Fund<sup>44</sup> and the Hullett Memorial Library at Raffles Institution (in honour of his former school principal) and in setting up the Friends of Singapore Society.<sup>45</sup> He was elected as president of the latter and remained in office until his death in 1941.

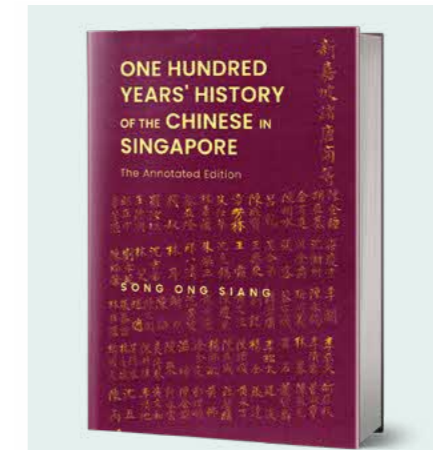
For his public service and contributions, Song was made Knight Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire in August 1936, the first Singapore-born person to be knighted.<sup>46</sup>

## Song's Personal Life

On 29 September 1907, when Song was 36 years old, he married Helen Yeo Hee Neo (the second daughter of Yeo Poon Seng, a well-known sawmill owner), who was 16 years his junior.<sup>47</sup> It was an arranged marriage and the first Chinese military wedding to be held in the Straits Settlements. The couple had no children of their own but adopted three daughters.<sup>48</sup> While his father Hoot Kiam lived in the heart of town, at 60 North Bridge Road, Song and his family lived at 322 East Coast Road in Katong, the favoured hub of wealthy Straits Chinese families.

After a brief illness, Song died at home on 29 September 1941 at the age of 70. The funerary church service was conducted by Reverend T. Campbell Gibson at Song's beloved Straits Chinese

Presbyterian Church on Prinsep Street. The Union Jack-draped coffin was then placed on a gun carriage and conveyed to Bidadari Cemetery where officers and non-commissioned officers of the Chinese Company formed the guard-of-honour. Three volleys were fired and six regimental buglers sounded the last post.<sup>49</sup> ♦



*One Hundred Years' History of the Chinese in Singapore: The Annotated Edition* is available for reference at the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library and for loan at selected public libraries (Call nos.: RSING 959.27 SON-[HIS] and SING 959.57 SON-[HIS]). The book also retails at major bookshops in Singapore.

## NOTES

- 1 Song, O.S. (1923). *One hundred years' history of the Chinese in Singapore*. London: John Murray. (Accession no.: B02956336A) [Note: For the purposes of this article, references to Song's classic book will be to the original version.]
- 2 The first reprint was by the University of Malaya Press in 1967. The second facsimile reprint was undertaken by Oxford University Press in 1984.
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- 4 Song, 1923, p. vii.
- 5 Song, 1923, p. ix.
- 6 Song, 1923, p. ix; See Buckley, C.B. (1902). *An anecdotal history of old times in Singapore: From the foundation of the settlement under the honourable the East India Company, on February 6th, 1819, to the transfer of the Colonial Office as part of the colonial possessions of the Crown on April 1st, 1867* (Vols. I and II). Singapore: Fraser & Neave. (Call no.: RCL05 959.57 BUC)
- 7 Song, 1923, p. x.
- 8 Song Ong Siang and his wife Helen embarked on a 10-month extended holiday in Europe on 24 March 1922, returning only on 25 January 1923. Accompanying them were Helen's sister and her husband, Tan Soo Bin. During their trip, the Songs wrote many postcards to family members back in Singapore. In 2017, Dorothy and Joyce

- Tan donated a collection of 43 postcards to the National Library Board in memory of their father, Tan Kek Tiam. Tan was married to Song Siew Lian, the adopted daughter of Mr and Mrs Song Ong Siang. See Ong, E.C. (2017, Oct–Dec). Mr Song's European Escapade. *BiblioAsia*, 13 (3). Retrieved from BiblioAsia website.
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  - 10 Chinese in Singapore. (1923, November 23). *The Malaya Tribune*, p. 6. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
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  - 12 The review is reproduced in *The Chinese in Singapore*. (1924, January 16). *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser (Weekly)*, p. 7. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
  - 13 The term "Straits Chinese" refers to the Malay-born Chinese of the 19th and early 20th centuries. They are also called Peranakan Chinese or *Baba*, although the latter term refers mainly to Peranakan men. Peranakan women are called *nonya*. During the colonial era, the Straits Chinese were also known as the King's Chinese in reference to their status as British subjects after the Straits Settlements became a Crown colony in 1867. The Peranakans speak a version of Malay, called *Baba Malay*, which has borrowed many Hokkien words and phrases. Their cuisine also reflect Malay influences. See National Library Board. (August 26, 2013). *Peranakan (Straits Chinese) community* written by Jaime Koh. Retrieved from Singapore Infopedia.
  - 14 Wheatley, P. (1969, February). Book review: *One Hundred Years' History of the Chinese in Singapore. The Journal of Asian Studies*, 28 (2), 402–403, p. 403. Retrieved from JSTOR via NLB's eResources website.

- 15 Warren, J. (1985, December). Book review: *One Hundred Years' History of the Chinese in Singapore. The American Historical Review*, 90 (5), 1259–1260, p. 1260. Retrieved from Oxford University Press website.
- 16 Song, O.S. (2016). *One hundred years' history of the Chinese in Singapore: The annotated edition* (annotated by Kevin Y. L. Tan). Singapore: National Library Board. Retrieved from BookSG.
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- 18 Song, 1923, p. vii.
- 19 Song, 1923, p. 243.
- 20 Raffles Institution. (1886, December 23). *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, p. 5. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 21 Notes. (1886, October 16). *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, p. 4. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 22 The four inns of Court are Middle Temple, Inner Temple, Gray's Inn and Lincoln's Inn. To be called to the English Bar and practise as a barrister in England and Wales, a person must belong to one of these inns.
- 23 At the time, a guinea was equivalent to 1 pound and 1 shilling; 20 shillings made up a pound.
- 24 Song, 1923, pp. 244–245.
- 25 Chinese Christian Association. (1893, September 9). *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, p. 2. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
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- 28 Untitled. (1930, March 3). *The Malaya Tribune*, p. 8. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 29 Roll of Advocates and Solicitors Singapore: 1852–1968 (Supreme Court Library, Singapore).
- 30 Song, 1923, p. 245.
- 31 'Knight without fear & without reproach'. *Morning Tribune*, p. 6. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 32 Song, 1923, p. 247.
- 33 Untitled. (1941, October 2). *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, p. 5. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 34 Trocki, C.A. (2006). *Singapore: Wealth, power and the culture of control* (p. 60). London; New York: Routledge. (Call no.: RSING 959.5705 TRO-[HIS])
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- 37 Song, 1923, p. 296.
- 38 Straits Chinese British Association. (1900, August 18). *The Straits Times*, p. 2. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 39 Song, 1923, p. 246.
- 40 Song, 1923, p. 247.
- 41 "One of greatest Straits Chinese". (1941, September 30). *The Straits Times*, p. 14. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
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- 45 "Friends of Singapore" Society. (1937, June 29). *Morning Tribune*, p. 8. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 46 Long and brilliant career of Sir Ong Siang Song. (1936, August 25). *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, p. 9; Malaya's first Chinese knight. (1936, January 5). *Sunday Tribune (Singapore)*, p. 2; Mr Small's address. (1936, August 25). *Morning Tribune*, p. 1. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 47 Song, O.S. (1984). *One hundred years' history of the Chinese in Singapore* (p. xi). Singapore: Oxford University Press. (Call no.: RSING 959.57 SON-[HIS])
- 48 Song, 1984, p. xii.
- 49 Funeral service. (1941, October 1). *The Morning Tribune*, p. 15. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

# MILESTONES TO THE METRIC SYSTEM

Prior to the 1970s, Singapore used three different systems of weights and measures. **Shereen Tay** traces how we transitioned to the metric system.



A metric information stall set up at Circuit Road Market to educate residents during the Zonal Metric Educational Programme for the MacPherson constituency in 1979. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

When people in Singapore reminisce about a time when life was simpler, it is unlikely that they would be referring to how they measured things. Until the 1970s, if you were buying cooking oil, for instance, you would be juggling three different systems of measurement: metric, Imperial and local.

Baey Lian Peck, Chairman of the Singapore Metrication Board during its existence from 1971 to 1981, recalled that at one point, “[cooking oil] was... sold in 36 different sizes and quantities, believe it or not. Rival brands [were] packed in gallons, fluid ounces, pounds, litres, kilograms, and *kati*”.<sup>1</sup>

The metric system, also known as the International System of Units (SI), uses units like the metre, the gram and the litre. Although this system

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is now commonly used worldwide, it was not the case in Singapore before the 1980s when the Imperial System reigned supreme. This meant using units such as inches, feet and miles for length; roods and acres for land area; fluid ounces, pints and gallons for volume; and ounces, pounds and stones for weight.<sup>2</sup>

Co-existing with these two systems were local units of measurement such as the *kati*, *tahil* and *pikul* for weight, and *chupak* and *gantang* for volume.

### Why Metric?

The British Imperial System was introduced during the colonial era when measurements such as gallons, ounces, pounds, feet, inches and yards were used in the public and commercial sectors and in the markets. Local units of measurement such as *chupak*, *gantang*, *tahil*, *kati* and *pikul* were common in the retail trade. The metric system, on the other hand, was used rarely, mainly in

specialised sectors such as engineering and science.<sup>3</sup>

The metric system was first adopted in France in the late 18th century and, over time, gained acceptance around the world (the United States being a major exception). In 1965, the United Kingdom announced that it would begin metrication, which sparked similar moves from other Commonwealth countries such as Australia and New Zealand. “[B]y 1969, 90 percent of Singapore’s external trade was with countries that were either already using the metric system or committed to conversion to the system,” said Baey.<sup>4</sup>

After Singapore gained independence in 1965, the government felt that moving to metric was necessary as the market for goods based on metric measurements would increase over time. The metric system also had other advantages: it was decimal-based and thus made computation easier. Children

also found the metric system easier to learn compared with other systems of weights and measures. Commercially, industries would enjoy cost savings because they would not have to package the same product for different systems.<sup>5</sup>

In November 1970, the Ministry of Science and Technology submitted a White Paper recommending that Singapore convert to the metric system in carefully planned stages, starting with government departments, followed by the private sector.<sup>6</sup>

To “guide, stimulate and co-ordinate the metrication programme, particularly in the private sector”, the White Paper proposed that a Metrication Board be set up under the auspices of the Ministry of Science and Technology. Speaking in parliament while introducing the legislation to implement metrication, Toh Chin Chye, then Minister for Science and Technology, said:

“As Singapore’s economy is very much dependent on developments outside the country, we must move in step with the metricating world... It is impossible to expect housewives, *amahs*, or hawkers to change overnight their familiarity with customary units of measures... There must be a long period of... education to orientate the public towards the new system.”<sup>7</sup>

The Singapore Metrication Board was formed on 13 December 1970, with Baey as chairman. A businessman who joined the public service in his late 30s, Baey was then Chairman of the Trade General Committee of the Singapore Manufacturers’ Association and a member of several other boards. The Singapore Metrication Board included representatives from major economic, industrial and professional organisations to ensure that the decisions of the board reflected the consensus of all the organisations represented.<sup>8</sup>

### LOCAL UNITS OF MEASUREMENTS

The traditional units of weight in Malaya were *tahil*, *kati* and *pikul*.

16 *tahils* = 1 *kati*  
100 *katis* = 1 *pikul*

1 *tahil* = 37.8 grams  
1 *kati* = 600 grams (approximate)  
1 *pikul* = 60 kilograms (approximate)

For volume, the traditional units of measurement were *gantang* (equivalent to 1 Imperial gallon or about 4.5 litres) and *chupak*.

1 *gantang* = 4 *chupak*

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Lim, L. (2018, January 18). How catty and tael entered the English language, along with picul, mace and candareen – Asian weight measurements. *South China Morning Post*. Retrieved from South China Morning Post website.

Two bills were subsequently passed in February 1971 to formalise the use of the metric system in Singapore: the Metrication Bill (1970), which introduced the International System of Units (SI units), and the Weights and Measures (Amendment) Bill, which legalised the usage of SI units.<sup>9</sup>

**Public Sector: Miles Ahead**

The public sector set the pace for adopting the metric system because any changes implemented by government departments and statutory bodies would cause ripple effects in the private sector and among the general population. All households in Singapore, for example, would be affected when the Public Utilities Board converted to the metric system

when billing consumers for water usage. Similarly, the adoption of the metric system by the Housing and Development Board (HDB) would spur the construction industry to follow suit.<sup>10</sup>

The metrication of water usage and gas billing began in 1971. For road transport, speed limit signs in metric were put up along major expressways in 1972 and all new cars imported into Singapore came pre-installed with speedometers in metric units the following year.

Postal weight was metricated in 1972. In education, the metric system was used exclusively in the Primary School Leaving Examination for mathematics and science from 1973, while plans were made for secondary schools and tertiary institutions to switch to the metric system

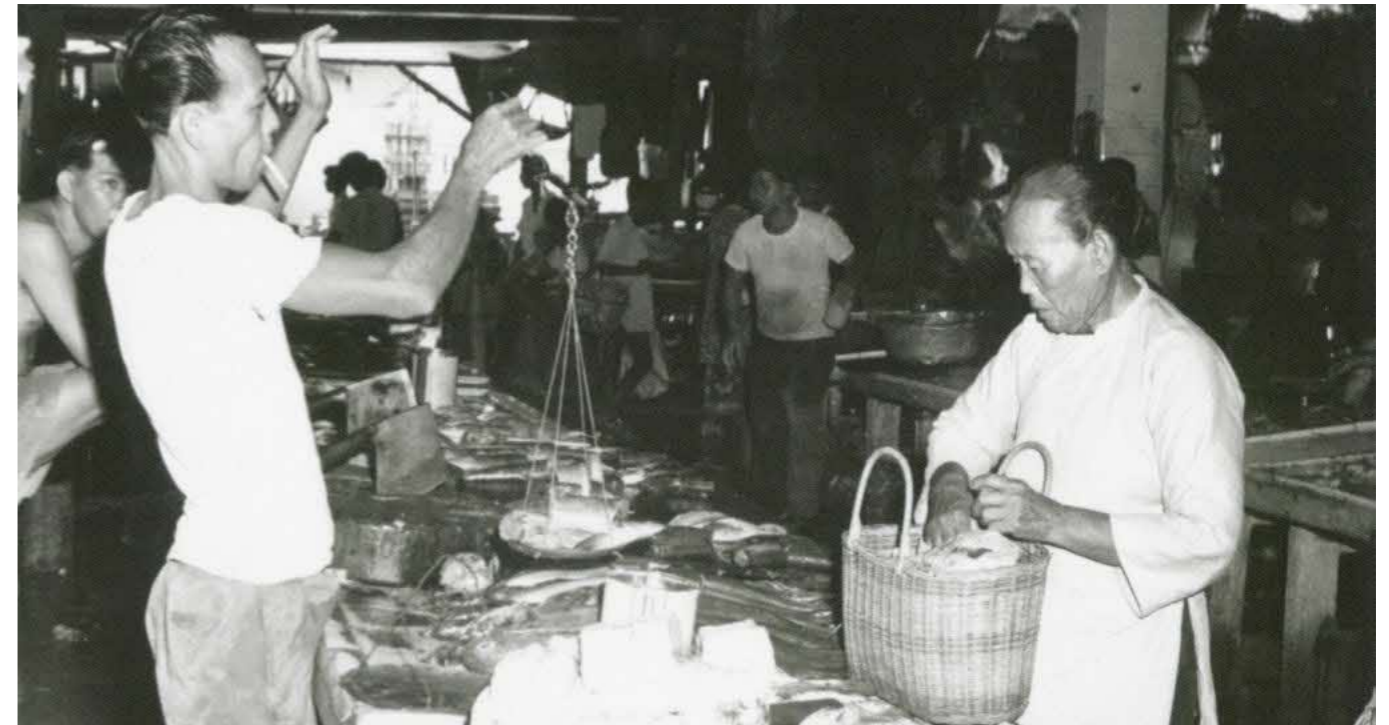
completely by 1975. By the end of 1973, most of the public sector had completed its conversion to the metric system, with the exception of those who had close workings with the private sector.<sup>11</sup>

The private sector generally supported metrication but there were challenges. Progress was slower for companies that had overseas parent headquarters or dealt primarily in international markets. Among the holdouts were companies in the oil rig building industry. Many were headquartered in the US and were, therefore, still using Imperial units. Civil aviation also lagged behind because it was dependent on the international regulatory bodies to convert to metric first.<sup>12</sup>

The most resistant industry was the retail trade which consisted of multiple players such as foreign exporters, importers, wholesalers, retailers and, most importantly, the general public. Because of the challenges, the Singapore Metrication Board decided to implement the changes in stages starting with a period of voluntary conversion followed by a mandatory changeover.<sup>13</sup>

Very early on, the board realised that the packaging of commodities had to be addressed. Surveys revealed that for some commodities such as cooking oil, the same item and quantity were sold in various sizes. This was confusing for consumers and also uneconomical for suppliers since the latter had to carry a wide range of the same stock. To address this, the board worked closely with respective industries to adopt a range of ideal sizes for consumer goods like soft drinks, milk powder, rice, ice-cream, bread, instant coffee, shampoo, toothpaste and detergent.<sup>14</sup>

But not all retail sectors were cooperative. Although the textile sector had agreed to use metric from 1972, the board noticed that they were still importing and selling fabrics by the yard in 1974. This was in part due to confusion and misinformation in the marketplace. In a 1976 news report, a stallholder in Tiong Bahru Market said customers believed that textiles sold by the metre were more expensive than those sold by the yard so they would rather shop at stalls still using Imperial units. The stallholder added, "They do not realise that one metre is three inches more than one yard. Since then I've reverted to tagging my goods in imperial units."<sup>15</sup> To assure the public that metrication would not lead to higher prices,



A fishmonger using a *daching*, 1960s. The *daching* was used to weigh items in *pikul*, *kati* and *tahil*. Metrication in Singapore made the traditional measuring scale obsolete. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



In the 1970s, the Singapore Metrication Board published a variety of posters with different themes to educate the public on the new metric system. Posters in four languages were displayed at government departments, schools, offices, factories, bus stops and even in coffee shops to reach out to as many people as possible. *Think Metric*, *Use Celsius* and *Think Metric, Metric is International* are from the collection of the National Library, Singapore (Accession nos.: B21228880I; B15913223D). *Learn the Metric Volume* is from the Singapore Metrication Board Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

the board produced conversion tables that rounded downwards instead.<sup>16</sup> By 1978, a survey found that 93 percent of textile sellers were willing to sell in metres when requested by customers.

Vegetable sellers, however, were more recalcitrant. The same survey found that 30 percent of stallholders still refused to sell in kilograms. One of the main reasons was the unwillingness to learn, with one vegetable seller complaining, "I am too old to change and I think it is easier to use the *daching*." Market stallholders, in general, also wanted to shift the responsibility of adopting metric to wholesalers and suppliers; nobody wanted to be the first to change.<sup>17</sup>

It was also not easy convincing the general public to switch to the metric system. A survey conducted in 1975 showed that 52 percent of homemakers still had not heard of metres and kilograms. The majority of them were older, not well-educated and did not work. To protect the public from being scammed by dishonest retailers, the board and the Ministry of Science and Technology agreed to postpone the compulsory metrication of the retail industry, which was initially scheduled for 1 January 1976. Instead, retailers were required to sell in metric if customers requested to ensure that the public had more opportunities to practise using the metric system.<sup>18</sup>

**Public Education**

The government mounted a public campaign on metrication. In 1976, the Singapore Metrication Board organised an Inter-School Metric Drama Competition for secondary students. The competition required participating teams to write and produce short plays based on a metric theme. A total of 31 plays in English, Chinese

and Malay were submitted by 28 schools. Eventually, six winning plays were recorded by Radio and Television Singapore (RTS) and broadcast as a special programme on the eve of National Day in 1976.<sup>19</sup>

Riding on the success of the Inter-School Metric Drama Competition, in 1977, the board and RTS jointly produced *Telemetric*, a bilingual family television

**THE DEATH OF THE DACHING**

The introduction of metrication in Singapore spelt the end of the Chinese *daching*.<sup>1</sup> The *daching* allowed retailers to cheat easily because they could switch to using a lighter counterweight. And because the bar hung away from customers' view, the buyer would not be able to see if the scale had been correctly calibrated.

Anticipating major resistance if they forced people to switch to the spring-based saucer scale, Baey Lian Peck, the Chairman of the Singapore Metrication Board, asked the Engineering Department at the University of Singapore to design a "fool-proof, non-cheating *daching*" based on the metric system. The metric *daching* set the bar horizontal when the correct measure was used so that the calibra-

tion was visible to consumers, and the counterweight was immovable.

In 1972, Baey arranged for the importation of 20,000 saucer scales and announced that retailers had to either use the saucer scale or the new metric *daching*. "As we expected, most of them opted for saucer scale," he said. "This scale is easier to use than the cumbersome new metric *daching* that had furthermore been stripped of all the 'advantages' to the retailer. With this, the traditional Chinese *daching* died a natural death in Singapore without any legislation."<sup>2</sup>

**NOTES**

- 1 The *daching* is a traditional weighing instrument consisting of a beam, a pan suspended on one end of the beam and a counterweight on the other end.
- 2 Ooi, K.B. (2013). *Serving a new nation: Baey Lian Peck's Singapore story* (p. 52). Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. (Call no.: RSING 959.5705092 001)

series to teach the metric system using quizzes and games. Twelve teams from registered societies and organisations took part. There were also contests and prizes for live audiences and home viewers.

From 1977 to 1980, the board conducted the Zonal Metric Educational Programme where staff visited constituencies and set up metric information stalls at selected markets to educate the public.<sup>20</sup> The board also produced a free magazine in English and Chinese, *Our Metric Way* (available for reference at the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library), and distributed it to households in various housing estates.

By 1978, surveys revealed that 79 percent of consumers knew about the metric system – a huge improvement compared with previous years. However, only 38 percent used metric measurements when shopping.<sup>21</sup>

To complete the metrication process in Singapore, the board legislated standard sizes of commodities. This was introduced on 1 July 1979 under the Weights and Measures Act for butter, rice, cooking salt, plain wheat flour and granulated white sugar. The next year, this was extended to edible oil, margarine, milk powder and powdered detergent.<sup>22</sup> On 1 April 1981, the Weights and Measures (Sale of Goods in Metric Units) Order came into effect, requiring the loose sale of textiles, groceries, bean sprouts, noodles, meat products, seafood products, fruits and vegetables to be conducted solely in metric.<sup>23</sup>



*It's Happening in Singapore: Weights and Measures* is a 13-minute documentary produced by Radio and Television Singapore in May 1971 introducing the public to metric measurements and the benefits of the metric system. This programme can be viewed on Archives Online. *Mediacorp Pte Ltd, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

### The Yardstick of Success

After 11 years, the Singapore Metrication Board was dissolved on 31 December 1981, having converted most of the commercial, industrial and service sectors in Singapore to metric. Its functions were taken over by the Weights and Measures Office in 1982.<sup>24</sup> Today, the Weights and Measures Office is managed by Enterprise Singapore, whose job is to ensure that a uniform and accurate system of weights and measures is used in Singapore.<sup>25</sup>

There were two areas that the Singapore Metrication Board did not convert to metric: existing property and land leases as these contracts spanned long periods of time, and Chinese medicine as the

conversion might affect the calibration of herbs required for different uses.<sup>26</sup>

Although the metric system is widely used in Singapore today, remnants of the Imperial System remain. Advertisements for private properties often cite the area in square feet rather than square metres (although HDB flats use square metres). The screen sizes for televisions and laptops are still measured in inches instead of centimetres. Likewise, it is not uncommon to find measurements of clothing expressed in inches. Meanwhile, bars still serve beer in pints and, occasionally, yard glasses. All these cases, however, are very much the exception.

Looking back, Baey Lian Peck concluded that the measure of success of Singapore's metrication was not whether it was implemented, but whether it caused disruptions and whether it brought about economic benefits to the country. On that score, he had no doubt. "I can proudly say we were quite successful in both these respects."<sup>27</sup> ♦

(Far left) *Metric Conversion Tables* is a handy pocket-size booklet providing conversions for a variety of measurements, such as inches to millimetres, *tahils* to grams, gallons to litres, and even Fahrenheit to Celsius. (Left) *A Metric Guide for Consumers* provides illustrations to help consumers learn and visualise in metric. For example, 1 kilogram is equivalent to the weight of four blocks of butter, and two normal-size tomatoes weigh about 100 grams. It also teaches consumers how to read a metric *daching* and spring scale. Both publications were produced in the 1970s. *Collection of the National Library, Singapore* (Accession no.: B15913223D).

The Singapore Metrication Board produced two newsletters about metrication. *Metrication Digest* (1971) was printed primarily for the industrial, commercial and manufacturing sectors, providing up-to-date news on technical aspects such as standards, conversions and programmes for implementation. Copies were distributed to teachers, trade associations, professional institutes and chambers of commerce. *Our Metric Way* (1973–1981) was written in a simple and light-hearted manner with pictures, cartoons and articles to educate the general public on metrication. Copies were distributed to residents in housing estates across Singapore. *Collection of the National Library, Singapore* (Accession nos.: B28825720A and B17562025F).



A campaign poster produced in 1980. *Singapore Metrication Board Collection, courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore.*

### NOTES

- Ooi, K.B. (2013). *Serving a new nation: Baey Lian Peck's Singapore story* (p. 50). Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. (Call no.: RSING 959.5705092 OOI)
- Examples: for length, one foot = 12 inches, 3 feet = one yard; for volume, one ounce = 1/20 pint, one quart = two pints; for weight, one ounce = 1/16 of a pound, one stone = 14 pounds.
- Ministry of Science and Technology. (1970). *Report on a study of the proposed conversion to the metric system in Singapore* (p. 2). Singapore: Printed by Lim Bian Han, Govt. Printers. (Call no.: RSING 389.152 SIN); Singapore Metrication Board. (1976). *3 years of metrication in Singapore, 1971–1973* (p. 11). Singapore: Singapore Metrication Board. (Call no.: RSING 389.15095957 SIN) Ooi, 2013, p. 45.
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- Singapore Metrication Board, 1976, pp. 15–17; Metrication Board: Industrialist Baey is appointed chairman. (1971, January 6). *Singapore Herald*, p. 4. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- Ooi, 2013, p. 46.
- Ooi, 2013, pp. 47–48.
- Singapore Metrication Board, 1976, pp. 21–32; Singapore Metrication Board. (1974). *3 years along the road. Metrication Digest*, 3 (7), p. 1. (Call no.: RSING 389.152 MD); Singapore Metrication Board. (1972). *Annual report 1972* (p. 17). Singapore: The Board. (Call no.: RSING 389.1520615957 SMBAR)
- Ooi, 2013, pp. 48–49.
- Ooi, 2013, pp. 49–50.
- Ministry of Science and Technology, 1970, pp. 37–41; Ooi, 2013, pp. 49–50; Singapore Metrication Board. (1977). *Annual report 1976/77* (p. 10). Singapore: The Board. (Call no.: RSING 389.1520615957 SMBAR); Singapore Metrication Board. (1978). *Annual report 1977/78* (pp. 20–21). Singapore: The Board. (Call no.: RSING 389.1520615957 SMBAR)
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### FOR FURTHER RESEARCH...

The National Library and National Archives of Singapore are the custodians of Singapore's published materials and government records. Primary material such as publicity posters, educational booklets and newsletters produced by the Singapore Metrication Board have been deposited with the two institutions and are available to researchers interested in this aspect of Singapore's economic history.

drive in markets leaves much to be desired. (1978, December 1). *The Straits Times*, p. 31. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

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- Singapore Metrication Board. (1977). *Annual report 1976/77* (pp. 12–13). Singapore: The Board. (Call no.: RSING 389.1520615957 SMBAR); Singapore Metrication Board. (1976). Metric Drama Competition finals at National Theatre in July. *Metrication Digest*, 5 (7), pp. 1, 4; Singapore Metrication Board. (1976). Metric plays on television. *Metrication Digest*, 5 (8), pp. 1, 4; Singapore Metrication Board. (1976). Drama competition results. *Metrication Digest*, 5 (9), pp. 1, 4. (Call no.: RSING 389.152 MD)
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- Metric board to dissolve in year. (1981, February 13). *The Straits Times*, p. 34. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- Enterprise Singapore. (2019, July 16). *Weights and Measures Programme – Frequently asked questions*. Retrieved from Enterprise Singapore website.
- Ooi, 2013, p. 53.
- Ooi, 2013, p. 54.

# THE NEWS GALLERY BEYOND HEADLINES

There is more to news than meets the eye. [Mazelan Anuar](#) and [Faridah Ibrahim](#) give us the scoop on the National Library's latest exhibition.



While rumours, falsehoods and hoaxes have been around since time immemorial, the advent of the internet and the proliferation of social media platforms have accelerated the speed at which such news is disseminated today.<sup>1</sup> The need to sift fact from fiction is all the more important given the volume

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of information (and disinformation) people are presented with from both established and new sources of media.

With this in mind, the exhibition “The News Gallery: Beyond Headlines” was launched in March this year by the National Library Board. The exhibition, on level 11 of the National Library building, contains six zones, each focusing on a different aspect of the news landscape, including one on the history of newspapers in Singapore.

## Singapore's First Newspapers

Old newspapers are treasure troves of information and are a rich resource for academics, researchers and anyone with an interest in history. “Early Editions”, the first zone that visitors to The News Gal-

The “Behind Every Story” interactive zone showcases significant events from Singapore’s history to illustrate how news reporting can create different versions of reality.

lery will encounter, examines the origins of newspaper publishing in Singapore and the early players in the scene.

The printed newspaper as we know it today began proliferating in the 17th century with the rise of the modern printing press. It took another two centuries before Singapore’s first English-language newspaper hit the stands when the *Singapore Chronicle and Commercial Register* rolled off the press on 1 January 1824. Francis James Bernard, the son-in-law of Singapore’s first Resident, William Farquhar, was its editor.<sup>2</sup>

In 1835, a second English newspaper called *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*<sup>3</sup> (see text box below) entered the scene. In response, the *Singapore Chronicle* halved its price and advertising rates, but to no avail. Barely two years later, the *Chronicle* folded; its last issue was published on 30 September 1837. Eight years later in 1845, *The Straits Times*<sup>4</sup> – the newspaper that most Singaporeans are familiar with and the longest-running daily broadsheet – was launched.

This zone of the exhibition also showcases non-English-language newspapers that were published in Singapore. These vernacular newspapers addressed and promoted the issues, concerns and interests

of their respective communities. In the early years, Chinese-language newspapers such as *Nanyang Siang Pau* and *Sin Chew Jit Poh* were concerned with the affairs of China,<sup>5</sup> while *Tamil Murasu* was the vanguard of the social reform movement that was taking place among Indians in Singapore.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, early Malay newspapers such as *Jawi Peranakan*<sup>7</sup> and *Utusan Malayu*<sup>8</sup> championed the causes of the Malay and Muslim communities in Singapore.

## The Story Behind the Story

Fake news is by no means a new phenomenon, but the internet and the new media have added to its exponential rise in volume and enabled it to spread like wildfire,

wreaking havoc on a global scale. This can take a multitude of forms: from dodgy websites and mobile phone text messages circulating unfounded rumours to posts on Twitter, Instagram and Facebook containing convincing but deceptive images. There are even insidious deepfake videos capable of tricking even news-savvy viewers into believing what they see. The factors that drive fake news are equally varied – from political propaganda, fraud and financial gain, hatred and malice to simply well-meaning but mindless and ignorant sharing of falsehoods.

One highlight of the exhibition is the “Fact or Fake?” zone which features examples of fake news drawn from real

## THE SINGAPORE FREE PRESS AND MERCANTILE ADVERTISER

While there are a number of English-language newspapers in Singapore today, *The Straits Times* is, by far, the dominant paper. However, it was not always so. In fact, even though it is Singapore’s longest-running newspaper, *The Straits Times* was a latecomer to the scene. When it first appeared, the paper had to compete with an earlier newspaper: *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*. It was a tussle that lasted over a century.

*The Singapore Free Press* was Singapore’s second English-language newspaper and began publishing on 8 October 1835. *The Free Press* took its name from the abolition of the gagging act. Prior to 1835, every issue of a publication in Singapore had to be submitted to the government before it could be published.<sup>1</sup> With the demise of the *Singapore Chronicle* in 1837, *The Free Press* remained unrivalled until *The Straits Times* was launched in 1845.<sup>2</sup>

*The Singapore Free Press* remained in circulation until 1869. It was relaunched in 1884 and, in 1946, it was bought over by *The Straits Times* in a move to fend off competition from a newspaper that had been launched in 1914, *The Malaya Tribune*.<sup>3</sup> In 1962, *The Singapore Free Press* was eventually merged with *The Malay Mail* and the new entity retained the *Malay Mail* name.

*The Singapore Free Press* is associated with a number of well-known names. It was originally set up by a group that included lawyer William Napier; architect George D. Coleman; Edward Boustead, the founder of Boustead and Company; and Walter Scott Lorrain, head of Lorrain, Sandilands and Company. It was relaunched in 1884 by Charles Burton Buckley (author of *An Anecdotal History of Old Times in Singapore 1819–1867*), who was later joined by John Fraser and David Neave (the co-founders of Fraser & Neave). Walter Makepeace (later co-editor of *One Hundred Years of Singapore*)<sup>5</sup> was a reporter with the paper who rose to become its joint proprietor and editor.



*The Singapore Free Press* was set up by William Napier, a lawyer; George D. Coleman, the first superintendent of public works; Edward Boustead, founder of Boustead and Company; and Walter Scott Lorrain, head of Lorrain, Sandilands and Company. This is the masthead of the issue dated 19 November 1835. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

*The Singapore Free Press* was also notable for its contributions to the Malay newspaper scene. In 1907, *The Singapore Free Press* set up *Utusan Malayu*,<sup>6</sup> the Malay edition of the newspaper. *Utusan Malayu* became the only Malay newspaper to be circulated in the Straits Settlements and Malay Peninsula after its rival, *Chahaya Pulau Pinang*, folded just a few months into 1908.<sup>7</sup>

Under its first editor, Mohamed Eunos Abdullah, *Utusan Malayu*'s mission was to provide the Malay community with an intelligent and impartial view of Malaya and the world.

In 1921, the newspaper was sued for libel by Raja Shariman and Che Tak, assistant commissioners of police in the Federated Malay States. The heavy damages awarded against it proved to be financially crippling and *Utusan Malayu* ceased operations as a result.<sup>8</sup>

## NOTES

- 1 National Library Board. (2005, June 15). *The Singapore Free Press* written by Thulaja Naidu Ratnala. Retrieved from Singapore Infopedia website.
- 2 National Library Board, 15 Jun 2005.
- 3 National Library Board, 15 Jun 2005.
- 4 Buckley, C.B. (1902). *An anecdotal history of old times in Singapore* (Vols. I and II). Singapore: Fraser & Neave, Limited. (Accession nos.: B02966444B; B02966440I)
- 5 Makepeace, W., Brooke, G.E., & Braddell, R.S.J. (Eds.) (1921). *One hundred years of Singapore: Being some account of the capital of the Straits Settlements from its foundation by Sir Stamford Raffles on the 6th February 1819 to the 6th February 1919* (Vols. I and II). London: John Murray. (Call no.: RCL05959.51 MAK)
- 6 National Library Board. (2014). *First issue of Utusan Malayu (1907–1921) is published*. Retrieved from HistorySG website.
- 7 Roff, W.R. (1972). *Bibliography of Malay and Arabic periodicals published in the Straits Settlements and peninsular Malay states 1876–1941: With an annotated union list of holdings in Malaysia, Singapore and the United Kingdom* (p. 6). London: Oxford University Press. (Call no.: RCL05016.0599923 ROF)
- 8 National Library Board, 2014.



At the height of the Michael Fay incident in 1994, *The Straits Times* deliberately published the opinions of US columnists alongside its own to rebut their arguments. *The Straits Times*, 8 April 1994. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

life, such as the supposed collapse of Punggol Waterway Terraces in Singapore, lynch mobs in India who were spurred to action by rumours of child abductions and organ harvesting, anti-immigrant disinformation during the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom, and investment scams featuring prominent Singaporeans. The content is presented in a light-hearted manner through an interactive quiz to engage younger audiences, especially students.

While most credible journalists aim to report truthfully, the reality is that no news article – whether from the traditional or non-traditional media – is completely free from bias. The political affiliations of newspaper owners and the personal opinions of journalists and news editors, among other factors, come into play. It is common knowledge that in the end, readers will believe what they want to

believe, or search for news that best reinforces their views and perceptions of the external world.

Look out for the interactive zone called “Behind Every Story” which highlights significant events from Singapore’s history to illustrate how news reporting can create different versions of reality for different readers. Various news articles, photographs and video footage have been combined into a multimedia showcase for visitors to learn about these events and to see how they were reported at the time.

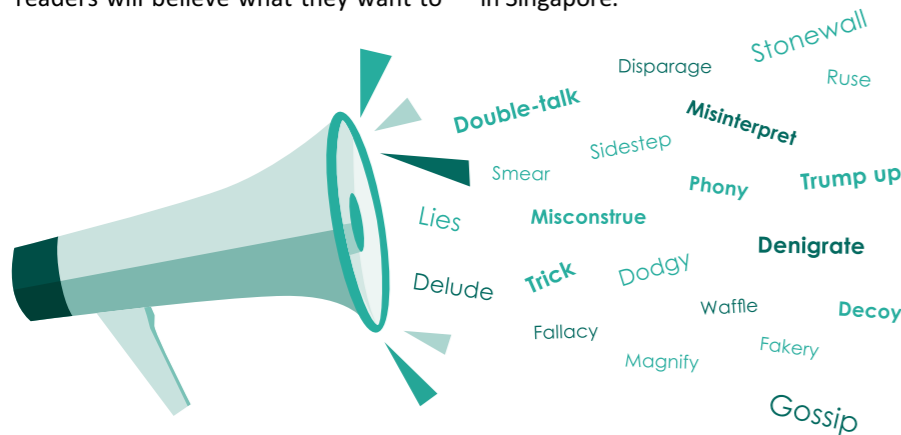
The events featured include the fall of Singapore in February 1942,<sup>9</sup> the Maria Hertogh riots in 1950<sup>10</sup> and Singapore’s separation from Malaysia<sup>11</sup> in 1965. More recent events include the Michael Fay saga in 1994<sup>12</sup> and the decision in 2005 to develop two integrated resorts in Singapore.<sup>13</sup>

**On a Lighter Note**

Newspapers are not merely about serious news – they also contain advertisements, entertainment stories, food reviews, photographs, recipes, puzzles, comics and even “Aunt Agony” columns. The zone “Extra! Extra!” showcases other interesting aspects of newspapers. The exhibits will be regularly updated to highlight different elements found in newspapers, with the first instalment on games and quizzes such as crossword puzzles, spot the ball and sudoku. Subsequent exhibits will look at photojournalism, cartoons and caricatures, and advertisements.

There is also a digital station featuring electronic newspaper resources available to library users. Visitors can browse and search past and current news on NewspaperSG, the National Library’s online archives of Singapore’s newspapers dating back to 1831 as well as other databases that provide access to local and international newspapers. ♦

“The News Gallery: Beyond Headlines” is located at the Promenade on level 11 of the National Library Building. Opened between 10am and 9pm daily, admission to this permanent exhibition is free.



**NOTES**

- 1 Although in recent years, social media networks such as Facebook, YouTube and Instagram have made concerted efforts to stem the flow of fake news and misinformation on their sites.
- 2 National Library Board. (2017). *Singapore Chronicle* written by Vernon Cornelius-Takahama. Retrieved from Singapore Infopedia website.
- 3 National Library Board. (2005, June 15). *The Singapore Free Press* written by Thulaja Naidu Ratnala. Retrieved from Singapore Infopedia website.
- 4 National Library Board. (2016, February 28). *The Straits Times* written by Stephanie Ho. Retrieved from Singapore Infopedia website.
- 5 Kennard, A. (1967, October 2). History of Chinese newspapers in Singapore. *The Straits Times*, p. 12. Retrieved from NewspaperSG. Also see Lee, M. (2020, Jan–Mar). From Lat Pau to Zaobao: A history of Chinese newspapers. *BiblioAsia*, 15 (4). Retrieved from BiblioAsia website.
- 6 Nirmala, M. (2013, February 9). A champion of Tamil causes who raised profile of Indians here. *The Straits Times*, p. 7. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 7 National Library Board. (2016). *Jawi Peranakan* written by Thulaja Naidu Ratnala. Retrieved from Singapore Infopedia website.
- 8 National Library Board. (2014). *First issue of Utusan Malayu (1907–1921) is published*. Retrieved from HistorySG website.
- 9 See National Library Board. (2013, July 19). *Battle of Singapore* written by Stephanie Ho. Retrieved from Singapore Infopedia website.
- 10 See National Library Board. (2014, September 28). *Maria Hertogh riots*. Retrieved from Singapore Infopedia website.
- 11 See National Library Board. (2018, November). *Federation of Malaysia* written by Lee Meiyu. Retrieved from Singapore Infopedia website.
- 12 On 3 March 1994, American teenager Michael Fay was sentenced to four months’ jail, six strokes of the cane and fined S\$3,000 for vandalism. His case was widely covered by the international media, especially in the US, who considered caning an archaic and barbaric act. The number of cane strokes was eventually reduced to four. Singapore-US relations remained strained for a number of years after the incident. See National Library Board. (2009). *Michael Fay* written by Valerie Chew. Retrieved from Singapore Infopedia website; New defining moments for Singapore (2018, September 24). *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from The Straits Times website.
- 13 The two integrated resorts, which opened in 2010, are Marina Bay Sands and Resorts World Sentosa. See National Library Board. (2011). *Marina Bay Sands* written by Alvin Chua. Retrieved from Singapore Infopedia website.



# MESSRS LEE KIP LEE & LEE KIP LIN FAMILY ARCHIVES

Delve into the Lee Kip Lee and Lee Kip Lin Family Archives – a collection of family papers from a noted Peranakan family – with Senior Librarian Ong Eng Chuan and Peter Lee (pictured left and right above). The latter is the son of the late Lee Kip Lee, who was the former president of The Peranakan Association Singapore.



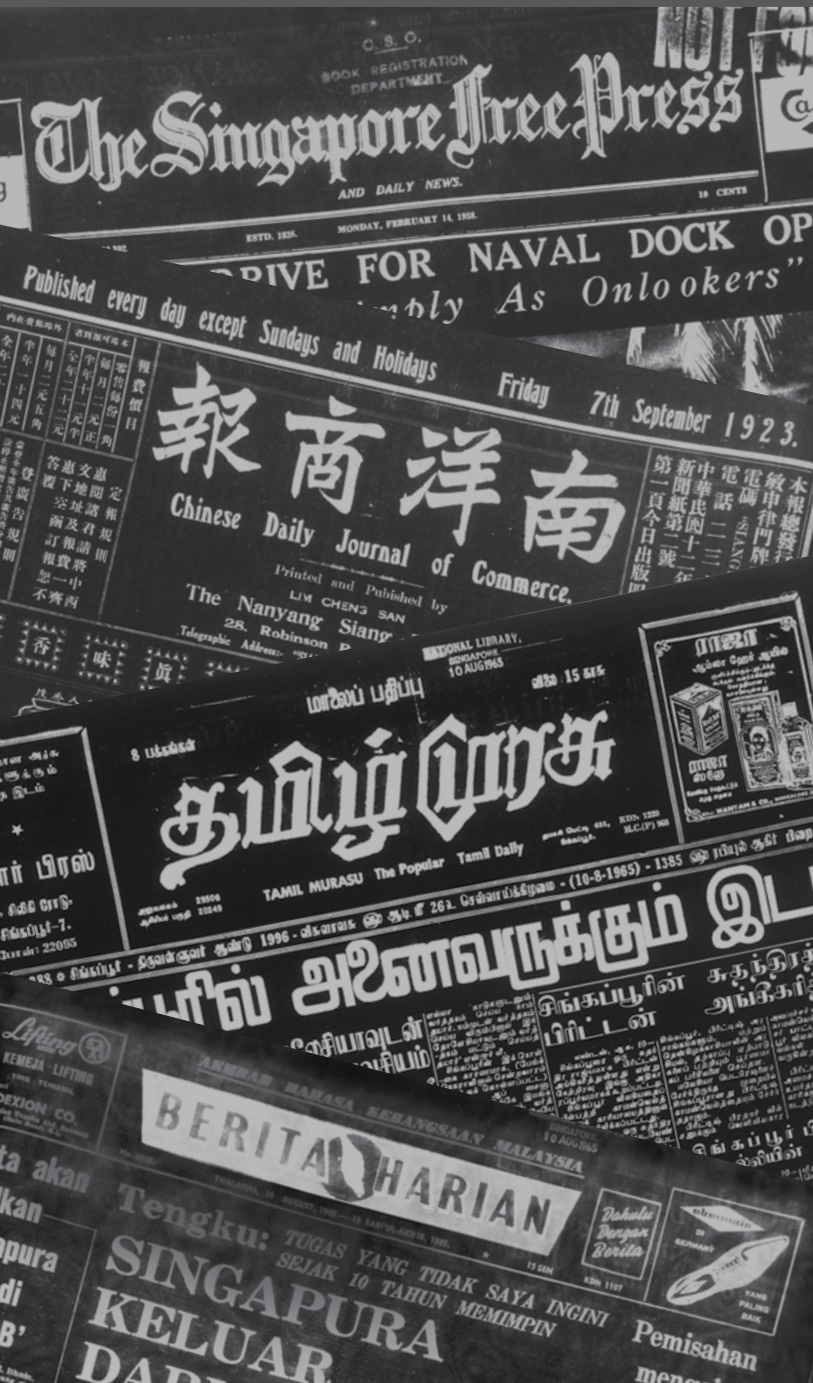
From the Stacks is a web series featuring rare materials of historical significance in the National Library Singapore’s collection.

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