

# biblioasia

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## RESTORING OLD CLASSICS

— p. 04 —



# Tamil Cholai

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## Director's Note

Singapore's filmmaking industry certainly looks like it's scaling new heights, what with drama-comedy *Ajoomma* (starring local actress Hong Huifang) being nominated for four Golden Horse Awards in 2022 and also being selected as Singapore's entry to the 2023 Academy Awards in the Best International Feature Film category.

In the 1950s and 1960s, we certainly weren't party to such glitzy international awards, but did you know that Singapore used to be a major centre for movie production back then? Films by Cathay-Keris and Shaw Brothers were popular in Malaya and Singapore, and these include *Orang Minyak* and *Seniman Bujang Lapok*, which have since become beloved classics. Unfortunately, it seems no one thought that preserving these films was particularly important, since reels upon reels of acetate film were left to disintegrate in dusty warehouses and forgotten storerooms over the decades. Chew Tee Pao's account of the challenges of restoring these films is both fascinating and inspiring.

While movies entertain us, religion provides our lives with meaning. In this issue, we look at three different manifestations of religious experience with Singaporean characteristics. William L. Gibson explores the shrines on Kusu Island, while Ng Yi-Sheng introduces us to three Taoist goddesses unique to Singapore. And ahead of Thaipusam, Nalina Gopal explains why devotees carry *kavadi* and how the festival has evolved since the late 1850s in Singapore.

We then travel back a few more thousand years with Foo Shu Tieng's essay on stone tools. It provides a fascinating look at what has been unearthed in our region, together with some rare photos of these artefacts – some of which might date back to 4000 BCE.

That's not all we have for you of course. You can also read about Subaraj Rajathurai, the nature conservationist who helped save Singapore's green spaces, and about how the postwar Chinese bookstore scene in Singapore has changed over the decades.

And definitely not to be missed is the story of how people in Singapore prepared for war in the days, weeks and months before Singapore fell in February 1942. This is part of a focus on Total Defence by the National Library and the National Archives – an effort that remains all the more relevant during these turbulent times.

As we enter a new year, may this issue help you recount these lessons and experiences of the past in hopes of a brighter path ahead.

Ms Alicia Yeo  
Director  
National Library

## Editorial & Production

**Editor-in-Chief**  
Jimmy Yap

**Senior Editor**  
Veronica Chee

**Engagement Editor**  
Soh Gek Han

**Contributors**

Chew Tee Pao

Foo Shu Tieng

William L. Gibson

Nalina Gopal

Benjamin Ho

Christabel Khoo

Lee Ching Seng

Ng Yi-Sheng

Mark Wong

**Design and Print**

Oxygen Studio

Designs Pte Ltd

**Please direct all correspondence to**

National Library Board

100 Victoria Street #01-02

National Library Building

Singapore 188064

Email: [ref@nlb.gov.sg](mailto:ref@nlb.gov.sg)

Website: [www.nlb.gov.sg](http://www.nlb.gov.sg)

**On the cover**

Neng Yatimah and P. Ramlee in *Patah Hati* by

K.M. Basker. Still obtained from 16mm print.

Courtesy of Shaw Organisation Pte Ltd.

*BiblioAsia* is a free quarterly publication produced by the National Library Board. It features articles on the history, culture and heritage of Singapore within the larger Asian context, and has a strong focus on the collections and services of the National Library. *BiblioAsia* is distributed to local and international libraries, academic institutions, and government ministries and agencies. Members of the public can pick up the magazine at the National Library Building and public libraries. The online edition can be accessed with the QR code on the right.



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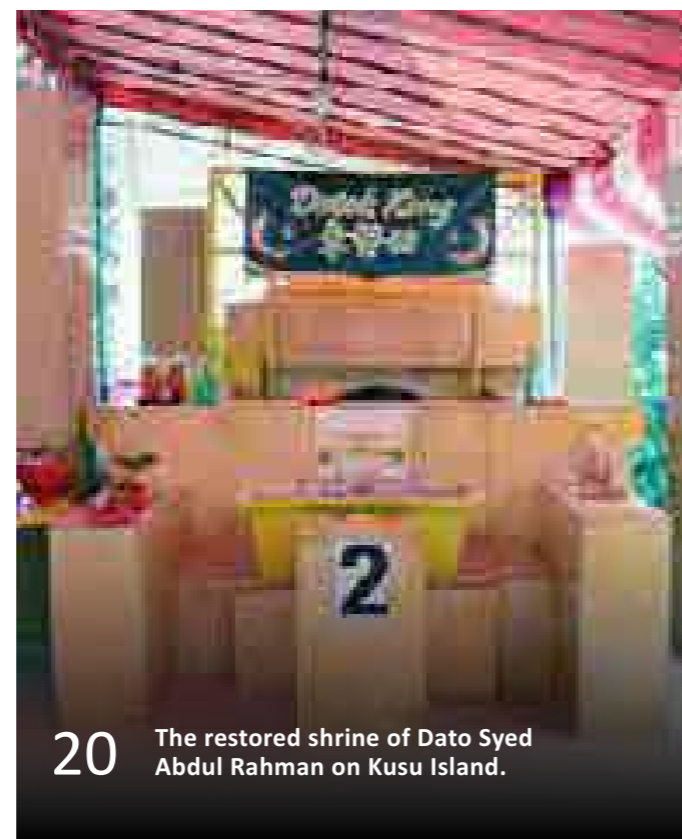
A quick look at four new books available in the National Library's collection.



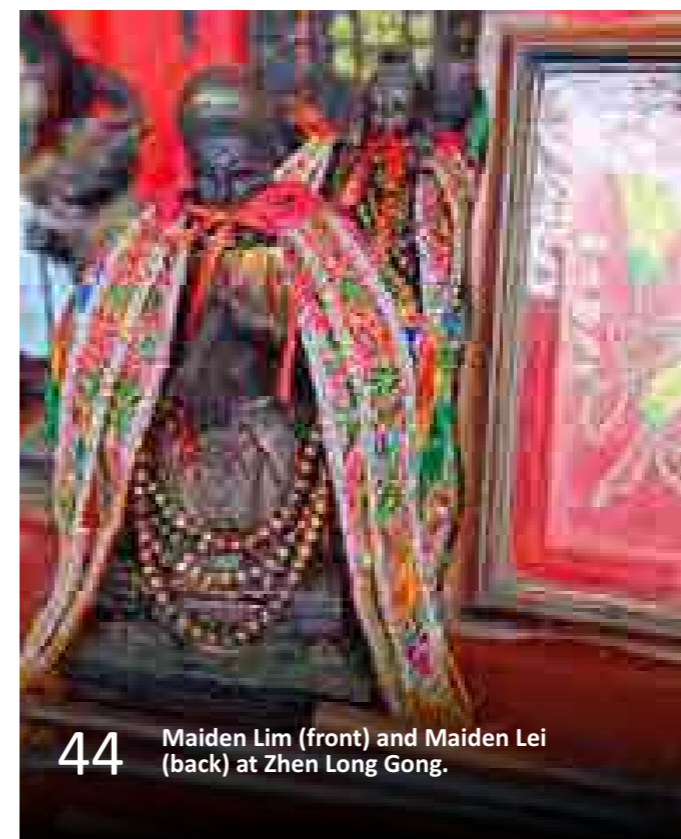
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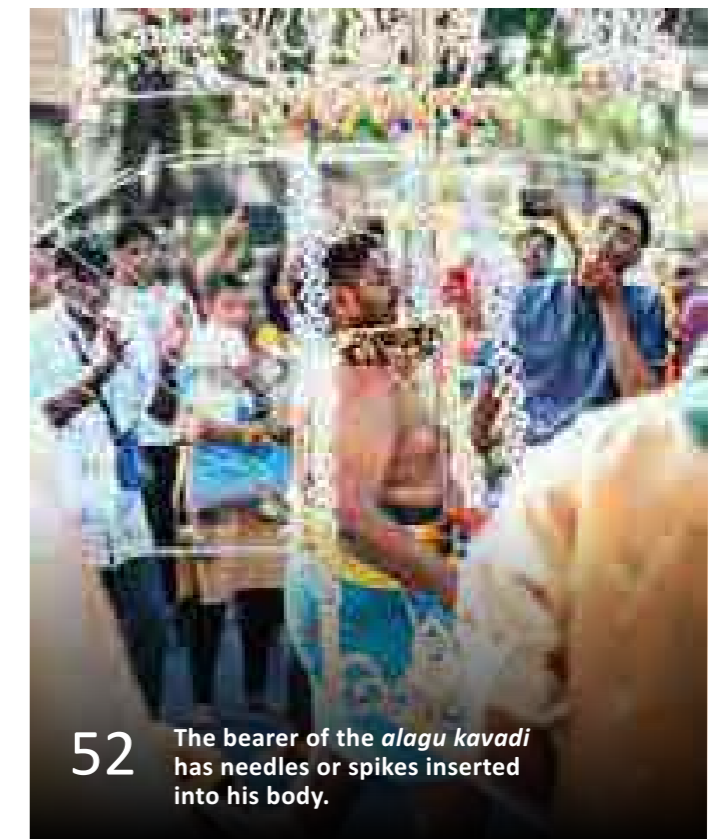
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# REPAIRING AND RESTORING SINGAPORE'S REEL HERITAGE



A damaged 35 mm film reel. Courtesy of Asian Film Archive.

The Asian Film Archive has been restoring old classics since 2014.

By Chew Tee Pao

Wong Kar Wai's *In the Mood for Love* (2000). David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962). Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936). Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali* (1955). These are just a handful of canonical works by the auteurs of world cinema that have been digitally restored in the last 10 years.

In 2012, the World Cinema Project and the National Museum of Singapore restored the Indonesian film *Lewat Djam Malam* (1954, Usmar Ismail). This project marked a major milestone for the restoration of Southeast Asian films with international support. In the ensuing years, films like *Mee Pok Man* (1995, Singapore), *Manila in the Claws of Light* (1982, Philippines), *Mukhsin* (2006, Malaysia), *Tiga Dara* (1957, Indonesia) and *Santi-Vina* (1954, Thailand) have been restored by both private and public archival institutions.

These movies were made using cellulose acetate-based film, a transparent plastic film used by photographers and filmmakers. The filmed materials were processed as picture and sound negatives that enabled copies of 35 mm theatrical prints to be produced for the cinemas.

Chew Tee Pao has been with the Asian Film Archive (AFA) since 2009. As an archivist since 2014, he has overseen the restoration of over 30 films from the AFA collection.

However, film degrades over time. The condition of both cellulose nitrate and cellulose acetate material is highly dependent on temperature and relative humidity. Storing film materials at room temperature or warmer, and coupled with high humidity, will inevitably cause chemical decay in the base and emulsion of the film material.

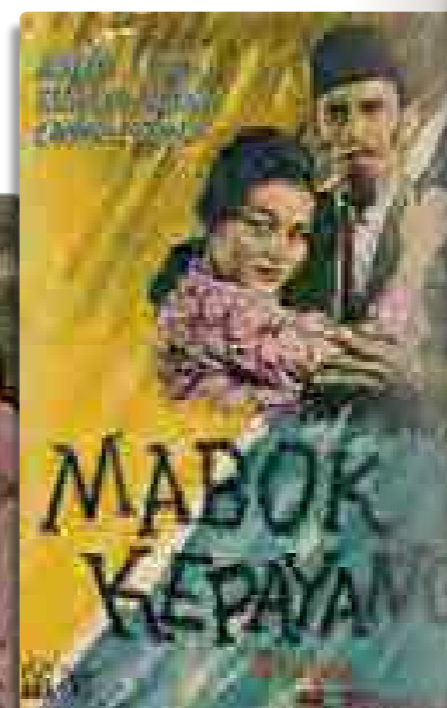
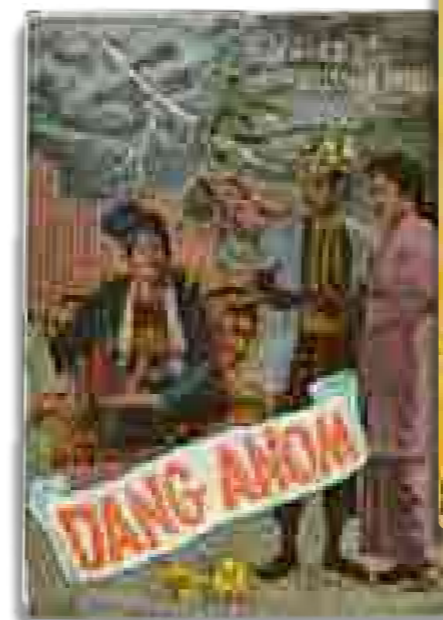
In Southeast Asia's tropical climate, the degradation resulting in the colour, image and sound loss of the material can occur easily with the lethal combination of humidity and heat. Problems such as "vinegar syndrome" cause films to become brittle, shrink and emit an acidic odour. In addition, the warm environment is a perfect breeding ground for the growth of mould, mildew and fungus. Improper handling and transportation of the material have also resulted in mechanical damage such as torn splices and broken perforations.

## Breathing New Life into Classic Films

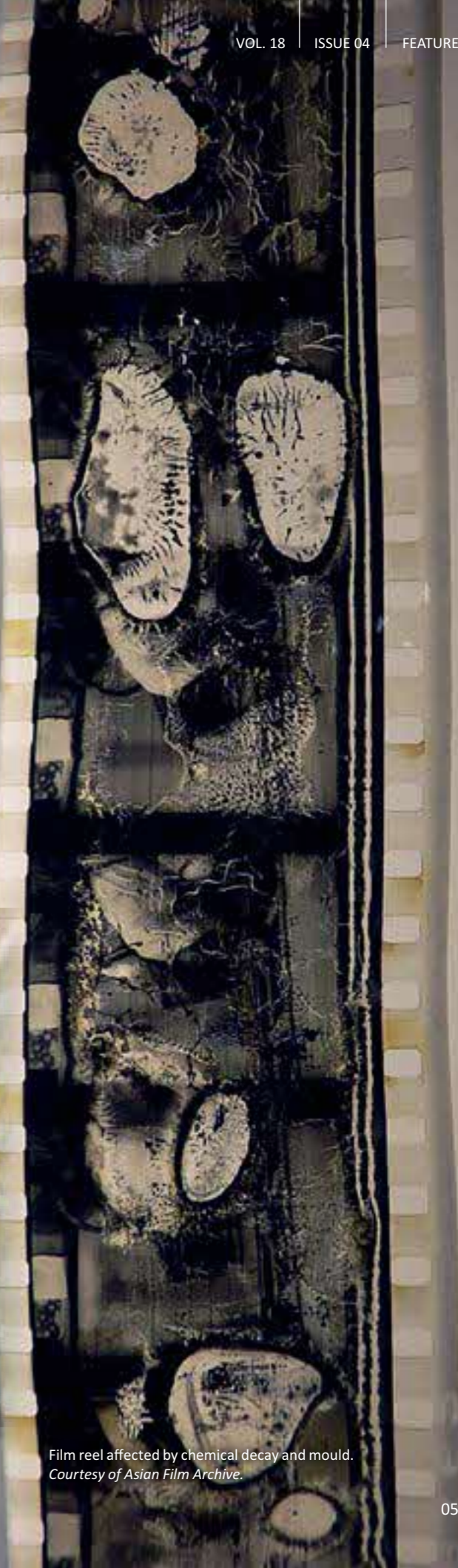
For films that are in poor condition and at risk of being lost completely due to deterioration, restoration is the most immediate intervention to salvage the film.

While "preserved" and "restored" are often used interchangeably in stories about rereleased and restored classic films, the terms are not synonymous. Veteran film archivist Ray Edmondson describes preservation as "practices and procedures necessary to ensure continued access, with minimum loss of quality, to the visual or audio content or other essential attributes of the films. This includes surveillance, handling, storage environments and methods".<sup>1</sup>

Film posters of *Dang Anom* and *Mabok Kepayang* produced by Cathay-Keris Films. Courtesy of Wong Han Min.



Film reel affected by chemical decay and mould. Courtesy of Asian Film Archive.





(Above) Hand cleaning and inspecting reels of Cathay-Keris films. Courtesy of Asian Film Archive.



(Left) Storage of Cathay-Keris Malay films before they were donated to the Asian Film Archive. Courtesy of Asian Film Archive.



(Below left) Screen shots from *Dang Anom* before and after colour correction. Courtesy of Cathay-Keris Films Pte Ltd.

Film restoration, on the other hand, is a highly specialised process consisting of different stages that involves digitising, duplicating and reconstructing a specific version of a film by piecing together surviving source materials, and using digital restoration tools “to identify and thoughtfully remediate damage and deterioration suffered by the original material and to return the appearance of a film to a state closer to what it would have been when it was first created”.<sup>2</sup>

In Singapore, the work of restoring old films has been spearheaded by the Asian Film Archive, a subsidiary of the National Library Board. Formed in 2005 as a non-profit organisation to preserve the rich film heritage of Singaporean and Asian cinema, the AFA began restoring films in 2014 starting with two movies from the Cathay-Keris Malay Classics Collection, which is a collection of Singapore films dating from 1958 to 1973. This is the largest single film collection that is being preserved by the AFA.

The story begins in 2007 when 91 surviving film titles, with a total of 671 reels in 16 mm and 35 mm formats, were donated to the AFA by Cathay



Due to severe disintegration, many 35 mm picture and sound negatives of titles such as *Ikan Emas* (1965), *Hati Batu* (1973) and *Selamat Hari Raya* (1955) were deemed unsalvageable. These reels had to be environmentally discarded to prevent them from infecting the rest of the collection. Courtesy of Asian Film Archive.

Organisation for preservation. Cathay-Keris Films and Shaw Brothers' Malay Film Productions (MFP) were the main producers of Malay films during the 1950s to 1970s, a period that is usually referred to as the golden age of Malay cinema in Singapore.

Many of the films produced by Cathay-Keris (including productions under the banner of Keris Films) from 1953, which includes *Buloh Perindu* (1953, B.S. Rajhans) and *Pontianak* (1957, B.N. Rao), are considered lost. This makes the donated surviving film materials a rare and significant collection that highlights the evolution of filmmaking in Singapore, and its development as a film production and distribution centre.

These Cathay-Keris films portray the traditional mores and culture of the Malays and provide a visual documentation of the physical landscapes, nation building, economic challenges, rapid modernisation, religious and social changes that occurred in Singapore in the post-war era.

The 35 mm and 16 mm prints were stored in a warehouse when AFA first encountered them, and all the reels were affected with varying degrees of vinegar syndrome that had developed over the decades.

The AFA took four years, until 2011, to complete the processing and hand-cleaning of all the reels.

In 2013, the AFA nominated the Cathay-Keris Malay Classics Collection to the UNESCO Memory of the World Committee for Asia and the Pacific (MOWCAP) to be inscribed on the Regional Register, a listing of endangered documentary heritage that represents a legacy for the world's community. In 2014, the collection became AFA's and Singapore's first inscription on the MOWCAP Asia Pacific Regional Register. The inscription marked a significant milestone for the AFA and the collection, amplifying the value of the films, and highlighting AFA's purpose to make the collection accessible through digitisation and restoration before further loss could happen.

### Saving a Private Collection for the World

In 2014, the AFA began its restoration efforts of the Cathay-Keris films. Two works were identified: *Sultan Mahmood Mangkat Dijulang* (1961, K.M. Basker) and *Gado Gado* (1961, S. Roomai Noor). These were chosen because they were in the worst condition. Mould and chemical decay had affected the prints, resulting in severe warpage and shrinkage of the material.

**For films that are in poor condition... restoration is the most immediate intervention to salvage the film.**



(Above) A reel undergoing re-hydration/desiccation treatment. Courtesy of L'Imagine Ritrovata.

(Above right) Repairing a splice of a 35 mm print. Courtesy of L'Imagine Ritrovata.



(Top to bottom) Stills from *Chuchu Datok Merah* by M. Amin, *Sultan Mahmood Mangkat Dijulang* by K.M. Basker, and *Gado Gado* by S. Roomai Noor. Courtesy of Cathay-Keris Films Pte Ltd.

Two sets of film elements were available for *Sultan Mahmood Mangkat Dijulang*. Reels 5, 8 and 11 of the 35 mm print were missing and had English subtitles burned in. Therefore, the 35 mm print was largely unusable and the film was mostly restored using the 16 mm print.

For *Gado Gado*, only the first reel of its negative had survived, but it was completely unusable due to serious decay, warping and shrinkage. The film was restored from a first generation 35 mm print.

Both works were unique within the Cathay-Keris collection. Based on the 17th-century *Malay Annals*, *Sultan Mahmood Mangkat Dijulang* was one of the studio's finest achievements among its stable of historical dramas and featured a rare star-studded cast.

The film was directed by K.M. Basker, an Indian filmmaker who was responsible for many of the early Malay films produced by both Cathay-Keris and Shaw Brothers' MFP in the 1950s, before Malay directors took the reins. *Gado Gado* was a charming oddity for being the only medium-length musical variety film that featured a host of star actors, resembling a tribute to the studio's stars.

The restoration of both films took over six months, and the restored films were presented for the first time with newly created English and French subtitles at the Cinémathèque Française as part of "Cinemas de Singapour en 50 films". This was a special retrospective programme co-organised by the Singapore Film Commission that showcased 50 Singaporean films to commemorate the nation's 50th year of independence in 2015.

*Gado Gado* was also selected for the Il Cinema Ritrovato, the first Singaporean work to be screened

at an important film festival for heritage and restored films in the Italian city of Bologna. *Sultan Mahmood Mangkat Dijulang* made its Singapore premiere at the National Museum of Singapore Gallery Theatre in 2015 in celebration of AFA's 10th anniversary and its first film restoration. To date, AFA has restored a total of nine titles from the surviving film elements of the Cathay-Keris Malay Classics Collection. The other seven are *Chuchu Datok Merah* (1963, M. Amin), *Aku Mahu Hidup* (1971, M. Amin), *Orang Minyak* (1958, L. Krishnan), *Dang Anom* (1962, Hussain Haniff), *Chinta Kaseh Sayang* (1965, Hussain Haniff), *Mat Magic* (1971, Mat Sentol and John Calvert) and *Dara-Kula* (1973, Mat Sentol).

*Chuchu Datok Merah* is a classic period drama by Malay director M. Amin that was restored and first presented in August 2015 at "Spotlight of Singapore Cinema" at the Capitol Theatre in celebration of Singapore's 50th year of independence. M. Amin was Cathay-Keris' most prolific director, having worked on nearly 30 films over a span of 10 years. He remained with the studio till the very end when it ceased operations in 1972.

One of the last films produced by Cathay-Keris is *Aku Mahu Hidup*. Written by Rajendra Gour, a pioneer of early independent short filmmaking in Singapore, the film's adoption and sensitive treatment of the then controversial subject of prostitution portrays the progressive social consciousness of 1970s Malay cinema.

Cathay-Keris' *Orang Minyak*, based on traditional folklore of a supernatural creature dripping in shiny black grease who abducts young women at night, predated Shaw Brothers' MFP's *Sumpah Orang Minyak* (1958, P. Ramlee) by a couple of weeks, demonstrat-

ing the competition between the two film studios for audiences. L. Krishnan was one of the first Indian directors employed to produce the earliest Malay films by Shaw Brothers and Cathay-Keris in the early 1950s.

*Dang Anom* and *Chinta Kaseh Sayang* are two of the 13 films directed by Cathay-Keris' star director Hussein Haniff. Unfortunately, he had a short career and died at the age of 32. However, he is regarded today as an auteur of classic Malay Cinema.

In 2020, the AFA restored *Mat Magic*, the only title in the Cathay-Keris collection jointly directed by iconic comedian Mat Sentol, and the American magician and film actor John Calvert. It marked an early creative collaboration between Singapore and Hollywood, and was the concluding film of the Mat series produced by Cathay-Keris. The restored film made its world premiere at the 50th International Film Festival Rotterdam in 2021. In the same year, AFA also restored *Dara-Kula*, a horror film by Mat



Stills from *Dang Anom* (right) and *Chinta Kaseh Sayang* (below) by Hussain Haniff. Courtesy of Cathay-Keris Films Pte Ltd.



Sentol, illustrating his move away from the comedy genre for his last work during his time at Cathay-Keris.

### Shaw Brothers' Malay Film Productions

Unlike the Cathay-Keris Malay Classics Collection that the AFA has been preserving since 2007, very few titles from Shaw Brothers' MFP have survived on film.

The first MFP film that the AFA encountered was a surviving 16 mm print of *Patah Hati* (1952, K.M. Basker), which starred a young P. Ramlee in one of his first major roles. The print was critically affected with mould and vinegar syndrome. It was discovered in the collection of the National Museum of Singapore during the search for MFP titles to restore and present at the "Spotlight on Singapore Cinema" event in 2015.

Upon close inspection, the first several minutes of the film were found to be completely missing from the print. The findings signified that the film was at potential risk of being lost in its entirety if nothing was done, thus giving greater reason to salvage and restore whatever remained of the material.

*Patah Hati* was one of the most challenging film restorations ever encountered by experienced restorers at the Italian laboratory L'Immagine Ritrovata, who carried out the restoration in 2015. The substantial number of missing image and audio frames, and extensive wear and tear meant that many individual frames needed to be carefully repaired before scanning was even possible, adding many man-hours to the task. The severe scratches and mould defects on the print required additional processing during the digital restoration stage.



Neng Yatimah and P. Ramlee in *Patah Hati* by K.M. Basker. Courtesy of Shaw Organisation Pte Ltd.

After six months of hard work, *Patah Hati* was finally restored and presented at "Spotlight on Singapore Cinema" in 2015. A text slate was included at the start of the film to address the entire missing first scene and to explain the challenges of the restoration.

### Singapore's Only Known Surviving Nitrate-based Film

In the course of restoring *Patah Hati*, the AFA stumbled upon a surviving 35 mm film print of *Permata Di-Perlimbahan* (1952, Haji Mahadi), produced by Shaw Brothers' MFP and kept in the collection of Shaw Organisation. It is the first Singapore film directed by a Malay director. Made at the beginning of the studio era, the film features one of the earliest film performances of Maria Menado and Nordin Ahmad for MFP before they moved to Cathay-Keris in the mid-1950s. Prior to this, Malay films were directed by Chinese and Indian filmmakers. What is even more fascinating is that the film is currently the only known extant Singapore film in a cellulose nitrate-based print.

The nitrate film format is chemically unstable thus making it highly flammable, and it is usually kept under sub-zero and underground storage. That the print stayed intact in Singapore's hot and inhospitable environment for decades is a miracle.

After the film was handed to the National Museum of Singapore, the print was sent to the specialised care of L'Immagine Ritrovata in 2014. AFA only discovered that it was a nitrate print when L'Immagine Ritrovata presented their findings.



Deteriorated frames on print of *Permata Di-Perlimbahan*. Courtesy of L'Immagine Ritrovata.

By that time, the print was already in an advanced state of chemical decay and shrinkage, affected by mould and numerous stains. Months of different chemical and rehydration treatments were carried out by the restorer to help alleviate the effects of nitrate decay on the image and in the sound. Continuous scratches and tears were present on every reel, which required intensive manual reconstruction for parts of many frames.

When combusted, nitrate film has a high burning point, is virtually inextinguishable and can spread quickly. Therefore, it needs to be stored in a low-humidity and protective environment, with temperatures below freezing point. It also needs to be kept away from other films. With no dedicated facility in Singapore that can handle and store nitrate films, the 35 mm print is now in the care and custody of Cineteca di Bologna's nitrate film vault (a film archive founded in 1962 in Bologna).

The restoration of *Permata Di-Perlimbahan* took almost a year to complete before it was presented at AFA's annual film and art event, "State of Motion 2020: Rushes of Time".



Still from *Permata Di-Perlimbahan* by Haji Mahadi. Courtesy of Shaw Organisation Pte Ltd.

### The Fate of P. Ramlee's *Seniman Bujang Lapok*

The first Malay classic film that I encountered when I started work at AFA was *Seniman Bujang Lapok* (1961) by the Malay film icon P. Ramlee. A self-referential spoof of the Malay film industry of the late 1950s to early 1960s, the film never fails to make audiences young and old laugh. The film exists today in video format and on poor quality VCD and DVD releases.

In 2017, the AFA discovered that the surviving print had been left with L'Immagine Ritrovata by the National Museum of Singapore in 2014. We looked into the feasibility of restoring the print, but the vinegar syndrome and degradation of the prints had already reached a fatal and unsalvageable stage.

Of the seven 35 mm reels, only the last reel could be salvaged. It took 10 weeks, using two different chemical treatments, to be able to uncoil the sticky reel. A large portion of the images had disintegrated and without additional sources of film elements, the film could not be restored.

The eventual digitisation of the last eight minutes, despite the hissing and shaking staticky images, provide a glimpse of how this beloved film could have looked and sounded on the big screen. The loss of this gem highlights the urgency of preserving what we can of our cinematic heritage while it is still possible. ♦

To learn more about the film restoration process, visit <https://go.gov.sg/asian-film-archive-restoration> or scan the QR code.



#### NOTES

- 1 Ray Edmondson, "The Building Blocks of Film Archiving," *Journal of Film Preservation* 24, no. 50 (March 1995): 55–58. (From ProQuest via NLB's eResources website)
- 2 Robert Byrne, Caroline Fournier, Anne Gant and Ulrich Ruedel, "The Digital Statement Part III: Image Restoration, Manipulation, Treatment, and Ethics," International Federation of Film Archives, accessed 7 November 2022, <https://www.fiafnet.org/pages/E-Resources/Digital-Statement-part-III.html>.

# SINGAPORE'S STONE TOOLS

Stone tools have been found in and around Singapore since the late 19th century. Much about them remains a mystery.

By Foo Shu Tieng

Much of the archaeological research on Singapore since the 1980s – whether land-based or maritime – has focused on historic periods, particularly the era from the 14th to the 20th centuries.<sup>1</sup> However, scholars have long suspected that the islands that make up Singapore might have been occupied several thousand years ago and that stone tools may provide the evidence for that period.<sup>2</sup>

Stone tools are stones that often bear the characteristics of being deliberately shaped and/or use marks.<sup>3</sup> Stone tools were initially attributed to male-hunting activities, but studies have since shown that hunting methods were gender-neutral.<sup>4</sup>

In Malaya, stone tools were found and reported during the colonial period, and were subsequently collected and deposited in museums.<sup>5</sup> These tools were studied and described, and theories were proposed as to which type of stone tools came first. Many of these early studies, which relied on relative dating, had to be reassessed after the advent of radiometric dating.<sup>6</sup> Malaya only began to use radiometric dating techniques for archaeological sites in 1960.<sup>7</sup>

Stone tools are usually not directly dated as this would only give an indication of when the rock was formed but not necessarily when the rock was manipulated and shaped. However, organic materials such as wood or shell might be found in the same excavation pit and dated based on their relative position to the stones. This is why finding artefacts in a non-disturbed context is vital.

**Foo Shu Tieng** is an Associate Librarian with the National Library, Singapore, and works with the Singapore and Southeast Asia collections. Her responsibilities include collection management, content development as well as providing reference and research services. Her publications on ancient money, shell middens and salt can be found on ResearchGate.

That said, there are some very old sites with stone tools found in Malaysia, and their discovery also raises the question as to how old the sites in Singapore might be. In 2008, archaeologists in Lenggong Valley, Perak, uncovered tools that may date back to an astounding 1.83 million years. For reference, the oldest stone tool site in the world is in West Turkana, Kenya, which is about 3.3 million years old.<sup>8</sup>

It is generally thought that stone tools found in this region, and around the world, functioned in a similar fashion to modern-day axes and were used for wood working.<sup>9</sup> In addition, we can see how stone tools are being used today to get a sense of how they might have been used in the past. Based on ethnographic literature, stone tools in Peninsular Malaysia are used in a variety of ways. Depending on their shape, stone tools could be used for root pounding, iron working, as whetstones to sharpen other tools, or as files for smoothening teeth.<sup>10</sup> Rocks are used in fires (for example, to stabilise cooking pots or to contain the fire) or for roasting grain.



A polished stone axe from Tanjong Tajam on Pulau Ubin, Singapore (Accession no. A1285). Collection of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

There is also evidence to show that rocks were used by Orang Asli groups, such as the Temuan and Semai, as an afterbirth procedure where the heated stones were wrapped in a specific kind of leaf and placed on the body of new mothers during the three days after giving birth. In addition, stones were also used for lighting fires, as projectiles, and even as medicine or for magical purposes.<sup>11</sup>

## Stone Tools in Singapore and Johor

In Singapore, stone tools were found in Tanjong Karang (now Tuas) and on Pulau Ubin. H.N. Ridley (Henry Nicholas Ridley), the director of the Botanic Gardens, first reported the discovery of a round axe at Tanjong Karang in 1891.<sup>12</sup> The precise location of the stone tool was not described in publications although Ridley's personal papers or museum records may provide further clues.<sup>13</sup> Unfortunately, subsequent development work in the area means that the soil in the vicinity would have likely experienced major disturbances, making it less viable for further research.<sup>14</sup>

One estimate of the stone artefact which Ridley found dates it to 4,000 BCE, but this was based on the type of stone tool rather than a radiocarbon date.<sup>15</sup> As Southeast Asia is one of the regions where stone



The round axe discovered at Tanjong Karang (now Tuas) in Singapore (Accession no. A1277). Collection of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.



A stone axe from Tanjong Tajam on Pulau Ubin, Singapore (Accession no. A1734). Collection of the Asian Civilisations Museum.



tools continued to be used by certain segments of the indigenous population even until quite recently, the round axe could also be much younger.<sup>16</sup>

In 1919, several stone implements of varying sizes were discovered in Johor's Tanjong Bunga by Engku Abdul Aziz bin Abdul Majid, the 6th Menteri Besar of Johor.<sup>17</sup> The location of Tanjong Bunga across the straits in Johor was close enough to Tanjong Karang in Singapore that Roland St John Braddell – a prominent lawyer and scholar of Malayan history – suggested in a 1936 paper in the *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* that there was a “stone-age portage” between Johor and Singapore, linking the sites of Tanjong Karang in Singapore and Tanjong Bunga in Johor in 1936.<sup>18</sup> This theory has yet to be tested.

The artefacts at Tanjong Bunga were described as “lying on white clay within twenty feet of the bank”, and Engku Abdul Aziz had suggested that the stone tools surfaced due to beach erosion resulting from the construction of the Causeway.<sup>19</sup> However, this is highly unlikely as a 2004 study highlighted that the initial Causeway construction led to low tidal energy in the Johor Strait instead; this indicates that the beach erosion would have occurred prior to 1919.<sup>20</sup>

No dates were attributed to the Tanjong Bunga stone tools but P.V. van Stein Callenfels (Pieter Vincent van Stein Callenfels),<sup>21</sup> a well-known prehistorian, had identified the two smaller stones as “neoliths”, suggesting that they were of a later date associated with domesticated plants and the use of pottery.<sup>22</sup>

M.W.F. Tweedie (Michael Wilmer Forbes Tweedie), former director of the Raffles Museum in Singapore, who published a paper in 1953 on stone tools found in Malaya, similarly described the Tanjong Bunga stone tools as “neolithic blanks” – meaning that these could be further modified further into a specific tool form. He further described two of the artefacts as “round-axes” and added that one of the two artefacts was ground at one end. Tweedie's diagram of Collings' Tanjong Bunga excavation site further indicates that artefacts were also found in the lower layer of peat. The discovery of artefacts in these two layers suggests two different periods of site occupation.<sup>23</sup>

H.D. Collings (Hubert Dennis Collings), who later became the Curator of Anthropology at the Raffles Museum, visited Tanjong Bunga in 1934 and 1935, and upon finding more implements, conducted an excavation at the site in 1938. This was the first archaeological excavation undertaken at the southern end of the Malay Peninsula. At Tanjong Bunga, Collings found more “small ground neolithic axes, flakes, pieces of haematite, resin and quartz microliths” approximately 90 cm below the surface.<sup>24</sup>

The excavated artefacts at the site were described as being found in a stratigraphic layer between two layers of mangrove peat, and it was suggested that this soil layer might have been formed “during a slight temporary advance of the sea”.

Although there was no method of dating sea level changes back then, one recent study for Singapore sug-

gested that the sea level rose to a maximum at around 3,150 BCE before falling to present levels.<sup>25</sup> This new data might present the best educated guess for when the site was in use until further environmental history studies can be made near or at Tanjong Bunga itself.

Other surface finds reported by Collings consisted of a round axe, four small neoliths and a quadrangular (four-sided) neolithic adze (a versatile cutting tool with an angled hoe-like blade). Given that these were surface finds, however, they may not have been from the same occupation period as the excavated finds.<sup>26</sup>

Artefact from Tanjong Tajam on Pulau Ubin, Singapore (Accession no. 1280). Collection of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.



A stone axe from Tanjong Tajam on Pulau Ubin, Singapore (Accession no. 0533). Collection of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

A 2018 review of the Tanjong Bunga stone tools asserted that the site bore evidence of a prehistoric adaptation to a mangrove environment, which is relatively rare for Peninsular Malaysia, as mangroves are found only in certain parts of the Peninsula.<sup>27</sup> The study also reaffirmed that the round axes at Tanjong Bunga were unlike those found in other sites in Peninsular Malaysia and were closer to those found in Island Southeast Asia. Similar round axes have been reported in Japan, India, Myanmar, Manchuria, Korea, Taiwan, North Vietnam, the Philippines, Melanesia and Micronesia. In Indonesia, the majority of the finds were in the eastern end of the archipelago although some were also reported at a few sites in Sumatra.<sup>28</sup>

On paper, the wide distribution would suggest that these stone tools were not geographically restricted. However, a visual comparison of the “round axes” depicted in published photographs from Singapore and Johor, and those suggested for Indonesia, indicates that there are quite a few differences. A more advanced technical study that investigates the life cycle of these artefacts may be more useful than the previous descriptive method of analysing these tools.<sup>29</sup>

**Stone tools are usually not directly dated as direct dating would only give an indication of when the rock was formed but not necessarily when the rock was manipulated and shaped.**

In addition to the Tanjong Bunga and Tanjong Karang areas, stone tools have also been found on Pulau Ubin. P.D.R. Williams-Hunt, Advisor on Aborigines for the Federation of Malaya,<sup>30</sup> reported the existence of several stone artefacts (more round axes and stone flakes) at a site called Tanjong Tajam on the western end of Pulau Ubin, and the find was made public in October 1949.<sup>31</sup> Williams-Hunt and Collings conducted an archaeological excavation at Tanjong Tajam in November 1949, but it was reported in 1951 that nothing of interest was found.<sup>32</sup>

In 2017, archaeologist David Clinnick and Sharon Lim, an assistant curator at the National Museum of Singapore, visited the Tanjong Tajam site. Although Clinnick reported finding a possible stone tool, a peer-reviewed article on this research has yet to be published and this finding cannot be confirmed.<sup>33</sup>

## Stone Tools in Bintan

Stone tools were also reported in 2012 and 2014 at the Kawal Darat shell midden on the nearby island of Bintan. Shell middens are man-made heaps where the primary component are shell remains, the result of marine resource exploitation during its site-use period.<sup>34</sup> This particular shell midden is known as Bukit Kerang Kawal Darat in Indonesian (BKKD).<sup>35</sup> The site consists of a group of three shell mounds near the Kawal River.<sup>36</sup>

An initial radiocarbon date from one of the shell middens suggested that it was in use between the 5th and 10th centuries, making it relatively young. In comparison, the Pangkalan shell midden in Aceh in North Sumatra was utilised between 10,890 BCE and 1,780 BCE.<sup>37</sup> The BKKD also existed much later than the Guar Kepah shell midden site in Penang, which dates back to between 3,800 BCE and 3,260 BCE.<sup>38</sup>

In 2012, an artefact made of andesite, a fine-grained igneous rock, was reported and found at BKKD in the same layer as plain earthenware fragments and *Tridacna* shells (*Tridacna* are a type of large saltwater clam). In 2014, artefacts made from quartzite and bauxite, as well as modified mollusc shells and bones, were reported.<sup>39</sup>

More significantly, part of a human jaw and calf bone were discovered on the eastern side of the shell midden, suggesting that there was a more complex use for the site rather than simply a depository for food waste.<sup>40</sup> The researchers stated that the quartzite and bauxite artefacts were likely to be locally sourced and that the site was used as a food processing area, among other things.<sup>41</sup>

The BKKD site gives some indication as to how stone tools continued to be in use in the area until much later. This, however, raises the important question: were the tools found in Singapore from the Neolithic period, or much later? Another question that the BKKD raises is the identity of the people who might have made these tools. Although no human remains were found in association with the stone tools unearthed

in Singapore and Johor, DNA analysis of the remains from the Bintan site may provide clues as to whether the stone tools might be traced to the Orang Laut (sea people) or to an even older and unknown prehistoric community.<sup>42</sup>

## Stone Tools in Southeast Asia

The stone tools found in and around Singapore need to be understood within the wider context of the development of stone tools in Southeast Asia. The evolution of stone tools in this region differs from that in Europe.<sup>43</sup>

Southeast Asia reports a much lower incidence of microliths (small flaked stone tools measuring approximately 1 to 4 cm in length)<sup>44</sup> and Acheulean handaxes,<sup>45</sup> although this may be due to a paucity of data from open-air sites.<sup>46</sup> (The Acheulean is a tradition of toolmaking that dates back to approximately 100,000 to 1.7 million years.)

Some researchers have argued that foragers and farmers in tropical environments like Southeast Asia would not have to rely so much on winter survival strategies compared to hunter-gatherers in temperate areas in capturing, processing and storing food leading up to winter. As such, the purpose of stone technologies may have been to make other tools that did not manage to survive the archaeological record.<sup>47</sup>

To explain the paucity of stone tools in this region, a “bamboo hypothesis” has been proposed. This theory suggests that the early inhabitants of the region relied on alternative materials like bamboo, wood or shell for more sophisticated tools. As these are made of perishable material or are thought of as being naturally occurring objects, they may not be as visible in the archaeological record.<sup>48</sup>

In the Thai-Malay peninsula, Pleistocene stone tools consisted of flaked cobbles (cobble-sized stone tools) as well as single and multi-platform cores.<sup>49</sup> (The Pleistocene era lasted from 2.6 million years ago to 9,700 BCE.)<sup>50</sup> The stone tool technology then transitioned to the Hoabinhian industry, which is



(Above) The Orang Seletar, one of the sub-groups of the Orang Laut, in Singapore, 1950s. DNA analysis of the shell midden site in Bintan may provide clues as to whether the stone tools might be traced to the Orang Laut (sea nomads) or to an even older and unknown prehistoric community. Dr Ivan Polunin Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



(Below) Aerial view of the Kawal Darat shell midden in Bintan. Image reproduced from Taufiqurrahman Setiawan, “Melihat Kembali nilai penting Bukit Kerang Kawal Darat,” in *Daratan dan Kepulauan Riau: Dalam Catatan Arkeologi dan Sejarah* ed. Sofwan Noerwidi (Jakarta: PT. Pustaka Obor Indonesia), 87. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RSEA 959.81 DAR).

characterised by Sumatraliths and flaked artefacts. Sumatraliths are unifacially flaked cobble artefacts; this meant that enough material was removed from the core so that a single bevel formed the working edge of the tool. Flaked artefacts include objects such as points and scrapers, and these were made from the detached bits of stone from a core.<sup>51</sup>

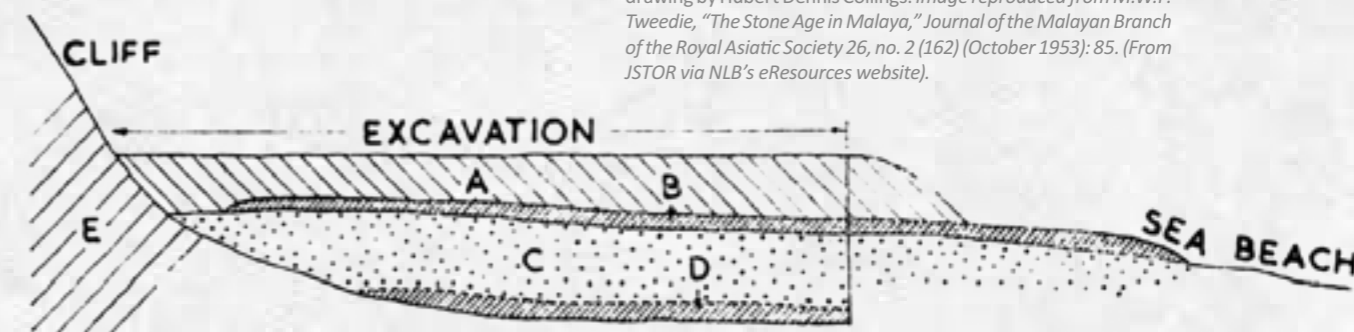
The sites in Thailand with these types of artefacts date from the end of the Pleistocene to the mid-Holocene period (24,050 BCE to 1,200 CE).<sup>52</sup> In Malaysia, a narrower timespan of approximately 16,000 BCE to 4,000 BCE is given.<sup>53</sup>

The stone tool technology then transitioned into highly polished stone adzes, axes and chisels, which some associate with the advent of pottery and agriculture (the Neolithic period), which for Peninsular Malaysia is said to be from approximately 4,000 BCE to 3,000 BCE.<sup>54</sup>

## Further Research

There are possibilities for further research on the stone tools discovered in Singapore, particularly in terms of the excavation notes (if any are to be found) and the research methods. Given that radiometric dating was not conducted for the sites with the artefacts, it cannot be determined whether the tools were used or made much later for their healing and magical properties. (There is ethnographic evidence to suggest that stone tools may have had a secondary use as thunderstones associated with magic rituals [Indonesian/Malay: *batu halilintar* or *batu lintar*] and this may be part of a larger global phenomenon.<sup>55</sup>)

Side profile of the excavation site at Tanjong Bunga in Johor from a drawing by Hubert Dennis Collings. Image reproduced from M.W.F. Tweedie, “The Stone Age in Malaya,” *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 26, no. 2 (1953): 85. (From JSTOR via NLB’s eResources website).



Neolithic type tools and flakes from Tanjong Bunga in Johor. Images reproduced from M.W.F. Tweedie, “The Stone Age in Malaya,” *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 26, no. 2 (1953): plate 10. (From JSTOR via NLB’s eResources website).

All the stone tool sites described earlier were either found along coastal or in brackish (mangrove) waters in Singapore. This raises the question: was there inland prehistoric activity for Singapore? Rivers would have been the general travel marker during early exploratory periods and tracing the old river courses may reveal

more important sites. Should anyone stumble upon such a site in Singapore, do leave the site untouched, mark its GPS location and alert the National Heritage Board immediately as the context of the find is likely to be as important as the find itself. Keep your eyes peeled: you never know what you might find. ♦

### Stone Tool Sites by Eras<sup>56</sup>

Geologic Time Scale	Age	Location (Note: In archaeology, the present is defined as 1950)
Holocene	11,800 years ago to the present (Post-Ice Age)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Jenderam Hilir, Langsat Valley, Selangor, Malaysia: 3,650 years ago<sup>57</sup></li> </ul>
Pleistocene	2,588,000 to 11,800 years ago (The most recent Ice Age)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Tham Lod, northwest Thailand: 40,000 to 14,000 years ago<sup>58</sup></li> <li>Kota Tampan, Lenggong Valley, Perak, Malaysia: 70,000 years ago<sup>59</sup></li> <li>Sangiran, Central Java, Indonesia: 1 million years ago<sup>60</sup></li> <li>Current proposed oldest known stone tool site in SEA: Bukit Bunuh, Lenggong Valley, Perak, Malaysia (BBH2007): 1.83 million years ago<sup>61</sup></li> <li>Current oldest known stone tool site in Asia: Shangchen (上陈), Shaanxi, China: 2.1 million years ago<sup>62</sup></li> </ul>
Pliocene	5,333,000 to 2,588,000 years ago	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Current oldest known stone tool site: Lomekwi 3, West Turkana, Kenya: 3.3 million years ago<sup>63</sup></li> </ul>

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The entrance to the shrine of Dato Syed Abdul Rahman before the fire, 2022. Courtesy of William Gibson.

# THE ORIGIN STORIES OF Keramat KUSU

Pilgrimages to the *keramat* on Kusu Island have been going on since the mid-19th century.

By William L. Gibson

In April 2022, a catastrophic fire engulfed the *keramat* (shrine) on the top of a hill on Kusu Island, off the southern coast of Singapore. Media coverage of the event showed the near-total destruction of the *keramat*.<sup>1</sup>

The *keramat* on Kusu Island is a popular pilgrimage spot with thousands of devotees making their way by boat to seek blessings from the shrine as well as the Chinese Tua Pek Kong Temple (龟屿大伯公宫)

**Dr William L. Gibson** is an author and researcher based in Southeast Asia since 2005. His research topic for the Lee Kong Chian Research Fellowship, awarded by the National Library Board in 2021, was an in-depth study of *keramat* in Singapore. His book *Alfred Raquez and the French Experience of the Far East, 1898–1906* (2021) is published by Routledge as part of its Studies in the Modern History of Asia series. Gibson's articles have appeared in *Signal to Noise*, *PopMatters.com*, *The Mekong Review*, *Archipel*, *History and Anthropology*, the *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient* and *BiblioAsia*, among others.

on the island. Despite its immense popularity, little is definitively known about the shrine. Delving into the records shows how the origin story of the *keramat* has changed over time.

Sunny Kusu Island – little more than a dome-shaped granite outcropping connected by a mud flat to a narrow rocky protrusion to the north, and surrounded by shallow reefs – was both an important navigation mark as well as a shipping hazard in the days of sail.

Around 1822, the British erected a signal on the island and as a result, the earliest maps of Singapore refer to it as “Signal Island”. The island was later renamed “Peak Island” and sometime in 1877, a brick obelisk harbour marker was erected on its south shore.<sup>2</sup>

The Malay name for the island is Pulau Tembakul, which means “mudskipper island”, either because mudskippers were once abundant on the mud flats or because in profile the island, with its bulbous head and narrow fin-like tail, resembles a mudskipper. “Kusu”, which means “turtle” in Hokkien, likely comes from the dome shape of the island resembling a turtle shell.



The shrine of Dato Syed Abdul Rahman before the fire, 2022. The phrase “Datok Kong” was repeated no less than three times here. Courtesy of William L. Gibson.



The Malay caretaker placing offerings from devotees at Dato Syed Abdul Rahman’s shrine, 1970. Image reproduced from Goh Tuck Chiang, “Picnic With the Harbour Gods,” *Straits Times Annual*, 1 January 1970, 66–67. (From NewspaperSG).

### Shrines and Temple

Remarkably, there is evidence that the Tua Pek Kong Temple and the *keramat* have been on the island since at least the mid-19th century.<sup>3</sup> This is based on a letter written by Cheang Hong Lim, a prosperous opium trader and head of the Hokkien community in Singapore, to J.F.A. McNair, Colonial Engineer and Surveyor General of the Straits Settlements, on 9 March 1875. Cheang protested the policy of using the island as a burial ground for the quarantine facility located on nearby St John’s Island.<sup>4</sup>

In the letter, Cheang petitioned for a title to the island. He wrote that the island had “for upwards of thirty years [c.1845] been used by many of the Chinese and native inhabitants of this Settlement as a place for them to resort to at certain periods every year for the purpose of making sacrifices and paying their vows to certain deities there called ‘Tua Pek Kong Koosoo’ and ‘Datok Kramat’, and as that place has lately, to the great prejudice of their feelings, been desecrated by the interment therein of a number of dead bodies”.<sup>5</sup> In the end, Cheng did not receive the land title but he did get a promise that quarantine burials would cease.

*Datuk keramat* (sometimes spelled as *dato*) are spirits who dwell within natural objects like trees, rocks, termite mounds and whirlpools. Also known as *datuk kong* (拿督公), these ancestor spirits of the



(Above) A Chinese couple at the shrine of Dato Syed Abdul Rahman, 1990. They are standing at the same spot as the group in the c. 1930 photograph on page 27. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

(Right) A Chinese woman hangs stones from a tree beside the *keramat*. Note the numerous joss sticks in the ground at the base of the tree and the white-washed columns of the shrine. Image reproduced from A.J. Anthony, “A Picnic... With the Harbour Gods,” *Straits Times Annual*, 1 January 1952, 26–27. (From NewspaperSG).



landscape are often represented by icons that resemble older Malay men. (*Datuk* is the Malay word for grandfather and is also a generalised honorific for an elder male, while *kong* is the Hokkien word for grandfather.)

Cheang’s letter refers to the practice of people visiting the temple and shrine on Kusu. The island was – and still is – thronged by pilgrims for the Double Ninth, or Chongyang Festival (observed on the ninth day of the ninth lunar month), during which it is customary to venerate graves of ancestors and to climb a high mountain.<sup>6</sup> It is likely that the rocky peak of the island jutting out of the water was a place to perform Chongyang rituals: both Tua Pek Kong (literally “Grand Uncle”, a deity unique to Malaya) and a local *datuk* spirit of the island would be treated as ancestors to be propitiated. (It is not unusual to find Tua Pek Kong temples and *datuk keramat* shrines close to one another.<sup>7</sup>)

The *keramat* was especially popular with couples seeking to have children and for prognosticating winning lottery numbers and it received visitors year-round.

More early details about the pilgrims who visited Kusu come courtesy of a report dated 16 October 1894 in the Baba Malay newspaper *Bintang Timor*. It reads: “Smalam dan hari Anam, banyak umbok umbok, baba baba dan orang Melayu dan segala bangsa ada pergi Koosoo bayar niat. Dia orang kata ini kramat ada banyak betol, dan dia slalu kasi apa dia orang minta.”<sup>8</sup> [“Yesterday and on Saturday, many Peranakan women (*umbok*) and men (*baba*), Malays and people of all races went to Kusu to offer *niat* (supplication). People say that the *keramat* is honest and true and will give you what you ask for.”]

The *keramat* was enlarged in the early 20th century. There are two plaques on the site, one in Baba Malay and Jawi dated 1917 and the other in Hokkien Chinese dated 1921. The Baba Malay plaque is dedicated to “Dato Nenek Kusu” and was emplaced by Baba Hoe Beng Whatt, a Peranakan (Straits Chinese). It includes a list of Baba Chinese who donated money to erect the shrine. The 1921 plaque also bears the names of donors to the shrines, many of whom were the same people who had donated earlier. The text on the plaque mentions that the “old fairy of Kusu Island” (龟屿老仙女) visited Hoe’s house with a child. The second plaque indicates that the shrine was expanded again in 1921.

**The *keramat* was especially popular with couples seeking to have children and for prognosticating winning lottery numbers and it received visitors year-round.**

#### Fishermen’s Friends

A *Straits Times* report in 1929 offers one of the oldest descriptions of the origins of the *keramat*. The reporter spoke to an old man at Joo Chiat (the implication being he was Baba or Straits Chinese), who gave an account that deserves to be retold in detail:



(Left) The two female shrines as seen from Dato Abdul Rahman’s shrine (stations 4 and 5 in the order of offerings) before the fire, 2022. The plaques from 1917 and 1921 could be seen embedded in the columns; the 1921 plaque was beneath the number 5. Courtesy of William L. Gibson.

(Below) The sign above the grave of Sharifah Fatimah indicates she is the daughter of Dato Syed Abdul Rahman but also uses the phrase “datuk nenek”, which indicates a female ancestor spirit. Similar signage appeared above the grave of Nenek Ghalib, his mother. Courtesy of William L. Gibson.

“Years and years ago there was a hilly spot, opposite the Police Station at Tanjong Pagar [Bain Hill, where another *keramat*, that of Syed Yasin, was located]. The coolies who were employed to level this hill more often than not had to pay with their lives. Many of them died after doing a day’s work. Those who were responsible for the work then resorted to the use of dynamite to break up the hill, and on the same night it happened that a sampan took across four or five Arabs in the direction of Kusu. Before the sampan man had actually arrived at the island, to his great amazement he found that his passengers had disappeared. He took the hint that they were the gods of this hilly spot who were removing to Kusu, and said nothing of the news until a few days after.

“In the meantime, the sampan man became rich and prosperous, being well-compensated for his trouble. This news was favorably received by the people, and pilgrimage to the place commenced. A Malay man who heard of it went to the island and led a hermit’s life until he died there. A Chinese who thought that such an island should have a temple erected one, so that those who visit may worship its gods.”<sup>9</sup>

A lengthy article about Kusu in a 1932 *Straits Times* report introduced new elements to the story. It noted that some time in the “olden days”, a Chinese fisherman who felt unwell was put ashore and, “in accordance with his dying wishes”, was buried on the deserted island by his friends who also erected a tombstone for him. Not long after, a Malay fisherman died on the island was also buried there. Friends of the



two fishermen became rich after dreaming about the deceased fishermen and began paying their respects to the spirits.<sup>10</sup> This version of the story forms the basis for the “legendary” version of Kusu Island that most of us are familiar with today in which the two men become sworn brothers.<sup>11</sup>

In the early days, the *keramat* was not associated with any particular named individual. The 1932 article describes the shrine as two small “sheds” of concrete. “One covers the grave of the Malay fisherman. The other is also supposed to be the graves of other Malays but no stories, so far as I can gather, are told concerning them.” The article adds that on a nearby *keramat* tree, “strings of stones” were hung. “When a man has his wish fulfilled, he recalls his vow, goes back to the island, hangs up the stones and takes them down only when he has discharged his debt!”<sup>12</sup> The hanging of stones was once common at other *keramat* in Singapore renown for powers of granting children, such as Iskandar Shah and Habib Nuh. While the tradition is no longer continued at these *keramat*, yellow ribbons are still tied on the trees around the *keramat* at Kusu.

The two plaques dated 1917 list the names of donors who built the shrine to “Dato Nenek Kusu” emplaced by Baba Hoe Beng Whatt, 2022. The top plaque in Jawi bears the same text as the bottom plaque in Baba Malay. The notice literally states that Dato Nenek Kusu came to his house in 1917, but the implication would be that her arrival brought a birth of a child. *Ada tiba di rumah* means “there arrived at the house”. Courtesy of William L. Gibson.



View of the Tua Pek Kong Temple from the *keramat* at the top of the hill, 1969. This was before reclamation works in the 1970s. *Lim Kheng Chye Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

### Keramat Stories

By 1940, the Malay fisherman at the *keramat* had been transformed into a family, though still anonymous. A *Singapore Free Press* article in 1940 reports that the shrine was supposedly “built over the graves of two Malay girls whose father is also buried nearby”. The reporter who visited the shrine saw “one or two Malays up here but they were surrounded by Straits-born Chinese women in bright sarongs, and many young girls in flowered blouses and trousers”. She spotted a woman seeking lottery numbers and several more seeking sons. “There are many stones suspended from the old gnarled trunk, and the women who paid homage there were given little scraps of yellow cotton and flower petals wrapped in newspaper to take away with them to ‘bring them luck’.”<sup>13</sup>

The name associated with the *keramat* today, Dato Syed Abdul Rahman, first appears in a 1948 *Straits Times* article. It mentions that the shrine of the dato consists of a “spiral-shaped tombstone, covered by a wooden shanty” that was joined to a “smaller hut containing the similar tombstones of two of the Dato’s female ancestors, Naik Ralip and Siti Fatimah” (his mother and his sister respectively). A caretaker named Chik bin Embee, who claimed to be a direct descendant of the *dato*, cared for the tomb with his two sons and daughter.<sup>14</sup>

In 1952, an article in the *Straits Times Annual* notes that the *dato* was “supposed to have had miraculous powers and to have died well over a hundred years ago”. The article mentions that only a few Muslims would visit the *keramat* as it was “not a shrine that is popularly accepted and revered among the Malays. Its fame depends almost entirely upon reverence among the non-Muslim Chinese”. Chinese visitors would show respect to the *dato* by abstaining from pork for the entire ninth lunar month and that the “usual Chinese divining blocks” would not be used at the *keramat*. However, occasionally “a Chinese woman can be seen tossing a couple of coins surreptitiously to obtain the desired effect”.<sup>15</sup>

A 1973 article in *Asia Magazine* adds a new, important twist to the origin story, based on an interview with the then caretaker of the shrines, Pak Besar. The man told the magazine’s reporter a variation of the tale of the Malay and Chinese fishermen that 140 years before, “two ascetics, an Arab named Syed Rahman and a Chinese named Yam”, travelled to Kusu to meditate. “The two hermits paid other visits to the island, and then died on it”, although Pak Besar, insisted they were still spiritually alive. “They just left the world,” he said. Later, the body of the Arab’s mother, Ghalib, and his daughter, Sharifah Fatimah, were brought there for burial and shrines were erected over their graves.<sup>16</sup>



The earliest known photograph of the *keramat*, c. 1930. The white-washed brick-and-mortar pillars seen here survived the 2022 fire. *Photo by Lim Lam San (Oct 1902–Sep 1990). Collection of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.*

Ghalib is an Arabic name usually used for men; the mother’s name on Kusu is perhaps an echo of the Malay *ghaib*, which means “something hidden or unseen”. The earlier spelling of Naik Ralip is likely a transliteration of Nek Ghalib from an oral source, suggesting the names were not written on the tombs. The sister of the *dato* had also become his daughter instead.

Photographs from this period show the formerly white-washed walls painted dark green – a traditional *keramat* color. Only later were they painted bright yellow, the colour of *datuk kong* shrines in Singapore (in Peninsular Malaysia, they are often red).

In the 1970s, Kusu, along with the other Southern Islands, came under the management of the Sentosa Development Corporation which had been set up, as the name implies, to develop what was then Pulau Blakang Mati and adjacent islands into the resort destination of Sentosa.

Land reclamation enlarged Kusu from 1.2 hectares (12,000 sq m) to 8.5 hectares (85,000 sq m) at a cost of around \$3.9 million. The development work included the construction of a new jetty, water supply

system, modern toilet facilities and footpaths. The *keramat* and temple were preserved as tourist attractions, and major renovation works carried out at both in 1976 included concreting and adding guardrails to the steps up to the *keramat*.<sup>17</sup> The new changes may have altered the original shape of the island, but they proved popular with visitors.<sup>18</sup>

A 1979 *New Nation* article reports a visit to the “Kramat *Datuk Khong*” that commemorates a pious man, Haji Syed Abdul Rahman together with his wife (rather than mother) Nenek Ghalib, and daughter, Sharifah Fatimah. The three of them, all “living in the days of Raffles” had climbed the hill and simply vanished without a trace, possibly by supernatural means. Syed Abdul Rahman’s “kinsmen were later advised in dreams to build a shrine for the three departed ones”. Visitors to the shrine were women seeking children and “numbers to instant fortune”, and the tradition of tying stones to the trees continued.<sup>19</sup>

Photographs from this period also show that other than cosmetic changes, the shrine looked much as it did until the fire in 2022.



(Above) The entrance to the stairs leading up to the *keramat*, 2022. Courtesy of William L. Gibson.

(Below) Lottery numbers are scrawled over the painted rocks at the entrance to the *keramat* at the top of the stairs, 2022. Courtesy of William L. Gibson.



## Fire and Reconstruction

The pilgrimages to Kusu continued unabated over the decades and a routine had been established. Pilgrims would first visit the Tua Pek Kong Temple to seek blessings, before climbing the steps to the *keramat* on the top of the hill. There are several waypoints within the *keramat*, and numbers have been printed and pasted at the different spots so that devotees would know the order in which to visit the different stations.

The blaze on 17 April 2022, however, threatened to put an end to the rituals. The fire broke out on a Sunday evening, at about 6.20 pm, and was eventually put out by firefighters after about an hour, aided by heavy rain. While no lives were lost, the *keramat* was almost completely destroyed. The fire's cause was not determined, but lit candles and incense are often left unattended there.

A month after the conflagration, it was announced that the *keramat* would be rebuilt at a cost of hundreds of thousands of dollars, in time for the Double Ninth Festival.<sup>20</sup> In early September 2022, the *Straits Times* quoted the shrine's caretaker, Ishak Samsudin, as saying that the *keramat* was about 70 percent rebuilt by then, and would "likely be ready" in time for the pilgrimage season at the end of September. Ishak told the newspaper that he had financed the reconstruction with donations from friends and companies.<sup>21</sup>

I returned to the site in November 2022. It had been rebuilt in time for the Ninth Month celebrations, but it was still not complete. A temporary marquee had been erected to provide shade and burned debris still littered the hillside beneath the shrines. The shrines were reconstructed in almost exact replicas with some of the original material, such as the concrete altars, left intact.

Unfortunately, the 1917 dedication plaques were badly damaged and poorly restored. However, by burning off decades worth of accumulated jerry-built material, the catastrophe revealed previously hidden artefacts. At the back of the altars for the two women are stone mounds commonly seen in *datuk* nature shrines. More intriguingly, a worn *batu nisan* (grave-stone) placed before one of these mounds is inscribed with a Jawi phrase that mirrors the 1917 plaque. The phrase "Datuk Nenek" is legible, which suggests that a shrine-grave was erected here during the 1917–1921 renovations in honour of the female *datuk* of Kusu Island. During my visit, several worshippers passed through, marking their devotion with prayers and incense as the sea glittered below. ♦

The author thanks Hikari D. Azyure and the Urban Explorers of Singapore. To see more photos of the *keramat*, including photos of what it looks like after the fire, visit <https://go.gov.sg/shrines-keramat-kusu> or scan this QR code.



The fire revealed previously hidden artefacts. At the back of the altars for the two women are stone mounds commonly seen in *datuk* nature shrines. Courtesy of William L. Gibson.

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# SUBARAJ RAJATHURAI

## A VOICE FOR THE WILD

A gentle giant with a larger-than-life personality, Subaraj Rajathurai helped to save Singapore's green spaces.  
By Benjamin Ho

Benjamin Ho is a Specialist with the Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore. His work involves developing the oral history collection, conducting workshops on oral history and disseminating oral history.

“A remarkable knack [for] spotting animals.” He “worked tirelessly towards the conservation of Singapore’s natural heritage”. It is “a great loss to nature lovers in Singapore”. These were some of the tributes that poured in after news broke that Subaraj Rajathurai, wildlife consultant and nature advocate, had died of a heart attack in October 2019 at the age of 56.<sup>1</sup>

Subaraj was one of the first personalities I interviewed after joining the Oral History Centre at the National Archives of Singapore. As a nature enthusiast myself, his name frequently cropped up in conversations with fellow nature lovers during field trips I had participated in. However, our paths did not cross until our first meeting in November 2017 at the National Library Building to discuss his oral history interview.

I remember a towering man (at almost 1.8 m tall) with his flowing white hair, long white beard and trademark bandana, who greeted me with a firm handshake. With a warm smile, he introduced me to his wife Shamla. The husband-and-wife team worked together at Strix Wildlife Consultancy – named after a genus of owls – that does research, wildlife surveys, educational outreach programmes, eco-tours and other conservation work. Subaraj loved nature so much that they even named their two sons, Serin and Saker, after a species of finch and falcon respectively.<sup>2</sup>

At this meeting, Subaraj told me that he was Singapore’s first licensed tour guide specialising in nature tours. What is even more remarkable about the man was that he was entirely self-taught, honing his craft in the field and following up with research in the library.



(Facing page) Subaraj Rajathurai showing participants a green snake at the launch of Ubin Day on Pulau Ubin, 2014. *Ministry of Communications and Information Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

(Above) Subaraj Rajathurai with his wife Shamla and sons Saker (left) and Serin (right) at Taman Negara, 2015. *Courtesy of the family of Subaraj Rajathurai.*



probing questions with authority, yet in an unassuming manner. In his soothing baritone, Subaraj's love for the wild side of life was apparent. Even before he and his then girlfriend, now wife, got married, he told her that two things would come before her: God (he was a Hindu) and nature.<sup>4</sup> At his wake, his wife told *The New Paper* that family holidays had always revolved around nature, and their flat was filled with pictures of wildlife. "If he could live atop Bukit Timah Hill, he would," she said.<sup>5</sup>

I consider it a great privilege to have known Subaraj and to have had the opportunity to document his life story, and capture his memories and his reflections on his work regarding nature conservation in Singapore over almost nine hours of audio recordings.

### A Passion for Nature

Back in 1994, long before environmental issues were at the forefront of public consciousness, Subaraj was considered "one of the key figures in the nature movement in Singapore".<sup>6</sup>

Born in 1963 to parents who were teachers, Subaraj grew up in a middle-class home in Siglap with an older brother and a younger sister. His initial encounters with wildlife were the insects and birds in his home garden as well as what he saw during his trips to Malaysia to visit relatives. As a child, Subaraj's hobbies included cutting out animal pictures from

**(Left)** Bukit Timah Nature Reserve, 1988. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

**(Below)** Migratory birds at Sungei Buloh Wetland Reserve. *Courtesy of the Singapore Tourism Board.*

magazines and collecting animal wrappers from Milkmaid condensed milk cans. He was inspired by the likes of David Attenborough, Jacques Cousteau, Jane Goodall and David Bellamy as he enjoyed watching their documentaries on television.<sup>7</sup>

Subaraj studied at Guillemard East Primary School where his father, Rajalingam Rajathurai, was a teacher. (Rajalingam was interviewed by the Oral History Centre in 2003.) Although Subaraj did well enough to go to Raffles Institution, he opted for Tanjong Katong Technical School (now Tanjong Katong Secondary School). After repeating his 'O' levels at Siglap Secondary School as he wanted a better certificate, Subaraj enrolled in a private college but this did not work out after he was asked to dissect a live frog.<sup>8</sup>

After his national service, Subaraj spent most of his time learning about and observing wildlife in their natural habitat, and attending courses conducted by university professors.<sup>9</sup> He went on field trips to places like the Endau-Rompin National Park in Johor to learn from experts such as the well-known Malaysian naturalist Dennis Yong. In 1985, Subaraj joined the Nature Society and had the opportunity to take people on guided nature walks.<sup>10</sup>

Subaraj recalled that his first paid job was in 1988 when he was asked to conduct a tour for foreign bird watchers. "[Taking] people out brought me finally to where I should be because the greatest joy is showing people what you love, enjoying what you love with others and seeing them enjoy it as much as you do," said Subaraj. "So, taking the bird watchers out, showing them was tremendous. Something that I love and that's what I wanted to do," he added.<sup>11</sup>

The opening of the Bukit Timah Expressway in December 1985. It separated the Bukit Timah Nature Reserve and the Central Catchment Nature Reserve. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

"I spent four years after National Service, in the field about five days a week, just studying everything about nature. Wandering around places like Bukit Timah and MacRitchie and a whole range of nature areas," said Subaraj. "[E]verything I encountered, I would write down in a notebook... I would describe it and then I would come right to the National Library – that time in Marine Parade, the branch. And I would sit there for up to three hours, looking at reference books that you can't borrow and find out the names of everything."<sup>12</sup>

Following that meeting, I went on to conduct a series of oral history interviews with Subaraj over six sessions from January to May 2018. He answered my





Subaraj Rajathurai showing Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong a green snake at the launch of Ubin Day on Pulau Ubin, 2014. *Ministry of Communications and Information Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

Subaraj underwent the Singapore Tourism Board's six-month tourist guide course and subsequently became the first nature licensed tour guide in Singapore in 1990. He then created and customised all kinds of tours, from general nature walks to hikes, boat rides and bike rides.<sup>12</sup> He had designed and conducted more than 50 tours around Singapore.<sup>13</sup>

Subaraj reckoned that he had taken thousands of people on nature walks to share his knowledge and hopefully win some sympathisers, advocates or activists to the conservation cause. "The more information we share, the better chance we have of saving nature through others having a better understanding and respect for it," he said.<sup>14</sup>

### Traipsing Up Bukit Timah Hill

Subaraj's first trek up Bukit Timah Hill was in the early 1980s when one of his good friends, who lived at the base of the hill, took him there. As soon as he got up the hill, he felt like it was coming home. "I was in a place where I belonged and I never looked back."<sup>15</sup>

Back then, Bukit Timah Nature Reserve was a lush, tropical forest, Subaraj said. "And then if it rains, if you go after the rain, it's like Fraser's Hill, Cameron Highlands. All mist everywhere, you are walking through a cloud forest like the cloud is sitting there and you are walking through mist, the ground is covered with water."<sup>16</sup> One had to be careful walking around though as "there are giant millipedes everywhere. ... [I]f you go in the trails, you have to avoid stepping on the giant millipedes because there are everywhere. You will be killing them."<sup>17</sup>

Subaraj's oral history interview provides a glimpse into how Bukit Timah Hill has changed over time. He observed that the lush vegetation on the hill had

become drier. He attributed this to the physical separation of Bukit Timah Nature Reserve and the Central Catchment Nature Reserve by the six-lane Bukit Timah Expressway (BKE). Completed in 1985, the expressway effectively cut the forest reserves into two.<sup>18</sup>

Subaraj recalled that when he first visited Bukit Timah Hill in the early 1980s, "they had just started cutting off Bukit Timah from MacRitchie and Central Catchment with the BKE. So, until then, it was all connected, ... after that, from the BKE over the last 30, 40 years, the winds have been blowing, blocking down the trees and drying up the forest."<sup>19</sup>

With the construction of condominiums right up to the edge of the hill as well as the building of more roads, Subaraj believed that Bukit Timah Nature Reserve was suffering. "I have been fighting a battle to try and save this hill but the preoccupation is there are people who just want to treat it like a park," he lamented.<sup>20</sup>

He recalled a time when Bukit Timah Hill was under the radar of most people. "So, most of the time... I probably had the hill to myself the whole day. I don't meet a single soul."<sup>21</sup> The turning point, according to Subaraj, was the release of a three-part documentary series in 1993 titled *Bellamy's Singapore*, hosted by the renowned botanist and conservationist David Bellamy. (Subaraj had been the natural history consultant for the programme.<sup>22</sup>) Because of concerns among the nature community that the large numbers of visitors would damage the natural heritage of Bukit Timah Hill, Subaraj said that he stopped conducting tours there.<sup>23</sup>

Nature conservationists were also worried that the isolation of the flora and fauna at the Bukit Timah Nature Reserve from the much larger Central Catchment Nature Reserve would adversely affect biodiversity and threaten the survival of plants and animals.<sup>24</sup> Finally, in 2013, a 50-metre-wide green corridor known



as Eco-Link@BKE was built to allow wildlife to safely cross from one forest tract to the other.<sup>25</sup>

In September 2014, Bukit Timah Nature Reserve was closed for two years for repair and restoration works to its slopes, trails and forests.<sup>26</sup> That, and the earlier opening of Dairy Farm Nature Park in September 2009, helped draw some human traffic away from Bukit Timah Hill which alleviated the pressure on the wildlife there.<sup>27</sup>

### The Allure of Pulau Ubin

Subaraj was also closely associated with Pulau Ubin, a small island located off the northeastern shore of mainland Singapore. He had conducted many tours on Pulau Ubin, which he described as a "very nice, thriving community, kampong community" with "very friendly people", and akin to "visiting Malaysia without your passport".

"It's like a different world. You step into a different time, more relaxed. If you go on a weekday to Pulau Ubin and you sit down quietly at the coffee shop and have a cup of coffee, I promise you, your stress will disappear, and you go into this very relaxed feeling," he said.<sup>28</sup>

In his oral history interview, Subaraj also talked about the local community on the island and the way they organised themselves. In the 1980s, there were a few thousand people living in villages scattered across the island, with a headman for each village. "That means each member of that council of elders was the headman of one village, led by the main headman of Pulau Ubin, and they made all the decisions for the

Sungei Buloh Nature Park, 1993. It was renamed Sungei Buloh Wetland Reserve in 2002 when it was officially gazetted as a nature reserve. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*



Sungei Buloh Wetland Reserve's 25th anniversary celebration, 2018. The guest-of-honour was Emeritus Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong. Accompanying him are Minister for Social and Family Development Desmond Lee and Subaraj Rajathurai. *Ministry of Communications and Information Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

islands." Whenever the government wanted to do something on Ubin, the ministers would seek advice from the council of elders first.<sup>29</sup>

Subaraj remembered taking visitors to the main headman's house and showing them the exotic pets that he kept. He recalled: "I knew him well. He used to have one bad habit and that was he liked to catch some of the local wildlife and keep in a mini zoo in his garden so [he] had a civet cat and a flying fox..."<sup>30</sup>

### Protecting Sungei Buloh

Subaraj was also involved in the effort to protect and preserve the natural environment at Sungei Buloh. Quietly nestled in the northwestern corner of Singapore, Sungei Buloh was a mangrove forest and farming area when avid birdwatcher Richard Hale discovered it in 1986. He found that it was rich with birdlife and spread the word to the rest of the nature community here.

Subaraj recalled: "So [Richard] was wandering around on his own in this area, and he stumbled upon this place where he came across from one side of the river looking across and seeing all these birds flying around... these migratory shore birds from Russia and Siberia and all."<sup>31</sup>

Sungei Buloh was originally earmarked for development as an agro-technology park. In December 1987, Subaraj, Hale and a few members of the Nature Society put forth a proposal for the creation of a 318-hectare nature reserve in Sungei Buloh.

"We sat down for eight months and wrote a proposal for Sungei Buloh based on whatever we know about the place, the research, the information, the potential value in the future for education and tourism and all that," recalled Subaraj.<sup>32</sup> The proposal was sent to the government, including Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew and President Wee Kim Wee. The latter also paid a visit to the site.



Subaraj Rajathurai conducting a tour at Sungei Buloh Wetland Reserve, 2010. The man peering into the telescope is the British wildlife expert and TV presenter Nigel Marven. Courtesy of the family of Subaraj Rajathurai.

Subaraj was initially skeptical that the effort would be a success. “[W]hen [Richard] brought [Sungei Buloh] to our attention, initially there was doubt as to whether this is worth going for because so many doors have been slammed. No area had been conserved since the British left since independence. But this area had one thing going for it, that is the future for it was agro-tech farming. Not housing, not schools, not a reservoir but agro-tech farming which was not so high [a] priority.”<sup>33</sup>

The proposal was accepted by the Ministry of National Development and on 8 April 1988, National Development Minister S. Dhanabalan announced that 85 ha of land in Sungei Buloh would be preserved for a bird sanctuary. This marked the first time since independence that land had been set aside for nature conservation in Singapore.<sup>34</sup> It was also the first time that a civil society group had successfully convinced the government to change its plans.<sup>35</sup>

Subaraj and the group of birdwatchers were subsequently involved in the setting up of the fledging bird sanctuary. “We had a say in the matter, even in the design, because when they were designing Sungei Buloh, they brought in a specialist from England, from Slimbridge who are specialists in water birds,

but they are not specialists in shore birds which is this place, so we came in and gave the information from behind the scenes.”<sup>36</sup>

Sungei Buloh Nature Park was officially opened by Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong in December 1993.<sup>37</sup> It was officially gazetted as a nature reserve in 2002 and renamed Sungei Buloh Wetland Reserve. It became Singapore’s first ASEAN Heritage Park in 2003.

Subaraj attributed its success to the hard work of the National Parks Board (which manages the place today), the nature community and volunteers, who replanted mangroves, protected the habitats and carried out research. “[Sungei Buloh] became a key education stop for students from all over, and it became recognised as that very key stop for migrating birds from Siberia to Australia... we work with all the different countries on the passage, to make sure there is passage for the birds, feeding areas for the birds.”<sup>38</sup>

Subaraj also cited the re-emergence of predator species such as the otter and saltwater crocodile as a validation of the successful reforestation of the mangrove habitat. These predators are important for any healthy ecosystem as they control the population of the prey species. “First the otters, then the crocodiles,” said Subaraj. “And when they are there, it indicates that this works, this ecosystem works.”<sup>39</sup>

Subaraj was proud to have been involved in the process of conserving Sungei Buloh since day one. He said: “It’s one of the few places in Singapore where I can go there and say, ‘So here!’ and it’s better than ever before.”<sup>40</sup>

## A Legacy to Remember

In 2018, Subaraj was able to look back with satisfaction at his work in protecting the natural environment in Singapore. “Sungei Buloh is now well-known worldwide, as is Pulau Ubin [and] Bukit Timah. And the Internet has made the world smaller, so people can read about it.”<sup>41</sup>

Subaraj had also worked on various environmental impact assessments, wildlife surveys and field studies in the 1990s such as Lower Peirce Reservoir where 123.8 ha of forest were saved. In 1990, he was involved in drafting the Master Plan for the Conservation of Nature in Singapore, which recommended a number of sites for conservation, including the mangroves in Mandai.<sup>42</sup>

He was also part of a working group of nature experts consulted by the Land Transport Authority regarding the upcoming Cross Island MRT Line and its impact on wildlife as this line could potentially tunnel under the Central Catchment Nature Reserve.<sup>43</sup> In addition, Subaraj helped to draft the proposed amendments to the Wild Animals and Birds Act; the bill was passed in Parliament in March 2020.<sup>44</sup>

Subaraj’s death came as a shock to all. He had suffered a heart attack while having an afternoon nap on 22 October 2019. At his funeral the following day, dozens of people from the nature community came dressed in green to pay their respects. Speaking at his funeral, Subaraj’s wife said: “The community will have to band together. They know what Subaraj was fighting for, and they will continue to fight for him.”<sup>45</sup>

Subaraj’s name will live on in the form of a tiny frog species recently discovered in Singapore. Subaraj’s Paddy Frog (*Micryletta subaraji*) is a greyish-brown



Subaraj’s Paddy Frog (*Micryletta subaraji*) is named after Subaraj Rajathurai. It is greyish-brown in colour and barely larger than a marble. Courtesy of the Herpetological Society of Singapore.

amphibian, barely larger than a marble, that was first sighted along Old Upper Thomson Road in 2019. Sankar Ananthanarayanan, president of the Herpetological Society of Singapore, was one of the researchers who helped to establish that the frog belonged to a unique species and thus needed a name.

In an interview with the *Straits Times* in August 2022, Sankar noted that many places and wildlife in the region are named after colonial-era figures such as Stamford Raffles and Alfred Russel Wallace. “It is only recently that regional scientists and amateur naturalists have become more prominent, so we wanted to name the frog after Subaraj, who was as much an inspiration to us as any of these other naturalists.”<sup>46</sup> ♦

To listen to Subaraj Rajathurai’s oral history interview with the National Archives of Singapore, go to <https://go.gov.sg/subaraj-rajathurai> or scan this QR code.



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# “BOOK CITY” IN TWO STREETS

## The Chinese Bookstore Scene in Postwar Singapore

Some Chinese bookstores in Singapore have managed to survive despite the challenges of the digital age and the decline in Chinese readers.

By Lee Ching Seng

In the last two decades, the successive closure of numerous Chinese bookstores in Singapore have drawn laments from book lovers. Bookstores have always been an integral part of my life. Since I was a child, I have loved visiting bookstores to buy books and peruse the colourful stationery on display. As an adult, I once even owned a bookstore and also worked as a librarian for more than 40 years. During this time, I had the opportunity to meet many book lovers and bookstore operators. The fact that bookstores are now becoming a sunset industry is, for me, a bitter pill to swallow.

### Book Streets: North and South Bridge Roads (1950–70)

My love affair with Chinese bookstores in Singapore began in 1966 when I first arrived here from Malaysia for my undergraduate studies at Nanyang University (Nantah). Back then, I lived in a dormitory on campus. Most Singaporean students who stayed in the dormitories would go home on weekends or during the holidays, so Malaysian students would be left behind and the campus would be unusually quiet. To stave off loneliness, my fellow Malaysians and I would go downtown to watch movies or visit the bookstores.

In those days, buses travelling from Nantah to town would end their journey at the terminal station on Queen Street, in the Bugis area. This was also where unlicensed taxis from Nantah would end up as well. There were between 20 and 30 bookstores clustered on North Bridge Road, Victoria Street, Middle Road, Bras Basah Road, Queen Street, Waterloo Street, Bencoolen Street, Prinsep Street and Selegie Street, as well as countless small book stalls nestled along the five-footway of shophouses.

*View of North Bridge Road, c. 1970s. Before the 1980s, it was a popular location for Chinese bookstores until they moved into the nearby Bras Basah Complex. Collection of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.*

The most well-known were Chung Hwa Book Company (中华), The Commercial Press (商务), Union Book Company (友联), Popular Bookstore (大众), Youth Book Company (青年), The Nanyang Book Company (南洋), China (中国), Black Cat Book Co. (黑猫) and The Student Book Store (学生). They were all situated along North Bridge Road or in one of its alleys. On nearby Victoria Street were other bookstores like Shanghai Book Company (上海), Tah Lian Book Store (大联) and Sing Lien Book Store (星联).

The concentration of bookstores in the North Bridge Road area helped to develop a vibrant reading culture. Each bookstore distributed or published its own unique genre of books and appealed to different categories of customers who thronged the stores on weekends. In the 1950s and 1960s, when public libraries had yet to become commonplace, these bookstores were havens for young people with intellectual inclinations.

Bookstores such as Shanghai, Chung Hwa, Popular, Youth and Student – which distributed publications from mainland China and Hong Kong, as well as periodicals from Singapore and Malaysia – were popular among left-wing readers, including secondary school students, college students, young working adults, science students from Nantah,

**Lee Ching Seng** is former head of the Chinese Library at the National University of Singapore. As a subject specialist in Singapore and Southeast Asian collections and resources, he has written bibliographies on Singapore Chinese literature, and articles on library collections and the overseas Chinese in Singapore and Southeast Asia.

and young people interested in literature and the arts. Occasionally, in some of the smaller bookstores, one could even find publications from China that the government had banned from importing.

Back then, I used to frequent Union on North Bridge Road. As the bookstore stocked the most comprehensive range of books from Taiwan, it was also referred to as the “Taiwan book specialist”. Most of the reference books recommended by professors of the Nantah College of Arts could be found in Union. On the other hand, students who studied Malay would visit Shanghai Book Company to buy Chinese-Malay dictionaries, Malay language magazines and bilingual books in Chinese and Malay.

After I was done visiting the bookstores on North Bridge Road, I would walk, or take a bus to South Bridge Road, the heart of the other book street. Spanning Upper Cross Street, Cross Street, South Bridge Road and New Bridge Road, South Bridge Road had the highest concentration of Chinese bookstores before World War II.

In the prewar era, most local Chinese bookstores also sold stationery and sporting goods. About 22 of these stores were of considerable scale. After the war, the nucleus of the book street, formerly centred on South Bridge Road, moved to North Bridge Road. By this time, only two bookstores, The World Book Company (世界) and a branch of Chung Hwa Book Company (中华), remained on South Bridge Road. Pan Shou, the famous Singaporean poet and calligrapher, often did his calligraphy work on the second floor of Chung Hwa on weekends. These public demonstrations of his art drew a great number of calligraphy lovers, who visited the store to ask for his autographed works.

The interior of Shanghai Book Company on North Bridge Road, c. 1920s–30s. Collection of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.



The Commercial Press and Shanghai Book Company on North Bridge Road c. 1920s–30s. Collection of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

### Book Cities: Golden Mile and Bras Basah (1970–80)

After Singapore gained independence in 1965, urban redevelopment took place at breakneck speed. Many old shophouses along North and South Bridge roads were demolished, and gleaming skyscrapers took their place. The majority of these high-rise buildings housed shopping malls, offices and residential units. New towns such as Queenstown, Toa Payoh and Ang Mo Kio sprang up in less densely populated suburban and rural areas.

In the 20 years that followed, the evolving urban landscape also brought about further changes: both the North Bridge Road and South Bridge Road book scenes shrank. One by one, Chinese bookstores moved into modern shopping malls that came with better facilities but had high rental rates.

In the 1970s, I was working for the National Library, and visiting bookstores to buy books was part of my job. If my memory serves me, when the Golden Mile Complex on Beach Road opened in 1973, the first batch of tenants included seven Chinese bookstores: Vanguard Book Room (前卫), Wan Li Book Co. (万里), Soon Seng Book Store (顺城), Bailien Bookstore (白莲), Yuancheng Wenhua Book Company (源城), Heng Lee Book Store (兴利奕) and Rinian Bookstore (日年). In 1979, these bookstores held their first joint sale, which attracted many book lovers. Later on, more Chinese bookstores moved into Golden Mile Complex. These included The House of Literature (文学), Fengyun Publisher (风云), Dong Sheng Publisher (东升), and several



others, bringing the total number of bookstores in the complex to nearly 15.

The success of the bookstores at Golden Mile attracted even more independent bookstores to commercial buildings in the vicinity of Beach Road, including Textile Centre at Jalan Sultan (home to Grassroots Book Room [草根书室], Sang Yang Book Store [向阳] and Yuan Yuan Book Store [源源]) and Shaw Centre (home to Xinghai Bookstore [星海] and Crystal Book Room [翡翠]). These two centres, together with Golden Mile Complex, formed a bookstore cluster that attracted bibliophiles.

In 1978, the Housing and Development Board built Bras Basah Complex, a mixed-use development housing both commercial and residential units on North Bridge Road to accommodate bookstores and other shops in the downtown area. Bras Basah Complex, also known affectionately as the City of Books in Chinese (书城), officially opened in 1980.

(Below) Popular Book Company on North Bridge Road, 1968. David Ng Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



Besides being home to older and more established English and Chinese bookstores from the North Bridge Road area such as Popular, Shanghai, Union and Youth, Bras Basah Complex also attracted newer bookstores like Xinhua, Books and Arts of All Ages (今古), Seng Yew Book Store (胜友), International Books (国际), Maha Yu Yi (友谊) and Evernew Book Store (永新) to set up shop on its premises. Within a short time, the new complex had replaced Golden Mile as the heart of the Chinese bookstore industry in Singapore.

The City of Books subsequently drew older bookstores like Commercial Press and independent bookstores such as Grassroots and Great River Book Company (长河) to either set up branches or new stores there. As a result, North Bridge Road has, once again, become the centre of the local Chinese bookstore scene, and its position remains unchallenged even to this day.

### Conglomerate Bookstores (1980–99)

Bras Basah Complex is currently the largest book hub in Singapore. It comprises 117 units (including office space), with more than 90 of these occupied by bookstores or stationery shops. Among the many

(Top left) Chung Hwa Book Company on North Bridge Road, 1920–40. Lee Brothers Studio Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

(Below) Union Book Company on North Bridge Road, 1968. Stationery was sold on the first floor, while books were found on the second floor. Courtesy of Union Book Company.



Grassroots Book Room at 25 Bukit Pasoh Road. The bookstore was formerly located in North Bridge Centre. Photo by Jimmy Yap.

bookstores there, Popular's flagship store is the biggest. Covering an area of around 2,323 sq m and spanning three floors at the time, it was considered the largest bookstore in Southeast Asia when it opened in 1980.

Popular was founded by Chou Sing Chu, who had come from Shanghai and set up The World Book Company in Singapore. The first Popular store was located at 205 North Bridge Road. In the 1980s, just as the Chinese bookstore industry started to go downhill, Popular became one of the first bookstores to take up a lease at Bras Basah Complex. It transformed into a bilingual bookstore selling both Chinese and English books. It also pioneered a new business model by selling stationery and gifts on a large scale. This was a refreshing change in the traditional Chinese bookstore trade.

In 1994, the Chou family merged The World Book Company and its subsidiaries into Popular, making it the first conglomerate bookstore in Singapore. Today, Popular Holdings operates in Hong Kong and various countries in Southeast Asia. With more than 4,000 publications and nearly 40 publishing houses under its belt, Popular offers literary books, periodicals, Malay dictionaries, textbooks, teaching aids and more. These publications are distributed through its network of publishing houses in Singapore, Jakarta and Hong Kong.

Another bilingual conglomerate bookstore that grew from humble beginnings in Singapore to becoming a global player was Page One (叶一堂). In 1983, the company opened its first store in Parkway Parade,



Bras Basah Complex is well known for its many bookstores and is referred to as the City of Books. Photo by Jimmy Yap.

along Marine Parade Road, far away from the City of Books at North Bridge Road. During Page One's early days, the store specialised in design and art publications, making it one of the earliest specialty bookstores in Singapore. At one point, Page One even had bookstores in China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Thailand.

### Struggling to Stay Afloat (2000–22)

However, by the 2000s, the Chinese bookstore industry began its decline as online bookstores entered the scene. The death knell for local Chinese bookstores sounded with the changes in buying and reading preferences brought about by the rise of these digital bookstores and the rapidly shrinking Chinese-reading population, coupled with increasing operating costs. Even as physical bookstores transformed into conglomerates, adopted a bilingual approach, or created niche markets, they were no match for the emerging e-book industry and its digital sales strategies.

The decline was keenly felt in 2011 when numerous bookstores went out of business or closed their stores in Singapore. These included the American book and music retailer Borders, which shuttered both outlets in Singapore, Chinese bookstores Shanghai and Vista Culture Square (远景), and specialty bookstores such as Page One. Popular Holdings, listed on the main board of Singapore Exchange in 1997, was delisted in 2015. It was evident that a strategy of conglomerate, bilingualism and diversification was ineffective in reversing the fortunes of the floundering Chinese bookstore industry.

However, some smaller Chinese bookstores known for their customer-centric and unique approaches – such as Union, Xinhua, Maha Yu Yi and Wanchun Book Store (万春) – managed to survive

the competitive climate and are still in business today. Although these bookstores do not carry English titles, they have, somewhat miraculously, retained their share of the Chinese book market.

Union, which used to specialise in books from Taiwan and Hong Kong, has undergone a transformation under the leadership of Managing Director Margaret Ma. Today, Union sells books from China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore and Malaysia written in both traditional and simplified Chinese. At the same time, the bookstore works with primary and secondary schools and libraries to promote new books, and also acts as a middleman to purchase books from overseas publishers on behalf of schools and libraries. The bookstore celebrated its 70th anniversary in June 2022. (For more about Union, check out the article in the Oct–Dec 2022 issue of *BiblioAsia*.)

Grassroots Book Room is another example of a small bookstore that was able to pivot successfully, though not easily. The late Yeng Pway Ngon, who later became an acclaimed writer and Cultural Medallion recipient, founded the bookstore in Textile Centre in 1976 but it closed in 1981. In 1995, Yeng re-established the store on North Bridge Road, but after two decades of struggles, he sold the business in 2014 to former journalist Lim Jen Erh, arts lover Lim Yeong Shin and medical doctor Lim Woon Tee. The bookstore has since relocated to Bukit Pasoh Road, where it continues to serve book lovers today.

Tan Waln Ching, a former employee of Grassroots, founded City Book Room (城市书坊) as a home publishing business in 2014. Two years later, it moved to North Bridge Centre, a few units away from Grassroots's original location. In June 2022, City Book Room relocated once more, this time to Joo Chiat Road in the east.

Both Grassroots and City have successfully carved niches for themselves. They have created cul-

tural spaces for readers and authors to come together in the celebration and promotion of new books. By organising events such as talks, themed book fairs and recitals, they also provide opportunities for authors and readers to interact with one another and share their love of books and reading.



A book discussion on 钦天监 (*Imperial Astronomer*) by Hong Kong's veteran author Xi Xi, held at City Book Room on Joo Chiat Road, 2022. Courtesy of City Book Room.

### A New Lease of Life

It is thanks to dedicated book lovers, who have been quietly pushing back against the declining trend of Chinese bookstores, that Singapore can still boast of the stores mentioned above. Despite the scarcity of Chinese bookstores in Singapore today, these brick-and-mortar stores are each unique in their own ways. Together, they safeguard a literary niche in the compressed space of the city we call home, prioritising cultural legacy over profits.

For readers, these bookstores provide sustenance for the soul; for writers, they provide a platform for the publication of their books; for creative youths, they offer a nurturing space for imaginative pursuits; and for the next generation, they provide a conducive environment that encourages Chinese reading.

Even though Chinese readership in Singapore is declining and the golden age of Chinese bookstores has passed, I believe that the worst is over. Moving forward, these independent bookstores – with their personalised touches and new business models – will give the bookstore industry a new lease of life. ♦

This essay was first written in Chinese. To read the original version, visit [go.gov.sg/chinese-bookstores](http://go.gov.sg/chinese-bookstores) or scan this QR code.



# MAIDEN LIM AND HER SISTERS

## TAOIST FOLK GODDESSES OF SINGAPORE

The local Taoist pantheon includes goddesses only found in Singapore, such as Lin Guniang, Lei Niangniang and Huang Guniang.

By Ng Yi-Sheng

In the 1960s, my father lived in mortal fear of the goddess Lin Guniang (林姑娘).<sup>1</sup> As a child living in Kampong Henderson, he knew her by her Hokkien name, Lim Kor Niu. While he often passed by her shrine on Henderson Road, he never dared to gaze at her statue.

“People said the place was haunted,” my father told me. “We’d be damn frightened. You’d pass by, but you wouldn’t look.”<sup>2</sup> He recalled that the shrine was tiny, fitting six people at most, with wooden walls and a gabled roof made of zinc or attap. It stood beside a tree, with a joss stick holder and a table outside. Alongside there was a storm drain with a stone bridge linking the site to the road.

The goddess was well-known in the neighbourhood. Residents referred to the lower stretch of Henderson Road between Tiong Bahru Road and Alexandra Road as “Lim Kor Niu” and even nicknamed a nearby hawker stall “Lim Kor Niu Char Kway Teow”. Yet

**Ng Yi-Sheng** is a poet, fictionist, playwright and researcher. His books include the debut poetry collection *last boy*, *A Book of Hims* and *Loud Poems for a Very Obliging Audience*, and the short story collection *Lion City*, which won the Singapore Literature Prize in 2020. He tweets and Instagrams at @yishkabob.

somehow, over time, memory of the goddess has faded. Today, even among Singapore heritage enthusiasts, her name is largely unknown.

This is a shame. Lin Guniang – also known as Hongshan Lin Guniang (红山林姑娘), or Maiden Lim of Redhill – is an example of a uniquely Singaporean Taoist folk goddess. Her legends and ritual traditions began not in China, Hong Kong or Taiwan, but on this very island.

The notion of a homegrown goddess may sound bizarre. In fact, several such deities exist. By far the most famous is the German Girl of Pulau Ubin, also known as Nadu Guniang (拿督姑娘), recently written about by William L. Gibson for *BiblioAsia*.<sup>3</sup> Photographer Ronni Pinsler has documented at least half a dozen more on his Facebook group “Local Gods & Their Legends”<sup>4</sup> and on his website, “The Book of Xian Shen”<sup>5</sup>.

In this essay, we will look at three homegrown goddesses, all based in the heartland of Singapore’s south. Their names are Lin Guniang, Lei Niangniang and Huang Guniang. Together, they have been dubbed by Taoist priest Jave Wu as “the three Immortal Maidens of Singapore”.<sup>6</sup>



The statues of Lin Guniang (front) and Lei Niangniang (back) at Zhen Long Gong, 2022. Courtesy of Ng Yi-Sheng.



Lin Guniang and Lei Niangniang are honoured with their names on the paper lanterns of Zhen Long Gong, 2022. Courtesy of Ng Yi-Sheng.

### The Legends of Maiden Lim, the Mysteries of Maiden Lei

Hidden in the neighbourhood of Bukit Merah, between Gan Eng Seng Primary School and a forest of condemned seven-storey SIT (Singapore Improvement Trust) flats, you will find the dragon arch of Zhen Long Gong (Chin Leng Keng; 真龙宫).<sup>7</sup> Remove your shoes and ascend the steps to the main hall, still gleaming from its 2022 renovations. Here, you will find the faithful paying their respects to dozens of Taoist and Mahayana Buddhist divinities: the bodhisattva Guanyin (Goddess of Mercy; 观音), the god of war Guan Gong (关公), the monkey king Sun Wukong (孙悟空), the medicine deity Baosheng Dadi (保生大帝), the god of grains Wugu Dadi (五谷大帝), and the tiger spirit Huyue (虎爷), to name a few.

Here, worshippers also bow before Lin Guniang. Her statue is swaddled in a glittering multicoloured cape, fastened around her throat with a red ribbon. Beneath the fabric, she is garlanded with beads. Ritual offerings lie on her altar: boxed cosmetics, lipsticks and perfumes. Paper lanterns hang outside the temple doors, marked with her name. Each year, on the 15th day of the seventh lunar month, a small festival is held in her honour.

Some controversy surrounds her origins. The temple's caretaker, 74-year-old Huang Yahong (黄亚宏), is happy to share what he knows of her legend, but cautions that certain details may only be shared orally, not in writing.<sup>8</sup> It feels safe, nevertheless, to reveal that his account corresponds closely with one printed in the *Straits Times* in 1989.

She "lived around the turn of the century [c. 1900] and was married to a sailor who was frequently at sea. A neighbour by the surname of Tan tried to seduce

her, but she spurned him. Furious, he framed her for infidelity. She committed suicide to prove her chastity and her spirit kept returning to help needy neighbours. Soon a shrine was erected for her in the Henderson Road area. As the story goes, she helps anybody except those with the surname of Tan".<sup>9</sup>

The caretaker also reveals the fate of Tan, the neighbour whose gossip caused her death. Supposedly, he went mad and killed himself by driving a nail into his own head.

The most widespread version of the goddess's tale, however, comes from television. In 1998, the Singapore Broadcasting Corporation (now Mediacorp) produced and aired the series *Myths and Legends of Singapore* (石叻坡传说), with the first episode titled "Lady of the Hill" (红山林姑娘), starring Fann Wong as Lin Guniang. It is this adaptation that currently serves as the primary reference for the goddess in online resources, such as Ronni Pinsler's entry on his website, "The Book of Xianshen",<sup>10</sup> and Jave Wu's blog, "International LSM Taoist Cultural Collegium".<sup>11</sup>

In this retelling, Lin Guniang is depicted as living in the early to mid-19th century, dressed in a *changshan* (长衫). She is a practitioner of traditional Chinese medicine, while her jealously possessive husband, Ah Guang, is a hunter. When he accuses her of adultery, she jumps into a well, which then overflows with blood. After her death, her village is struck by a plague, but she returns as a spirit to aid the afflicted.

The writers of "Lady of the Hill" draw an explicit parallel between their tale and the Malay legend of how Redhill got its name. The episode opens with a representative of the National Museum of Singapore conducting research at Zhen Long Gong. When asked why the soil in the area is red, the worshippers repeat the familiar story of how the boy hero Hang Nadim was assassinated by an evil Raja, thus marking the earth with his blood. One worshipper then offers Lin Guniang's tale as a counter-narrative, declaring, "It was her blood that stained the hill red."

Huang the caretaker rejects this account. He reminds us that Lin Guniang's shrine had its origins in Kampong Henderson, near Tiong Bahru, and not Bukit Merah. Any association between the shedding of her blood and the crimson earth would only have been invented after her shrine's relocation.



Caretaker Huang Yahong (黄亚宏) of Zhen Long Gong. Courtesy of Ng Yi-Sheng.

He adds that her death could not have taken place more than a hundred years ago, as he is acquainted with a neighbourhood resident who was a little girl when the tragedy took place. Nor is the goddess particularly renowned for her healing powers.<sup>12</sup> She bestows more general blessings upon her followers, though they were often known to ask her for luck in gambling, specifically in the popular lottery game of *chap ji kee*.<sup>13</sup>

But there is another, more recent story connected with the goddess, one that suggests my father had good reason to fear her power. This took place in the 1970s, shortly after Lin Guniang's shrine on Henderson Road was cleared for redevelopment.

At the time, the Member of Parliament for Bukit Merah was Lim Guan Hoo. On Sunday, 13 February 1977, he collapsed from a stroke while attending an event at the National Stadium.<sup>14</sup> He passed away on 3 August at the Singapore General Hospital (SGH) after being in a coma for 172 days.<sup>15</sup>

This was only one of many uncanny events that followed in the wake of the shrine's demolition and subsequent relocation. "Among the Housing Development Board [HDB] people, many fell sick," the caretaker says. "They were scared. The head of HDB was scared too. And one of our grassroots leaders, his son also died."<sup>16</sup>

Then, around 1980, grassroots leader Yeo Chin Hua (杨振华) arranged to have Lin Guniang transported to Zhen Long Gong, an institution he had helped form by uniting four Taoist temples affected by redevelopment.<sup>17</sup> According to his son, the goddess had visited him in a dream, expressing her wish to make her new home in this united temple.

The temple committee was happy to comply. But where would they house the goddess? She was technically a terrestrial spirit, distinct from the celestial gods, and might require a separate shrine on the temple grounds.

A solution came from Baosheng Dadi, the patron deity of Zhen Ren Gong (Chin Lin Keng; 真人宫), one of Zhen Long Gong's constituent temples. During a ceremony, his statue was placed on a palanquin, and his spirit possessed his palanquin bearers, enabling them to trace a divine message in a heap of ashes. In writing, he granted Lin Guniang permission to be worshipped within his temple. The very same palanquin was later used to transport her statue to Zhen Long Gong.

Zhen Long Gong after its renovation, 2022. Courtesy of Ng Yi-Sheng.





Before we move on, return your gaze to the altar. To the right of Lin Guniang is the statue of yet another Singaporean folk goddess, named Lei Niangniang (Lui Niu Niu; 雷娘娘), or Maiden Lei. She, too, is honoured with her name on the temple's paper lanterns, and a copper brazier is marked with the names of both goddesses, indicating their equal status. Below her stands a gift from a devotee: a framed rectangle piece of cloth, embroidered with her name and the date of her festival: the seventh day of the fourth lunar month.

What are her origins? Some call her Si Jiao Ting Lei Guniang (四脚亭雷姑娘), which suggests a connection with the Si Jiao Ting Hokkien Cemetery in Tiong Bahru.<sup>18</sup> Huang the caretaker, on the other hand, insists she was native to Kampong Henderson, and that she was admitted to Zhen Ren Gong sometime in the 1950s.

"Her story is not known," he says. "After her death, her spirit was felt in the village." To pacify her soul, the temple deified her and bestowed her with her current title. Unfortunately, her mortal name, like her mortal deeds, is lost to history.

**(Left)** The statue of Lei Niangniang on the formal altar of Zhen Long Gong after the renovation of the temple, 2022. Courtesy of Ng Yi-Sheng.

**(Below)** Wat Ananda Metyarama along Jalan Bukit Merah. Its columbarium houses the tablet of Huang Guniang. Courtesy of Ng Yi-Sheng.



Huang Guniang's former tablet (left) and shrine (right) erected beneath a tree in the compound of the Singapore General Hospital. The shrine was cleared in 2017. Courtesy of Victor Yue.



### The Martyrdoms of Maiden Huang

A half-hour stroll from Zhen Long Gong brings us to Wat Ananda Metyarama on Jalan Bukit Merah, the oldest Thai Buddhist temple in Singapore. Saffron-robed monks perform chores amid common iconography in Theravada Buddhist temples: four-faced Brahma, the eclipse-causing deity Rahu, even a vibrant mural of the wheel of samsara in which appear the distinctive towers of Marina Bay Sands. Ignore these for now and enter the Julamane Prasad: the small columbarium at the base of the temple's three-storey belltower.

Here, you will find the tablet of Huang Guniang (黄姑娘), also called Maiden Huang, Maiden Ng and Ng Kor Niu. Her name is written in gold on red, couched on a stylised lotus and framed by flowering vines. In a glass cabinet, she sits on the topmost shelf, above 28 tablets of other deceased souls, while the ash-filled urns of other mortals occupy the walls of the neighbouring rooms.

The details of Huang Guniang's legend are unusually precise. On his website, the Taoist priest Jave Wu states that she was born in 1866, on the 12th day of the sixth lunar month, in the village of Gu Ah Sua (龟仔山), later known as Kampong Silat. Her name was Huang Su Ying (黄素英, pronounced Ng Shor Eng in Hokkien and Wong Sok Eng in Cantonese). As her family was poor, she worked with her mother as a laundress from a young age.<sup>19</sup>

In 1879, Huang Guniang began doing laundry with her paternal aunt at the Kandang Kerbau Hospital. In 1882, they moved to SGH, which had just shifted to its current location on Outram Road. One day, a doctor suggested that she train to be a nurse. She qualified in 1900 and began caring for patients and assisting in the pharmacy.<sup>20</sup>

Sadly, death came for her the very next year, just before the Qingming Festival. A fire broke out one night at a kampong near her home. "Maiden Ng did not hesitate to volunteer herself at the fire site to assist the injured," Wu says. "With a dash, she ran to the fire site... trying her best to save as many villagers as possible." However, while attempting to rescue an old lady, the house she was in collapsed. Her body was never recovered.<sup>21</sup>

There are, of course, other accounts of her origins. In 2017, a then-66-year-old former resident of her kampong named Liu Xing Fa (刘星发) told *Shin Min Ri Bao* (新民日报) that Huang Guniang had killed herself for love after her family had matchmade her to someone else.<sup>22</sup>

As a child, Liu had witnessed the worship of Huang Guniang in Heng San Teng (恒山亭) on Jalan Bukit Merah. "She committed suicide near the temple," he explained. "The kampong people couldn't bear to let her become a wandering spirit, so they invited her into the temple to worship her."<sup>23</sup>

Heng San Teng burned down in 1992. Around this time, a small shrine dedicated to the goddess was erected beneath a tree on Hospital Drive, within the SGH compound. It was a humble affair, consisting of a simple, red boxed altar where devotees had placed offerings of joss sticks, food and cosmetics before her tablet. Nevertheless, patients flocked to the site, desperately praying to her for good health.

“If on that very night after the honouring, the patient dream[s] of a big white spider or [a] spider with long legs, the chances of getting his illness cured will be high,” Wu notes. He adds that her presence brought an end to traffic accidents along Hospital Drive and the opposite road, and that visitors would occasionally catch a glimpse of her spirit at the junction near her shrine and her former temple.<sup>24</sup>

Alas, all this good work could not save Huang Guniang’s altar. In 2017, because of SGH’s plans for redevelopment and expansion, her shrine was cleared from its original site.<sup>25</sup> According to Victor Yue, creator of the “Story of Ng Kor Niu 黄姑娘” Facebook group, the contractor engaged a Taoist priest to administer the shift.<sup>26</sup> A huge paper mansion was also burnt for her as part of a ceremony to invite her to Wat Ananda Metyarama.

Worshippers continue to pray to the goddess at the columbarium. A small sign reading “This Way to Maiden Huang” has been posted by the front door, directing them to her tablet: a newer, more ornate piece than the one that formerly occupied her demolished shrine.

During the ceremony inviting Huang Guniang to Wat Ananda Metyarama, a paper mansion was also burnt for her, 2022. Courtesy of Raymond Goh.

Some may grumble that SGH should have found her a home on their premises where she could continue to offer comfort to those in need of hope and healing. Yet there have been no whispers of vengeance in the five years following her move. Huang Guniang, it seems, is content.

### Singapore’s Spirits

This essay is by no means a comprehensive survey of Singapore’s homegrown Taoist pantheon. Perhaps in future essays, we may make the acquaintance of other local gods and goddesses, such as Liang Taiye (梁太爷), Zhu Guniang (朱姑娘), Liu Xiu Guniang (刘秀姑娘), Cai Fu Xiao Guniang (蔡府小姑娘), Hong Hua Guniang (红花姑娘), Sun Jiang Jun (孙将军) and Zhang Fu Ren (张夫人). Some of these figures have long vanished from altars, while others still hold sway in temples. Some may still be honoured in household shrines around Singapore.

So far, most of the research into these local gods and goddesses has been conducted by passionate amateurs such as Ronni Pinsler, Jave Wu and Victor Yue. More formal scholarship is needed, not only to record the names and stories of these deities, but also to better grasp their place in Southeast Asian culture. What sense can we make of the parallels between their

reverence and Malay *keramat* (shrine) worship?<sup>27</sup> What parallels can we draw with other gods of the regional Chinese diaspora, such as Tua Pek Kong (Da Bogong; 大伯公), with his origins in Penang?<sup>28</sup>

In saying this, I do not mean to downplay the contributions of non-academics in this field. On platforms such as the “Local Gods & Their Legends” and “Taoism Singapore” Facebook groups, aficionados share knowledge about ritual practices across the region.<sup>29</sup> Here, we share recollections of forgotten deities and learn about those still worshipped in our midst. Regardless of whether we are believers, sceptics or just agnostic, we work to keep our sacred heritage alive.

Lin Guniang, Lei Niangniang and Huang Guniang have not, in my opinion, been accorded the full respect they deserve. Over the decades, their

The ceremony inviting Huang Guniang to Wat Ananda Metyarama, 2022. Courtesy of Raymond Goh.



congregations have dwindled, their shrines have been destroyed and their tales have been carelessly rewritten.

Nevertheless, their existence remains an inspiration. They serve as proof that Singapore is not merely a meeting place for spiritual cultures, but a site for their creation. This is not a disenchanting island. This is a city where goddesses are born. ♦

Besides the many individuals cited in the text and captions, I am also indebted to heritage activist Choo Lip Sin, who personally aided me with research and translation for this essay.

For more photos related to these three local Taoist goddesses, check out the online version of the article at <https://go.gov.sg/taoist-folk-goddesses-singapore> or scan this QR code.



### NOTES

- Singapore’s Lin Guniang must not be confused with the goddess Lin Guniang (or Lim Ko Niao) worshipped in southern Thailand. The two are distinct and unrelated deities, and the term “guniang” simply means girl or young woman in Mandarin. For more information, see Mistuko Tamaki, “The Prevalence of the Worship of Goddess Lin Guniang by the Ethnic Chinese in Southern Thailand” (G-SEC Working Paper 22, Keio University Global Research Institute (KGRI), December 2007), [https://www.kgri.keio.ac.jp/en/docs/GWP\\_22.pdf](https://www.kgri.keio.ac.jp/en/docs/GWP_22.pdf).
- Ng Hark Seng, interview, 26 July 2022.
- William L. Gibson, “Unravelling the Mystery of Ubin’s German Girl Shrine,” *BiblioAsia* 13, no. 3 (Oct–Dec 2021).
- Ronni Pinsler, “Local Gods & Their Legends,” Facebook, accessed 27 September 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/localgods/posts/>.
- Ronni Pinsler, “The Book of Xian Shen,” accessed 15 September 2022, <https://bookofxianshen.com/>.
- Jave Wu, “Story of Maiden Lim of Redhill (石叻坡傳奇之紅山林姑娘),” International LSM Taoist Cultural Collegium, 1 March 2013, <http://javewutaosimplace.blogspot.com/2013/03/story-of-maiden-lim-of-redhill.html>.
- Zhen Long Gong (Chin Leng Keng) is made up of four temples: Leng San Teng, Chin Lin Keng, Kai Kok Tien and Ban Sian Beo. The four temples were affected by urban redevelopment in the early 1970s. They came together in 1976 to lease the current site for the construction of Zhen Long Gong, which was completed in 1978.
- Huang Ya Hong, interview, Zhen Long Gong, 20 June 2022.
- “Singapore Maiden Joins the Taoist Pantheon,” *Straits Times*, 27 May 1989, 22. (From NewspaperSG)
- Pinsler, “Book of Xian Shen.”
- Wu, “Story of Maiden Lim.”
- There is in fact some evidence for Lin Guniang’s reputation as a healer. According to historian Tai Wei Lim, elderly taxi drivers in the neighbourhood agree that she “has special Shamanistic healing powers and even [helps] out at traditional Chinese medicine institutions”. Is this entirely based on the 1998 TV serial, or are they citing deeper memories? See Lim Tai-Wei, *Cultural Heritage and Peripheral Spaces in Singapore* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 68. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RSING 363.69095957 LIM)
- Still other variations of Lin Guniang’s origin myth exist. My mother, for instance, says her own mother shared a version in which Lin Guniang was the victim of sexual violence. Ng Gim Choo, interview, 26 July 2022.

- “Lim Still On Danger List,” *New Nation*, 15 February 1977, 1. (From NewspaperSG)
- “MP Dies,” *New Nation*, 3 August 1977, 1. (From NewspaperSG)
- According to Huang Yahong, shortly before Lin Guniang’s shrine was removed, a small Hindu shrine in the same area was also demolished. Worshippers at Zhen Long Gong associate this incident with the sudden death of MP for Radin Mas N. Govindasamy on 14 February 1977, just a few hours after Lim’s collapse. See “MP Dies.”
- Yeo Keng Hoo (son of Yeo Chin Hua), interview, Zhen Long Gong, 22 August 2022.
- Wu, “Story of Maiden Lim.”
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# The Divine Lance

# THAIPUSAM

# and MURUGAN

# WORSHIP

## in Singapore

Thaipusam speaks of a migratory community that carries its deep-rooted cultural tradition wherever its people go.

By **Nalina Gopal**

A devotee carrying the *alagu kavadi* (also known as the *silavu kavadi* or *mayil kavadi*) during the Thaipusam procession, 2015. Photo by T. Kavindran. Courtesy of Hindu Endowments Board.

**Nalina Gopal** is an independent curator and researcher focused on South Asia and its diaspora. She is the founder of Antāti, a historical research and museum consultancy.

On 9 February 1952, the *Singapore Free Press* carried a story titled “No ‘Kavadis’ Today”.<sup>1</sup> That year, Singapore’s Tamil community scaled down Thaipusam celebrations and refrained from holding the procession because of the death of King George VI. That was an unprecedented event. Since then, there hasn’t been such another instance of Thaipusam being put on hold, that is, until 2021 when the procession in Singapore was disallowed because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Thaipusam personifies the worship of Murugan, a celebrated patron god in Tamil tradition who has been revered for over two millennia. Taking place during Thai, the 10th month in the Tamil calendar (January to February in the Gregorian calendar), Thaipusam is celebrated in South India, and outside it, by the Tamil diaspora in Singapore, Malaysia, Mauritius, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Myanmar and even Australia.

In Singapore, the festival is one of the most distinguishing features of diasporic Hindu practice and one of the earliest public Hindu festivals. Worshipers, including carriers of milk pots and *kavadi*, exemplify their devotion to Murugan in an annual 4-kilometre foot procession.<sup>2</sup> The festival is a reflection of a journey that spans over 160 years, growing beyond its orthodoxy, in cross-cultural Singapore.

### The God with a Lance

மாயோன் மேய காடுறை உலகமும்  
சேயோன் மேய மைவரை உலகமும்  
வேந்தன் மேய தீம்புனல் உலகமும்  
வருணன் மேய பெருமணல் உலகமும்  
முல்லை குறிஞ்சி மருதம் நெய்தல் எனச்  
சொல்லிய முறையான் சொல்லவும் படுமே

the pastoral region, presided over by Mayon;  
the mountain region, presided over by Ceyon;  
the riverine region, presided over by Ventan;  
the great sandy (coastal) region, presided over  
by Varunan;  
these, in the order enumerated, are called *mullai*,  
*kurinci*, *marutam* and *neytal*.<sup>3</sup>

- *Tolkappiyam*, 951



(Above) In the early 20th century, the silver chariot bearing the processional image of Murugan was drawn by cattle, 1920s. Collection of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

(Right) Paal kudam or milk pot bearers usually make up the bulk of devotees undertaking the Thaipusam procession. Here, devotees are seen waiting to commence the procession at the Sri Srinivasa Perumal Temple on Serangoon Road, 2015. Photo by T. Kavindran. Courtesy of Hindu Endowments Board.



Thaipusam is centred around the worship of Murugan. The boy god Murugan's identity is a complex mix of several inseparable historical and cultural roots, and a reflection of the inherent complexity of Tamil tradition. Tamil poetry of the Sangam era (a period spanning roughly 3rd century BCE to 3rd century CE) positions Murugan (or Murukan from the word *muruku* meaning "beautiful", "fragrant" or "youthful one") as the god of the hills and hunt,<sup>4</sup> and the son of Korravai, goddess of war and victory.<sup>5</sup>

Murugan was a name originally given to the god of the hilly region Kurinci.<sup>6</sup> In the *Tolkappiyam*, the oldest extant Tamil grammatical text, he is described as Ceyon or the red one due to the association of the ruddy hills of the region with his skin tone.

The Murugan of Sangam literature – a considerable corpus of classical devotional and literary works – has a peacock for his mount and wields a lance or *vel*, after which his priests and the chieftains of the hills, the *velan* ("bearer of the lance"), were named.

By the 5th century CE, Murugan's attributes were fused with those of Skanda (also known as Karthikeya, Subrahmanya and Kumara), a god found in the literature of the Epic period of the north (when the Ramayana and Mahabharatam were composed).<sup>7</sup> Devotional compositions authored by Saivite poet-saints around the 7th century CE incorporated him into the Saivite pantheon and worshipped him as the son of Siva. (Followers of Siva are called Saivites.)

Murugan's roots in a long and rich Tamil cultural heritage is perhaps one of the reasons why he is a recipient of unwavering faith, celebrated across the global Tamil diaspora.

### A Myth Celebrated

திரிய விட்டெறிந்து,  
நோயுடை நுடங்கு சூர் மா முதல் தடிந்து

You swirled your weapon  
and destroyed Sur[an], personified fear, who  
had taken the form of a moving mango tree<sup>8</sup>

- Lines written by Kaduvan Ilaveyinaar  
and set to music by Kannanaakanaar  
appearing in the Paripadal (V: 3-4)<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps the most central myth in Murugan worship involves him vanquishing the demon Sur or Suran, a myth known as early as the 1st century CE.<sup>10</sup> In preparation for the battle, he is presented with a *vel* by Sakti, the wife of Siva. The day he was given the invincible *vel* is celebrated as Thaipusam (named after the day in which the Pusam star is exalted in the month of Thai).

With his *vel*, Murugan destroys Suran by splitting a huge mango tree into two, the mango tree being the form that the shape-shifting Suran had taken. Suran then assumes the form of a peacock and a cockerel, with the former eventually becoming Murugan's vehicle while the latter is a symbol subsumed in his flag.

Dating back to the 3rd century CE, the Tirumuru-garrupadai, the oldest devotional poem of the Sangam era dedicated to Murugan, lists the *arupadaiveedu* or six abodes of Murugan: Tiruttani, Swamimalai, Tiruchendur, Tiru Avinankudi (widely known as Palani), Pazhamudircholai and Tirupparamkunram.

Thaipusam commemorates Murugan receiving the *vel* from Sakti, while a separate festival, Kanda Sashti, marks the defeat of the demon Suran. These events are linked with Tiruchendur, the location where Suran was defeated. However, the specific form of Murugan worship during Thaipusam is associated with the legends at Palani. Palani is a hill temple site where Murugan is enshrined as Dandapani (also Dandayudapani or Thendayuthapani), a young ascetic who holds a staff, exemplifying mastery of the self.

The story goes that a young Murugan, angry with his parents for their judgement of a competition in favour of his sibling, retreats to the top of a nearby hill to do penance. Petulant at the loss of the award, a divine fruit, he is consoled by being told "*pazham ni*" ("you are the fruit") from which the hill town of Palani derived its name.

It is while in penance on this hill abode that Murugan meets the demon Idumban, seen as the primordial *kavadi* bearer.

In the myth, Idumban's teacher, Saivite seer Agastya, enlists Idumban's help to carry two hills, Sivagiri and Saktigiri, from the north to the south for Siva's southern abode.



(Above) A kavadi bearer and his supporters at the Sri Thendayuthapani Temple, 2015. Courtesy of T. Kavindran.

(Below) An *alavu kavadi* involves the devotee's tongue and cheek being pierced with a metal *vel* or lance, 1986. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



Idumban ties the two hills to a celestial staff using divine serpents in the place of ropes, and carries the two hills on the staff that acts like a shoulder pole, a prototype for a *kavadi*. Enroute, tired by his burdened journey, he lays the hills down for a rest but finds he is unable to lift them when ready to depart. He sees a boy-ascetic, who is in fact Murugan, atop one of the hills and confronts him without realising his divine identity.

Murugan destroys Idumban but eventually revives and installs him as the door guardian for his abode. Murugan cites Idumban's arduous *kavadi* journey as a method for his worshippers to propitiate him. This myth has become the quintessential format for a unique ritual worship of Murugan. The Idumban *kavadi* or the shoulder pole is a fundamental *kavadi* type still carried by devotees today.

It is this surrender of a burden (of arrogance and ignorance) to Murugan, emulating the example of the primeval devotee, Idumban,<sup>11</sup> that the annual foot procession of thousands of *kavadi*-bearing devotees in Singapore (and around the world) exemplifies.

### The Red One in the Red Dot

சிங்கை காக்கும் குக முருகா

Guhan, Muruga, the guardian of Singapore

- A line from hymn 88 in the  
*Singai Nagar Antati*<sup>12</sup>

The celebration of Thaipusam in Singapore can be traced to the Nattukottai Chettiars, who became an influential diaspora of private financiers in Southeast Asia in the 19th century.<sup>13</sup> They adopted Murugan as their patron deity in their diasporic homes and as a partner in their business ventures, and their settlement pattern typically involved the construction of Murugan temples. When boarding a ship, the pioneering migrants carried the *vel* of Murugan, transferring their burden of worry for safe passage to the deity with the words "Murugan *tunai*" ("Murugan protects us").<sup>14</sup>

In 1858, Nattukottai Chettiars installed the *vel* of Murugan beneath a pipal tree, beside a water tank, at the foot of a hill at the junction of Tank Road and Clemenceau Avenue.<sup>15</sup> (According to collective memory, the *vel* was worshipped for around 30 years before the establishment of their temple.<sup>16</sup>) By 1859, the Sri Thendayuthapani Temple was built nearby on land obtained from Thomas Oxley, with its design and layout based on the Murugan temple in Penang, an architectural template that would be adopted across the region by the merchant bankers.<sup>17</sup>

While this temple on Tank Road is dedicated to Thendayuthapani, inspired by the Palani god, the *vel* is accorded primary space during temple rituals even today. The austerity of the god and his lone, self-disciplined stance was an exemplar to a migrant community of single men who had left home and family in search of opportunity in a foreign land.

Within a year of the temple's establishment, the festival of Thaipusam began to be observed in Singapore. A three-day celebration complete with a silver chariot procession and spectacular fireworks,<sup>18</sup> the festival was a public holiday from 1879 until 1914, when members of the community led by N. Veerasamy petitioned to have the more widely observed Deepavali declared a day off instead.<sup>19</sup> Despite the cessation of the holiday, some banks would still be closed, mail delivery unavailable and cinema shows at the YMCA cancelled in lieu of the processional celebration.<sup>20</sup>

In the late 19th century, the festival would commence with the Chettiars issuing a general invitation to all residents to attend the festival of Thaipusam held at their temple on Tank Road.<sup>21</sup>

Typically, on the day before Thaipusam, a silver chariot procession known as Punar Pusam (named after the star in ascendance on the day) would be undertaken in the morning from the Sri Thendayuthapani on Tank Road to the Layan (Sepoy Lines) Sithi Vinayagar Temple (also maintained by the Chettiars) on Serangoon Road. The chariot or *ter* was drawn by cattle up to the 1970s. The cattle was then replaced by a motorised vehicle.

In the evening, *kavadi* bearers carrying the traditional semi-circular wooden burdens would trail the returning chariot procession conveying the *utsava murti*, or processional image of Murugan, via Market Street. They were all men from the Nattukottai Chettiar community, thus earning the event the name – Chetti Pusam.

A 1938 letter from Sockalingam Chettiar of Market Street addressed to the chief police officer provides an insight into the extent of arrangements made for the festival.<sup>22</sup> Anticipating a huge crowd of devotees for a period of three days (15 to 17 January), the letter made very specific requests for police personnel, such as asking for Sikh corporals and sergeants, and Tamil police constables. It also identified the three crucial components of the festival:

"[A] silver car starting not later than 8.30 am from Tank Road Temple... to Keong Saik Road and after a short display of daylight fireworks there till noon, will return to Tank Road Temple starting at about 6 pm via Market Street. ... On Sunday, the 16th January, from morning till midnight the devotees will gather round the Tank Road Temple premises... On Monday, the 17th January, a religious procession of *kavadi* will go round the temples at Tank Road and Orchard Road [the Sivan temple located at Dhoby Ghaut then]... the last and the huge procession again starting from Tank Road will proceed to Raffles Reclamation ground, Beach Road, where there will be a grand display of fireworks..."<sup>23</sup>

As can be seen from the above excerpt, in 1938, the Thaipusam procession of *kavadi* bearers would also visit the erstwhile Sri Sivan temple on Orchard Road, a temple closely associated with the Nattukottai Chettiars. The procession over the three days would have a presence across the districts of present-day Chinatown, the Central Business District (including Market Street), Clemenceau, Orchard Road, and even Beach Road.



A child with a *thol kavadi*, which is carried on the shoulder, 1984. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

In 1932, the Sri Thendayuthapani Temple acquired a new and bigger silver chariot, but it could not be used because it was too tall to fit below the Traction Co.'s trolley bus wires along the way.<sup>24</sup> The chariot was only used when motor buses replaced trolley buses.

In 2019, Saththappan Chettiar, then 74, recalled his earliest memory of the festival. Dolls were manoeuvred above Market Street by men stationed in the upper storey of *kittangi* (warehouse and place of work of the Chettiar merchant bankers) on either side of the street, such that as the silver chariot went past, the dolls would descend with garlands to honour Murugan.

He said: "The deity would be seated on the silver chariot, drawn by bulls through Market Street. ... one person would be stationed on the second floor of one of the *kittangi*, and one more on the second floor of the opposite shophouse, facing the *kittangi*. They would each hold on to one end of a rope; a doll holding out a garland would be suspended from the middle of this rope. The two men would swing the doll back and forth in a dance, and when the chariot appears below the doll, the doll would descend with the garlands, and 'place' the garlands on Lord Murugan's shoulders, to loud cheers."<sup>25</sup>

The *utsava murti* or processional image of Murugan as Thendayuthapani, 2015. This is placed on a silver chariot, which departs from the Sri Thendayuthapani Temple on the eve of Thaipusam for the Sri Layan Sithi Vinayagar Temple. Courtesy of T. Kavindran.



### Devotion on Display

In the early years, the *kavadi* foot procession would begin from any of the Hindu temples across Singapore. Eventually, however, the starting point came to be the Sri Srinivasa Perumal Temple on Serangoon Road for the purpose of convenience. The foot procession would then depart from that temple to Tank Road, spanning a route approximately 3 to 4 km. Tourism brochures would promote this annual and public Hindu observance.<sup>26</sup>

From the eve of the festival, devotees arrive progressively at the Sri Srinivasa Perumal Temple, finding a suitable spot to aid their preparations for carrying the *kavadi*, either independently or in groups.

On the day of Thaipusam, they begin their preparation early in the morning. Following cleansing rituals, the *kavadi* are arranged in an altar-like format on the ground, with offerings placed on banana leaves filled with aromatics and offerings. Then comes the penetration of the needles, which is undertaken by devotees in a state of utmost concentration, equated at times to a trance.<sup>27</sup>

The *kavadi* bearers depart at dawn on the foot procession, moving to rhythmic chants of *Vel Vel* or *Vel Muruga Vel*, walking at a steady pace until they reach the Sri Thendayuthapani Temple. There, their pace quickens in anticipation of the culmination of their journey of devotion.

The offering of milk or honey, usually incorporated into vessels ensconced within the *kavadi*, are offered as ablutions to Murugan when devotees end their foot procession at the Sri Thendayuthapani Temple. Devotees subsequently hold a ceremony in their homes to honour Murugan and sometimes perform a rite known as Idumban Puja, usually within three days of Thaipusam. Idumban Puja is also known to be performed by some Chinese *kavadi* bearers in Malaysia.<sup>28</sup>



The silver chariot bearing the processional image of Murugan, 2015. Courtesy of T. Kavindran.

### Worship, Ritual and Aesthetics

Penitents carry the *kavadi* to fulfil their vow of devotion for protection during a time of great tribulation. While the *kavadi* is strongly associated with Thaipusam, it is not exclusive to the festival. The firewalking festival of Theemithi, dedicated to the mother goddess as well as Panguni Uttiram, a festival celebrating Murugan's celestial wedding, have also seen devotees engaging in a worship ritual involving the *kavadi*.<sup>29</sup>

The *kavadi* can take many forms. A simple *thol kavadi* has semi-circular wooden poles decorated with peacock feathers and a cloth canopy carried on the shoulder. An *alagu kavadi* (beautiful sharp-edged *kavadi*) is a more elaborate form including a stainless steel or aluminium framework bedecked with peacock feathers and other colourful materials, supported by a belt and shoulder pads,<sup>30</sup> relating to the practice of self-mortification.

The *paal kudam* or milk pot burden is carried by around tens of thousands of devotees annually in Singapore,<sup>31</sup> including women and children, offering some opportunity for balance in an otherwise gendered processional space.

The concentration of the devotee on Murugan is the focus of the *kavadi* that involves piercings. The *alavu kavadi* involves the piercing of the tongue or cheek with a *vel* to prevent the devotee from speaking during the walk of faith. The *alagu kavadi*, on the other hand, involves the penetration of the skin of the bearer with needles or spikes, while the *ratha kavadi* involves the devotee pulling a chariot that is attached to their back.

The *alagu kavadi*, meaning "beautiful *kavadi*", gets its name because of how it looks and its tendency to attract the most attention during the festival. In 2009,

the devotee R. Sharuhasan's *alagu kavadi* weighed around 35 to 40 kg and had a total height close to two storeys when lifted. The peacock features were each about 90 cm long, and the *kavadi* was designed to evoke those carried by his uncles some 20 years ago. "I didn't aim for it to be the biggest *kavadi* that day, but rather to carry on the family tradition," he said.<sup>32</sup>

S. Kalleychelbon, who has been carrying the *kavadi* after being hospitalised with a knee injury, was reported in the *Straits Times* in 1990 as saying that he would typically fast for 48 days before carrying the chariot *kavadi*, which was modelled after the silver chariot of Murugan at Palani.<sup>33</sup>

In 2016, Prethev Raj carried the *arigandam kavadi* in which four stainless steel rods pierced his waist to hold the *kavadi* sans belt.<sup>34</sup> Veeraraghaya Naidu carried a similar *kavadi* in 1990, but in addition, he walked with clogs embedded with nails, mimicking Idumban's arduous foot journey to Palani.<sup>35</sup>

From the late 1930s, Tamil organisations helming the Self-Respect Movement raised protests regarding self-mortification. In view of the banning of piercings in Madras (now Chennai), the Sri Thendayuthapani Temple forbade the *alagu kavadi* in 1950, only to retract its decision by end of the year in the face of prodigious opposition from devotees.<sup>36</sup>

Some view the devotee as the processional vehicle and the *kavadi* as a personification of Murugan's shrine. Another school of thought is that the *kavadi* is an embodiment of the human form occupied by the devotee, with the wooden structure being a metaphor for the skeleton, the cloth canopy for skin, and so forth.<sup>37</sup>

It is also customary for the *kavadi* bearer to be accompanied by family and friends chanting the names of Murugan or singing "Kavadi Sindu". This is sung by

On the eve of Thaipusam in a procession known as Punar Pusam, members of the Nattukottai Chettiar community carry the wooden *kavadi* and follow the silver chariot procession. In this photograph they are seen outside the Sri Mariamman Temple on South Bridge Road, 2015. Courtesy of T. Kavindran.



the accompanying ensemble to spur the devotee on. Part of a special musical genre attributed to the poet, Annamalai Reddiyar, the verses have an odd number of lines rendered in alternating slow and fast tempos, a mesmerising metre that aids the devotee in retaining focus through rhythmic movements.<sup>38</sup>

An early version of “Kavadi Sindu” composed and sung in Singapore is the “Singainagar Singara Vadivelar kavadi Sindu”, written by R.M.R. Ramanathan in 1907. It is dedicated to the deity at Sri Thendayuthapani Temple addressed as “Thendayutha, Kadamba”, asking him to protect the kavadi bearers.<sup>39</sup>

The ban and seizure of musical instruments used during Thaipusam began in 1973. In 2017, for the first time in over 40 years, the government allowed live music during the street procession but stipulated that people could only play specific instruments like the *nadhaswaram* (a wind instrument), a barrel-shaped drum called the *tavil* and the *urumi melam* (Indian drum).<sup>40</sup> Music is important to the devotee. “With the beat and the singing, I bounced while walking and the bounce of the kavadi took the weight off me,” longtime kavadi bearer Subash Gunaseelan told the *Straits Times* in 2019. “In the past, without any music, the journey felt very long and we had to rush. Now, the music makes carrying the kavadi enjoyable as well.”<sup>41</sup>

Interestingly, the regulation of musical instruments during Thaipusam has a long history in Singapore. In 1896, colonial police confiscated the drums of the band of the Maharaja of Travancore, which had been engaged to perform for the Thaipusam festival.<sup>42</sup>

## Celebrations by the Tamil Diaspora and Other Communities

In 1860, when Thaipusam was first celebrated in Singapore, South Africa saw the emergence of Murugan worship. The observance of a 10-day kavadi festival included the hallmark carrying of the traditional wooden kavadi.<sup>43</sup> In Mauritius, the carrying of the kavadi involving piercing is also undertaken, not unlike in Singapore and Malaysia.<sup>44</sup>

It is not uncommon to see those of diverse faiths and ethnicities undertaking the pilgrimage. As early as 1966, the *Straits Times* carried an interview with Lim Ewe Chia, a Chinese kavadi bearer from Penang who said that he vowed to carry the kavadi if his family was cured of asthma. Apparently, none of his family members suffered any attack that year. “I consider this a miracle,” he said.<sup>45</sup>



(Above) A Chinese kavadi bearer arriving at the Sri Thendayuthapani Temple, the culmination point of the Thaipusam foot procession, 2014. *Chettiar's Temple Society Collection*, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

(Left) An *alagu kavadi* bearer with his tongue and cheek pierced with a *vel*, 1985–99. Behind him is a female devotee with a milk pot on her head. *G.P. Reichelt Collection*, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

The idea of not confining devotion to one transcendental deity has spurred some Chinese Buddhists and Taoists to participate in Thaipusam. Some of them even enter a trance. This is more common in Malaysia, notably in Penang, than it is in Singapore.

It is also not unusual to see worshippers from Singapore attend the festivals in Penang or Batu Caves. The latter is Malaysia's foremost pilgrimage site of Murugan worship and receives up to 400,000 visitors annually during the chariot procession.<sup>46</sup> Thaipusam has been observed at the caves since 1892, and here the festival and its environment bear the closest resemblance to the observance at the Palani hill temple in Tamil Nadu.

In Phuket, the celebration of the nine-day Taoist festival dedicated to the Nine Emperors sees penitents with spikes in their faces and walking on hot embers to display their devotion to deities. These practices are inspired by the festivals of Thaipusam and Theemithi.

Thaipusam, of course, continues to be celebrated in South Asia, in Palani (and across Murugan temples in the region) and Katargama in Sri Lanka.

The festival of Thaipusam is a phenomenon tying together source and diasporic communities, particularly those that were part of a modern wave of migration across colonial settlements. This age-old festival is a long-surviving cultural umbilical cord of inescapable historical and social significance, that also extends beyond ethnic and religious boundaries. ♦

### NOTES

- 1 “No ‘Kavadis’ Today,” *Singapore Free Press*, 9 February 1952, 1. (From NewspaperSG)
- 2 The etymology of the word Thaipusam has been offered as (a) காவடி (sacrifice) + கட்டி (pole or stick) by the University of Madras Tamil Lexicon, taken to mean a pole or stave of wood used for carrying burdens; or (b) as காவடி + அட்டி, taken to mean sacrifice at every step, perhaps a reference to Idumban's arduous and burdened journey.
- 3 Subbiah Ganapathy, “Patterns in Religious Thought in Early South India: A Study of Classical Tamil Texts” (PhD thesis, McMaster University, Ontario, August 1988), 64. [https://macsphere.mcmaster.ca/bitstream/11375/15543/1/Subbiah\\_Ganapathy.pdf](https://macsphere.mcmaster.ca/bitstream/11375/15543/1/Subbiah_Ganapathy.pdf).
- 4 Fred W. Clothey, “Pilgrimage Centers in the Tamil Cultus of Murukan,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 40, no. 1 (March 1972): 80. (From JSTOR via NLB's eResources website).
- 5 Kamil V. Zvelebil, *Tiru Murugan* (Chennai: International Institute of Tamil Studies, 1981), 69, Tamil Digital Library, <https://www.tamildigitallibrary.in/book-detail?id=jY9lup2kZl6TuWGZQdZt9Lzh3&tag=Tiru%20Murugan#book1/>.
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# IN THEIR OWN VOICES PREPARING FOR WAR IN SINGAPORE

Before the fall of Singapore in 1942, people prepared for the imminent war by stockpiling food, building air raid shelters and volunteering in civil defence units.

By Christabel Khoo and Mark Wong

Russia's invasion of Ukraine is a stark reminder that even today, wars still break out. Russia's relentless attack on Ukrainian cities also drives home the point that combat does not only involve soldiers; the civilian population also ends up suffering deeply, whether as a by-product of fighting, or as a deliberate strategy.

This is something that the population in Singapore learnt at their great cost some eight decades ago. The first Japanese bombs dropped on Singapore on 8 December 1941, and the bombing continued unabated throughout the Japanese army's Malayan campaign. Conditions in Singapore worsened when the Japanese crossed the Strait of Johor in early February 1942, and pitched battles were fought on the island itself. Finally, on 15 February 1942, the British surrendered, which ushered in over three years of misery in Japanese-occupied Singapore.

**Christabel Khoo** is an Assistant Archivist with Records Management at the National Archives of Singapore.

**Mark Wong** is a Senior Specialist (Oral History) with the Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, where he leads the oral history project on Singapore's experiences with Covid-19. He is also Vice President of the International Oral History Association.

This year, 2023, marks the 81st anniversary of the fall of Singapore. With each passing year, we lose more and more of the generation of people who had survived the war. One way that society has tried to ensure that the stories and lessons of this period are not forgotten is through oral history.

Oral history is powerful. Not only can stories of the past be preserved in their factual detail, but the voices of witnesses convey complex emotions that are difficult to express in the written word.

Over the last eight decades, military historians have examined how the Japanese were able to prevail against a much larger British military force. The travails of the Japanese Occupation period have also been well documented. However, one aspect of the war has not been as well studied – how people in Singapore prepared for the worst in the months prior to and even as bombs and artillery shells began to rain on the island.

This essay highlights first-person accounts from the oral history collection of the National Archives of Singapore to give an insight into life in Singapore before the first bombs fell on the island on 8 December 1941 to the British surrender on 15 February 1942.

A warden of the Air Raid Precautions dousing an incendiary bomb at Raffles Place as part of a regular weekly mass demonstration to make people living in Singapore bomb conscious and informed, c.1941. Courtesy of Library of Congress (04810).

## Stockpiling Food

One of the first things many people did was to stockpile food. In early 1941, the British authorities had initially encouraged the people to build stockpiles. However, when prices began rising due to shortages and profiteering, the authorities tried to discourage stockpiling, but it did not work.<sup>1</sup>

Toh Mah Keong was a 20-year-old student from Penang who had come to Singapore for his education. He recalled that people began stocking up on canned food. “[Y]ou’ll find that everybody’s house you visit there’ll be cases of sardines. . . . You’ll find, as you walk around the streets in the evening, going home in buses, everybody carrying parcels or baskets of provisions.”<sup>2</sup>

Canned sardines were a popular item that people hoarded. Soh Guan Bee, who was 13 at the time, said that as a result of the war, he developed a lifelong dislike for sardines. “We got sardines. . . . Practically, it’s sardines and nothing else. . . . Till today I dare not eat sardine, I see sardine I get sad.”<sup>3</sup>

Medical doctor Tan Ban Cheng, then also 13 years old, recalled how his family’s stockpile became the only source of food they had for weeks before the

surrender: “[T]owards the end that’s all we had to live on, the tin foods and whatever food we had. . . . at least two to three weeks before the surrender, most of us could not get any food from outside. We had to depend on whatever food we had.”<sup>4</sup>

## Escaping to the Countryside

Tan Guan Chuan, who was in government service and a volunteer with the Air Raid Precautions, observed how people fled to the countryside when the first bombs fell on 8 December 1941. “You find cars running from the city all right up to the remote parts of Singapore to escape from the bombs that were dropping. . . . everybody just [took] their families and [drove] to any relations who are staying far away from the city.”<sup>5</sup>

Among them was Abdealli K. Motiwalla and his family, who moved out of Raffles Place to Yio Chu Kang Road. At the time, they were living near the shop where Motiwalla was working, a shop that his grandfather had established in 1886. He recalled: “[E]verybody was running away and then people were running and people thought now the war has started, we shall have to leave the city, go outside city. . . . people thought will be more safe because bombing will take place in the city.”<sup>6</sup> Motiwalla’s family rented a bungalow in Yio Chu Kang but he continued travelling to Raffles Place every day to work at the shop until the Japanese entered Singapore.



Volunteers of the Air Raid Precautions fighting fires at the docks in Singapore, c. January 1942. Courtesy of the Australian War Memorial, 012464.

## Building Air Raid Shelters

In their Yio Chu Kang compound, Motiwalla's family had built an underground air raid shelter made of bricks. Although originally meant for the family, they generously opened it to others. "[N]ext door people used to come also. And they had also their own shelters, different compound. They had their own, also they had made. But in my place it was quite big, so many people used to come," recalled Motiwalla.<sup>7</sup>

Across the island, many people were building their own air raid shelters. The British colonial government had initially adopted a "stay put" policy. In May 1939, they announced that "the best thing to do in an air raid would be for citizens to remain in their homes", as shelters and evacuation camps were considered impracticable.<sup>8</sup> By May 1941, owing to

public pressure, the government changed their stance and published notices in newspapers informing the people that they could register for accommodation in evacuation camps. These, however, were intended for the "poorer classes among the population".<sup>9</sup>

By September 1941, there were still no public air raid shelters. A government notice tried to explain this by saying that the low, flat land of Singapore with water near the surface rendered underground shelters impossible. It also said Singapore's large population of half a million, as well as narrow streets, made air raid shelters impractical.<sup>10</sup>

Instead, the notice recommended an open grassy place as the safest option, urging people to "find out where the nearest open space is, and make for that in air raid". The government assured the people that the "publication of this notice need cause no alarm" and "it does not mean that Government is expecting war to break out in this part of the world at present. On the contrary, the position in the Far East at the moment is calmer than it has been for several months past".<sup>11</sup>

But barely three months later, the first bombs rained down on Singapore. Lee Tian Soo, then a 16-year-old boy living in Chinatown, recounted that when the first bombs fell, people "started to rush everywhere, anywhere, those people found any ground they started to build air raid shelters, that was the time. Everybody seemed to be busy, building shelters".<sup>12</sup>

Tan Geok Koon and his family, who were living on Thomson Road, built their own air raid shelter that could accommodate about 20 people. "There was a hill behind my house, so we dug about eight feet tall and in a semi-circle, about – five or six feet wide and

in a semi-circle form. And at the top of it, [we] put a lot of planks and also sandbags and all that we did by ourselves, or rather we call a few of the Malay villages to do it, and so that is how we had the shelter."<sup>13</sup>

Not everyone was fortunate enough to have land for a shelter. Chu Shuen Choo (Mrs Gay Wan Guay), who was then a teacher living in Katong, had to make do with whatever available space she had. "[M]y shelter was just underneath the staircase and a table," she recalled. "So whenever we hear the siren, I would take my flask of milk with my baby and carry her downstairs and go under the table."<sup>14</sup>

## Evacuating Overseas

Those who had the means evacuated overseas to countries such as India, Indonesia and Australia. Municipal Commissioner Rajabali Jumabhoy, who was also president of the Indian Chamber, recalled that as soon as the Japanese attacked, the British were the first to leave, especially the civilians, their wives and children.<sup>15</sup>

Jumabhoy was one of those in charge of the evacuation of Indians, but there were no ships available. "So I as President of the Indian Chamber of Commerce cabled Gandhiji [Mahatma Gandhi] and Lord Wavell [Archibald Percival Wavell, then Viceroy of India] and were sent four ships. Very few could leave, say about 5,000 and no more. I had to take the last ship. Mr Tan Chin Tuan was I think in charge of Chinese evacuees and he helped quite a bit to leave Singapore. Mostly the well-to-do people left from here and also Malaysia."<sup>16</sup>

Jumabhoy sent his wife and children away on 21 January 1942, but he remained in Singapore as the governor felt that Jumabhoy's departure would affect the morale of the Indian public. Later, fearing reprisal from the Japanese as he had held high positions under the British,<sup>17</sup> Jumabhoy took the last boat leaving for India on 7 February 1942 with "1,000 Indians and 52 non-Indians".<sup>18</sup>

Not everyone chose to evacuate, even if they had the opportunity. There were those like Ibrahim Isa, then a part-time announcer with the Malaya Broadcasting Corporation (MBC). "No, I never made any preparations [to leave Singapore]," he said. "Although the MBC, they offered their staff, those who wanted to evacuate, they were prepared to take them. But I think, no Malay staff prepared to leave Singapore. I think one or two Chinese staff were forced to leave Singapore."<sup>19</sup>

## Participating in Civil Defence

The recruitment of volunteers for civil defence units began in 1939. These civil defence units, which started conducting training, included the Air Raid Precautions (ARP), Medical Auxiliary Service, Observer Corps, Fire-fighting Squad and the Special Constabulary. Some 6,000 men and women volunteered.<sup>20</sup>

Ang Seah San, a bookkeeper at Lexus Borneo Motors Limited, was chosen by his company to attend Passive Defence Services training in the beginning of

1941. He attended a crash course in firefighting and first aid. He also learned how to manage public behaviour and "what precautions to take in order to minimise injuries to persons and damages to properties".<sup>21</sup>

Ang recalled practising air raid drills. When the air raid siren sounded, "wardens on duty were ordered to patrol the streets... householders would comply with our instructions, such as the taking of cover in the shelter and switching off the lights at night, advising pedestrians to cover, to take cover wherever possible. Vehicles travelling on the road were ordered to park by the roadside with lamps, headlamps switched off... In order that the public might be acquainted with the requirements, these exercises had been continually practised for about a month or so".<sup>22</sup>

Teacher Gay Wan Guay joined the ARP soon after the war started. His job was to "tell people, especially in the outlying areas in Tuas and Jurong and Woodlands and so on, to move away from the Johor Straits as the Japanese were advancing". But he found it difficult to persuade people to leave their farms, pigs and poultry behind.<sup>23</sup>



(Above) An air raid shelter in Tiong Bahru, 1940. M. Masson Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

(Right) Civilians in an air raid shelter during a Japanese bombing raid, December 1941. ©Imperial War Museum (KF 102).



The Straits Settlements Volunteer Force begins compulsory training for its members, 1941. ©Imperial War Museum (K 114).



Members of the Singapore Volunteer Corps in a photo taken in 1949. Before the Japanese invasion, members were trained in warfare. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Lee Kip Lee (who later became Honorary Life President of The Peranakan Association Singapore and was the father of singer-songwriter Dick Lee) was in his last year at Raffles College just before the British surrender of Singapore. He volunteered with the Medical Auxiliary Services Unit in Raffles College at the beginning of 1941. He recounted that they were basically trained to provide first aid: “So, we were taught first aid and we were divided into groups... And the government provided us with, with one or two ambulances which were actually converted Singapore Traction Company omnibuses ... not the real ambulances.”<sup>24</sup>

Students also had to participate in air raid drills in school. Mani Letchumanan Masillamani recalled practising such drills after war was declared in Europe in 1939. Interestingly, the drills changed over time. Initially, everyone would go to the edge of the classroom and lie down with the head touching the wall, legs turned facing up. He said: “Then we were asked to put the hand like that [over forehead and eyes]... One month later, they changed the thing. Now what happened, they say, ‘You must face down.’”<sup>25</sup>

Masillamani also remembered that his school asked for used exercise books and how that meant forgoing the *kacang puteh* he used to get in exchange for them. “[T]hese all were all given away to them for collection, will be used as material, useful material, as part of the war effort... In those days, we sell it to the *kacang puteh* [peanut] man, he will give you one packet of *kacang puteh* in those days.”<sup>26</sup>

In 1941, the Department of Supply had organised a series of “salvage weeks” where scraps of all kinds were collected for disposal as part of Singapore’s war effort. Besides paper, people also donated pots, pans, kettles, hat pegs, coat hangers, shoe trees, bathroom fittings, brass ornaments, cigarette boxes and cigar humidors.<sup>27</sup>

Soh Chuan Lam, a Standard VII (equivalent to Secondary 2) student at St Joseph’s School collected scrap iron. He said: “[T]here was a shortage of iron... So on certain days of the week, we were allowed to leave the school and go around collecting scrap iron and took them to the school for the government to take them away.”<sup>28</sup>

### Preparing for Combat

Some people decided that they would learn to take up arms to fight. One option for them was to join the Singapore Volunteer Corps (SVC).

The SVC had its roots as the privately funded Singapore Volunteer Rifle Corps in 1854, before becoming a public organisation a few years later. The SVC had played an important role in quelling civil disturbances and preserving the security of the island – duties such as operating defence lights and manning harbour defences during World War I. It was known by various names, including the Singapore Volunteer Artillery and the Straits Settlements Volunteer Force.<sup>29</sup>

Prior to the Japanese invasion, large-scale training in Singapore was held for the Straits Settlements Volunteer Force, which was made up of the respective volunteer corps in Singapore (two battalions), Penang (one battalion) and Malacca (one battalion).

Chan Cheng Yean, a volunteer with the Malacca Volunteer Corps recalled that he came to Singapore for training around 1940. “You have to go to the field, learn the location, how to attack the enemy. And then you learn how to be along the Singapore beaches and all, where they have pill boxes. Then we put up barbed wire when the enemy, when they tried to land, the barbed wire will stop them from entering... After the five days’ training we were sent back to Malacca.”<sup>30</sup>

Others joined Dalforce, a volunteer army formed by the local Chinese community to resist the Japanese invasion. It was named after its commander, Lieutenant Colonel John Dalley of the Federated Malay States Police Force.

Unfortunately, Dalforce volunteers lacked adequate training.<sup>31</sup> “My impression of these people [being trained] is that they are brave but their training is far too short for them to know anything... They were quite young. They consist of hawkers, shopkeepers and some of them could be working but they are not English educated,” said Jack Ng Kim Boon, who used to live in a kampong on Martin Road, near the Dalforce headquarters on Kim Yam Road.” He also recalled that they practised with shotguns rather than rifles.<sup>32</sup>

### Destroying Traces of the Past

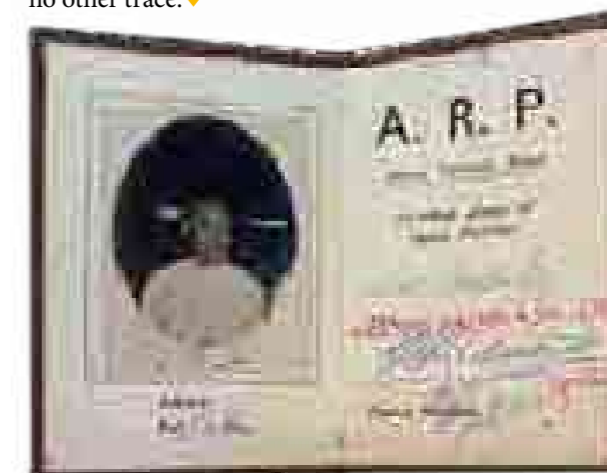
After the British surrender in February 1942, some people in Singapore destroyed traces of their past to avoid leaving behind a history of anti-Japanese activity.

Tan Wah Meng, a volunteer for the Medical Auxiliary Service, said people burned records to avoid them falling into the hands of the Japanese. His father, the chairman of the Bukit Timah and Jurong Chew Cheng Huay (Relief Fund) Committee, was one of those who got into trouble because of an incriminating photograph. “[I]t happened that somebody did not destroy a photograph of the committee. My father’s photograph [was] inside and the name inside. That’s why [the Japanese] looked [for] our family, you see. They got hold of that photograph.” Tan, his father and elder brother were later taken in for questioning by the Japanese. While Tan was released “one or two hours later”, his brother and father spent a week and a month locked up, respectively. In addition, his father suffered torture.<sup>33</sup>

Ang Seah San, the bookkeeper and sergeant of an ARP unit, said that he destroyed all documents relating to the ARP so as not to leave any evidence for the Japanese. “The wardens and I... we decided to destroy all records, logbooks, uniforms, helmets in order that we could deny of any connections with the previous government... Three days after our meeting, we were told that the British army surrendered, unconditionally to the enemy... We called the meeting because we got

instruction from headquarters that we have got to be disbanded... We advised all the other wardens that, your uniform, your uniform, your helmet all must be buried or burned away.”<sup>34</sup>

This destruction of records during wartime, both deliberate and accidental, underlines the importance of oral history. Through the memories of these survivors, captured on tape and now digitised for convenient access, we will be able to preserve vital aspects of Singapore’s past that would otherwise have no other trace. ♦



Air Raid Precautions squad member card of Tan Geok Seng. Victor Tan Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

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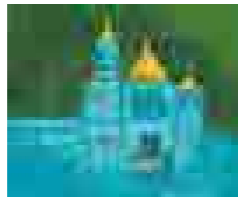
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# NEW BOOKS ON SINGAPORE HISTORY

## The Blue Mosque of Singapore and a Peek into the Migrant Muslim Community from Kerala

by Mohamed Nasim Abdul Rahim

Mohamed Nasim Abdul Rahim (2022), 204 pages  
Call no. RSING 297.355957 MOH



This book is a window into the history of pioneer Muslims from the state of Kerala on India's Malabar coast.

The determination and vision of a few men from the Malabar Muslim community eventually enabled the completion of the Malabar Muslim Jama-Ath Mosque in Singapore in 1963.

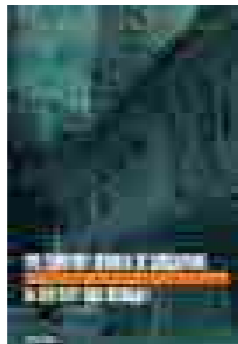
This distinctive blue mosque is prominently located at the junction of Victoria Street and Jalan Sultan, and has become a local landmark. It also plays an important role in the life of the Indian Muslim community here.

The author pieces together information gleaned from old official records, newspaper articles, photographs and interviews to tell the little-known story of a mosque that is part of Singapore's built heritage.

## The Comfort Women of Singapore in History and Memory

by Kevin Blackburn

NUS Press (2022), 208 pages  
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Why did no former comfort women from Singapore come forward to tell their stories when others across Asia began to do so publicly in the 1990s? To understand this silence, this book details the sex industry serving the Japanese military during the wartime occupation of Singapore: the comfort stations, managers, procurers, and girls and women who either volunteered or were forced into service and, in many cases, sexual slavery.

With care, balance and sensitivity given to a difficult subject, the author turns from history to the public presence of the comfort women in Singapore's memory and reveals how these women became known in Singapore in the 1990s and 2000s.

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by Sabine Hein

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The contribution of Germans to Singapore is both fascinating and multi-faceted. Their role in Singapore can only be understood in terms of their interrelationship with this country.

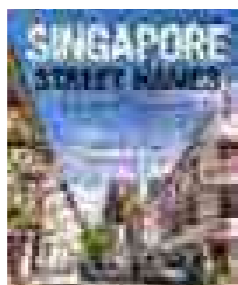
Singapore paved the way for Germans to expand their presence in Asia. At the same time, the Germans who were here also made important contributions to Singapore.

This book is in both English and German to reach out to both Singaporean and German readers.

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by Victor R. Savage and Brenda S.A. Yeoh

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