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## Puff Love

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Goh Beng Kwan, *Blue Clouds* (1997), acrylic and collage on canvas, artwork detail. *Collection of the National Library & Archives Board.*


# Director's Note

I have a weakness for food origin stories. If like me, you've found yourself pondering about a certain savoury snack that's handy to hold, you're in for a spice-blended treat. Armed with archival research and a healthy appetite, Christopher Tan has discovered that there's more to the simple curry puff than meets the eye.

In fact, the same can be said for the other stories in this issue.

Take, for instance, the Lee family holiday in Cameron Highlands in August 1965. In the days leading up to 9 August, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew was supposedly enjoying a round of golf amidst the cool air. In truth, he was secretly in Kuala Lumpur for talks to finalise Singapore's separation from Malaysia. His wife, Kwa Geok Choo, helped maintain his cover. In a fascinating oral history interview, she offers a rare, personal glimpse into the days before and after Separation.

Another intriguing tale concerns Lim Yew Hock, Singapore's former Chief Minister. He was in Canberra serving as Malaysia's High Commissioner to Australia and New Zealand when he mysteriously vanished in June 1966. He reappeared 10 days later with only a vague explanation for his disappearance. Felix Cheong revisits this mystery, whose details remain unsolved to this day.

Going further back in time, Peter Borschberg examines the decline of Temasek and the rise of Melaka in the 15th century. Drawing on Malay sources, Portuguese texts and Chinese records, he offers fresh perspectives on this fascinating period of Singapore's early history.

Closer to our era chronologically, though considerably further away geographically, is the story of how a visit to Mauritius in 1979 helped shape Singapore's Speak Mandarin Campaign. Caleb Leow explores how Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's observations during that trip contributed to debates about language policy back home.

In this issue, we also uncover a little-known collection of Singapore artefacts at the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C.; revisit the history of Merdeka Bridge and Nicoll Highway; and explore the story of the former St James Power Station.

From curry puffs to political intrigue, from ancient Temasek to modern Singapore, this issue offers plenty to sink your teeth into. Grab a coffee and a snack (perhaps a curry puff?) and dig in.

**Alicia Yeo**
Director
National Library of Singapore

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**On the cover**
Christopher Tan's fried lamb-fat curry puffs. *Photo by Christopher Tan.*

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Image credits, clockwise from top left: Lee Kuan Yew Collection, National Archives of Singapore; Collection of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board; National Library of Singapore; Jimmy Yap; Department of Anthropology, Smithsonian Institution; SPH Media Limited; Ministry of Culture Collection, National Archives of Singapore.



58 The Lee family's vacation in Cameron Highlands was the perfect smokescreen for discussions on Singapore's separation from Malaysia.



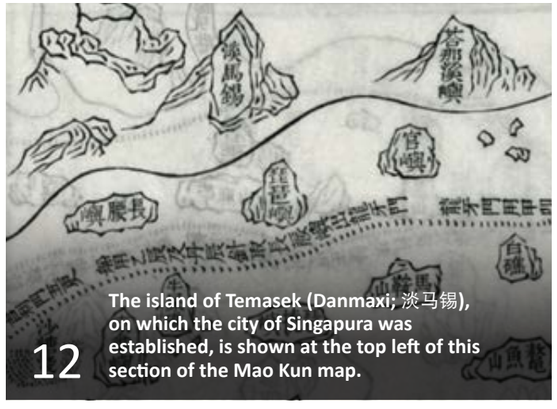

20 The Speak Mandarin Campaign was launched on 7 September 1979 after a visit to Mauritius.



48 Merdeka Bridge embodied Singapore's aspirations for freedom and independence.



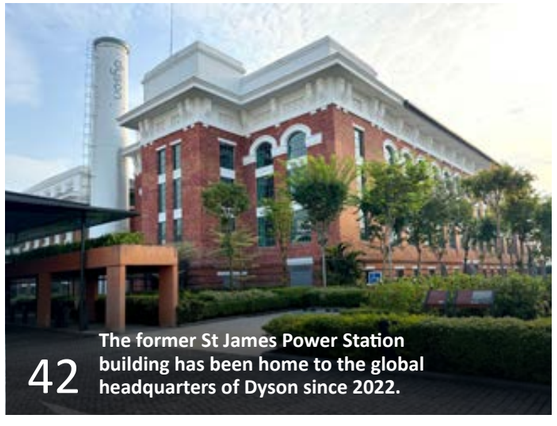
28 Lim Yew Hock, along with his family, left for Canberra in 1964 to take up his appointment as the Malaysian High Commissioner to Australia and New Zealand.



12 The island of Temasek (Danmaxi; 淡马锡), on which the city of Singapura was established, is shown at the top left of this section of the Mao Kun map.



34 Naturalist William Louis Abbott collected this basket from Singapore in 1904.



42 The former St James Power Station building has been home to the global headquarters of Dyson since 2022.

# Puff Love

## A Deep Dive into Singapore's Beloved Snack

Curry puffs are crusty on the outside, and tender and heart-warmingly spicy on the inside, just like a good Singaporean.
**By Christopher Tan**





**Christopher Tan** is a food writer, author, educator and photographer. His most recent books are *NerdBaker 2: Tales from the Yeast Indies* (Epigram Books, 2024), about yeast cookery, and *The Way of Kueh: Savouring & Saving Singapore's Heritage Desserts* (Epigram Books, 2019), a celebration of local kueh culture. He is a regular *BiblioAsia* contributor who has also appeared in the National Library's *From Book to Cook* video series and *BiblioAsia Podcast*.

Portable pastries packing a potent punch, curry puffs have been quintessential staples in Singapore for a long time. As far back as 1917, Victoria Confectionery (the original "Red House" bakery on Victoria Street) advertised baked curry puffs on offer "every Saturday; on other days made to order only".[1]

They were namechecked surprisingly frequently in local newspapers' coverage of society events. In July 1927, for example, the *Malaya Tribune* reported on a dance held at the Fort Canning Garrison Staff Sergeants' Mess, where "a plenitude of coffee, sandwiches and other refreshments (curry puffs greatly in demand) were served by a band of willing helpers".[2]

In the 1970s and 1980s, Mackenzie Road was dubbed "Kali Pup Lane" (after a humorously mangled mispronunciation of "curry puff") as three eateries opposite the Rex Cinema, namely Old Chang Kee, Selera Restaurant and Rex Restaurant, all sold curry puffs which were enormously popular with cinemagoers and diners.[3]

Further east, the area around the Geylang Serai Wet Market and Joo Chiat was another curry puff hub. Nooraisha Hashim, the fifth-generation owner of Haig Road Putu Piring and who grew up in that neighbourhood, recalled: "Every Friday my late grandfather would go to Masjid Khalid and then buy a full box of 10 puffs from the bakery [next door]. The triangle one with potato was my favourite."[4]

A survey of local hawker foods published in 1940 lists no less than six distinct curry puff types sold by Cantonese, Hainanese, Bengali, Tamil, Malay and "Hokkien Straits-born" (probably Chinese Peranakan) hawkers. Hainanese ones were baked but all the others were fried. Malay "kari pop" and Cantonese puffs had beef and potato filling, while Hainanese "curry pop" and Hokkien "ipok ipok" used pork and potatoes. Bengali beef and potato puffs were "folded into fancy shape" and fried in mutton fat, whereas Tamil curry puffs paired potatoes with prawns and were fried in coconut oil.[5] Echoes of these street snacks can be seen in the several kinds of curry puffs we still enjoy today.

**(Facing page)** Christopher Tan's fried lamb-fat curry puffs, 2026. *Photo by Christopher Tan.*

### Epok-epok Encounters

Perhaps the most perennially popular species, *epok-epok* puffs are familiar to most Singaporeans as school tuckshop and hawker centre staples, and were once commonly prepared by students in home economics classes. Made with a dough of flour, water, a fat such as ghee, oil or margarine – sometimes mixed in while hot to yield a more tender texture – and sometimes egg, these half-moon fried puffs have curved edges crimped by hand, or sealed with a fork or plastic press. Their name comes from the Riau Malay word *epok*, meaning a small pouch traditionally used to hold betel-chewing accoutrements, which the pastry may have resembled.[6]

Adibah Ahmad, of local Malay *kueh* and snack specialist Deli Maslina, recalled that her family first started selling *epok-epok* at Mukmin Restaurant in Bedok North in 1981. "We only made one flavour, *kentang* – curried potato," her grandmother's recipe. After they opened a second larger outlet, their repertoire grew to include sardine, vegetable, egg, chicken and beef puffs. "As years went by, with many challenges in navigating the business, we even thought of [not] making our own *epok-epok* and selling frozen ones instead," Adibah shared. "However, the demand remains consistent, hence we are still producing *epok-epok* today." She observed that sardine puffs are currently the most popular flavour. "It's evergreen… something that everyone in the family can enjoy."[7]

In Malaysia, circular cousins of *epok-epok* called *tembosa* sandwich the filling between two plain (or spiralled – see next page) dough discs crimped all around their circumference. According to Malaysian culinary doyenne Kalsom Taib, "Sekiranya ditanyakan kepada lelaki dari Johor, bakal isteri yang dicari mestilah tahu mengelim karipap." ["If you ask a man from Johor, the future wife one seeks must know how to crimp curry puffs."][8]

## The Indian-Muslim Karipap

Triangular or oblong, the *karipap* made by Indian Muslims uses a laminated (repeatedly layered and folded with fat) pastry dough which is sturdier and less airy than Western puff pastry. A particular rolling technique splays and displays its layers to give the baked puffs uniquely crunchy edges: Hazreen Mahmood Hussain explained this to me in her home kitchen, demonstrating how to press out a chunky dough cube into a thin square.[9]

*Karipap* construction is layered deep into Hazreen's heritage. Her grandfather Shaikh Jan Bux migrated from Bangladesh to Singapore and became an itinerant hawker, selling bread from a head-mounted basket. He accrued enough success to eventually open Joo Chiat's Indian Muslim Bakery & Confectionery in 1942, which became famous for its wares baked in large stone-floored ovens – "bread, curry buns, sugee cookies," said Hazreen.[10]

The bakery eventually became known to regulars – such as Nooraisha Hashim's grandfather – as "Onan Road Karipap",[11] after Hazreen's father, Jan Bux's eldest son Mahmood, took over as boss in 1977 and began to highlight the pastries. "It's my mother, who is very creative, who came up with different types of puffs," Hazreen recalled. "Beef *karipap* – which was the signature that really made us different from other places – chicken *karipap*, egg, sardine… I'm proud to say that we served the best [puffs] back then."[12]

Hazreen would bring her mother's custom spice blends to the local mill to be ground into curry powder. Growing up in and around the bakery, she and her siblings regularly lent a hand, and sometimes took the opportunity to play. "We would chase each other around the table… jump here, jump there until we were covered with flour." Now a school canteen operator, Hazreen still sells her homemade family *karipap* during school holidays, churning out a few hundred by hand each weekend. It is literally back-breaking work – "I injured my spine because of too much rolling," she shared. But when customers tell her that her *karipap* reminds them of her father's, it is all worth the effort, she said.[13]

## Spiral Symmetries

If a water-based dough is laminated with a fat-based dough, rolled out and then rolled up into a log, slicing this crosswise yields discs which, once flattened, folded around a filling and fried or baked, yields puffs with beautifully flaky concentric ridges. This puff style is made by both Malay and Chinese hawkers here, and is also known as *karipap gulung,* or *karipap pusing* (*gulung* meaning "roll", *pusing* meaning "turn", both referring to the spiralling technique) or *epok-epok pusar* (*pusar* meaning "navel", referring to the spiral's visible centre).

Tay Mui Lan is the third-generation owner of Soon Soon Huat Curry Puff, which began life as 1A Crispy Curry Puffs in Eunos Block 1A in the 1990s. The business later moved to Henderson and is now at Katong. Its founder, her Teochew grandmother Madam Lim Sai Hong, was a keen and expert cook: inspired by the different curry puffs she saw around the Chai Chee kampung where she lived, she created her own spiralled version. Mui Lan fondly recalled, "My Ah Mah,

*Epok-epok* puffs are frequently sold in school tuckshops and hawker centres, 2026. *Photo by Christopher Tan*.









she will tell us, can you please fold 28 [crimps]? She would count them," because scrimping on crimping makes the edge unpalatably thick. Also, "the pastry has to be light, not greasy, not thick, and the curry should be moist, not dry".[14]

While she has added new filling options like custard and durian, Mui Lan still sticks rigorously to her grandma's crust, chicken-potato curry and sardine filling recipes after 35 years, albeit with necessary tweaks to account for fluctuations in ingredients and environment. The puffs are made from scratch by hand, fried and sold out every day, with no leftovers for the next. Mui Lan told me about a recent customer who, for her 80th birthday celebrations, ordered "10 chicken and 10 sardine puffs each day on Friday, Saturday, Sunday, because she was meeting different friends for her birthday!" and came by to pick them up each day without fail.[15]

Knowing that she is feeding the community is precious to Mui Lan. "It's very important that you have the heart to make this food taste good. People appreciate that this is the old-time taste." And not only in Singapore – in 2025, visiting chefs from Macau's Wynn Resort tasted her puffs and were so impressed that they requested a collaboration. With Mui Lan's tutoring, Soon Soon Huat-branded puffs are now served at the resort, all still hand-made to her Ah Mah's exacting standards.[16]



**(Left and above)** Hazreen Mahmood Hussain and her homemade family-recipe *karipap*, 2026. *Photo by Christopher Tan*.

## Puff-Pastry Perspectives

Puffs made with many-layered, high-rising Western-style butter puff pastry were popularised by local bakeries from the mid-20th century onwards, many of which were run by Hainanese chefs who were trained in Continental cuisine.

To take just two iconic examples: Mont d'Or in Ngee Ann Building (where Ngee Ann City stands today) and Polar Café on High Street rose to fame on the strength of their curry puffs and other baked goods. Advertisements from the late 1950s extolled Mont d'Or as an "ice cream, milk and snack parlour" serving "delicious ice-cream and appetising snacks, curry puffs and also Sunday Special Gado Gado".[17]

Next to the former Parliament House, Polar Café was a popular haunt of politicians, parliamentarians, lawyers, court reporters and other City Hall denizens. In a *Straits Times* article from March 1986, then Member of Parliament Tan Soo Khoon recalled Polar puffs being regular teatime fare in the Members' Room at Parliament House, beloved for "fragrance in the stuffing which could not be matched" and for their signature crisp, light pastry.[18]

The most recently flourishing puff species in Singapore also uses puff pastry likely learnt from Continental or Portuguese sources, but is now made with vanaspati, an Indian vegetable shortening. Found across Little India's latest crop of cafe-bakeries, such as Madras Bakery and Star Café, these classic South Indian snacks from states like Kerala and Tamil Nadu are typically filled with





**(Above)** Tay Mui Lan (right) and her mother Ow Siew Kheng in the kitchen at Soon Soon Huat Curry Puff making her signature spiral puffs, 2026. *Photo by Christopher Tan.*

**(Above right)** Soon Soon Huat's curry puffs, 2026. *Photo by Christopher Tan.*

egg, paneer, chicken and vegetables, spiced a little differently from Southeast Asian curry puffs, all the better to pair with a cup of hot chai.[19]

## Passage From India

How did curry puffs arrive in Southeast Asia? Britain's Cornish pasties are often invoked as possible curry puff forebears, but is there any truth to this? Similarities in their shaping may not have any significance. After all, there are only two basic ways to make a filled pastry, geometrically speaking: fold a single dough piece around a filling, or sandwich a filling between two dough pieces. Stuffed dough foods with both geometries are found in virtually every cuisine.

The 1970s domestic science textbook, *Let's Learn to Cook*, by teacher Christina Fones contains clearly differentiated recipes for Cornish pasties; fried curry puffs made with Chinese lard pastry or Western shortcrust; and baked shortcrust, flaky or puff-pastry curry puffs.[20] We can plainly see from this and other vintage texts that classic Cornish pasties are large and sturdy, wrapping thick shortcrust pastry around raw meat and vegetables, which during a relatively lengthy bake release their own gravy.

Curry puffs differ markedly: smaller and daintier, they have precooked fillings bound by (if any) thickened sauces, and are cooked for a short time only, often in hot oil, if not an oven. Crimps aside, any resemblance to pasties is scant.

As is true for many heritage foods, curry puffs have a more complex backstory than you might expect. The terms "curry" and "curry puff" can both be traced to colonial India, when the British expatriate and Anglo-Indian communities there blended Indian and English culinary traditions in their kitchens. The wrapping of leftover or purpose-made curry in pastry was a natural, logical and commonplace result.[21]

Author Jennifer Brennan, raised in Punjab under the British Raj, features a sardine curry puff recipe in her cookbook, *Curries and Bugles: A Memoir and Cookbook of the British Raj*, citing them as being "very convenient for the *khansamer* [house chef] to make because we always had sardines in the store cupboard".[22]

Curry puffs subsequently travelled with the British to Malaya. Written by Seremban-based "mem" Mrs W.E. Kinsey and published in 1929, *The "Mems" Own Cookery Book* is a vivid example of how British expatriates abroad ran their home kitchens. Kinsey's succinct baked puff recipe folds a mixture of minced beef or mutton leftovers, curry powder, onion and butter in shortcrust pastry.[23]

Such recipes were rapidly assimilated into local cuisines up and down the Malay Peninsula. For instance, Penang's Jawi Peranakans adopted the colonial habit of Sunday tiffin, a light meal taken at lunch or at teatime. According to ethnographer Mareike Pampus, a Jawi Peranakan tiffin would regularly feature curry puffs, which Pampus describes as "a deep-fried pastry shell filled with either chicken or potato curry… varieties with tuna, sardines, and beef rendang also exist". Her interlocutor rather more colourfully observes, "basically what would happen if a British chicken pie and an Indian samosa would have a baby".[24]

## Eastern Promise

Speaking of samosas, these are thought to descend from pastries originally detailed in Arabic cookery texts penned between the 10th and 15th centuries, which also contain the first recorded recipes for laminated doughs.[25] These snacks and techniques subsequently spread along trade and exploration routes from the Middle East to Europe, Central Asia and South Asia. Southeast Asia received these recipes and traditions from South Asia via Muslim traders, and also on a separate track from the Iberian (Al-Andalus) region via Portuguese and Spanish colonisers – who notably also brought from the New World the chillies and potatoes that are inseparable from the curry puffs we know today.[26]

Within India, the medieval recipes flowered into several samosa species beyond the flat triangles or chunky cones now familiar to most people outside India. Hyderabad has square or rectangular *lukhmi* samosas (from the Arabic word *luqma*, meaning "morsel" or "bite"), while Bhopal has triangular *warqi* samosas with crisply defined thin pastry layers (from the Arabic *warq*, meaning "leaf", "sheet" or "paper"). Delhi has *Japani* ("Japanese") samosas, assuredly not from Japan but named for how their edges spread open into a fan shape as they are fried.[27] As befits its colonial heritage, Goa has Portuguese-inflected incarnations of the samosa, *chamuças*, which may be filled with pork, beef or other meats.[28]

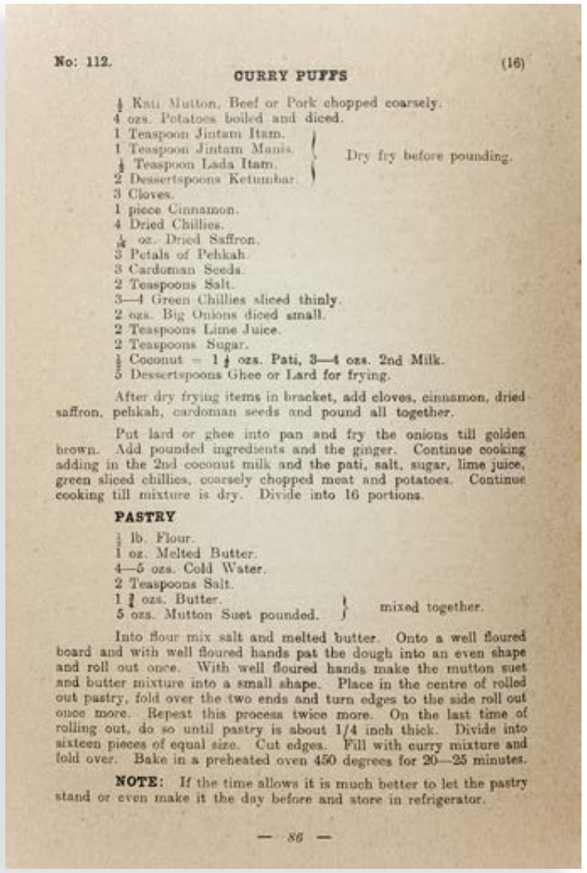
Iberian influences are especially apparent in the globe-spanning family of spiral-laminated puffs. Meat-filled *pastéis* (pastries) from Chaves in northern Portugal boast extravagantly fine, ruffled edges.[29] Murcia in southeastern Spain has *pasteles de carne* (meat pies) whose tops boast dizzyingly, densely concentric spirals.[30] Similarly spiralled discs are hand-pressed to make the ultra-flaky bases of *pastel de nata*, Portugal's iconic egg custard tarts.[31]

All of the above are very old recipes which could very well lie in the direct lineage of Asian spiral puffs. *Karipap gulung* has many visually identical cousins across Southeast Asia. Its Filipino relative is the *empanada de kaliskis* (*kaliskis* meaning "fish scales" in Tagalog, a poetic allusion to the pastry's ridges) from Bulacan province, whose meat or vegetable fillings are typically sweeter and milder than our curry puffs.

Over in Thailand, "karee pup" are also spiralled but usually a little smaller than their Singaporean relatives, and their filling only mildly spiced: Thai food scholars attribute them at least partially to the Portuguese.[32] In Indonesia, puffs made with both plain and spiral pastry and stuffed with many different filling varieties are often called "pastel", meaning "pastry" in both Spanish and Portuguese.[33]

Puff-pastry curry puffs from Balmoral Bakery, 2026. *Photo by Christopher Tan.*





No: 112. CURRY PUFFS (16)

½ Kati Mutton, Beef or Pork chopped coarsely.
4 ozs. Potatoes boiled and diced.
1 Teaspoon Jintam Itam.
1 Teaspoon Jintam Manis.
½ Teaspoon Lada Itam.
2 Dessertspoons Ketumbar.
} Dry fry before pounding.
3 Cloves.
1 piece Cinnamon.
4 Dried Chillies.
¼ oz. Dried Saffron.
3 Petals of Pehkah.
3 Cardoman Seeds.
2 Teaspoons Salt.
3—4 Green Chillies sliced thinly.
2 ozs. Big Onions diced small.
2 Teaspoons Lime Juice.
2 Teaspoons Sugar.
½ Coconut = 1½ ozs. Pati, 3—4 ozs. 2nd Milk.
5 Dessertspoons Ghee or Lard for frying.

After dry frying items in bracket, add cloves, cinnamon, dried saffron, pehkah, cardoman seeds and pound all together.

Put lard or ghee into pan and fry the onions till golden brown. Add pounded ingredients and the ginger. Continue cooking adding in the 2nd coconut milk and the pati, salt, sugar, lime juice, green sliced chillies, coarsely chopped meat and potatoes. Continue cooking till mixture is dry. Divide into 16 portions.

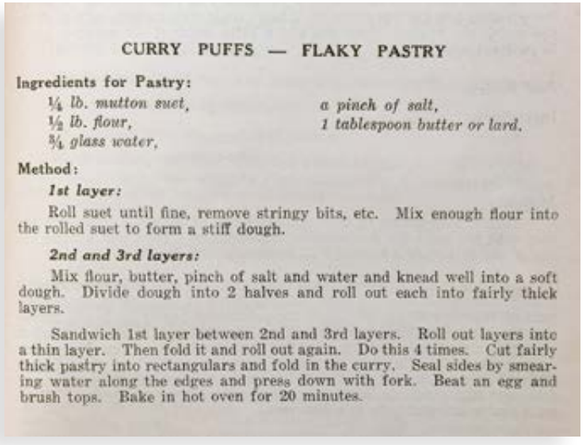
**PASTRY**

½ lb. Flour.
1 oz. Melted Butter.
4—5 ozs. Cold Water.
2 Teaspoons Salt.
1½ ozs. Butter.
5 ozs. Mutton Suet pounded.
} mixed together.

Into flour mix salt and melted butter. Onto a well floured board and with well floured hands pat the dough into an even shape and roll out once. With well floured hands make the mutton suet and butter mixture into a small shape. Place in the centre of rolled out pastry, fold over the two ends and turn edges to the side roll out once more. Repeat this process twice more. On the last time of rolling out, do so until pastry is about 1/4 inch thick. Divide into sixteen pieces of equal size. Cut edges. Fill with curry mixture and fold over. Bake in a preheated oven 450 degrees for 20—25 minutes.

**NOTE:** If the time allows it is much better to let the pastry stand or even make it the day before and store in refrigerator.

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CURRY PUFFS — FLAKY PASTRY

**Ingredients for Pastry:**

*¼ lb. mutton suet,*
*½ lb. flour,*
*¾ glass water,*
*a pinch of salt,*
*1 tablespoon butter or lard.*

**Method:**

***1st layer:***

Roll suet until fine, remove stringy bits, etc. Mix enough flour into the rolled suet to form a stiff dough.

***2nd and 3rd layers:***

Mix flour, butter, pinch of salt and water and knead well into a soft dough. Divide dough into 2 halves and roll out each into fairly thick layers.

Sandwich 1st layer between 2nd and 3rd layers. Roll out layers into a thin layer. Then fold it and roll out again. Do this 4 times. Cut fairly thick pastry into rectangulars and fold in the curry. Seal sides by smearing water along the edges and press down with fork. Beat an egg and brush tops. Bake in hot oven for 20 minutes.

Laminated and spiral pastry techniques may have reached China from Central Asia via the Silk Road. Such influence is visible, for instance, in northern China's many varieties of *shaobing* (烧饼, a genre of traditional Chinese flatbreads and pastries).[34] Whether *shaobing* have a contiguous connection to the laminated lard pastries of southern China is unclear, or at least not well documented. Nonetheless, there are many visual and technical commonalities between spiral puffs and, for example, Shanghai's "eyebrow pastries", named for their curvy evocation of the God of Longevity's eyebrows. Featuring shells of water and fat-based wheat-flour doughs interleaved with a "three-fold, one-turn" lamination, these encase a melange of shredded pork, shiitake mushrooms, and either winter bamboo shoots or carrots.[35]

## A Panoply of Puffs

Between the 1970s and 1990s, local newspaper *Berita Harian* published articles featuring a fascinating range of *karipap* varieties, including "karipap India", a version of Indian Muslim puffs, and "karipap jagung istimewa", shaped like a sweetcorn ear with yellow pastry "kernels" and green pastry "husks".[36]

Appearing in 1998, "karipap tanduk" were puff-pastry cones that looked very much like Western cream horns, but filled with meat and potato curry instead of whipped cream. A follow-up article even showed how to arrange 30 "karipap tanduk" around a doll figurine to look like a flounced ballgown, a savoury twist on doll cakes typically made with skirts of jelly or cake.[37]

These recipes all used butter or pastry margarine for the puff dough. However, two 1970s "karipap lapis" recipes instead laminated the dough with mutton or beef fat.[38] Hazreen Mahmood Hussain recalled her uncle telling her how bakers would "boil mutton fat, then… harden it and layer it [in the pastry]. He said that that was the *best* karipap, a lot better than now". This use of animal-fat pastry formulas rings true to Hazreen's belief that her grandfather and his peers learnt their baking techniques from the British.[39]

Colonial-era Anglo cookbooks certainly did likewise. *The "Mems" Own Cookery Book* makes shortcrust with butter and fat drippings from roast meat.[40] In Susie Hing's recipe from *In a Malayan Kitchen* (1956), puff dough is laminated with a mixture of butter and "5 ozs mutton suet, pounded".[41] *The Malayan Cookbook*, published in Ipoh before 1964, also specifies raw mutton suet for curry puff pastry, instructing readers to roll it "until fine, remove stringy bits, etc.".[42] The same book's chicken pie pastry uses a whopping 2.5 pounds (1.1 kg) of suet to 3 pounds of flour, shaping a spiralled pie lid very much like Murcian *pastel de carne*.[43]

After digesting texts from all of the above, I created my own version of lamb fat pastry, folding and shaping it into fried and baked curry puffs, which you can see in episode 13, "How Did Curry Puffs Come to Singapore?", of *From Book to Cook* (Season 3) on the National Library Board's YouTube channel.[44] Lamb fat gives the pastry a unique and distinctively savoury aroma and crisp flakiness, which lasts for a few days after frying and baking. (Refer to the online version of this article for a simplified recipe of the spiral curry puffs featured in the video.) I also talked about curry puffs in a *BiblioAsia Podcast* episode, "The Crisped, the Baked, the Spiralled: Curry Puffs and Their History", available on Spotify, Apple Podcasts and melisten.[45]

We hope this article will inspire you to make your own version, read up on more recipes, or simply indulge in a curry puff for your next afternoon tea. ♦

Scan the QR code to see more photos in the online article as well as a special recipe for spiral curry puffs.

**(Above left)** In Susie Hing's curry puff recipe, puff dough is laminated with a mixture of butter and mutton suet. *Image reproduced from Susie Hing, In a Malayan Kitchen (Singapore: Mun Seong Press, 1956), 86. (From National Library of Singapore, call no. RCLOS 641.59595 HIN-[RFL]).*

**(Left)** The curry puff recipe in *The Malayan Cookbook*, published before 1964, uses raw mutton suet for the pastry. *Courtesy of Christopher Tan.*

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# REWRITING THE 15th CENTURY

## A NEW HISTORY OF SINGAPORE AND THE RISE OF MELAKA

The new edition of *Seven Hundred Years: A History of Singapore* uses Malay sources, Portuguese texts and Chinese Ming records to offer new perspectives on the decline of Temasek and the rise of the Melaka Sultanate.

**By Peter Borschberg**




**Dr Peter Borschberg** is co-author of *Seven Hundred Years: A History of Singapore* (2nd and 3rd editions). He is an award-winning historian of the early modern period who has published widely on the history of Singapore and its region, global history and globalisation, and maritime history and Europe–Asia interaction in the period 1300–1900.

For generations, the 15th century has occupied an uncertain place in Singapore's longer history, treated as an interval between the trading settlement of Temasek mentioned in the Javanese epic poem *Nagarakretagama* (c. 1365) and Raffles's founding of modern Singapore in 1819.

The third, fully revised edition of *Seven Hundred Years* asks new questions of the surviving evidence.[1] The second chapter of the book traces the connections between Singapore and Melaka as successive stages in a wider transformation across the Malay world.

### Redefining the 15th Century

Earlier accounts of Melaka's founding have emphasised its strategic location, founder Parameswara's migration and Chinese recognition. This new edition asks how Melaka's rulers built and sustained the polity and what role Singapore played in that process, including what became of it.

Approached from that angle, the 15th century acquires a different dynamic. Melaka no longer appears fully formed, ready to assume its place as the dominant port of the Straits region. Instead, readers encounter a process of construction that began with the decline of Temasek-Singapura and culminated in the emergence of a new maritime centre. Singapore is no longer presented as a predecessor eclipsed by a more successful rival. It becomes the point of departure for understanding how Melaka acquired the political relationships, commercial networks and diplomatic experience that underpinned its later success.

One of the book's most innovative approaches lies in its treatment of the evidence. Histories of early Melaka have been dominated by a limited documentary tradition. Some scholars have privileged the *Sulalat al-Salatin* (Genealogy of Kings), or *Malay Annals*, as the definitive local account of its origins, while others have relied on the Portuguese chroniclers of the 16th century. Still others have looked to Ming records – *Ming Shi-lu* (明實錄; Veritable Records of the Ming Dynasty), a collection of annals about the emperors of Ming China (1368–1644).

The chapter reads Malay, Portuguese and Chinese sources alongside one another without privileging any single tradition as inherently authoritative. It recognises that each was produced for different purposes and preserves a different facet of the same historical transformation.[2] Such an approach has become possible only through changes in the available source base and the sustained linguistic work required to bring these materials into dialogue.



**(Facing page)** The "Chinarum Insule" map of Maritime Southeast Asia from the Miller Atlas is a highly detailed nautical chart created around 1519 by cartographers Pedro Reinel, Jorge Reiner and Lopo Homem, and illustrator António de Holanda. This is a section from the map showing the Malay Peninsula and Indochina. Both "Malaqua" and "Mabaqua" on the map refer to Melaka. *From Bibliothèque Nationale de France.*

**(Right)** Singapore probably received its epithet of "Lion City" because the lion was an auspicious symbol of Buddhism practised in 14th-century Southeast Asia. The *Sulalat al-Salatin*'s descriptions of Sri Tri Buana (Sang Nila Utama) suggest he was consecrated as an incarnation of a Bodhisattva, probably the Amoghapasa form of Avalokitesvara, so justifying his claim to rulership over the Malays, who had yet to convert to Islam. As an incarnation of Avalokitesvara, he would have been seated on a lion throne or *singhasana*, as depicted in this 13th–14th-century Chinese figure, in gilt bronze with silver inlay, of Guanyin, the Chinese form of Avalokitesvara. *Collection of the Asian Civilisations Museum.*



According to the *Sulalat al-Salatin*, the ruler of Palembang, Demang Lebar Daun, concluded a covenant with Sri Tri Buana which stated that in return for the undivided loyalty of his subjects, Sri Tri Buana and all his descendants would be fair and just in their rule. This extract is from the 1840 edited version by Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir (Munsyi Abdullah) published under the title *Sejarah Melayu. Collection of the National Library of Singapore (Accession no. B31655050C).*

The present revision draws more systematically on Tomé Pires's *Suma Oriental*, new translations of relevant passages from João de Barros's *Décadas da Ásia* (Decades of Asia) and Brás de Albuquerque's *Comentários do Grande Afonso de Albuquerque* (Commentaries of the Great Afonso de Albuquerque), and the Italian letters of Giovanni da Empoli, which were not considered in earlier editions.

The challenge lies not simply in locating additional texts, but in reading materials written across distinct textual traditions, political vocabularies and authorial purposes. No single language or archive preserves the whole story. Yet the principal obstacle was also historiographical: the inherited assumption that little more remained to be recovered about Singapore during the Melaka Sultanate discouraged precisely the questions that have now made this chapter possible.

The *Sulalat al-Salatin*, an important literary work composed in its most familiar form anchored in Raffles Ms. 18 (this manuscript is based on the earliest version of the text and likely transcribed for Stamford Raffles) around the early 17th century, is concerned, above all, with the moral foundations of kingship. It seeks to explain what made a ruler legitimate, why kingdoms prospered or declined, and what obligations united ruler and subject. Its account of Singapore's downfall is not primarily an exercise in chronology but an exploration of political ethics.

The humiliation of Sang Rajuna Tapa's daughter becomes the decisive breach of the covenant established between Sri Tri Buana (or Sang Nila Utama, believed to be the Srivijayan prince from Palembang who founded the city of Singapura on the island of Temasek around 1299) and Demang Lebar Daun (the chief of Palembang). The people promised to be loyal to the king, and in return Sri Tri Buana promised that the rulers would never publicly shame, humiliate or oppress their subjects. Sang Rajuna Tapa was the state treasurer of Singapura under Sultan Iskandar Shah, its fifth and final ruler.

When Sang Rajuna's beautiful daughter became the sultan's favourite concubine, the other jealous consorts framed her for infidelity, which led her to be publicly executed. Angered by this, Sang Rajuna sent a message inviting the Majapahit Empire of Java to invade Singapura. Iskandar Shah and his followers fled north and he eventually founded Melaka. The destruction of Singapura happened because the moral order of the kingdom had been compromised.[3] The narrative is less interested in military events than in explaining why legitimate authority was undermined.

The Portuguese sources, on the other hand, were shaped by a very different set of concerns because they emerged from the circumstances of conquest in 1511. During the decade following the capture of Melaka, Portuguese officials, merchants and chroniclers found themselves responsible for administering what had been one of the wealthiest commercial centres in Asia. They had taken a remarkably successful port-polity but possessed only a limited comprehension of how it functioned. To govern Melaka effectively, they needed to understand the political and commercial machinery they had taken over.

That understanding was acquired not in Europe but in Melaka itself. The Portuguese lived among the very people who had sustained the sultanate's success. They spoke with those who remained after the conquest, as well as with Gujarati, Tamil, Javanese, Chinese, Arab and Persian traders, harbour officials, pilots, interpreters and visitors from neighbouring kingdoms. Their histories grew out of conversations, negotiations and enquiries conducted in the years immediately following the conquest. The Portuguese narratives therefore preserve far more than European observations. They also record, albeit through Portuguese mediation, the collective historical memory of Melaka's neighbours, allies, merchants and officials.

This explains why the Portuguese texts ask questions that do not appear in the *Sulalat al-Salatin*. They seek to understand how Parameswara acquired power, why he abandoned Singapore, how Melaka secured the support of the Orang Laut (communities of the sea), why merchants preferred its harbour, how alliances were maintained, how customs were collected and how commercial confidence was built and cultivated across a diverse trading community. Their concerns focus on the practical construction and maintenance of a successful maritime polity. Simply put, the Portuguese sources explain what made Melaka tick and how it worked.

The Chinese records shed light on a third dimension of that story. Their principal concern was neither the ethics of kingship nor the practical operations of commerce, but the incorporation of new polities into the diplomatic framework of the Ming empire. They provide the most detailed chronology for many events while revealing the importance that Melaka attached to imperial recognition and tributary diplomacy.[4] Read alongside the Malay and Portuguese traditions, Chinese sources show how international standing and legitimacy formed part of Melaka's political strategy rather than a ceremonial afterthought.

Each of these archives therefore answers different sets of questions. The Malay texts explain legitimacy, the Portuguese accounts explain politico-economic construction and sustenance, and the Chinese documents explore chronology and diplomacy. Considered individually, each offers only a partial view, but read in unison they reveal something far greater.

The chapter does not attempt to harmonise differences between the sources or identify a single authoritative tradition. Instead, it treats those differences as historically meaningful because they reflect the concerns of the societies that produced them. The outcome is a more differentiated reconstruction of Singapore and Melaka than has generally appeared in earlier histories.

## Revisiting Melaka's Origins

The chapter's reinterpretation of Melaka's origins follows the same logic. Past accounts generally present the city as the product of a foundational moment: the encounter with the mouse-deer (*sang kancil*)[5] beneath the Melaka tree and the founding of Melaka that followed. Whatever its symbolic value, the story compresses a longer process into a single dramatic episode. The new chapter recovers another and arguably older narrative that has gradually receded from view.

A century ago, the origins of Melaka became the subject of one of the great historiographical debates in Southeast Asian history. It began with Gabriel Ferrand (1864–1935), the distinguished French Orientalist, diplomat and authority on the Indian Ocean world, whose pioneering studies of

The Cantino planisphere (or Cantino world map), drawn by an unknown Portuguese cartographer in 1502, is the oldest surviving map to document early Portuguese geographical discoveries in the Eastern and Western hemispheres. The map is preserved at the Biblioteca Estense Universitaria in Modena, Italy. *From Wikimedia Commons.*






Printed engraving of a "Melaya Captain" leading a group of armed Orang Laut, in Johan Nieuhof's *Embassy from the East India Company*, printed in 1669. *Image reproduced from Johan Nieuhof, Voyages & Travels to the East Indies, 1653–1670 (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1988), 27. Collection of the National Library of Singapore (Call no. RCLOS 915.98 NIE-JSB)].*

Arabic, Persian and European geographical texts sought to reconstruct the early history of maritime Asia. In a book published in 1918, Ferrand argued that Melaka's origins reached much further back than generally assumed. He thought he had identified references in texts which pointed to an established settlement well before the 1400s. His bold thesis immediately attracted attention and raised fundamental questions about the relationship between Singapore and Melaka.

Ferrand's arguments provoked an extraordinary response from Gerret Pieter Rouffaer (1860–1928), one of the Netherlands' foremost scholars of the Indonesian archipelago and an authority on Javanese and Sumatran history. Rouffaer originally intended to write a brief 20-page review. Instead, he produced a monumental study exceeding 400 pages. Before one could understand the origins of Melaka, Rouffaer contended, one first had to reconstruct the history of Temasek-Singapura itself. The debate consequently expanded far beyond the dating of Melaka's foundation and became an enquiry into the transformation of the entire southern Malay world.[6]

Although Rouffaer rejected Ferrand's historical conclusions, he came to recognise something of much greater and more enduring importance. The Malay and Portuguese source traditions preserved a pattern of migration. The founders of Melaka did not suddenly appear on the west coast of the peninsula. Their story unfolded through successive stages stretching from Java or Palembang to Singapore, then onwards through Muar before finally reaching Bertam and Melaka. The history of Melaka is therefore deeply intertwined with that of Singapore.

Although Rouffaer's reconstruction gradually entered the historiography, its wider implications were seldom explored. The migration sequence became accepted as background while scholarly attention shifted towards questions of chronology, Islamisation and the historical identity of Parameswara.

The new chapter restores migration as one of its central themes. Rather than treating movement as a prelude to Melaka's foundation, it asks what migration itself accomplished. The answer extends well beyond the relocation of a royal household. Rulers travelled with followers, merchant communities, Orang Laut alliances, diplomatic experience and established practices. Authority itself proved mobile because it rested on relationships rather than territory. Seen from this perspective, Melaka did not emerge from a single act of foundation beneath a tree. It developed through the gradual transplantation and recombination of an order whose immediate antecedent lay in Singapore and whose deeper roots reached back to Palembang.

## Reframing Singapore's Decline

The chapter's reinterpretation of Melaka's origins is matched by an equally important reassessment of Singapore's decline. Conventional histories have generally explained the decline of Temasek-Singapura in relatively straightforward terms. The polity succumbed to attack, whether from Majapahit, Siam or some combination of external forces, and its significance disappeared abruptly. Melaka then inherited Singapore's commercial role and assumed its place as the principal maritime centre of the Straits. The transition appears neat and decisive.

The new chapter presents a considerably more complex picture. The fall of Singapore was not a single event but the culmination of interacting processes. More importantly, the source traditions explain those processes in strikingly different ways. Once again, the differences between them are treated not as contradictions that can be ignored but as evidence that authors in the deeper past understood the crisis from different vantage points.

Within the *Sulalat al-Salatin*, Singapore's destruction is first and foremost a political and moral catastrophe. The ruler, as stated earlier, violated the covenant established between Sri Tri Buana and Demang Lebar Daun. The subsequent betrayal of the kingdom is presented not as an isolated act of treachery, but as the consequence of a ruler who has abandoned the ethical foundations of kingship. Military defeat completed a process that had already begun. Legitimate authority collapsed before the city itself fell.

The Portuguese narratives are concerned with political ambition, shifting alliances and strategic calculation. Parameswara appears not as a moral exemplar but as an ambitious political actor operating within a competitive environment. He establishes himself in Singapore, seizes power, cultivates support and eventually abandons the settlement when confronted by a powerful Siamese expedition, probably reinforced with help from Patani. Questions of diplomacy, maritime security, commercial opportunity and rivalry dominate the narrative in place of moral judgement.

Neither explanation is rejected, nor is either privileged. The Malay texts highlight the indigenous language through which legitimacy was understood, while the Portuguese preserve contemporary explanations of strategy and statecraft. Read together, they suggest that Singapore's decline resulted from an interaction between internal fracture and external geopolitical pressures.[7]

The city's fall appears neither inevitable nor instantaneous. It unfolded through a succession of decisions that weakened an already fragile order before external intervention brought the experiment to an end.

This reinterpretation also alters the relationship between Singapore and Melaka. If Singapore collapsed solely because it was attacked and defeated, then Melaka naturally became its replacement. If, however, Singapore's decline involved the erosion of authority while many of its relationships, commercial networks and maritime alliances survived, depending on the sources, the Majapahit or Siamese attack, then Melaka began to look less like a successor than an inheritor. The continuity thus lies not in territory but in people, connections, practices and experience.

## A History Built Through Relationships

This emphasis on continuity leads directly to one of the chapter's central arguments. Neither Singapore nor Melaka is explained primarily through geography. Historians have long pointed to Melaka's strategic location astride one of the world's busiest maritime corridors, and with good reason. Yet favourable geography alone cannot explain why one settlement became a very significant centre in Asia while many others occupying equally advantageous positions remained comparatively insignificant.

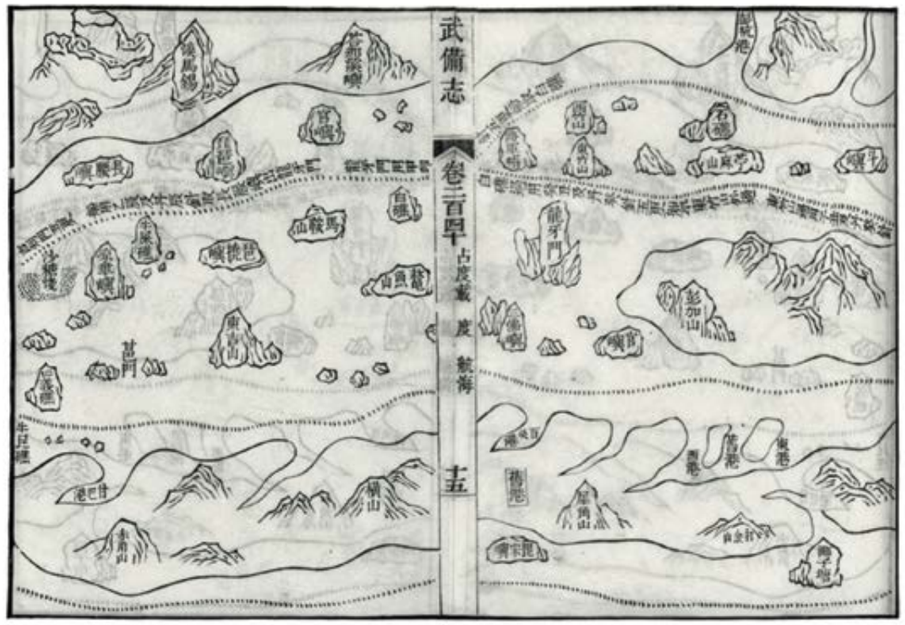
The chapter argues that Melaka's success also rested on relationships. Its rulers assembled a system in which different forms of authority reinforced one another. Support from the Orang Laut enhanced maritime security. Maritime security encouraged merchant confidence. Merchant confidence attracted greater volumes of trade, increased prosperity and strengthened the ruler's prestige. Greater prestige facilitated diplomacy with regional powers and enhanced Melaka's standing within the regional tributary structures. Each relationship reinforced several others, creating a cumulative process through which commercial success and authority developed together.

Importantly, none of these relationships emerged in isolation. Melaka did not invent the techniques on which its success hinged. Maritime peoples had long been incorporated into royal service elsewhere in the Malay world. Merchant communities had long been encouraged through privileges and commercial protections. Diplomatic marriages, tributary relationships and negotiated alliances had deep historical roots. What distinguished Melaka was not institutional novelty but the effectiveness with which its rulers combined inherited practices into a coherent and durable order.

Migration thus becomes significant well beyond movement from one place to another. Melaka's founders carried with them much more




Portuguese Macau postage stamp of the Portuguese apothecary and chronicler Tomé Pires, 1955. His *Suma Oriental* (Summary of the Orient, c. 1513) is the oldest and most extensive account of the Portuguese East at the beginning of the 16th century. *From Wikimedia Commons.*




Section of the Mao Kun Map (茅坤图) plotting the passage of Zheng He's fleet past Longyamen (Dragon's Teeth Gate). The Mao Kun Map is the collective name for a set of navigation charts purportedly based on the 15th-century expeditions of the Indian Ocean by Ming-dynasty explorer Admiral Zheng He (郑和). Danmaxi (淡马锡; Temasek) is shown at the top left of the map. *Collection of the National Library of Singapore (Accession no. B26078782G).*

than a court and its immediate followers. They transferred commercial connections, maritime alliances, diplomatic experience and established expectations about how authority should be exercised. The migration from Palembang through Singapore to Melaka was simultaneously the migration of an accumulated repertoire.

This emphasis on ruler agency represents another key departure from earlier interpretations. Explanations centred on geography, commerce or Chinese protection tend to reduce leadership to a secondary role. The chapter reverses that relationship. Geography created opportunities, but opportunities still had to be recognised and exploited. Commercial prosperity depended on confidence, confidence depended on security and security depended on judgement. Melaka's rulers became entrepreneurs who consciously assembled and maintained the relationships upon which their polity's prosperity rested.

Underlying these arguments is a broader historiographical shift. For much of the past century, historians sought to classify Melaka according to one political model or the other. The new chapter instead directs attention towards the practical problems confronting its rulers. How does a displaced ruler establish authority in a new environment? How are merchant communities persuaded to relocate? How are alliances forged across diverse ethnic and political communities? How is maritime security maintained?

These questions shift the focus from classification to construction. Melaka no longer appears as the almost inevitable outcome of favourable geography or expanding regional trade. It emerges through a succession of choices, each addressing problems while creating new opportunities. The history of the 15th century thus becomes less a catalogue of institutions than an account of creativity in action.

## A Different 15th Century

One of the chapter's most important intellectual debts is to Anthony C. Milner's seminal work on the Malay *kerajaan* (Malay for "government" or "kingdom"). Milner, one of the world's leading scholars of Malay history and political culture, wrote that European notions of the "state", defined by territorial boundaries and permanent institutions, sit uneasily with the realities of the pre-modern Malay world. Allegiance attached to persons more readily than to places, while power radiated outwards through networks of loyalty whose strength varied according to circumstance. The chapter accepts this insight but asks an additional question that has received surprisingly sparse attention: If rulers occupied the centre of the political system, what did successful rulers actually do?[8]

Successful rulers emerge not just as figures embodying legitimate authority, but as active builders of order. They negotiated alliances with neighbouring courts, cultivated the loyalty of the Orang Laut, reassured merchants that justice and security would prevail, strengthened diplomatic links with other polities and balanced competing regional interests. Merchant communities did business in Melaka because they saw that agreements would be honoured, commerce protected and disputes resolved fairly.

This emphasis transforms the way Melaka's success can be understood. Melaka prospered because successive rulers recognised opportunities, assembled durable alliances and successfully combined inherited practices into a resilient system. Their achievement rested on sound judgement exercised over generations.

Seen from this perspective, the 15th century acquires a very different rhythm. Traditional histories often present the period as a sequence of established kingdoms succeeding one another starting with Srivijaya. Each polity appears almost fully formed before yielding its place to the next. Such narratives conceal the uncertainty and negotiation through which political communities were actually created.

The chapter foregrounds those processes to explain why Singapore unconventionally occupies such a prominent place within the chapter. The island becomes the principal setting in which many of the relationships, commercial practices and diplomatic habits that would later characterise Melaka were assembled, tested and refined. The significance of Singapore therefore lies not simply in its existence as a port, but in its role as a laboratory of experience whose legacy travelled with those who eventually established Melaka.

The chapter proposes a different way of writing the history of the Singapore and Melaka Straits region by placing relationships at the centre of historical explanation. Instead of presenting migration as disruption, it understands mobility as one of the defining characteristics of maritime political life. It demonstrates how diplomacy, commerce, maritime security, legitimacy and recognition interacted to reinforce one another. And it allows Malay, Portuguese and Chinese sources to shed light on different facets of the same historical transformation.

The cumulative effect is to restore the 15th century to its proper place within Singapore's history. It now emerges as one of the most creative periods in the island's past, when an older tradition was reconfigured into a new maritime order that would dominate the Straits for well over a century.

This is what differentiates the new chapter from earlier accounts. Its originality lies in the questions it asks of evidence that has long been available. By shifting attention to the processes through which order was constructed, it reconnects Singapore and Melaka within a single historical narrative. In this way, the rise of Melaka and the decline of Singapore cease to be separate stories. ♦

The third edition of *Seven Hundred Years: A History of Singapore* (fully revised and updated) will be published in early 2027. The book will be available for reference at the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library (RSING 959.57 KWA-[HIS]), for loan at selected public libraries (SING 959.57 KWA-[HIS]), and for sale at physical and online bookstores.




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# Too Many TONGUES?

## How Lee Kuan Yew's 1979 Visit to Mauritius Influenced the Speak Mandarin Campaign

Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew made a largely forgotten trip to the Republic of Mauritius, accompanied by three journalists, in August 1979. What they observed there would contribute to debates on language policy back in Singapore.

By Caleb Leow








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More than 5,000 km separate Singapore and Mauritius, an island nation in the Indian Ocean off the southeastern coast of Africa. Yet the two island nations have more in common than their geographical separation might suggest. Almost three times the size of Singapore, Mauritius is another former British colony whose diverse cultures and languages have been shaped by centuries of trade, migration and encounters between East and West.

The similarities between the two islands extend beyond these broad historical parallels. In August 1979, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew made a three-day visit to Mauritius following the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Lusaka, Zambia. Accompanying him were three journalists: Lam Keng Loi of *Nanyang Siang Pau*, Loy Teck Juan of *Sin Chew Jit Poh* and Seah Chiang Nee of the *Straits Times*. There, Lee encountered a multilingual society that offered a striking illustration of the difficulties of mastering multiple languages – a challenge that also confronted Singapore.[1]

Describing his experience in Mauritius in his National Day Rally speech that year, Lee declared: "It was a revelation to me."[2] His observations from the trip would feature in his arguments for the Promote the Use of Mandarin Campaign, better known today as the Speak Mandarin Campaign, which he officially launched on 7 September 1979, less than a month after his visit.[3]

### A Babel of Languages

Like Singapore, Mauritius is a multiracial and multicultural society. Of its approximately 1.2 million inhabitants today, around two-thirds are Indo-Mauritian, about a fourth are Creole, while smaller proportions are of Chinese and Franco-Mauritian descent.[4] And as is the case in Singapore, this multiculturalism owes much to the island's historically strategic location.

Situated at the crossroads of Africa, Asia and the Middle East, Mauritius has attracted a succession of travellers, explorers and colonisers over the centuries. Historical evidence suggests that the island was visited by Arab traders as early as the 10th century. While it served as a port of call for the Portuguese in the early 16th century, it remained uninhabited during this period.[5]

It was only under the Dutch – who first arrived in 1598 and began settlement around 1638 – that the island began to be populated when the Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie, or Dutch East India Company, transported colonists and enslaved labourers to Mauritius, primarily for the harvesting of ebony wood.[6] In 1715, five years after Dutch withdrawal, the French took possession of the island and brought over more enslaved labourers – mostly from Madagascar, Mozambique and elsewhere in East Africa – mainly to develop its sugarcane industry which had been established by the Dutch.[7]

The demographic composition of the island would continue to evolve under the British, who took over in 1810 after defeating the French in a fierce naval battle. In the 1820s, the British began experimenting with bringing in indentured labourers, mainly from India, to sustain the plantation economy. This migration intensified following the abolition of slavery in Mauritius in 1835, as plantation owners increasingly relied on indentured labour.[8]

**(Facing page)** A street market in Port Louis, Mauritius, 2016. *Eric Nathan/Alamy.*

Similarly, the contemporary contours of Singapore's population were largely shaped by British colonialism, under which "demand for labour in the public works and agricultural plantations" had engendered "large and sustained immigration" from China, the Indian subcontinent and the Dutch East Indies.[9] Both island states thus faced a similar issue after independence from the British in the 1960s. With a highly heterogeneous population – composed largely of communities of diverse migrant origins and linguistic traditions – how would people communicate? What should the national language be?




Here, the Mauritian case offered answers that Singapore did not have at the time. A hybrid language had developed on the island known as Creole, which was already widely spoken by the time of its independence in 1968. Creole served as a lingua franca of sorts for the island's inhabitants even as they continued to use a multitude of languages in different settings. A legacy of French colonial rule, Mauritian Creole is a French-based creole that developed in the multilingual environment of colonial Mauritius and subsequently incorporated vocabulary from African, Malagasy, Indian and English sources.

The development of Creole was facilitated by one of the French surrender clauses, which allowed the continued use of the French language under British rule.[10] Creole was widely spoken across Mauritius, and during the 1970s and early 1980s, there were campaigns by Mauritian intellectuals and political activists to recognise it as a national language.[11]

**(Left)** Mauritian dailies in a multitude of languages as seen in the documentary, *Mauritius and Luxembourg – A Language Profile*, aired during the televised discussion between Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew and the three journalists on language competence and multi-lingual societies on 20 November 1979. *Courtesy of Mediacorp Pte Ltd and National Archives of Singapore (Accession no. 1997001802).*

**(Below)** The Sri Sockalingum Meenatchee Ammen Kovil (commonly known as the Kaylasson Temple) is a historic Hindu temple in Port Louis, Mauritius, 2023. *Dr Jürgen Bochynek/istock.*







In Singapore, Lee sensed that interactions between people of different linguistic backgrounds would similarly lead to the emergence of some shared, hybrid language. This was particularly so as more of the population moved into Housing and Development Board flats throughout the 1970s where, in Lee's words, "our neighbours do not speak what we are speaking at home". Lee further remarked: "Out of this interaction, some Singapore patois will emerge. Before the war and immediately after the war, that patois was bazaar Malay. After the war, particularly after Chinese education acquired larger numbers of students, that patois became more and more Singapore Hokkien, not Amoy Hokkien, not standard Hokkien but Singapore Hokkien with Malay words, English words – a Singapore patois."[12]

Mauritius offered much food for thought regarding the future of language in Singapore. In his oral history interview with the National Archives of Singapore in 2022, *Nanyang Siang Pau*'s Lam Keng Loi recalled that it was only at the end of the Commonwealth meeting that Lee made a last-minute decision to visit Mauritius.[13] Mauritian newspapers reported that Lee's visit was meant to "spark off a political awakening among the island's leaders to the realisation that Mauritius needed a strong government, proper economic direction and a metamorphosis of work ethics".[14] Lee, perhaps, also had other items on his agenda.

## Masters of None

Stepping into Mauritius, Lam said, gave him an uncanny sense of being back in Singapore ("你一进去, 去到毛里求斯, 你就有那种感觉, 就很像新加坡"). The intermingling of English, French and Creole, in particular, reminded Lam of the courts on South Bridge Road in Singapore, where one could often hear Hokkien, Malay, English and Mandarin all at the same time.[15]

As in Singapore, a whole array of languages could be seen and heard across Mauritius, in both private and public settings. A 1978 account of Mauritius, presented at a Commonwealth broadcasting conference, captured this linguistic diversity: "Road signs are in English, newspapers are in French, Hindi gets extensive coverage on radio and television. Tamil, Telugu, Urdu and Bhojpuri also make frequent appearances. Prices in some shops are notched up in Chinese."[16]

While Mauritians appeared to speak many languages, and often claimed to be bilingual or trilingual, their proficiency in each language varied widely. This became clear as Lee and the journalists began to meet Mauritian diplomats, who offered them an insider's view of the linguistic situation of the republic. What they discovered, in the words of Seah Chiang Nee of the *Straits Times*, was that even those who were "high up in the government and well educated" found the overabundance of languages in Mauritius "punishing to the human mind".[17]




Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew (extreme left) and the three journalists who accompanied him to Mauritius in the televised panel discussion aired on 20 November 1979 about language competence and multilingual societies. *Courtesy of Mediacorp Pte Ltd and National Archives of Singapore (Accession no. 1997002179).*

A similar assessment was made by Lee, who had met the acting Governor-General of Mauritius, Dayendranath Burrenchobay. At a televised panel discussion titled "Language Competence and Multi-Lingual Societies", featuring Lee and the three journalists on 20 November 1979, Lee described Burrenchobay as "a very able, very cultivated man". "[Burrenchobay] is an engineer by training, an outstanding intellect educated at the Imperial College, London, PhD; he has been a civil servant; been in charge of education."[18]

Burrenchobay also admitted to Lee the difficulties of maintaining proficiency across languages. Lee recalled Burrenchobay telling him: "My English I would rate at 70, my French I would rate at 60, my Creole I would rate at 50. […] When I'm staying in England for any length of time, then my English would go up to 90 or 85 and my French and my Creole would go down. But if I were to stay in Paris, then my French would go up to 75 or 80 and my English would go down."[19]

If multilingualism imposed a burden even on highly educated Mauritians, the challenges appeared greater still for Mauritian students. These difficulties were explored in a documentary titled *Mauritius and Luxembourg – A Language Profile*, produced by Radio and Television Singapore and broadcast during the panel discussion, which discussed the educational challenges of multilingualism faced by the two titular countries, both of which Lee had visited earlier in 1979.[20]



A newscaster reading the news for the Mauritius Broadcasting Corporation, which broadcast programmes in 12 languages. This is a still from the documentary, *Mauritius and Luxembourg – A Language Profile*, aired during the televised discussion between Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew and the three journalists on language competence and multi-lingual societies on 20 November 1979. *Courtesy of Mediacorp Pte Ltd. and National Archives of Singapore (Accession no. 1997001802).*

Beginning with the case of Luxembourg, the documentary observes that "[t]he young Luxembourger starts life with the educational strain of having to acquire knowledge of at least four languages – German, French, English, and the native dialect Letzeburgisch".[21] The documentary then turns to Mauritius where students appeared to face similar challenges. As Mauritius's Minister for Education and Cultural Affairs Khersingh Jagatsingh explained, the government had undertaken to teach the "oriental languages" of various ethnic groups on the island in addition to English and French, thus offering lessons in no fewer than 10 languages, including Hindi, Tamil, Urdu, Mandarin and Arabic.[22]

The effort to promote so many languages was not without obstacles. Phan Phouc, a teacher interviewed for the documentary, noted the challenges of teaching Mandarin to students in Mauritius: "They don't have the opportunity to practise it because […] 50 percent of the pupils speak Hakka and 50 percent speak Creole with their parents at home," she said.[23] When Seah Chiang Nee asked Loy Teck Juan about the level of Mandarin being taught in the documentary, the latter simply remarked that "it is very low".[24]

The journalists who travelled with Lee took home lessons about the challenges of multilingualism, although these were framed in rather harsh terms. "The cultural shortcomings of the Mauritian people can serve as a mirror for us," Lam Keng Loi wrote in a *Nanyang Siang Pau* article. "We must make sure not to repeat the same mistakes. Singaporeans are practical people, and the shortcomings of the Mauritians can alert us to our own and allow us to make timely improvements." ("毛里求斯人民的文化通病，正好作为我们的借镜，我们绝对不应该重蹈覆辙，新加坡人是着重实际的，毛里求斯的毛病，可以点醒我们，让我们及时改进。")[25]




The Tien Tan Chinese Pagoda in the outskirts of Port Louis, Mauritius, 2023. *Dr Jürgen Bochynek/Adobe Stock.*





## Languages, Dialects and Creoles

Just a few weeks after the Mauritius trip, Lee launched the Promote the Use of Mandarin Campaign on 7 September 1979. It is unlikely that the trip was the catalyst given that Radio and Television Singapore had banned television and radio advertisements in dialect a year earlier.[26]

In debates surrounding the campaign, the situation in Mauritius was used to demonstrate the difficulties of learning too many languages at once, and to show that the widespread use of Chinese dialects could potentially interfere with the mastery of English and standard Mandarin. Mauritian Creole was also a real-world case study that allowed Lee and the journalists to debate the merits and drawbacks of discouraging the use of Chinese dialects in Singapore.

Seah pointed out that both Creole and Chinese dialects shared the same advantage: they were arguably the most natural forms of language to many in Mauritius and Singapore respectively. Since there were already large communities in which they were spoken and used, there would be few emotional or psychological barriers to learning them. As Seah noted, "I think the argument, in fact, of the Mauritians is that, well, in Creole, we have in fact a language which we can use, you know, among 90 percent of our people, and it doesn't really sort of pose that much of a mental burden on our people." He reasoned that a similar case might be made about dialect use in Singapore where "unlike the other languages which we saw in the film, we don't have to go to school to study them; we pick them up as a natural process".[27]

Conversely, it was argued that Creole and Chinese dialects also shared the same disadvantages: they were rarely understood outside of the local context and were therefore seen as hindering, rather than facilitating, international economic and cultural engagement. Such concerns were also expressed within Mauritius's educational establishment. In response to calls to make Creole a national language, Ramesh Ramdoyal, Deputy Director of the Institute of Education, noted in the documentary that giving "official preponderance" to Creole would end up "cutting [Mauritius] away from the main trends of world life" and hinder Mauritians from "open[ing] up out to the world".[28]




Poster for the inaugural year of Promote the Use of Mandarin Campaign (now known as Speak Mandarin Campaign), launched on 7 September 1979. *Ministry of Culture Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image No. 19990005265 - 0001).*

Similarly, in Lee's view, the promotion of Mandarin would ensure that for Chinese Singaporeans, "at least we are using a language of some international value and not Mauritian Creole or Jamaican pidgin or our own special particular sub-language".[29] During the panel discussion, Lee and the journalists had highlighted the case of Mauritian Creole as support for their arguments.

## A Life of Their Own

For Lee and the three journalists, the trip to Mauritius seemed to affirm the view that the government had to play a more active role in streamlining language use in Singapore. While

this was based on a belief that language proficiency is a zero-sum game, which should not be taken as a foregone conclusion, there was a desire to avoid what they perceived as the multilingual confusion of the relatively laissez-faire African republic, as well as to steer language policy in the same outward-looking direction as the economy. The Speak Mandarin Campaign, now in its 47th year, continues to encourage the use of Mandarin among the Chinese community in Singapore.[30]

Another language campaign, the Speak Good English Movement, was launched in 2000 by Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong to discourage the use of Singlish and to encourage Singaporeans to speak the kind of English that would, for him, offer "a distinct advantage in terms of doing business and communicating with the world".[31]

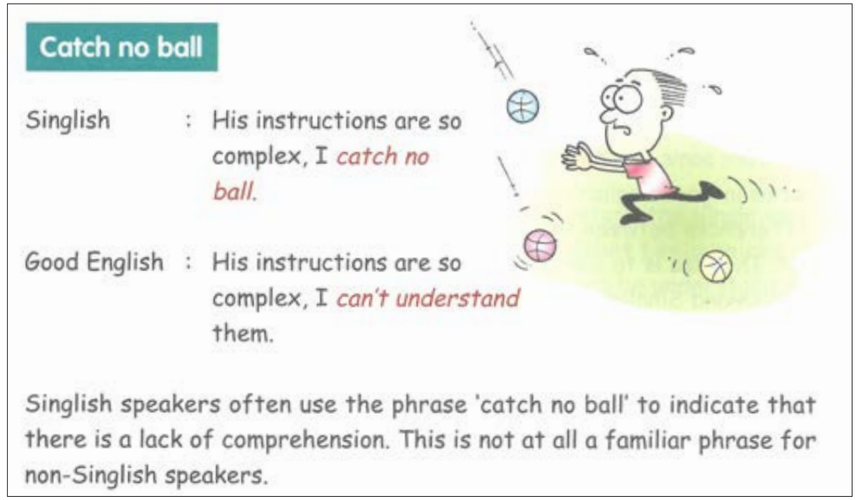
Interestingly, even as Mauritius was used as a cautionary tale for Singapore in the language debates of the late 1970s, the linguistic landscape in Singapore today resembles Mauritius in a way. This is notably due to the continued use of Singlish, which some linguists consider an English-based creole. Singlish is a distinctive variety of English that draws on vocabulary and grammatical features from Malay, Tamil, Mandarin and Chinese dialects. It is widely spoken by Singaporeans in everyday life.

Singlish, like Mauritian Creole, has been increasingly seen as an indispensable marker of national identity. In a 2024 study on race, religion and language by the Institute of Policy Studies, more than half of the 4,000 respondents agreed that "Singlish gives Singaporeans a sense of identity, and that it is an important part of culture that should not be lost".[32]

Nearly half a century after Lee's visit to Mauritius, the linguistic histories of the two islands offer a more complicated lesson. The Speak Mandarin Campaign and the Speak Good English Movement reflect sustained efforts by the Singapore government to shape how languages are used, but the persistence and popularity of Singlish – alongside the use of Mandarin and English – also reveal the lived realities of Singapore's residents. Like Mauritian Creole, Singlish reminds us that language is shaped not only by policy, but also by the communities that speak it, and will ultimately take on a life of its own. ♦




Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew speaking at the launch of the Speak Mandarin Campaign at the Singapore Conference Hall on 7 September 1979. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image No. 19980002275 - 0028).*




A Singlish expression and its corresponding explanation in standard English. *Image reproduced from Speak Well. Be Understood (Singapore: The Speak Good English Movement Committee, 2000), 27. (From National Library of Singapore, call no. RSING 427.95957 SPE).*

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MR. BHUTTO

**Razak: Happy to have ties with Pakistan again...**

KUALA LUMPUR, Sun. — The Deputy Prime Minister, Tun Abdul Razak, welcomed Pakistan's friendship overtures.

Tun Razak was referring to yesterday's statement to Jakarta newsmen by the Pakistani Foreign Minister, Mr. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, that Pakistan was making peace with Malaysia.

Today, Tun Razak said: "We have had no official from there (Pakistan) yet.

"It was Pakistan who broke relations with us. But we shall be very happy to have them as friends again."

# Police aid sought

MISSING SINCE FRIDAY AFTER LEAVING FOR AN UNDISCLOSED DESTINATION

# Tun Lim mystery

CANBERRA, Sunday

POLICE have been called in to help find the Malaysian High Commissioner here, Tun Lim Yew Hock, who has not been seen since Friday afternoon.

The Second Secretary at the High Commission, Mr. Ajit Singh, revealed this tonight at a press conference to seek aid in finding the High Commissioner.

An official statement issued by the High Commission said that Tun Lim had been in ill health for some time.

He had left on Friday for an undisclosed destination.

He told his office that he was going away for a quiet weekend, the statement said.

The High Commission now wished to get in touch with him on a matter requiring his immediate attention.

Mr. Singh told reporters that the High Commissioner's car was still in Canberra and no-one whom the High Commissioner had taken him to the airport.

**26 die in floods**



**PULL OUT BY HO's TROOPS**

SAIGON, Sun.—Two battalions of North Vietnamese troops withdrew from entrenched positions in the central highlands today in the face of pressure from reinforced American paratroopers.

Under cover of predawn fog, the Communist force of about 800 men faded into thick undergrowth and bamboo thickets 30 miles northwest of Kontum city.

A U.S. military spokesman said the North Vietnamese were no longer in the positions on ridges where they were known to be dug in last night.

**Malik throws dinner for Ghazali**

JAKARTA, Sun. — The Indonesian Foreign Minister, Mr. Adam Malik, last night gave a dinner party at his official residence in honour of Tan Sri Ghazali bin Shafie, Permanent Secretary to the Malaysian Foreign Ministry, here on a peace mission.

Tan Sri Ghazali has been under heavy security guard since his arrival here on Friday night and pressmen have been barred from seeing him.

*Statement*

The security, defence and foreign affairs committee

**Perak Derby claims two victims**

By EPSOM JEEP

IPOH, Sun. — The $25,000 Perak Derby run over a gruelling distance of 12f claimed two victims here today.

Sinar Mata and Pena'alok collapsed and died in front of the packed grandstands after the race.

They were on their way back to the saddling enclosure when they showed signs of distress. Doug Weir, who rode Pena'alok, quickly dismounted, followed by Johnny Nelson on Sinar Mata.

The club vet, Dick Coughlan, was quickly on the scene but both horses died before help could be rendered.

*PAID $11I8*

Pena'alok, owned by Mr. and Mrs. Cheong Kok Lim and trained by Lee Kim Yan, won the Derby trial over 9f to pay $118 last week.

Sinar Mata, owned by August stable and trained by Doc Rodgers, recently earned a promotion to Class 1 after a smashing win in a Class 2 10f race with 9.5.

The valuable classic was won by Felton, with Des Coleman up. Second was Dennis the Menace (Glen Pretty) with champion (Luke King) third and Sinar Mata (Nelson) fourth.

**Death fall**

SINGAPORE, Sun.—A 16-year-old girl, Lee Yoke Cheng, fell to her death from a block of flats

# The Mystery of the Missing Diplomat

In June 1966, Lim Yew Hock, Malaysia's High Commissioner to Australia (and former Chief Minister of Singapore), bought a ticket to Sydney from Canberra. Then dropped off the face of the earth.

**By Felix Cheong**



WEEPING WIFE MAKES NATION-WIDE APPEAL ON TV

**Beach search for Tun Lim**

SPECIAL REPORT by telephone from LESLIE HOFFMAN

SYDNEY, Tues.—A distraught Toh Puan Lim Yew Hock appeared on a nation-wide television hook-up today to appeal to her husband, missing Malaysian High Commissioner, Tun Lim Yew Hock, to rejoin the family, as police concentrated their search for him on Bondi beach.

Toh Puan Lim wept throughout her appearance and was only able to say: "I am sad at my husband's absence from Canberra. It has up-

Toh Puan Lim..."I am sad at my husband's absence..."

*OFFICIAL DENIES AUSSIE PAPER REPORTS*

CANBERRA, Tues. —Newspaper speculation that Tun Lim Yew Hock might have dis-

TUN LIM ...Search for him on Bondi Beach.

**Felix Cheong** is the bestselling author of more than 30 books across different genres. His graphic novel, *The Showgirl and the Minister* (Random House SEA, 2023), was inspired by the 10-day disappearance of former Singapore Chief Minister Lim Yew Hock. Conferred the Young Artist Award in 2000, Felix has been invited to writers' festivals all over the world. He holds a masters in creative writing and is currently a university adjunct lecturer.

Over 10 days in June 1966, Tun Lim Yew Hock,[1] the Malaysian High Commissioner to Australia and New Zealand (1964–66) and Singapore's former second Chief Minister (1956–59), vanished.

It was an incident that had all the elements of politics and intrigue. It hogged the headlines of newspapers in Singapore and Australia for weeks, and reportedly sent thousands of women weeping. To this day, 60 years later, it remains a mystery, with more questions than answers.

## The Man Who Fell Out of Power

Born in Singapore in 1914, Lim rose through the labour movement before entering politics, first under the Singapore Progressive Party and, later, the Labour Front.[2] When David Marshall resigned as Singapore's first Chief Minister in June 1956 after failing to secure full internal self-government from the British, Lim, the Minister for Labour and Welfare, succeeded him.[3]

In March 1957 and May 1958 respectively, Lim led the second and third All-Party Mission to London for constitutional talks with the British government, resulting in Singapore's full internal self-government in 1959.[4] But Lim's years in office were often viewed as turbulent. To the British, he was instrumental in acting firmly against left-wing activists, trade unionists and Chinese middle-school students whom they feared were aligned with the communists.[5] To the Chinese-speaking masses in Singapore, however, the same toughness looked like repression. The 1956 Chinese middle-school riots, and the hundreds of arrests that followed, stained his reputation among voters already leaning towards Lee Kuan Yew's People's Action Party (PAP).

The upshot: the PAP swept into power in the 1959 Legislative Assembly General Election, with Lim's Singapore People's Alliance winning only

**(Facing page)** In June 1966, the mysterious disappearance of Lim Yew Hock in Australia made it to front-page news. *Source: The Straits Times, 13 June 1966, 1 © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.*

**(Above)** Lim Yew Hock's wife made an emotional appeal on television for his return, while the police concentrated their search on Bondi Beach. *Source: The Straits Times, 15 June 1966, 1 © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.*



Lim Yew Hock was the second Chief Minister of Singapore from 1956 to 1959. *Image reproduced from Singapore Constitution Exposition, Jan–Feb 1959: Souvenir Number (Singapore: Dept. of Information Services, 1959), 29. (From National Library of Singapore, call no. RCLOS 959.51 SIN-[RFL]).*

four seats.[6] The formation of the Federation of Malaysia in 1963 gave him another role. Taking up Malaysian citizenship, Lim was appointed Malaysia's High Commissioner to Australia and New Zealand in 1964.[7]

Based in Canberra, Lim discharged his duties as Malaysia's chief diplomatic representative Down Under. Then, in June 1966, he suddenly vanished.

## Ten Days Missing

On Friday, 10 June 1966, Lim left Canberra. According to early reports, he had told staff at the Malaysian High Commission that he was going away for a quiet weekend. A Canberra journalist who knew Lim had seen him buying a ticket with cash, under another name, before flying to Sydney. The journalist also said that Lim was "carrying no baggage and was wearing an open neck shirt with a sports jacket".[8]

When Lim failed to return on 13 June, concern turned into alarm. This was not a junior officer extending a holiday. This was a high commissioner, a former head of government, missing in a foreign country at the height of the Cold War. The Malaysian High Commission held a press conference that night to seek help finding Lim. An official statement by the High Commission revealed that he had been in ill health for some time and "had been under medical treatment for about two months", but did not disclose the nature of his illness.[9]

The High Commission enlisted the help of the Australian police, involving even the Australian security and intelligence agencies. Police concentrated their search around Bondi Beach, and the Malaysian Chief Protocol Officer, Abdul Rahman Jalal, was sent to Canberra to help in the search.[10]

Lim's elder daughter Shirley also went to Sydney personally to check the places where her father usually stayed.[11] Even students from Malaysia and Singapore studying in Australia were roped in for the hunt. The *New York Times* reported that "student leaders issued an appeal by radio for the 700 students from the two countries to check every place where the envoy might be found".[12]

The search for the missing diplomat was made even more poignant when Lim's wife, Chia Kim Neo ("Toh Puan" is the title given to the wife of a "Tun"),[13] appeared on Australian television with their two daughters on 15 June, pleading for him to come home. "I am sad at my husband's absence from Canberra. It has upset me very much. I don't know what to say because I am too distressed," crying as she said this. Then it was Shirley's turn: "We know that you are not very well. Please come back to us. Your absence is causing us much unhappiness and distress."[14]

The television appeal apparently struck a chord because the newspapers reported that thousands of women wept after watching the High Commissioner's wife.[15] According to Second Secretary of the High Commission Ajit Singh, Lim's wife had been just as ill as her husband – if not more – and had also been receiving medical attention for some time.[16]

The story, however, took an unexpected turn when a report by *Time* magazine linked Lim to a 19-year-old stripper named Sandra Nelson, who often performed at Paradise Club in Sydney's red-light district, Kings Cross.[17] Nelson was not just another showgirl. She had already gained notoriety two years earlier for her publicity stunts, such as taking a popular ferry in a see-through top that left little to the imagination. Russian by birth, she had run away from a migrant camp in Wollongong and then resurfaced in the strip club circuit.[18]

Tunku Abdul Rahman, Malaysia's Prime Minister, made a personal appeal from Kuala Lumpur. "Come back, my dear friend, and I will welcome you. I will be happy to let bygones be bygones," he said.[19]





## Returning Home

After 10 days, Lim returned to his Canberra residence at 9.15 am on 20 June. His younger daughter Adeline was the only person at home as her mother and sister were still in Sydney. On opening the front door, she was shocked to find her father standing on the porch. "I was so surprised. I ran into his arms. I cried with joy," she said. "I kissed him and said: 'I'm glad you're home daddy'," she told the *Straits Times*. "Daddy just hugged me and said: 'Alright dear, don't cry'."[20]

The official explanation by the High Commission at the press conference later that night was that Lim was "suffering from a physical and nervous illness" from overwork, and that a "good Samaritan" had found him ill in Sydney, cared for him and driven him back. "The High Commissioner is back in Canberra but he is sick and is resting at his home," said Malaysian Chief Protocol Officer Abdul Rahman Jalal. "As you know, the High Commissioner took a plane to Sydney on Friday. While there he was in a state of collapse and a good Samaritan – that is the only phrase I could use – took him over. There he stayed with this kind soul." Abdul Rahman Jalal added that when Lim was found by the man, he was "vomiting and was very ill".[21]

The Malaysian Prime Minister was also informed of Lim's return on 20 June and was reported to be "very happy". In a message thanking Australian newspapers for their help, Tunku Abdul Rahman said: "He [Lim] will remain in Australia until I am satisfied that he is well enough to go to his new post in Rome."[22]

The media were dissatisfied with the responses from the High Commission about Lim's disappearance. Canberra police were informed of Lim's return only 12 hours after he had been driven home. "It is a pity that there was a 12-hour delay in telling the Australian people that the man about whose fate they have been perplexed and concerned for 10 days was safely home. One would have thought the news would have been sent out as soon as the good Samaritan had returned Tun Lim," went a *Sydney Sun* editorial.[23]

On 23 June, Lim expressed his gratitude in various newspapers throughout Australia, thanking the government, police, press, radio, television, the Australian public, and Malaysian and Indonesian students for their assistance during his recent illness.[24]

Before leaving Australia for good on 1 July, Lim gave a press conference on 30 June, his first since his return. He told reporters that he "could not remember anything of his disappearance earlier this month" and did not know the police were looking for him. "You see, I wanted to take a holiday," he said, "I had been working very hard, sometimes making three speeches in one day, and I was very tired." He explained, "I was walking around quite nicely when pop – I stumbled on something and fell and hurt my head. For many days after that I was looked after by this good Samaritan whose identity I still cannot reveal."[25]

Although Lim had "given his word not to divulge his helper's name", he was later identified in September 1966 as Vincent Laus, a 35-year-old guesthouse proprietor from the city of Gosford, near Sydney. According to Abdul Rahman Jalal




Lim Yew Hock with his first wife and two daughters at Paya Lebar Airport on 16 January 1964. He was bound for Canberra to take up his new appointment as the Malaysian High Commissioner to Australia and New Zealand. *Source: The Straits Times © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.*



Malaysian Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman (left) exchanging greetings with Singapore's Chief Minister Lim Yew Hock, 1958. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image No. 19980001343 - 0024).*

in the press conference on 20 June, "The man who was with [Lim] came to know that it was Tun Lim Yew Hock only last evening [the evening before he returned home]." Laus rejected the "many dirty stories" connecting Lim with Kings Cross strippers, and said "Tun Lim did not do anything wrong and that he was sick and needed rest".[26]

Years later, in his memoir *Reflections*, which was published posthumously in 1986, Lim offered a different explanation for his disappearance. He wrote that his relationship with his wife had become "strained and unbearable", but admitted that he was not free from blame. "I had been fickle and my wife was an unforgiving woman." He had felt that "life was no longer worth living and [he] wanted to do away with [him]self." Lim then hid in a boarding house, "planning to put an end to [his] misery", but the thought of his children changed his mind. Lim also wrote that he had grown a moustache to disguise himself but the boarding house keeper eventually recognised him from his pictures shown on television and drove him home to Canberra.[27]

## The Aftermath

In October 1966, it was reported that Lim would take on a desk job at the Malaysian Ministry of External Affairs. "I have asked him to take complete rest for a few months. But he told me he wanted something to do," said Malaysian Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman.[28]

Two years later, news broke on 7 November 1968 that Lim had resigned in June from his post at the Foreign Ministry where he was the Deputy Secretary (Special Duties) because of the "strain" on him. "I am now no more a government servant. I just want to rest and relax and I'm out of politics for good," he said. Lim then retired to Melaka.[29]

Later in the month, on 29 November, the *Straits Times* reported that the Yang di-Pertuan Agong (sultan) had "cancelled and annulled" the title of "Tun" that had been awarded to Lim in 1958. He was acting on the prime minister's recommendation and no reason was given.[30]

In 1972, Lim embraced Islam, took the name Omar and immigrated to Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. Over there, he worked as Special Assistant to the president of the Islamic Development Bank. After his first marriage broke down, he married Chinese Muslim convert Hajjah Hasnah Abdullah and had two children with her.[31]

## Unanswered Questions

The simplest question in this whole incident is still the hardest: where was Lim in those 10 days, and why did he not make contact? He should have known that a senior diplomat could not just disappear without consequences.

Another unresolved question is the role of the good Samaritan Vincent Laus. His silence during the nationwide search remains difficult to explain. The Australian media had extensively reported Lim's disappearance. Why did Laus not alert local authorities to the man he had found?

Then there is the stripper Sandra Nelson. While she denied there was any serious relationship between them, the rumour travelled too widely to be ignored. Nelson maintained that her relationship with Lim was purely casual. "I knew him, but only just casually. I never met him. He just came to the club to see me," she told the *Straits Times* in an interview on 23 August 1966.[32]

A fourth question is in Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman's interview appeal when he used the curious phrase, "let bygones be bygones". Lim said at his press conference on 30 June 1966 that he did not know what the Prime Minister had meant by this.[33] This seems to suggest that Lim must have incurred his wrath over something not publicly named. Whatever differences the two might have had, the Tunku buried the hatchet and he subsequently penned the introduction to Lim's memoir. Lim also dedicated his memoir to his "very good friend YTM Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj First Prime Minister of Malaysia".[34]

The final question lies in Lim's account in his memoir in 1986. In *Reflections*, he claimed that he withdrew to a boarding house because of the breakdown of his marriage. Assuming the public story at the time about him falling, or having taken ill, was merely a cover-up for problems at home, what specifically were those problems? This question is particularly pertinent because by his own account in *Reflections*, he made another disappearance a year later "after the same domestic trouble erupted".[35]

Australian striptease performer Sandra Nelson, c. 1960s. Photo by Robert McFarlane. *© William McFarlane Trust.*



The disappearance of Lim Yew Hock can be read in many ways: a diplomatic embarrassment, a tabloid scandal, a marriage on the rocks, a medical episode, or the public unravelling of a man who had already lost one public life. None of these readings, however, cancel the others.

While he had led a very colourful life, his passing was quiet. Lim died on 30 November 1984, at the age of 70, in his home in Jeddah. The *Straits Times* reported that he had died peacefully and had been found lying on a sofa in the morning by his daughter. He was buried in Mecca.[36] ♦

**NOTES**

1 The title of "Tun" was awarded to Lim Yew Hock in 1958. "Tun" is the top civilian title in Malaysia, similar to a "Lord" in the United Kingdom. See "Now He's No More Tun Lim...," *Straits Times*, 29 November 1968, 1. (From NewspaperSG)
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4 "Colony Talks a Success – Triumph for Mr. Lim," *Straits Times*, 30 March 1957, 1; "Last Mission to London," *Straits Times*, 8 May 1958, 6. (From NewspaperSG)
5 Lulin Reuten, "Man Who Thumped the Reds," *Straits Times*, 1 December 1984, 14. (From NewspaperSG)
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14 Hoffman, "Beach Search for Tun Lim."
15 "Thousands Wept with Her," *Straits Times*, 18 June 1966, 11. (From NewspaperSG)
16 "Tun Lim: Fears Grow for His Safety."
17 "Australia: The Diplomat & the Samaritan," *Time*, 1 July 1966, https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,835866,00.html.
18 Martyn Jolly, "Girls Galore!: Photography in Australian Men's Magazines in the 1960s," *Journal of Australian Studies* 47, no. 1 (2023): 91–127, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14443058.2022.2157036.
19 "Australia: The Diplomat & the Samaritan."
20 "Tun Lim Found – He's Ill," *Straits Times*, 20 June 1966, 1. (From NewspaperSG)
21 "Tun Lim Found – He's Ill"; Fingleton, "Tun Lim: Police Not Told Till 12 Hours Later."
22 "Tun Lim Found – He's Ill"; Fingleton, "Tun Lim: Police Not Told Till 12 Hours Later."
23 Fingleton, "Tun Lim: Police Not Told Till 12 Hours Later."
24 Jack Fingleton, "Tun Lim to Say 'Thank You' in the Papers," *Straits Times*, 22 June 1966, 11. (From NewspaperSG)
25 "Tun Lim: I Was Walking Nicely When 'Pop' I Fell...," *Straits Times*, 1 July 1966, 1. (From NewspaperSG)
26 "Tun Lim Found – He's Ill"; Fingleton, "Tun Lim: Police Not Told Till 12 Hours Later"; "Tun Lim's 'Good Samaritan'," *Straits Times*, 8 September 1966, 20.
27 Lim Yew Hock, *Reflections* (Kuala Lumpur: Pustaka Antara, 1986), 109–10. (From National Library of Singapore, call no. RSING 320.9595050924 LIM)
28 V.K. Chin, "Tun Lim – A Desk Job," *Straits Budget*, 12 October 1966, 7. (From NewspaperSG)
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30 "Now He's No More Tun Lim...."
31 Lim, *Reflections*, 115, 123, 128; John, "Lim Yew Hock Dies in Jeddah"; "Ex-Chief Minister Lim Yew Hock Dies in Jeddah," *Business Times*, 1 December 1984, 12. (From NewspaperSG)
32 Jack Fingleton, "Sandra: I'm Ready to Send a Bundle of Photos," *Straits Times*, 24 August 1966, 11. (From NewspaperSG)
33 "Tun Lim: I Was Walking Nicely When 'Pop' I Fell...."
34 Lim, *Reflections*, 1–5.
35 Lim, *Reflections*, 110.
36 John, "Lim Yew Hock Dies in Jeddah"; "Ex-Chief Minister Lim Yew Hock Dies in Jeddah."

# SINGAPORE AT THE SMITHSONIAN

## Ethnological Encounters at the National Museum of Natural History



Tucked away in the cabinets of the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History is a curious collection of objects associated with Singapore. The stories behind them reveal visions of Singapore in the American imagination.

**By Chia Jie Lin**

Measuring 70 cm long with a diameter of 5.5 cm, this *sapu lidi* (broom), labelled as a "fly-brush", was likely collected from Singapore by the United States Exploring Expedition before being accessioned into the US National Museum in 1858. *(From E14259-0, Department of Anthropology, Smithsonian Institution).*





**Chia Jie Lin** is a former Librarian with the National Library of Singapore and is currently on secondment to the National Heritage Board. She is passionate about engaging fellow Singaporeans with stories from Singapore's past. Her favourite animals include the Malayan tapir and banded leaf monkey.

"I don't like Singapore, it is a rotten place as is indeed every other town. I am simply crazy to get away again," wrote the American naturalist-collector William Louis Abbott in a 1903 letter to his sister.[1] Wrapped up in this complaint seemed to be his general ambivalence towards cities. Abbott also had little love for his native United States, finding "the masses of its people vile".[2]

Despite his feelings, Singapore, then a British colonial trading port, served as Abbott's base for his collecting expeditions across maritime Southeast Asia. Between 1900 and 1909, Abbott's schooner – the *Terrapin*, which he built and outfitted in Singapore – took him on collecting trips along the Malayan and Sumatran coasts, up the rivers of Borneo to the islands of the South China Sea, and further eastward to western New Guinea. A prolific collector of mammal and bird specimens as well as ethnological items, Abbott became the single largest contributor – of over 6,000 objects – to the Smithsonian.[3] His impressions of Singapore were peculiar to him. Other American collectors who landed on our shores left behind a more varied and, in some cases, warmer record of the island.

It was during my time at the Summer Institute in Museum Anthropology at the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History in 2025 that I chanced upon Abbott's collection and an assemblage of 83 items from "Singapore" within its ethnology collections. Thus began my journey of studying this assemblage and the circumstances of its formation. What factors informed the collecting practices of American explorers and public servants in Singapore from the 19th to 20th centuries? What visions of Singapore and Southeast Asia did American collectors have?

### The "Wilkes Ex. Ex."

"Singapore?" reads the catalogue card of a "fly-brush" donated to the former US National Museum (now the National Museum of Natural History) by the United States Exploring Expedition (1838–42). Listed as its collector is the "Wilkes Ex. Ex." (Wilkes Exploring Expedition), referencing the expedition's commander – Lt Charles Wilkes, who was a naval officer and scientist by training.[4]

The expedition was funded by Congress with the goals of exploring and mapping the Pacific, Antarctica and the northwest coast of the United States, promoting American commerce and industry as well as "to extend the bounds of science, and to promote the acquisition of knowledge".[5] While the expedition established American scientific and intellectual efforts as equal to those of Europe, its primary purposes were commercial and militaristic, with the goal of projecting American soft power across the globe.[6]

This "fly-brush" is the earliest item associated with Singapore to have been accessioned into the US National Museum. It is among nearly 4,000 ethnographic objects collected by the "scientifics" – a civilian group of nine scientists with the expedition – and deposited at the then newly established Smithsonian Institution and the US National Museum in the 1850s.[7] Yet the question mark with the geographical attribution for the "fly-brush" raises, well, a question: one of provenance.

The USS *Vincennes*, under the command of Lt Wilkes, made a stopover in Singapore in February 1842 before returning to the United States.[8] Some collecting was conducted here, particularly of natural specimens. Wilkes wrote: "The neighbouring seas afford a great variety of shells and corals; among the latter I may mention




Collected in 1904 in Singapore by William Louis Abbott, this lidded basket has a height of 25.4 cm and a diameter of 35.6 cm. Photo by Chia Jie Lin. *(From E232504-0, Department of Anthropology, Smithsonian Institution).*

the cup of Neptune (Alcyonium), which grows to a very large size, and is not found elsewhere. Our collections, by the industry of the naturalists and officers, were much increased here."[9] Could the "fly-brush" have been collected at the time?

The vast swathes of natural specimens and ethnological objects gathered by the expedition steadily made their way back to Washington as cargo on other ships. However, accurate identification data on collection records for many specimens were subsequently lost or removed when passing through various institutions before arriving at the US National Museum.[10]

A description of the "fly-brush" can be found in artist and museologist Titian Peale's handwritten catalogue titled "Collections of the United States South Sea Surveying and Exploring Expedition, 1838, 9, 40, 41, & 42".[11] Peale, who served as one of the expedition's principal scientific collectors, listed it as an "ornamented brush from the island of Negros, one of the Phillipine [sic] group", thus revealing the uncertainties surrounding its true origins. Given its role as a waypoint to East Asia and maritime Southeast Asia, first as an indigenous port before 1819, and then as a colonial port-city and gateway to the Malayan hinterland, many items attributed to Singapore likely did not have Singapore as their true provenance.[12]

Two other early items linked to Singapore are a sheathed keris and a sheath without its keris, both collected by William Rich. It is likely that he obtained the items during his time as a botanist on the Wilkes Expedition and passed these on to Spencer F. Baird, assistant secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, who then donated the items to the Smithsonian in 1874. We do not know exactly when these items were collected, nor do we know where the missing keris is. The lack of information offers insight into the challenges Smithsonian staff faced while organising their rapidly expanding global collections in the 19th century.

## Consular Collectors

Another group of collectors, the American consuls, contributed the majority – 49 items – to the Singapore assemblage. According to academic Pamela Sodhy in her 1983 essay, "United States Consuls in Singapore", this "special breed of men – adventurous, daring, and willing to take risks", was also "overworked, underpaid, and understaffed".[13] From 1833 onwards, American consuls to Singapore produced handwritten reports, known as *Singapore Despatches*, for the United States Department of State, and sometimes included clippings and other materials relevant to US interests.[14]

Beyond dealing with foreign diplomatic representatives, the work of the consuls was heavily commercial in nature due to Singapore's prosperity as a free port and a desire by the US "to share in that trade, to make Singapore a potential market for American goods".[15] Among other duties, American consuls sent quarterly and annual reports to the State Department about shipping and trade activity in Singapore; managed the aftermath of shipwrecks and deserters; and monitored regional piracy and political developments.[16]

American consuls worldwide were also collectors of material culture. Between 1898 and 1920, consuls donated approximately 1,000 textile samples to the US National Museum. These samples eventually became part of the "consular collections" now housed at the National Museum of American History.[17]

One of the artefacts in the Singapore assemblage at the National Museum of Natural History is a betel chewing set described as a "Siri Quid Chewer's Outfit", with "siri" referring to *sirih* (betel leaf). It was collected by Adolphus G. Studer, the American consul in Singapore from 1871 to 1889.

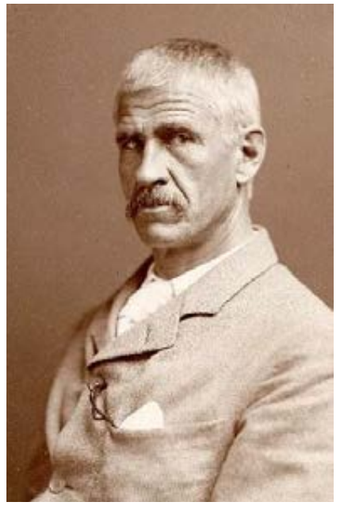
Studer came to prominence in the American Civil War, serving in the Union Army under General Ulysses S. Grant. Grant, who later became the 18th president of the United States, appointed Studer as consul in Singapore.[18] As Singapore was then part of the Straits Settlements, US-Singapore relations were mediated by the British colonial authorities. Consular appointments required the approval of the British monarch. Queen Victoria




**(Above)** Measuring 34 cm in height with a diameter of 20.3 cm, this drum was collected by Rounsevelle Wildman, 1891. Wildman's contributions are easily identifiable. Each item is affixed with a paper label containing his printed name, title and location (Singapore), alongside handwritten notes about the item and the month and year in which it was collected. Handwritten on the label for this drum are "Malay Taplan Gallabau" and "July 1891". Photo by Chia Jie Lin. *(From E94913-0, Department of Anthropology, Smithsonian Institution).*

**(Below)** This Malay stringed instrument, which is 31.1 cm long and has a diameter of 6.67 cm, was collected by Rounsevelle Wildman, 1892. According to its accompanying catalogue card, the instrument appears to have been purchased in Singapore. *(From E95067-0, Department of Anthropology, Smithsonian Institution).*





The naturalist, zoologist and ethnologist William Louis Abbott, undated. Between 1903 and 1907, Abbott added 23 items from Singapore to the ethnology collection of the National Museum of Natural History. *(From National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution).*

approved Studer's appointment, which was published in the *London Gazette* in August 1871.[19]

A highlight of Studer's 19-year tenure was the "happy occasion" of Grant's visit to Singapore in April 1879.[20] Accompanying Grant on this post-presidential world tour was journalist John Russell Young, who observed that "there was nothing lacking in the hospitality of Singapore… There were dinners at the Government House and a reception. There was a band which made a heroic attempt at various American national airs, succeeding only in Yankee Doodle".[21]

The catalogue card for the betel chewing set bears the annotation "N.O. Exp." (New Orleans Exposition), which referred to the World's Industrial and Cotton Centennial held in New Orleans from December 1884 to June 1885.[22] Also known as the 1884 New Orleans World's Fair, the exposition showcased "the ethnological, animal, and mineral resources of the United States". Like other world's fairs, it provided an opportunity for the Smithsonian to enhance its collection of international items by acquiring them from exhibitors at low cost.[23]

Studer's other Singapore finds, also showcased at the exposition, included three pairs of wooden clogs – described as "wooden sandals" – used for everyday wear and household work in the kitchen. One pair has low block heels bound by leather straps, while another contains protruding toe knobs, which would have been clamped between the first and second toes. These two pairs of clogs were likely displayed at the exposition's ethnological exhibit, for which ethnology curator Otis T. Mason wrote a circular.[24] In October 1885, the State Department donated the items to the US National Museum, reflecting how consular involvement in the world's fairs allowed them to serve as conduits for ethnological representations of Singapore in the museum.

The world's fairs were hotbeds of colonial ideology, with exhibits reinforcing hierarchical views of human societies and cultures. This was exemplified by the deception that the Johor contingent found themselves embroiled in at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, as writer and researcher Faris Joraimi revealed.[25] Rounsevelle Wildman, then the American consul to Singapore and the World's Fair Commissioner for the Straits Settlements, had arranged for the Johor exhibit to be shown at "the showman's quarter and not the main part of the Fair".[26]

To make things worse, Wildman had assigned the rights to the Johor exhibit to the Ocean Trading Company without Johor's knowledge. The contingent's eventual exhibition in the Agricultural Building alongside other independent nations was only possible due to the efforts of Johor statesman Abdul Rahman Andak and Harry Lake, an engineer and secretary to Sultan Abu Bakar of Johor. Such fraught encounters may be more indicative of the desultory attitudes of collectors towards local communities than the objects collected themselves.

It was this same Wildman whose collecting efforts were no doubt encouraged by his additional role as Special Commissioner for the Smithsonian Institution of the Straits Settlements and Siam. While he was consul, Wildman contributed 45 items to the Singapore assemblage, including 34 musical instruments, five kerises, four games, a basket and a turtle carapace, the last dubiously listed as a "war shield". Among the musical instruments were single-sided drums (*ketebung*, spelt "cattaban" on the museum's catalogue cards) and two-sided drums (*gendang*, spelt "ghendan").[27]

Wildman's acquisitions must be read against his literary visions of Singapore. "Were it not for the great black python, that lies sleeping in the road in front of you, or the green iguana that hangs in a green *timboso* tree over your head, or a naked runner pulling a rickshaw, you might think you were travelling the wide asphaltum streets of Washington," he described in *Tales of the Malayan Coast* (1899), a collection of fictional and semi-autobiographical stories based on his time living and travelling in Southeast Asia.[28] Wildman's impressions are rife with images of "a Malay in *sarong* and *kris* by his side, singing… the glorious promises of the Koran", "the Chinese 'boy'… always the 'boy' until he dies", and "the genie of the cart… a tall, wiry, bronze-colored Hindu", among others.[29]

Viewed through a colonial lens, the objects Wildman collected have been reduced to curiosities plucked from a rotating cast of exotic stereotypes. This raises new questions: What stories did these artefacts carry, and how much of these were lost in the transactions, and in translation?

## Abbott's Adventures

Wildman was not the only American who collected items from Singapore at the turn of the 20th century. Enter Abbott, a naturalist, zoologist and ethnologist of means. In October 1900, Abbott and a crew of Malay sailors departed Singapore aboard the *Terrapin*, as zoologist Cecil Boden Kloss wrote in his travelogue, *In the Andamans and Nicobars* (1903).[30]

Abbott's donations, amassed from his travels to virtually all Southeast Asian island groups within 1,000 km of Singapore, eventually formed the majority of the Smithsonian's ethnology collections.[31] Between 1903 and 1907, Abbott contributed 23 items from Singapore to the ethnology collection at the National Museum of Natural History: seven baskets, four rice storage and cooking implements, four spears, three hats, a knife, a sleeping hat, a "chopper", a sword and a "fish scoop, 'penango'", described as a "pocket at the end of the fish fyke, (kelong)".

Abbott also donated a selection of material culture and ethnographic photographs from Borneo to the ethnology collection of the Raffles Library and Museum between 1903 and 1909.[32] These items were later inherited by the Asian Civilisations Museum.[33]

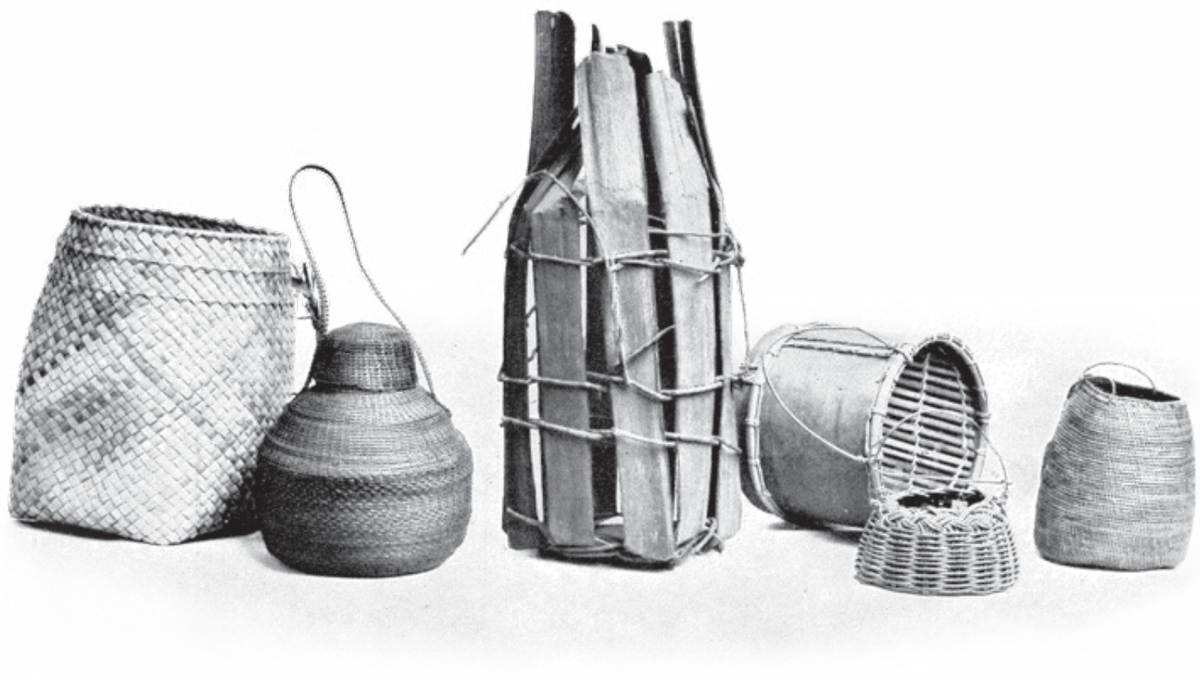
The breadth and variety of these items reflect the then prevailing ethos to systematically collect "representative samples" of every culture that marked ethnological collecting. In his publication, *Vocabulary of Malaysian Basketwork*, Otis T. Mason examined the forms, structures and techniques of Malaysian basketwork represented in Abbott's Smithsonian collections.[34] Yet, the voices of their actual makers have largely been absent from the historical record.

## Interpreting Ethnological Collections Today

It would be remiss to examine the Singapore assemblage in isolation. These objects discussed are best understood within this context of a broader Malay world: a sea of islands with interconnected histories, trade networks and cultural exchanges that shaped life in the region long before the arrival of Western naturalists and collectors.

From everyday household items to kerises, the Singapore collection at the National Museum of Natural History is but a small portion of all

Different types of Malaysian basketwork. Shown lying on its side is a rice steamer collected from Singapore, which has a cylindrical body made of a strip of hard, tough bark with the ends sewn together, and handles made of rattan. *Image reproduced from Otis T. Mason, Vocabulary of Malaysian Basketwork: A Study in the W. L. Abbott Collections (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1908), Plate I. (From National Library of Singapore, call no. RSEA 746.41 MAS).*





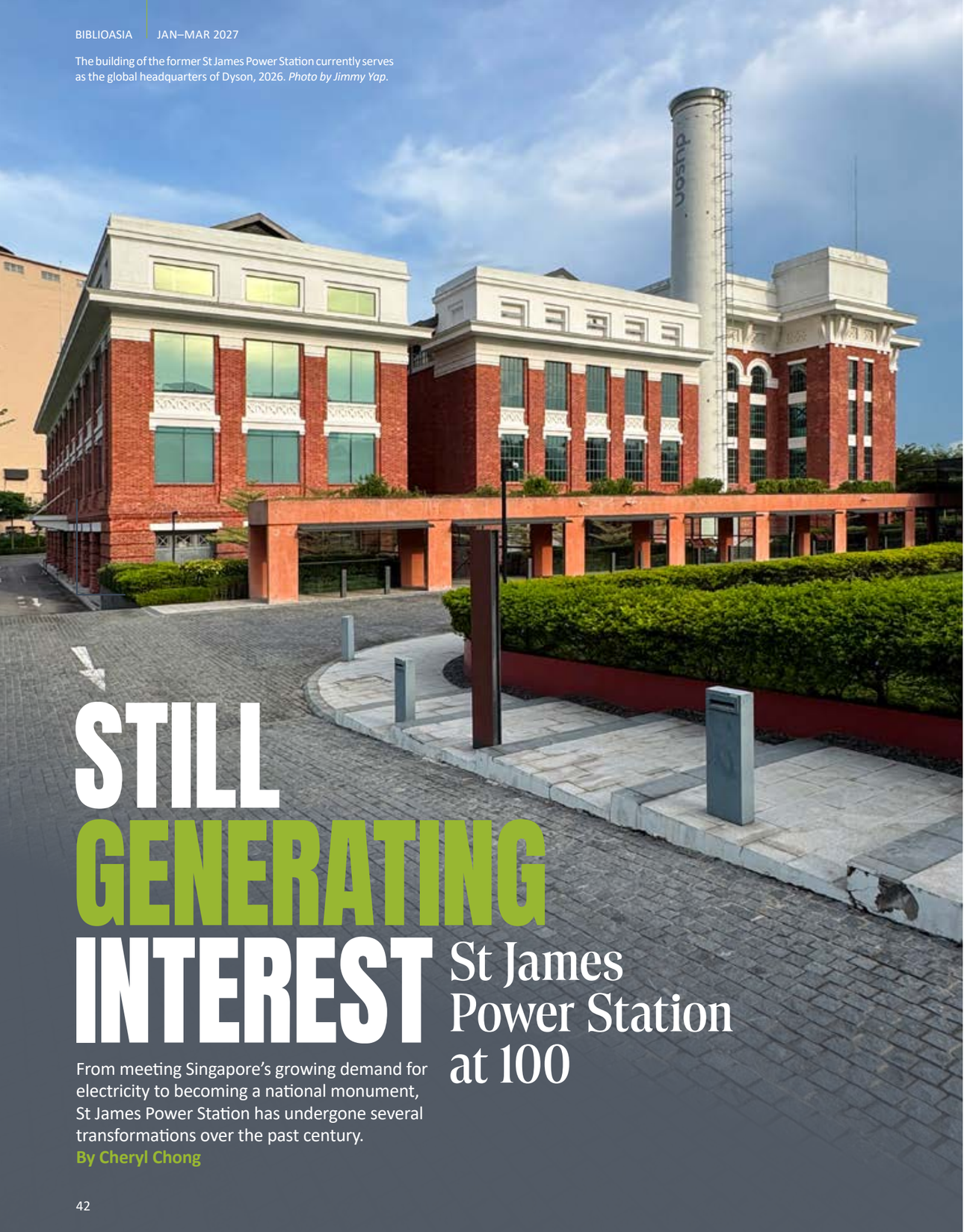

The National Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C., 2026. Photo by Ajay Suresh. *(From Wikimedia Commons).*

the objects that bore witness to the negotiated encounters between American collectors and Southeast Asian communities. These objects reveal not only American conceptions of what was deemed worthy of collecting from Singapore, but also the agency of local communities and traders who actively shaped what made its way westward, presenting goods they believed would resonate with Western buyers. However, the perspectives of those who made, used and ultimately parted with these objects remain largely absent from historical records. To study these items today is to acknowledge these silences, and to invite more Southeast Asian researchers and communities to encounter them and reinterpret their material heritage on their own terms. ♦

The writer gives special thanks to the Summer Institute in Museum Anthropology at the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History for the opportunity to explore the Singapore ethnological assemblage, and to Dr Joshua Bell, Alex Foo and Caleb Leow for their inputs in the writing of this article.

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9 Charles Wilkes, *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition: During the Year 1838, 1839, 1840, 1841, 1842*, vol. 5. (Philadelphia: Lea & Blanchard, 1845), 432, Biodiversity Heritage Library, https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/page/41010499.
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26 "True Tale of Johore," *Singapore Free Press*, 19 September 1893, 190. (From NewspaperSG)
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The building of the former St James Power Station currently serves as the global headquarters of Dyson, 2026. *Photo by Jimmy Yap.*

# STILL GENERATING INTEREST

## St James Power Station at 100

From meeting Singapore's growing demand for electricity to becoming a national monument, St James Power Station has undergone several transformations over the past century.

By Cheryl Chong





**Cheryl Chong** is a former public servant of 19 years who is currently on a career break. She writes freelance and spends much of her free time exploring Singapore's history and built heritage. Her writing can be found in *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore*, *Cha: An Asian Literary Journal* and *Chautauqua Journal*.

People these days take it for granted that when they flick on the light switch, turn on their televisions, or plug in their phones to be charged, that everything will simply work. Few, however, give any thought to all the infrastructure needed to make this happen. Scattered around Singapore are 31 power stations that mostly burn natural gas to generate the electricity needed to power all the homes, commercial buildings, trains, factories, data centres and petrochemical plants in the country.[1] In 2025, the city-state generated 59,616 gigawatt-hours of electricity according to the Energy Market Authority.[2]

It would be unimaginable to live without electricity today. A century ago though, life was very different. Electricity was still a fairly recent innovation and not yet available everywhere on the island. However, even back then, it was abundantly clear that electricity, and lots of it, would be needed in a modern metropolis. Which is why the authorities decided to build St James Power Station, a coal-fired plant with an initial capacity of 7,000 kW. Built at a cost of $30 million in the Edwardian style, it was officially opened on 7 November 1927.[3]

At the time, electricity was still such a novelty that at the official opening of St James, Straits Settlements Governor Hugh Clifford could recount a story of people who had yet to encounter using an electrical appliance. Clifford recalled that when he was in Nigeria (where he had been governor between 1919 and 1925), a servant had come up to him to ask for permission to bring his wife into his office so she could see for herself how a kettle could boil water by plugging "a peg into the wall" instead of being heated over a fire.[4]

### A Short History of Electricity

Although the opening of St James marked a significant milestone in the development of Singapore's public electricity supply, electricity had, in fact, arrived in Singapore in 1878. A power station had been built outside the eastern entrance to the dock and the Tanjong Pagar Dock Company installed an electric arc lamp at the wharves that emitted light equivalent to about 2,000 candles "to facilitate work which had to be carried on all night" and also provided security and protection against crime.[5]

In 1906, the MacKenzie Road Power Station began operations. Located beside Bukit Timah waterworks, the station supplied electricity to power trams, wharves and streetlights. Anticipating that demand for electricity would rise in the near future, Municipal Engineer R. Peirce observed that "there is every prospect of a reasonable increase of consumers".[6]

Between 1906 and 1907, the number of electricity accounts rose by more than 400 percent, and continued growing. By the early 1920s, MacKenzie Road Power Station had become overtaxed, with little downtime for maintenance. In 1921, the Municipality's Engineer-in-Chief, H.L. Pearson, pessimistically concluded: "The backward state of the electrical situation is holding back the progress of the town not only in respect to public and private lighting, and power and road improvement on tram routes but the high price of current has also ruled out of consideration the adoption of electric vehicles which have many advantages for Municipal work of certain kinds."[7]

The Municipality decided to plan for a larger power station. In October 1923, the Municipal Commissioners instructed British engineering firm Preece, Cardew and Rider to select a suitable site for the power station.[8] Cape Saint James, a narrow strip of land formerly known as Telok Blangah Bay, was identified. It had once belonged to Temenggong Abdul Rahman, with whom Stamford Raffles negotiated to sign the 1819 Singapore Treaty that allowed the British to establish a trading post on the island.[9]

The site's location beside Keppel Harbour provided direct access to seawater for the turbines, while its proximity to the wharves facilitated the delivery of coal by sea. Coal and other materials could also be transported quickly to St James by rail, as the Federated Malay States Railway Station was nearby.[10]

In 1924, after the Municipality purchased the 65,000 sq ft (6,039 sq m) site for $375,000, a "considerable amount of preliminary work" was conducted before the "actual work of laying the concrete foundations and erecting the huge steel skeleton of the building".[11] This included reclaiming

sections of tidal swamp, levelling the ground and relocating squatters on an ideal site whose "only drawback was the necessity of driving piles in the filled-in portion on the west side". Preece, Cardew and Rider had originally chosen a site on the east side of the peninsula, which comprised "practically solid rock", but this was rejected by the government.[12]

Actual construction began only in late 1924. The most difficult part of the foundation work involved the construction of a twin culvert for the inlet and outlet of circulating water, which would run under the station between the turbine and switchgear house, with a trench 37 ft (11.3 m) wide and 24 ft (7.3 m) deep excavated for this purpose. The culvert had to be made "amply strong" as it was intended to bear the weight of rolled steel columns and the building. The underground laying of the inlet and outlet pipes also presented challenges, as these ranged from 195 to 280 ft (59 to 85 m) in length, weighing a hefty 6.25 tons per 10 ft (3 m) length. Foundations for the boiler house, turbine house and switchgear house were completed by Christmas 1925.[13]

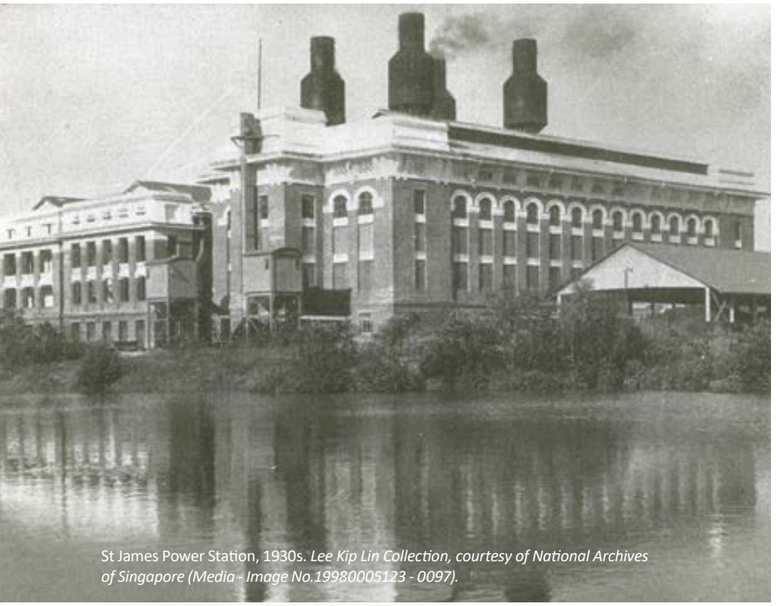
Although St James had been planned for completion in March 1927, the first 2,000 kW generator in the power plant was installed and commissioned on 30 September 1926, and operated from 6 to 11 pm daily, to relieve the peak electrical loading on existing sources. As St James ramped up its operations, there was a gradual reduction in supply from the MacKenzie Road Power Station, which ceased its electrical supply on 29 October 1926. By June 1927, ahead of St James's official opening in November the same year, it was supplying electricity for the whole existing system.[14]

## A Grand Dame

St James was designed by Chief Municipal Architect Alexander Gordon, who was also responsible for the City Hall building, with recommendations from Preece, Cardew and Rider. Massive steel works formed the skeleton of the superstructure, with about 820 tons of steel used to construct the building.[15]

The facility's distinctive features were its red-brick facade lined with rows of full-length windows and tinted-glass panels that let natural light into the cavernous interior spaces for industrial machinery, along with soaring chimneys. Similar to buildings of its time like the Central Fire Station, its neoclassical exterior retained an air of elegance and decorum despite the building's utilitarian function.[16] Victor Koh Dut Sye, who worked at St James as a storekeeper in the 1950s described it as grand, observing that "during those days, anything in red-brick gave a very 'high-class' kind of feeling".[17]

The building housed a boiler house, turbine room, switchgear house, pumps and storage areas for coal. Six boilers were supplied by a British manufacturer, each capable of boiling 40,000 lb (18,144 L) of water per hour, with one steel chimney for every two boilers. Three turbines – one with a capacity of 2,000 kW and the other two with capacities of 5,000 kW each – would generate electricity for distribution to several substations. At its full capacity, the power station was designed to accommodate a maximum capacity of 40,000 kW, subject to extension of the building and additional equipment. With the increasing cost of coal in the late 1930s, the station switched from burning coal to fuel oil in 1940, with two boilers converted for oil-firing.[18]



St James Power Station, 1930s. *Lee Kip Lin Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image No.19980005123 - 0097).*

## "Keeping the Lights On"

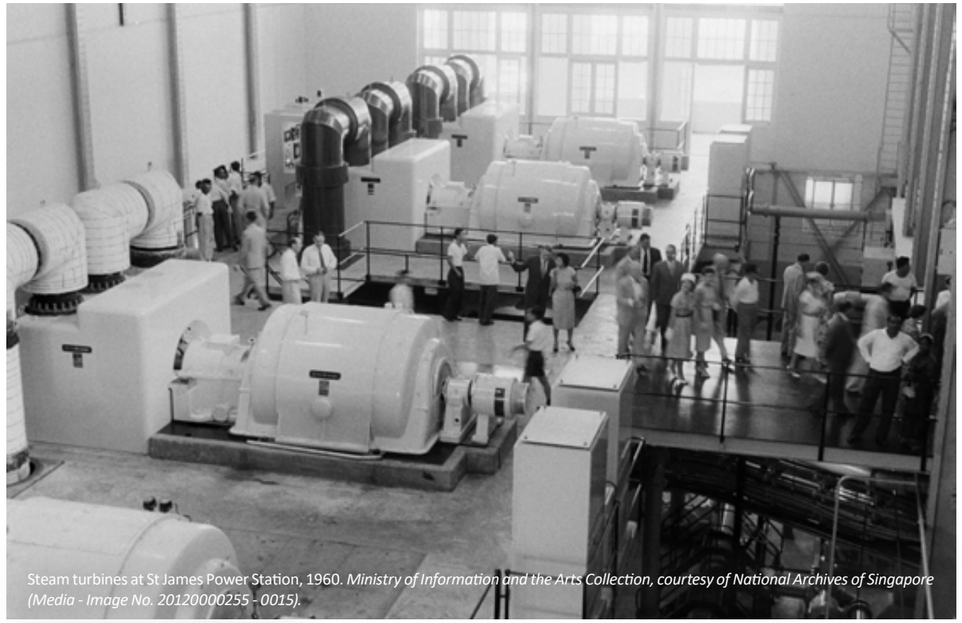
St James provided an expanded electricity supply, and connected Singapore to the grid at a time when the port and commercial economy were booming. The electricity it generated would reach around 28,255 people across different neighbourhoods,[19] in addition to powering street lighting, tramways, port and industrial purposes.

With St James up and running, the Municipality took on the role of stimulating electricity demand. In 1928, the Electricity Department opened an office on Orchard Road to provide the public with advice on using and acquiring electrical appliances like cookers, fans and water heaters, which could be leased to households for a fee.[20]

Its early years were beset by difficulties. As early as June 1927, the Municipal Commissioners anticipated a rise in demand and authorised the addition of a new 10,000-kW turbo-alternator, with the consulting engineers instructed to call for







Steam turbines at St James Power Station, 1960. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image No. 20120000255 - 0015).*

tenders immediately. Sure enough, demand among the public increased as tariffs were reduced and the unit cost of electricity declined from 14 cents in 1927 to 6.2 cents in 1932.[21]

St James experienced blackouts and power failures as early as 1928, some of which were attributed to negligence on the part of the junior shift engineers who were subsequently dismissed. Following a shutdown of the power station on 12 November that year, the electrical engineer discovered three days later that "the steam kept in one of the boilers, which should have been at a pressure of from 190 lb. to 50 lb., had been let down to 30 lb".[22]

Working at St James was often demanding and thankless. "While most people enjoy their weekend leisure, the power station staff will be hard at work, converting heat from coal into energy, striving to increase the amount of work obtained from each pound of coal and keeping on the alert in case an emergency should arise and a black-out result," the *Straits Times* wrote in 1933. In the event of an electrical fault, staff were expected to react in "a matter of ten minutes or so", with "many telephone bells ringing". "The engineers would be awakened, the whole engineering staff would be summoned, and, as quickly as firefighters, the Superintendent, Assistant Superintendent, Boiler Superintendent and others would be on duty".[23]

These incidents did not dampen the work ethic and diligence of staff like S.R. Urquhart, who served as superintendent of St James prior to the Second World War. His daughter, Muiriel MacLeod, recalled that her father reported for work at the power station every day. "He went there pretty early in the morning, came back for lunchtime, had a little rest, then went back in the afternoon. There were times when he had to go back in a hurry, and that might have been when there were blackouts, because the power station wasn't able to handle the lights and everything in Singapore. But I think he was on top of his game there, and I know he loved his job."[24]

The same rigour and resourcefulness were demanded of local staff who worked to "keep the lights on" during the Japanese Occupation of Singapore, when expatriate engineers like Urquhart were interned in Changi Prison.

"In the distribution section, there were just these two Japanese and we were running the whole section by ourselves," recalled Lawrence Estrop, an engineering assistant. "We did not have much of a problem running the system… Sometimes we did not have the spares and we would look for them on the black market. All the expatriates were gone… There was nobody with experience left. There were only the foremen. When there was any breakdown, they had to call us. It was sink or swim. We had to do a lot of things that we had never done before."[25]

Wireman Lim Loo Cheong was another local staff member who was called back to work. "When there was a cable fault that needed fixing, the Japanese would send someone to my house to pick me up to fix the fault," he said. "And it was a good job because they gave me a lot of rice and vegetables for my work."[26]

## "A Second Act"

Wartime shortages and makeshift repairs took a heavy toll on the station's machinery. By the end of the war, its turbines were "all very seriously damaged",



St James Power Station, 1960. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image No. 20120000254 - 0058).*

while "the boiler house was in deplorable condition, as were all auxiliary pumps". There was also an urgent need to restore equipment and quickly expand electricity supply, as domestic demand for electricity had spiked by about 50 percent after the war.[27]

As a result, blackouts became common in the late 1940s and 1950s, caused by equipment failures at St James. On 7 February 1948, a generator at the power station broke down, causing a power failure lasting eight-and-a-half hours, which affected all non-city areas in Singapore. "It was estimated that thousands of dollars' worth of ice-cream in private houses and restaurants melted and was made useless," the *Straits Times* reported. The Acting Municipal Electrical Engineer R. Waddle appealed to the public to "cut electricity consumption to a minimum to lighten the load on generators operating on temporary repairs".[28]

Two years later, on 19 September 1950, another generator failure at St James plunged the whole of Singapore into darkness for about one-and-a-half hours. "When the single generator broke down all other generators in operation failed, and after a few moments flickering all light and power throughout the city was cut off just before 10.30 pm," reported the *Straits Times*. At Kandang Kerbau Hospital – one of the last places to have power restored – three babies were delivered safely by lamplight. Meanwhile at the General Hospital, the night medical officer examined patients using a hurricane lamp. Over at the Victoria Memorial Hall, the "show went on" after a car was driven into the auditorium and had its lights – reflected from a large mirror – directed on the stage.[29]

In anticipation of such blackouts, engineers brought forward their start-up times on Monday to better manage the sudden spikes in demand from offices and factories resuming a new work week – called "the Monday Syndrome". Engineer Lau Gar Ning recalled: "To meet this spike, the power stations were asked to move their start-up time to the early hours of Monday morning. One would start at, say, 3 am, another at 4 am."[30]

Working at St James continued to be challenging. Howard Higgins, who served as superintendent after the Japanese Occupation, recounted that the station's restoration was a testament to "the grit and determination of the Municipal electricity staff", despite crises like "the resignations at one time of two-thirds of senior staff, because the daily process of working the station became too drastic for their endurance".[31]

A renovation in 1956 and reopening in July 1960 equipped St James with new generators to raise its power output by 18,000 kW and extended its useful life, but could not indefinitely delay the inevitable. The power station had grown inefficient, with its running costs exceeding that of Pasir Panjang Power Station. In 1955, the cost of electricity generation at St James was 3.57 cents per unit, compared to Pasir Panjang's 1.4 cents per unit.[32] With the full opening of Pasir Panjang Power Station in 1966, St James was gradually phased out and its last gas turbine was decommissioned in 1976.[33]

## A New Lease of Life

The building was not demolished though. Since the 1980s, the building has been repurposed for a myriad of uses, ranging from an automated warehouse for the Port of Singapore Authority between 1983 and 1992, to an entertainment and leisure complex from 2006 to 2018.[34] Since 2022, it has been home to the global headquarters of British technology company Dyson.[35]

While the building certainly reflects the Edwardian design of its time, it has undergone a number of makeovers. After an initial restoration of its facade in 2006, the building underwent further redevelopment in 2018. Mapletree, its developer, inserted new floating floor slabs to create additional space for modern office use, while atriums were introduced to bring natural light into the building's cavernous interiors, facilitating communal mingling.[36]

These conservation efforts earned St James two Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) Architectural Heritage Awards. In 2010, the building received the URA Architectural Heritage Award (Category A) following its earlier restoration and conversion into an entertainment complex. In 2022, it received the URA Architectural Heritage Award for Conservation & Innovation (Distinction) in recognition of its restoration and adaptive reuse as a modern office building.[37] The power station had earlier been gazetted a national monument by the National Heritage Board in 2009.[38]

Disruptions to global energy markets caused by the war in Iran in 2026 have renewed awareness of energy-related vulnerabilities in Singapore. The city-state's electrical system is almost entirely dependent on imported gas and liquefied natural gas, heightening anxiety. Nonetheless, for a city whose skyline is always in motion, with old buildings falling to make way for newer ones, the century-old St James Power Station stands as a symbol of Singapore's history of adaptability, resilience and capacity to respond to uncertainty. ♦

The writer would like to thank Mapletree Investments Pte Ltd for providing video footage of an interview with Muiriel MacLeod on her father S.R. Urquhart, former superintendent of St James Power Station.

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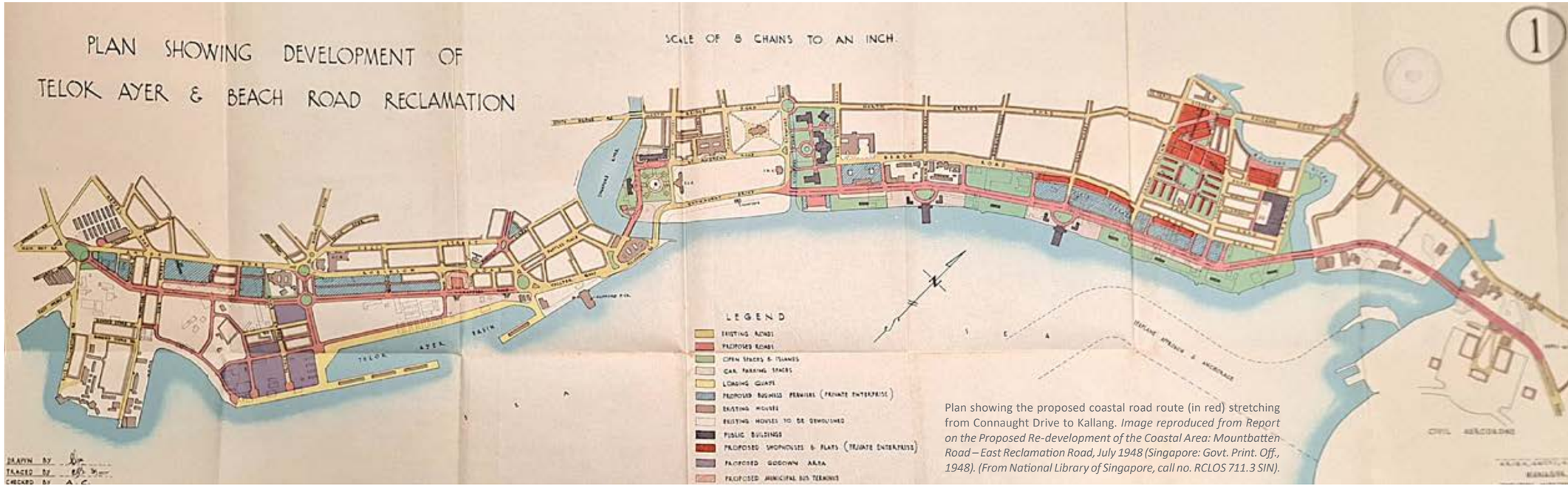
# THE MAKING OF MERDEKA BRIDGE AND NICOLL HIGHWAY

Opened in 1956, Merdeka Bridge and Nicoll Highway reshaped Singapore's eastern coastline, and transformed the way people travelled between the city and the suburbs.

**By Lim Tin Seng**

One of the stone lions and its accompanying 9-metre-tall mosaic pylon at one end of Merdeka Bridge, 1960s. *Collection of the National Museum of Singapore, courtesy of National Heritage Board.*

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Plan showing the proposed coastal road route (in red) stretching from Connaught Drive to Kallang. *Image reproduced from Report on the Proposed Re-development of the Coastal Area: Mountbatten Road – East Reclamation Road, July 1948 (Singapore: Govt. Print. Off., 1948). (From National Library of Singapore, call no. RCLOS 711.3 SIN).*

On the "lovely, cool evening" of 17 August 1956, "[with] a proud, truly national spirit the people of Singapore, in their tens of thousands… took part joyously in the opening of the Merdeka Bridge and Nicoll Highway," the *Straits Times* reported. Under an evening sky of "pearly hue" against the backdrop of the hangars of the former Kallang Airport, they were there to witness Chief Minister Lim Yew Hock declare the opening of the bridge and road.[1]

For a population navigating the twilight of British colonial rule, the completion of Merdeka Bridge and Nicoll Highway marked the island's journey to self-government. Accompanied by the First Battalion of the Singapore Volunteer Corps and the tunes of the Singapore Police Force Band, Lim linked the bridge to Singapore's aspiration for "Merdeka" (Malay for "freedom" or "independence"): "[T]his Merdeka Bridge symbolises for us the spirit in which we will achieve merdeka, through calm and thoughtful planning and through painstaking laying of a stable solid foundation. It is a reminder that merdeka is not a matter of building the spirit of independence only, but of building the skeleton and flesh of merdeka."[2]

On a practical front, however, Merdeka Bridge and Nicoll Highway were conceived to resolve the worsening traffic congestion in the Kallang area which was described as "shocking" and a "nightmare". As Lim noted in his speech: "[T]his is a bridge into the future… It relieves us of the nightmare of the bottleneck at Kallang."[3]

## A Coastal Road to the East

The idea of constructing a coastal road stretching from the Padang to Kallang was not new. The government had been exploring this as early as 1939 after a special committee was appointed for the Beach Road reclamation scheme. The road would provide motorists with a scenic "waterfront drive" from Anderson Bridge to Kallang. Although the proposal was "approved in principle", its implementation was halted by the outbreak of World War II.[4]

When the war ended, the same committee reconvened in 1947 to revisit its findings. In its updated 1948 report, the committee not only revived the waterfront coastal road proposal, but also expanded it to reach Mountbatten Road via a new bridge over the Kallang River. However, the recommendation remained on the back burner for a number of years until the worsening traffic conditions in the area during the early 1950s forced the colonial government to reconsider.[5]

By then, the traffic situation on Singapore roads had deteriorated to a state of "frightful" chaos. The gridlock was largely driven by a massive postwar population boom and rapid suburban expansion into areas like Tanglin to the north, and the Katong-Geylang area and beyond to the east. Residents faced a gruelling daily commute to their workplaces in the town area.[6]

The commuting problem was further exacerbated by a total lack of alternative routes. At the time, Kallang Road was the only major artery connecting the east coast to the town area. A traffic census by the Public Works Department (PWD) in 1954 revealed that during peak hours, more than 2,200 vehicles per hour in each direction jostled for space on Kallang Road. Compounded by frequent roadworks, it was common for motorists to be stuck on the road for "as long as 25 minutes [while] lining up four abreast over a considerable distance".[7]

To ease the situation, the government launched a series of stopgap measures ranging from tighter traffic controls to one-way traffic schemes.[8] However, these failed to alleviate the congestion but instead invited sharp criticisms from the public and the Legislative Council.[9] Bowing to systemic pressure, the government finally agreed in February 1953 to "press on with the Coast Road project and the new bridge over Kallang River", both of which were described as "long overdue".[10]



An aerial view of Merdeka Bridge and Nicoll Highway under construction, 1955. *Public Works Department Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image No.19980001355 - 0083).*

Projected to cost some $11.5 million, the blueprint – revealed in June 1953 – involved extending Esplanade Road along the Beach Road reclamation site via a new coastal road that would run directly to the mouth of the Kallang River before leading to a bridge. From there, the road would cut across the runway of the soon-to-be-decommissioned Kallang Airport to meet Mountbatten Road at its junction with Guillemard Road, where a roundabout would be built.[11]

## Designing the Bridge and Highway

The new coastal road and bridge scheme, led by the City Council and PWD respectively, was deemed a "very high priority" and envisaged to be completed within two years, by mid-1956.[12]

Preliminary investigations – surveys, deep borings, test pilings and soil samplings – were conducted in July 1953 to determine the ultimate design of the proposed bridge. These tests confirmed that the subsoil at the Kallang Basin site was of "poor quality" with parts of it reaching up to 21 m deep. To overcome this, the PWD settled on a 610-metre-long prestressed concrete bridge divided into 25 spans, each measuring 24 m. Each span rested on heavy, precast reinforced concrete piles – which was then a new building technology – with some having to be driven down as deep as 40 m for greater stability.[13]

Merdeka Bridge was designed by PWD Superintending Engineer of Major Works R.J. Hollis-Bee, as the "first major girder bridge" in Malaya and Singapore at the time. It was planned to be 20 m wide to accommodate two lanes of carriageways on each side, as well as a walkway for pedestrians, cyclists and trishaws, with the potential to expand to a maximum 29 m for an extra lane on each side. There was also a 3-metre headroom clearance beneath the bridge for "crafts without masts" to pass through.[14]

The new coastal road leading to and away from the bridge would not have any intersections to "ensure that traffic entering and leaving the city will move in an uninterrupted flow". Led by the City Council's City Engineer B.E. Thompson, the coastal road would be built entirely on land previously reclaimed along the Beach Road seafront on the western end of the bridge as well as on the runway of the former Kallang Airport on the eastern end. As the soil at the site of the new road was either "very poor" or consisted of "slow easy flowing muds and clays varying in depth", 130,000 tons of hard filling material were brought in from the quarry at Jalan Eunos to create the necessary firm surface.[15]

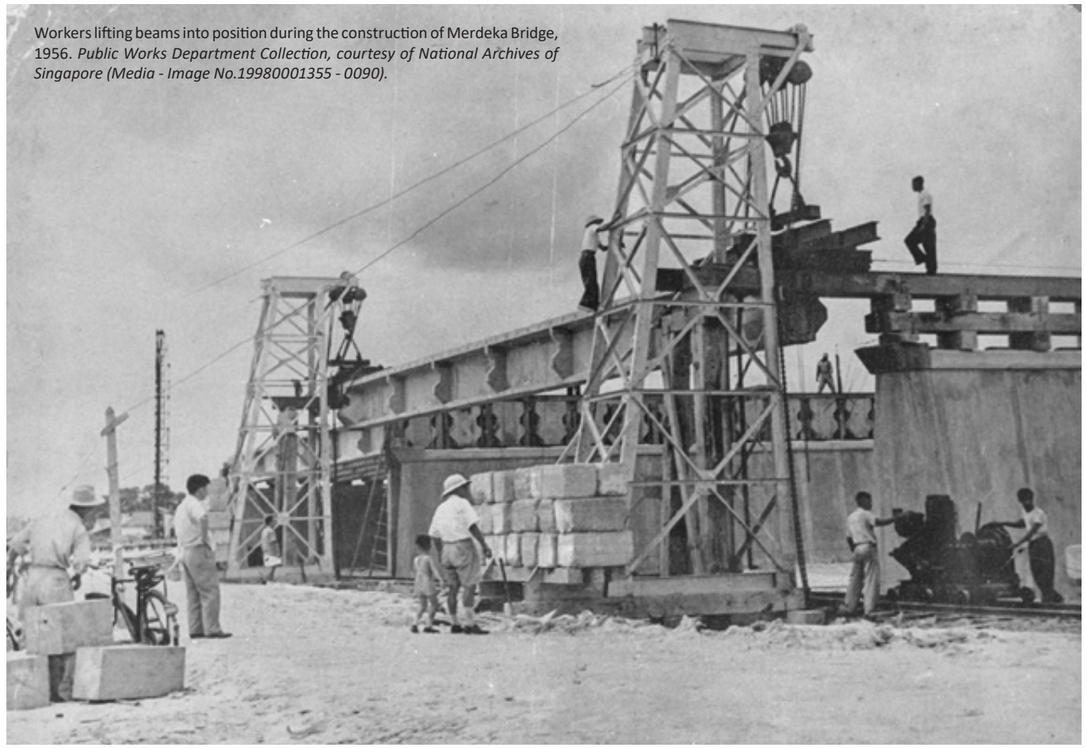
At the western end of the road, a smaller and shorter bridge called Stamford Bridge was




This illustration is based on a 1958 map of Singapore.







Workers lifting beams into position during the construction of Merdeka Bridge, 1956. *Public Works Department Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image No.19980001355 - 0090).*

constructed over the Stamford Canal. This bridge was 30.5 m long and 28.7 m wide, and built so that the coastal road could cross the mouth of Stamford Canal to connect to Connaught Drive.[16] Although Stamford Bridge no longer exists today, the two structures that used to mark its piers, each measuring a metre tall, still remain.[17]

## Construction Delays and Tender Controversies

Although the bridge's design and the coastal road's alignment had been secured, physical execution of the project could only begin after overcoming several early obstacles, including the immediate need to clear the worksite of illegal squatters and light industries. Back then, some 600 charcoal and firewood traders and 400 squatters occupied the Beach Road reclamation area. Plans were drawn up to relocate the traders to a new centre in Tanjong Rhu and the squatters to a public housing estate on Guillemard Road.[18]

Beyond resettlement hurdles, there were also unexpected disruptions. Between 1954 and 1955, a London dock strike and a local labour strike threatened foundation and river-channelling work. Furthermore, the unpredictable subsoil conditions at the western end of the bridge compelled further soil tests to determine ground stability, although piling work had been completed and the official construction tender had been called in October 1954.[19]

The procurement process came under public scrutiny after the government announced in December 1954 that the contract for the construction of Merdeka Bridge had been awarded to Paul Y. Construction Company, a local firm associated with Hume Industries and Sime Darby, even though Paul Y. Construction had submitted the highest bid.

Critics pointed out that the firm was "comparatively new", possessed zero experience in constructing prestressed concrete bridges, and even had to subcontract both the foundation work and the beam manufacturing to other companies.[20] Questions also arose as to why Paul Y. Construction was selected despite being the only bidder that failed to submit an alternative bridge design as stipulated in the tender.

At the 28 January 1955 meeting of the Legislative Council, Colonial Secretary W.A.C. Goode explained that Paul Y. Construction secured the contract because it was "the only one which complied with PWD requirements". He argued that the competing tenderers had proposed pile designs that were either structurally unsuitable or lacked adequate steel reinforcement.[21]

Despite the lingering controversy, the government stood firm and rejected all calls to reconsider the award.

## Building and Naming

To construct the bridge, the PWD erected a temporary earth dam, or bund, inside the Kallang Basin to divert the river. Completed in November 1954, the dam allowed workers to operate on dry land, improving efficiency and saving an estimated $6.5 million in construction costs.[22]

The bridge structure was assembled using either components cast on-site (in situ), or built from precast concrete units manufactured in temporary yards and transported into position on rail bogies. The foundational piles and vertical piers were built with standard reinforced concrete, while the flat deck slab and main horizontal beams, each weighing nearly 30 tons, used prestressed concrete. This technology was so new at the time that Merdeka Bridge was among the first prestressed concrete bridges built outside the United States.[23]

The bridge was targeted to be completed by June 1956, "a record" 15 months. "Work on the bridge has so far progressed very harmoniously," Hollis-Bee told the *Singapore Standard* in March 1956. "The contractor and sub-contractors have been very co-operative in the task with members of the Public Works Department staff and it is because of this that the work has gone ahead so quickly and accurately."[24]

Although contractors engaged by the City Council had begun work on the accompanying coastal road in September 1954, its progress was held back by the remaining charcoal and firewood traders who had refused to relocate to their new sites in Tanjong Rhu.[25] The authorities eventually negotiated their removal, and the City Council immediately cleared the site of the physical obstructions left behind, including small huts, sawmills and timber yards that "densely covered" parts of the work site.[26]

The completion of the bridge and coastal road coincided with a period of political change in Singapore, which had achieved partial internal self-government on 8 February 1955 and held the first Legislative Assembly general election on 2 April that year. As a result, Minister for Communications and Works Francis Thomas announced on 21 June 1956 that the bridge would be named Merdeka Bridge because "it expresses the confidence and aspirations of the people". Just a week later, on 30 June, the City Council named the accompanying road Nicoll Highway after former Governor John Nicoll, in recognition of the "drive and energy" he had given to allow the road to be built.[27]

To anchor this new identity, the bridge was adorned on both ends with a pair of identical, two-and-a-half-ton stone lions, which were referred to as the "Merdeka Lions". These were designed by Architect L.W. Carpenter of the Public Works Department and sculpted in Manila under the direction of Hong Kong-based Italian artist Raoul Bigazzi. Each lion was accompanied by a 9-metre-tall monumental pylon decorated with vibrant blue mosaic tiling and crowned with the official crest of the City of Singapore. Standing as "Freedom Guardians", the two stone lions also symbolise Singapore as the "Lion City".[28]

## Official Opening

The official opening of Merdeka Bridge and Nicoll Highway on 17 August 1956 was a grand occasion attended by a crowd of 60,000 spectators and some 500 invited guests, including guest of honour Chief Minister Lim Yew Hock, the bridge's designer Hollis-Bee and Acting City Council President R. Middleton-Smith.[29]

After the opening speeches, religious leaders representing six major faiths – Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism and Sikhism – held a joint service to bless the bridge.[30] Celebrations began as a plane swooped low to shower the crowd with fresh roses and souvenir leaflets. The official party then marked the end of the ceremony by boarding three open-top Land Rovers to cross and inspect the bridge. The scene burst into a spontaneous "unrehearsed and unexpected" moment of public joy as the crowds surged past police rope barriers at both ends of the bridge to cross it for good luck. Flooding the entire stretch, the two groups surged forward as if to greet one another from both ends, transforming the bridge into "a seething mass of happy humanity".[31]

The new coastal thoroughfare was hailed as a welcome reprieve after years of gruelling commutes across the Kallang Basin, with commuters calling it the "saver of hundreds of man-hours". Motorists reported that "travel time to the city [was] cut by 25 to 35 minutes despite a 20 m.p.h. speed-limit until the final surfacing of the road [was] completed" in January 1957. The time motorists saved in these early months roughly equalled what they had previously spent stuck in evening rush-hour gridlock along Kallang Road.[32]

As Merdeka Bridge and Nicoll Highway were vital arterial lifelines and a symbol of Singapore's journey to self-government, they became prime targets during Indonesia's Konfrontasi campaign (1963–66) against the formation of Malaysia. Indonesian saboteurs targeted the bridge twice when they planted explosives there in May 1964 and July 1964. Although the first bomb created a crater measuring 30.5 cm wide and 15 cm deep, and the second caused a hole 91 cm long and 7.6 cm deep, these "did not cause much damage" and no one was injured.[33]

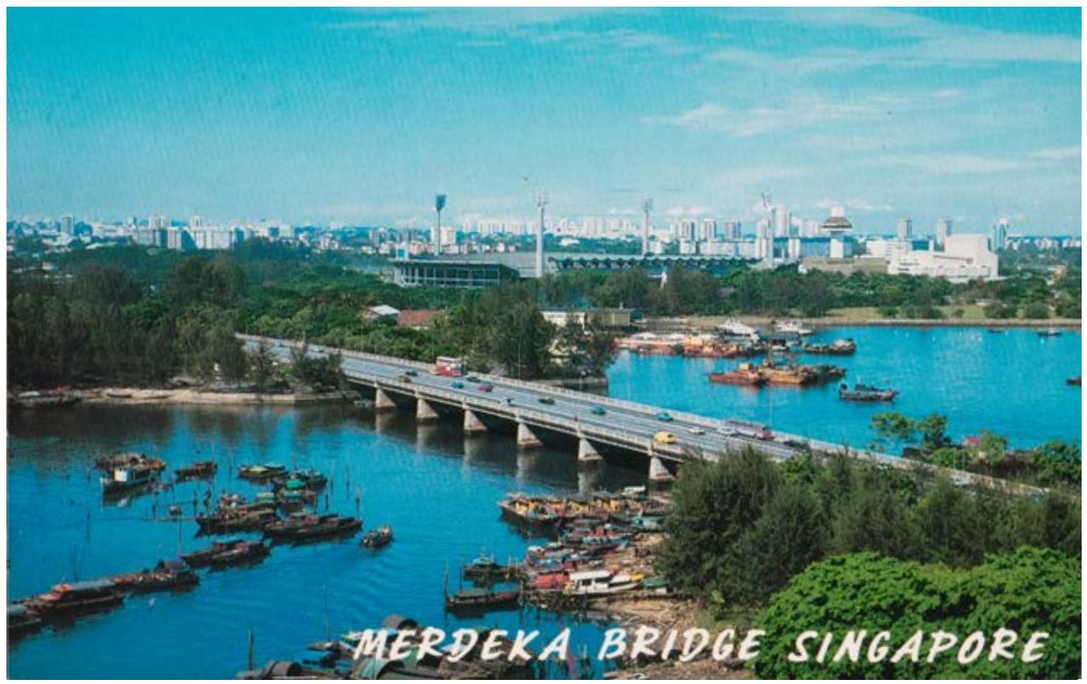


Crowds surging across the newly built Merdeka Bridge after the opening ceremony on 17 August 1956. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image No. 19980001283 - 0002).*

## Expansion and Reversible Tidal Flow

Unfortunately, within two years of the opening of Merdeka Bridge and Nicoll Highway, the very traffic gridlock they were built to resolve swiftly returned. The convenience of Nicoll Highway proved to be its own undoing. By providing a fast, direct route, it actively encouraged residents to drive or take buses to work. Driven by this surge, Nicoll Highway saw its peak traffic volume leap from 1,000 to 2,380 vehicles per hour from 1956 to 1958, outstripping its intended maximum design capacity of 2,100 vehicles per hour. By 1965, the initial four lanes had become "insufficient" to handle the volume of peak-hour traffic.[34]




The PWD embarked on a major widening scheme between 1965 and 1967. Merdeka Bridge was expanded to a total of seven lanes by adding an extra lane on each side and creating a shared lane down the middle. The entire stretch of Nicoll Highway was also widened in a similar arrangement.[35] Unfortunately, the two lions and pylons had to be dismantled from both ends of the bridge in 1966. The lions were relocated to Stadium Walk near the entrance of Kallang Park. (They stood there until 1987 when the redevelopment of the area necessitated another move to the Singapore Armed Forces Training Institute at Pasir Laba Camp for storage. The lions were moved once again in 1995 to the new Singapore Armed Forces Training Institute in Jurong where they remain today.)[36]

The road expansion facilitated the implementation of the "reversible tidal flow system" in 1967 where the central lanes shifted direction during peak hours to optimise traffic flow. In the morning, city-bound traffic was allocated five lanes, while traffic leaving the city was restricted to two. This pattern was reversed during the evening rush hour.[37] The "flexi-lanes" system finally ended in 1992 due to "better traffic distribution in the area throughout the day", after almost three decades. In its place, the seven-lane configuration was converted into a "permanent two-way road of three-lanes each from Guillemard Road to Bras Basah Road".[38]

**(Left)** Traffic along Merdeka Bridge during the laying of new beams for its widening in 1967. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image No. 19980005326 - 0034).*

**(Below)** Aerial view of Merdeka Bridge, mid-1970s. In the background on the right is the former National Stadium. *Collection of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.*

In 2004, Nicoll Highway was struck by one of the worst civil engineering disasters in Singapore's modern history. On 20 April, a catastrophic failure of a temporary retaining wall during the excavation for the Mass Rapid Transit Circle Line tunnel caused a section of the road to cave in, plunging the surrounding ground into a 30-metre-deep chasm. The disaster claimed four lives, including Foreman Heng Yeow Pheow, who sacrificed his life helping fellow workers escape before the collapse. The accident closed the vital road link for over seven months before reopening in December 2004.[39]

## Historic Designation

Today, Merdeka Bridge and Nicoll Highway remain vital arteries within Singapore's urban transport network. While expressways like East Coast Parkway and Marina Coastal Expressway have since absorbed the bulk of long-distance coastal traffic, Merdeka Bridge stands as a resilient link across the Kallang Basin.

Beyond its functional utility, Merdeka Bridge came to embody Singapore's aspirations for freedom and independence. Recognising this profound socio-political significance, the National Heritage Board officially designated Merdeka Bridge a historic site in 2002.[40] ♦

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# "MR LEE IS PLAYING GOLF STILL."

## A FAMILY VACATION IN CAMERON HIGHLANDS PROVIDED COVER FOR LKY'S EFFORTS TO FINALISE SEPARATION.

As a lawyer, mother and the wife of founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, Kwa Geok Choo provides a unique insight into the days just before and just after 9 August 1965.




**(Facing page)** Kwa Geok Choo receiving Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew at Paya Lebar Airport on his return from the Malaysian Mission to 17 African states from 21 January to 27 February 1964. Seen in the photo are their two children Wei Ling and Hsien Yang. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image No. 19980000357 - 0073).*

This is an extract from the book, *The Albatross File: Inside Separation*, edited by Susan Sim.[1] It includes an excerpted transcript of an oral history interview that Tan Kay Chew conducted with Kwa Geok Choo, the wife of Prime Minister of Singapore Lee Kuan Yew, between 25 October 1981 and 21 June 1982 at their residence at 38 Oxley Road. Kwa was interviewed for the Political History of Singapore 1945–65 project. She was the legal draughtsman who helped draft the crucial constitutional provisions that guaranteed Singapore's continued water supply after Separation from Malaysia.

By the end of July 1965, Singapore's Finance Minister Goh Keng Swee had worked out the main terms of Singapore's separation from the Federation of Malaysia to become an independent country. In early August, Goh and Law Minister E.W. [Eddie] Barker finalised the arrangements with their Malaysian counterparts. When almost all the details were ironed out, Lee made his way to Malaysia.

Lee's presence in Kuala Lumpur was kept a secret because the architects of Separation from both Malaysia and Singapore did not want to alert the British to plans to carve out Singapore. Had the British known of these plans, they would have attempted to derail it. In addition, there were parties in Singapore and Malaysia who would have tried to stop Separation if they had gotten wind of it. Separation had to be presented as a *fait accompli* if it was to succeed.

To allay suspicions, Lee went to Cameron Highlands in early August with his family. The official story was that he was there to rest before a meeting of the Federal Parliament. In reality, Lee was only briefly in Cameron Highlands before he made his way to Kuala Lumpur on 6 August to await the final agreement and to then meet Malaysian Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman.

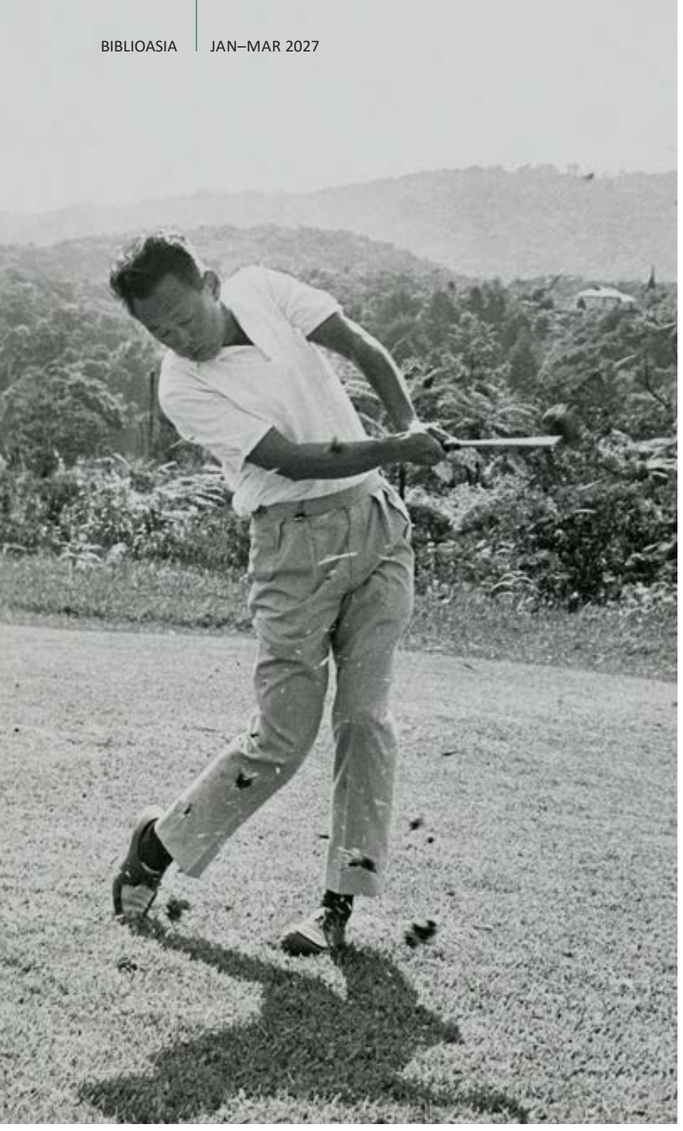
While Lee was in Kuala Lumpur, his family remained in Cameron Highlands. Kwa had to maintain the story that Lee was playing golf when he was actually in Kuala Lumpur. In her oral history interview, she provides a glimpse into her relationship with Lee and offers a behind-the-scenes look at the days Lee spent in Kuala Lumpur, as well as the period immediately after 9 August 1965, when a despondent Lee had to come to terms with the aftermath of Separation.

Kwa and Lee first met in Raffles Institution (RI). As the top student in the whole of Malaya in the 1936 Senior Cambridge Examination, Kwa joined a special class at RI for students competing for the prestigious Queen's Scholarship. Barker was also in that 1938–39 special class. Lee, who was younger than both, initially saw Kwa chiefly as his competitor. The academic rivalry gave way to romance when they met again during the war. Kwa won the Queen's Scholarship to study at Cambridge University in 1947. Lee also began his studies at Cambridge University in the same year. Kwa married Lee in Stratford, England, in December 1947, and they graduated in 1949. Together with Lee's brother, Lee Kim Yew, they co-founded the law firm, Lee & Lee, in 1955.

Kwa died on 2 October 2010. In his eulogy to his wife at her funeral service on 6 October, Lee said: "She was precise and meticulous in her choice of words. The amendment statute [that Kwa drafted] was annexed to the Separation Agreement, which we then registered with the United Nations. ... Each time Malaysian Malay leaders threatened to cut off our water supply, I was reassured that this clear and solemn international undertaking by the Malaysian government in its Constitution will get us a ruling by the UNSC [United Nations Security Council]."[2]

Kwa was given a state-assisted funeral "in recognition of her exceptional and unique contributions to Singapore for more than five decades, beginning before Singapore became independent," the Prime Minister's Office said.[3]

In this excerpt recorded on 21 June 1982, Kwa gives a behind-the-scenes perspective of key events leading up to Separation: the excitement of the Malaysian Solidarity Convention in June; her role in editing some of the transcripts of the prime minister's speeches and press conferences; the weekend in Cameron Highlands when she and the children provided "camouflage" as her husband went secretly to Kuala Lumpur to finalise the Separation Agreement; Lee's state of mind on 9 August itself, both before and after the press conference; and the anguish he felt on Separation.



Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew playing golf in the Cameron Highlands, 1967. *Lee Kuan Yew Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

**Tan Kay Chew: On to June 1965, the Malaysian Solidarity Convention. You were there, Mrs Lee. Can you describe what it was like?**

It was a Sunday morning. Wasn't it? Yes, I think it must have been a Sunday morning. Any other day, you can't get a crowd. On a working day, you can't get a crowd to attend. So if you have a big party meeting, it has to be on a Sunday. And this was a Sunday morning, we had to make an effort to get up early and be there by nine or ten. I think we had to be there by ten. I remembered seeing them all up there on the platform. I was sitting in the front row, but to the side, not immediately in the centre. And I saw the Australian High Commissioner was there – [William] Pritchett. Somehow I noticed him particularly. He probably had been to Cameron Highlands to play golf. … And the New Zealand person, [Robert] Wade, I suppose, would have been there.

And the meeting was an exciting meeting. … It was one of the best speeches I thought my husband had made. I've heard quite a few of his speeches, but sometimes I have a feeling that whenever somebody says, "your husband made a marvellous speech …", I said, "but I wasn't there then." This happened at Lagos.[4] [Harold] Wilson said he made a very good speech, and I said: "No, I'm sorry, I wasn't there." Then it happened in Lusaka.[5] They told me the same thing, and I wasn't there.

He made that long four-hour speech in [the Malaysian] Parliament. I don't go to Parliament every time, I wasn't there. But this is one speech that he made [at the Malaysian Solidarity Conference] which was a good speech, and it was an off-the-cuff speech without a prepared text. He must have had a few notes. He got up and spoke probably after the others. As a rule, he would be the last speaker. I cannot remember whether this was so, on this occasion. And what I remember particularly was how he made the Malaysian Chinese Association leaders appear [like] absolute running dogs, without using the words, "running dogs". What I remembered was his gestures with his hands. He's got very expressive hands, which he uses sparingly. But when he does use them, you could almost picture a little dog running up and wagging its tail when it's patted by its master.[6]

And it impressed me. I am not usually. I'm quite a critical person and will come back sometimes, and tell him that his speech is – sometimes I tell him where I think it's gone a little bit too far, or ... I don't quite think it should have been said in such and such a way. … But that one I thought was very well done. And it came over tremendously well, and was received well by the audience, I think.

The other speakers, I do remember this man, Michael Buma.[7] But other than that, I can't remember the speeches. The hall must have been full. It isn't always full for our meetings there. Sometimes it is more full than others, but this time it was a crowded hall. It was a nice sunny day and we went home. I came away satisfied that the meeting had got off – this movement – well. I didn't have a sense of history in realising that this was the beginning of something that would snowball. But I had a feeling this was a successful meeting. Sometimes we'd have meetings, I'd say, "Oh, that was a dull meeting." And he'd say, "No, no, we have to do these things." But this one was not a dull meeting. …





**In May 1965, PM was not allowed to speak to reply in the Malaysian Parliament. And after that he held a press conference. Do you remember going up to KL?**

Yes. Well, he went up for Parliament quite often in those days – I mean, whenever Parliament was in session, he would go. I'm working, I don't always go with him. So that time he'd gone up, I'd stayed behind. I was in the office, I think, when I had a telephone call to say to take the plane up, that he … was going to make a speech, and that I was to help Sankaran[8] after that, when Sankaran was transcribing, to help him to sort out, and edit.

But when I got there, … in the room set aside for use by the opposition … Sankaran was there, I was there, whoever was his Press Officer, Vas,[9] I think, in those days, was also there. And suddenly my husband came and said no, he was not going to be allowed to make that speech. So it appeared as though I had gone up for nothing, but no, he was going to have a press conference. … So Vas was running around making arrangements for the press conference.

[…]

Looking through the letters, I found one amusing one which Kuan Yew wrote back from Accra.[10] This was 1964 when he did the long trip around Africa to counter Sukarno's [President of Indonesia] things about Konfrontasi.

He wrote: "Been to Lagos, have been to Guinea, Sékou Touré[11] has not issued the communique he had earlier promised." You see, after every country that he visited he hoped that the leader would come up with a communique supporting Malaysia. So he is disappointed Sékou Touré did not come up with a communique.

"Though he says – he said to me privately before I left to say how much he was convinced we had right on our side – he was impressed by my dispassionate and factual analysis and told me that I was known as an honest and progressive man. I have seen the local papers up to 3 February. I thought the *Straits Times* did not do me justice on bringing Ben Bella[12] around. Hope the Tunku[13] knows who put in the effort. But then there are things which may count more in the long than in the short run. He may realise through British and Australian sources what a good job I did for him and it may make quite a difference to the attitude of the African countries at future conferences and in the UN."

That's amusing because when Tunku gave him his book many, many years later, in 1977 – Tunku wrote the book called *Looking Back*, his memoirs[14] … – inside he inscribed: "Mr Lee Kuan Yew, the friend who had worked so hard to found Malaysia, and even harder to break it up. Kindest regards, Abdul Rahman."

So, oh, how many years? 1964 to 1977 – 13 years. Tunku did know that my husband worked very hard for Malaysia. But he also thought my husband worked harder to break up Malaysia.

**On the break-up – you were in Cameron Highlands those few days when everything happened. Do you remember Dr Goh calling PM?**

Yes. I am not sure that I knew it was Goh [Goh Keng Swee; Minister for Finance]. I knew before we went up to Cameron Highlands that things were coming to the boil. We couldn't help but know that things were not going well. After the riots,[15] … I remember Ko Teck Kin[16] coming to see my husband, very worried. He, as Chairman of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce, had come out with a statement at the time of the Referendum to tell the Chinese people: "Vote for Malaysia. Let's go into Malaysia." And when these riots took place in 1964, Ko Teck Kin felt responsible, as my husband felt responsible, for letting the Singapore people in for this kind of trouble.

And Ko Teck Kin came around to Sri Temasek. I remembered him visiting my husband, seeing him and looking very worried. And that is why my husband had respect for the man. He was not just a selfish, money-making Chinese businessman. He felt a sense of responsibility. He'd brought Singapore into this thing by asking them to vote for the merger. And my husband felt the same way. …

Therefore, when we went up to Cameron Highlands, I knew things were coming to the boil. Before we left Singapore, my husband had shown me a draft. That was shown to me in Oxley Road,[17] and not in Cameron Highlands. He had shown me a draft and asked me to run through it and said: "It is alright? Is there anything there that you think should be tightened up or is not clear?"

My main … what I feel is my duty in such a thing … is to see whether there are any ambiguities which can later lead to disagreement and conflict, which can be interpreted one way or another way. That, as a draughtsman, is how I look at the thing. Is there any sentence where the meaning is not clear? It is not for me to say whether the meaning is correct, [whether] it is right that you should do this, or it is wrong that you should do that. My whole attitude is, what is it you want to do? Has it been spelt out clearly in words which nobody can argue about?

And when he showed me that piece of paper, I ran my eye through it, and I remembered pointing out: "Here, this part here is open to argument. And this part perhaps you could say it this other way. Otherwise it might be interpreted another way." And he was in a … we did not have much time ... I don't think we spent more than 10 minutes on it.

And he looked at it, and he listened to me, and he said, "Yes", and "No", and off he went.[18] It was at home, at six, seven o'clock [in the evening] when he produced this piece of paper. I knew what it was all about. I knew that there had been talks about pulling apart, and getting some other arrangement. I am not sure that I would have known the details of the arrangement, what was actually planned. But when I saw this, of course I must have understood what it meant.

And therefore, when we went up to Cameron Highlands, I knew things were coming to the boil. My husband was there playing golf, [I was] walking around with my husband – we went down to the village sometimes together. Then he'd go off and play golf. My children and I, we amused ourselves. But one day in the evening, he had a phone call. He said: "Yes, I am going down to KL." And we were expecting the phone call.

## In the evening.

Well, whatever time the phone call, I think he left in the evening. He didn't leave in the daytime. And he left and the children asked: "What's happened?" I said: "No, Papa's got some work." And I stayed on in Cameron Highlands with the children. I knew that things were coming to a boil … meaning that it's … well, the Separation was going to take place. How it was taking place? Who was doing it? I did not know the details, but we were coming to a crisis.

He must have gone down on a Thursday. On Friday, I was there alone with the children. We went down to the town as usual. We stayed up in Cluny Lodge.[19] We had a car. We must have gone down to the village. The people in the shops are accustomed to seeing my children and me, going into the shops, we buy a few things. They asked me: "Where's Mr Lee?" "Oh," I said, "Mr Lee is playing golf still." And if the children had heard me, they would have known I was telling a lie. But I don't think they questioned me.

This would be Friday. On Saturday … Friday night I think he must have telephoned me to come down ... because Saturday morning, I drove down. … He telephoned and said, "Yes, you come down to KL too." So I didn't ask any questions. "Come down", so I packed up, paid off the bill at Cluny Lodge, came down with the children and we arrived at Temasek House, sometime in the afternoon, I suppose on that Saturday, in Kuala Lumpur.[20] …

So when we came down – as a rule, when we are in Temasek House KL, we have the run of the house. Or at the most, there would be one other person, his secretary would be there or the SO [security officer]. But my husband and I, my children, would occupy that house. This time, we found that the house was full of people. So that my husband, myself and three children were occupying one room; we usually spread out in three or four bedrooms.

And so I got the bedsheets, I remembered, and extra blankets and put them on the floor and made a bed on the floor, if you understand what I mean. And they slept on the floor with the bed made English-style with the bedsheet tucked under something, and the blankets over them. Because it's air-conditioned. It's air-conditioned, so there were the two of us and three children. We slept there on Saturday night. And I must have had to hush the children and tell them not to get underfoot, get in the way. We had our dinner in Temasek [House], must have had it earlier than the others. There were so many people there.

## Who were there, do you remember?

Keng Swee, Raja, Pang Boon?[21] I told my husband I remembered Othman being there. He said, "no", he can't remember Othman – Othman Wok.[22] I said: "Who signed in Singapore?" Nyuk Lin[23] didn't come up. Nyuk Lin signed in Singapore. Eddie, I don't remember seeing him. He may have left when I came or he may have just passed … but Pang Boon, Chin Chye,[24] Raja … the place looked full of people, and grown-ups, that my children had to be kept out of the way, which had never happened in Temasek House.

My children were sort of told to not get in the way, not make a nuisance of themselves. So the next morning [8 August], we left and drove down. I knew my husband would be flying down, and we drove down leisurely in the car and came straight back, not to Oxley Road. We may have come [to Oxley Road] to collect our things, but we stayed in Sri Temasek that night.[25]

So the whole of Sunday, we were driving and arrived back in Singapore. … Usually we'd come back in the evening, I suppose get in five, six o'clock. And we slept that night at Sri Temasek. You see, we did not know what would happen when the break-up was announced at ten o'clock [on 9 August]. Ten o'clock on Monday morning, the break-up was announced over the radio.[26]

I think I may have telephoned the office in the morning, just to tell them: "Look, I am back in Singapore, but I am not coming to the office yet." We stayed on at Sri Temasek, not knowing when this thing bursts and becomes public knowledge, will the Malays riot because they are left alone in Singapore? Or will the Chinese riot and try to take their own, get their own back and beat up the Malays? We didn't know whether there would be riots and civil commotion.

So we were at Sri Temasek, I think for at least a week. And it was at Sri Temasek that he held a TV conference downstairs where he announced





Mr and Mrs Lee Kuan Yew in their residence at 38 Oxley Road with their children Hsien Loong, Wei Ling and Hsien Yang. *Lee Kuan Yew Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

the break-up.[27] And it was at Sri Temasek that he received [Antony] Head, and he said Head met Ling,[28] and Ling asked him, "You want to see my father?" And Ling must have been – that was in 1965, she was 10 years old then.

The children liked to stay at Sri Temasek. There's a big open field there, the Istana fields. So we stayed there for at least a week, I think, at least a week. And then we came back home[29] – oh, that was when we had the greatest trauma, where we had all the change and the extra security, because they were jittery, not knowing what was going to happen. They, being the security, the police who were in charge, and responsible for my husband's safety.

## When you were in Cameron Highlands, was it agreed beforehand that you would say Mr Lee was playing golf?

No, I didn't need to be told these things. He just said: "I am going off." That's that and I knew that when he goes off like this, you don't tell the whole world that he's gone down to Kuala Lumpur to negotiate these delicate things. So there are certain things he may have told me, "just don't …"

No, I don't think it was necessary. I knew what … this is a cloak and dagger thing. You don't tell people. If my son had blurted out, "papa's not here", that would have been trouble. But my son would have known better, my big boy.[30] My children wouldn't have known, the younger ones wouldn't have known. No, I don't know whether we discussed – there're certain things you don't need to discuss. I mean, we knew this was Top Secret. He's gone down, things are coming to the boil. It's going to be pulled off. And so I just stayed back waiting for the phone call saying "come down".

When he said, "come down," then … I was there just as a camouflage. As far as the world knew, I mean, he was on holiday in Cameron Highlands. So when they asked me: "Where's your husband?" "He's playing, he's on the golf course." And when you are in Tanah Rata,[31] in the village, in the town there, whether you are on the golf course or not, cannot be proved, because it's a big rambling place.

## That last night before the break-up, do you remember Mr Lee getting up in the middle of the night?[32]

No, no. He was upset after the thing was over. When the thing is on, there is no time to be upset. There is no time to be jittery and nervous while you are doing it. No, no. I think where he had the nearest to a nervous breakdown was after it was over, after the press conference [on the afternoon of 9 August] when we came back and slept in this room.[33] Then he was very, very upset.

Devan[34] was left up there in Kuala Lumpur. His [Lee's] cause for concern was that he had abandoned our supporters in Malaya and that Devan was left our MP in Bangsar. And at that time the metaphor he used was: The spaceman has just gone up. They had sent something into space and a man had gone out [of the space capsule] and walked outside … and walked in space.[35]

And he said: "Devan is like that spaceman walking out in space." And he was really upset at the idea of Devan being alone in Malaya to carry on, and that we had abandoned all these people.



Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew (extreme right) at the press conference on the separation of Singapore from Malaysia on 12 August 1965. Beside him is Devan Nair, future president of Singapore. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image No. 19980000615 - 0031).*

And he had to make up for lost sleep, sleeping here in that room, and Devan came to see him. I remembered very clearly. Devan came down from KL, and my husband was sleeping and I took Devan to the little study at the back and said: "Look, you've got to convince Kuan Yew that you are staying on in Kuala Lumpur of your own volition. You are a grown up adult person. If you did not want to be left alone in Kuala Lumpur, you can come back to Singapore. And Kuan Yew is not responsible for your staying behind in Kuala Lumpur." That was what upset him.

He was very distressed, distressed for the people and for Devan. And I told Devan: "Look, you are not a puppet, you are an independent person with your own mind. You've got to convince Kuan Yew not to be so upset about it because you are making up your mind yourself, not Kuan Yew making up your mind for you and leaving you behind." So Devan agreed with me, but we let my husband sleep. He needed the sleep.

Then when he woke up, I think he saw Devan. I didn't sit in with them when he saw Devan. But he was very, very upset. That is the nearest I have seen him to being near a nervous breakdown. After, not before. But it was very short, because he had to recover and then after that meet the press. Monday, after Separation was announced, I think he met the foreign correspondents that afternoon, and then some time later in the week, he may have met them again.[36] Then we went up to Changi.[37] And when we were in Changi, I remember Fred Emery[38] of the *London Times* went up to meet us. So even then, he was working, he had to recover from this temporary … for a few days or for one day, he was very, very distressed, very distressed that we had let down the people who voted for us, and that he had left Devan there. I compared his reaction to Chua Sian Chin's[39] reaction. He [Chua] said: "Serve those people right. If more of them had voted for PAP [People's Action Party], this wouldn't have been necessary." That was Chua Sian Chin's reaction. But he was from Melaka, and he had fought in Melaka. So his reaction was: The people did not vote the PAP MPs in. And that's why there was only Devan. But my husband felt that those people who had looked up and expected so much from the PAP had been let down.

He must have been very tense. That's when you have real tension. Then relaxed after that. And this feeling … almost distraught and distressed for … it was only here within the four walls of my room … once at that press conference, when he broke down, but not after that. Not after that, but when he came back. And he had to sleep it off.

And when Devan came, I told Devan: "Look, you've got to convince my husband. It is not his fault." And that took – I don't know … took a little while I suppose. I can't remember how long Devan stayed here … whether it was one hour or half an hour or two hours … I can't remember that. But I remember taking Devan to the back room and saying: "Kuan Yew is sleeping. But this is the position. That's why you must talk to him and convince him." ♦

**NOTES**

1 Susan Sim, ed., *The Albatross File: Inside Separation* (Singapore: National Archives of Singapore and Straits Times Press, 2025), 473–82. (From National Library of Singapore, call no. RSING 959.5705 ALB)
2 "Eulogy by MM Lee Kuan Yew at the Funeral Service of Mrs Lee Kuan Yew," Prime Minister's Office Singapore, 6 October 2010, https://www.pmo.gov.sg/newsroom/eulogy-minister-mentor-lee-kuan-yew-funeral-service-mrs-lee-kuan-yew-mandai-crematorium/.
3 "According Honours to the Late Madam Kwa Geok Choo for Her Final Journey," Prime Minister's Office Singapore, 5 October 2010, https://www.pmo.gov.sg/newsroom/press-statement-prime-ministers-office-according-honours-late-madam-kwa-geok-choo-her/.
4 British Prime Minister Harold Wilson had called a special meeting of the Commonwealth leaders in Lagos, Nigeria, in January 1966 to discuss the unilateral declaration of independence by Ian Smith, then Prime Minister of Rhodesia. Lee attended the two-day meeting with Minister for Culture S. Rajaratnam.
5 Lee spoke at the Third Summit Conference of the Non-Aligned Countries in Lusaka, Zambia, on 9 September 1970.
6 Kwa was likely referring to the part of Lee's speech where he described how Malaysian Chinese Association leaders like Lim Swee Aun, a Federal Cabinet Minister from Taiping, would occasionally stand up for minority rights: "Lim Swee Aun says, 'We are all co-owners.' I like to hear that. You know, his tail was up, wagging again. You know, in February, his tail was down. Umno branches in Perak were condemning him and calling him anti-Malay, anti-National Language. 'Sack him!' Passing resolutions in their special network in Jawi. We were reading it. We got alarmed. … I say there's no need to be frightened. You see, the tails already are up. And now Lim Swee Aun says, 'We are co-owners.' This is important. We are fighting for Malaysia: agreed. Who owns Malaysia? This is very important because having fought for Malaysia, 10 years of Confrontation, suddenly we find only some are owners." (The text of Lee's speech is available from the National Archives of Singapore.)
7 Michael Buma was Chairman of the Machinda Party of Sarawak. In his memoirs, Lee described Buma as brilliant. "He spoke simply but with tremendous effect. His speech was so devastating that the English newspapers were afraid to publish his punchlines." (Lee Kuan Yew, *The Singapore Story: Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew* [Singapore: Times Editions: Singapore Press Holdings, 1998]. [From National Library of Singapore, call no. RSING 959.5705092 LEE]).
8 Ayyavier Sankaran was the private secretary to Prime Minister Lee.
9 Vas was an officer with the Singapore Ministry of Culture.
10 Lee visited Accra, capital of Ghana, as the leader of a Malaysian delegation which undertook a 35-day mission to 17 African countries from January to February 1964.
11 Ahmed Sékou Touré was the first president of Guinea, formerly known as French Guinea, from 1958 until 1984.
12 Ahmed Ben Bella was the first president of Algeria who ruled from 1963 to 1965.
13 Tunku Abdul Rahman was the prime minister of Malaysia from 1957 to 1970.
14 *Looking Back: Monday Musings and Memories* is a compilation of articles by Tunku Abdul Rahman published in *The Star*, a Malaysian newspaper. It covers his life story and political career and the role he played in the formation of independent Malaya in 1957, and later, Malaysia in 1963. See Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj, *Looking Back: Monday Musings and Memories* (Kuala Lumpur: Pustaka Antara, 1977). (From National Library of Singapore, call no. RSEA 959.5 ABD)
15 Race riots erupted twice in Singapore in 1964 – first, on 21 July during a procession marking the birth of the Prophet Muhammad; the second time, on 2 September.
16 Ko Teck Kin was a businessman, banker and president of the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce from 1954 to 1955 and again from 1958 to 1965. After Separation, he was appointed Singapore's first High Commissioner to Malaysia, serving from 1965 to 1966.
17 The Lee family residence.
18 In his memoirs, Lee said that he had asked his wife to write a clause guaranteeing the water agreements between Singapore and Johor. This was inserted as clause 14 in the Bill to amend the Malaysian Constitution and annexed to the Separation Agreement.
19 A cottage in Cameron Highlands that became part of the Aloha Resorts, a holiday facility owned by the Singapore government for civil servants.
20 Temasek House (Rumah Temasek) on Jalan Tun Razak in Kuala Lumpur was where Singapore officials used to stay. After Separation, it was, until 2014, the official residence of the Singapore High Commissioner to Malaysia.
21 S. Rajaratnam was the Minister for Culture of Singapore and Ong Pang Boon was the Minister for Education of Singapore.
22 According to Othman Wok, Minister for Social Affairs, he had driven Rajaratnam up to Temasek House on 7 August, and Lee had later that day asked him if he would sign the Separation Agreement if Lee himself did (see Othman Wok's oral history excerpt on p. 293 of the Albatross book). Ong was also in Kuala Lumpur that weekend and was persuaded by Toh to sign the Separation Agreement at Temasek House.
23 Yong Nyuk Lin was the Minister for Health of Singapore.
24 Toh Chin Chye was Deputy Prime Minister of Singapore.
25 In his memoirs, Lee wrote that they decided to spend the night at Sri Temasek because they "would be safer there if any Umno Malays in Singapore should riot when the news broke the next morning" (Lee, *The Singapore Story*, 1998).
26 Radio Singapore announced Singapore's separation from Malaysia on 9 August 1965 at 10 am. The proclamation was broadcast in English, Malay and Mandarin and repeated every half an hour.
27 The TV conference was not held at Sri Temasek but at Caldecott Hill where Radio and Television Singapore, the predecessor of Mediacorp, was located. The telecast showed Lee breaking down and wiping his tears when he described Separation as "a moment of anguish".
28 Lee Wei Ling, daughter of Lee Kuan Yew and Kwa Geok Choo.
29 Lee and his wife moved to Changi Cottage for a few weeks after they left Sri Temasek.
30 The older son, Lee Hsien Loong, was 13 years old in 1965.
31 Tanah Rata, which means "flat land", is the largest town in Cameron Highlands.
32 Lee wrote in his memoirs that sleep was difficult that night because he "was fretting; had I overlooked any important [thing] that needed to be buttoned up?" (Lee, *The Singapore Story*, 1998).
33 It is not clear which room Kwa was referring to. It would appear she thought Lee's meeting with Devan Nair took place in Oxley Road, where this oral history interview was being conducted. But they were staying at Sri Temasek in the first days after Separation.
34 Devan Nair was the sole People's Action Party member in the Malaysian Parliament representing the Bangsar constituency.
35 In June 1965, while the US spacecraft *Gemini 4* was in orbit, astronaut Edward White emerged from the craft, floated in space for about 20 minutes, and became the first person to propel himself in space with a manoeuvring unit. Three months earlier, Soviet cosmonaut Alexei Leonov had been the first man to walk in space on 18 March 1965.
36 Lee did not meet only the foreign correspondents. There were local journalists present too.
37 Changi Cottage, a government holiday bungalow in Changi, was where Lee stayed to rest and recuperate after Separation. Sited on Netheravon Road, it is now part of the Singapore Civil Service Club.
38 Fred Emery was the Southeast Asia correspondent for *The Times* of London based in Singapore in the 1960s.
39 Chua Sian Chin had contested unsuccessfully as a PAP candidate in the 1964 Malaysian General Election. He joined the Singapore Cabinet in 1968 as Minister for Health.

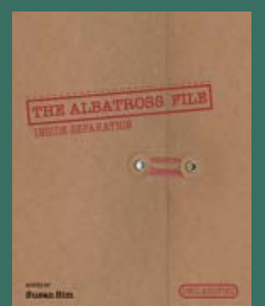
**ALBATROSS EXHIBITION AND BOOK**

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

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

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

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





# LEGACY ON A HILL

## The Maqam Habib Noh

In a *BiblioAsia Podcast* episode, architectural historian Imran Tajudeen talks about the history and architecture of Maqam Habib Noh, including its multiethnic neighbourhood.



Architectural historian Imran Tajudeen, 2026. *Photo by Jimmy Yap.*

Imran Tajudeen is a senior lecturer in the Department of Architecture, College of Design and Engineering, National University of Singapore. He teaches subjects on identity and representation through the arts, urban history and built cultural heritage in maritime Southeast Asia, with a focus on Singapore and maritime Southeast Asia. He is currently writing a book about Maqam Habib Noh, which reopened in January 2026 after one-and-a-half years of renovations. The *keramat* (shrine) is dedicated to the Muslim man Habib Noh and houses his tomb.

**Imran:** One of the remarkable things about the mausoleum is that it's on a hillock [off Palmer Road], so it necessitated that monumental staircase. The staircase was built, as we know now, by no less than Swan & Maclaren. In fact, it's a bridge. If you look at the structure properly, it's not resting directly upon the hillside. It's like a bridge with arches, with foundations into the ground, so that any landslide won't affect the staircase. If you imagine [it] like an overhead bridge-staircase, that's what it is.

**Jimmy:** Interesting.

**Imran:** With arches, though, because this is brick, not concrete, right? The overhead bridges we are familiar with today are in concrete. This is in brick and plaster. So, if you look carefully at the sides, you'll be able to see the former arches that have now been walled over in between the arches.

**Jimmy:** You can still see the outline.

**Imran:** The outlines of the arches are articulated in mouldings. So, it's a very beautifully built staircase, with granite steps, no less. And Shanghai plaster balustrades on top. And then the mausoleum itself is also interesting because it takes on European features, if you look at the mouldings outside the windows. But it has a dome, and the dome itself is interesting because it's actually circular. It's a globe, but a flattened globe with a disc on top. So, it's not a typical dome that you would find.

**Jimmy:** What do you mean by a flattened dome?

**Imran:** So instead of being a perfect sphere, it's somewhat elliptical.



**(Facing page)** The Haji Muhammad Salleh Mosque is on the right, 2026. Photo by M. Adrian Jurhami. *(From Wikimedia Commons).*

**(Left)** Maqam Habib Noh, 1989. *Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image No. 19980007354 – 0066).*

**Jimmy:** Okay, so it's a little bit flatter.

**Imran:** Flatter, yeah. And then on top of that is a circular drum. It would be called a drum in architectural terms, meaning that it's like a cylinder on top of it. But of course, the function of these domes above mausoleums is well known in Islamic architecture. In fact, the word in Arabic for dome, *qubba*, is also synonymous with the term for *maqam*, or mausoleum. So, if you say *qubba*, people would assume you're talking about a mausoleum or tomb. The use of *qubba* or domes for mosques is less frequent. In fact, early Arabian mosques didn't even have a dome.

**Jimmy:** Yes, that's right.

**Imran:** Now, this is the interesting confusion I want to bring in. People have mistaken the mausoleum at the hillock summit to be the mosque when in fact it is a mausoleum. The humble roofed, two-tiered roofed building at the base of the hill next to the base of the staircase is the mosque [present-day Haji Muhammad Salleh Mosque].

**Jimmy:** That's so interesting.

**Imran:** Yes, that's the mosque. And maybe it's a good point here to introduce the mosque a little bit. Kampong Sambau, as I said, [was] a very old settlement. It was already there when [Habib Noh] came, and it was already there when the Hakkas built the temple [present-day Fook Tet Soo Hakka Temple/Hock Teck See Temple]. The mosque had existed as a wooden building nearby. We have the old maps to show it.

**Jimmy:** So, it's an exact location, and it's not where it is now?

**Imran:** Yeah, it's slightly further away. It was rebuilt around 1907 – we have the building drawing for it. And this is where Haji Muhammad Salleh [a good friend of Habib Noh] entered the picture. By all accounts, we don't have more precise documentation on him, but we do know his descendants who are still around.

But they don't remember all the full details either, so this is where it gets a bit less certain. But we know that Haji Muhammad Salleh endowed the mosque, and he rebuilt it. Now, this is something forgotten because people assume that he built the mosque from scratch. But from my study of the old maps and documents, the mosque was already there before him.

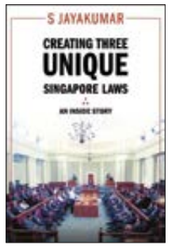
**Jimmy:** But that makes complete sense, right? Because this is an old kampong.

**Imran:** There would've been a *surau* [small prayer house]. In fact, in English, we don't make the distinction, but in Malay it would be a *surau*, right? As opposed to a *masjid* [mosque]. So, a *surau* was definitely already there, and he [Haji Muhammad Salleh] rebuilt it in about 1907 in the form we see more or less today. There were some renovations in the mosque actually, in 1984. Without visuals though, it's difficult to explain. From having four interior columns, it was expanded to six. So usually when I do some architectural tours for Singapore Heritage Festival, I would ask whether you can tell which are the two new columns. Some people can tell because if you look at the mouldings of the column capital, you can tell that the [newer] ones are a bit different. That was from 1984 as opposed to the 1907 original construction. ♦

This is an edited extract of the full interview. Scan the QR code to listen to the full episode on *BiblioAsia Podcast*, "The 160-Year-Old Tomb of Holy Man Habib Noh".

# New Books ON SINGAPORE HISTORY

## Creating Three Unique Singapore Laws: An Inside Story




By S. Jayakumar

Straits Times Press (2026), 243 pages
Call no. RSING 342.595703 JAY

Former Deputy Prime Minister and Law Minister S. Jayakumar provides behind-the-scenes Cabinet deliberations and constitutional amendments of three distinct Singaporean political institutions: the elected presidency, Group Representation Constituencies and the Non-Constituency Member of Parliament scheme.

## Lee Hsien Loong and Singapore

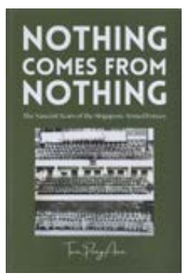



Edited by Gillian Koh, Chua Mui Hoong and Terence Ho

World Scientific Publishing Co Pte Ltd (2026), 359 pages
Call no. RSING 959.57053 LEE-[HIS]

Lee Hsien Loong was Prime Minister of Singapore for two decades, from 2004 to 2024. By examining his leadership and contributions, the chapters in this book recount how Lee led Singapore through several crises, such as the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, the Covid-19 pandemic, and the domestic challenges of income inequality and social stratification.

## Nothing Comes from Nothing: The Nascent Years of the Singapore Armed Forces

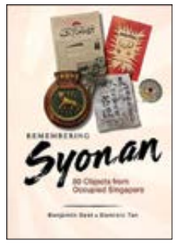



By Tan Peng Ann

Tan Peng Ann (2026), 151 pages
Call no. RSING 355.0095957 TAN

Retired army colonel Tan Peng Ann traces the early years of the Singapore Military Forces and the Singapore Volunteer Corps whose pioneers contributed to the Singapore Armed Forces. Included in the book are stories and rare photos of regulars and volunteers.

## Remembering Syonan: 80 Objects from Occupied Singapore

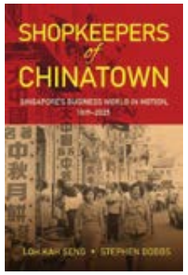



By Benjamin Seet and Dominic Tan

World Scientific Publishing Co Pte Ltd (2026), 208 pages
Call no. RSING 959.5703 SEE

Identity booklets, ration cards, bicycle registration cards, remittance letters, lottery tickets, permits for buying condensed milk or cloth, and even counterfeit Japanese Occupation currency (banana notes) are among the 80 curated artefacts featured in this publication.

## Shopkeepers of Chinatown: Singapore's Business World in Motion, 1819–2025

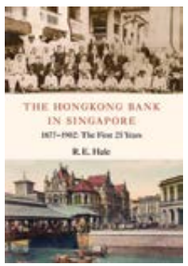



By Loh Kah Seng and Stephen Dobbs

Strategic Information and Research Development Centre (2026), 419 pages
Call no. RSING 959.57 LOH-[HIS]

Stories of shopkeepers, stallholders and other small businesses in the Chinatown of old take centre stage in this volume. The accounts cover a wide range of individuals and businesses, from storytellers to brothels, textile shops and tea merchants, starting with their origins to how they were affected by rapid development and gentrification in the wake of independence.

## The Hongkong Bank in Singapore 1877–1902: The First 25 Years




By Richard E. Hale

Marshall Cavendish Editions (2026), 228 pages
Call no. RSING 332.1095957 HAL

The Hongkong and Shanghai Banking Corporation opened its first branch in Singapore in December 1877. Drawing on bank archival documents and contemporaneous newspaper reports, Richard Hale traces the branch's first 25 years: its day-to-day operations, its issuance of bank notes and the occasional crises, from a banknote forgery to the theft of $272,000 from the bank's vault.



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