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biblioasia

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SINGAPORE COMICS

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Director's Note

Life, as you know, is a never-ending process of change. In that light, I would like to say hello to readers of *BiblioAsia* as the new head of the National Library.

While change might be the only constant in life, what hasn't changed is our commitment to delivering great reads to you, illuminating interesting nuggets of Singapore's history.

This issue's cover story is on comics in Singapore. Two mild-mannered librarians, Jacqueline Lee and Chiang Yu Xiang, take us on a fascinating tour of the history of local comics, which goes all the way back to the 1860s.

Still on the subject of fiction, if you are interested in monkey-man chimeras and dog kings, read Benjamin J.Q. Khoo's eye-opening essay on how Singapore and Southeast Asia are featured in European literature before the 19th century.

We don't have to go all the way to Europe to hear tall tales though. Pulau Ubin is home to the famous German Girl shrine, which has inspired plays and orchestral scores. But how much of the tragic story actually happened? After a few bumboat rides (and plenty of research), William L. Gibson uncovers the truth behind the tale.

From fiction, we turn to food. Khir Johari has recently published a book – *The Food of Singapore Malays* – and in this issue, we run a fascinating extract from that book on foraging. Durian lovers, in particular, will not want to miss what he has to say.

Moving on from what captivates our stomachs to what captivates the eye – we explore the shiny lure of gold. Foo Shu Tieng explains when and how the metal as both ornament and currency became popular in Southeast Asia and looks at what gold artefacts have been found by archaeologists in and around Singapore.

Finally, don't miss Andrea Kee's article on the rise of newly independent and assertive young women in Singapore during the interwar years; Alvin Tan's essay documenting the painstaking efforts to restore the statues of St Joseph's Church on Victoria Street; Athanasios Tsakonas's tribute to the contractors from Hui'an who helped build some of Singapore's famous landmarks; Zhuang Wubin's examination of three important pre-war photo exhibitions; and Rebecca Tan's deep dive into the history of Changi Airport.

There is, as you can see, no shortage of interesting things to read in this issue. Who says history is boring?

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On the cover
Comic strip from *Moving Forward* by Drewscape and published by the National Library Board, 2014. This book was nominated for an Eisner Award for Best Short Story in 2013.

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Image credits, clockwise from top left: *Tani of the Tigers*; William Gibson; Jimmy Yap; St Joseph's Church (Victoria Street) and Pixelmusica Pte Ltd; Law Soo Phye and Khir Johari.

04 Early comic book heroes from Singapore include Tani of the Tigers and the valiant Pluto-man.

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SINGAPORE COMICS

PANELS PAST AND PRESENT

With great power comes great responsibility. Jacqueline Lee and Chiang Yu Xiang use their power to give us an overview of the history of comics in Singapore.

Since the first comic book, *The Glasgow Looking Glass* – which poked fun at the fashion and politics of 19th-century Scottish society – was published in Glasgow in 1825,[1] comics have become more and more mainstream and popular. Comics these days are used to educate, entertain, lampoon, satirise and provoke.

Today, Singapore has a thriving local scene with homegrown comic book artists and writers. Life in the city-state is a fertile backdrop for many budding comic artists. As Sonny Liew, who wrote the award-winning graphic novel *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* (2015), notes: "Artists often write about what they know, so stories set in Singapore or with a local flavour are a natural step."[2]

When people talk about local comics today, what come to mind are popular comic series such as *Mr Kiasu* and Liew's *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye*. However, there are other works by Singaporean comic book artists that are equally well received and have won awards as well.

Jacqueline Lee is an Associate Librarian with the National Library, Singapore, who works with the Singapore and Southeast Asia collections. Her responsibilities include developing and promoting the Legal Deposit and Web Archive Singapore collections.

Chiang Yu Xiang is an Associate Librarian with the Public Libraries, Singapore. He has had the opportunity to meet and work with many creative Singaporean comic artists.

Award-winning Comics

The Eisner Awards are sometimes referred to as the comics industry's equivalent of the Academy Awards. In 2017, Liew's *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* won three Eisner Awards. However, this is not the only comic book to have attained international success. *Moving Forward* is a short comic by Drewscape (whose real name is Andrew Tan) that was nominated for an Eisner Award for Best Short Story in 2013.[3]

Another award-winning comic book is Koh Hong Teng's *Ten Sticks and One Rice* (2012) which clinched the third prize at the 7th International Manga Awards 2014 in Japan. In 2009, Koh had adapted Dave Chua's award-winning novel *Gone Case* into a two-volume comic book. (*Gone Case* is a coming-of-age story set in a public housing estate, which won the Singapore Literature Commendation Prize in 1996.)

Many popular comic books in Singapore today are autobiographical or semi-autobiographical. Lim Cheng Tju, an educator and an author and editor of comic books, notes that while autobiographical comics are considered an alternative genre in the United States, they are considered mainstream in Singapore. The majority of comic artists in Singapore are hobbyists

(Above) From left: Comic strips from *Bawang Puteh Bawang Merah, Tani of the Tigers, What If They Call Me Chicken?* and *The Antibiotic Tales*. *Images reproduced from Nora Abdullah, Bawang Puteh Bawang Merah (Singapura: Geliga, 1957). (From PublicationSG); Willie and Bio, Tani of the Tigers (Singapore: Keng Yan Leng, [19--]). (From PublicationSG); Singapore Anti-Narcotics Association, What If They Call Me Chicken? (Singapore: Singapore Anti-Narcotics Association, [1979]). (From PublicationSG); and Sonny Liew and Hsu Li Yang, The Antibiotic Tales (Singapore: Epigram, 2019). (From National Library, Singapore, Call no. RSING 615.329 LIE).*

and rely on government grants to fund their comic book projects.[4] With many comic artists choosing to tell personal stories or pursue passion projects instead of trying to appeal to the mass market, the autobiographical genre has become mainstream here.

Ten Sticks and One Rice is an example of this phenomenon. Produced by Koh Hong Teng together with Oh Yong Hwee, it is based on the creators' hawker parents. Another example is Troy Chin's *The Resident Tourist* series of graphic books. These recount interesting snippets of Chin's life in Singapore as a "tourist" following his return here after a nine-year stint in the United States.[5]

More recently, we have *Chronicles of a Circuit Breaker* by cartoonist Joseph Chiang. Between April and June 2020, Singapore entered a "circuit breaker" period where schools and most workplaces were closed to break the chain of infection resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic. In his book, Chiang documents life during the two months and summarises some key lessons that he learnt from the period.

Launchpads for Comics

Many comic books started out as regular comic strips in the dailies. From the *Straits Times*, there is *The House of Lim* by Cheah Sin Ann and *Chew on It!* by Lee Chee Chew that provide incisive social commentary on Singapore and poke fun at local foibles and idiosyncrasies.

Several 联合早报 (*Lianhe Zaobao*) comic strips have also been compiled into volumes. Ang Thiam Poh's 又是这一班 (*You Shi Zhe Yi Ban; It's This Class Again*) is a six-volume series about school life.[6] Chua Sin Yew's 新鲜阿婆 (*Xin Xian A Po; What's New With Grandma?*) is set in the local neighbourhood and looks at Singapore through the eyes of its geriatric protagonist, an incurable optimist.[7]

笑看城市人 (*Xiao Kan Cheng Shi Ren; Looking at City Folks*) by Wu Yu (whose real name is Goh Ting Cheng) is a collection of the best 500 strips from the series 朝九晚五 (*Zhao Jiu Wan Wu; Nine to Five*) in *Lianhe Zaobao*. Wu's comic strips focus on the daily struggles of white-collar workers. Meanwhile, 新加坡啦 (*Xin Jia Po La; Singapore Lah*) by Goh Kar Hoe (Wu Jiahe) comments on the headlines of the day.

In Singapore, veteran comic artists have readily taken newbies under their wings. Wee Tian Beng, the creator of the *Celestial Zone* comic series, has mentored several artists such as Yeo Hui Xuan for the *Dream Walker* series (2009–18), Clio Hui Kiri for *A Deal with Lucifer* (2015–17) and Shen Jiahui for *The Makeup Toolbox* (2018–19). In 2018, Johnny Lau, one of the creators of *Mr Kiasu*, worked with artist Rick Chen on the creation of a comic series titled *SupeRich*. The second volume of this comic book was published in 2020.[8]

There have also been efforts to raise the profile of Singaporean comic artists by promoting their works through platforms like Comix.sg, an online directory and archive of comic creators born and/or based in Singapore and their works. This directory was launched in April 2020.

In the following sections, we look at some major comic genres and introduce interesting comics available in the National Library's collections.

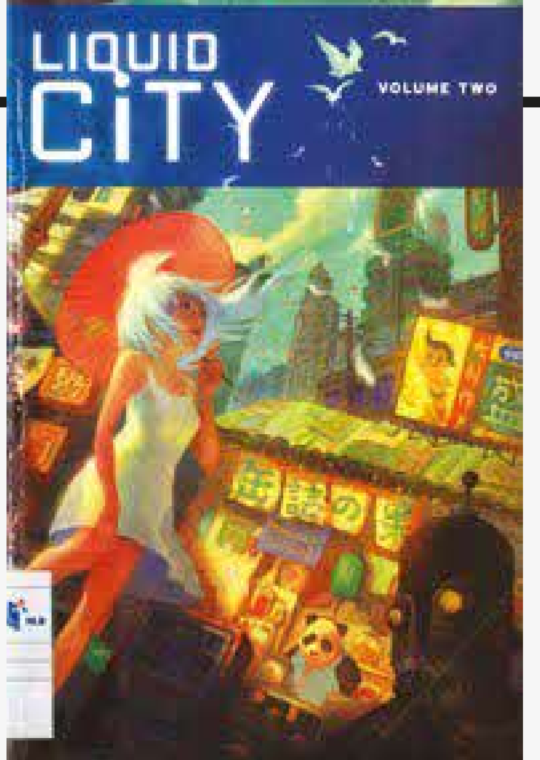
COMIC ANTHOLOGIES

Anthologies are a popular format for comics. A number of collections have been published over the years and these have helped to bring many artists to prominence.

PAST...

漫画同盟 (*Comics Alliance*) – a four-volume anthology series published in 1997, 1998 and 2001 – is a compilation of Chinese comics by various Singaporean comic artists. The books are edited by comic veterans Wee Tian Beng and Wee See Heng.

The *Liquid City* anthology, the brainchild of Sonny Liew, brought together a star-studded cast of artists who contributed short comics that have been compiled in three volumes. The series has received much attention, with volume two being nominated for Best Anthology Series at the 2011 Eisner Awards. Many of the participating artists went on to produce their own comic books. Otto Fong, a contributor to the anthology, said: "The experience of being in an anthology and working alongside other comics artists spurred my competitiveness."[9]



Volume two of the *Liquid City* anthology was nominated for Best Anthology Series at the 2011 Eisner Awards. *Image reproduced from Sonny Liew and Lim Cheng Tju, eds., Liquid City Volume Two (Berkeley, California: Image Comics, [2010]). (From National Library, Singapore, Call no. RSING 741.59 LIQ).*

PRESENT...

In 2015, when Singapore celebrated 50 years of independence, a comics publication titled *Our Months Together*, comprising 12 stories representing the 12 months in a year, was published. That same year also saw the publication of *Mr Kiasu in Singapore History*, which brought the titular character back to different periods in Singapore's history.

In 2020, the Difference Engine – an independent comics publisher based in Singapore – released its first anthology titled *Sound: A Comics Anthology*. The publication is a showcase of 13 comics by writers and illustrators from across Southeast Asia in response to sound.

SUPERHEROES

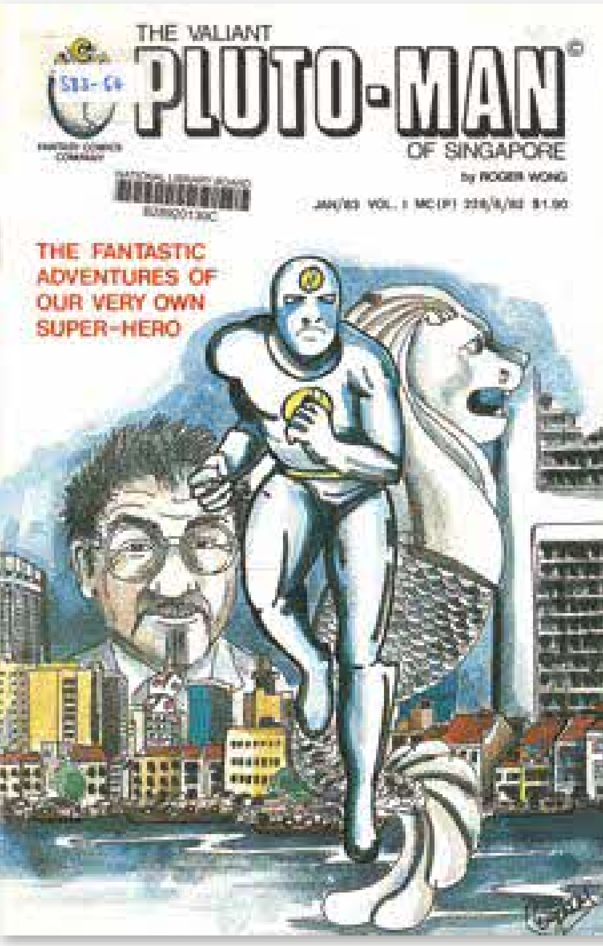
Mention comics and most people automatically associate it with characters such as Superman and Wonder Woman. Superman popularised the superhero genre and inspired others to create their own superheroes, including in Singapore.

PAST...

One of the earliest local comic book superheroes is Pluto-man, who swooped onto the scene in 1983. He is the eponymous hero in *The Valiant Pluto-man of Singapore* by Roger Wong. Aliens from the planet Pluto transform an ordinary man named Po Shan into Pluto-man by shooting plutonic electrons into his body. They instruct him to "use [his] might and power to fight crime, and help those in need". The aliens also give Po Shan a ring that aids in his transformation and which also doubles up as a weapon that can emit freeze rays.

With his newfound powers – super strength, super speed, flight and a "plutonic instinct" for fighting crime – Pluto-man goes on a crime-busting spree, including foiling a bank heist involving a fake Merlion.

In 1985, the Singapore Police Force unveiled Captain V as the mascot for the National Crime Prevention Council. Captain V's mission was to explain crime prevention to children and their role in the fight against crime.[10] At the launch, a 3.65-metre-tall model of Captain V stood atop a bus, which crashed through a paper wall at the Police Academy on Thomson Road to reveal Captain V himself.[11]



Pluto-man is endowed with super strength, super speed, flight and a "plutonic instinct" for fighting crime. *Image reproduced from Roger Wong, The Valiant Pluto-man of Singapore (Singapore: Fantasy Comics, 1983). (From PublicationSG).*

In 1987, Captain V was given his own comic book series when the first issue of *The Amazing Adventures of Captain V* was launched at Singapore's second comics convention (Comicon '87). Although Captain V combats crime using technology such as jet boots, he does not possess any inherent superpowers but has qualities such as vigilance and valour.

As a sidenote, while not strictly a superhero comic, among the older comics in the National Library is *Python Gang* by Ronald Wild. Written in English, Chinese and Malay, the comic revolves around police investigations into a criminal syndicate called the Python Gang. While it was printed in Singapore, there are no details about the publisher or year of publication. However, we do know that the comic has been in the National Library's Legal Deposit collection since 1963.

PRESENT...

The *Dim Sum Warriors* (点心侠; *Dian Xin Xia*) series is the creation of husband-and-wife duo Colin Goh and Woo Yen Yen, of the TalkingCock.com satirical website and the *Coxford Singlish Dictionary* fame.[12] The series features a colourful cast of familiar *dim sum* such as *cha shao bao* (roast pork bun), *xia jiao* (shrimp dumpling) and *shao mai* (pork and shrimp dumpling), imagined as kungfu warriors. The idea was conceived out of the couple's love for *dim sum* and kungfu movies.

The bilingual comic book was first published in 2012 and later adapted into a musical that toured major Chinese cities.[13] In 2019, the couple launched a spin-off storybook series for children as well as an educational app for children to learn Mandarin.[14]

Special mention should also be made of *Sacred Guardians* (2020) by Adyeel Djoeharie and illustrated by Alan Bay. Supported by the National Arts Council, this comic book is a prequel story to "Sacred Guardian Singa: A Singapore Superhero Project". Sacred Guardian Singa is a "*Tokusatsu* superhero character rooted in the real culture, history and heritage of Singapore and Southeast Asia".[15] (*Tokusatsu* is a Japanese term for live-action film or television drama that makes heavy use of special effects.)

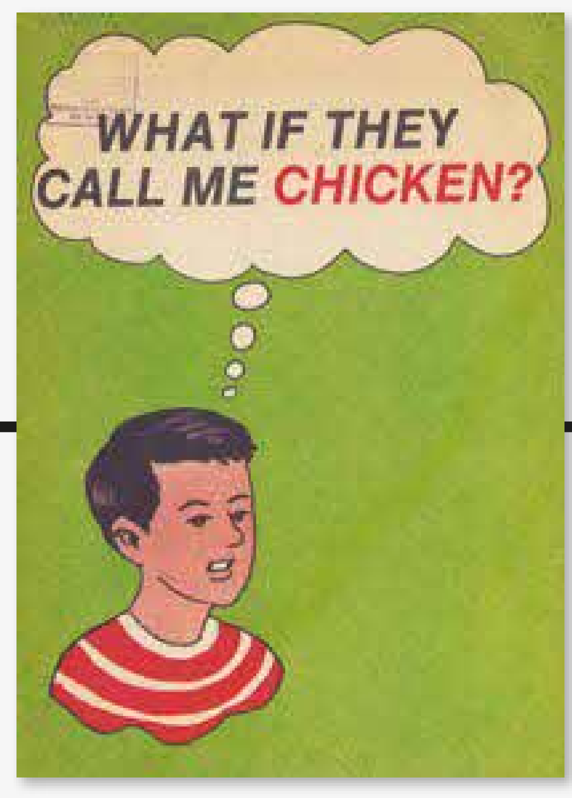
Set in the 7th century on the island of Tumasik (Temasek), the story follows the quest of the immortal scribe Dev who gathers a group of "sacred guardians" with special powers to fight an invasion by the evil demon king. In June 2021, *Sacred Guardians* became the first local comic book to be made into an audio drama.

INFORMATIONAL/EDUCATIONAL

Various organisations, companies and government agencies in Singapore have used comics as a medium to convey important information and messages in an effective yet highly entertaining manner.

One of the best examples is the poster on toilet etiquette found in public toilets across Singapore. Rendered in a comic strip format, these posters are a collaboration between the National Environment Agency and the cartoonist Lee Chee Chew as part of the Clean & Green Singapore campaign.[16]

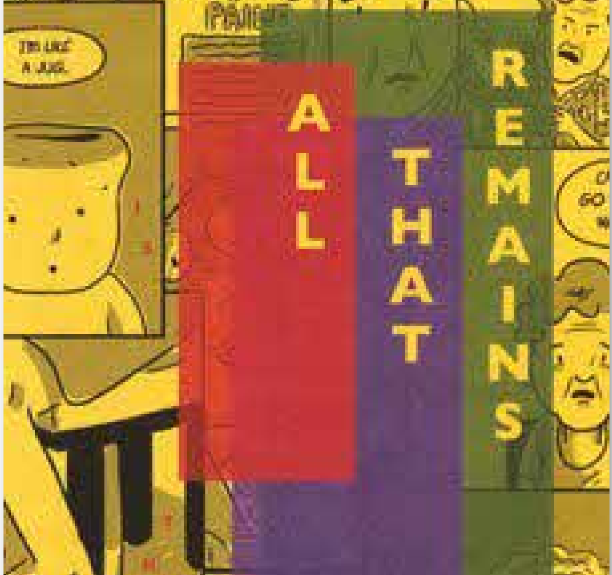
Another example of an educational comic is Otto Fong's popular "Sir Fong's Adventures in Science" comic series that impart scientific concepts in a fun and accessible way. Fong drew on his many years of experience as a secondary school science teacher for his comic series featuring a teacher who is a monkey and his student-rabbits.



PAST...

Published by the Singapore Anti-Narcotics Association in 1979, *What If They Call Me Chicken?* is a cautionary tale about the dangers of taking drugs. A schoolboy named Kok Meng is offered a cigarette laced with drugs. While his friends agree to try it, he turns it down and goes home and tells his parents what had happened. Kok Meng is called a "chicken" for saying no to drugs, but he is vindicated in the end as his friends are arrested and punished. The message is blunt and direct: taking drugs is wrong and will ruin your life.

This comic book is a cautionary tale about the dangers of taking drugs published by the Singapore Anti-Narcotics Association in 1979. *Image reproduced from Singapore Anti-Narcotics Association, What If They Call Me Chicken? (Singapore: Singapore Anti-Narcotics Association, [1979]). (From PublicationSG).*



This graphic novel deals with dementia. *Image reproduced from James Tan, All That Remains (Singapore: Lien Foundation: Alzheimer's Disease Association, Singapore, 2018). (From National Library, Singapore, Call no. RSING 616.83 TAN).*

PRESENT...

Graphic medicine is a genre in which comics are used as a medium for communicating about medicine and healthcare.[17] Examples of local comics in this category include *All That Remains* (2018) and *All Death Matters* (2020) about dementia, and end-of-life and palliative care respectively. Created by James Tan and funded by the Lien Foundation, the two comics aim to initiate "die-logues" about taboo topics such as death and illness and to start thinking about palliative care planning.

In *The Antibiotic Tales* (2019), Sonny Liew partnered infectious diseases physician Hsu Li Yang to create a cautionary tale of an apocalyptic future because of a general resistance to antibiotics.

MYTHS AND LEGENDS

Publisher Asiapac Books produces English comic titles on Chinese classics like the story of Mulan to get the younger generation interested in Chinese culture and literature.

There are also locally published comics inspired by local legends. In the Chinese comic, 女侠红头巾: 大战油鬼仔 (*The Samsui Sword*; 2021), the protagonist takes on the *orang minyak*, or oily man, a supernatural creature from Malay folklore who is coated in black oil and preys on young women. And in *The Secret of Redhill* (2015), a group of students go back in time to relive the legend of Bukit Merah.

PAST...

Published in 1949, *Tani of the Tigers* is an adventure comic and a Malayan spin on legends like *The Jungle Book* and *Tarzan*.[18] It tells the story of Tani, an orphaned child raised by tigers in the Pahang jungle of Malaya and who is able to converse with animals. An advertisement in the *Malaya Tribune* described it as being "drawn, written & published by Malayans" and that it "[excelled] any American comics published overseas!"[19]

Tani was perhaps inspired by the highly successful Tarzan novels and film adaptations which were all the rage at the time.

In the 1950s, one of the early publishing houses in Singapore that published comic books was Geliga. The comics were produced in Jawi and included Malay folktales and contemporary tales in Malay society.

Nora Abdullah, also known as Nek Norzarah Abdullah, was Geliga's first female cartoonist and also the first known Malay female cartoonist in Singapore and Malaya.[20] Born in Kelantan, Nora Abdullah was only 15 years old when she published her first comic book with Geliga in 1955, titled *Cik Siti Wan Kembang*.[21] Siti Wan Kembang is the legendary queen who ruled Kelantan in the 17th century. She was renowned for her wisdom and mystical powers, and rode to battle on horseback armed with a sword and accompanied by an army of female warriors.

(Right) This Malayan tale tells the story of Tani, an orphaned child raised by tigers in the Pahang jungle of Malaya and who is able to converse with animals. *Image reproduced from Willie and Bio, Tani of the Tigers (Singapore: Keng Yan Leng, [19--]). (From PublicationSG).*

(Below far left) Nora Abdullah, also known as Nek Norzarah Abdullah, was Geliga's first female cartoonist and also the first known Malay female cartoonist in Singapore and Malaya. *Courtesy of the Malay Heritage Centre.*

(Below left) An Indonesian folktale about a gentle and obedient village girl living with her evil stepsister and stepmother. *Image reproduced from Nora Abdullah, Bawang Puteh Bawang Merah (Singapura: Geliga, 1957). (From PublicationSG).*

Between 1955 and 1961, Nora Abdullah published at least 12 comic books with Geliga, including *Bawang Puteh Bawang Merah* (1957), which is based on an Indonesian folktale about a gentle and obedient village girl living with her evil stepsister and stepmother. The village girl eventually marries a prince.

PRESENT...

The Comics of Singapore Histories (COSH Studios) – a collective of artists and writers – has produced seven graphic novels on local history between 2017 and 2018, with funding from the National Heritage Board. These comics offer stories relating to Singapore history and heritage but with a speculative twist. From supernatural encounters in Bukit Brown Cemetery (*Final Resting Place*) to cooking chicken rice in a zombie apocalypse (*We'll Eat When We're Done*), COSH comics present Singapore stories in a creative and fun way, reinterpreting familiar situations in new and witty ways.

HISTORY AND POLITICS

Political cartoons tend to focus on issues of the day that matter to the man in the street. Many comic strips and single panel political commentaries in local newspapers have been published as a collection, such as *Hello Chok Tong, Goodbye Kuan Yew* (1991), which pokes fun at Singapore politicians as well as Singaporeans and their lifestyle, and *The Year in Cartoons* by the cartoonists of the *Straits Times* (published in 1997, 1998, 1999 and 2000).

Lim Cheng Tju notes that political cartoons in Singapore walk a fine line between a consensus-shaping role in the nation-building process and allowing cartoonists to exercise their creativity in the political space.[22]

PAST...

Straits Produce was first published in 1868, making it possibly the first comic to be published in Singapore. It aimed to provide "an abstract and brief chronicle of our time, with lines lightly touched in with pen and pencil, hitting off good-naturedly the chief features of the topics of the moment, and holding up the mirror of not unkindly humour to Straits men and Straits affairs".[23] It was started in response to then Governor of the Straits Settlements Harry Ord's financial policy, which it roundly criticised through caricature and cartoon.

In 1932, *Dream Awhile: Cartoons from Straits Produce Showing in Pictorial Form the Main Events in Local History* was published.[24] The volume was produced to commemorate 10 years of continuous publication of *Straits Produce* and is probably the earliest publication of local political cartoons in the National Library's collection.

A better-known example of a comic that tackles history and politics is Liu Kang's *Chop Suey*, which records the horrors of the Japanese Occupation in Singapore (1942–45). First published in 1946, and with reprints thereafter, *Chop Suey* is a four-volume publication (three in English and one in Chinese) of charcoal sketches and caricatures.[25] Liu and his friend, Zheng Zhenen, had collected stories from people who suffered during the Occupation, and these were depicted in the illustrations showing the various ways in which the Japanese tortured prisoners-of-war to force confessions. Liu's work remains a poignant record of wartime memories.[26]

(Above right) In 1923, Neil Malcolm, General Officer Commanding the Troops in the Straits Settlements, called Singapore "the centre of the empire" in a speech at the British naval base in Sembawang, inspiring this pictorial response of Britannia (the personification of Britain as a helmeted female warrior holding a trident and shield) using a compass to draw a circle on a map with Singapore at the centre. *Image reproduced from Dream Awhile: Cartoons from Straits Produce Showing in Pictorial Form the Main Events in Local History (Singapore: Printers, 1932). (From National Library, Singapore, Call no. RCLOS 959.5 STR-[RFL]).*

(Right) Sharp pencils being poked into the ears of a prisoner as a form of torture. *Image reproduced from Liu Kang, Chop Suey, vol. 1 (Singapore: Eastern Art Co., 1946). (From National Library, Singapore, Call no. RRARE 959.5106 CHO; Accession no. B02901745F).*

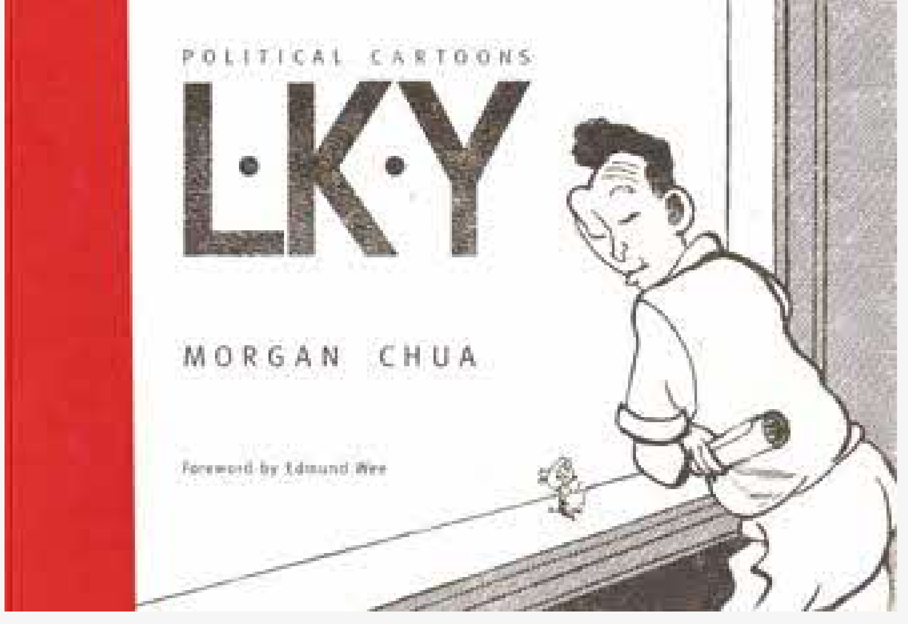
PRESENT...

In conjunction with the 90th anniversary of *Lianhe Zaobao* in 2013, Singapore Press Holdings organised an exhibition titled "A Collection of our Shared Memories", featuring comics published in the *Sin Chew Jit Poh*, *Nanyang Siang Pau* and *Lianhe Zaobao* Chinese newspapers between 1929 and 2013. In 2015, more than 100 of these comics were compiled and published into a book, offering a glimpse into the daily lives of people in the past. Many of the works are a form of social commentary – reflecting the changing social, political and economic conditions in Singapore over the decades.

Sonny Liew's *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye*, while difficult to place in a specific genre, can be argued to be a work based on Singapore's history, even as it modifies and retells it. The story, which provides an alternative lens into Singapore's mid-20th-century history through the eyes of a fictitious comic artist, has been interpreted by critics as metafiction, an allegory or a satire of the "Singapore story", and a homage to comics. A year earlier, in 2016, when the comic won the Singapore Literature Prize, it earned the distinction of being the first graphic novel ever to clinch the award.[27]

With Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew's passing in 2015, several biographical works in comic book form were published about him. These include Morgan Chua's *L.K.Y. Political Cartoons*, which covers Lee's political career over the decades, and Yoshio Nabeta's *manga, The LKY Story: Lee Kuan Yew, the Man Who Shaped a Nation* and *The Story of LKY*.

Morgan Chua's cartoons trace Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew's political career over the decades. *Image reproduced from Morgan Chua, L.K.Y. Political Cartoons, (Singapore: Epigram Books, [2014]). (From National Library Singapore, Call no. RSING 959.5704092 CHU).*



Promoting Comics at the National Library Board

Besides building a collection of comics, the National Library Board (NLB) has hosted various comics events to increase the profile of local comic creators and spark interest in creating comics.

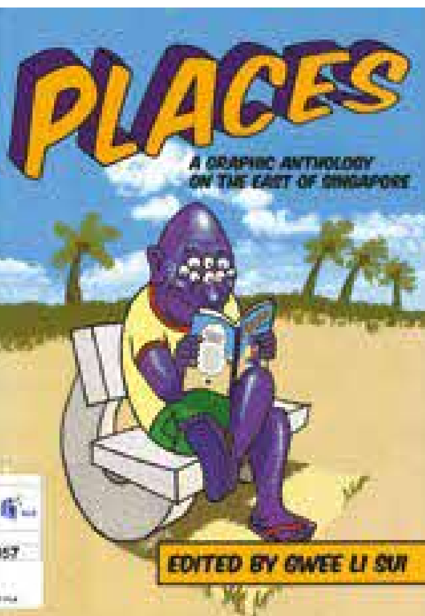
In 2005, NLB hosted the first Comix Jam at the National Library Building, followed by the 24-hour Comics Day Challenge at Bukit Merah Public Library in 2012 and a 12-hour variation at library@harbourfront in 2019.[28] These were held in the "draw-a-thon" format that allowed participants an uninterrupted period of time to create comics (for the 24-hour Comics Day Challenge, participants had to create 24 pages of comics within 24 hours).

NLB has also hosted longer comics workshops where participants underwent a comprehensive editorial and mentorship process of comic creation, with peer review of comic drafts. An extension of the 24-hour Comics Day Challenge, the first Panelgraph (the authoring of stories using comic-book panels) sessions were held at Toa Payoh Public Library from 2015 to 2016. The comics created during the sessions were compiled as digital issues and made available on the Panelgraph website.[29]

In 2016, Tampines Regional Library was the venue for Places, a 13-week art co-creation workshop organised as part of the Community Arts & Culture Nodes initiative of the National Arts Council. Under the guidance of Gwee Li Swee – poet, graphic artist and author of several books, including the graphic novel *Myth of the Stone* – participants created comics with a select few compiled into an anthology.

The 24-hour Comics Day Challenge held at Bukit Merah Public Library in 2012.

A compilation of comics created for Places, a 13-week art co-creation workshop, in 2016. *Image reproduced from Gwee Li Sui, ed., Places: A Graphic Anthology on the East of Singapore (Singapore: National Library Board, Singapore, [2016]). (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RSING 741.59597 PLA).*



In the same year, Central Public Library played host to Speech Bubble, a month-long event comprising talks, workshops and an exhibition showcasing artefacts, books and original artworks from comic artists. Conceptualised by Sonny Liew and Lim Cheng Tju, the objective of the event was to celebrate Singapore comics and their rich and colourful history.[30]

NLB is also a venue sponsor of the Singapore Original Comics Festival, a month-long annual comic-based event that focuses on creating original content by Singaporeans. Organised by the Comics Society (Singapore) since 2015, the festival hopes to uncover new local talents and present new comic works. In 2019, a comics exhibition, a book launch and a panel discussion were held at Jurong Regional Library.[31]

Gwee Li Sui's "How to Fall in Love with Classics", a popular series of lectures on literary classics organised by NLB, focused on graphic novels in the 6th instalment in April 2020. One of the graphic novels discussed was *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* (the recorded lecture is available online).[32]

With all these ongoing efforts and initiatives by comic groups and societies in Singapore as well as various government grants, the comics scene is set to take off, or as Superman might say, to go "up, up and away". ♦

The writers would like to thank Lim Cheng Tju for reviewing this essay. His essays on comics have been published in *BiblioAsia* Vol. 7, issue 4 (March 2012) and Vol. 9, issue 3 (Oct–Dec 2013). For a list of the comics featured in this article, please scan this QR code.

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30 Nur Asyiqin Mohamad Salleh, "Singapore Comics Celebrated at Month-long Event Speech Bubble," *Straits Times*, 2 September 2016, https://www.straitstimes.com/lifestyle/arts/comics-in-singapore-pack-a-pow.
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UNRAVELLING THE MYSTERY OF UBIN'S GERMAN GIRL SHRINE

What is the truth behind the German girl shrine on Pulau Ubin?
William L. Gibson investigates the history of Pulau Ubin to uncover the origin of the tale.

The German girl shrine, located on the southern coast of Pulau Ubin, has captured the popular imagination in a way that few other shrines in Singapore have. Apart from news stories, the shrine is the subject of documentaries, a play and a telemovie based on that play. It has even inspired a six-minute piece written for a Chinese orchestra.

According to local folklore, the shrine memorialises a German girl who is believed to have died on the island. At the outbreak of World War I, the girl was supposedly living with her parents on a coffee plantation on Ubin. When British soldiers came to capture her family, she bolted, only to stumble off a cliff to her death. After the war, her parents returned to look for their missing daughter, but due to communication difficulties, were unable to find any trace of her. Over time, a simple shrine was built at her gravesite and her spirit is worshipped to this day.

While fascinating, a close examination of the account reveals a number of major inconsistencies that make this story unlikely. Studying the history of the shrine shines a light on the practice of folk religion on Pulau Ubin and the Singapore-Johor region, and also demonstrates the power of the mass media to simultaneously generate, preserve and distort historical memory.

Dr William L. Gibson is an author and researcher based in Southeast Asia since 2005. Gibson's book, *Alfred Raquez and the French Experience of the Far East, 1898–1906* (2021), a biography of journalist, Alfred Raquez, is published by Routledge as part of its Studies in the Modern History of Asia series. His articles have appeared in *Signal to Noise*, PopMatters.com, *The Mekong Review*, *Archipel*, *History and Anthropology*, the *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient* and *BiblioAsia*, among others.

Chia Yeng Keng's Account

The best-known version of the German girl story today is largely the product of a Teochew man named Chia Yeng Keng (谢衍庆), born in 1928 and a resident of Ubin since 1931 (he died in the mid-2000s). Chia lived near the shrine and claimed to be an authority on it: between 1987 and 2004, he gave no fewer than seven separate interviews that appeared in English and Chinese newspapers, was featured in a documentary film and even gave an oral history interview deposited with the National Archives of Singapore.[1]

In his first print interview in 1987, Chia told the 新明日报 (*Xin Ming Ri Bao*; *Shin Min Daily News*) newspaper that the girl was of Dutch-German ancestry. Her parents were from Holland and the family lived on a coffee plantation on the western side of the island. However, Holland was neutral during World War I and the British did not intern Dutch citizens. In subsequent interviews, Chia dropped the Dutch ancestry and merely said that the family was German.

Later, Chia freely admitted that he had no way of knowing if any part of the story was true. When pressed for details in an oral history interview in 2004, he protested: "I was born more than 10 years after the death of the German girl so I don't know anything about her."

According to Chia, the story had been related to him by a village elder he addressed as Uncle Foon Da, a man from China who had lived on Ubin since the 1880s. Uncle Foon Da, however, was not an eyewitness to the events himself. He told young Chia that he did not personally see the body of the girl but had only been told of the story by others.

So, how much of the German girl story holds up to scrutiny? And what can it tell us about the history of Pulau Ubin?

Of Coffee Plantations and Mysterious Germans

There was indeed, at one point, a coffee estate on Pulau Ubin. It was opened in 1880 by Thomas Heslop Hill, a British planter who grew both coffee and cacao on 150 acres (around 61 hectares) of land.[2] Pulo Obin Estate, as he called it, was located on the western end of the island, exactly where Chia said the German coffee plantation had been located.

D. Brandt and Co. was the trading agency that represented the estate and owned an interest in it as well. The company had been founded in 1878 by Germans Daniel Brandt and Herman Muhlinghaus.[3] These names were uncovered in the early 2000s and subsequently presented as proof that there were Ger-

(Facing page and top right) As part of the renovation to the German girl shrine in 2015, a new statue of the German girl now rests beside the urn on the altar. She holds a sprig of coffee berries in her hand. The Barbie doll is enclosed in a plastic case. Note the mirrors and cosmetics left as offerings. Photos taken in 2021. *Courtesy of William L. Gibson.*

(Below) Chia Yeng Keng (谢衍庆), shown in the newspaper clipping, is the primary informant of the German girl story, giving seven interviews over 17 years. Accompanying this interview is the earliest known photograph of the altar at the German girl shrine. *Image reproduced from 联合晚报 [Lianhe Wanbao], 14 July 1990, 2. (From NewspaperSG).*

奇庙

马来人和华人
拜德国少女神

开场白

mans living on Ubin at the beginning of World War I. The records, however, tell a different story.

According to land registry documents, Brandt purchased the land from Hill in 1892 for $13,333.33, but sold it in 1907.[4] The local coffee industry was in freefall by that time. The coffee leaf rust disease caused by the virus *Hemileia vastatrix* spread to Malaya around the turn of the 20th century and promptly decimated plantations already fighting a boom in Brazilian coffee that was depressing the global market. Across the region, coffee was replaced with cash crops like rubber. In 1910, the Pulau Ubin coffee estate was bought by the British-owned Serangoon Rubber Company, which replaced the coffee plants with rubber trees.[5]

In 1914, when the war broke out, *The Singapore and Straits Directory* listed the Pulau Ubin estate as the only plantation remaining on the island, occupying 789 acres with 352 acres of rubber and coconut under cultivation. The estate manager was F.W. Riley, an Anglo-Irishmen, and no women were recorded as living on Ubin in the "Ladies Directory" in that year.[6]

In a nutshell, there was no coffee plantation in operation on Pulau Ubin in 1914 and no evidence to suggest a German family had been living there at the time. However, based on what we know about how the British authorities treated Germans in Singapore in 1914, we can speculate what their fate might have been, had they existed.

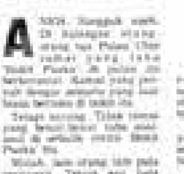
After war was declared on 14 August 1914, all German and Austrian nationals in the Straits Settlements were required to swear not to undertake "hostile acts against Great Britain". The British were initially hesitant to intern German families who had been living in Singapore for decades and were pillars of the business and social world, but after Germany began to intern enemy subjects, the British decided to respond in kind.[7]

On 23 October 1914, all German and Austrian males in Singapore were ordered to report at the P&O Wharf at New Harbour (now Keppel Harbour) the following afternoon at 2 pm, to be taken to the quarantine facilities on St John's Island. Married men were allowed to return to mainland Singapore on 25 October for "a few hours". Within the week, they were transferred to the army barracks at Tanglin, which had hastily been converted into a prisoner camp – over 200 men were held there. By 28 October, it was announced that German women and children would also be removed from Singapore and allowed to relocate to "any place not within ten miles of the sea or a navigable river" within the Federated Malay States or to a neutral country.[8]

These facts considerably complicate the German girl narrative. First, there was no raid leading to the girl's untimely death. Second, the girl's mother (or perhaps *amah*, or nanny, if there had been no mother) would have stayed with her when her father left, and her father would have returned home the following day, at least for a few hours. If the girl had indeed gone missing, the alarm would have been raised immediately. Yet there is no trace of reports of a missing European girl in the newspapers of the time.

Finally, there is no satisfactory explanation as to why the German girl's family was unable to find her when the war ended four years later. Chia suggested that communication difficulties presented an insurmountable barrier, but this seems unlikely given that the family would have had access to interpreters. The story of a family showing up to look for their missing daughter on Pulau Ubin is a sensational one that would surely have made it into the press, yet no such story appeared in the newspapers of the day.

In 1985, an article in the *Berita Minggu* carried a report about the grave of a princess from Java that was located on a hill on Pulau Ubin. Accompanying the piece is the earliest known image of the building now called the German girl shrine. *Image reproduced from Berita Minggu, 27 October 1985, 11. (From NewspaperSG).*



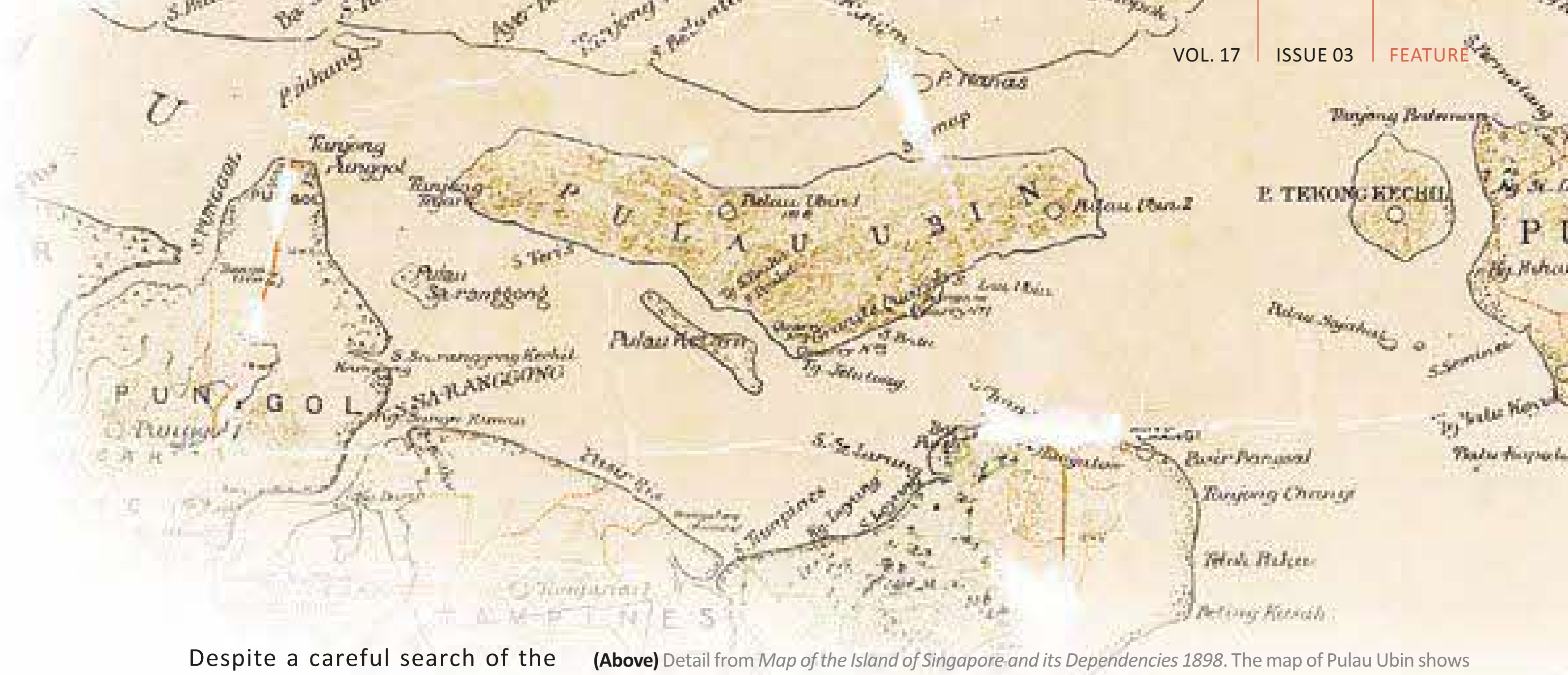
Cerita Puteri Jawa di 'Bukit Puaka'

Oleh SAADON ISMAIL

Larikan diri

MENURUT DONGENGNYA, BATU YG BERBENTUK BADAN WANITA INI DIKATAKAN BERASAL DARI MAYAT PUTERI JAWA.

"Disebabkan Puteri Jawa itu adalah seorang bangsawan, maka mayatnya dikebumikan di puncak bukit. Sebelum makam itu dirobohkan, ia menjadi batu keras berbentuk seorang wanita yang sedang terbaring."



(Above) Detail from *Map of the Island of Singapore and its Dependencies 1898*. The map of Pulau Ubin shows the names "Tanjong Puaka" and "Sungei Puaka" across from Ketam Island near where the shrine is located today. *Survey Department Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

(Bottom) "Termites made a tomb for her": a termite mound that looks like a recumbent figure in East Coast Park, 2021. *Courtesy of William L. Gibson.*

Despite a careful search of the archives, there is no historical evidence to substantiate the German girl story. This leads us to the question: whose shrine is worshipped on Pulau Ubin today?

The Keramat of Pulau Ubin

Intriguingly, the first newspaper article to describe the German girl shrine makes no mention of Germans at all.

In 1985, an article in the Malay newspaper *Berita Minggu* mentioned the grave of a princess from Java that was located on a hill on the island. She had "fled to Pulau Ubin over one hundred years ago", perhaps because of a broken heart or to avoid an arranged marriage. In another version, she was "cared for" by a wealthy *tongkang* (bumboat or lighter) builder. When she died, her body "became a hard rock shaped like a woman lying down". She was said to later haunt the hill as a *hantu puteri*, or ghost princess, seducing a quarry worker from Johor who met a terrible fate.[9]

The writer, Saadon Ismail, explained that quarrying work on the hill required the grave be removed and a shrine was then built by the seashore nearby, guarded by "a group of Chinese who feel it needs to be maintained".[10] The article concludes with the earliest known photograph of the shrine. The writer, however, cited no source for his information.

A guidebook published in 2007 noted that there was a *datuk keramat* on Ubin where a "holy woman" had been buried. "The back of the shrine has an oracle 'eye'," noted the guidebook, "which legend says will blink at votaries, promising to grant their wishes".[11] (In Malay, *datuk* is a term of respect. Among other things, it is used as a title for a person in a high position. A *datuk keramat* refers to a shrine that is worshipped and associated with earth, tree or rock spirits, though it could also be the spirit of someone who has departed.)

Often, the sites where these *datuk* spirits reside are worshipped by Malays as a *keramat*. Chinese migrants, familiar with earth spirits, adapted such *keramat* to their own traditions, progressively Sinicising them over time. Known as *datuk kong*, such shrines still appear by roadsides across Singapore. When quarrying was a major industry in Singapore, *datuk kong* shrines were often found nearby, so workers could ask for protection in the hazardous conditions, and one remains on Ubin, close to the German girl shrine.

The German girl shrine, too, once stood near a quarrying operation. According to Chia, the shrine was originally located on Ong Lye Sua, once a 190-foot-high (57.9 m) granite hill that has since been completely removed. It is now the deep pond of Ketam Quarry.[12]

In another account by Ahmad bin Kassim, who has lived on the island since the early 1940s, the grave belonged to an Indian Muslim craftsman from Johor who travelled to Ubin to work at the quarry. He died there and was buried on the granite hill – a story that lacks as much historical evidence as the German girl tale (for the record, Pak Ahmad had been told that the German girl fell off a cliff into the sea and had no grave).[13]

In an email to the author in March 2021, Pak Ahmad said that the *keramat* was a mound of dirt shaped like a *mayat*, a corpse. He was told the mound was

once covered by a copper sheet and had *batu nisan*, or grave markers, but these had since been stolen. What was left was *kelambu kuning*, a yellow netting traditionally used to denote graves as *makam*, or sacred. Pak Ahmad also recalled that there were 99 steps to reach it, a significant number in Islamic architecture as there are 99 holy names for Allah.

The assistant caretaker of the shrine, Ah Cheng, recalled that the shrine was accessed by a flight of steep and narrow stairs. At the top, he remembered an "unusually curved rock formation that embraced what remained of the German girl in its alcove, sheltering her from the elements with the help of a simple mosquito net, draped over her grave".[14]

Madam Tan, a resident of Pulau Ubin born around 1938, recalled red brick steps leading to the shrine. She said that Chinese, Indians and Malays all worshipped there and so as to not offend the Muslim worshippers, no pork was offered, only chicken and fruits. She did not know who was buried there, only that her mother would take her up the hill to worship on the first and 15th day of each lunar month.[15] Ah Teck, a longtime taxi driver on the island, was told that 108 steps led to the shrine, the number being significant in Taoist-Buddhist cosmology.[16]

Chia also said that the shrine had become popular with gamblers by the time he was visiting it as a boy in the 1930s. Nearly a century later, this practice has not diminished as the shrine is still regularly visited by punters seeking luck in the 4D lottery (where people place a wager on a four-digit number that is matched against winning numbers).

Ants and Termites

If the shrine had indeed been built over a grave, who could have been buried there? The following accounts offer some clues.

In 1990, Chia told the *Lianhe Wanbao* newspaper that when plantation workers found the German girl's body, she looked like a dead ant.[17] In a subsequent 1993 magazine article, he said the body was "covered with ants" so the workers "threw soil over the remains".[18] Ah Cheng the assistant caretaker related in a 2017 interview that when the girl was discovered, she was "covered by a lot of ants and mud and was in a human body shape".[19]

In another version of the story related by Ong Siew Fong, another long-term resident on the island and caretaker of the Wei Tuo Fa Gong Temple, the girl did not fall to her death but hid in a cave or outcrop at the top of the hill. When the villagers went to look for her, they discovered that "termites had made a tomb for her" and decided not to disturb the mound, a point that Chia also made in a 2003 interview.[20] (Termites are known as white ants in Chinese.)

A termite mound being worshipped in Penang, 2021. In this region, it is not uncommon for termite mounds to become the site of *datuk keramat*, with devotees worshipping the spirit in the mound after having good luck with lottery numbers. *Courtesy of Lee Chow-Yang.*

In this region, it is not uncommon for termite mounds to become the site of *datuk keramat*, with devotees worshipping the spirit in the mound after having good luck with lottery numbers. It is believed that the mounds of red and black ants bring bad luck, while those with white ants, or termites, bring good luck. These colours also correspond to the *datuk* spirits who reside in the mounds.[21]

This last point offers a possible origin for the German girl in the termite mound on the hill. The white *datuk* spirit of this shrine, gendered female due to the shape of the mound, became a "white" girl, her backstory embellished as a means of explaining how she came to rest in the ground on Ubin.

What can be said with certainty is that when the mound was subsequently excavated, no skeleton of a teenage girl or otherwise was found.

Quarries and Urns

In the 1920s, the Ong Lye Sua granite hill was bought by entrepreneur Wee Cheng Soon, who established quarrying works there. After Wee died in the late 1940s, the land was sold to the New Asia Granite Company; two decades later, it was acquired by Aik Hwa Granite.

Aerial photographs show that Ong Lye Sua was almost completely levelled by 1969. Within a few years, Aik Hwa would remove the land on which the shrine was located and agree to move it to a new home. Unfortunately, there is no record of this event in Aik Hwa's company archives. While the exact date is not known, Chia suggested 1974, which seems plausible.

Aik Hwa built a clapboard hut near the sea and painted it yellow – the traditional colour of *datuk kong* shrines, reflecting their Malay roots – and hired a Taoist priest to conduct rites. Ong Siew Fong recalled that it was this priest who labelled the spirit as a "datuk maiden" (拿督姑娘) to denote its female gender. He also named it Yatikakak. Yati, a Malay name with Sanskrit roots, is also one of the holy names of the Hindu goddess Durga, the protective mother, while *kakak*, which means "elder sister" in Malay, is an honorific for older women.

Aik Hwa also hired workers to exhume the mound of the original shrine. In the 1987 新明日报 (*Xin Ming Ri Bao*) article, Chia said they found a metal cross and some coins. However, in his 2004 oral history interview, Chia said the man employed to dig up the grave "refused to say anything", that he "talked nonsense" and did not "believe in facts". When the mound was opened, a "shape of a person" could still be seen, but aside from a few strands of hair, nothing else was found. Her bones, he repeated three times, had "become ash".

Chin Tiong Hock, nicknamed "Bala", had helped with the exhumation. His wife, Ong Siew Fong, recalled that the men found some "finger bones",[22] although these could possibly have been chicken bones from prior offerings. They also found a one-cent coin from British North Borneo dated 1890.[23]

The hair, cross and other coins were placed in an urn on the altar of the new shrine – or maybe not. In one interview, Chia claimed that the cross was taken by the men Aik Hwa Granite had hired to dig the grave. In 1990, Chia peered inside the urn "to verify that the hair and iron cross were there", and he was shocked to find it empty. He later offered an implausible tale that the original urn had in fact been stolen and replaced with an exact replica, a story that has now become a part of the German girl lore.

Likely, though, the urn – a symbolic vessel to hold the *datuk* spirit – was probably always empty. A study of temporary shrines that have displaced older *datuk keramat* on construction sites in Malaysia points out that empty "Chinese-style urns, believed to embody the keramat spirit", are commonly placed on the altar by Chinese companies that own the construction sites.[24]

In the late 1980s, Pulau Ubin underwent a transformation as quarrying operations wound down and thousands of workers departed. Within a decade, only a few hundred villagers would remain; by the late 1990s, the little German girl shrine was nearly forgotten. It was not mentioned in a 1998 survey of recreational use of the island that included religious and historical sites.[25] A visitor in 1998 found it sorely neglected.[26] The old caretaker had passed away and no one was looking after the shrine.

That situation was about to change dramatically.

Haunted Barbie

In 2000, the story of the German girl appeared in the coffee-table book *Pulau Ubin: Ours to Treasure,* written by nature enthusiast Chua Ee Kiam.[27] The tale prompted film student Ho Choon Hiong to shoot a 17-minute documentary about the shrine (prominently featuring Chia). The documentary was shown at the 2001 Singapore International Film Festival, inspiring dramatist Lim Jen Erh to write *Moving Gods*, a play staged by The Theatre Practice in 2003. Ho directed and produced the play as a telemovie of the same name, which was broadcast on television in 2004.

The shrine was also featured in an episode of the *Site and Sound* documen-

The Ketam Quarry pond on Pulau Ubin, 2021. This was formerly Ong Lye Sua, the 190-foot-high (57.9 m) granite hill that has since been completely removed. *Courtesy of William L. Gibson.*

tary television series in 2004, hosted by anthropologist and architectural historian Julian Davison.[28] The following year, it was discussed in Jonathan Lim's *Between Gods and Ghosts* (2005), a book about Singaporean folklore.[29]

In his 2006 book, *Final Notes from a Great Island*, popular author Neil Humphreys wrote about a red and yellow sign in English, German and Chinese on Ubin that pointed to the direction of the "German Girl shrine". Humphreys had taken the information of the shrine from a 2003 *Straits Times* article he found tacked to the wall of the shrine. (The story was written by ethnomusicologist Tan Shzr Ee, who had composed the soundtrack for the *Moving Gods* telemovie).[30]

Not long after, it was reported that an unnamed Ubin islander had a strange dream three nights in a row. A foreign girl had shown him the way to a Barbie doll in a store and asked him to bring it to the "*Datuk*'s Girl's Temple" on Ubin. Sceptically, the man followed the instructions and was surprised to find a Barbie doll that matched the doll in his dream exactly.[31] The doll was placed on the altar beside the urn, perfectly, if coincidentally, timed with the rise of social media.

This "haunted Barbie" of Pulau Ubin proved digital catnip to journalists, bloggers and ghost chasers. Following the cut-and-paste logic of online content creation, very few bothered to do much fact checking; through sheer repetition, the story recounted by the long-dead Uncle Foon Da to Chia in the 1930s had become the official version of the German girl tale.

The Sinicisation of the original *datuk keramat* would soon be cemented in the structure itself. In 2015, a down-on-his-luck Singaporean businessman travelled to the Goh Hong Cheng Sern Temple in Batu Pahat, Johor, where monks told him to build a shrine for the deity on Ubin.[32] The wooden shrine was demolished and a slightly larger brick structure with granite cladding, a tiled roof and ceramic bamboo window bars was erected in its place.

The German girl shrine as it appeared in 1999, prior to its renovation in 2015 and becoming a well-known attraction on Pulau Ubin. *Image reproduced from Chua Ee Kiam, Pulau Ubin: Ours to Treasure (Singapore: Simply Green, 2000), 47. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RSING 333.78095957 CHU).*

After an extensive renovation in 2015, the 12-square-metre German girl shrine on Pulau Ubin is today a slightly larger brick structure with granite cladding, a tiled roof and ceramic bamboo window bars, 2021. *Courtesy of William L. Gibson.*

A wooden sign above the entrance to the shrine has the words *Berlin Heiligtum* engraved on it, meaning "Berlin Sanctuary" in German, beneath the date 1896, a year mistaken for the commencement of World War I. A three-foot-tall (around 90 cm) statue of the German girl now sits on the altar beside the urn and the Barbie doll, a beatific smile on her face and a sprig of coffee berries grasped in her hand.

Popular fascination with the German girl story shows no signs of abating. In 2018, Singaporean composer Emily Koh wrote a piece for the Chinese orchestra titled "Fräulein Datuk".[33] More recently, in 2021, *History Mysteries*, a television show hosted by local actor Adrian Pang, featured an episode about the shrine.[34]

Punters seeking a fortune do not care if it is the spirit of a German girl or something else: so long as it brings good luck, they will continue to descend on Ubin and worship there.

As for myself, I first chanced upon the shrine in 2006 and continue to visit it frequently to this day. On a recent trip, I noticed a termite mound outside the wall directly behind the altar. Despite all the changes over the decades, perhaps the old *datuk* spirit still lingers around the place. ♦

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The Role of Foraging in Malay Cuisine

Foraging for food in the hills, the forests and the coastline has been carried out by the Malays for centuries, as **Khir Johari** tells us.

The *Sulalat al-Salatin*[1] (*Genealogy of Kings*), better known as *Sejarah Melayu* or *Malay Annals*, tells us that when Sang Nila Utama – the Sumatran prince of Palembang who sired the Malay kings of old Singapura – landed on the island of Temasek around 1299,[2] the shores were at a dry low tide (*ayer tohor*). We know this because the tale reports that the first thing his men did after landing was to forage along the beach. Here Sang Nila Utama is referred to by his title Sri Tri Buana, which means "Lord of Three Worlds" (the upper realm of the gods, the world of humans and the underworld):

> "And when [the men] reached the shore, the ship was brought close in and Sri Tri Buana went ashore with all the ship's company and they amused themselves with collecting all manner of shellfish and seaweeds."[3]

This gives us an idea of just how embedded the practice of foraging for food was for coastal Malays. In fact, man has been foraging for food since time immemorial.

Foraging, requiring little to no specialised tools and demanding less physical exertion than agriculture and hunting, is likely the oldest means of acquiring sustenance. But gathering food from wild sources has not been abandoned entirely today. Certainly not in the Malay world, where foraging – or *meramu* (to collect all sorts of materials) – has survived well into modern times. The verb *meramu* is a prefixed form of the root *ramu*. The Malay word for ingredients – as in those needed in a recipe – is *ramuan*: things which have been gathered.

The Gems Around Us

The Malays foraged in multiple ecological domains and habitats. This emerged from their well-oriented understanding of local geography, which was made legible by the use of specific nomenclature. They identified different types of terrestrial features: there were *padang* (plains), *cangkat* (knolls), *bukit* (hills), *lembah* (valleys) and *gunung* (mountains). But even flat land itself was differentiated based on elevation, with *darat* (upland) distinguished from *baruh* (lowland). Forests, or *hutan*, were classified as either *rimba* (virgin forest) or *belukar* (secondary forest). Rivers were divided into *hulu* (upstream) and *hilir* (downstream). Freshwater swamps, or *paya*, were different from mangrove swamps, or *bakau*. Formations on the coast were also differentiated into *telok* (bays and coves) and *tanjong* (capes). At sea, the Malays identified *terumbu* or *beting* (patch reefs), *karang* (coral reefs) and *busung* (mudflats).

On land, the Malays foraged in the spacious yards around their rural homes, in the *belukar* near their villages as well as along trails that connected them. Much could be made of the leaves, shoots, stems and roots found therein. In the dish known as *botok-botok*, fish steak is marinated with spices and infused with flavourful foliage and herbs before being wrapped in banana leaves and steamed. Flowers could also be gathered for consumption. The flowers of the durian tree – prior to their fruiting – were often collected and enjoyed as *ulam* (a dish of raw vegetables eaten with rice).

Besides foliage, flowers, shoots, roots, stems and tubers, the forests also occasionally turned up rare extravagances, like wild honey. A person skilled in the dangerous task of extracting honey (*manisan lebah*, literally "bee's sweets"; also known as *ayer madu* or simply *madu*) from a hive was the *pawang lebah* (beekeeper).

There was also much to obtain from the swamps, both freshwater and mangrove, which were a rich source of edible flora and fauna. *Beremi*, a native watercress (*Herpestes monniera*), was once abundant in freshwater swamps in the Malay world but is now no longer widely available due to habitat loss.

At One with the Sea

Of course the sea was no stranger. Gathering shellfish, seaweed and other intertidal products (*berkarang* or *mengambil karang-karangan*) was an important pastime for the Malays, many of whom lived near or by the sea. Among specimens commonly collected for consumption were *gonggong* (dog conch; genus *Strombus*), *ranga* (spider conch; *Lambis lambis*; alternatively *rangar*; *range* in the Johor-Riau dialect), *siput kilah* (noble volute), *jani* (sea urchin), *gamat* (sea cucumber), *latoh* (sea grape), *sangu* or *agar-agar* (jelly seaweed), *kupang* (mussel), *remis* (surf clam), *kepah* (Venus clam) and *kerang* (cockle).

Cockles were once abundant along the entire west coast of the Malay Peninsula and on the sandy shores of Singapore. Collected in bucketfuls and carefully rinsed, these shellfish are "a favourite article of diet" of the Malays,[4] who cooked them into *sambal*, or simply boiled them, stir-fried with vegetables, or skewered into *sate kerang*.

In the days before Singapore's southern islands were reclaimed and their inhabitants relocated to the mainland, the islands were home to various Malay communities who had an intimate relationship with the marine ecology around them. Juria Toramae, an independent researcher, artist and marine conservationist, has written about how the residents of outlying islands like Pulau Sudong lived off collecting corals and seaweed, in a place where land was too scarce to put under the plough. She notes how "corals and seaweeds were popular amongst Singapore's mainlanders for home decoration and jelly-making".[5]

(Left) Foraged leaves and herbs to make *botok-botok*. *Photograph by Law Soo Phye, courtesy of Khir Johari.*

(Above) To prepare *botok-botok*, fish slices are marinated with spices and infused with flavourful foliage and herbs, before being wrapped in banana leaves and steamed. *Photograph by Law Soo Phye, courtesy of Khir Johari.*

(Facing page) Foraging at low tide. *Photograph by Law Soo Phye, courtesy of Khir Johari.*

(Below) Sea urchin consumption was once common among coastal Malays. In many parts of the world today, sea urchin is considered a delicacy. *Photograph by Law Soo Phye, courtesy of Khir Johari.*

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In a paper published in 1982, Chew Soo Beng gives a rich account of the lives of the Pulau Sudong islanders before they were resettled into high-rise public housing on the mainland in the late 1970s:

> "Groups of women row their *kolek* [small wooden boat] to different parts of the exposed portions of the reef to gather sea produce. This activity was performed with considerable gaiety, seeming to be an enjoyable activity. Everyone carried a basket and unmarried girls wore *bunga raya* (hibiscus) in their hair. In teams of threes or fours, usually to form a line, they combed the reef for *agar-agar* (an edible seaweed), *gulong*, the *trepang* and a variety of *beche-de-mer*. When both the tide and sun were low, the gathered chatter of the women at work could drift into the village where the men, excluded from the offshore merriment, conversed beneath their favourite *pondok*."[6]

Remnants of this lost way of life can be seen today only in those parts of the Riau Islands in Indonesia where such time-tested rhythms have not been swept away by the modern economy's relentless forces. The fishing and gathering expeditions of Singapore's southern islanders often brought them to Riau. The islands on both sides of the Singapore-Indonesia border together formed a contiguous maritime neighbourhood.

Bound by ties of kinship, these island communities transcended the artificial international borders that divide the waters between Singapore and Indonesia, first drawn up by the British and Dutch colonial powers in the Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1824.[7] Prior to the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, the Singapore dollar was a widely accepted currency in Riau. Even when Riau islanders got married, dowry exchange was made in the Singapore dollar as well. This affinity with Singapore was made possible by geographical proximity.

Islanders on Pulau Pemping (on the Riau side of the border), for example, can see the Singapore skyline from their homes overlooking the sea. They adhered to the Singapore Standard Time for their daily prayers and watched Singaporean television. Movement across the border used to be more porous. Mak Imah, who lived on Pulau Semakau (on the Singapore side of the border), simply dismantled her home, crossed over to Pulau Pemping and reassembled it. This took place when she and her neighbours were ordered to resettle on the mainland. Singapore's authorities then amalgamated Pulau Semakau with Pulau Seking to form Semakau Landfill, which began operations on 1 April 1999.

(Below) Male *gonggong* (sea snails) collected from mudflats. *Photograph by Law Soo Phye, courtesy of Khir Johari.*

(Bottom) Picking the seasonal *agar-agar*, which is boiled down and its gelatinous by-product made into dessert throughout the Malay world. *Photograph by Law Soo Phye, courtesy of Khir Johari.*

Of course, mainland Singapore itself is an island, and Malays residing in its coastal settlements lived much the same way. Those living in seaside villages such as Tanjong Irau, Telok Mata Ikan, Padang Terbakar, Kampong Wak Hassan and Pasir Panjang, for example, also engaged in foraging for seafood on beaches, intertidal zones, estuaries and rivers. This spontaneous relationship with one's ecological surroundings is at odds with post-independence Singapore's micromanagement of nature. In the manicured city-state, fishing is allowed only at designated waterways, and picking of any fallen fruit, vegetable or mineral from the wild is either banned or subject to approval by a state-issued permit.

Janur (tender young coconut fronds), destined for transformation into *ketupat* casing. *Photograph by Law Soo Phye, courtesy of Khir Johari.*

In 2009, the *Berita Harian* newspaper reported that two women – Che' Kamsiah and Che' Saemah – were seen picking cockles and shellfish from Sungai Ketapang, a tributary of the Bedok River (Sungai Bedok).[8] That an activity once so commonplace is now considered newsworthy attests to the radical transformation in the way of life of Malays in Singapore. Sungai Ketapang has since been canalised in concrete and courses by the Laguna National Golf and Country Club before flowing into the Bedok River.

Conscious Consumption

Prior to reclamation and more recent development, one can imagine how Sungai Ketapang was perhaps one among many natural cornucopias for Malay settlements in old Tanah Merah. More importantly, this episode suggests the profoundly intimate knowledge that indigenous communities have of their natural world, one that has even withstood – in its own little way – the displacement brought about by urbanisation.

This knowledge extends to understanding what can be acquired at which times of the day and year, as well as the natural processes of an ecological system that make such foraging practices sustain-

A DURIAN BY ANY OTHER NAME

Unlike the coconut and the pineapple, the durian does not seem to have been cultivated as a commercial crop by the Malays in the past. Durian trees were either encountered in the wild, or one might have the trees in one's *dusun* (orchard or private fruit grove). The Malay expression *durian runtuh* (like a fallen durian) – used to convey unexpected bounty or good fortune – best illustrates the serendipity with which the durian fruit is found on the ground.

There were once dozens of durian varieties that are now mostly lost, eradicated by modern monoculture. Due to aggressive commercial cultivation, durian consumption is now woefully limited to the same set of popular cultivars, such as Mao Shan Wang (Musang King) and the blandly named D24. Gone are the heirloom varieties known to Malays of old.

The evocative names of these heirloom durians lyrically describe their shape and form, such as Kuching Tidur (Sleeping Cat). Kachapuri referred to durians whose only edible pulp was found right in the centre (hence kachapuri, the central chamber of a palace). Varieties whose names were inspired by the shape of their pulp include Durian Kepala Gajah (Elephant's Head), Kepala Rusa (Deer's Head), Telor (Egg), Daun (Leaf), Kembar Dua (Pair of Twins), Gempa Bumi (Earthquake), Raja Asmara (King of Passion), Juring Panjang (Long Slice), Jantong (Heart), Gelok (Water Vessel), Mata Ketam (Crab's Eye) and Sultan Bersandar (Reclining Sultan). Durian Bantal (Durian Pillow) probably had a "pillowy" texture. Some names referred to the colour of the fruit, such as Durian Nasi Kunyit (Turmeric Rice), Mentega (Butter), Emas (Gold), Batil Suasa (Rose Gold Bowl), Tembaga (Brass), Gading (Ivory), Susu (Milk) and Otak Udang (Prawns' Brains).

There is also a vocabulary associated with the anatomy of the durian: a single whole durian fruit is *sebutir* or *sebiji* durian; a single segment of its interior is *sepangsa* durian, while a single seed with its edible flesh adjoining is *seulas* durian, meaning one unit.

The following are terms related to the stages in a durian's growth:

Mata ketam	Very small
Mendamak	When thorns first appear
Kepala kera	Larger but dry
Mentimun ayer	Beginning to be juicy
Meliat	Getting consistency
Mendaging ayam	Sweet and rich
Menchempur	Getting soft
Membuang burok	Fruit first falling
Gugur rahat	Falling plentifully

able. For Malays living in pre-industrial times, where natural resources were readily shared with the community, the principle of conscious consumption was largely upheld.

For instance, it was never in the long-term interest of a kampong community to harvest all the fish in a water body at once, even if one had the means. Some foraging practices could even help in the propagation of certain plants, such as *turi* (*Sesbania grandiflora*) and *ubi kayu* (cassava; *Manihot esculenta*), where a broken-off stem regenerates into two or more new ones. Even when flowers were picked, it was important not to strip the entire plant bare, but to leave some flowers behind to ensure that there was no decline in the fruit crop.

If an entire tree had to be killed, no part went to waste. This was the case when the *umbut* – the prized heart of a palm – was acquired. Once the *umbut* was removed, the palm ceased to live. For coconut palms, the leaves were gathered for weaving into *ketupat* (rice cakes) cases or for wrapping *otak-otak* (fish mousse mixed with spices, wrapped in banana or coconut leaves and then grilled). The spines of the fronds, *lidi*, had multiple uses too: they were mainly used as skewers for *sate* (*satay*), and could also be bundled together to form an egg-beater or even a broom if longer fronds were used. The trunk was often used as a beam in construction, while dried coconut husks were used as cooking fuel.

Modern-day exploitation of natural resources and industrial capitalism, however, challenged the viability of foraging as a way of life. Just as the last of the Malay villages in Singapore were being torn down in the 1970s and 80s, growing awareness was afoot in the West about this fast-disappearing mode of consumption.

In 1971, Alice Waters, one of the key pioneers of the organic food movement in the United States, opened her restaurant Chez Panisse (which is still in operation today) in Berkeley, California. The restaurant emphasises using only locally grown ingredients from sustainable sources, and the menu changes according to the seasons, serving only what is available at that time of the year.

This sensitivity to seasonal constraints was also a crucial characteristic of foraging by the Malays. They only plucked the leaves of the *puchok pakis* (fiddlehead fern; *Diplazium esculentum*) while these were tightly furled. While *binjai* (*Mangifera caesia*) can be consumed even before it ripens, as some find it appealing in its sour stages, one rarely plucked the tree bare before the fruits reached their prime. As for the *keranji* (*Dialium indum*), the fruits emerge only once every five years, making it a waste to chop the tree down in its "unproductive" years in between.

Industrialised food production has overcome constraints like these. One can now enjoy durian at any time of the year, despite it being a seasonal fruit. This has allowed the human consumer to transcend their position within the food chain, no longer subject to its natural processes or the constraints of seasonality. There is a danger, perhaps, in this growing distance between us and the natural processes that give rise to our food. The more removed we are from the natural domains where our ingredients were once traditionally harnessed, the less control and discernment we have in determining what food we should be consuming.

A Malay *gulai* (curry) of young fern fronds. *Photograph by Law Soo Phye, courtesy of Khir Johari.*

Raking seaweeds on Singapore's shores. *Photograph by and courtesy of Lim Kwong Ling.*

In Singapore, a contemporary movement is advocating for a revival of organic food production. Social enterprises run foraging trips and are trying to build an urban farming industry. This has been attributed to a "global food trend" of picking and eating plants growing in the wild, drawing inspiration from the likes of Michelin-star Danish restaurant Noma, started by chef René Redzepi in 2003.[9] While this movement may in fact draw on a recent global turn towards sustainable practices in light of growing concerns about climate change, we have observed how foraging for food by our forebears in Singapore is nothing new, but in fact was once also the norm.

Journalist and food writer Michael Pollan argues that the modern food industry has taken over the role that culture and living in nature once played in mediating our relationship with food.[10] "The human omnivore," he writes, "has the incalculable advantage of a culture, which stores the experience and accumulated wisdom of countless human tasters before him."[11] Whereas an ecologically conscious existence once informed our choices about what and how much we could eat and when, these decisions today have been largely taken over by a highly organised global food industry.

Cultural knowledge on consumption – providing a system of ethics, taboos, and other do's-and-don'ts with regard to nutrition – has also become increasingly less relevant as advancements in nutrition science offer more systematic guidelines. While the latter ought to be celebrated, we cannot help but mourn, however little, the loss of inherited wisdom from earlier generations that understood food within an ecological context, and one in which the human consumer was embedded. As global food security becomes an increasing concern, it is perhaps timely to remind ourselves that not so long ago, it was still in fact possible for people in Singapore and the region to – at least in part – feed themselves by directly harnessing nature's gifts. ♦

NOTES

1 *Sulalat al-Salatin* (*Genealogy of Kings*) is one of the most important works in Malay literature. The current form was compiled in the 17th century based on older prototypes by Bendahara Tun Seri Lanang, the most senior minister of the Johor Sultanate.
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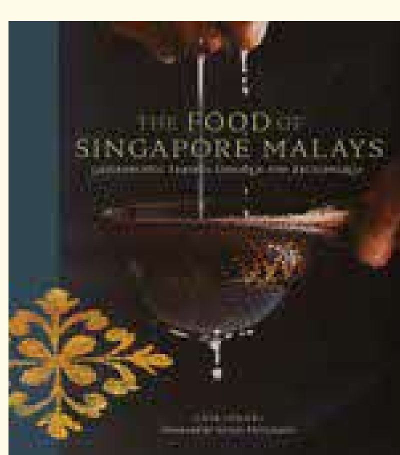

This is an edited chapter from *The Food of Singapore Malays: Gastronomic Travels Through the Archipelago* by Khir Johari, published by Marshall Cavendish Editions (2021). The book explores in detail the history and culture of Malay food in Singapore and raises questions such as: How did Malay cuisine evolve to its modern-day form? How has geography influenced the way Malays eat? What cultural beliefs shape the rituals of Malay gastronomy? What does food tell us about the Malay worldview?

This book is scheduled to be published in October 2021. Thereafter, it will be available for reference at the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library and for loan at selected public libraries. It will also retail at major bookshops in Singapore.

The Modern Girls

of Pre-war Singapore

Andrea Kee explores how the enigmatic Modern Girl asserted her new-found identity, femininity and independence in interwar Singapore.

In the first half of the 20th century, major cities around the world began to witness a new phenomenon: the emergence of the Modern Girl.[1] She was almost instantly recognisable with her distinctive wavy bobbed hair, painted lips, slim body (often with her arms and back exposed), and always impeccably dressed in the latest fashion.[2] A historically specific expression of modernity and femininity, she appeared almost simultaneously in cities like Beijing, Bombay, Tokyo and New York during the interwar years.

The Modern Girl was also a phenomenon in Singapore of course. As diplomat-turned-writer R.H. Bruce Lockhart noted in his memoirs, women here – particularly Straits Chinese women – had changed significantly by 1933 compared with the early 1900s. "Gone, too, is the former seclusion of the better-class Chinese women, and to-day Chinese girls, […] all with bobbed and permanently waved hair in place of the former glossy straightness, and all dressed in semi-European fashion, walk vigorously through the streets on their way to their studies or to their games."[3]

Departing from the traditional female roles of "dutiful daughter, wife and mother",[4] women were becoming increasingly involved in activities such as working, sports, and smoking and drinking, which were previously considered the domains of men.[5] These social changes were in part motivated by the rise of feminism, the development of women's suffrage movements in places like Britain, America and India, and more women participating in nationalist movements.[6]

According to the Modern Girl Around the World Research Group based in the University of Washington, American corporations were "the most important international distributor of imagery associated with the Modern Girl, especially because of US pre-eminence in the international distribution of advertising and film".[7] Hence, the image of the Modern Girl, and her associated iconology and ideologies, found their way across the globe through the worldwide channels of multinational corporations, print media and the American film industry. By the late 1920s, the Modern Girl had made her debut in Singapore.

(Left) Portrait of a woman with a permed bob and floral *cheongsam*, 1930s. Also known as the Shanghai dress, the *cheongsam* was popularised by Shanghai's film stars and favoured by local Modern Girls. *Lee Brothers Studio Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

(Above) This advertisement for Mysore Sandal Soap features a woman with shaped brows, painted lips and bobbed hair. However, the inclusion of a *bindi* and head covering – elements of her Indian heritage – give her a distinctively hybrid Modern Girl look. *Image reproduced from தமிழ் முரசு (Tamil Murasu), 5 May 1936, 5. (From NewspaperSG).*

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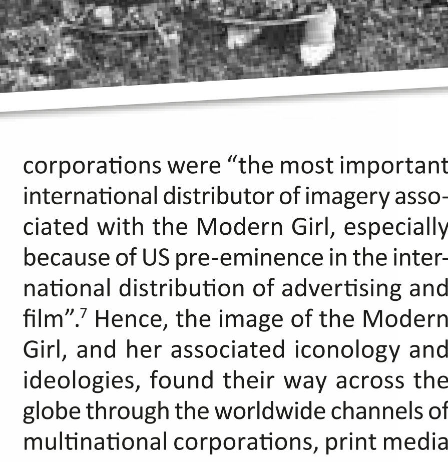

(Left) Two women, one with a scarf wrapped around her head (left) and the other with a wavy bob (right), dressed in *sarong kebayas* in Penang, 1930s. Local Modern Girls often drew inspiration from both Western and regional fashion and beauty trends. *Image reproduced from Peter Lee, Sarong Kebaya: Peranakan Fashion in an Interconnected World, 1500–1950 (Singapore: Asian Civilisations Museum, 2014), 271. (From National Library, Singapore, Call no.: RSING 391.20899510595 LEE-[CUS]).*

(Bottom) 《良友》(*Liangyou; The Young Companion*) was a pictorial magazine produced in Shanghai. It featured the latest in fashion and celebrity lifestyles. *Image reproduced from 良友 = The Young Companion, no. 90 (Shanghai: Shanghai Liangyou Book Printing Co., Ltd, 1934). (From National Library, Singapore, Call no. Chinese R059.951 YC).*

A Modern Girl By Any Other Name

While the term "Modern Girl" first appeared during the 1920s and 30s, the use of the term "girl" was popularised in England in the late 19th century and referred to "working-class and middle-class unmarried women who occupied an ephemeral free space between childhood and adulthood". By the 1920s and 30s, however, "girl" had come to refer to young women who aspired to subvert conventional female roles and expectations.[8]

The Modern Girl went by different names in different places. In the US, she was sometimes known as a "flapper", in China as 摩登小姐 (*modeng xiaojie*; modern young lady) and in India as *kallege ladki* (college girl). In Singapore, the English-language press commonly referred to her as the Modern Girl or Modern Woman. Regardless of what she was called, Modern Girls were identified as young women with an "up-to-date and youthful femininity", provocative in behaviour and fashion that drew influence from other countries.[9]

As international companies began customising their advertisements to appeal to domestic markets, local companies started adopting the advertising strategies of international companies.[10] By the 1930s, local businesses had begun constructing a Modern Girl relatable to the masses in Singapore. Advertisements in Singapore's vernacular and other English press targeted at local Asians often featured a female with features drawn from elsewhere, yet sporting elements distinctive to the cultures of the region (such as the muslim headscarves and the coloured dot known as *bindi* that Indian women wear on their foreheads).

The Modern Girl in Singapore

The print media – such as pictorial magazines, journals and newspapers – also began selling a modern lifestyle and culture. In cities like Shanghai, pictorial magazines such as《良友》(*Liangyou; The Young Companion*), featured the latest in fashion, makeup and celebrities.[11] Available in Singapore, *Liangyou* would have presented a different way for women to see themselves and shape their lives.[12]

According to historian Chua Ai Lin, Hollywood played a key role in influencing social change among Singapore's youth and the city's modern identity. Singapore's young women looked to Hollywood not only for fashion and beauty tips and trends, but also for contemporary views on love, sex and romance. Chua suggests, however, that cultural products such as film appeared to effect greater change in women due to the parallel evolution of women's social roles.[13]

The interwar years in Singapore saw drastic changes in women's societal roles. For the first time, a significant number of females had become part of the workforce, consumers of public amusements and, more importantly, students.[14]

A number of factors were at work. First of all, there were simply more women in Singapore. As resistance against female emigration in China eroded, more Chinese women moved to Singapore in search of work.[15]

Women's roles in society were also evolving due to changing attitudes towards female education. And as more women received an education, they could now participate in the public sphere, look for paid work, have more opportunities for self-expression and leisure, and engage in various cultural and political movements. They would have also been exposed to more possibilities of modern life through education and various cultural products and, with these, new identities.

Fashioning Singapore's Modern Girl

Singapore's Modern Girl challenged existing gender norms through her expressions of femininity, most visibly through fashion and style. From the 1920s, she adopted Western-style clothing (with short hemlines and high heels), wore makeup and sported a bob haircut.[16]

One such young woman was Betty Lim, who later wrote *A Rose on My Pillow: Recollections of a Nyonya*. Before the popularity of the Modern Girl look, her long hair was usually styled in a traditional Straits Chinese *sanggul* (plaited hair that was coiled up) for formal events. In

the late 1920s, Lim cut her hair in the style of American actress Colleen Moore – a straight bob with a fringe – and showed off her new "radical" look at a party she attended with her sibling.[17]

Singapore's Modern Girls were also influenced by fashion styles from the region, such as the sarong *kebaya* (a tight-fitting sheer embroidered lace blouse paired with a batik sarong skirt), which was first worn in Java in the Dutch East Indies. In the 18th and late 19th centuries, Peranakan women typically wore the *baju panjang* or *baju kurung* (a knee-length tunic worn over a batik sarong), but by the 1920s the sarong *kebaya* had become the attire of choice for Peranakan women in the Dutch East Indies and younger Peranakan women in the Straits Settlements.[18]

The *cheongsam* (or *qipao*; also known as the Shanghai dress) was also gaining favour among young modern Chinese women in Singapore. Popularised by Shanghai's film stars, the *cheongsam* was cut to fit – and flatter – the female figure.[19] Prior to this, young, educated Chinese women had worn the *sam kun*, a long sleeve blouse paired with a calf-length skirt.[20] By the 1930s, Straits Chinese women in Singapore had begun to add the *cheongsam* to their wardrobe staples.

Singapore's Modern Girls also adopted a hybrid East-meets-West style, combining Western trends, such as wavy bobs and makeup, with local fashions. The quest for modernity expressed through fashion was riddled with anxieties about what constituted the ideal modern feminine aesthetic, especially in a cosmopolitan city where multiple ideas of modernity circulated. The Modern Girl's fashion and style was therefore not without controversy – she faced criticism for dressing immodestly, overspending on cosmetics and being too "Westernised".

The press became a space where Singapore's Modern Girls could push back and make their case, their letters affording a glimpse of how these young, educated and assertive women articulated their own identities and expressions of modernity through their appearance and individuality. One of these platforms was the *Malaya Tribune*, the most popular English-language newspaper among middle-class anglophone Asians in Singapore and Malaya in the 1930s.[21]

Those who wrote to the *Malaya Tribune* were mainly English-educated Straits Chinese men and women, hence when the topic was discussed, it tended to centre on the Chinese Modern Girl. (It is important to note, however, that many letter-writers used pseudonyms, making it a challenge to ascertain their identities and verify the content. Nonetheless, these letters offer valuable insight into the voices of educated Asians in colonial Singapore.)

In March 1931, a "Miss Tow Foo Wah" voiced her concern that her fellow female schoolmates were wearing Western-style dresses that were "much too short above the knees", describing them as "disgraceful".[22] Similarly, another writer who used the name "Evelyn" expressed that "a skirt that is six inches above the knees or a flear[sic]-skirt with the upper part exposed is a disgrace to put on. […] It is better for us to put on skirts exactly up to the knees or an inch above or lower".[23]

In defence, a "Miss Anxious" argued: "If short skirts give comfort as well as add charms to one's personality, why shouldn't one wear them? […] As long as it makes us fascinating and fashionably elegant what do we care about what others say?"[24]

Chinese Modern Girls wearing Western-style attire were often criticised for copying Western trends and being an embarrassment to national pride.[25] A Helen Chan and "A Modern Chinese Girl" astutely pointed out that Chinese men, too, wore Western-style clothing but were not subjected to the same judgement.[26]

(Below) Colleen Moore, a popular American actress who starred in multiple films in the 1920s and 30s, popularised the Modern Girl's quintessential short bob. *Image reproduced from Malayan Saturday Post, 5 May 1928, 36. (From NewspaperSG).*

(Below right) This watch advertisement features a Modern Girl, characterised by her distinctive wavy bob hairstyle and trendy shoulder-baring dress. *Image reproduced from the Malaya Tribune, 2 December 1927, 5. (From NewspaperSG).*

Whiteawy department store introduced Singapore's first-ever female lift operator when it opened its new store in May 1936. *Image reproduced from Morning Tribune, 1 May 1936, 11. (From NewspaperSG).*

S'pore's First Girl Lift Attendant

FAMOUS STORE MODERNISED

Grand Opening In May

Singapore, Thursday.

DRESSED in a snappy uniform of pleasing colour with cap to match at a rakish angle, a pretty Singapore girl is now operating an electric lift for the first time in the history of the Colony.

This is indeed a welcome innovation to Singapore but lift-girls are common enough in other civilized parts of the world. In the larger cities of Great Britain, Europe and America, lifts are operated by charming girls.

PRACTICE SPREADING

Singapore's first girl lift attendant. The picture gives an excellent idea of the pleasing design of the lift itself—the first of its kind in Singapore.

the hardware section comes next. The centre space at the far end is devoted to travelling goods.

Near the sea-front entrance are special teak cross-grained bays and other artistic fittings.

On the first floor, connected by the electric lift, the customer will enter another scene of spacious, spotless cleanliness, where there are neat and pleasing fittings, smart sales girls and an amazing variety of wearing apparel which appeal to the fair sex.

This floor, which has remained completely closed to the public for close on two years, will be a revelation to the visitor to-day. Although actual work of reconstruction was begun only in February last, wonderful progress has been made.

All along the Post Office side of the building are neat teak-panelled fittings built on the most modern lines. All the fixtures are of the "quick serving type" and there are no unsightly and cumbersome boxes to be seen anywhere: the customer will be shown her requirements in a great variety promptly and without delay.

Towards one end is a large raised polished platform or display centre. This has been specially constructed for mannequin parades whenever occasion calls for such shows but regular weekly features will be a display of ladies' goods.

LONDON EXPERT

both in point of comfort and appearance.

The same pleasing colour scheme of pale green which has been introduced throughout the whole of the building is being extended to the lift and the whole is encased in a Celotex sound-proof blanketing. This work is being executed by Sime, Darby and Company, Ltd.

HIGH QUALITY GOODS

An important change in the policy of this modernised company which will effect and be welcomed by the public is the sources of supply employed.

All goods imported will chiefly be from recognised British houses in Britain and the British Empire.

There will, of course, also be imports from America and Europe but the bulk of stocks carried will be British and Empire products.

"Another important factor in our new

(Continued on page 28)

TO-DAY TIFFIN: $1.00

Also commonly under fire was the Modern Girl's use of cosmetics. In his letter to the *Malaya Tribune* in 1938, a Chia Ah Keow called Modern Girls superficial and criticised their excessive expenditure on cosmetics and beauty products, even providing a list of such products – highlighting ones with questionable names like "Forget-me-not" and "Kiss-me-again" lotions.[27]

Chia's letter provoked responses from "A Modern Girl" and a Juliet Loh, who described him as "ridiculous" and "out of his mind", noting that there were no products with such names. In her letter, Loh pointed out that most Modern Girls in Singapore did not wear makeup,[28] one of the key characteristics of the global Modern Girl. Her emphasis on how Singapore's Modern Girls did not use cosmetics also highlights how to some of the city's Modern Girls, wearing make-up was not part of their identity even though globally, it was seen as a marker of being one.

The notion of modernity as understood among the locals was not fixed, and some ethnic Chinese might have looked to their cultural heritage for ideas about what the Modern Girl should embody. As a Chinese woman, Loh could have been influenced by the overseas Chinese's interpretation of modernisation, which drew heavily on Chinese national and ethnic pride and emphasised the importance of retaining traditional representations of "proper" femininity such as not wearing makeup or jewellery.[29]

Life, Love and Work

Singapore's Modern Girl also defined her modern identity through her attitude towards life and aspirations for her future. In her letter to the *Malaya Tribune*, "Evelyn" explained that Modern Girls now had a newfound sense of freedom and could freely go "shopping or to a friend's house unchaperoned sometimes", in sharp contrast "to our grandfather's period [when] it was very hard for a man even to see a girl's shadow".[30]

More and more non-European women in Singapore were educated and becoming more active in public life. The Modern Girl could now choose who to marry and how she wanted to live her life.[31] A 1938 *Straits Times* article reported that modern Chinese youths, particularly those who had been educated at English-medium schools, believed that marriage should be founded on "love and courtship" and thus rejected arranged marriages. They also wanted fewer children and hoped to have their own marital home instead of living with their in-laws.[32]

Women like "Adelina" also wrote letters to the *Malaya Tribune* encouraging fellow young women to develop their own outlook on life before getting married, warning that "many girls fall blindly in love with men and settle down before they know really what life is".[33]

Thanks to education, Modern Girls were able to break with conservative norms and seek jobs outside the home. The *Straits Times* reported in 1939 that an increasing number of young Chinese women in Malaya were taking up professions, even "invad[ing] the mercantile offices" and "ousting young men from their positions". It added that after leaving school, many women furthered their studies by attending classes to study shorthand, typewriting and book-keeping so as to prepare themselves for office careers. Other professions that young Chinese women took up included retail, nursing and teaching.[34]

Women also started to break into traditionally male dominated jobs. In May 1936, the Singapore branch of the Whiteaway departmental store opened its newly modernised store. While it boasted new features such as an electric lift, the true marker of its modernity was the introduction of Singapore's first-ever female lift operator. Whiteaway was praised for following the lead of "other civilised parts of the world" such as Britain, Europe and America and the young lift operator was described as having "courageously given the lead" on the modernisation of the store.[35] In another article, the *Morning Tribune* wrote that in employing a woman to be a lift attendant, Malaya had shown that it accepted the

modern principle that "girls are as good as men at some jobs".[36]

The Modern Girl's new outlook on life and work sparked debate among Asian anglophones in the press. In a 1938 opinion piece, Zola, a *Malaya Tribune* correspondent, mused whether young women should be allowed the right to compete with men for commerce jobs.[37]

Several readers wrote in to argue that women should not be given the same opportunity because they were "naturally weaker" compared to men. A G.S. Teo claimed that, unlike men, women were incapable of withstanding the "strain and stress" of industrial life. He also saw men and women as playing inherently different roles and incapable of sharing them. He added that if the "future tendency of educated girls is to usurp the 'bread and butter' positions of men, we might then envisage a time, when we boys must learn how to cook, sew, look after the homes and the babies!"[38]

Another reader, C.T.C., argued against women working in "men's work" because it was not what "Nature has best equipped them to accomplish". Instead of working in traditionally male spaces, he advised women to develop "talents... peculiar to their sex" such as homemaking, teaching, nursing and dressmaking.[39]

Many readers challenged such mindsets. "Educated Female" wrote in response to Zola: "Singapore is still trailing behind the times if it harbours such an ignoramus as 'Zola' who dares to submit that 'boys in every way are far more capable of discharging their duties than girls'."[40] Another female reader, Sunny Girl, highlighted that women had every right to use their educational qualifications and independence to secure employment to support their families.[41]

The Limits of a Modern Girl

Some Modern Girls were able to go well beyond the role that society had prescribed for women. Mrs H.A. Braid, née Lona Soong Tong Neo, was a Modern Girl who, despite her father's lectures on "how a good daughter should behave", made life choices that were considered unconventional for her time: she cut her hair short, found employment as a clerk, and even went overseas for work.[42]

However, conservative ideas were still pervasive even among Modern Girls. For instance, Betty Lim might have looked like a Modern Girl, but she did not share all the ideals of personal agency that they embodied. She led a sheltered life and did not have close contact with men and was, in fact, not allowed to go out with her fiancé unchaperoned.[43]

Modern Girls had to constantly contend with prevailing patriarchal expectations of becoming wives and mothers, as well as those who were anxious about how such young women challenged "traditional structures of authority".[44]

In 1931, a robust discussion on whether Modern Girls were "unmarriageable" unfolded in the Correspondence section of the *Malaya Tribune*. The debate was sparked by an article about the problem of unmarriageable modern Chinese girls, citing the Modern Girls' "ultra-modernism, materialism, misinterpretation of life desire for so-called emancipation and freedom" as reasons they would be unable to find willing husbands.[45]

While some agreed that Modern Girls lacked the ability to manage domestic affairs to "lessen their husbands' burdens",[46] others sympathised and argued that Modern Girls possessed "the power to lead young men along the right path", as any good wife would.[47] However, both sides ultimately placed the value of Modern Girls on their abilities to be good wives and mothers.

In her *Straits Times* article, June Lee said that despite the new freedoms enjoyed by the Modern Girl, it was unquestionable that they would eventually have to marry: "[The Modern Girl] may take up a career – an escape from domestic boredom for a while – but her ultimate aim is marriage."[48] Other articles touted the Modern Girl's increased education as a path that opened up greater career opportunities, but in the same breath also noted it made her an "asset to her husband" by being a better companion. After marriage, many husbands preferred their working wives to stay home to "learn the career of being a 'helpful wife and wise mother'".[49]

Despite modernity's promise of a more liberated lifestyle for women, not all young women could aspire to be Modern Girls though. Many young women, especially those from poorer families in interwar Singapore, still had limited freedoms and found it difficult to break with conventional gender roles. It was only after the war that more women across different social classes began venturing out of the domestic sphere to work, and attire favoured by the Modern Girl, such as the *cheongsam*, became more affordable.[50]

Whatever the case, the Modern Girls of the period played a key role in initiating discourse and debates about the expectations of modern womanhood, and in defining young women's identities in a world vastly different from that of their mothers'.

Despite the criticisms and limits placed on Modern Girls, they actively, vocally and bravely challenged their detractors to prevent themselves from being seen solely as wives and mothers, and confined only to domestic chores. Their attempts at disrupting social conventions were important and significant steps toward establishing and normalising greater gender equality in all aspects of life. ♦

A 1930s studio portrait of a couple dressed in Western-style clothing. The woman is wearing a straw cloche hat, a popular hat style for women in the 1920s to early 30s. *Lee Brothers Studio Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

Nanyang Girls' School athletes at a sports meet, 1930s. Previously relegated to the sidelines, changing gender norms in the early 20th century saw more young women taking part in sports. *Lee Brothers Studio Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

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46 Goh Tong Liang, "Unmarriageable Girls," *Malaya Tribune*, 20 December 1931, 3. (From NewspaperSG)
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48 June Lee, "Chinese Girls Now Choose Their Husbands," *Straits Times*, 20 July 1939, 1. (From NewspaperSG)
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Ancient Gold IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Where did ancient gold come from? What was it used for and what gold discoveries have been made in Singapore? **Foo Shu Tieng** has the answers.

Gold is a precious commodity admired for its beauty, rarity and monetary value. To understand how it became such a valued metal in Southeast Asia specifically, we need to look at the historical,[1] archaeological[2] and ethnographic[3] evidence.

Why write about it now? With the price of gold at an all-time high, many ancient historical sites in Asia, especially those believed to contain gold jewellery and artefacts, are being looted.[4] If the trafficking of antiquities is left unchecked, the potential loss of knowledge and heritage would be devastating. For example, the ancient burial site of Bit Meas in Prey Veng province, Cambodia (estimated 150 BCE to 100 CE), was almost completely looted in early 2006 by treasure hunters.[5] While local authorities have since put in place mitigation policies and experts have issued recommendations to deal with illegal antiquities trafficking, these may not be sufficient and greater community awareness is needed.[6]

Singapore has not been spared from the ravages of treasure hunters either. In 1949, a section of Stamford Road in the civic district – an area with potential 14th-century Temasek period finds – was dug for "buried treasure" supposedly left behind from the days of the Japanese Occupation (1942–45).[7]

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The Early Gold Trade

It was in 4th century BCE that Southeast Asia began to be associated with names such as "Land of Gold" (*Suvaṇṇabhūmi*), "Wall of Gold" (*Suvarṇakudya*), "Islands of Gold" (*Suvarṇadvīpa*) and "Golden Peninsula" (*Khersonese*).[8]

One theory why the region was associated with gold is that sometime around 300 BCE, there was a disruption in the trade caravans supplying Siberian gold via the Silk Road to South Asia (specifically the Mauryan empire, which at its height, included north and central India, and what is now part of Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan). Nomadic invaders destroyed several cities in the Margiana and Aria regions (present-day eastern Turkmenistan and western Afghanistan respectively) just before 290 BCE, for example.[9] This trade route was not restored until Roman Emperor Nero's reign (r. 54–68 CE). However, when he tried to debase the gold content in Roman coinage to counter inflation, this led to Roman gold coins becoming less accepted for commercial transactions in South Asia where they were used as bullion.

The supply of gold to South Asia was further hampered by Roman monetary and precious metal controls in 2nd century CE.[10] Roman Emperor Vespasian (r. 69–79 CE), for example, issued regulations that prohibited the exports of precious metals from the Roman Empire. The scarcity of precious metals such as gold thus might have encouraged South Asians to seek out new sources of gold in Southeast Asia.

Another theory is that an increased demand in prestige goods encouraged South Asians to explore the Southeast Asian region.[11] Sinitic influence is also possible but this theory has not been fully explored.[12] Such theories, however, do not take into account the role of Southeast Asians in actively procuring gold nor their participation in various aspects of the gold trade value chain.

The ancient maritime trade between Southeast Asia and South Asia prior to the 1st century BCE shows that there was a two-way transmission of material goods between the two regions. The nut of the areca palm, fruits such as citron, mango and banana, and sandalwood were known to have been transported westward into parts of South Asia and Africa during the prehistoric period.

Meanwhile, Indian rouletted ware (a kind of pottery with rouletted designs at the base)[13] has been found in various parts of Southeast Asia such as the Malay Peninsula, Thailand, Vietnam, Java and Bali by the 1st century BCE.[14] The gold trade in Southeast Asia would have initially relied on existing trade networks.

(Facing page) A 1694 print showing a gold mine (*tambang* in Indonesian) in Sumatra by Caspar Luyken and published by Willem van de Water. *Retrieved from Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (RP-P-1896-A-19368-994).*

(Above) A section of an armband with a kāla motif thought to be from East Java, 9th to 14th century CE. The Samuel Eilenberg-Jonathan P. Rosen Collection of Indonesian Gold, Bequest of Samuel Eilenberg and Gift of Jonathan P. Rosen, 1998. *Retrieved from The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (1998.544.58).*

Ancient Literary Sources

Abū Zayd al-Sīrāfī's 9th–10th century *Arabic Accounts of China and India* (*Akhbār al Ṣīnwa-l-Hind*) carries an early traveller's tale of how gold collected during a Javanese king's reign was redistributed among his subjects after his death and became a measure of the king's glory.[15]

According to the account, every morning, "the king's steward would bring an ingot of gold [and] place the ingot in [a tidal] pool [that adjoined the royal palace]. When the tide came in, the water covered this and the other ingots collected together with it, and submerged them; when the tide went out, the water seeped away and revealed the ingots; they would gleam there in the sunlight, and the king could watch over them when he took his seat in the hall overlooking them".[16]

This continued every day for as long as that particular king lived. Upon his death, the ingots were "counted, melted down and shared out among the royal family, men, women, and children, as well as among their army commanders and slaves, each according to his rank and to the accepted practice for each class of recipients. Any gold left over afterwards would be distributed to the poor and needy". The final number and weight of the gold would be recorded, and it was said that the "longer a king reigned and the more ingots he left on his death, the greater his glory in the people's eyes".[17]

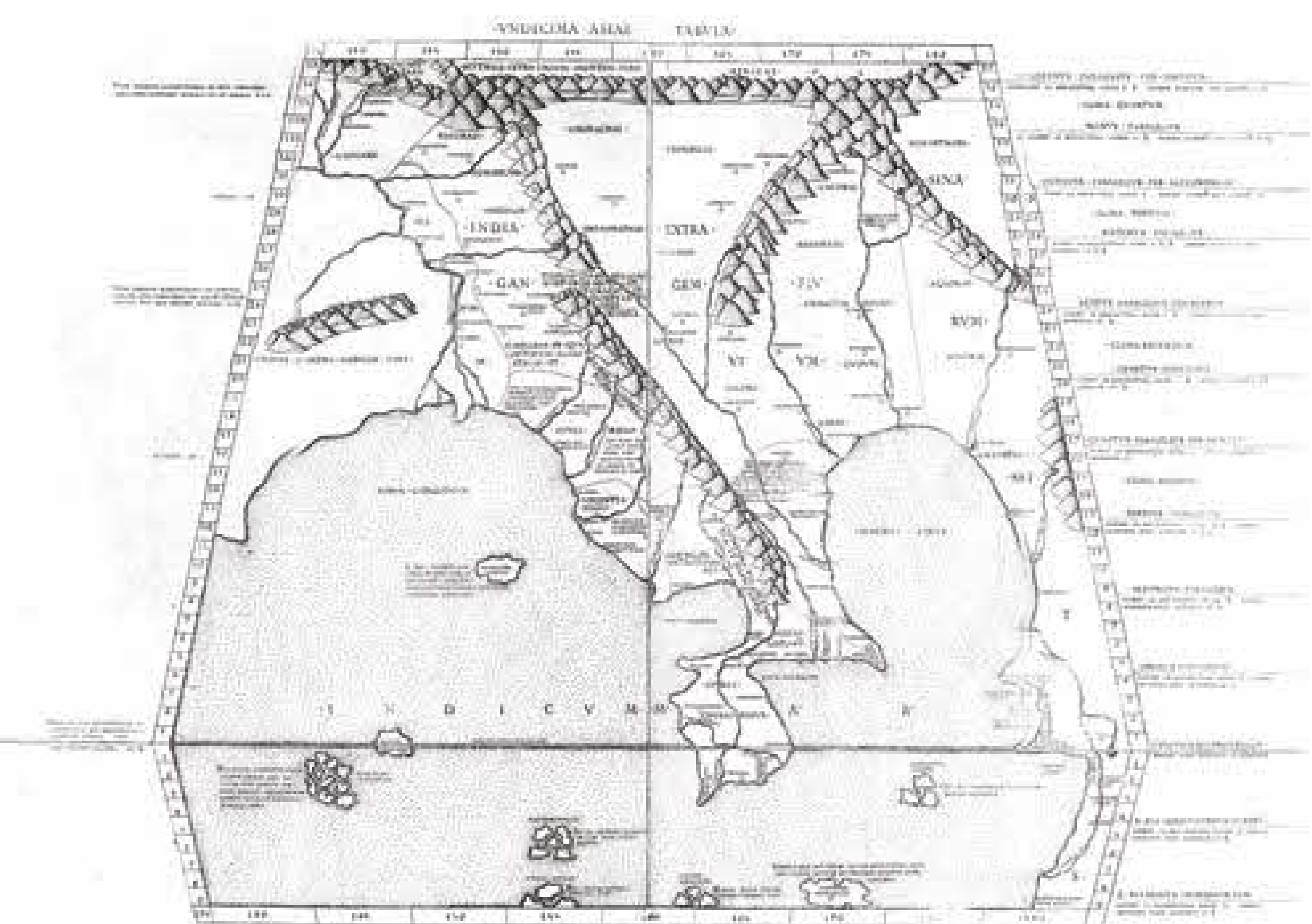
Chinese texts such as Wang Dayuan's[18] (汪大渊) 島夷志略 (*Dao Yi Zhi Lue*; *A Brief Account of Island Barbarians,* dated 1349) and Fei Xin's[19] (费信) 星槎勝覽 (*Xing Cha Sheng Lan*; *The Overall Survey of the Star Raft,* dated 1436) cite gold as an important strategic resource for Southeast Asia.[20] The texts mention that the seats for nobility in the kingdom of Chenla (真臘; *Zhenla*) (now parts of Cambodia and Laos) were made of gold; that everyone used gold tea trays, as well as plates and cups made of gold; that the royal cart for the sovereign was made of gold; and that gold was accepted as a medium of exchange.[21]

Current Chronology for Gold

Currently, the earliest gold finds in the world date to the mid-5th millennium BCE in the regions north and west of the Black Sea.[22] As more and more communities began to view goods made with this new medium as precious and exotic, gold began to be traded more widely.

In India, gold has been found in graves dating to the first millennium BCE and possible early mining sites have also been identified.[23] In China, gold was used for personal ornaments in the northwest during the Western Zhou period (11th to 8th century BCE).[24]

The first gold ornaments in Southeast Asia were South and West Asian prestige



The oldest item in the National Library's Rare Materials Collection is this 1478 copper-engraved map titled *Vndecima Asiae Tabvla (Ptolemaic Map of India and Southeast Asia)* by Claudius Ptolemy and published by Arnold Buckinck in Rome. Ptolemy's *Geographia* (2nd century) refers to Southeast Asia as the "Golden Peninsula" (*Khersonese*). *Collection of the National Library, Singapore (Accession no. B26055962B).*

goods that appeared around 400 to 300 BCE. Sites such as the Tabon Caves in Palawan in the Philippines, Giong Ca Vo in Vietnam and Khao Sam Kaeo in southern Thailand yield evidence of some of the earliest gold discovered in the region.[25]

Obtaining Gold

Generally, there are two ways of obtaining gold from nature: panning and mining. Panning does not leave archaeological traces and no equipment or specialist knowledge is needed. However, mining does, and in Southeast Asia, gold mining has been generally reported for the late historic periods.[26] Some mines had the support of royalty and when raw materials were depleted from an area, the polity would move its base to a more lucrative area.[27]

Historically, gold was produced in Perak, Kelantan, Pahang, Negeri Sembilan, Melaka and Patani on the Malay Peninsula; the Barisan mountain range in West Sumatra; western Borneo; Luzon and Mindanao in the Philippines; Timor; northern Burma; northern and central Vietnam; Laos; as well as the Oddar Meanchey, Preah Vihear and Rattanakiri provinces in Cambodia.[28]

Making Gold

Smithing in Southeast Asia was considered specialist knowledge and associated with mantras, rituals and offerings. A Karo[29] goldsmith in Sumatra, for example, would mutter certain prayers and present "the blood, heart, liver and lungs of a scaly, red chicken and also some lombok [chili]" as an offering to "wake up" his tools and appease them before beginning his work.[30]

Temple reliefs depicting smithing activities, such as those of Candi Sukuh in central Java, signified their importance in society, where the metal was sometimes used for Hindu-Buddhist temple consecration deposits.[31] Smiths were mentioned in Javanese and Balinese inscriptions in the 9th to 10th century CE, and taxed according to the number of bellows they had.[32]

Smithing sites are generally identified through excavations, surveys and interviews with local informants, and by finding tools (furnaces, blowpipes or bellows and tuyères [ceramic or stone tubes] as well as ceramic crucibles) and by-products (slag).[33]

Using Gold

One theory explaining why gold became so popular in Southeast Asia is that gold ornaments and other gold trade objects were likely carried or worn by visiting traders, and "visually communicated special status". These material goods would have assisted regional elites in forging alliances by exchanging the items during marriages and ritual gifting, for example.[34]

Gold ornaments were part of early long-distance trade networks and the gold artefacts found at the stone sarcophagus burial site of Pangkung Paruk on Bali (2nd to 4th century CE) seems to support this. The site yielded gold-glass beads typically found at Western Indian Ocean sites as well as gold ornaments which were tested and found to be similar to those discovered at Giong Ca Vo in Vietnam and Khlong Thom in Thailand.[35]

Gold in Singapore

In Singapore, 10 ancient gold ornaments said to be related to the Majapahit empire[36] were accidentally discovered in 1928 during excavation works for the construction of a reservoir at Fort Canning. These items may have been deliberately hidden, possibly during a Siamese attack[37] at the end of the 14th century.[38] Only four ornaments remained after the Japanese Occupation; the whereabouts of the other six are unknown.[39] The kāla motif[40] on one of the ornaments is said to be similar to a belt from a Mahākāla statue[41] from Padang Roco in Sumatra. Other ornaments with kāla heads have also been discovered in Java.[42]

Were the gold ornaments found in Singapore part of royal regalia, made by Majapahit artisans? Geologically, Singapore does not have native gold, so the gold would have to be imported.[43] Further trace element analysis on the artefacts, such as those done for other assemblages from Southeast Asia, may provide clues that point to a more precise point of origin but as gold is often recycled, the results may not be conclusive.[44]

Archaeological excavations in Singapore carried out between 1984 and 2017 have uncovered additional pieces of gold at Fort Canning and other sites in the civic district, consisting of small ornament fragments or gold foil, interpreted as part of secondary deposits.[45] The 1994–95 excavation of the Parliament House site, for example, yielded a few pieces of gold artefacts: part of a jewellery strap; a sheet fragment with incised decoration; part of a ring; as well as a piece of "irregularly" shaped foil, possibly for rework by a goldsmith.[46]

According to ancient Javanese inscriptions from the 9th to 10th century CE, there were two types of jewellery artisans. The first category lived within the palace compound and made ornaments solely for the royal family. The second category fulfilled village commissions, with the ring makers (*pasisim* in Old Javanese) considered a special class of jeweller.[47] This is because gold rings with auspicious inscriptions (*simsim prasada mas* in Old Javanese) may also have been used as "special purpose" currency for temple donations and ritual offerings.[48] This may have been the case for ancient Temasek.

Gold was a medium of exchange on the island in the 14th century. Chinese traders used something called "red gold" (紫金) as a form of currency in places such as Longyamen (龍牙門) and Banzu (班卒) on the island, thought to be located at or near the Singapore Straits.[49]

If lead or mercury vessels were found, this could be evidence of local gold working as these vessels were used to help separate gold from the ore. There is a theory that a type of stoneware jar found in large numbers in soil layers dating to the 14th century in several sites in Singapore, as well as other sites in Southeast Asia such as Kota Cina in Sumatra and Kedah and Pahang on the Malay Peninsula, were used for that very purpose. However, a recent study has cast doubt on this theory

(Below) Replica of the Padang Roco Mahākāla statue with a Kāla belt at Museum Siginjei Jambi, 2013. *Courtesy of Foo Shu Tieng.*

(Bottom) A temple relief thought to depict smithing activities in Candi Sukuh, Central Java. Gold was sometimes used in Hindu-Buddhist temple consecrations. *Courtesy of Foo Shu Tieng.*

as the shape of the vessel is unlikely to be suited for carrying mercury.[50]

Another opportunity for the study of gold artefacts in Singapore is the octagonal gold cup from the Tang dynasty shipwreck discovered by fishermen near the island of Belitung, Indonesia, in 1998. (This was the wreck of an Arabian dhow that might have sunk around 830 CE on its return journey from China to Arabia.) The gold cup may have been made by Tang artisans in the style of Sogdian[51] silverware from Central Asia from the mid-700s CE. Why the cup was in a ship in Southeast Asian waters is a mystery yet to be fully solved.[52]

Javanese-style gold jewellery dating back to the Majapahit period was discovered at Fort Canning in Singapore during excavation works in 1928. *Courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.*

Further Research

While some strides have been made in the study of gold in Southeast Asia, there are still some research gaps that need to be filled. Exploring the history of mining in the region can help with gold sourcing studies, for example. In addition, scholars have begun to collate historical, ethnographic and archaeological data on gold and present these as part of a geographic information system to analyse gold trade networks.[53]

Although modern scholarship continues to advance our knowledge of ancient gold in the region, the ability to uncover such information is becoming more difficult due to illicit trafficking of antiquities. Therefore, we have to ensure that such tangible heritage be safeguarded and documented where possible for the benefit of future generations. ♦

NOTES

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Strange Visions of Singapore and the Malay Peninsula

From a letter written by a human-monkey chimera to a dog who became king, **Benjamin J.Q. Khoo** regales us with four fantastical tales that reflect European views of Southeast Asia.

From the 16th to 18th centuries, European ships returned from their sojourns to distant lands carrying not only shipments of fine spices and finer haberdasheries but also descriptions of these faraway places. Some of these were published based on first-hand observations and are unparalleled in historical detail, while others are highly embellished accounts, infused with heightened sentiments of atypicality and danger. Mixed in with this basket are fictional accounts that occasionally mirror closely the narratives of real ones.

Many of these adventures proved to be endlessly entertaining and were remarkably popular. Indeed, the enduring appeal of these accounts lies in the fact that they provided readers with "the shoes of flight", allowing them to dream of mobility in an age when travel was largely inaccessible and imagine societies vastly different from the ones they lived in.[1]

Unbeknownst to many, Singapore and the Malay Peninsula, situated as they were at the crossroads of an increasingly curious and interconnected world, also featured in these flights of fancy.

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Whence Solomon's Ships Return

For would-be explorers and adventurers of the sea, the Bible contains lines of tempting mystery. In the Book of Kings, it is written: "And King Solomon made a navy of ships in Eziongeber, which is beside Eloth, on the shore of the Red Sea, in the land of Edom. And Hiram sent in the navy his servants, shipmen that had knowledge of the sea, with the servants of Solomon. And they came to Ophir, and fetched from thence gold, four hundred and twenty talents, and brought it to King Solomon."[2] But gold was not all that Ophir produced; the ships of Solomon also brought back other commodities: silver, ivory, apes and peacocks, algum-wood and precious stones.[3]

Where, then, is this Ophir? To date, there is no agreement. Suggested locations extend from Arabia, Peru, India and Ceylon to numerous places in Southeast Asia, including the Malay Peninsula (which Greek and Roman geographers of classical antiquity called the "Golden Chersonesus", meaning the "Golden Peninsula").

Given the speculation as to its location, it is not at all surprising to learn that Singapore was also touted as a possible site for the mystical Ophir. This suggestion was advanced by the Calabrian theologist, geographer and occasional demonologist, Giovanni Lorenzo d'Anania.

In his *Universale Fabrica del Mondo, overo Cosmografia* (*Universal Fabric of the World, or Cosmography*), d'Anania takes his reader on a veritable tour of the known 16th-century world. The first and second editions contain nothing extraordinary but it is the third edition, published in 1582, that includes certain interesting additions about Singapore.[4]

"But we return", d'Anania writes, "close to the equinox, beyond the cape of Singapura, which overlooks the southern part of the continent, where many islands extending east are [located]".[5]

Many of these places that d'Anania mentions make little sense to us today: there is Temian, Campar and the island of Poverera, and close by the shallows of Capaccia, the mouth of the river Dara, Capasiacar, with the little islet of Canados, then Ciagna and Saban and its Strait Calatigan, and after that, Andrapara and Manancavo, where great quantities of gold can be found.

However, after the roving eye is satisfied, presumably with the aid of a map, d'Anania directs the reader to "make a turn towards Singapura" where "quantities of ivory, aloe[wood] and all sorts of aromatics" can be found, the island "to which Solomon's fleet navigates every year from the Red Sea".[6]

Singapore's tenuous connection to Solomon's Ophir likely rests on the famed wealth of the island as a centre of trade and a collection point for the merchandise of the world, for which it was known in earlier times. As d'Anania, approximating knowledge from the Portuguese historian João de Barros, relates, Singapura was a "market" (*mercato*), where all the vessels of India and China sailed to. This entrepot was later abandoned for the traffic of Melaka.[7]

The Monkey's Letter

If Ophir seems familiar, much less well-known are the fantasies of the French writer Nicolas-Edme Rétif. Rétif, who used the pen name Restif de la Bretonne, was the author of several salacious titles such as *Le Paysan Perverti* (*The Perverted Peasant*; 1775), *Le Pornographe* (*The Pornographer*; 1769) and *L'Anti-Justine; ou, Les Delices de l'amour* (*The Anti-Justine; or, The Delights of Love*; 1798). In all, Rétif produced over 200-odd works ranging from biographies to science fiction and short stories, covering topics that vary from politics to incest.

(Facing page) Detail showing Singapore and the Malay Peninsula from the map titled *Les Isles de la Sonde entre lesquelles sont Sumatra, Java, Borneo, &c. (The Sunda islands among which are Sumatra, Java, Borneo, etc.)* by Nicolas Sanson, 1652. *Collection of the National Library, Singapore (Accession no. B16132429F).*

(Top right) Portrait of French writer Nicolas-Edme Rétif, who used the pen name Restif de la Bretonne. Among his more successful works is *La Découverte Australe par un Homme-volant, ou Le Dédale Francais*, published in 1781. *Retrieved from Wikimedia Commons.*

(Below) "Solomon Receiving the Queen of Sheba" by Peter Paul Rubens, 1620. Solomon is seen receiving gold, spices and precious stones, similar to the ships from Ophir. *Image from Courtauld Institute.*

Among his moderately successful publications is one often acclaimed as a proto-work of science fiction, *La Découverte Australe par un Homme-volant, ou le Dédale Francais* (*The Southern Discovery by a Flying Man, or the French Daedalus*).[8] Published in 1781 in four volumes, it is a novel of great eccentricity and social critique although its shock value has been very much blunted by the passage of time.

In the third volume is a transcript of a letter written by a fantastical half-monkey to his species. Titled *Lettre d'un Singe* (*Letter by a Monkey*), the epistle relates the extraordinary circumstances of his plight and plea.

This demi-simian was said to be born of a union between a woman of Melaka and a baboon. Considered an abomination, the chimera was destined to be drowned but a

La
Découverte auſtrale
Par un Homme-volant,
ou
Le Dédale français;
Nouvelle très-philosophique:
Suivie de la Lettre d'un Singe, &c.
Troisième Volume:
Imprimé à Leipſick:
Et se trouve à Paris.

(Right) Title page of *La Découverte Australe par un Homme-volant, ou Le Dédale Francais* (1781) by Nicolas-Edme Rétif. *Retrieved from Gallica, Bibliothèque Nationale de France.*

(Below) César of Melaka, the human-monkey, writing a letter to his own species. *Image reproduced from Nicolas Edme Restif de La Bretonne, La Découverte Australe par un Homme-volant, ou Le Dedale Francais, vol. 3 (Paris: Leipzig, 1781). Retrieved from Gallica, Bibliothèque Nationale de France.*

European trader who happened to be on the "Peninsula of Singapore" saved him. He was christened César and later given to an Australian at the Cape of Good Hope. From there, the creature was transferred to a certain *Salocin-emdé-fitre* (an anagram of Nicolas-Edme Rétif), who made him a present to a respectable dame thereafter.[9] Now writing from Paris, where he had been brought up and educated in human ways, César of Melaka had cause to write a lengthy diatribe against the race of men to his apish brethren.

Man, the "king of the world (*roi du monde*)", César rages, only thinks of inflicting misery, perpetuating fopperies, and consecrating barbarism in blasphemy of the laws of nature and religion. He espouses equality and fraternity but contradicts his own ideals.[10] He is cruel and hypocritical, especially in enslaving his fellow men, and exhibits slavish pretence to religion. And as he builds up his arguments, César of Melaka twists his verbal knife – it is Man who is the true chimera, "engendered of a Tiger and a Hyena", with his brutal lust for cruelty and violence.

To his simian brothers, César exhorts a singular warning – apes should not ape man, for he is a base ape. The dream of humanity is a mere nightmare. "Yes, fortunately I am a monkey," he writes, "and not subject to human laws and prejudices!"[11]

Rétif's monkey from the Peninsula or Strait of Singapore mixes natural and colonial history, scientific imagination and lively anecdotes into a trenchant social critique of his times that would not be out of place given his revolutionary milieu. However, if change was afoot, we would certainly be surprised if it concerned a royal pooch.

The Dog Who Became King

In 1860, the Parisian elites were witness to the ill-starred debut of *Barkouf* by Jacques Offenbach, a German-born French composer, cellist and impresario of the Romantic period. Over three acts, the audience was treated to courtly intrigues, forced marriages and foreign invasions within an entirely fictitious Mughal Empire, the comic genius of the piece being sustained by a dog, the titular character of the opera, who is appointed to the reins of governorship. Offenbach had exercised much creative licence; in fact, he had lifted much of his opera from a fable set in the Malay Peninsula. The original 1784 work, titled *Mani et Barkouf*, came from the pen of the Abbé François Blanchet, a French priest.

In the original tale, there was once a certain mandarin, the viceroy of Johor, who ruled his province with an iron fist. Injustice and cruelty led the people to rebel, defenestrate their tyrant and declare their independence. This uprising came to incur the wrath of King Chaou-Malon of Siam, who arrived with his army to subjugate Johor. Frightened at the king's might, the Johorese quickly surrendered and submitted in tears, and their chiefs were brought before the Siamese king on the back of elephants.

"Base vermins [in other versions, vile insects] who have dared to offend the King of the White Elephant," the king thundered, "you do not deserve to be governed by one of my mandarins". He then summoned his dog Barkouf and placed it on the throne of Johor. Turning then to a Chinese man named Mani, who had long been established in Johor, he appointed him as prime minister and directed him to manage the affairs of the king.

After the Siamese king departed, both mutt and man got on extremely well. Each played his role to perfection; the dog Barkouf strutted in pageantry and presided over his royal councils, while the minister Mani reformed the laws and enhanced the prosperity of the state.

The province of Johor was well governed until an army of barbarians from the "Peninsula of Melaka" attacked. Barkouf and Mani rallied the troops and together they drove out the intruders, winning a great victory. But alas! Barkouf the sultan was wounded in battle and died from a poisoned dart. Mani then led a deputation to report this sorry news to the king of Siam.

Pleading for a successor, Mani cried, "deign therefore to order that we always be under the rule of a mastiff!" Upon hearing this, King Chaou-Malon grew pensive. "If the people bestow too much regard to their quadrupeds as chiefs," he mused, "they might grow restless and rebel against the rule of my mandarins. Why, even my own royal crown might be endangered by a dog!"

The cover of the musical score (1861) for Jacques Offenbach's *Barkouf. Retrieved from Gallica, Bibliothèque Nationale de France.*

Ruminating thus, the king decreed that his mandarin, Miracha, should take charge of the province of Johor instead. Needless to say, the people lived unhappily ever after as the king's minister was incomparable to the ruler-dog. Blanchet's moral is this: "the next best to an efficient emperor is an indifferent prince who delegates to an able minister."[12]

Monarch haters, dog lovers and the general cognoscenti were tickled pink by this entirely fictitious fable of the dog-king of Johor. The story was reprinted in many fashionable magazines of the day, such as *The Universal Magazine of Knowledge of Pleasure*, *The Edinburgh Magazine*, *The Lady's Magazine*, and even in *La Feuille Villageoise* (*The Village Paper*). Such was the story's prominence that it was also rendered into poetry in French and English, and later, as we know, turned into an opera. Blanchet's story was immensely creative and entertaining. But we save the fullest and most imaginative tale for the last.

A caricature of Jacques Offenbach by French caricaturist André Gill, with Barkouf the dog in the lower right, 1866. Jacques Offenbach composed the music for *Barkouf*, his opera bouffe in three acts, which premiered at the Opéra-Comique in 1860. *Retrieved from Gallica, Bibliothèque Nationale de France.*

An Antipodean Arcadia

In 1718, a travelogue divided into four parts appeared in print with the title *Relations de Divers Voyages Faits dans l'Afrique, dans l'Amerique, et aux Indes Occidentales* (*Relation of Several Voyages made to Africa, America, and the East Indies*).[13] This account concerns the life story of the French naval officer Dralsé de Grandpierre who, at 16, runs away from his father's house in Rochefort, southwestern France, for Bueno Aires.[14] From Argentina, we follow him on his various adventures, from his capture and imprisonment by the English to his travels into parts of Africa. Later, he becomes involved in the slave trade and travels to places such as Martinique, Benin and Mexico.

Grandpierre was a keen observer of the places he visited and their inhabitants, and such is the value of his work that historians have referenced it in their research. There is, however, one small problem: his voyages were all imaginary. Besides the entirely fictitious nature of some of his travels, no other external verifications of Dralsé de Grandpierre himself seem to exist. But before we dismiss this fiction out of hand, his work contains a story within a story, describing a marvellous island newly discovered in the Straits of Singapore, bearing a name many might find familiar.

The story of Grandpierre's voyage and discovery of this wonderful and mysterious island begins with a description of his position in the straits between Johor and Sumatra. "As we advanced through this Strait," Grandpierre relates, "we find there such a great quantity of islands that we know not the number of."[15]

Later, Grandpierre's vessel narrowly escaped shipwreck and dropped anchor in the straits for a few days. It was then that Grandpierre and his crew noticed a small prow sailing towards them, carrying a woman, three men and a young child. Two distinguished-looking young men boarded Grandpierre's ship, and were given food and lodging. They subsequently tell our protagonist their story.

The two young men turned out to be princes of Golconda (in Hyderabad). After the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb took the Kingdom of Golconda in 1687, as they related to Grandpierre, their grandmother, a member of the dispersed harem, escaped with her infant daughter. The daughter grew up, married a general and lived in luxury. However, after giving birth to two sons, her husband died while fighting a war. The family lost their wealth and were reduced to poverty. Beset by sudden destitution, their mother brought the two young boys to São Tomé de Mylapore (present-day Chennai) where she sought the protection of a rich Portuguese man. Although he took them in, he later brought the boys to Macau and left them there.

After reaching man's estate, the two princes longed to see their mother again. So when the two young princes met a group of Chinese men headed to Batavia (present-day Jakarta), they decided to join them, hoping to then find a way back to India. However, after encountering a vicious tempest near the island of Pedra Branca (a small island about 24 nautical miles, or 44 km, to the east of Singapore), all lives were lost except for the two fortunate princes who ended up hopping from island to island in search of sustenance. After wandering about and barely surviving, they arrived at a fourth island where they stumbled upon a settlement.

It was then that the two princes discovered, to their great surprise, not only did the people speak the Malabar language (*Lingua Malabar Tamul*) but that the community was made up of other survivors from Malabar who were also shipwrecked on the same island. After they had explained their life story and how they came to be shipwrecked, the villagers decided to welcome them with open arms. The two princes were brought betel and tobacco, toured the settlement and were generally feted by all. And as they celebrated, recounting their story to every curious individual, one of the women suddenly fainted.

An aquatint print of Pedra Branca with dark storm clouds in the background by Thomas Daniell and his nephew William Daniell, 1810. The two princes of Golconda were said to be shipwrecked off this island, which is located about 24 nautical miles (44 km) to the east of Singapore. *Courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.*

The following morning brought more drama. The woman who had collapsed the night before entered their chamber and asked the princes to continue with the rest of the story. When they had finished, she fell on them, saying, "Ah my children! My dear children! It's you, I have the pleasure to see you both… the joy to be reunited! O heavens, is it possible?"[16] Soon after, the story of this wonderful reunion spread throughout the whole settlement, bringing joy to all and sundry.

This island is no ordinary place, recounts Grandpierre to his readers. Here was a true picture of the "Age of Gold". Friendship and harmony reigned, liberty of religion existed, egality subsisted, there was no lack of needs and joy flourished always. There were no judges, no lawyers, no executioners and no need of doctors even, since the air was the best in the world, and for over 20 years only 10 had died due to natural causes.

Their mother's tale, how she ended up on the island and how they strove to build this perfect society, is perhaps a tale too long to be repeated here, but it suffices to know, as the princes said, "there is no one happier than he who lives on this island".[17] If there was one slight imperfection, which induced the princes to leave, it was that there was no priest, sacrament nor proper church – this their belief could not abide by.

Such was the tale the princes related to Grandpierre and they made him promise to tell no one lest the island should fall under the domination of the Dutch, who were the dominant foreign power in the region at the time. This island was named Isle de la Pierre Blanche ("pierre blanche" being French for "white stone", which is also what "Pedra Branca"[18] means in Portuguese), a Malabarese Arcadia, whose location was kept secret among the innumerable islands in the straits between Johor and Sumatra.

Setting the Imaginary Against the Real

These four entertaining vignettes that touch on Singapore and the Malay Peninsula represent a chronicle of encounters that Europeans had with the region. These fantasies draw upon real and historical information for narrative verisimilitude, revealing not only that knowledge of Singapore and the Malay Peninsula was available and circulated among the European reading public between the 16th and 18th centuries, but also that it was consciously and creatively put to use.

It is also easy to see how these stories closely reflect European intellectual concerns as we move through space and time. Whether it is a search for the biblical Ophir, meeting animals that criticise the prevailing social mores and cultural practices, or encountering utopian societies of idealised equality, what we glimpse are the contours of a distinctively European imagination, tied to the events and preoccupations of the period the tales were produced.[19]

Finally, we also have to be aware that these imaginative visions impinge upon the realities of the world they drew inspiration from. These stories work to assemble and reduce the complex realities of these very real places to the level of stereotypes. This can be gleaned from the last two narratives, where the region was used as a canvas for a utopia or a place where a dog can be king, an image of nonsensical despotism allowed free rein.

Fuelled by expanding geographical knowledge, the writers of these fantastical stories tried to make sense of change in the world, all the while changing how people made sense of the world. ♦

NOTES

1 Mary B. Campbell, *The Witness and the Other World: Exotic European Travel Writing, 400–1600* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 146. (Not available in NLB holdings)

2 1 Kings 9:26–28. The Holy Bible (King James Version).

3 Other mentions of Ophir in the Bible can be found in 1 Kings 10:12, 14; 1 Kings 10:21–23; 2 Chronicles 8:16.

4 Giovanni Lorenzo d'Anania, *L'universale Fabrica Del Mondo, overo Cosmografia Divisa in Quattro Trattati* (Venezia: Presso il Muschio, 1582), 265, Internet Archive, https://archive.org/details/ARes37419.

5 D'Anania, *L'universale Fabrica Del Mondo, overo Cosmografia Divisa in Quattro Trattati*, 265.

6 D'Anania, *L'universale Fabrica Del Mondo, overo Cosmografia Divisa in Quattro Trattati*, 268.

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HOW CHANGI AIRPORT CAME TO BE

As Singapore's Changi Airport marks its 40th anniversary in 2021, **Rebecca Tan** uncovers fascinating facts behind the decision to build the airport and how it eventually took shape.

On 1 July 1981 at 7.10 am, SQ 101 made history when it became the first commercial flight to land at the newly opened Changi Airport. The plane arrived from Kuala Lumpur's Subang Airport and carried 140 passengers, some of whom had especially travelled to the Malaysian capital just so that they could be on this flight.

To mark the occasion, all passengers received certificates and were treated to a lion dance and a pipe band performance upon arrival. Less than an hour later, SQ 192 headed for Penang, becoming the first flight to depart from Changi.[1]

In the four decades since, Changi Airport has grown from strength to strength; it is regularly voted one of the top airports in the world and has helped turn Singapore into a major aviation hub and international gateway. Today, it is hard to imagine Singapore without Changi Airport and its iconic control tower. However, what many people do not know is the particular set of circumstances that led to its existence.

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Changi Versus Paya Lebar

Before Changi Airport opened in 1981, commercial flights landed in Paya Lebar Airport, which had begun operations in 1955. However, within two decades, Paya Lebar's shortcomings became obvious.

"By mid 1970s, it was clear that Paya Lebar Airport would not be able to cope with the growing traffic for much longer," said Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew in 2006 at Changi Airport's 25th anniversary dinner. "We needed a bigger airport, with at least two runways. The proposal put to me was to expand Paya Lebar and construct a second runway."[2]

External consultants recommended expanding Paya Lebar's terminals and building a second runway by filling up the nearby Serangoon river. "This would be a difficult engineering task because of the soft clay of the river bed, so it would need special compaction equipment," he noted.[3]

But Lee was not keen on expanding Paya Lebar Airport. "I felt then that Paya Lebar had inherent disadvantages. It was located near the city centre. Expansion would be limited. Worse, noise and air pollution would become worse because the flight path footprint was already over our city centre."[4]

The alternative was to build a new airport in Changi, taking over the former Royal Air Force base there. Such an airport would be located away from the city centre and flights into and out of Changi would be over water. In addition, there was the possibility of future expansion by reclaiming land.

Lee revealed that the consultants initially had not recommended Changi because of "the cost of relocating to Changi plus the loss of $800 million in investments already made on Paya Lebar". He recalled that the Cabinet had reluctantly agreed to the decision to build the airport at Changi.[5]

Before the plan could be implemented, however, the world was gripped by the oil crisis that began in 1973. The price of oil had quadrupled leading to a reduction in air traffic. Also, with the larger-capacity Boeing 747s taking to the skies and carrying more passengers, there were fewer smaller planes landing at Paya Lebar. All these meant that the pressure on the airport was reduced and the need for a second runway became less pressing.

"I appointed Howe Yoon Choong, then chairman of the Port of Singapore Authority, to head a team to study if we could move to Changi in time before a second runway was necessary," Lee recalled. "The team concluded that Changi was possible and could be ready by 1981."[6]

In the early days, when Changi was still being considered, Pek Hock Thiam, director of the Ministry of Communications, organised helicopter and Skyvan trips for airport development committee members and ministers, including Lee, to view the Changi site. He recalled their excitement mixed with the fear of the unknown. As Pek noted: "There was nothing there. Worse, we knew that half the land for the airport would have to come from the sea. Who would believe we could create so much land in 2½ years?"[7]

The final decision to build the new airport at Changi came quickly. "Although [the] cost of relocating the airport to Changi was high, some $1.5 billion", Lee believed that this would be the better option in the long term. When Lee was in Washington in April 1975, Goh Keng Swee, as acting prime minister, sent him an urgent message to say that a quick decision had to be made if Changi Airport was to be built by 1981.[8] Lee cabled back and told Goh to proceed.

(Facing page) Singapore Airlines and Scoot planes at Changi Airport. In the background is the iconic control tower. Photo by Shawn Ang, 16 March 2020. *Retrieved from Unsplash.*

(Below) Paya Lebar Airport, 1960s. The airport only had a single runway. Seen on the tarmac is a plane belonging to the Malaysia-Singapore Airlines which existed from 1966 to 1972. The predecessor of Singapore Airlines. *Courtesy of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.*

(Bottom) Aerial photograph of the Royal Air Force base in Changi, 1950s. In 1975, parts of the air base were acquired to build Changi Airport. *RAFSA Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

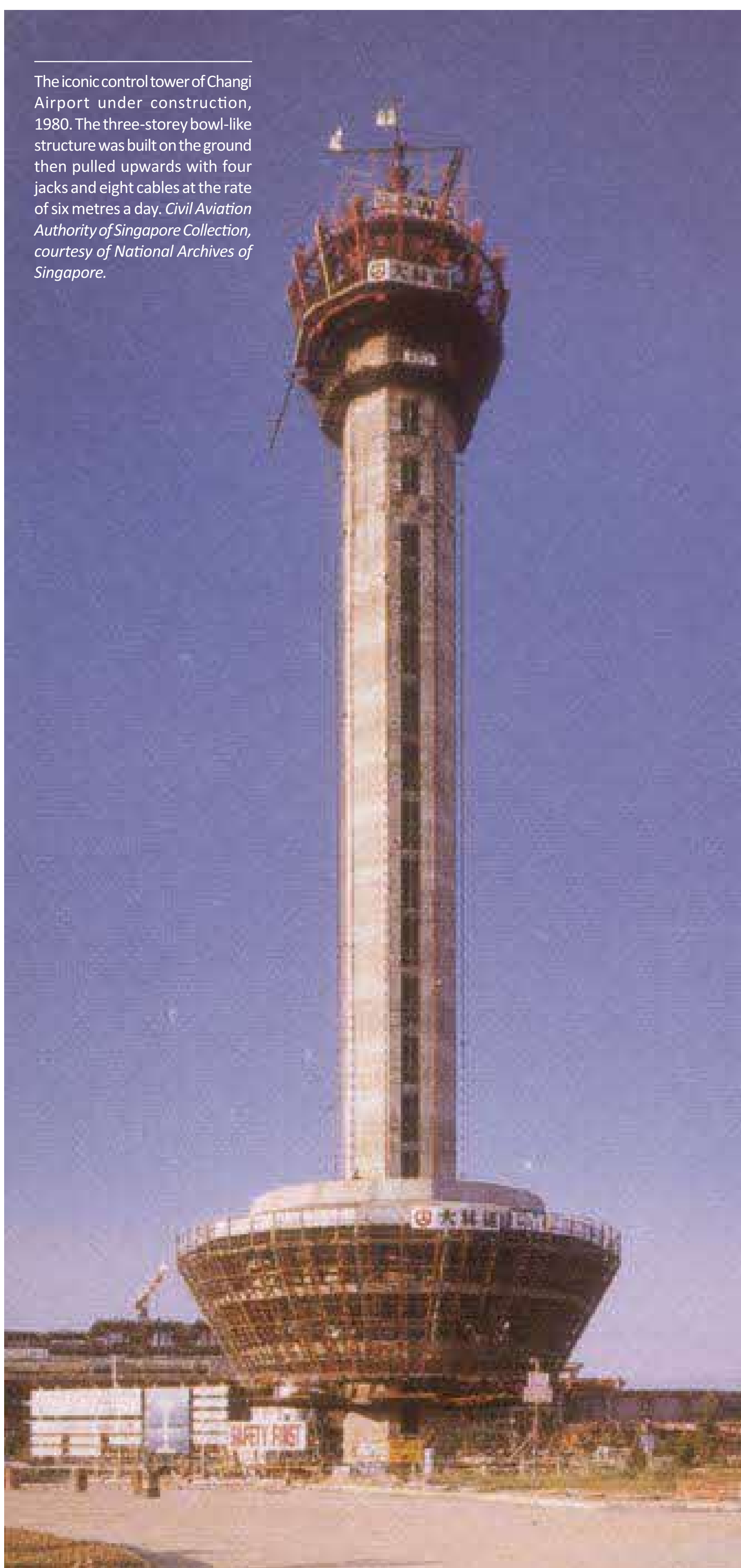
Building Changi

To coordinate and lead the development of the airport, Sim Kee Boon, permanent secretary at the Ministry of Communications, was appointed chairman of the Executive Committee for Airport Development (ECAD). Howe Yoon Chong, who chaired the airport steering committee, was responsible for updating Lee on Changi's progress.

Changi Airport was planned to be at least five times bigger than Paya Lebar Airport. To accommodate the new airport, existing land had to be cleared and new land reclaimed.

Site preparations began in June 1975, which eventually involved demolishing 558 buildings, exhuming 4,096 graves and clearing nearly 200 acres (80 hectares) of swampland.[9]

The land reclamation was a mammoth undertaking as 870 hectares of land had to be reclaimed. While some 200 hectares came from cutting down hills on existing land, the rest was reclaimed from the sea. This called for the use of five giant cutter suction dredgers, each



The iconic control tower of Changi Airport under construction, 1980. The three-storey bowl-like structure was built on the ground then pulled upwards with four jacks and eight cables at the rate of six metres a day. *Civil Aviation Authority of Singapore Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

costing $50 million. Operating some 3 kilometres from the shore, the five machines began dredging up 50,000 cubic metres of earth each day. And this was just at the start of the project; running at full capacity, these machines were expected to double the output. Some 41 million cubic metres of earth were sucked out by pumps and conveyed by 10 kilometres of metal pipeline to the filling site.[10]

Other infrastructural projects included reconstructing and extending the existing military runway to double its length from 2,000 to 4,000 metres. A 40-aircraft parking apron, taxiways, earthworks and drainage were also constructed. Apart from the infrastructure of the airport, there was also the design and building of the airport terminal as well.

Although the passenger terminal building was based on an initial plan submitted for the expansion of Paya Lebar, the final design for Changi deviated significantly from this. Sim noted that the original design gave "very little consideration to aesthetics". "We finally decided that the airport should be an extension of our garden city," he said. "This is because the first point of contact for the tourist visiting Singapore, apart from your Singapore Airlines girl in the plane, is the airport. So we took great care to combine the aesthetics with the functional aspects."[11]

One key change that occurred was the location of the now-iconic control tower. Built at a cost of $8.5 million, it was originally meant to be situated on top of an administration building. However, that would leave the airport without a focal point. "Finally, we decided to have the control tower as the focal point and to put the administration block over the finger piers," said Sim.[12] In all, the air traffic control tower's design underwent more than 20 changes before the final design was approved.

Given the scale of the Changi Airport project, the construction process inevitably encountered numerous challenges. Takao Kitamura, the director in charge of international operations at Takenaka Komuten, the main contractor for the airport's passenger terminal building, recalled that after the company began work on the project, the price of sand rose by about 300 percent, and labour costs rose by 50 percent.

Extremely detailed plans were also necessary. "We even had to plan where to deliver the materials," he said. "If you deliver them at one end of the building, it could be a one-kilometre walk to the other end."[13]

Even something as mundane as the weather could throw a spanner in the works. Every time it rained, workers would not show up for work. In fact, on one occasion in 1978, a flood turned a basement into a veritable swimming pool and ruined the expensive machinery there, holding up work for a month. The challenges extended even to landscaping. Pek Hock Thiam recalled: "I had to argue, beg and cajole the Parks and Recreation Department to give us big trees instead of small trees."[14]

The Changi project had a very tight deadline because Paya Lebar was approaching saturation, which is why an arrival hall had to be built there as a temporary measure. To ensure that Changi would not be delayed, Sim said that there had to be a mindset shift in the Public Works Department, which was in charge of building the airport.

"The traditional method of operation is that the [Public Works Department] engineers supervise the contractor who does the work. After that, if the contractor has a problem, the engineers will say it is not their problem. So if the contractor goes bankrupt, too bad. Employ another one. If the project is delayed, never mind, because the time factor is usually not critical. But for us, it was.

"So very early on, we impressed on all the officers that the contractors problems were their problems, and in the end, my problems, because I'm in charge."[15]

Preparing for the Big Day

As with any big event, there were a number of dry runs before actual operations commenced on 1 July 1981. The first test flight, a Boeing 747, touched down at 7.25 pm on 13 May – two weeks before the big day.[16]

The first flight with paying passengers, SQ 100, landed on 31 May at 9.50 am. It was a chartered flight with 246 passengers, comprising mainly families with children. Organised by a travel agent, the flight had taken off from Paya Lebar Airport and flown up the east coast of peninsular Malaysia to Mersing before turning back and touching down at Changi.[17]

Lee Kee Foon, a housewife who flew first class with her family, said: "We wanted to see Changi Airport before it is open to the public." After the flight, passengers were each presented with a souvenir medallion and flight certificate.[18]

Switching over from one airport to another was no easy task. As Bernard Chen, assistant secretary at the Ministry of Finance, noted: "Very few people appreciate this – we moved from Paya Lebar to Changi in one night without any disruption in [air transport] service… Everything was ready. We didn't have to bus anybody back."[19]

(Below) Passengers on board Singapore Airlines flight SQ 101 from Kuala Lumpur to Singapore on 1 July 1981. It carried 140 passengers, some of whom had especially travelled to the Malaysian capital to board the flight. *Image reproduced from The Straits Times, 2 July 1981, 8. (From NewspaperSG).*

(Bottom) Passengers boarding a Singapore Airlines flight at Changi Airport, 1981. *Civil Aviation Authority of Singapore Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

TESTIMONIAL of the historic occasion — passengers on the first flight into Changi receive certificates to commemorate the event. — Picture by TAN WEE HIM.

SQ 101 makes first Changi landing with 140

In addition to careful planning and dry runs, the authorities also went abroad to learn from the experience of other airports.

"The Civil Aviation Authority sent officers to observe moving operations in

Taiwan when they switched operation from the old airport to Chiang Kai-shek Airport at Taoyuan," said Ong Teng Cheong, who was minister for communications between 1978 and 1983. "They also went to Tokyo to see the [move] from Haneda to Narita… So it's a question of observing the experience of others and planning carefully for our own switching-over operation."[20]

The last plane to land at Paya Lebar – SQ 11 from Los Angeles and Tokyo – did so at 10.50 pm on 30 June 1981, while the last commercial flight, SQ 28 to Abu Dhabi and Frankfurt, left shortly after at 11 pm. That same night, personnel from the Republic of Singapore Air Force arrived with all the equipment necessary to facilitate Paya Lebar Airport's conversion into a military air base.[21]

Expanding Changi

Changi Airport began operations on 1 July 1981 with just one terminal and one runway. Work on the second runway was completed in 1983 and commissioned the following year. To cope with increased passenger traffic, Terminal 2 was opened in November 1990, while Terminal 3 began operations on 1 January 2007.

In 2006, the Budget Terminal commenced operations. This was built in response to the increasing trend of low-cost travel in the region, but it closed in 2012 to make way for the construction of Terminal 4, which opened in 2017.[22]

Over the years, Changi also improved on its connectivity with the city centre. In 2001, the Changi Airport Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) station on the East-West Line was opened. Such a link had not been viable back in the 1980s when most of the land around the airport was relatively undeveloped.[23] In future, the airport will be accessible from the city via the Thomson-East Coast Line as well.[24]

In 2008, Changi Airport Group was formed as a result of the corporatisation of Changi Airport.[25] One of the key projects it subsequently embarked on was building Jewel Changi Airport, a large shopping and entertainment complex that opened on

(Below) Air traffic controllers at work in the control tower of Changi Airport, 1985. *Civil Aviation Authority of Singapore Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

(Bottom) The finger pier at Changi Airport Terminal 2, 1996. *Civil Aviation Authority of Singapore Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

NOTES

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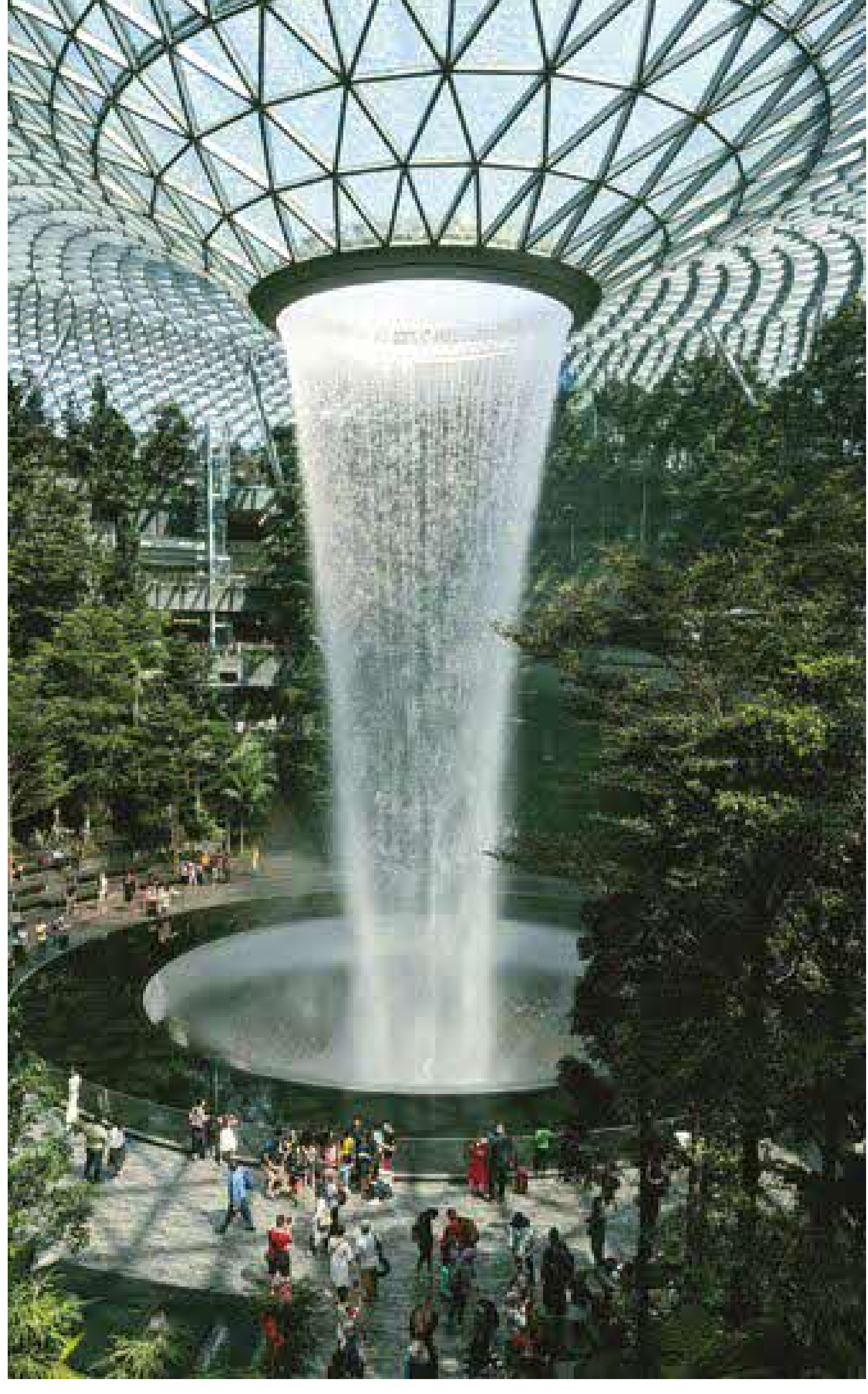
The Rain Vortex at Jewel Changi Airport. With water cascading down 40 metres, it is the world's tallest indoor waterfall. Photo by Jansen Yang, 8 October 2019. *Retrieved from Unsplash.*



17 April 2019. A joint venture between Changi Airport Group and CapitaMalls Asia, the project took three years to gain the approval of Singapore's Cabinet.[26]

Awards, Accolades and the Future

Over the years, Changi has developed an international reputation. In 1988, just seven years after it opened, *Business Traveller UK* magazine rated Changi Airport as the world's best airport; it had been number two in the previous four years.[27] The following year, airport officials from 16 countries visited Changi Airport to attend a seven-week airport management course, learning from Changi's experiences.[28]

Changi has since gone on to win many other such awards: it clinched the "Best Airport in the World" award from *Business Traveller US* a total of 27 times between 1991 and 2020.[29]

Changi Airport turned 40 in 2021 in what is a very challenging time for the air travel industry. The Covid-19 pandemic has upended business and leisure travel globally, leading to a reduction in passenger air traffic everywhere. As a result of the pandemic, Changi's own passenger traffic levels dropped by over 80 percent between 2019 and 2020.[30] Changi Airport Group lost a significant revenue stream, while shops and restaurants in the terminals continued to suffer.

Speaking in Parliament in October 2020, then Transport Minister Ong Ye Kung said that the government would support Changi Airport Group and other companies in the aviation sector, "[b]ut the most meaningful support we can give to our aviation companies is to restore passenger traffic and revive our air hub, in a safe, in a controlled manner".[31]

As vaccination rates rise in Singapore and the country moves towards dealing with Covid-19 as an endemic disease, air traffic through Changi Airport will hopefully increase. With the same foresight, fortitude and perseverance that led to its genesis, the fortunes of Changi will undoubtedly rise again. ♦

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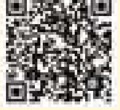
For more resources on Changi Airport's early years, scan this QR code.



Carving Cultural Imprints

THE HUI'AN IN SINGAPORE

A group of contractors from Hui'an county in China were responsible for building some of Singapore's iconic landmarks. **Athanasios Tsakonas** has the story.

In the heart of Geylang, along a nondescript lane inhabited by an assortment of clan associations, guild houses and Chinese temples, an unusual, grey-stone-clad boundary wall greets the casual observer. This masonry "canvas" is adorned with striking sculptured reliefs of what appears to be a bygone period out of China.

Upon closer observation, the artwork reveals a carefully choreographed narrative presenting the cultural identity of the occupants of the premises behind, the Singapore Hui An Association (新加坡惠安公会). A Hokkien (Fujian) clan association that traces its origins to 1924,[1] its present members are descended from immigrants who hailed from Hui'an, a county today under the jurisdiction of Quanzhou in China's Fujian province.

Taking centre stage on this wall is an image depicting a flotilla of traditional tri-masted Fujian junks with a radiating sun in the background (see above). The foreground depicts a man and woman grappling with a woven basket brimming with fish. Occupying the full height of the wall, the scene symbolises the virtue of honest toil that marks the seafaring people of Hui'an who have enjoyed a deep connection with the sea for centuries and prospered from it. It also evokes the trading activity that occurred in the port city of Quanzhou, one of the starting points of the historic maritime silk route. A close examination of the relief reveals a more detailed history and narrative of the Hui'an people.

To the immediate left of the central image of the man and woman is an oblique representation of a multi-pier stone bridge, upon which stands a formally garbed official. This is Luoyang Bridge (洛阳桥),[2] recognised as one of the four ancient bridges in China, and the man on it is its designer and builder, Cai Xiang (蔡襄, 1012–67), chief of Quanzhou prefecture, who was also a renowned calligrapher, structural engineer and poet. Spanning 1,200 metres, with 46 ship-shaped piers supporting its stone structure, the Luoyang Bridge's raft foundations were reinforced through the innovative breeding of oysters alongside, whose liquid secretion aided the binding of the footstones and thus solidified its base.

This bridge is significant as it is believed to be the first stone beam bridge constructed in China using a living organism to reinforce its structure. Further along the full span of this boundary wall, other structures are prominently depicted such as Mengjia Qingshan Temple (艋舺青山宫) in Wanhua District in Taipei,[3] the Jingfeng Temple (净峰寺) and Chongwu ancient city wall (崇武城墙) in Hui'an,[4] a mosque in Baiqi Xiang (百崎乡) in Hui'an, and a scene of Hui'an women constructing a dam.

Other buildings featured on the wall include the East Hui'an Overseas Chinese Hospital (惠安县惠东华侨医院) and Fujian Hui'an Kai Cheng Vocational Secondary School (福建惠安开成职业中专学校), both of which were constructed thanks to donations by Hui'an philanthropists from Singapore.[5]

Unveiled on 17 November 2012, this wall measuring almost 12 metres by 1.8 metres was the culmination of an endeavour that had commenced over a year before. It had become apparent to the association's leaders that there was a growing disconnect between their efforts to sustain the traditions and ancestral links to the "homeland", and the younger generation who are born and bred in Singapore.

The committee decided that an expression of the key elements of the Hui'an identity could be transposed onto a physical wall fronting their premises. This would provide both a reminder and introduction to the rich history of the Hui'an community, reinforcing their roots and cultural identity in China and throughout the overseas diaspora.[6]

Given that stone carving in Hui'an has a history of over 1,600 years and is listed as one of the national intangible cultural heritages of China, the committee agreed to engage a sculptor from Hui'an and use granite from the county to create this relief. Tellingly, it was then left to the appointed sculptor, Wang Xiangrong (王向荣), himself a fifth-generation artist and stone mason, to propose the key elements to the diorama.[7]

In all, the carvings on the wall show how the building and construction industry was instrumental in shaping and moulding the identity of the Hui'an craftsmen who came to Singapore in search of greener pastures.

Arrival of the Hui'an People

Located along China's southeastern coast of Fujian province, between Quanzhou and Meizhou Bay, Hui'an has come under different administrative jurisdictions throughout its history. During the Sui dynasty (581–618), Hui'an belonged to Nan'an county. In the ensuing Tang dynasty (618–907), it was handed over to Jinjiang county. In 981, Hui'an separated from Jinjiang and established itself as a separate county, before merging with Jinjiang, Tong'an, Nan'an and Anxi into the modern-day prefecture-level city of Quanzhou.

Whereas Quanzhou was connected to the internal China hinterland through its early trade networks, it was during the Song (960–1279) and Yuan (1279–1368) dynasties that this city would become an important centre for international commerce, which also facilitated extensive contact with foreign cultures and merchants. To promote trade, Quanzhou's internal infrastructure was greatly improved with roads, bridges and associated works.

This construction programme not only necessitated a great investment by the authorities but also brought with it the need for large numbers of highly qualified architects, engineers and tradespeople. At the same time, on account of Hui'an's vast repositories of granite, the stone industry flourished, with thousands of masons involved in stone-cutting and carving for such public utilities as gateways, sanctuaries and pagodas.[8]

Thanks to Quanzhou's deep-sea port, established trade routes and the overseas networks created by the Chinese diaspora, these stone commodities would subsequently find their way to and across Southeast Asia. According to Claudine Salmon and Myra Sidharta in their essay, "The Manufacture of Chinese Gravestones in Indonesia", it was the need for ballast on the sailing ships that provided the economic case for transporting stone from Hui'an to Southeast Asia. Both plentiful and inexpensive, these stone ballasts (壓船石; *yachuan shi*; literally "stones that keep the ship down") would be exchanged along the journey's various ports with an equivalent weight in commodities and goods for the return leg.[9]

(Facing page) A granite stone wall adorns the premises of the Singapore Hui An Association in Geylang. Taking centre stage on the wall is an image of a man and woman grappling with a woven basket brimming with fish, against a background of traditional Fujian junks and a radiating sun. *Photo courtesy of Jimmy Yap.*

(Below) Members of the Singapore Hui An Association outside their original association building at 7 Teo Hong Road during its 10th inauguration on 28 December 1947. *Singapore Hui An Association Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

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Both raw stone and carved slabs for tombstones, graves and temples also made their way across the South China Sea, bringing not only the products but also stamping the reputation of the Hui'an people for their quality material and workmanship. It was a prelude to the human capital that eventually arrived in the region in general and, Singapore in particular.

Following the arrival of Stamford Raffles in 1819 and the establishment of a British trading port thereafter, the early Chinese migration to Singapore was predominantly drawn from the Straits areas and southern China.[10] Significant migration from Quanzhou would only commence from the late 19th through to the beginning of the 20th centuries.

Arriving later, along with migrant groups from Fuzhou, Putian and Fuqing, the people from Hui'an would find that what profitable industries were available in Singapore had already been taken up by others so they initially settled as coolies (indentured labourers)[11] doing back-breaking work. Those who came from coastal northern Hui'an and were accustomed to the sea and fishing, made their home on large bumboats by the Singapore, Rochor and Kallang rivers, navigating between them and the coast for their livelihoods.[12] Others worked as rickshaw pullers or as labourers in the construction, mining and agriculture sectors in exchange for three meals a day.

Before the Hui An Association was founded in Singapore in 1924, early Hui'an immigrants sought out and received help from their fellow clansmen who had arrived before them. Their most pressing needs were finding accommodation and employment. Most lived in shophouses in the Tanjong Pagar area comprising Craig Road, Tras Street, Duxton Hill and Duxton Road in lodgings known colloquially as *coolie keng* (估里间; *gu li jian*). Here, dozens of men would be crammed into tiny, compartmentalised and windowless rooms – most without running water or proper sanitation – sleeping on tiered wooden bunk beds that were also shared. Despite the deplorable living conditions, these lodgings kept the new migrants together and afforded them some form of protection.

Faced with isolation, alliances between fellow Hui'an men would form, mostly through membership in secret societies or triad associations. In the case of the Craig Road and Duxton Hill areas, where the Hui'an migrants worked mainly as rickshaw pullers, membership was allied under the surnames of Ho, Chang and Chuang.[13]

For those Hui'an migrants with masonry or carpentry skills or who had valuable trade experience back home, Singapore's buoyant building and construction industry provided them with a myriad of opportunities. They began as subcontractors to more established entities before expanding their operations and becoming main contractors, inevitably encroaching into the domain of established European contractors.[14]

Many European firms took advantage of this situation by subcontracting to these Chinese companies. In many cases, the European firms would retain their names as principal contractors and supervise the work through their appointed resident engineers. In light of Japan's growing military might, the British authorities saw the need to further strengthen Singapore's defences, with opportunities arising in building as well as upgrading new and existing military camps and associated defence facilities. In turn, this productive period in building and construction work would help to elevate the reputation of these pioneering Hui'an contractors in Singapore.

Notable Hui'an Contractors

Soh Mah Eng

Alighting from his car on 31 March 1922 to the backdrop of curious onlookers at the Esplanade (now Padang) and a guard of honour consisting of 100 former servicemen, the Prince of Wales (later King Edward VIII) inspected this ceremonial guard before making his way to the foot of the war memorial, which was erected to honour 124 men from Singapore who had died in action in Europe during World War I. Delivering a speech extolling the virtues of bravery and sacrifice displayed by those men being commemorated, he proceeded to push a small button on the dais. With that action, a large Union Jack, fully draped over the structure, pulled away to reveal the new Cenotaph.[15]

Unveiling of the Cenotaph on 31 March 1922, officiated by the Prince of Wales. It was erected to honour 124 men from Singapore who had died in action in Europe during World War I. The contractor who built it is Soh Mah Eng. *Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

(Below) The China Building on Chulia Street, 1964. It was built by Chia Eng Say and completed in 1932. It later served as the headquarters of the Oversea-Chinese Banking Corporation arising from a merger of the Oversea-Chinese Bank and the Chinese Commercial Bank. *Kouo Shang-Wei Collection, PictureSG, National Library, Singapore.*

(Bottom) Soh Mah Eng was responsible for building the Cenotaph in 1922. *Courtesy of the Singapore Hui An Association.*

Following a short dedication by the Bishop of Singapore and the sounding of the last post and reveille, the prince, accompanied by Governor of the Straits Settlements Laurence Guillemard, greeted the invited dignitaries, which included the monument's lauded architect Denis Santry of architectural firm Swan & Maclaren. Among that gathered company of Singapore's building fraternity was Soh Mah Eng (苏马英), the contractor for the monument. The prince cordially shook his hand and even offered a few words of gratitude.[16] It was fitting recognition for this Hui'an native who had migrated to Singapore some 20 years earlier and subsequently through his company, Chin Hup Heng & Co., became a pioneer in the island's infrastructure development.

Modelled after the Whitehall Cenotaph in London, the 18-metre-tall Singapore Cenotaph, raised on a plinth, would be entirely constructed of local granite. Bronze tablets inscribed with the names of the fallen adorn its face.[17] Given its national significance, the quality of its finish was expected to be of the highest standard. The British colonial government, well aware of Hui'an's reputation with stone and already familiar with Soh's earlier work on Anderson Bridge, appointed him as the builder to undertake the main building works.

Finding himself short of manpower soon after commencing, Soh appealed to the authorities for additional labour and was allowed to recruit more than 200 skilled masons from his hometown village of Sukeng in Hui'an.[18] The Cenotaph was thus successfully completed on schedule. What is more significant, though, is that the memorial helped cement the Hui'an community's reputation for construction work in Singapore and provided the island with a future generation of skilled stone craftsmen as well.

Before long, fellow Hui'an natives such as Chia Eng Say, Chia Lay Phor, Ho Bock Kee, Zhuang Yuming, Lee Chwee Kim, Chng Gim Huat and Ong Chwee Kow to name but a few, would follow in Soh's footsteps and make a name for themselves. These men would be responsible for some of the most signifi-

cant landmarks in Singapore and Malaya. Furthermore they did not confine themselves to the construction industry, soon diversifying into industries such as quarrying, rubber, tin mining, steel, trading and development.

Chia Eng Say

Among the most prominent in this group is Chia Eng Say (谢荣西). Born in 1881 in Hui'an, Chia first moved with his father to Sumatra at the age of 11 and then to Singapore at the turn of the 20th century. He initially established himself in the import-export business before moving into construction and, in particular, the stone industry.

Chia owned several quarries in Bukit Timah, Mandai and Pulau Ubin. Granite extracted from Chia Eng Say Granite was used for the foundation of the Supreme Court building, the Naval Base at Sembawang as well as the Causeway, where he was a major subcontractor to Messrs Topham, Jones & Railton of London, which had been awarded the construction contract.[19]

Other notable projects to his name include the China Building (which became the headquarters of the Oversea-Chinese Banking Corporation after the merger of the Oversea-Chinese Bank and the Chinese Commercial Bank in 1932) on Chulia Street,[20] along with numerous schools and private residential estates in both Singapore and Penang. Such was his prominence within the local construction industry that the track in Bukit Timah upon which his quarry was located would be named Chia Eng Say Road. (This road was later expunged but the name was subsequently resurrected; today Chia Eng Say Road lives on in Upper Bukit Timah, just fronting The Rail Mall.[21])

It was in education that Chia would make his most important contribution. In 1929, he was appointed as the main contractor for the Chinese Industrial and Commercial Continuation School (南洋工商补习学校) on Outram Road at York Hill.[22] A decade later, Chia would join with fellow philanthropists to build Chung Cheng High School on Kim Yan Road in 1939,[23] making it one of the largest schools in Singapore and Malaya at the time. Sadly, on the final day of the Imperial Japanese Army's invasion of Singapore in February 1942, Chia would be caught in a crossfire between Japanese and Australian troops along Geylang Lorong 31 and mortally wounded.[24]

(Above) Chia Lay Phor being congratulated by Colonial Secretary Patrick A.B McKerron upon the completion of the Kallang Airport runways extension, 1949. *Courtesy of Joseph Chia.*

(Right) Self-made millionaire Chia Eng Say owned quarries in Bukit Timah, Mandai and Pulau Ubin, and even has a road named after him. His construction projects include the Causeway in 1924, the China Building on Chulia Street in 1932 (later the headquarters of the Oversea-Chinese Banking Corporation) and Chung Cheng High School in 1939. *Courtesy of the Singapore Hui An Association.*

Chia Lay Phor

Whereas Soh Mah Eng and Chia Eng Say arrived as children in Singapore and learnt their trade through their fathers, the same could not be said of Chia Lay Phor (谢荔圃), the nephew of Chia Eng Say. Hailing from the western Hui'an town of Huangtangzhen, Chia came from a well-to-do family where his grandfather owned a cloth dyeing business. This enabled him to be one of the privileged few in Hui'an to have received an education and be trained as a teacher. Although most Hui'an males emigrated because of the poverty and lack of opportunities back home, Chia's motive differed markedly.

Unfortunately, Chia's ability to write letters and maintain accounts also became the source of his problems: he had been kidnapped twice by bandits who wanted him to work for them. Needless to say, this was not a tenable proposition so he migrated to Singapore as a 24-year-old. He immediately went to work at Chia Eng Say's construction company, Chia Eng Kee Chan, rising to the post of general manager and overseeing projects in Malaya and Singapore.[25]

Eventually branching off, he became a contractor for the Public Works Department. The younger Chia's added engineering skills saw him involved in numerous heavy infrastructure projects for the British authorities. These include the levelling of Kampong Silat Hill for the Singapore Improvement Trust's housing development scheme in 1948, and the new taxiways and extension of the runway at Kallang Airport a year later. His most significant accomplishment, though, and that which accorded him the most professional recognition within the industry occurred just prior to World War II.

Between 1937 and 1940, while still working for his uncle, Chia Lay Phor oversaw his largest and most extensive construction project: building the 356-bed British Military Hospital (now Alexandra Hospital). Chia Eng Kee Chan had been appointed as the main subcontractor for Dobb & Co. and the War Department. The hospital was equipped with medical, surgical and officer wards as well as ancillary buildings comprising a barracks block, a laboratory, a mortuary and living quarters for staff and their families.[26]

Ho Bock Kee

Born in 1905 in the small village of Fengqi in Wangchuan town in Hui'an county, Ho Bock Kee (何穆基) was the eldest of four children. His father was a carpenter while his mother was a housewife. Although daily life in a small rural community was hard and poverty was an everyday reality, his early exposure to carpentry and Hui'an's economy centred around construction would prove invaluable. Unlike the impoverished and unskilled Chinese immigrants who ended up as indentured labour in Southeast Asia, Ho arrived in Singapore in 1929 as a qualified carpenter.

Initially subcontracting his labour to other builders working on numerous army camps and military facilities across the island, the Japanese Occupation (1942–45) saw Ho resorting to slipping in and out of Malaya undertaking odd jobs to survive. It was the post-war demand for reconstruction that provided him with the impetus and opportunity to venture into main contracting.

Capitalising on the opportunity, Ho established his own construction company – beginning where he left off before the war – repairing and rebuilding old army camps and bases as well as those used for internment. An invaluable listing on the preferred contractor panel for the Public Works Department soon followed, and over the next 30 years, Ho Bock Kee Construction was awarded numerous public and private contracts, including a Ngee Ann Kongsi school on Balestier Road (1965), Singapore Television Studio Centre

(Below) Ho Bock Kee was a prominent name in the local construction industry. Among the many projects that his construction company handled include the Singapore Memorial at the Kranji War Cemetery in 1957 and the National Library building on Stamford Road in 1960. *Courtesy of the Ho Family.*

(Below right) The National Library on Stamford Road, 1967. It was built by Ho Bock Kee's construction company. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

(Bottom) The Singapore Memorial with war graves of fallen servicemen at the Kranji War Cemetery, 1960s. The memorial was built by Ho Bock Kee's construction company. *John C. Young Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

at Caldecott Hill (1966), Bedok Reformative Training Centre (1961), Mount Vernon Crematorium (1962) and the National Library building on Stamford Road (1960).

As a main contractor, Ho's most internationally recognised work was the Singapore Memorial at the Kranji War Cemetery. Officially unveiled on 2 March 1957 by the Singapore Governor Robert Black and attending international dignitaries, the event was broadcast throughout the Commonwealth to an extensive overseas audience.[27] Designed by the British architect Colin St Clair Oakes, the memorial was built to resemble an aeroplane with its 22-metre central pylon and wing-shaped roof supported by 12 stone-clad pillars.[28] The names of over 24,000 casualties without known graves are inscribed on the pillars. Memorial services are held at the cemetery every year on Remembrance Day (11 November), as well as ANZAC (Australian and New Zealand Army Corps) Day on 25 April.

Leaving a Legacy

By the late 1980s, the Hui'an construction community in Singapore accounted for almost 50 enterprises, excluding those in the region. By now, the Hui An Association had expanded to include representation throughout most of Malaysia, Hong Kong, Taiwan, the Philippines, Indonesia and greater China. These pan-Asian cultural ties led to further opportunities for a new generation of industry pioneers.

This story of the enterprising and intrepid Hui'an people and their contributions both within and outside China is an inspiring one. It was with this in mind that the sculptured wall fronting the Singapore Hui An Association at Lorong 29 Geylang was commissioned. It is both an icon of the success that Hui'an immigrants have achieved overseas as well as an enduring symbol of their contributions to the Chinese homeland – as evidenced by depictions of the aforementioned Fujian Hui'an Kai Cheng Vocational Secondary School and East Hui'an Overseas Chinese Hospital.

The images carved on the stone wall and the memories they recall of the homeland also serve another purpose, as captured by the Greek word *nostos*, which means "homecoming". In ancient Greek literature, it describes an epic hero returning home by sea. The term – first recounted in Homer's *The Odyssey* – refers not merely to the physical return of the hero but to his elevated identity and status upon arriving home. In a similar way, the Hui'an stone frieze depicts the journey of an enlightened culture to Southeast Asia and its eventual return back home. ♦

(Top) Unveiled on 17 November 2012 and measuring almost 12 metres by 1.8 metres, the boundary wall of the premises of the Singapore Hui An Association premises is an expression of the key elements of the culture and heritage of the Hui'an people. *Photo courtesy of Jimmy Yap.*

(Above) Hui'an women, in traditional clothing, removing bits of seaweed, shells and other remnants of the day's haul from fishing nets hung out to dry. The nets would be mended before the next day's catch. *Photo courtesy of Jimmy Yap.*

(Facing page) Standing atop the Luoyang Bridge is its designer and builder, Cai Xiang (蔡襄, 1012–67), chief of Quanzhou prefecture, and also a renowned calligrapher, structural engineer and poet. Luoyang Bridge is recognised as one of the four ancient bridges in China. *Photo courtesy of Jimmy Yap.*

The author acknowledges the generous research and translation assistance from Joseph Chia (谢福崧) and Teo Seng Yeong (张成雄) of the Singapore Hui An Association, Fiona Lim and Yoke Lin Wong.

NOTES

1 Established in 1924 as the Singapore Hui Ann Association, for the purposes of this essay the toponymic reference will instead be either the hanyu pinyin pronoun "Hui An" or the noun "Hui'an".

2 Situated at the mouth of the Luoyang River, the Luoyang Bridge (also known as Wan'an Bridge) in Quanzhou was constructed between 1053 and 1059 in the Northern Song dynasty. In 2021, the bridge was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List.

3 The Mengjia Qingshan Temple is dedicated to Qing Shan Ling An Zun, a general from Hui'an, Quanzhou.

4 Chongwu town is located in southeastern Hui'an. The town's historical centre, the Old Chongwu Fortress, is a walled city dating back to the late 14th century.

5 The Fujian Hui'an Kai Cheng Vocational Secondary School building was gifted to Hui'an by Ong Chwee Kow, a successful contractor and developer. The school imparts trade skills to young men and women without the means and opportunities. The East Hui'an Overseas Chinese Hospital building was gifted to the county by the steel magnate Liu Mah Choon, which superceded his earlier donation of a dispensary on the same site.

6 Joseph Chia, online conversations, 20 February 2019 to 17 August 2021.

7 "故乡的石头会说话: 惠安公会石雕壁画展风情" ["Hometown's Stones Can Talk: Hui'an Guild's Stone Sculpture Murals Exhibition Style"], *联合早报 [Lianhe Zaobao]*, 24 February 2013, 13. (From NewspaperSG)

8 Claudine Salmon and Myra Sidharta, "The Manufacture of Chinese Gravestones in Indonesia – A Preliminary Survey". *Archipel* 72 (2006): 196, https://www.persee.fr/doc/arch_0044-8613_2006_num_72_1_4031.

9 Salmon and Sidharta, "The Manufacture of Chinese Gravestones in Indonesia," 198–99.

10 While the earlier Chinese migrants were mainly from the Cantonese and Hokkien dialect groups, those from Hui'an spoke either the Xinghua or Minnan dialect.

11 The word "coolie" is believed to have originated from the Hindi term *kuli*, which is the name of a native tribe in the western Indian state of Gujarat. The word *kuli* also means "hire" in Tamil. See Naidu Ratnala Thulaja, "Chinese coolies," in *Singapore Infopedia*. National Library Board Singapore. Article published 2016.

12 Otherwise known as *twakow* or *tongkang*, the bumboat was a large barge vessel used extensively for transport purposes along the Singapore, Rochor and Kallang rivers, and also along the coast of the mainland and other nearby islands. See Vernon Cornelius-Takahama, "Bumboats," in *Singapore Infopedia*. National Library Board Singapore. Article published June 2019.

13 "Coolie Keng and Their Alliances," *Straits Times*, 31 August 1982, 1. (From NewspaperSG)

14 "European Contractor Gives Evidence in Loveday Case," *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser,* 22 August 1940, 5. (From NewspaperSG). Many of these practices came to light during the 1940 trial by court martial of Captain R.C. Loveday, R.E., who was charged with conspiracy to defraud the War Department.

15 "At the War Memorial," *Malaya Tribune,* 31 March 1922, 6. (From NewspaperSG)

16 "At the War Memorial."

17 Zaubidah Mohamed and Valerie Chew, "Cenotaph," in *Singapore Infopedia*. National Library Board Singapore. Article published 2010.

18 区如柏 [Ou Rubo], "不做拉车夫走入建筑界的惠安人" ["Rickshaw Drivers No Longer, the Hui'an People Enter the Construction Industry"], *联合早报 [Lianhe Zaobao]*, 25 December 1988, 34. (From NewspaperSG)

19 "Page 5 Advertisements Column 1," *Straits Times*, 2 August 1939, 5; "Page 6 Advertisements Column 1," *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 14 February 1938, 6. (From NewspaperSG); 中正中学校友会, *源远流长: 中正中学创校八十周年纪念文集 = A Chung Cheng 80th Anniversary Commemorative Publication, Chung Cheng High School Alumni 2019* (Singapore: 中正中学校友会, 2019), 44. (From National Library, Singapore, Call no. Chinese RSING C810.08)

20 Completed in 1932, the five-storey China Building was one of the most recognisable landmarks in the business district with its distinctive pagoda-stye roof. It was designed by international architectural firm Keys and Dowdeswell, which operated out of Shanghai, China. The firm was named after British architects Major P. Hubert Keys and Frank Dowdeswell. See "New Bank Building," *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 1 July 1929, 4. (From NewspaperSG)

21 Located near the former Keretapi Tanah Melayu (KTM) Railway truss bridge along Upper Bukit Timah Road, Chia Eng Say Quarry is now a lake known as Singapore Quarry within Bukit Timah Nature Reserve. Chia Eng Say Road, which ran parallel to the KTM Railway line, was a private road built by the quarry company to gain access to their quarrying operations. The road also ran through a Chinese kampong called Kampong Chia Eng Say. See 柯木林 [Ke Mulin; Kua Bak Lim], "敢问路在何方?" ["Who Dares to Ask Where the Road Is?"], *联合早报 [Lianhe Zaobao]*, 18 August 2012, 20. (From NewspaperSG); Victor R. Savage and Brenda S.A. Yeoh, *Singapore Street Names: A Study of Toponymics* (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Editions, 2013), 74. (From National Library, Singapore, Call no. RSING 915.9570014 SAV-[TRA])

22 Established in1920 by Mr Shi Su, the Chinese Industrial and Commercial Continuation School started out as an evening Chinese school for working adults on Tanjong Pagar Road. It moved to Enggor Street in 1920 and then to York Hill in 1929. The school closed in 1985 and reopened as Gongshang Primary School, currently located in Tampines. See also "工商補習學校建校募捐之第一日," *南洋商报 [Nanyang Siang Pau]*, 21 February 1929, 4. (From NewspaperSG).

23 The first principal of Chung Cheng High School was Chuang Chu Lin (庄竹林; Zhuang Zhulin) (1930–57), who was also a Hui'an native. The school moved to larger premises on Goodman Road in 1947 and was renamed Chung Cheng High School (Main). The original campus on Kim Yan Road became Chung Cheng High School (Branch) and has since moved to Yishun.

24 莫美颜 [Mo Meiyan], "若有来世还要做他女儿 庄曼娜忆父亲庄竹林" ["If There is an Afterlife She Will Still Want to be His Daughter, Zhuang Manna Recalls Her Father Zhuang Zhulin"], 新加坡新闻头条, 5 February 2020, https://toutiaosg.com/若有来世还要做他女儿——庄曼娜忆.

25 Joseph Chia, online conversations, 25 June 2021.

26 "Big Singapore Military Hospital," *Straits Times*, 7 August 1938, 17; "New Singapore Military Hospital," *Straits Times*, 29 January 1939, 12. (From NewspaperSG)

27 Athanasios Tsakonas, *In Honour of War Heroes: Colin St Clair Oakes and the Design of Kranji War Memorial* (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Editions, 2020), 184–86. (From National Library, Singapore, Call no. RSING 725.94095957 TSA)

28 Colin St Clair Oakes also designed Kanchanaburi War Cemetery and Chungkai War Cemetery, both in Thailand; Rangoon War Cemetery in Burma; Imphal War Cemetery in India; Sai Wan Bay Cemetery in Hong Kong; and Chittagong War Cemetery in Bangladesh. See Athanasios Tsakonas, "In Honour of War Heroes: The Legacy of Colin St Clair Oakes," *BiblioAsia* 14, no. 3 (Oct–Dec 2018), https://biblioasia.nlb.gov.sg/vol-14/issue-3/oct-dec-2018/.

EXHIBITING PHOTOGRAPHY IN PRE-WAR SINGAPORE

The founding of two camera clubs in 1921 created more opportunities to exhibit photographs in Malaya. **Zhuang Wubin** revisits three significant photo exhibitions in pre-war Singapore and examines their implications.

Between the 1920s and the onset of the Japanese Occupation in 1942, there had been various efforts to organise photography exhibitions in Singapore that featured the works of European and Asian photographers. The organisers of each exhibition had their own agendas and reasons for staging the event. Their political affiliations and sources of patronage were also different. By revisiting these initiatives, we can piece together a narrative of pre-World War II Singapore through the conditions that made the staging of these exhibitions necessary and possible.

Malaya Borneo Exhibition, 1922

On 31 March 1922, the Malaya Borneo Exhibition opened to much fanfare on reclaimed land adjacent to the Telok Ayer basin. Occupying 65 acres (around 263,046 sq m), the colonial spectacle was put together in less than six months. After several extensions, the fair ended on 17 April.

Governor of the Straits Settlements Laurence Guillemard conceived the idea for the exhibition. As he noted in the souvenir guide, its objective was to "bring together, for the first time in history, representatives of all classes from the two important Malayan countries under British influence", namely British Malaya and Borneo, so that "by interchange of ideas and discussion of matters of interest to each, considerable mutual benefit might be derived by all, and a revival of local trade possibly stimulated".[1]

However, in truth, the revival of colonial trade was probably the key reason for organising the exhibition. In Singapore, the post-World War I euphoria quickly gave way to a recession in 1920, which only started easing in 1922.[2] There was also the minor matter of coinciding with the visit by the Prince of Wales who officiated the opening. The souvenir guide also highlighted that the exhibition would show the prince the "natural resources and possibilities of Malayan countries under British influence, and to illustrate as far as possible some of the characteristic features of these countries and their people".[3]

To that end, plans were made for members of the Malay, Dyak and Murut communities to create life-size replicas of their traditional houses for display.[4] While 42 Dyaks arrived from Sarawak to build their longhouse, the North Borneo Chartered Company, however, failed to round up enough men to re-create a Murut house.[5] In any case, the Arts and Crafts Section remained one of the most popular exhibits at the fair, featuring some 20,000 items made by or belonging to the indigenous communities of Malaya and Borneo. Many of these items were also available for sale.[6]

The exhibition included performances to entertain visitors, such as Sulu and Dyak dances, *mak yong* and *menora* dance forms from Kelantan, *boria* theatre from Penang, *mek mulung* theatre and *wayang kulit* shadow play from Kedah, regimental band music and even a Tamil fire dance.[7]

Many major businesses in Singapore, such as Fraser and Neave, Robinson and Co., and Sime Darby and Co., participated in the Commerce Section and bagged medals and diplomas for their best products. This was the key objective for staging the fair in the first place.[8]

Outdoor events included boat races, football matches, "live" Terengganu boat-building demonstrations, a circus, a dog show, a zoo comprising animals from different "collections" and even Manila Carnival entertainment.[9] Into that melee was an exhibit of photographs.

F. de la Mare Norris, government entomologist and assistant to the director of agriculture of the Federated Malay States, was instrumental to this photographic display. Norris had been elected president of the Malayan Camera Club (MCC) when it was established in Kuala Lumpur in 1921.[10] In the same year, the Singapore Camera Club (SCC) was founded, which catered initially to Japanese amateur photographers in Singapore and Johor (this club is unrelated to the similarly named club formed in 1950 in Singapore).

When plans were drawn up for the Malaya Borneo Exhibition in Singapore, the organisers turned to the MCC for help due to its connection with the colonial milieu, instead of approaching the SCC. Norris was selected to chair the Photography (Amateur) Committee, which comprised non-Asian members, including his wife Muriel. (Norris also served as honorary secretary of the exhibition's Agricultural Section Committee.)

In January 1922, an open call was held for submissions from "amateur photographers of all races" for the photographic display. At the time, amateur photography connoted an artistic pursuit as opposed to professional photography where practitioners engaged in photography for profit. One of the conditions stipulated was that the photographs had to be taken in either the Malay Peninsula or Borneo.[11]

Exhibitors could submit photographs in any of the seven classes (or categories): (i) pictorial photography; (ii) portrait studies; (iii) outdoor or fancy-dress portraits; (iv) nature studies; (v) native life studies; (vi) places of interest, and (vii) miscellaneous. The first three classes were "intended solely for work of a pictorial and artistic nature", while "photographs exhibited merely for their interest or technique" should be submitted to the remaining classes.[12] Not surprisingly, the winning submissions were dominated by Japanese practitioners of the SCC and British members of the MCC. Norris and his wife also won multiple awards.[13]

Professional photographers were not left out. A Photography (Professional) Committee was also set up to organise submissions from professional photographers. In that committee of five, two Asian names stood out: Lee Keng Yan (most likely Lee King Yan; 李镜仁) and S.K. Yamahata.[14] Their inclusion suggests that by the early 1920s, Japanese and Chinese studio photographers had gained a foothold in Singapore's photographic trade, and could no longer be sidelined by the colonial government or European studio owners.

The winners of the professional section were dominated by Japanese photographers who blended Japanese tradition with Western techniques, although the Chinese-owned Empire Studio (established by Low Kway Song in 1920) and Eastern Studio (founded by Lee King Yan in 1922; he had previously set up Lee Brothers Studio on Hill Street) also won awards.[15]

Selected photographs submitted to the two committees were displayed in one of the railway godowns on the exhibition grounds. One of the first portraits a visitor would have seen in the professional section was that of Lady Guillemard, wife of Laurence Guillemard, placed near a portrait of the Sultan of Johor. The power structure of the colonial society was made clear in a visual and spatial sense. On a superficial level, the close proximity of the two photos indicated an equal relationship between the British and Malay elites. The implication, however, is that it was the "protection" and tutelage of British colonialism that ensured the continuity of Malay power.

More crucially, the public display of photographs in the exhibition marked a significant attempt to utilise the amateur and professional pursuits of photography to advance the agenda of the colonial state. Photography was included in the array of displays and performances in the fair, which

(Facing page) A souvenir guide produced for the Malaya Borneo Exhibition held in Singapore from 31 March to 17 April 1922. *Image reproduced from Guide to the Malaya Borneo Exhibition 1922 and Souvenir of Malaya (Singapore: Malaya Borneo Exhibition, 1922). (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RRARE 607.34595 MAL; accession no. B29358041).*

(This page) The carnival at the Malaya Borneo Exhibition held in Singapore from 31 March to 17 April 1922. *Arshak C Galstaun Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

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advertised and showcased the products and "development" of Malaya and Borneo, giving the impression that these were the result of "benign" British rule. In effect, photography was used by the British to visualise and shield the specific effects of colonialism. In the process of decolonisation and nation-building, the national elites retained a similar faith in photography, mobilising it for a variety of cultural, socio-political and diplomatic projects.[16]

Overseas Chinese Photographic Exhibition, 1935

On 24 March 1935, the Chinese Consul-General to Singapore, Philip K.C. Tyau, presided over the opening of the Overseas Chinese Photographic Exhibition. Newspaper reports hailed the exhibition as the "very first of its kind in Singapore" and the "first one promoted by the Chinese in Malaya", presumably because it showcased the works of Chinese photographers residing in Malaya even though entries by photographers from Hong Kong were also included.[17]

By this time, the SCC and MCC had become inactive. And unlike the public display of photographs at the Malaya Borneo Exhibition in the previous decade, where works by the Japanese were featured, it had become less acceptable during the 1930s for Chinese photographers – who considered themselves cultural elites – to be seen on the same public platform as their Japanese counterparts. This was because Japan's blatant aggression in China from the late 1920s had given rise to anti-Japanese sentiments among the Chinese communities in Singapore and a surge in nationalist feelings for the Chinese motherland.[18]

The exhibition was held at the premises of the Nanyang Chinese Students Society on Prince Edward Road. Founded in Singapore in 1919, the society was a self-help organisation targeted at overseas Chinese youths, with the aim of helping them eradicate bad habits, strengthen their physiques and propagate the national language.[19] The exhibition organisers also invited Tyau to serve as its patron. These initiatives revealed the unmistakeable imprint of Chinese nationalism on cultural and artistic matters in Singapore.

(Below) *The Straits Times* featured a selection of photographs from the Overseas Chinese Photographic Exhibition, held at the premises of the Nanyang Chinese Students Society from 24 to 31 March 1935. *Image reproduced from the Straits Times, 28 March 1935, 20. (From NewspaperSG).*

OCEAN MOTOR POLICIES

The Straits Times

THE OCEAN

Enjoy the atmosphere of MALAYA'S charm

...with the aid of GILBEY'S INVALID & JOYCE BISCUITS

The idea of staging the exhibition was first mooted by a small group of photo enthusiasts at a New Year's Eve dinner in 1933.[20] Application details were disseminated throughout February 1935 via the network of Chinese photo studios in Singapore, and also through Keng U photo studio in Kuala Lumpur and Kong Hing Cheong in Penang.[21]

Kwa Soon Hock, an employee of the Oversea-Chinese Banking Corporation (OCBC), was responsible for receiving the submissions.[22] Despite the hefty entry fee of $1, the organisers received 352 prints from 38 entrants in Sitiawan, Seremban, Kuala Lumpur, Selangor, Negeri Sembilan, Perak, Penang, Terengganu, Singapore and Hong Kong. After two rounds of selection, 83 prints were shortlisted.[23]

The participating photographers included well-known amateurs like Chia Boon Leong and OCBC general manager Kwa Siew Tee, who was the father of Kwa Soon Hock. Chia was no stranger to photography exhibitions, as he had earlier received two awards at an exhibition organised by the SCC in 1926.[24] Kwa Siew Tee, on the other hand, was a member of the Royal Photographic Society, having been elected in 1913. He was made associate of the society in 1935,[25] and in 1940, he was appointed Justice of the Peace.[26]

The opening was chaired by OCBC manager Chew Hock Leong, who also contributed an essay to the exhibition catalogue.[27] In his address, Chew explained the objectives for organising the exhibition. According to him, the organisers felt that by popularising photography and encouraging "fellow photographic comrades" to focus on the exploration of art, their works would become more artistic and in time measure up against the standard of photographers in advanced nations.[28] There is a strong element of nationhood in Chew's speech, even though it is not easy to clearly delineate what "nation" meant to the organisers, the participating photographers and the exhibition visitors at the time.

The presence of Tyau and the choice of exhibition venue suggest that the organisers felt a certain affinity with the affairs of China. They identified themselves as *huaqiao* (华侨; overseas Chinese) and named the exhibition accordingly.

南洋商報

星華籌賑大會主辦

滇緬公路攝影展覽會

舉行隆重開幕

Top left photo: The Chinese Consul-General for Singapore Kao Ling-pai opening the Yunnan-Burma Highway Photo Exhibition at the premises of the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce on 24 November 1939. Top right photo: Lee Kong Chian, president of the exhibition committee. Bottom photo: Visitors at the exhibition. *Image reproduced from 南洋商报 [Nanyang Siang Pau], 25 November 1939, 7. (From NewspaperSG).*

When describing the exhibits, the English newspapers of the day tended to mention their aesthetics, valorising some of the works as exemplars of pictorial art.[29] In contrast, an article in the Chinese newspaper *Union Times* (总汇新报) on 25 March 1935 singled out a particular photograph by Li Ying (黎英). The writer praised the work for its ability to transport viewers to the actual scene of combat where brave soldiers of the 19th Route Army in the Republic of China fought against the enemy. The photograph had been titled with a Cantonese curse word, most likely to reflect how strongly the photographer felt about the war in China.[30] The 19th Route Army was lauded when it put up fierce resistance against the Japanese troops who attacked Shanghai on 28 January 1932 (known as the January 28 Incident or Shanghai Incident). This event was the precursor to the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–45).

The exhibition was hailed as a "thorough success", with some 2,000 people visiting the show before it ended on 31 March. As a result of the exhibition, the Oversea Chinese Photographic Society was formed in March 1936. It was exempted from registration by the colonial state, suggesting a certain degree of closeness that some of its members enjoyed with the British authorities. Members included prominent figures associated with Chinese banks in Singapore, such as Chew Hock Leong, Kwa Siew Tee and Teo Teow Peng, who was director of Sze Hai Tong Bank.[31] Police photographer Liew Choe Hoon (or Liew Chor Hoon), an early initiator and participant of the exhibition, also became a member.[32]

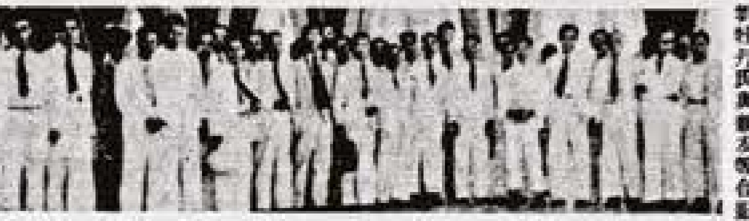
Yunnan-Burma Highway Photo Exhibition, 1939–40

On 7 July 1937, two years after the Overseas Chinese Photographic Exhibition was held, the Second Sino-Japanese War broke out between China and Japan. As a result, Chinese communities in Southeast Asia became even more connected to the fate of the motherland.

In Singapore, the Singapore China Relief Fund Committee (SCRFC) was set up in August 1937 with prominent businessman and philanthropist Tan Kah Kee as president. A year later, in October, Tan helped to establish the Southseas China Relief Fund Union (SCRFU) and became its chairman. By January 1939, the SCRFC had formed over 20 sub-committees with more than 200 branches across the island, extending its collection of funds beyond the city centre of Singapore. This caused much concern to the colonial authorities as the SCRFC was increasingly functioning "like a political party machinery" at the grassroots level.[33]

In 1938, Japan gained control of Xiamen and Guangdong, two major hometowns of the overseas Chinese in Nanyang (Southeast Asia). By then, China had lost most of its seaboard connections to the outside world. To open up a route so that war supplies could enter China, the 1,154-kilometre-long Yunnan-Burma Highway (also known as the Burma Road), linking Lashio in eastern Burma (Myanmar) with Kunming in China, was rushed through for completion by some 200,000 Burmese and Chinese labourers.

Traversing treacherous terrain, the highway became serviceable for heavy transportation vehicles at the start of 1939. However, China still lacked skilled drivers and mechanics to work along the route. In early 1939, the Kuomintang (Chinese Nationalist Party) government of the Republic of China appealed to the SCRFU for help. Around 3,200 people across Nanyang, not all of whom were ethnic Chinese, answered the call. Some gave up well-paying jobs while a few women disguised themselves as men to serve in China's war relief efforts.[34]



These two photos accompany the Chinese article in *Nanyang Siang Pau*. Top photo: Journalists Chang Ch'u-k'un (second from left) and Chen Geding (extreme right) spent two months reporting on the Yunnan-Burma Highway and took more than 1,000 photographs. Second from the right is Lau Boh-tan (刘牡丹), a representative from the Southseas China Relief Fund Union and Tan Kah Kee's trusted assistant. Photo on the right: Lau Boh-tan with his family and friends. *Image reproduced from南洋商报 [Nanyang Siang Pau], 10 August 1939, 7. (From NewspaperSG).*

Knowing that there would be interest among readers in Malaya, the Chinese dailies *Nanyang Siang Pau* (南洋商报) and *Sin Kuo Min Jit Poh* (新国民日报) sent two journalists – Chang Ch'u-k'un (Zhang Chukun; 张楚琨) and Chen Geding (陈戈丁) – to report on the Yunnan-Burma Highway. Setting sail for Rangoon (Yangon) in August 1939, they spent the next two months filing dispatches along the route. The two men also took more than 1,000 photographs which Chen brought back on his return trip via Vietnam.

With Tan Kah Kee's support, the SCRFC decided to mount a photo exhibition to help raise funds for China and at the same time provide visitors with a comprehensive experience of the highway.[35] An exhibition committee was quickly assembled, with Lee Kong Chian, Tan's son-in-law, as president.

A three-tier ticketing structure was established: the honorary ticket costing five Straits dollars and came with a complimentary print, while the special ticket was a dollar each and the normal ticket cost 20 cents. The Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce (SCCC) served as the exhibition venue where tickets were sold for the duration of the exhibition.[36] Prints were available for purchase, and all proceeds from the tickets and prints were channelled into the relief fund.

Tapping into SCRFC's vast network, activists combed the island, cajoling all segments of Chinese society to purchase tickets. By the time the exhibition opened at the SCCC on 24 November 1939, over 6,000 Straits dollars had been raised from ticket sales.[37]

It is unclear if the Oversea Chinese Photographic Society was involved in the exhibition, but members of the Society of Chinese Artists (SOCA) certainly were. The SOCA was formally established in January 1936, with permission granted by the colonial authorities. In 1938, it helped to establish the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) with member Lim Hak Tai appointed as the founding principal.[38] Lim also headed the exhibition's installation committee, while SOCA president Tchang Ju-ch'i (张汝器) and fellow member Zhuang Youzhao (庄有钊) became his deputies.[39] The three men were responsible for the exhibition's clean and modern design. They utilised specially made free-standing panels to display the prints. Red, silk-fabric ropes were used to direct the viewers through the exhibition venue.[40]

The exhibition featured some 300 photographs, systematically organised into categories such as the lives and training of the drivers and mechanics, their transportation work, conditions of the highway, sights in Burma, peoples and customs of the borderlands, Chinese historical sites, tourist attractions and educational facilities relocated to Kunming due to the war, among others.[41]

To reach the masses, the organisers promoted the exhibition by connecting some of the sights captured in the photographs with scenes from the ever-popular Chinese classic, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (三国演义).[42]

Originally slated to close on 27 November, the exhibition was extended to 29 November. The *Malaya Tribune* reported that some 13,000 people had visited the exhibition at the SCCC.[43]

The exhibition was then moved to the Happy World amusement park to coincide with the SCRFC fundraising fair held there from 1 to 3 December; each ticket was priced at 10 cents. To attract non-Chinese visitors, the text and captions accompanying the photographs were translated into English.[44] On 3 December, in just three hours from 7 to 10 pm, over 500 exhibition tickets were sold. Due to popular demand, the exhibition was extended another week and ended on 10 December.[45] In early 1940, the exhibition toured Melaka, Muar and Batu Pahat, again to a rousing reception.

The Yunnan-Burma Highway Photo Exhibition was probably one of the most visited photographic exhibitions in Malaya during the first half of the 20th century. The exhibition attempted to illuminate its subject matter by organising the photographs into different thematic sections. The exhibition also involved different strata of Chinese society, including NAFA students who maintained order at the venue and volunteers from Chinese-medium schools who served as attendants.

The exhibition helped to visualise and strengthen the connection between the overseas Chinese in Malaya and Singapore and the emerging nation in China. This link would have serious consequences during the Japanese Occupation and the subsequent era of decolonisation.

In the early Occupation years, the Japanese military systematically targeted the Chinese for their alleged support of the movement in an exercise known as Sook Ching (肃清; "purge through cleansing"). From 21 February to 4 March 1942, Chinese males between the ages of 18 and 50 in Singapore were ordered to report at various mass screening centres, with those suspected of being anti-Japanese subsequently executed.

After the war, nationalist and anti-colonial sentiments continued to rise. What it meant to be Chinese in Malaya and Singapore (and how one's relationship with China was perceived) was a highly contentious issue, which directly affected one's survival.

Different and Yet the Same

In revisiting these three photo exhibitions – held in 1922, 1935 and 1939–40 respectively – in pre-war Singapore, we see a definite shift in patronage and political affiliations that facilitated these events. To an extent, these exhibitions enabled participating photographers and visitors to visualise and imagine a sense of place and loyalty, whether it was directed at Britain, China or Malaya. What remained unchanged, however, was the involvement of political and cultural elites in organising and mobilising these exhibitions for their own motivations and desires. ♦

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Making the INVISIBLE VISIBLE

Restoring the Statues of St Joseph's Church on Victoria Street

Alvin Tan documents the painstaking process behind the restoration of the statues in St Joseph's Church.

Alvin Tan is an independent researcher and writer with a strong focus on Singapore history, heritage and society. He is the author of *Singapore: A Very Short History – From Temasek to Tomorrow* and the editor of *Singapore at Random: Magic, Myths and Milestones.*

The spires, domes and sweeping roofs of houses of worship are at once expressions of faith and calls to encounter the divine. The dome of St Joseph's Church, which tops a 20-metre-high octagonal belfry, makes that overture from its location along busy Victoria Street.

While the church's architectural features are eye-catching at street level, much of the building remains hidden and invisible behind its walls. Inside, its treasures are revealed in their glory. Among these gems are the statues of saints and other figures that are strategically placed around the church for worshippers to encounter various manifestations of the divine.

As with many Catholic churches, St Joseph's has its fair share of statues. But St Joseph's probably has more statues than most churches here, given that its history dates back to 1853 when it was built by the Portuguese Mission. Known as São José ("St Joseph" in Portuguese), that Gothic-style building was demolished in 1906 and subsequently replaced with the current, larger building by noted architectural firm Swan & Maclaren in 1912. Over the last 150 years or so, the church – which was gazetted as a national monument in 2005 – has accumulated a number of statues that have come to be beloved by worshippers.

The 30 or so statues in the church are physical connections to the history of the church and the Portuguese Mission in Singapore. These statues are also reminders of festivals, feast days and other activities that constitute the life of a church. So when the church authorities decided that a major restoration project for the building was needed to save it, they were determined that the statues be conserved as well.

(Facing page) Restoration of the statue of a guardian angel and child revealed their soft and gentle facial expressions and the detailed finery of their garments. *Courtesy of Saint Joseph's Church (Victoria Street) and Pixelmusica Pte Ltd*

(Below) Before restoration, the guardian angel had a nonchalant fixed stare while the child had a look of doubt. *Courtesy of Saint Joseph's Church (Victoria Street) and Pixelmusica Pte Ltd.*

Restoring St Joseph's

The restoration of the church initially started out as a paint job. But in June 2017, workers discovered intricate plasterwork hidden under decades of paintwork, exposing floral and foliage motifs.[1] The discovery triggered a larger investigation into what else needed to be done, and a professional structural engineer was engaged to assess the building's structural integrity.

The final report confirmed what had long been suspected: a major overhaul was needed. The building's facade facing Victoria Street was tilted forward. Over time, this had caused cracks to ripple through the building's 45-centimetre-thick walls. Some of these cracks stretched from the ground to the ceiling, while others were large enough to peer through. Further technical tests revealed that the building foundation had to be stabilised.

A decision was made to close the church in 2018 so that the structural issues could be rectified and the building restored. The entire restoration project was estimated to cost $24.4 million.[2]

Given that the church building would be undergoing a major restoration, it also made sense to look at what else needed to be repaired. As a result, church's building committee began examining the possibility of restoring its 32 statues as well.

The statues are relatively young, dating from the early 20th century, and were mass-produced in plaster. Of the 32 statues, 14 were manufactured and distributed worldwide by Maison Raffl (also known as La Statue Religieuse), a well-known French manufacturer of religious statues. Little is known about where the other statues were manufactured. Some of these statues were bought by the church, while others were donated by individuals, or societies and associations affiliated to the church.

Filipa Machado in her workshop, Singapore, 2021. She restored all the statues at St Joseph's Church between 2018 and 2021. *Courtesy of Filipa Machado.*

There were a number of options for dealing with these statues. One of the companies that the church approached said that the best (and only) approach was to strip the statues of all paintwork, including the original layer, and then repair and repaint them. This proposal was rejected because such a drastic process would result in the statues losing their material past(s) and become "new".

To Monsignor Philip Heng, SJ,[3] then the church rector, the statues had "a special historical value that connects them" to the church community. So while these were not expensive works of art, he felt it was important to conserve the statues.[4]

After the *Straits Times* ran an article in July 2017 about the church's discovery of treasures hidden under paint,[5] Filipa Machado, a Portuguese art restorer residing in Singapore, approached the church at the urging of friends to offer her services.

Trained in Lisbon and graduating top of her class in 1999, Machado had garnered about 17 years of experience working on restoration projects in Portugal. From 2009 to 2014, she was part of an award-winning restoration team that won the Prémio Vilalva award recognising excellence in the conservation of Portuguese cultural heritage at the Sacramento Church in Lisbon. In 2015, she clinched an award from the Portuguese Association of Museology for her work in restoring a 48-square-metre heritage mural painted in 1955 by the Portuguese artist Luis Dourdil.[6]

After reviewing Machado's portfolio, the church building committee got her

to undertake a small restoration work in order to assess her technical competence and skill. In the meantime, the committee also ran her credentials by the National Heritage Board. She passed the restoration test with flying colours and was given the task of restoring all the statues.

For Machado, the project was particularly meaningful and a source of pride as she would be "involved in the [restoration] project of a Portuguese Church [established in 1853] so far away from Portugal".[7]

She was under no illusion that it would be an easy task. For a project of this size, a team is usually involved in the restoration, according to Machado. However, in this case, she was going solo.

The restoration project began in August 2018 and an air-conditioned workshop was built on the church grounds to ensure optimal storage conditions and minimise the need to transport the statues. Between 2018 and 2021, a total of 29 statues were restored. (Three statues were deemed beyond restoration and decommissioned.)

Making the Invisible Visible

At the start of the project, Machado did a comprehensive survey of the statues and put together a report for the building committee. In her initial assessment, she examined 24 statues to ascertain their physical condition. The report was mixed: 14 statues were in good physical condition, but had yellowed over time. Overpainting and haphazard repairs had also caused a further loss of detail and definition and some statues had missing fingers. Also missing were the objects representing the saints' particular attributes or virtues.

The remaining statues were in poor physical condition: there were visible cracks, and the original paintwork was damaged and, in some instances, totally stripped off. A few statues were beyond restoration and repair.

Machado's recommendation was to remove the overpaint, reconstruct the missing parts and restore the original paintwork.

Her approach was guided mainly by conservation principles. Every intervention had to be reversible, using techniques and materials that would only affect the statue minimally. Only durable, high-quality conservation-grade materials that were non-toxic and non-acidic could be used. Such materials would protect the work from future oxidation, water damage and exposure to light.

In addition to the technical aspects, Machado also had to ensure that the restoration faithfully represented the historical and cultural contexts of both the statue and the saint. Her sensitive approach is an indication of how the restoration of a material object can sit at the intersection of history, art, chemistry, material science and more.

St Francis Xavier

Machado's first restoration piece was the statue of St Francis Xavier (1506–52), a task that took two weeks to complete. One of the seven original members of the Society of Jesus (also known as Jesuits), St Francis Xavier is remembered for his missionary work in establishing Christianity in Asia, the Malay Archipelago and Japan. Based in Melaka for several months in 1545, St Francis Xavier was informed that he had been appointed provincial of the "Indies and the countries beyond" while he was in Singapore at the end of 1551.[8]

The 150-centimetre-tall plaster statue of the saint was in poor material condition. It was dirty and its surface was marred by cracks, abrasions, holes and other lacunae. Missing fingers had been replaced with crudely shaped plaster substitutes. Although coats of paint had been applied over the decades, mostly based on the painters' imagination and preference, these had little regard for the original colour, hue, tone and shade.

Restoring the statue of Francis Xavier took two weeks. The original statue (left) was dirty, jaundiced, with a flat facial expression, and full of cracks and abrasions. After restoration (below), the original porcelain white surplice (or tunic) with clear detailing and patterning can be clearly seen, while the dark-purple stole was restored to its original hue of lustrous, rich gold. *Courtesy of Saint Joseph's Church (Victoria Street) and Pixelmusica Pte Ltd.*

Fine details were also painted over, causing the statue to lose definition. It had a mildly jaundiced skin tone and its facial expression was flat and lacked affect. A dark-purple stole (a band of cloth used as a liturgical vestment by ordained ministers) only made the statue look gloomy and dirty. In short, St Francis Xavier had aged a lot and rather ungracefully.

The first step in the restoration work involved cleaning off the surface dirt and determining the number of layers of overpaint. Small areas were examined by using a stainless steel surgical scalpel to scrape away thin layers of overpaint.

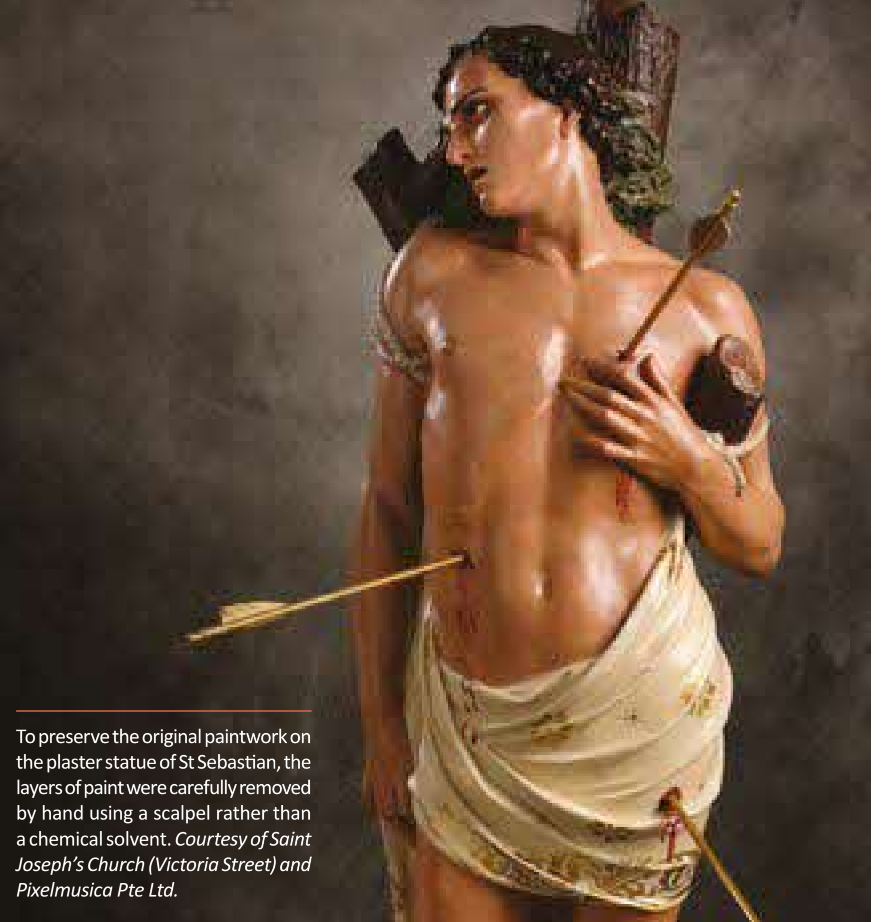
After exposing the original paintwork, a suitable solvent was applied with a brush to dissolve and remove the overpaint. Ethanol, which is colourless and evaporates quickly and cleanly, was then used to remove any residual paint. All the old physical repairs were also removed. Lumps of plaster, glue and even the odd nail were carefully taken out with a precision power drill. A solvent was also used to dissolve visible rust.

Having revealed the original paintwork and stabilised the statue's structural integrity, physical repairs began. Two replacement thumbs and one replacement finger were fabricated from plaster and then attached to the statue with conservation-grade glue. Conservation-grade filler – more durable, has stronger adhesive qualities and is less toxic – was used to fill in small holes, replace missing plaster and smooth over abrasions.

To protect the original paintwork from oxidation, scratches, water damage and dirt, the statue was then varnished and a layer of water-resistant acrylic resin applied.

Next, pigment was used to restore St Francis Xavier's surplice – a tunic with large sleeves, usually knee length, worn by the clergy – to its original porcelain white, with particular attention given to the detailing and patterning at its hem. The dark-purple stole was restored to its original hue of lustrous, rich gold using a gilding liquid made from mixing real gold leaf with varnish.

With its now soulful eyes, kindly visage and handsome vestments, the restored statue of St Francis Xavier will once again grace the church building.



To preserve the original paintwork on the plaster statue of St Sebastian, the layers of paint were carefully removed by hand using a scalpel rather than a chemical solvent. *Courtesy of Saint Joseph's Church (Victoria Street) and Pixelmusica Pte Ltd.*

Guardian Angel and Child

Angels feature prominently in the Bible and Catholics traditionally believe that there are guardian angels who watch over, guide, protect and accompany the faithful throughout their lives.

In St Joseph's, the statue of a guardian angel sits in a niche situated after the portico, welcoming worshippers just as they enter the church. The guardian angel, with a child under its protective mantle and the shadow of its wings, looks on the child and points his finger heavenward.

Unfortunately, years of overpainting had hardened the facial expressions of the angel and child. The angel wore a nonchalant fixed stare while the child responded with a look of doubt. The friendly relationship of trust and protection, so pronounced in the original statue, had been lost. Further work uncovered details on the angel's wings and mantle. With the dirt and overpaint stripped away, the soft and gentle aspects of the facial expressions of the statue were revealed. Using the same process as she did in the restoration of the statue of St Francis Xavier, Machado reinstated the detailed finery that clothed both the angel and child.

St Sebastian

The biggest technical challenge in the entire project was the restoration of the plaster statue of St Sebastian, the patron saint of archers, athletes and soldiers. Martyred in third-century Rome during the Roman emperor Diocletian's persecution of Christians, St Sebastian is usually depicted as a handsome, fair-skinned youth pierced by arrows. The difficulty in restoring this statue was not because much of the original paintwork had been lost. In fact, it was the opposite.

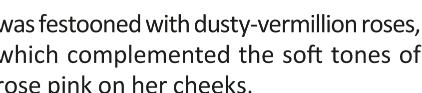
When evaluating the statue, Machado "was surprised by the pristine condition of the original chromatic layer" because "when an artwork is so heavily repainted, it is because the original condition is bad".

To preserve the original paintwork, she chose therefore to remove the overpaint by hand rather than risk damaging it by using a chemical solvent. Because she had to "remove all the overpaint with a scalpel very slowly and carefully", Machado said that she came to "appreciate every detail of the statue".[9] Over a fortnight, she spent consecutive 12-hour days to complete the removal process.

It was an effort that fully stretched Machado's professional and technical skills. She had to constantly make judgement calls based on her experience, guided by visual inspections and tactile

(Below and right) Before restoration, the statue of St Agnes of Rome (below) had a flat and lifeless appearance. After the restoration (right), the patterned ivory white tunic and emerald green *palla* with an intricate gold motif can be seen. *Courtesy of Saint Joseph's Church (Victoria Street) and Pixelmusica Pte Ltd.*

(Far right) The statue of St Roch, the Catholic patron saint of dogs, is always depicted with a canine at his feet. *Courtesy of Saint Joseph's Church (Victoria Street) and Pixelmusica Pte Ltd.*



feedback when applying the scalpel. This was complicated by the knowledge that any damage to the original chromatic layer due to clumsy or hasty execution would be irreversible.

In the end though, all that effort paid off. Machado said she was "very moved by the [facial] expression of the statue" and she was pleased to be able to "bring it back to its original condition". [10]

Looking back, Machado said she was extremely proud of the work she had been able to accomplish on this project, "to have done such a big number of artworks by myself in such a short amount of time".[11]

St Agnes and St Roch

Of all the statues Machado restored, her favourite is that of St Agnes of Rome, a patron saint of virgins, girls and chastity. St Agnes was merely a young girl of 12 or 13 when she was martyred during a wave of persecutions in 303 CE unleashed by the Roman emperor Diocletian. The statue depicts a young woman with long, flowing tresses, wearing a Roman tunic with a *palla* (long shawl) draped over it. In her left arm, she is cradling a lamb.

Unfortunately, the old paint job had given the statue a flat and lifeless appearance. After Machado removed the old paint and restored the statue to its original appearance, the lavishly patterned ivory white tunic and emerald green *palla* decorated with an intricate gold motif became visible. The headband was festooned with dusty-vermillion roses, which complemented the soft tones of rose pink on her cheeks.

Machado's other favourite statue is St Roch, a male saint canonised in the 16th century. Among other things, St Roch is a patron saint of dogs, invalids, the falsely accused and bachelors. Machado "love[d] all the decorative elements of its clothing" and being an animal lover, the inclusion of a dog as part of the statue delighted her. She felt that it was "one of the most beautiful of the male [statues]" she had restored.[12]

The Way of Truth, Beauty and Goodness

As the restoration of St Joseph's Church approaches completion in late 2021, after almost three years, its full architectural splendour will be made visible with its original flooring reinstated, new lighting and paintwork. The statues will once again take up their places in niches that line the nave and transept, their finery revealed by soft illumination.

Reverend Father Joe Lopez Carpio, the current rector, is pleased with the outcome of Machado's hard work: "The statue restoration has been executed professionally alongside the building restoration. The statues no longer have any cracks or other physical damage. Their original colours have been restored, together with their facial expressions, which make them come alive. We are now working to perfect the illumination for the statues so that their restored beauty can be seen by every visitor to the church."[13] In short, to encounter the invisible that has been made visible.[14] ♦

NOTES

1 Melody Zaccheus and Adrian Lim, "Treasures Hidden Under Layers of Paint," *Straits Times*, 30 July 2017, 14. (From NewspaperSG)
2 Saint Joseph's Church, *Restoring Saint Joseph's Church: Bringing Life and Colour to a National Treasure* (Singapore: Saint Joseph's Church, undated), 44. (Not available in NLB's holdings)
3 Members of the Society of Jesus – a religious order of the Catholic church headquartered in France – use the letters SJ after their personal names. This is an abbreviation of their Congregation's name. The members of this order are called Jesuits.
4 Monsignor Philip Heng, SJ, interview, 17 July 2021.
5 Zaccheus and Lim, "Treasures Hidden Under Layers of Paint."
6 Luis Dourdil (1914–89) was a 20th-century Portuguese artist. A self-taught man, he created several notable wall paintings and murals. See "Luis Dourdil," Prabook, accessed 16 July 2021, https://prabook.com/web/luis.dourdil/3742719.
7 Filipa Machado, interview, 26 February 2021; Filipa Machado, email , 22 July 2021.
8 "Saint Francis Xavier," Jesuits, accessed 15 June 2021, https://www.jesuits.global/saint-blessed/saint-francis-xavier/.
9 Filipa Machado, email, 22 July 2021.
10 Filipa Machado, interview, 26 February 2021.
11 Filipa Machado, interview, 26 February 2021.
12 Filipa Machado, interview, 26 February 2021; Filipa Machado, email, 22 July 2021.
13 Reverend Father Joe Lopez Carpio, email, 30 July 2021.
14 St John of Damascus wrote: "For the invisible things of God since the creation of the world are made visible through images." See "Medieval Sourcebook: John of Damascus, in Defense of Icons c. 730," Fordham University, accessed 18 August 2021, https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/johndam-icons.asp.

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