

# biblioasia

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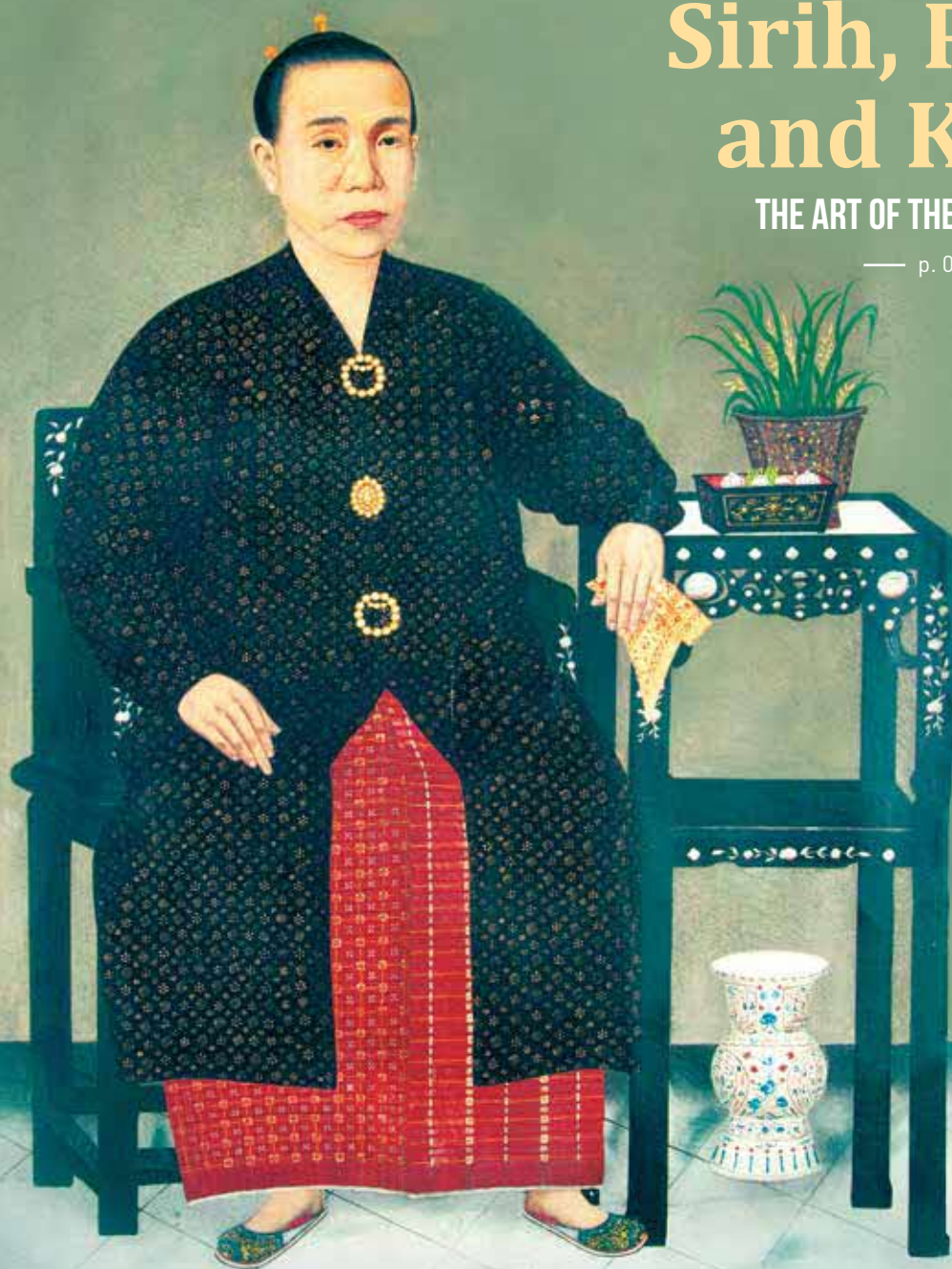
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## Sirih, Pinang and Kapor

THE ART OF THE BETEL CHEW

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# From the Stacks

## SEASON 2

From a 15th-century map of Southeast Asia to Muhammad Ariff Ahmad's old exercise books containing his early poems, the National Library's Rare Materials Collection is a treasure trove of artefacts. Join our librarians as they bring you the inside stories behind these and other items in the latest season of From the Stacks.



From the Stacks is a web series featuring rare materials from the National Library Singapore's collection.

## Director's Note

Betel chewing is a time-honoured practice in Southeast Asia although the custom has mostly died out here. In our cover story, Fiona Lim and Geoffrey Pakiam explore various aspects of the betel quid. Years ago, I remember asking my husband's late aunt to make a quid for me to try but she refused, saying that it would be too intoxicating.

Those intoxicating effects are nowhere near as dangerous as opium smoking. Yet, about a century ago, partaking of this opiate was so prevalent among the Chinese coolie community that it made up half of the colonial government's annual tax takings. Diana S. Kim explains how the colony ended its dependence on opium revenue.

Violent gun crime also used to be common in Singapore; up until the 1960s, street shootouts and kidnappings of millionaires were regular occurrences. Tan Chui Hua's account of the city's gun-happy gangsters is a reminder that the "good old days" weren't always so good.

On a less violent note, this year is the centenary of former French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau's visit here and the 50th anniversary of the opening of Queenstown Library. Lim Tin Seng revisits 1920 while Paddy Jonathan Ong recounts the history of Singapore's first proper branch library.

We then turn to the National Archives of Singapore with Yap Jo Lin as our guide. She tells us what the 250,000 plans in the Building Control Division Collection reveal about Singapore's architecture. The archives are also the focus of Meira Chand's essay. By poring over memoirs and listening to oral history interviews, the London-born author was able to recreate in her mind the sights and sounds of mid-20th century Singapore.

As a resident of Marine Parade, William L. Gibson became fascinated by two old buildings in his neighbourhood. That led to his essay on Karikal Mahal recounting the colourful history of the two landmarks on Still Road South.

A somewhat larger structure inspired Erni Salleh. After completing her Masters degree, the librarian turned her research into *The Java Enigma*, a thriller that delves into the origins of Indonesia's Borobudur, a Buddhist monument from the 9th century.

Collecting materials that capture present-day events or culture is a way for the National Library to preserve a documentary heritage representative of Singapore. Janice Loo's piece on the COVID-19 documentation project explains how you can help future generations understand this extraordinary time. Shereen Tay, on the other hand, provides an update on a different, but no less important, collection effort: web archiving.

Also, don't miss Lee Meiyu's essay written in Chinese on the Kim Mui Hoey Kuan Collection and Wan Wee Pin's review of the recently published book, *The Year 1000*.

Finally, I would again like to invite everyone to take part in our readers' survey. Please visit our website at [biblioasia.nlb.gov.sg](http://biblioasia.nlb.gov.sg) or use the QR link below to have your say. We want to make *BiblioAsia* better than ever, and your feedback is invaluable.

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#### On the cover

Portrait of Mrs Tan Beng Wan nee Lim Imm Neo, late 19th century. Tan Beng Wan was the eldest son of Tan Kim Tian. In 1871, father and son co-founded the Tan Kim Tian and Son Steamship Company. In the portrait, Mrs Tan can be seen holding a handkerchief, probably used to wipe spittle from chewing betel. There is a betel box on the table beside her, with a spittoon under it. *Collection of the Asian Civilisations Museum. Gift of Mr and Mrs Tan Choon Hoe.*

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



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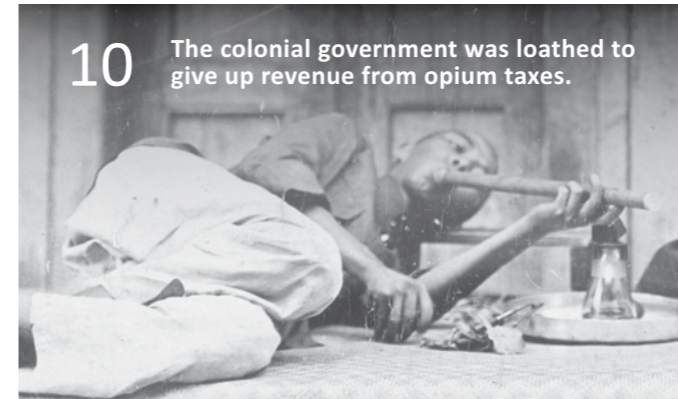
04

The practice of betel chewing was popular among Singapore's Malay, Indian and Peranakan communities until it fell out of favour in the 1950s.



10

The colonial government was loathed to give up revenue from opium taxes.



16

Firearms were once so commonplace in early Singapore that rifles and revolvers could be bought at department stores.

AUTOMATIC  
GOLT

Cal. 6.85  
Cal. 810  
Cal. 890  
Cal. 45.



PISTOLS

Wbley 6.85  
Wbley 455  
Browning 6.85  
Savage 890

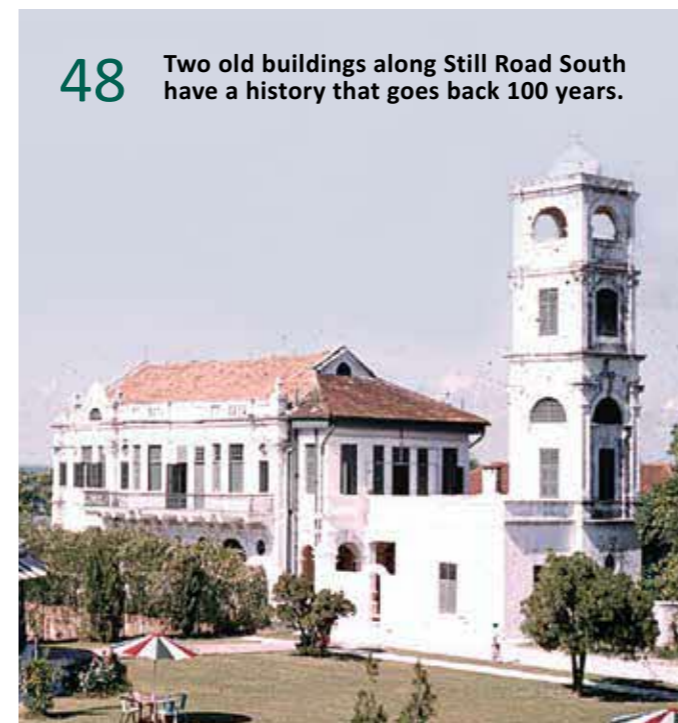
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Building plans dating back to 1884 are a unique way to appreciate Singapore's architecture.



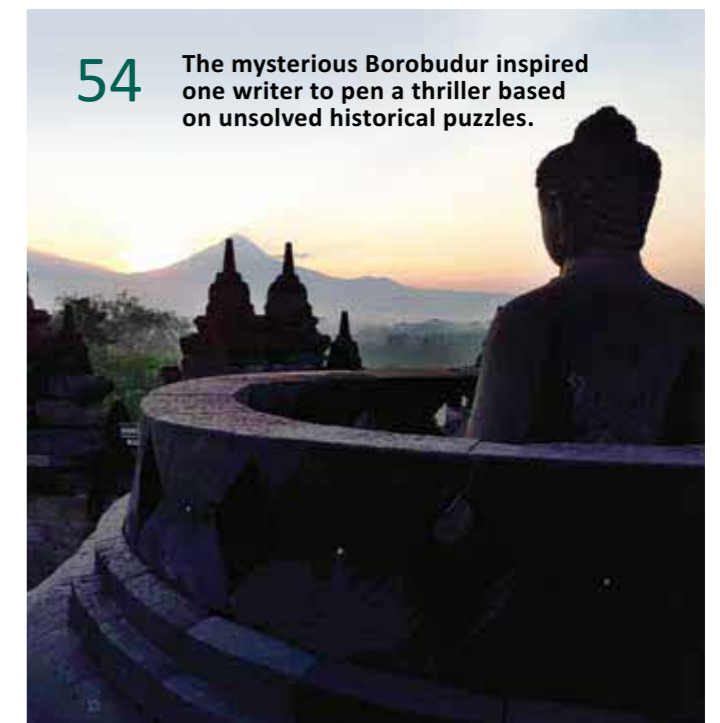
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Two old buildings along Still Road South have a history that goes back 100 years.



54

The mysterious Borobudur inspired one writer to pen a thriller based on unsolved historical puzzles.



# A BITE OF HISTORY

## BETEL CHEWING IN SINGAPORE

Fiona Lim and Geoffrey Pakiam look at this time-honoured tradition – once a mainstay in Malay, Indian and Peranakan homes – that has since fallen out of fashion.



**B**etel chewing has been practised for thousands of years in Asia. Across Southeast Asia, betel chewing (*makan sirih*<sup>1</sup> in Malay) was once a social necessity. The practice was also deeply embedded in Indian and Peranakan communities. However, the rich symbolism in the various elements of betel chewing, as well as the important social and cultural functions that it once served, has often been overshadowed by the visual spectacle of the betel chewers, with their black-stained teeth, crimson lips, scarlet saliva and proclivity for spitting.

In Singapore, betel chewing has all but died out among its people today, and the practice is now sustained largely by migrants and visitors from regions where chewing betel remains widespread.

### A Millennia-old Asian Habit

Fragments of containers from the 14th century that held lime (calcium carbonate) have been discovered in Singapore, attesting to the likelihood that betel chewing on the island dates from this period at least.<sup>2</sup> However, the quid has been part of Asia's social and

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**Dr Geoffrey Pakiam** is a Fellow at ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore. He works on the history of commodities and is currently researching the interplay between livelihoods, consumer cultures and the environment of the Malay world.

**(Facing page)** A *sirih* seller, Indonesia, late 19th–early 20th centuries. Courtesy of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

**(Below)** The basic elements of the betel quid: the betel leaf (*sirih*), pieces of areca nut (*pinang*) and a smear of slaked lime (*kapor* or *chunam*), a white paste made from the powdered shells of molluscs or coral. Photo from Shutterstock.



cultural landscape for much longer. One of the oldest known sources of evidence dates to around 2660 BCE: skeletal remains with stained teeth suggestive of betel chewing, as well as containers for storing lime, were discovered at a burial site in Duyong Cave on the island of Palawan in southern Philippines.<sup>3</sup>

Historian Anthony Reid points out the wide-ranging indigenous terms for areca nut and betel used in the Indonesian Archipelago and the Philippines, suggesting that the betel quid originated from island Southeast Asia.<sup>4</sup> The areca palm itself (*Areca catechu*) may have a Malayan origin, judging by the sheer number of palm varieties recorded in the Malay Peninsula.<sup>5</sup>

The archaeological and linguistic records found in southern India strongly suggest that the areca palm and betel vine (*Piper betle*) came from Southeast Asia, probably from the second millennium BCE onwards.<sup>6</sup> Through centuries of maritime trade and migration, betel chewing and its accompanying botanical material spread throughout Southeast Asia to the western Pacific, across the Indian subcontinent and even reaching as far as the fringes of East Africa.

### A Parcel Like No Other

While it is often referred to as betel chewing, strictly speaking, what is chewed is known as the betel quid. In its most basic form, the betel quid comprises three ingredients: betel leaf (*sirih*), areca nut (*pinang*) and slaked lime (*kapor* or *chunam*), a paste made from the powdered shells of molluscs or coral. Slaked lime is first spread on the leaf before shavings or pieces of dried areca nut are laid on top. The leaf is then folded inwards to cover the contents, ready to be chewed.

Preparation techniques varied according to cultural and individual preferences. According to Gwee Thian Lye (better known as G.T. Lye), a well-known *dondang sayang*<sup>7</sup> performer and consultant on Peranakan culture, two types of betel leaves were chewed in Singapore: one larger and dark green, the other smaller and light green. Peranakan Chinese ladies are said to have favoured the latter for making *sirih*, while the Indian and Malay communities mainly used the former.<sup>8</sup>

Many also considered gambier to be an essential ingredient and small pieces would be added alongside the areca nut slices. Later, tobacco became a popular addition and shreds of it might be folded together with the leaf. For a change of flavour, betel chewers sometimes rubbed a wad of tobacco against their teeth and gums after chewing betel.<sup>9</sup>

Known as *vetrilai* (Tamil), *paan supari* (Hindi) or *tambula* (Sanskrit), the betel quid favoured by Tamils included finely ground spices such as cardamom, clove, nutmeg and mace for an extra dash of fragrance. The mix of spices is known as *paan masala* and each betel quid vendor (*paanwalla*) had his own unique mix. A clove might also be used to seal the betel package.

The English herbalist John Gerard first described the areca nut as the “drunken date” in 1597, due to its supposedly intoxicating effects when consumed together with slaked lime.<sup>10</sup> The common physiological effects of areca nut, similar to narcotics and stimulants, include a sense of well-being, heightened alertness, increased bodily warmth, improved digestion and better stamina.<sup>11</sup> The combination of lime and areca nut releases the latter's alkaloids, particularly arecoline, producing a sedative effect. At the same time, arecoline affects the peripheral and central nervous systems of the body.<sup>12</sup> Chewing the quid also produces copious amounts of red saliva, leading to the habit of frequent spitting and even red stools.

The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that some 600 million people around the world consume some form of areca nut today. The areca nut is classified as a carcinogen by the WHO, and studies have shown a correlation between



A painting of two men selling betel quid by an Indian artist, c. 1800s. Wellcome Collection. Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0).

betel chewing and cancer of the mouth and esophagus.<sup>13</sup>

As with other widely consumed alkaloids like caffeine and theobromine (the latter is present in cocoa), the psychotropic effects of betel chewing vary between individuals and, perhaps more importantly, are heavily tempered by social context. Those accustomed to viewing betel chewing as a comforting and calming practice may feel calm and relaxed from chewing, while the habit may have the opposite effect on someone brought up to believe in betel chewing's stimulating effects.

### Our Daily Chew

In Singapore and Malaya during the 19th and early 20th centuries, the betel quid was enjoyed by a broad swathe of society, often transcending class and gender. It was consumed throughout the day, especially after meals due to the quid's digestive and

breath-freshening qualities.<sup>14</sup> Although only a minority of Chinese migrants and Eurasians in Singapore appreciated the quid, many aristocrats, merchants and labourers in the Indian, Malay and Peranakan communities chewed betel regularly.<sup>15</sup>

Perhaps the most fundamental role of the betel quid was in promoting and strengthening social ties.<sup>16</sup> Betel chewing served as a social lubricant, like communal eating or drinking alcohol:

“Over a chew of betel, they might cogitate over the day's problems, or gossip with a neighbour or just sit and relax. Chewing betel is a leisurely business and cannot be hurried over.”<sup>17</sup>

During social and business gatherings, it was *de rigueur* to welcome guests, friends, colleagues and relatives with a

tray of betel quid ingredients. According to Reid, “Everyday hospitality consisted in the sharing of betel, not food.”<sup>18</sup> Declining the quid was deemed as being disrespectful to the host, and those who did not chew would politely consume a betel leaf at least. The betel set was thus an indispensable part of Tamil, Malay and Straits Chinese homes.<sup>19</sup> For some, it was treated like a sacred object that had to be respected. In Straits Chinese homes, placing a betel box on the floor instead of a table when one was seated on a chair was widely believed to invite bad luck.<sup>20</sup>

As in much of the Malay world, betel chewing in Singapore tended to have feminine overtones. According to a 1951 *Singapore Free Press* article, among ethnic Indians it was mostly women who “chewed a lot”, and the typical image of a Tamil grandmother in the 1950s was of her “sitting with her legs stretched out at ease and pounding away her chew of betel in her little mortar”.<sup>21</sup> Even well into the 1980s, Peranakan Chinese *bibik*<sup>22</sup> were popularly portrayed as deftly folding *sirih* during card games such as *cherki*.<sup>23</sup> The *Malaya Tribune* reported in 1949 that many Peranakan Chinese women (known as *nonya*) were so attached to their chews that “wherever the *nonya* goes, the *sirih* set is sure to go”.<sup>24</sup> Peranakan Chinese men (*baba*) who indulged in betel chewing were said to be quite rare, and those who did were perceived to be effeminate.<sup>25</sup>

However, many men were known to be habitual chewers. Indian labourers sharing areca nuts, betel leaves and lime with one another were once a common sight.<sup>26</sup> For them, betel chewing was perhaps a means to stave off hunger and be more alert. Manual workers were said to derive energy from chewing betel during their long hours of work.<sup>27</sup> The betel quid was also believed to be particularly useful for those embarking on a long journey, such as Muslims performing the Haj, as it helped tide them over periods of hunger and fatigue.<sup>28</sup>

### A Symbol of Love

The *sirih*'s centrality in mediating social relations extended to love and romance. The betel quid symbolised courtship, marital and sexual union in Malay, Straits Chinese and Hindu cultures, and features strongly in betrothal rituals. It is believed that the areca nut and betel leaf complement each other perfectly: they are considered “heaty” and “cooling” foods respectively – together they symbolise balance. The betel leaf and areca nut are also said to represent the

female and male respectively, alluding to how the betel vine entwines itself around the areca palm.

The age-old association of the betel quid with love and courtship is evident in the etymology of Malay and Tamil words relating to marriage and betrothal. The Malay terms for proposing marriage (*meminang*) and betrothal (*pinangan*) are derived from *pinang* (areca nut), while the Tamil term for engagement, *nichaya tumbulam*, is derived from *tumbulam* (betel quid).

In traditional Malay culture, a suitor or one of his relatives would bring a tray of betel quid to the prospective wife's residence to ask for her hand in marriage. This custom of *hantar sirih* (Malay for “presenting betel”) was also practised by the Peranakan community, albeit with some differences. Female guests of a Straits Chinese wedding would have received an invitation known as the *sa kapor siray* – a miniature triangular parcel of betel quid containing a smidgen of areca nut. This custom was still practised in post-war Singapore, but was replaced by Western-style invitation cards by the 1980s.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, the Chetty Melaka (Peranakan Indians) had a ritual known as

*hantar sirih kovil pathiram* during which trays of invitation cards, betel leaves, areca nuts, flowers and other items would be blessed at the temple before being distributed to guests.<sup>30</sup> One's acceptance of a betel quid in most social contexts implied agreement.

In Malay weddings, a ceremonial betel box known as the *tepak sirih*, containing betel quid ingredients, was once the centrepiece in the bridal display. Traditionally, the *tepak sirih* was also placed outside the newlyweds' room on the first night of marriage as an indication of the bride's chastity. If the groom discovered that his wife was not a virgin, the *tepak sirih* would be turned upside down the next morning.<sup>31</sup> In Straits Chinese culture, the betel box also symbolised the bride's purity: on the wedding day, a betel box was placed in the centre of the marital bed. These rituals are no longer customary in Singapore as most Malay and Straits Chinese weddings now take on a more contemporary flavour.

However, Malay weddings today still feature the betel leaf in various guises: *sirih dara*, *sirih junjung* and *sirih lat-lat*. *Sirih dara* and *sirih junjung* refer to floral arrangements featuring verdant green

betel leaves rolled into a conical shape, representing the virginity of the bride and groom respectively. These are displayed during the wedding ceremony.

*Sirih lat-lat* is a small floral bouquet containing betel leaves, which is delivered to the groom on the wedding day to signal the bride's readiness to be visited by the groom and his entourage. According to researcher Khir Johari, the betel leaf, or *sirih*, generally represents humility, generosity and respectfulness in the Malay world – a reflection of the way in which the betel vine climbs up its host plant unobtrusively.<sup>32</sup>

The betel quid is considered an aphrodisiac in the *Kamasutra*, the ancient Sanskrit text on sexuality and eroticism.<sup>33</sup> In Hindu marriage ceremonies, trays of betel quid, symbolising everlasting bonds, were passed around for guests to chew.<sup>34</sup> Although betel quid ingredients are still used in Hindu prayer offerings and wedding ceremonies today, the quid is rarely chewed.

### The Decline of Betel Chewing

By the 1950s, betel chewing had reportedly fallen out of favour among younger adults in Singapore.<sup>35</sup> Some 30 years later,

Portrait of a Peranakan Chinese woman holding a betel quid by August Sachtler, Singapore, c. 1860s. On the table is a betel box. Collection of Mr and Mrs Lee Kip Lee. Courtesy of Peter Lee.



### THE BETEL CHEWER'S TOOLKIT

A typical betel set might comprise a box with three or four containers (*cembul*) – for storing betel leaves, sliced areca nut, slaked lime, gambier or tobacco – and a slicer (*kacip*) for cutting the dried areca nut. The quality of a betel caddy indicated the owner's social status: the working class had their betel chewing paraphernalia wrapped simply in a piece of newspaper or cloth, or kept in a wooden box, while the well-heeled showcased betel boxes made of highly decorated brass, copper or silver.<sup>1</sup> Ornate *kacip* often featured handles carved in the form of the *kuda sembrani*, the Malay mythological flying horse.<sup>2</sup>

A moderately wealthy household usually had two betel sets at home: one for daily use and another for guests. The more elaborate betel boxes ended up as family heirlooms or collectors' items. Alongside betel sets, spittoons were also a common fixture in homes and establishments to hold the red spittle produced from chewing betel. These spittoons were often made of brass or porcelain. Elderly chewers who lacked teeth used a small mortar and pestle to grind larger

An early 20th-century Straits Chinese betel set comprising four containers (*cembul*) for storing betel leaves, areca nut slices, slaked lime and gambier, and a nut slicer (*kacip*) designed as the Malay mythical flying horse known as the *kuda sembrani*. Courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.



ingredients, if not the entire quid, into a finer consistency for an easier chew.<sup>3</sup>

Betel chewing also shaped sartorial practices. A wealthy Malay lady in the 1920s might wear an intricately crafted silver belt from which hung a purse and a case to contain betel ingredients so as to satisfy her craving for a chew while she was out.<sup>4</sup> A Straits Chinese woman would drape a large red or dark-coloured handkerchief, folded into a triangle, over one shoulder of her *kebaya* for wiping red spittle from her lips.<sup>5</sup>

### NOTES

- 1 Ponnudurai, V.R. (1951, August 25). Chewing the betel. *The Singapore Free Press*, p. 9. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 2 Norhuda Salleh. (2015). *Tepak sireh: Interpretation and perception in Malay wedding customs*. *INTCESS15 – 2nd International Conference on Education and Social Services* (p. 1184). Retrieved from International Organisation Center of Academic Research website.
- 3 Chia, F. (1994). *The Babas revisited* (p. 102). Singapore: Heinemann Asia. (Call no.: RSING 309.895105957 CHI)
- 4 Hunt for ethnic costumes. (1993, January 19). *The Straits Times*, p. 19. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 5 The wispy see-through kebaya tantalised many a Baba youth... (1976, May 12). *New Nation*, pp. 10–11. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

the practice was near extinction, enjoyed only by the elderly, a remarkable decline of such an old, pervasive habit within a single generation.

Growing concerns about betel chewing's long-term effects on health likely played a part in deterring youths from picking up the habit, and perhaps nudged some older people into reducing their chewing frequency. While *sirih* is a common ingredient in traditional Malay medicine, betel chewing from the 1930s onwards became increasingly associated with oral cancer. The purported dental benefits of chewing betel, such as the strengthening of teeth and gums, were also challenged in popular media. That said, Singapore newspapers continued to run health advisories against betel chewing as late as the 1980s, suggesting that such advice was often ignored, particularly among habitual chewers.

Changing social and cultural attitudes were, perhaps, greater contributing factors to the quid's demise in Singapore. Once socially acceptable, betel-stained teeth were increasingly perceived as unsightly, thanks to the circulation of images in mass media of "beautiful" people with spotless, gleaming teeth. Negative perceptions were also reinforced by unflattering portrayals of chewers in Asian literature. In a short story published in the Malay-language newspaper *Berita Harian* in 1964, the protagonist was

so repulsed by his wife's betel-stained teeth that "he wanted to jump from the window".<sup>36</sup> Meanwhile, the effect of red-stained lips caused by betel chewing, often coveted by women as a marker of beauty, was achieved by cosmetics, which replaced the increasingly unfashionable chew. In a 1994 feature in *The Straits Times*, Helena Rubenstein's Rouge Glorious lipstick was touted as "a cross between a shine-less matt lipstick and a long-wearing one with cling-to-the-lip colour but without the betel-nut stain effect".<sup>37</sup>

The habit was also often deemed unsanitary due to the frequent spitting that accompanied the chewing. When betel chewing was still widespread in Singapore, walkways and roads in the town area were covered in red blotches of spittle, prompting frequent complaints about defaced environments and hygiene issues. One writer expressed disgust at the "revolting scarlet gobs of the betel chewer" that occasionally landed on an unfortunate passer-by.<sup>38</sup> Newspapers published numerous letters airing similar grievances up until the 1980s.

Anti-tuberculosis campaigns in the post-war decades also portrayed spitting as socially deviant and disease-spreading. Given the many negative connotations surrounding betel chewing, it was perhaps unsurprising that aspirational individuals and households found it difficult to reconcile

the age-old habit with new forms of civic-mindedness and respectability in Singapore.

As independent Singapore pursued its modernisation plans at full throttle, betel chewing became a habit associated with the older generations and was perceived as an outdated practice. In the mid-1970s, the weekend crowd at Geylang Serai Market was described as comprising mostly the elderly who chewed betel together.<sup>39</sup> In Little India, too, the main chewers were older proprietors, seated in front of their shops.<sup>40</sup> By the late 1980s, the *paanwalla* was considered part of a long list of vanishing trades in Singapore, along with Indian parrot astrologers and Chinese letter writers.

### Contemporary Consumption

The 1980s saw the Singapore government vigorously courting the tourist dollar and Little India was developed into a tourist attraction. As a result, the *paanwalla* were retained and co-opted into the government's plan to inject "local flavour" into the area.<sup>41</sup> In this vision, a guided tour in Little India would not be complete without a visit to the *paanwalla* for a betel chewing demonstration, where tourists could marvel at his red saliva and stained teeth.<sup>42</sup> Betel chewing was thus presented as an object of fascination in a reordered, modern and sanitised city.

The betel quid trade in Singapore today is largely supported by migrants and visitors from countries like Bangladesh, India and Myanmar, where betel chewing remains widespread. A handful of vendors still operate in areas frequented by migrants, such as Little India and Peninsula Plaza. One may also encounter the betel quid in Indian restaurants. Green bundles are strategically placed on trays located near the cashier so that patrons can grab one for a post-meal chew while paying their bill.

In most homes today, betel chewing lives on, if at all, in the memories of those who recall their elderly relatives indulging in the habit:

"I can still see [grandma], fragile and lovely in her *sarong kebaya*, her bun immaculate even at that hour, each ornate *cucuk sanggul* in place. Beside her was the betel set that was her trademark, each tiny container holding mystery none of her grandchildren would ever fathom. With each story she delicately prepared and chewed a betel quid, weaving a spell that held us entranced."<sup>43</sup> ♦

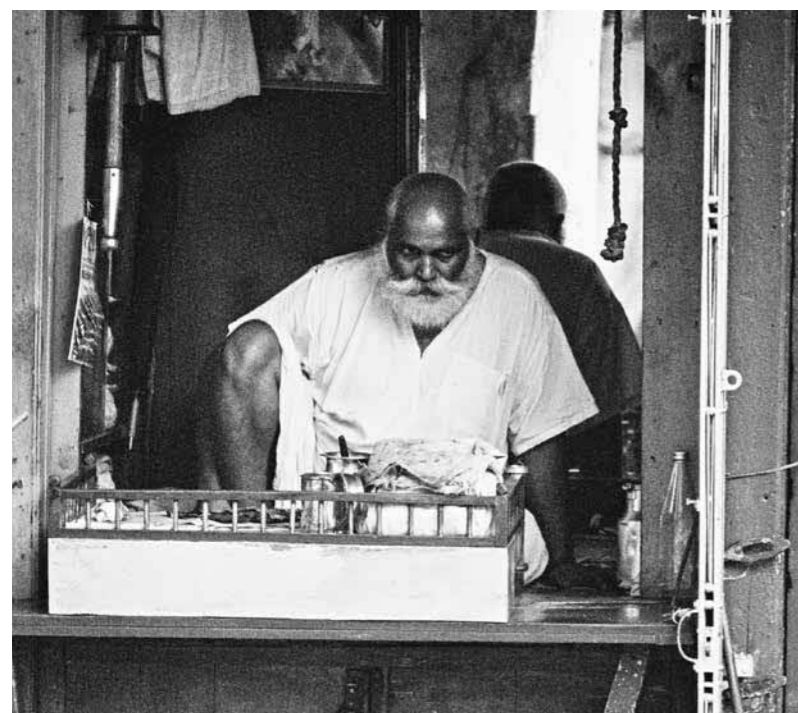


A Malay wedding *sirih* set, 2004. It comprises a gold embroidered red container filled with betel leaves, brass receptacles for holding the incense and *air mawar* (rose water), and a container for storing the areca nut (*pinang*) and slaked lime (*kapor* or *chunam*). PictureSG, National Library, Singapore.

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(Left) A *paanwalla*, or betel quid vendor, at his stall, 1968. By the 1980s, as betel chewing had fallen out of favour, these vendors, once a ubiquitous sight in Singapore, joined the ranks of a long list of vanishing trades. George W. Porter Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

(Right) A woman with a chew in her mouth, 1955. Betel chewing was a habit indulged in by many women in early Singapore. Donald Moore Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



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- Any opinions, findings and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Heritage Board, Singapore.

# THE STICKY PROBLEM OF OPIUM REVENUE

At one point, half of Singapore's annual revenue came from taxing opium. **Diana S. Kim** looks at how the colonial government managed to break its addiction to easy money.

**Dr Diana S. Kim** is an Assistant Professor at Georgetown University in the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service. She is the author of *Empires of Vice*, a comparative study of the rise of opium prohibition in British Burma, Malaya and French Indochina.

On 16 September 1952, the government in Singapore found itself in a delicate situation over the sum of \$55 million. This money was sitting in the Opium Revenue Replacement Reserve Fund, an entity set up in 1925 that contained nearly 30 years' worth of revenue collected by the British colonial authorities from legal opium sales in Singapore. It seemed reasonable, opined one member of the Legislative Council, Charles Joseph Pemberton Paglar, to spend at least part of the money raised from the drug to help those suffering from its ill effects.<sup>1</sup>

At the time, opium addiction was a deeply controversial social issue. Only the year before, a new Dangerous Drugs Ordinance had rendered opium consumption in Singapore an offence punishable by imprisonment. Some denounced the

government's punitive turn while others welcomed it as a "corrective" approach as "the prison acts as a hospital and reformatory at the same time and it is better than either alone".<sup>2</sup> But both sides shared similar dismay at the persistence of opium-smoking and its associated problems. At least 2,000 illegal opium saloons were operating in Singapore then and opium-related crime, tuberculosis and suicide rates were high.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, the law was being made a mockery of, according to the physician and social reformer Chen Su Lan. Chen, the elected president of the Singapore Anti-opium Society in 1930, worried how "opium addiction, instead of being regarded as an offence was being used as a legitimate excuse for illegal possession of opium".<sup>4</sup> Like Chen, Paglar was a medical doctor and, in his capacity as the Progressive Party's elected representative for Changi, also a longstanding advocate for better care of the sick and poor.<sup>5</sup> He requested that some of the funds be released to treat opium addicts in need.<sup>6</sup>

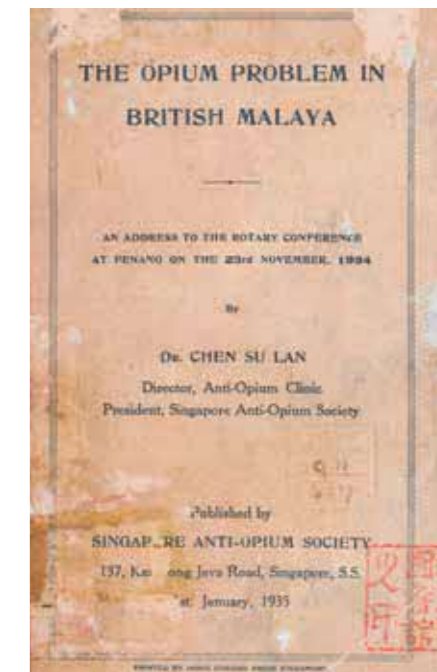
The government, however, rejected Paglar's proposal and informed him that the Opium Revenue Replacement Reserve Fund was "not available for the curative treatment of needy addicts".<sup>7</sup>

In 1953, the \$55 million was transferred to a different account – the vaguely named Special Reserve Fund.<sup>8</sup> By the time the British granted Singapore internal self-government in 1959, this fund had been absorbed into the general revenue surplus, without any traceable connections to its opium origins. The disappearance of the huge sum of money marked the quiet end to a radical arrangement that helped justify a deeply controversial aspect of 20th-century British colonial rule in Singapore: fiscal dependency on opium taxes.

## Opium and Colonial State Building in Singapore

From the earliest years, the colonial government had levied taxes on opium consumption. At its peak in the 19th century, opium accounted for over 50 percent of the revenue collected in the Straits Settlements (comprising Singapore, Melaka and Penang). Until 1909, Singapore auctioned off rights to private interest groups to operate opium tax farms. Thereafter, the government established a monopoly that collected licence fees directly from state-owned opium retail shops.

During the first half of the 20th century, opium tax revenue was essential to Singapore because it constituted a large proportion of the territory's finances and



Dr Chen Su Lan, as Director of the Anti-Opium Clinic and President of the Singapore Anti-Opium Society, delivered an address on the opium problem in British Malaya at the Rotary Conference held in Penang on 23 November 1934. *Collection of the National Library, Singapore.* (Accession no.: B02890349B).

there were few viable options to replace it. Opium helped pay for the building and maintenance of public infrastructure like roads, bridges and lighthouses, and financed the upkeep of the harbour and wharves at the heart of Singapore's economy.<sup>9</sup>

Metropolitan Britain and other British territories also profited from the opium revenue: in 1914, the Straits Settlements contributed the largest share of military funds to the Imperial Exchequer among the Crown Colonies, more than half of which came from opium revenue.<sup>10</sup> In the early 1920s, government opium sales represented 75 percent of the colony's excise tax and internal revenue, or 55 percent of its total revenue.<sup>11</sup>

From an administrative perspective, Singapore's fiscal dependency on opium had long been worrisome, but it was not necessarily an actionable problem. For one, opium was regarded as a predominantly Chinese realm of profit-making that the British authorities tended to avoid interfering with. Since the early 19th century, migrant workers from southern China, many of whom smoked opium, had provided the essential labour for pepper and gambier plantations as well as in tin mines across the Malay Peninsula that sustained the colonial economy. Powerful Chinese entrepreneurs competed to run the Singapore opium tax farm and paid enormous licence fees



to monopolise the sale and distribution of opium.

However, the colonial government did not have a clear idea how these Chinese-run opium tax farms operated financially. As late as 1903, Governor of the Straits Settlements Frank Swettenham admitted to the Colonial Office that “no individual and no Department has made any study of the question and there is no one with experience to whom to appeal for advice on the subject”.<sup>12</sup>

Among administrators stationed in the Straits Settlements, there was a weak conviction about the necessity of official action addressing the harms and social ills caused by opium. In the heyday of social Darwinism and evolving scientific knowledge about the drug’s addictive properties, Europeans held that the so-called Asiatic races were less injured by opium and used this to justify its commercial sale in Southeast Asia. As a result, the British often discounted social demands in their colonies to ban opium-smoking.

In 1906, despite protests citing the harmful effects of opium to the Chinese community in Singapore, Penang and Kedah, records reveal that local bureaucrats were skeptical such collective action conveyed actual popular anti-opium sentiments. As Charles J. Saunders, the Acting

Secretary for Chinese Affairs, explained to the Straits Settlements Opium Commission, “I do not think that either the idea or the movement is indigenous.” More likely, he believed it was due to the loud machinations of “zealous and religious people” such as Protestant missionaries in Singapore and certain members of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce.<sup>13</sup>

Official reluctance to end opium taxation was further linked to the daunting task of finding and replacing such a large source of revenue. The possibility of raising stamp fees and kerosene taxes was considered, or perhaps higher excise taxes on tobacco and alcohol. Instituting estate taxes or a state monopoly over pawnbroking were also examined.<sup>14</sup>

Chinese-specific taxes were looked at, including a poll tax on migrants from China, taxes on their remittances and savings, as well as an income tax on wealthy Chinese inhabitants who owned property in the Straits Settlements. According to Dr David Galloway, Head of the Singapore Medical Association, taxes targeting the Chinese were justified because declining opium consumption would most likely benefit the health and welfare of the Chinese community.

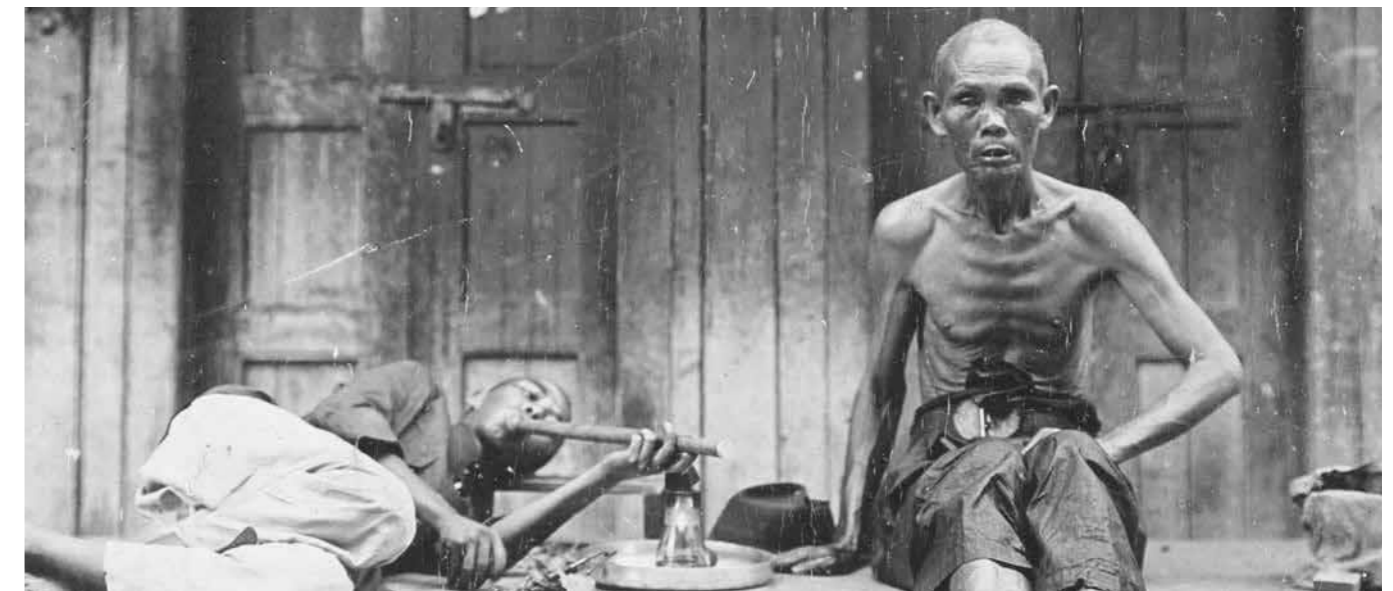
These possibilities were more easily imagined than done. Any alternative

revenue source was too small. “[T]o produce anything like the same revenue [from opium], the poll tax would have to be \$10 or \$15 per head,” fretted one administrator.<sup>15</sup> Chinese-specific taxes were seen as highly discriminatory, as the eminent doctor and prominent community leader Lim Boon Keng pointed out, because if Singapore was able to eradicate opium consumption, it was hardly to the advantage of the Chinese only, but also “to the general advantage of the State”.<sup>16</sup> It was also obvious that social backlash would occur. T.S. Baker, the legislative councillor representing the Singapore Chamber of Commerce, pointed out that an income tax that fell disproportionately on the Chinese was a fiscal strategy “fifty if not one hundred years in advance of the times” and would lead to “dishonesty and deception” while driving away “capital business, trade and people”.<sup>17</sup>

**Opium Revenue Reserve Replacement Fund**

It was a complex and deep-seated problem of fiscal dependency and decades would pass before a viable solution emerged. The impetus came partly from external pressures. During the interwar period, there were strong international anti-opium feelings, at once drawing upon and recon-

Emaciated Chinese labourers smoking opium, late 19th century–early 20th century. Courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.



figuring the demands of religiously inspired reformers and transnational activists who had long framed the harm caused by opium as serious moral problems and lobbied for the drug’s prohibition.<sup>18</sup> The end of World War I had helped consolidate multilateral cooperation among European empires to end opium’s commercial life, not least because ratifying pre-war agreements to restrict the drug was made a condition of the 1919 Versailles peace treaties.<sup>19</sup>

In this context, the fiscal practice of taxing opium consumption was a potential source of embarrassment that would damage imperial prestige and repute. During a meeting in Geneva in 1924–1925, Britain faced accusations of “being influenced by money considerations in postponing a desirable social reform”.<sup>20</sup> Diplomats and politicians in London pressed the colonial authorities in the Straits Settlements to devise an arrangement that would help signal both the Empire’s will and ability to end its reliance on a controversial source of revenue.

Yet, neither the abstract demands of an international community nor the worries of imperial leadership about losing face before other empires provided a practical way to wean Singapore off its opium revenue. This was a deeply entrenched problem of colonial governance that long predated the global rise of anti-opium norms. It would take someone with intimate knowledge of the nitty-gritty workings of Singapore’s opium-entangled fiscal regime, who was creative within the narrow bounds of bureaucratic imagination, and with just enough hubris to take on the enormous task of reinventing the economic

foundations of the British colonial state. That man was Arthur Meek Pountney.

“I am extremely fond of figures,” professed the Oxford mathematics graduate who also took great pride in being an expert in matters of opium and Chinese affairs across the Malay Peninsula. In 1908, as Selangor’s Assistant Protector of Chinese, he produced what his colleagues called “the most complete... the most instructive set of tables and notes” on Chinese migrants and opium consumption.<sup>21</sup>

Throughout his administrative career, Pountney capitalised on his talent for numbers: he moved to Singapore in 1910 to oversee the census, then joined the Treasury Department in 1913 and became

Treasurer in 1917 before finally assuming the position of Financial Adviser to the governor. In this capacity, Pountney designed the Opium Revenue Reserve Replacement Fund, calling it “the apotheosis of that part of my career which has been long and intimately connected with the opium question as it affects Malaya”.<sup>22</sup>

The idea was simple, Pountney explained to the Straits Settlements Legislative Council on 25 August 1925. The colonial government would set aside \$30 million – which would come from Singapore’s currency surplus – part of which would be transferred to an investment fund that “after 5 years... give 4 percent interest, an annual income of \$1,460,000”.

(Below left) A coloured zincograph print of a poppy flower and seed capsule (*Papaver somniferum*) by M.A. Burnett, c. 1853. This species of poppy is used to produce opium. Wellcome Collection. Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0).

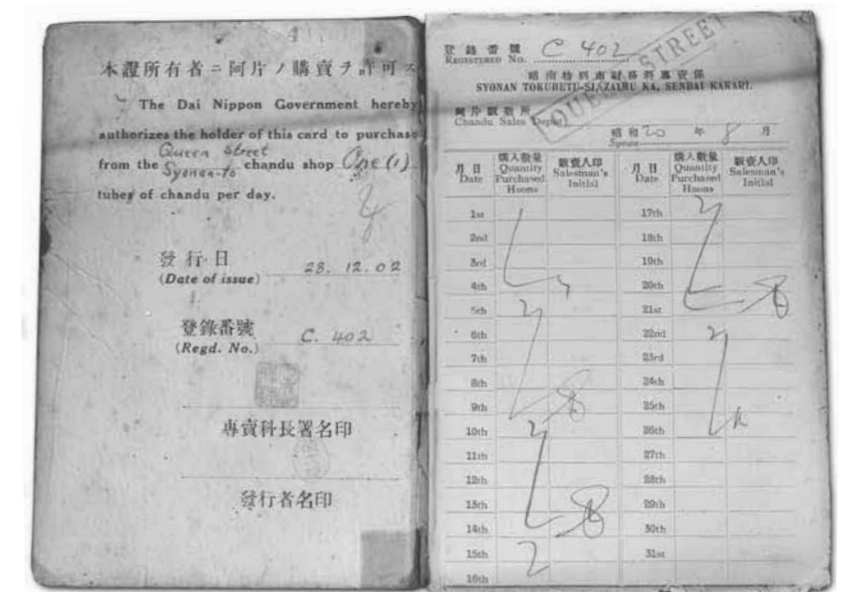
(Below right) In July 1952, police raids in Singapore resulted in the arrest of more than 200 opium addicts and opium den operators. *The Straits Times*, 8 July 1952, p. 5. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.



OPiUM PIPES, paraffin lamps and other smoking apparatus are seen here being brought in a police van to the Third Police Court as exhibits.—Straits Times picture.

**'Papa, papa' cry as 208 face opium charges**

An authorisation card to purchase *chandu* (opium) from Queen Street in 1942, during the Japanese Occupation. Chew Chang Lang Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



This was not a huge sum, acknowledged Pountney, as it would amount to less than a quarter of opium revenue accrued to the colonial state's coffers. Thus, the shrewd bureaucrat planned for the equivalent of 10 percent of the colony's annual revenue to be transferred into the reserve fund to top it up. According to Pountney: "[A]ssuming that the fund was left absolutely intact, and growing at compound interest, it would amount in 5 years... to a sum which would give an annual income of \$2,050,000" and "within a reasonable time... might come to something approximating the revenue from opium".<sup>23</sup>

By design, the fund was a long-term arrangement. Indeed, it would be a very long-term income stream, with increasingly larger returns. Poutney estimated that in 10 years, "the income would be \$3,100,000; in 15 years \$4,360,000; and 20 years \$5,900,000". This administrator's prosaic calculations contained a remarkably bold vision of British colonial governance and its prospects as a permanent and stabilising force. Pountney announced that he "did not want to leave to posterity an annual bill which it cannot meet without a very great reduction of efficiency or a drastic reduction in the maintenance and upkeep of the systems and institutions of Government".<sup>24</sup>

Observers remarked that the Opium Revenue Reserve Replacement Fund was a "financial innovation of a startling nature for which, as far as we know, no precedent exists".<sup>25</sup> Some lauded the fund as anchored in considerations of both honour and prudence. Legislative Council member E.S. Hoses admired how the fund provided "tangible proof to all the world" that despite the dependence on opium revenue, it did not "interfere with a honest and sustained endeavor to overcome the evil of [opium] consumption within our borders".<sup>26</sup>

Others worried that "the existence of so large a fund... will tend towards profligate expenditure on the part of the Government spending departments" and the surplus would be "liable to be diverted to other uses".<sup>27</sup> The Singapore Chamber of Commerce sharply criticised Pountney's "indulgence of posterity" at the expense of the welfare and needs of people in the present. Within the Colonial Office in London, suspicions were also voiced about the possibly impure intentions of administrators in Singapore to "build up a fund so large, that the interest upon them would equal the opium revenue which is to be lost

and the Governments would then live like rentiers upon their savings".<sup>28</sup>

Each perspective contained elements of potential truth. There was a clear instrumental value to the mere existence of this arrangement as it enabled the British to claim on the international stage that they were making a genuine effort to curb opium consumption in their colonies and asserting the moral authority of imperial rule. However, there was also a blatant lack of transparency as to how the colonial government would use what quickly became a very large pot of money. By the end of its first year of operations, the fund had increased by \$4 million to \$34 million, a sum that far exceeded Pountney's original projections. Yet both perspectives missed a deeper story about the transformation of the colonial state and how a bureaucratic solution was emerging to address Singapore's long-standing problem of fiscal dependency on opium sales under British rule.

### Managing the Fund

The bureaucratic solution to a century-old problem of fiscal dependency would soon morph into an abstract form of investment wealth that helped sustain the Empire and finance myriad projects for colonial development. The fund's management was entrusted to the Crown Agents, a quasi-governmental office of the Treasury in London, and invested across the world. In 1926, the \$34 million generated another

**(Right)** Charles Joseph Pemberton Paglar, a medical doctor and member of the Legislative Council. In 1952, he proposed using part of the Opium Revenue Replacement Reserve Fund to help opium addicts. *Eric Paglar Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

**(Below)** Visitors to the Opium Treatment Centre on St John's Island, 1957. The facility opened in 1955 to treat and rehabilitate opium addicts. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*



\$4 million in net value through purchasing colonial stocks in Nigeria, Jamaica, Sierra Leone, the Union of South Africa, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), Hong Kong and Canada. Within 10 years, vestiges of the fund could be found in nearly all territories under British rule, with a total net value of \$62 million.<sup>29</sup>

Closer to home, the fund helped support the Perak Electric Power Company, which had long supplied electricity to the Kinta Valley, one of the main tin mining areas of the Malay Peninsula. The British feared the company would default on a loan and used the opium funds to transform the loan into an investment to avoid losses from the company's possible liquidation or restructuring.<sup>30</sup>

The fund took on a longevity that extended far beyond what had been an imaginable future in interwar Singapore. Even the Japanese invasion in 1942, which replaced the Union Jack with the Rising Sun, and subsequent Occupation (1942–45), did not fundamentally weaken the fund.

During the Occupation years, the Japanese Military Administration and local community leaders in Singapore both



disavowed and also benefitted from the revenue generated from opium's commercial sale.<sup>31</sup> And while the British no longer ruled Singapore, they still gained because the Opium Revenue Replacement Reserve Fund was held in sterling securities in London and continued to collect compound interest.

It is still not completely clear what exactly happened to the fund following the end of World War II, after Japan's defeat and the return of the British to Singapore. Hopefully, this will be a topic for future research. What is evident in currently available and declassified archival records is that the fund carried over to postwar Singapore and became a controversial topic of much public debate. In June 1946, the prominent lawyer Roland Braddell argued that the opium funds belonged to the public, but had never been subject to proper accounting. "We do not know at what figure they stand today," he noted.<sup>32</sup> The following year, a committee report of the Singapore Association estimated that approximately \$9 million was missing from the fund because the British had utilised all of the interest that had accrued during the war, instead of reinvesting the money in securities in London.<sup>33</sup>

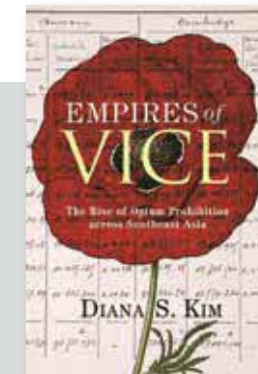
Such concerns about the fund's murkiness were tied to larger questions about Singapore's future – if and how the legacies of colonial opium revenue might help finance its postwar recovery, where opium-

entangled funds might fit into Singapore's assets and liabilities, and what vision of posterity should guide a government in the protracted process of decolonisation.

Any solution to this problem – so deeply entwined with the foundations of British colonial rule in Singapore and accumulated for over a century – would necessarily be imperfect and partial. By 1952, when Charles Paglar's request to use the Opium Revenue Replacement Reserve Fund for addict treatment was denied, it had assumed a strange ambiguity, its only clarity being that the fund not be used for the people from whom it had been collected, i.e. opium smokers in Singapore. Questions regarding its actual purpose and legitimate use were sidestepped as the fund was effectively renamed in 1953 and absorbed into a Special Reserve Fund to assist the government's commitments to development and public infrastructure improvement.<sup>34</sup>

The same year that the fund was renamed, a solution for addressing the problem of Singapore's opium addicts arose for discussion. Official plans for establishing a rehabilitation facility on St John's Island were put forward, garnering much public support. "St John's is ideal," said physician and social reformer Chen Su Lan, calling it a "quiet, restful spot 'away from it all' with plenty of fresh air, sunshine, and the sea" that would help opium addicts "forget

their habit".<sup>35</sup> Paglar concurred, calling it a "wonderful gesture" by the government.<sup>36</sup> Two years later, the St John's Opium Treatment Centre opened its doors with much fanfare, commanding the attention of the international community and medical experts as "the first in the world established solely to fight opium addiction".<sup>37</sup> ♦



This essay is based on research that led to Diana S. Kim's *Empires of Vice: The Rise of Opium Prohibition across Southeast Asia* (2020). The book is available for reference at the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library and for loan at selected public libraries (Call nos.: RSING 364.1770959 KIM and RSING 364.1770959 KIM). It also remains at major bookshops in Singapore.

### NOTES

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# AT GUNPOINT

## WIPING OUT ILLEGAL FIREARMS IN SINGAPORE

Street shootouts, bank robberies and armed kidnappings used to be common here. **Tan Chui Hua** zeroes in on how the city's gun-toting criminals were eliminated.

**W**hen dawn broke, Mr Goh, using a loud hailer, warned the men inside to surrender. Repeated warnings were given as police thought a woman and child were also inside.

"A few minutes passed before Loh himself appeared at the front door. Within seconds, the lights in the house were switched off and Loh made a sudden appearance with his machine gun.

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"Standing at the door, he sprayed a full magazine at the police before running back inside.

"Then began the fiercest battle in Singapore crime annals when hundreds of rounds of ammunition and scores of teargas bombs were fired into the gang's house."<sup>1</sup>

The battle between the police and the notorious kidnapper Loh Ngut Fong and his gang raged for several hours. It finally ended after Gurkhas stormed the house in St Helier's Avenue that the gang was using as a hideout. Loh died clutching a light machine gun and an automatic pistol.

The shootout between Loh's gang and the police took place in November 1968, a little more than 50 years ago. For a large part of the 20th century, Singapore was a violent and lawless city. In the post-war years especially, armed robberies, kidnappings at gunpoint and shootouts with the police were not uncommon. It was only from the 1970s onwards that effective measures to contain gun violence began to have an effect and guns became less common in Singapore.

One of the earliest accounts of the use of firearms in criminal activity is found in Charles Burton Buckley's *An Anecdotal History of Old Times in Singapore*, although that was related to piracy at sea in the early 1800s.

While robbers and gangsters were responsible for many of the violent crimes committed in Singapore in the 19th century, many of the incidents involved knives rather than guns. The proliferation of firearm use on the island picked up dramatically at the turn of the 20th century and escalated sharply by the 1920s to the point that, according to *The Malaya Tribune*, "Singapore can be likened to notorious Chicago in that it tops the crime list in the Straits Settlements and Malaya".<sup>2</sup> Street shootouts and reports of police wounded or even killed in the line of duty were common.

While guns and firearms could be legally sold in Singapore, and indeed were available in department stores such as John Little, the root of the problem lay in the unlicensed weapons that were illegally imported into the island. The situation became so severe that in 1924, *The Straits Times* reported that:

"... an estimate of the firearms illegally held in Singapore, among the gang robbers and secret societies, was ten thousand automatic pistols and hundreds of thousands of rounds of ammunition. That may be an exaggeration: we have no means of checking the estimate, but it is a fact that illegal import has been going on for several years, that very light punishments used to be inflicted, and that in spite of the more stringent law, the business continues on a quite considerable scale."<sup>3</sup>

In 1925, *The Malaya Tribune* reported that guns were smuggled in from ships and "in this way hundreds of revolvers and pistols find their way into the Colony. Armed with these weapons gang robberies and murders have been frequent in all parts of the island; the thickly populated Chinatown being the happy hunting ground".<sup>4</sup>

Matters were not helped by an understaffed and ill-equipped police force, with limited means to stem firearms trafficking or take down large armed gangs, especially Chinese secret societies. These triads, with their widespread membership, were responsible for many of the violent crimes committed in Singapore. René H. Onraet, Director of Criminal Intelligence and later Inspector-General of the Straits Settlements Police, wrote in 1928 that "no phase of Singapore criminal life has shown such rapid development as the use of firearms and the advent of the gunman".<sup>5</sup>

In 1939, according to *The Straits Times*, "[i]t is estimated that there are in Singapore alone 170 secret societies with 15,000 members. These societies have degenerated into dangerous hooligan gangs which were, to a great extent, responsible for the abnormal increase in crime last year.

"At one period, armed robberies by footpads were nightly occurrences, committed for the most part by Cantonese gangsters armed with knives and pistols. In many cases,

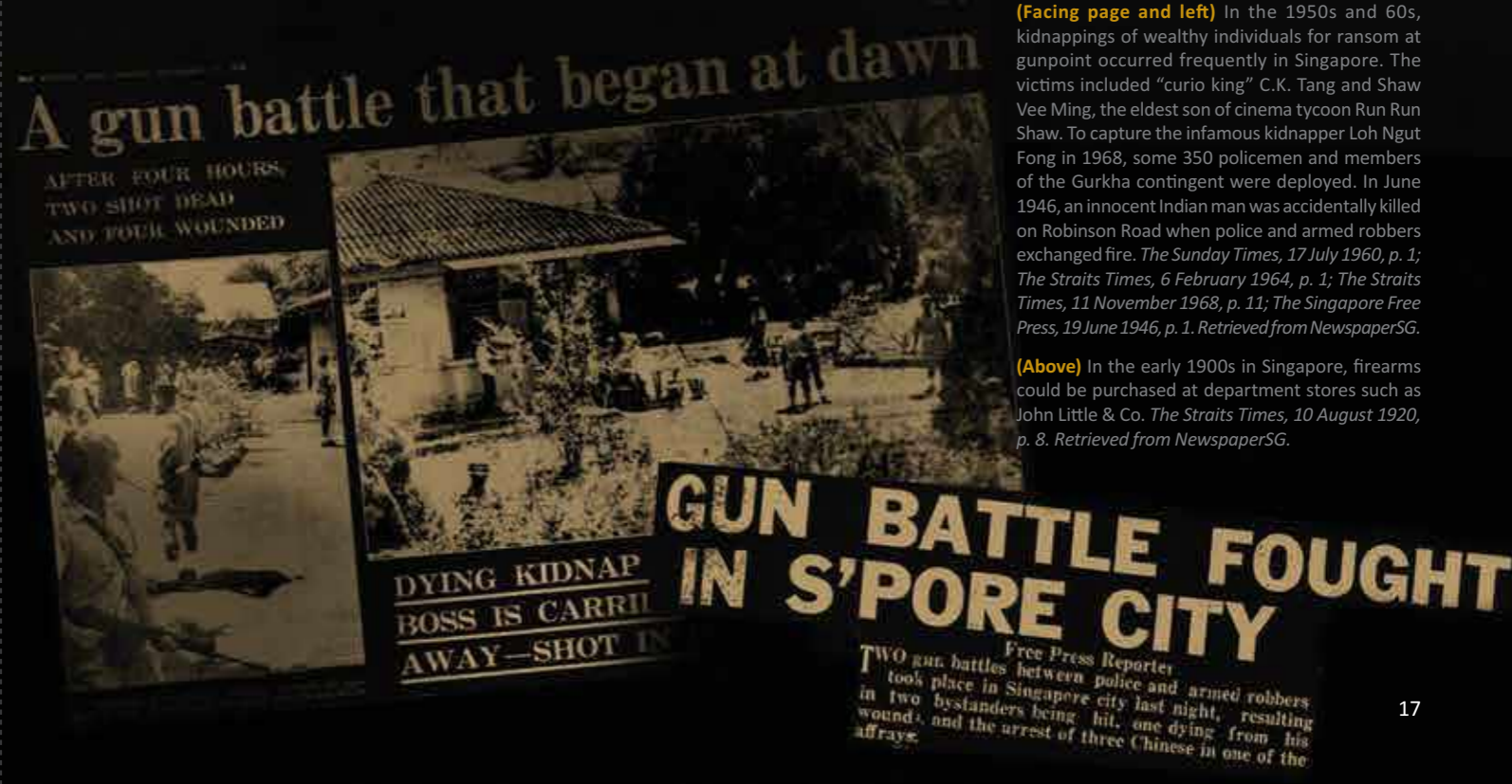


the pistols were dummies, but were, nevertheless, effective for the purpose."<sup>6</sup>

During the Japanese Occupation of Singapore (1942–45), gun crimes came to a halt as strict controls over movement of persons and swift, harsh punishments on criminals were carried out by the Japanese Military Administration. This lull lasted only as long as the Occupation years though.<sup>7</sup>

(Facing page and left) In the 1950s and 60s, kidnappings of wealthy individuals for ransom at gunpoint occurred frequently in Singapore. The victims included "curio king" C.K. Tang and Shaw Vee Ming, the eldest son of cinema tycoon Run Run Shaw. To capture the infamous kidnapper Loh Ngut Fong in 1968, some 350 policemen and members of the Gurkha contingent were deployed. In June 1946, an innocent Indian man was accidentally killed on Robinson Road when police and armed robbers exchanged fire. *The Sunday Times*, 17 July 1960, p. 1; *The Straits Times*, 6 February 1964, p. 1; *The Straits Times*, 11 November 1968, p. 11; *The Singapore Free Press*, 19 June 1946, p. 1. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

(Above) In the early 1900s in Singapore, firearms could be purchased at department stores such as John Little & Co. *The Straits Times*, 10 August 1920, p. 8. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.



### Gunmen, Gunmen Everywhere

When the Japanese Occupation ended in August 1945, gang activity resumed with a vengeance. Armed robberies and shootouts between police and criminals rose dramatically because of uncontrolled arms trafficking, and the looting of military property and equipment.<sup>8</sup> In the last eight months of 1946 alone, more than \$4.5 million worth of property was stolen from army ordnance dumps.<sup>9</sup>

Between September 1945 and December 1946, not a month went by without yet another newspaper report of a run-in between police and gunmen. In 1946, there were 960 reported incidents of armed robberies. The casualties included innocent bystanders such as an Indian employee of *The Straits Times*, who was caught in the crossfire between police and armed robbers on Robinson Road. On that same day, another shootout took place at Nankin Street, injuring a Chinese man.<sup>10</sup>

In its 1948 annual report, the police reported that the state of security was such that “lootings, particularly in the Harbour Board area, produced an almost insoluble problem... armed robberies which were reported, and there were many not reported, were in the neighbourhood of three or four every twenty-four hours”.<sup>11</sup> On top of that, the police had to contend with armed leftists and their sympathisers who were not above violence. In 1948, a grenade was thrown at labourers who turned up for work during a strike at the Singapore Harbour Board.<sup>12</sup>

In that same year, however, the police managed to score a big win. After a year of undercover work, Singapore police officers in cooperation with Dutch authorities raided a gun-smuggling ring on Airabu island in the Dutch East Indies (present-day Indonesia). The operation led to the seizure of three-and-a-half

tonnes of arms and ammunition, and the crackdown of an international syndicate supplying weapons to different parts of Southeast Asia, India and the Middle East. The seized items included submachine guns, Browning automatic rifles, aircraft machine guns and ammunition. The arrests, which took place in Airabu and Singapore, included three Americans, a Filipino, four Britons, an Irishman, a Eurasian, and a woman believed to be an Australian.<sup>13</sup>

### Curbing Gun Violence

To suppress the alarming spike in gun violence, the police did various things. In 1945, it established the Gangs and Radio Sub-branch, using radio communication to help combat armed gangsters.<sup>14</sup> Surprise swoops targeting gangs were carried out almost nightly. In one such exercise in 1946, almost 500 men were involved – comprising 280 uniformed policemen, 70 officers and detectives, and 110 paratroopers.

Policemen underwent special training in smashing up gangs and in unarmed combat, and the police force also worked closely with the military police and its counterparts in Malaya to uncover and break up gangs. In addition, officers and men of the Criminal Investigation Department were ordered to be armed at all times in anticipation of encounters with armed gangsters.<sup>15</sup>

The police also began offering cash rewards of \$200 for information leading to the arrest and conviction of persons in possession of arms. This resulted in one gun being recovered almost every day. One informant was reported to have been paid \$4,000 after he led police to a small arsenal of arms.<sup>16</sup>

In 1946 alone, 260 automatics and revolvers, 22 rifles, six Verey light pistols, two Tommy guns, one Sten gun, one submachine gun, 12,922 rounds of ammunition, 160 hand grenades and 21 detonators were seized. In 1947, one of the biggest seizures took place in Bukit Panjang, where 91 cases containing 1,095 hand grenades, a case containing 38 sticks of gelnite and about 2,000 rounds of small arms ammunition were uncovered. The following year, two Chinese men were caught for the illegal possession of 48,952 rounds of rifle ammunition.<sup>17</sup>

In 1948, the police launched the “999” telephone service that enabled the public to call the Radio Control Room, which was in constant communication

(Right) Secret society members in Singapore were responsible for committing various acts of violence and crime on the island during colonial times. Gang members usually sport tattoos on their bodies, like this snake tattoo, to symbolise their affiliation to a particular gang. *Singapore Police Force Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*



(Below) Police cadets of “B” Company at the Police Training School, 1941. *Singapore Police Force Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*



In 1948, the police launched the “999” telephone service that put callers in touch with the Radio Control Room, which was in constant communication with police radio cars. Such radio cars allowed the force to respond more quickly and efficiently on the ground, c. 1950s. *Singapore Police Force Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*



with police radio cars. Such cars could be quickly deployed if needed.<sup>18</sup>

These measures, however, did little to stem the tide of an increasing number of crimes involving firearms. In the 1950s and 60s, kidnapping for ransom at gunpoint frequently made the headlines. The victims were mainly wealthy individuals, including millionaire Thio Soen Tioe, kidnapped in 1953; Chung Khiaw Bank vice-chairman Ng Sen Choy in 1957; millionaire Sundram Appavoo Kandiar in 1957; Tan Eng Chuan, grandnephew of multimillionaire Tan Lark Sye in 1957; “curio king” C.K. Tang of House of Tang in 1960; and Shaw Vee Ming, son of cinema tycoon Shaw Run Run, in 1964. However, not all the victims managed to survive. In 1960, Thye Hong Biscuit chairman Lee Gee Chong was kidnapped and later found murdered.<sup>19</sup>

Lionel Jerome de Souza, who joined the police force in 1961, recalled his 1965 confrontation with notorious gunman and kidnapper Ah Hiap<sup>20</sup> along Victoria Street:

“The next thing I knew was I saw flash light bulbs, ‘poom, poom!’

two shots. I released him. If I were to say I was not shocked, it’s a lie. I was shocked, but somehow or other I managed to get control of myself. I drew my gun, by that time he had rushed across Victoria Street to Cashin Street, towards the old Odeon Theatre. And I fired one round. I don’t think he was hit. I fired a second round. Still he was running inside, then the crowd came out. They were showing the film *Von Ryan’s Express*. I [shall] never forget. So he got lost in the crowd.”<sup>21</sup>

In 1957, the police streamlined its alarm system to marshal every available policeman to join in a manhunt within minutes of a kidnapping report.<sup>22</sup> Two years later, a special operational unit of detectives was formed to target armed robbers and, in 1964, another “special squad of tough, hand-picked ‘crime busters’” was created for the same purpose.<sup>23</sup>

More powers were also granted to the police through new ordinances and amendments to existing laws. Starting

from 1960, the police could stop and search any motor vehicle suspected of being used in a crime. In 1961, the Kidnapping Act was passed to make the crime punishable by death.<sup>24</sup>

The kidnapping of millionaires continued well into the late 1960s and 70s though. Robberies involving the use of firearms persisted as well, with 93 reported cases in 1971, 79 in 1972 and 127 in the first half of 1973 alone. There were also payroll heists like the one in 1971 when two gunmen snatched \$31,000 meant to pay the week’s wages of some 800 daily-rated employees of International Wood Products Ltd.<sup>25</sup>

### Guns for Hire

The ease of obtaining firearms and the lack of convincing deterrents to using them spurred violent crime. In the early 1970s, it was estimated that there were some 20 gun-hirers in Singapore who rented out weapons believed to have been smuggled in from Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia. The supply of firearms in Singapore was such that in 1970, *The Straits Times* reported that “the authorities admit they

may never completely disarm the criminals”, but may “succeed in containing the number of guns and blocking ammunition supply lines”.<sup>26</sup>

Gangster-turned-pastor Neivelle Tan recalled his days gunrunning in the 1950s and 60s. “They [firearms] were almost literally freely sold around town [in Thailand], in the brothels there, even in the hotel rooms. It wouldn’t be a strange thing to go into a gambling den, find somebody losing and taking out his brand-new, or very new-looking automatic pistol and putting it on the table and offering it for sale.”

The guns in Thailand cost about \$300 to \$400 each, and Tan bought a half dozen of them, which he smuggled into Singapore. “It was really not difficult at all. You could just chuck them in the boot and nobody looks at it. The customs officers hardly looked at it, especially when your boot is empty. You could just put it under the mat or sometimes you just tuck it into your waist. They will search the whole car but not your person.”<sup>27</sup>

According to Tan, once in Singapore, it wasn’t the firearms that were difficult for gunmen to find, but the ammunition. “The revolvers, the guns were quite easily attainable but the bullets were quite difficult. The main source of the bullets were from the army. I don’t know how it came out, but most of them came out from there.”<sup>28</sup>

Throughout the 1970s and 80s, the police cracked down relentlessly on gunrunners. In 1972, the infamous Hassan brothers, who were running a gun-smuggling syndicate bringing in arms from Thailand, committed suicide by gun at the cemetery in Jalan Kubor after being surrounded by the police. In 1973, two gun-for-hire syndicates were smashed, and more than 50 pistols and over 1,000 rounds of ammunition were seized.<sup>29</sup>

The killing of Detective Police Constable Ong Poh Heng in July 1973 – he was shot while intervening in an argument between an armed motorist and a bus driver over who had the right of way<sup>30</sup> – appeared to have been the catalyst that led to stiffer penalties imposed for offences committed using firearms.

### Eradicating Gun Violence

Ong’s death was repeatedly cited as a reason why parliament should pass the Arms Offences Bill; it was passed and the law came into force in February 1974.<sup>31</sup> Under

Police discovery of a cache of abandoned firearms and gear, 1960. David Ng Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



the new law, anyone using or attempting to use firearms with the intent to cause physical injury would face the death penalty. Accomplices of gunmen and arms traffickers could also be punished with death, and long prison sentences awaited those in illegal possession of firearms and ammunition. More importantly, those who consorted or associated with gunmen, or abetted or sheltered them, were also convicted.<sup>32</sup>

The new legislation had an immediate impact, seeing a dip in the number of armed robberies when the provisions of the bill were announced in August 1973. Between September and November that year, there were just 14 cases, compared with 155 cases from January to August.

The first gunman sentenced to death under the new act was Sha Bakar

Dawood in September 1975. He had shot and wounded three people at a brothel and opened fire on a police squad along Thiam Siew Avenue. Just a month later, the first man sentenced to death for being an accomplice to two armed gang robberies was hawker Talib bin Haji Hamzah.<sup>33</sup> The latter case demonstrated that even accomplices to armed robberies would face the full force of the law.

Other factors also contributed to the decline in gun violence. First, more resources were invested in modernising the police force, such as the introduction of new policing methods, improvements to weaponry and the deployment of gun-sniffing dogs at points of entry into Singapore.<sup>34</sup>

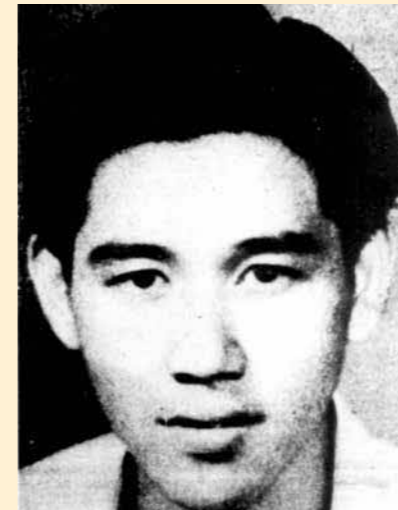
At the same time, there was greater collaboration among ASEAN countries

### FROM SPECIAL SQUADS TO SHOOTING STYLES

To deal with armed gangs and secret societies, the police formed special units such as the Phantom Squad created in early 1959.

Comprising 10 specially chosen detectives armed with .38 revolvers, the squad would venture into gang territory. *The Straits Times* reported that the squad’s first confrontation with a gang unfolded the night after its formation. Three members of the squad dressed in dark clothes began patrolling a particularly “bad area”. Before long, they found

Wanted man Lim Ban Lim was one of the first gunmen to be slain by the new FBI shooting technique adopted by the Singapore Police Force. *The Sunday Times*, 26 November 1972, p. 1. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.



themselves surrounded by an armed mob. “The gang leader shouted: ‘What game do you play?’ – the usual gangland challenge to strangers to identify their secret society affiliations... The trio knew they had got what they sought. ‘We’re the police!’ they yelled back. War cries rang out and the thugs attacked them. The gangsters were soon put to flight. Three arrests were made and weapons, including a sword favoured by Chinese mediums for their tongue slashing acts, were recovered.”<sup>1</sup>

In the first six months of operations, the Phantom Squad shot several thugs and arrested more than a hundred. Such was the squad’s reputation that in September 1959, the police seized three homemade guns from a secret society arsenal in Lorong 17 Geylang. The firearms were believed to have been part of the secret society’s preparations for facing the Phantom Squad.<sup>2</sup>

The squad, however, disbanded following the killing of a suspected gang member under controversial circumstances: a 23-year-old Indian dockyard worker had been fatally shot in the chest during a clash between an armed gang and the police on 3 August 1959. Another unit known as the “Special Squad” – comprising 73 officers and men, including the 10 detectives from the Phantom Squad – was subsequently formed to carry out the same duties.<sup>3</sup>

The police force also began training its officers to be more effective in facing armed criminals. In November 1971, a new style of shooting used by the United States Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) was introduced for its “greater speed and applicability”. Prior to this, Singaporean

The first gunman sentenced to death under the Arms Offences Act was Sha Bakar Dawood in September 1975. He had shot and wounded three people at a brothel and opened fire on a police squad along Thiam Siew Avenue. *The Straits Times*, 3 September 1975, p. 8. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

### GUILTY ON ALL FIVE CHARGES

## Sha Bakar sentenced to death

By GERALD PEREIRA

SHA Bakar Dawood was yesterday sentenced to death by the High Court for shooting and wounding three people at a brothel and then opening fire at a



policemen were trained in the British “battle crouch” shooting style. Training consisted of firing at still targets and from behind cover in a crouched position so as to present a small target for the enemy.<sup>4</sup>

The new technique, however, involved being trained to fire from the hip at fast-moving targets. The heavy Webley and Scott revolver was also replaced with the lighter and smaller Smith and Wesson, which provided a firmer grip and allowed for a faster draw.<sup>5</sup>

One of the first gunmen to be slain by this new shooting technique was Lim Ban Lim, who had topped the wanted list for 10 years. Lim was gunned down in Queenstown in November 1972. His accomplice, Chow Ah Kow, was shot dead in Clemenceau Avenue 23 days later.<sup>6</sup>

The FBI shooting method was so effective that by 1975, it was announced that all regular members of the police force would switch to the new style within two years.<sup>7</sup>

### NOTES

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Police officers undergoing training at the Police Training School, 1990. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



to stem arms trafficking. During the ASEANPOL Conference held in Jakarta in 1983, ASEAN police chiefs pushed for the adoption of several measures, including enhanced penalties for those caught having firearms and the updating of laws to tighten licensing and control of firearms. Concerted efforts were also put in place to enforce gun laws, particularly at entry and exit points, border areas and coastlines. There was also greater exchange of information among the police forces of the different ASEAN countries.<sup>35</sup>

In the 1980s, community policing was introduced in Singapore which was geared at partnering the public in keeping the country crime-free. The people's participation in neighbourhood policing schemes also led to a higher level of public confidence in the police, and the number of arrests due to information and

assistance from the public increased from 592 in 1985 to 2,476 in 1986.<sup>36</sup>

Gun-smuggling rings, however, remained a problem through out the 1980s. It was through a combination of harsh penalties for possession and use of firearms, increased surveillance of Singapore's coastlines and points of entry, and greater regional efforts to curb arms trafficking that eventually put an end to gunrunning.

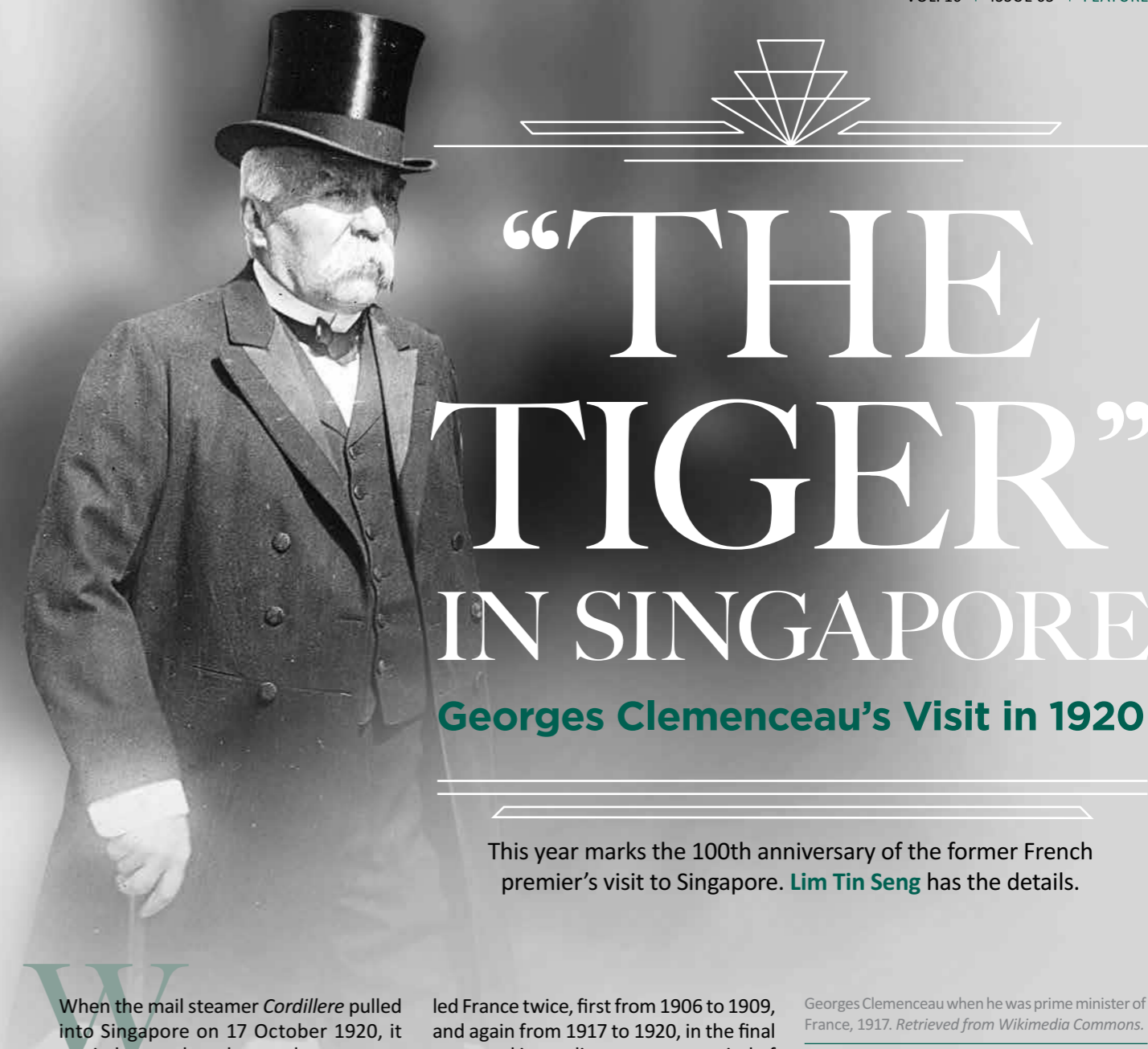
Although gun violence was effectively contained in Singapore during the 1980s and 90s, violent crimes involving the use of firearms would sporadically occur, including a series of goldsmith robberies by gunmen in 1989.<sup>37</sup> However, the era of street shootouts and gun battles was effectively over. By the new millennium, gun crime had become a rarity in the city-state. ♦

#### NOTES

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# “THE TIGER” IN SINGAPORE

## Georges Clemenceau's Visit in 1920

This year marks the 100th anniversary of the former French premier's visit to Singapore. **Lim Tin Seng** has the details.

When the mail steamer *Cordillere* pulled into Singapore on 17 October 1920, it carried more than the usual assortment of letters, postcards and parcels. Also on board was a distinguished passenger: the former prime minister of France, Georges Eugène Benjamin Clemenceau (1841–1929).<sup>1</sup>

Nicknamed *Le Tigre* (The Tiger), Clemenceau was in Singapore from 17 to 22 October en route to Java before returning to the island on 15 November for a one-day stay. The two stopovers took place during his six-month tour of India, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), Malaya and the Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia), an expedition he embarked upon after retiring from politics.<sup>2</sup> It was also the first and only visit to Asia by the man who had

led France twice, first from 1906 to 1909, and again from 1917 to 1920, in the final years and immediate post-war period of World War I.<sup>3</sup>

#### Arrival of “The Tiger”

On arriving at Johnston's Pier in Singapore and seeing the huge number of vessels docked off the coast flying a variety of national flags, Clemenceau grabbed the arm of his travelling companion, Nicolas Pietri, and exclaimed: “*Et on veut que nous soyons à égalité avec les Anglais!*” (“And to think France is on par with the British!”).<sup>4</sup>

Clemenceau was greeted by a roaring crowd – which he “confessed surprised and touched him” – “carried out in a manner worthy of [a] great visitor”,

Georges Clemenceau when he was prime minister of France, 1917. Retrieved from Wikimedia Commons.

complete with a guard-of-honour, a red carpet, buntings, marching bands and an overjoyed crowd cheering “*Vive Clemenceau!*”, or “*Long live Clemenceau!*”. At the welcome reception, H.A. Low, representing the Municipal Commissioners and the town of Singapore, announced that a new road in Singapore (today's Clemenceau Avenue) would be named after the Frenchman.<sup>5</sup>

After leaving Johnston's Pier, Clemenceau was driven to Government House, where he stayed as the guest of the governor of the Straits Settlements, Laurence Nunns Guillemard.<sup>6</sup> Along the way, huge crowds lined both sides of the road cheering him. Among them were 500 children from the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus (also known as Town Convent) on Victoria Street, which

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The plaque erected by the Municipal Commissioners of Singapore at Clemenceau Bridge. The bridge was completed in 1940 but demolished in 1989 to make way for the Central Expressway (CTE). In 1991, a new Clemenceau Bridge was built to connect the CTE's Chin Swee Tunnel with Clemenceau Avenue. *Lee Kip Lin Collection, PictureSG, National Library, Singapore.*



was founded in 1854 by nuns from the Institute of Charitable Schools of the Holy Infant Jesus of St Maur in France. French homes and establishments were also adorned with the French tricolour flag for his visit. Deeply impressed by what he saw, Clemenceau penned the following telegraph message to his relatives later that night:

“Nous sommes arrivés ce matin. Un peu déconcertés par une réception officielle dépassant tout ce qui pouvait être prévu. (...) Singapour est une merveille.”<sup>7</sup>

[Translation: “We arrived this morning. A little disconcerted by the reception effort beyond anything that could be expected... Singapore is a wonder.”]

### “The Tiger” in Singapore

Clemenceau was almost 80 years old at the time of his visit to Singapore but despite his age, he was remembered for having “an inexhaustible supply of energy”<sup>8</sup> and had a packed itinerary during his five-day stay here. His first visit, on 18 October, was to the French Consulate to meet members of the French community. Those present included priests from the Catholic mission as well as French bankers, merchants and engineers. A party of French miners from the Malayan state of Perak also specially made the journey south to meet him.<sup>9</sup>

Clemenceau’s next stop was Commercial Square (present-day Raffles Place) and High Street for a bit of shop-

ping before proceeding to the Raffles Museum for a tour.

Sometime after 1 pm, Clemenceau boarded the Royal Navy light cruiser *H.M.S. Curlew* where he inspected the crew, enjoyed lunch with the officers and “astounded everybody with his wonderful energy”. In his speech, Clemenceau stressed the “importance of a close understanding between Britain and France”.<sup>10</sup>

The next day, Clemenceau visited the General Hospital and the Tanglin Club, and then ended the day with a

dinner at the Garden Club organised by the Chinese community and hosted by Dr Lim Boon Keng, a medical doctor and prominent member of the community. Other guests at the dinner included Governor Guillemard and Sultan Ibrahim of Johor.

In response to Lim thanking him for leading the Entente Powers (comprising France, Britain, Russia, Italy, Japan and the United States), Clemenceau said his services had been exaggerated and that the real winners of the war were the



(Top) Georges Clemenceau visiting Yeong Cheng Chinese School on 20 October 1920. On his left is Dr Lim Boon Keng. *Courtesy of Musée Clemenceau.*

(Above) A reception given in honour of Georges Clemenceau at Government House. Clemenceau is talking to the man holding his hat. *Courtesy of Musée Clemenceau.*

soldiers who had sacrificed their lives.<sup>11</sup> The former prime minister added that he was enjoying his visit to Singapore and was pleased to find contentment written on the faces of the various people he met. This made him feel like he was back in France. He drew much laughter when he said that it would be great if he could “find a Chinese home” and to be given a place to stay.<sup>12</sup>

On 20 October, Clemenceau, accompanied by Dr Lim, visited Yeong Cheng Chinese School on Club Street and Singapore Chinese Girls’ School on Hill Street. He was warmly received by the teachers and students of Yeong Cheng School and given a tour by the principal. Before Clemenceau left, he was presented with some artworks made by the students and photos of the school, one of which bore an inscription in Chinese that read “Defender of Peace”.<sup>13</sup> After the school visits, Clemenceau paid courtesy calls on prominent Chinese community leaders Eu Tong Sen and Seah Liang Seah at their homes. At the latter’s residence, Clemenceau was shown Seah’s collection of china and other art objects.<sup>14</sup>

In the afternoon, Clemenceau, a polo enthusiast, watched a match at the Singapore Polo Club on Balestier Road.<sup>15</sup> He ended the day with a dinner given by Governor and Lady Guillemard at Govern-

ment House. The dinner was attended by many of the city’s prominent community figures and government officials, including Lim, the Chief Justice of the Straits Settlements James Murison and Major-General Dudley Ridout, the Commander of Troops of the Straits Settlements.<sup>16</sup>

The next day was another busy one for Clemenceau. In the morning, he visited the Town Convent where he delivered a speech in French to the children, paying special tribute to the Reverend Mother. He noted:

“Ici je vois qu’on vous aime et que la Révérende Mère a le secret de se faire obéir sans se fâcher, sans faire de gros yeux, sans menacer toujours. La Révérende Mère se fait obéir avec un sourire, elle fait supporter son autorité avec bienveillance, et une inspiration toujours noble et élevée.”<sup>17</sup>

[Translation: “Here I see that you are well taken care of and that the Reverend Mother has the secret of being obeyed without getting angry, without stern looks, without always threatening. The Reverend Mother is obeyed with a smile, she conveys her authority with benevolence,

and an inspiration that is always noble and distinguished.”]

Clemenceau then toured Pasir Ris before returning to Government House for a garden party hosted by Governor and Lady Guillemard.<sup>18</sup>

On 22 October, the final day of his trip, Clemenceau attended the groundbreaking ceremony to inaugurate the construction of Clemenceau Avenue. Stretching from Newton Circus to the southern bank of the Singapore River, the new road was conceived as an alternative access between the northwestern part of the city and Orchard Road, which was then served by Cairnhill Road and Cavenagh Road. Clemenceau Avenue would also replace the stretch of Tank Road connecting Orchard Road with Fort Canning Road.<sup>19</sup>

In his opening speech, Captain E.P. Richards, Deputy Chairman of the Singapore Improvement Trust, highlighted the significance of having a road named after Clemenceau in Singapore as a way to “commemorate lastingly in Singapore the visit of a great man and a great statesman...”<sup>20</sup> Clemenceau then turned a shovelful of earth and cut a ribbon to signify the inauguration of the construction of the new road.

In his speech, Clemenceau hailed the road as a symbol of friendship between England and France, and described the day as one of the happiest in his life:

“Do not forget that the name Clemenceau stands for friendship and loyalty between the two countries. In your name and mine, in the name of Great Britain and France, let me express the hope that we remain forever good friends.”<sup>21</sup>

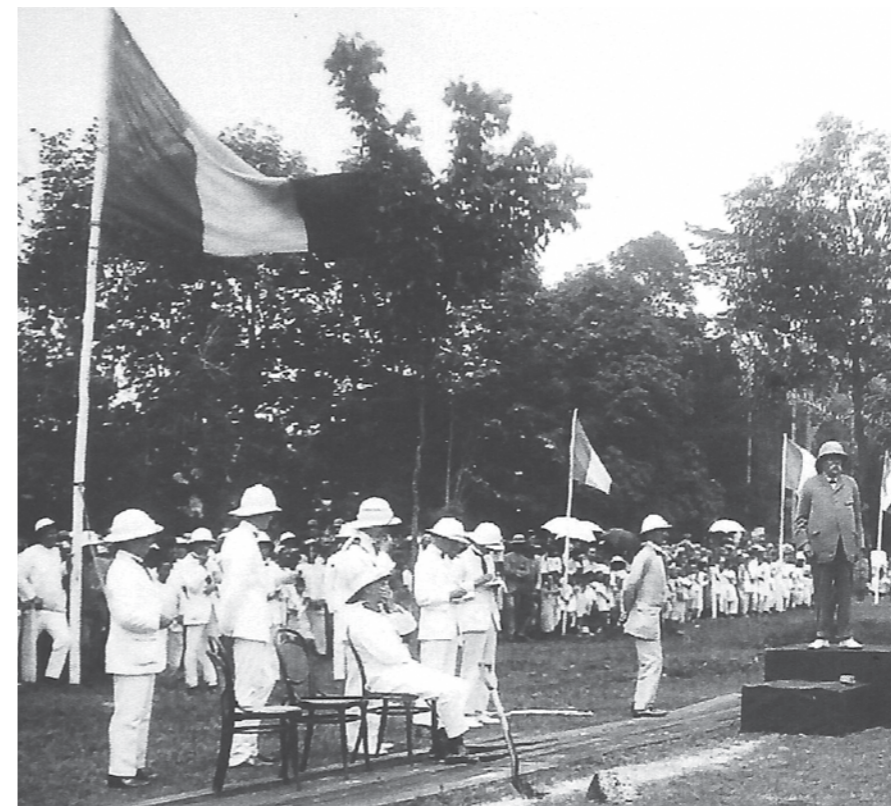
He then proceeded to plant two palm trees, one on each side of the new road, before the playing of the British and French national anthems brought the ceremony to a close.<sup>22</sup>

Clemenceau departed from Singapore on the same day on the Dutch vessel *Melchior Treub*. He toured the Dutch East Indies for about a month before returning to Singapore on 15 November for a one-day visit.<sup>23</sup>

### Return of “The Tiger”

Despite concerns over his health due to a bronchial illness contracted in Java, Clemenceau witnessed the laying of the

Georges Clemenceau (on the podium) attending the groundbreaking ceremony for Clemenceau Avenue on 22 October 1920. *Courtesy of Musée Clemenceau.*



foundation stone of the Cenotaph that very evening by Governor Guillemard.<sup>24</sup> The war memorial was designed by the architectural firm Swan & Maclaren to commemorate the soldiers who had sacrificed their lives in World War I.<sup>25</sup>

That night, Clemenceau had dinner with Governor Guillemard before boarding the *Sea Belle* to Muar, Johor, to continue with his tour of the region.<sup>26</sup> He arrived back in France on March 1921.<sup>27</sup>

When asked by *The Malaya Tribune* about what he thought of the island, he replied it was a beautiful place:

“... the trees, the birds, the houses, the happy looks on the faces of the people – all have pleased me immensely. I am especially struck by the way in which the different communities seem to get along without squabbling. Your poor people – they seem so much more contented than the poor people of Europe.”<sup>28</sup>

Georges Clemenceau with monks and nuns at the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus, 21 October 1920. Courtesy of Musée Clemenceau.



### CLEMENCEAU AVENUE AND CLEMENCEAU BRIDGE

Georges Clemenceau is memorialised in a road and bridge named after him in Singapore. Although the groundbreaking ceremony for Clemenceau Avenue was held on 22 October 1920, work did not commence until 1928 as construction of the road was costly.<sup>1</sup> The road was built in two phases. The first section of the road, from the entrance of Government House to Cavenagh Road, was completed in 1929. The second stretch of the road, between

Cavenagh Road and Newton Circus, was completed in 1936.<sup>2</sup>

Clemenceau Avenue was the first road in Singapore to have electric street lamps, installed in the section between Cavenagh Road and Newton Circus.<sup>3</sup> These were mercury vapour lamps that generated light using an electric arc passing through vapourised mercury. Prior to this, the streets were lit by gas-filled lamps.

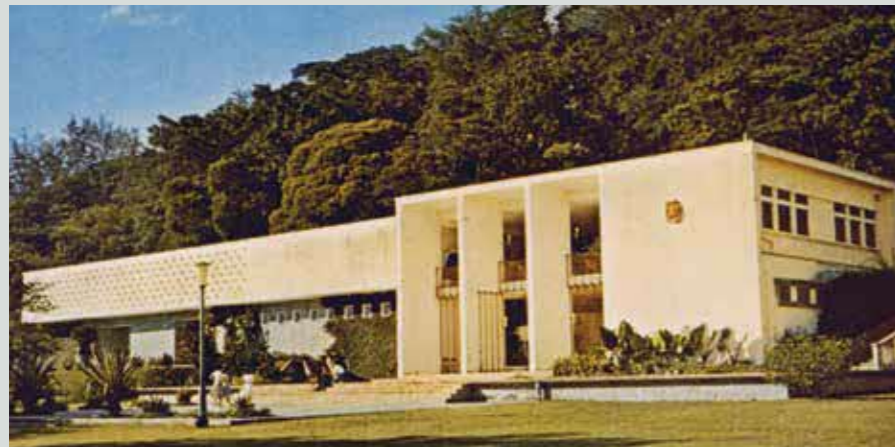
Towards the end of the 1930s, a plan to link Clemenceau Avenue to Keppel Road was implemented, resulting in the construction of Clemenceau Bridge across

the Singapore River.<sup>4</sup> This bridge was built in 1940 but demolished in 1989 to make way for the Central Expressway (CTE). A new Clemenceau Bridge was built in 1991 to connect the CTE's Chin Swee Tunnel with Clemenceau Avenue.<sup>5</sup>

Clemenceau Avenue used to host a number of prominent landmarks, including George Lee Motors, the National Theatre, the Rediffusion building and the Van Kleef Aquarium. One historical landmark that still remains is the House of Tan Yeok Nee, a gazetted national monument.<sup>6</sup>

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The Van Kleef Aquarium, 1960s. Situated at the foot of Fort Canning Hill at the junction of Clemenceau Avenue and River Valley Road, the aquarium was named after Dutchman Karl Willem Benjamin van Kleef, who lived in Singapore from the late 19th to early 20th century. He bequeathed his estate to the Municipal Commissioners for the beautification of the town. The aquarium was built in 1955 and demolished in 1998. *Chiang Ker Chiu Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

Unveiling of the Cenotaph by the Prince of Wales during his visit to Singapore, 1922. The Cenotaph is a war memorial for soldiers who lost their lives in World War I. On 15 November 1920, Georges Clemenceau witnessed the laying of its foundation stone. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



And when told that some critics had called Singapore backward, he responded: “Who? Why?... I do not think any such thing! Your colony has a tremendous future before it. It has beauty and talent and it is rich.”<sup>29</sup>

Some years later, Guillemard wrote in *The Times* of London about Clemenceau’s visit, calling it one of the highlights in his life:

“... it was my good fortune to meet him in holiday mood... he was like a great boy. He went everywhere, saw everything, and talked to everybody. The charm of his manners was irresistible; his gay humour was infectious; his courtesy won all hearts, and in two days he was the idol of Singapore.”<sup>30</sup> ♦

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# LOOKING BACK AT QUEENSTOWN LIBRARY'S

# 50 Years

**Paddy Jonathan Ong** traces the history and development of Singapore's first branch library since it opened its doors in 1970.

**Paddy Jonathan Ong** has been an Associate Librarian with Queenstown Public Library since 2017. He manages its community garden and the adults' collection, and also creates services and programmes to help adults rediscover their love for reading and learning.

**F**ringed by tall palms and old rain trees, a modest, two-storey building nestles in the quiet street that is Margaret Drive. With its characteristic bowtie arches and floor-to-ceiling glass windows, the Queenstown Public Library has been a neighbourhood landmark for half a century. Although not a grand edifice, this humble building has played a significant role in the social and cultural life of a young nation.

Queenstown is Singapore's first satellite town, and the prototype for the country's housing and urban development.<sup>1</sup> Named after Queen Elizabeth II in commemoration of her coronation in 1953,<sup>2</sup> the housing estate was built by the Housing & Development Board in the early 1960s.<sup>3</sup> On 30 April 1970, Queenstown Branch Library, Singapore's first branch library, was officially opened by founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew.

The opening of the library was significant because it marked the move towards making books accessible to all Singaporeans, at a time when few could afford them. Until 1960, the Raffles Library, located within the Raffles Museum (what is now the National Museum of Singapore), was Singapore's only subscription-based library for the public with its predominantly English collection available to fee-paying members.<sup>4</sup> (There were also part-time branch libraries located on Lim Ah Pin Road and in Siglap but these had small collections and were only opened on certain afternoons a week.<sup>5</sup>)

When the Raffles National Library opened in a new building next to the Raffles Museum on 12 November 1960, membership was made free for Singapore residents. Located on 91 Stamford Road, Raffles National Library was renamed the National Library in December 1960.<sup>6</sup>

## The Need for More Libraries

In the 1960s, public library services in Singapore consisted of the National Library on Stamford Road, small part-time branch libraries in Siglap and Joo Chiat, mobile library services<sup>7</sup> and the part-loan service, which was essentially a bulk loan service to organisations and institutions such as prisons and hospitals. Early on, the National Library's management recognised that

there was a need to decentralise library services further to allow more people to use the library. This meant opening new branches across the island.<sup>8</sup>

In 1963, the National Library's first annual report identified a number of suitable locations for the branch library: Queenstown, which was near the city; Jurong in the west; and Katong or Geylang in the east. Jurong was only lightly inhabited at the time, and Katong and Geylang were still served by the Joo Chiat and Siglap part-time branch libraries, so Queenstown was eventually chosen. Minister of State for Culture Lee Khoo Choy made the announcement in parliament in 1966.<sup>9</sup>

In a memo dated 20 April 1967 to the Ministry of Culture, Prime Minister Lee threw his weight behind the expansion of libraries, saying "it is a development to be welcomed and encouraged, and the facilities must be expanded to take in our ever growing educated youths".

Once funding was approved, the librarians began drawing up a plan for the building, working closely with government architects from the Public Works Department. Chan Thye Seng, who was then Head of the Library Extension Service, was appointed the Head Planner for the library. In an interview with the Oral History Centre, he recalled: "Kenneth Rosario was the lead architect. He was a very friendly architect and easily accessible. His office was in Kallang and any time, I could go to see him, go over details with him and make amendments and so on. It was a very happy working relationship."<sup>10</sup>

The new library's design was austere and modernist, and took into consideration the climate and the technology at the time. Each floor was designed to have high ceilings to provide good air circulation as there was no air-conditioning. Floor-to-ceiling windows helped with ambient lighting and ventilation, while the glass windows were tinted to counteract the bright sunlight. These windows also enabled those passing by to look in. The library was built to accommodate 200,000 books and had a seating capacity for 280. The Children's Room was on the first floor, while the Adult & Young People's Room and Reference Section were on the second floor.<sup>11</sup>

Books were acquired from the United Kingdom, Malaysia, India, Taiwan and Hong Kong, while the library furniture had to be custom built and procured through the central supply arm of the government. Recalled Chan: "We had to draw the diagrams out for adult and children's reading tables to differentiate them; the sloped and flat trolleys, and catalogue cabinet stands. It was not uncommon for existing staff to measure dimensions of various furniture and draw them out on paper with the measurements, to send an order to the manufacturers."<sup>12</sup>

Construction of the library took about a year. After it was completed in December 1969, the installation of furniture and equipment, and the shelving of books took about three months. Library staff personally delivered the books to the library, using the fleet of mobile library vehicles for transportation. The opening ceremony was a grand affair

**(Facing page)** Queenstown Branch Library on the night of its official opening, 30 April 1970. The ceremony began at 8.15 pm. Crowds are seen waiting to enter the library. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

**(Below)** Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew is taken on a tour of Queenstown Branch Library by Mrs Hedwig Anuar, Director of the National Library, during its official opening on 30 April 1970. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*



with a “dragon dance and all the grassroots leaders,” recalled Chan. “[A stage was built] outside the library so [Prime Minister Lee] could give an address and the grassroots leaders lined up to shake his hand.”<sup>13</sup>

### Superlatives and Success

At the opening, Prime Minister Lee described Queenstown Branch Library as “a milestone in our rising standards of life” and announced that similar libraries would be set up in every major housing estate such as Toa Payoh, Katong, Jurong and Woodlands. He noted that these libraries would provide convenient access to books which most people could not afford to buy, and they would also be “sanctuaries of peace and quiet where concentration and better work is possible”. Queenstown Branch Library, he said, marked “one milestone along the road up the hill towards a more educated society”.<sup>14</sup>

The library’s popularity was evident in the snaking queues at the counter that

formed on Saturdays as people borrowed and returned books. Additional staff had to be deployed to handle the crowd, many of them students in their early teens or younger. The library was so popular that by the end of 1972, it had achieved 97 percent of its membership target of 24,000. The number of books borrowed that year also saw a 15.9 percent increase to 1.76 million, compared with 1.5 million loans in 1971.<sup>15</sup>

Among those young bookworms was former Member of Parliament Chan Soo Sen. Chan remembered how he had been impressed when he visited the library for the first time as he had never seen so many books before. He said: “It was a nice environment. Near my place. Just walked five minutes from there.”<sup>16</sup>

Another regular visitor to the library was Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen, who grew up around Tanglin Halt and Commonwealth Drive. He recalled: “... as a teen you sort of go and walk, what would be considered quite far, 20 minutes, 30

minutes, and go out and go to your library... The library was very useful because we would spend afternoons just reading.”<sup>17</sup>

Senior Minister of State Heng Chee How, who grew up in Queenstown in the 1970s, was a regular user too. “I wouldn’t claim that I was particularly studious or anything like that,” he said. “But that place I like it a lot because I do like to read and couldn’t afford buying books anyway [at] that time. When I want to research, that’s the only place where you have encyclopaedias, only hoping that when you get to the page, that it’s still there; it’s not been torn out.” The Queenstown library still holds fond memories for him. “When you close your eyes, you can still remember how the shelves made certain sounds,” he recalled.<sup>18</sup>

The new branch library also received praise from academics and overseas visitors. In 1971, Jay E. Daily, Professor of Library Science at the University of Pittsburgh, was in Singapore to gather research for a book on comparative librarianship. Having examined the library systems of 45 countries, he said: “Los Angeles has a very good public library system, among the best in the United States, but I think that your Queenstown Branch Library is better than the branch libraries in Los Angeles. One expects something massive and monumental for national libraries, but branch libraries are usually neglected. I have seen nothing in the East to compare with Queenstown.”<sup>19</sup>

But the most important validation came from regular Singaporeans. Iris Lim, a former resident of Queenstown who lived near the library recalled: “When I was in primary school, every day I would go to the library.” As a child, she would devour the fairytales and folktales of various cultures, all translated into Mandarin, and she said she eventually read the entire collection. “That’s why my Chinese is so good,” she quipped.<sup>20</sup>

Hedwig Anuar, then Director of the National Library, was particularly pleased with the library’s success in attracting non-English educated patrons. “Some make use of the library as a club. They come regularly to read, meet their friends and attend the various activities. They even know the librarians by name and the librarians too know their names,” she said.<sup>21</sup>

### More Than Just Books

Beyond being a repository of books and knowledge, libraries also became community spaces. As one of the few spaces accessible to the public in the 1970s, the library organised a plethora of pro-

grammes and events, some of which were quite unorthodox for a space meant as a peaceful sanctuary. There were gardening or bonsai talks; arts and crafts sessions for children; talks and presentations on photography, bridal makeup, car design; and even a forum on whether television would replace books.<sup>22</sup>

Then there were events like a karate demonstration in 1972 by the Singapore Karate Association, where an instructor and seven black belts demonstrated free-sparring movements and smashed bricks with their fists and legs before 200 wide-eyed children. The next year, the library hosted the band of the 1st Battalion Royal New Zealand Infantry Regiment, as they performed hits by Elvis and a Mozart concerto to a large crowd packed against and between the shelves.<sup>23</sup>

The library also organised programmes that took patrons outside of the space, such as the visit to the camp of the 6th Battalion of the Singapore Infantry Regiment in 1972. This was aimed at helping civilians understand military life.

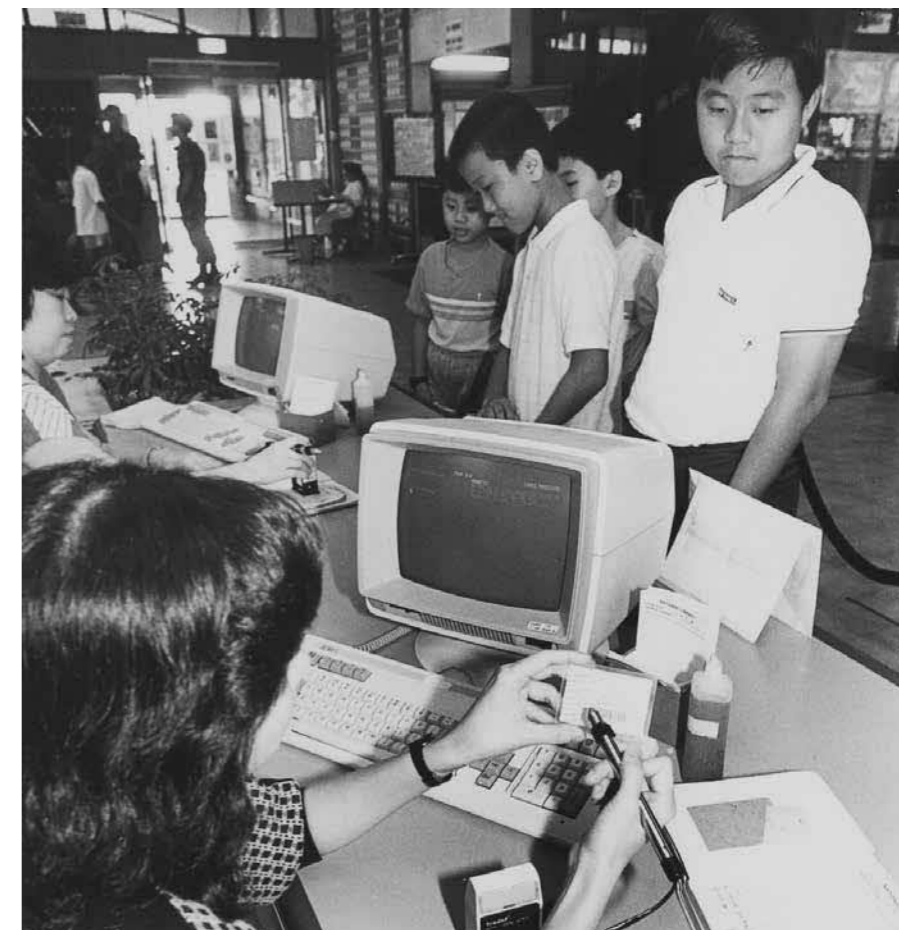
These events were all planned and facilitated by the librarians themselves in an effort to break down the barriers between librarians and patrons, to cultivate good reading habits as well as provide social and cultural enrichment. The library was becoming a livelier place. As National Library director Anuar noted, “the [stereotypical] image of librarians as shy, mousey and retiring is no longer true. They are now modern, fashionable and able to get along well with children, teenagers and adults.”<sup>24</sup>

These library events continued through the decades. Kweh Soon Huat, who joined Queenstown Branch Library in 1991 as a librarian, organised talks by professional athletes when Singapore hosted the Southeast Asian Games in 1993. “I invited a few sports personalities like Abbas Saad to the library,” he recalled. “He spoke about his achievements and did some football skills on the stage. The crowd was huge, it was full house.”<sup>25</sup>

External organisations also used the library’s facilities for their own programmes. In 1986, the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE) organised a public forum at the library on the proliferation of sexist advertisements in the media. It subsequently made the news. AWARE also used the library for forums on polygamy and the Women’s Charter, and on equality in marriage and divorce. The last one actually featured Anuar as one of the speakers.<sup>26</sup>

The library was also an incubator for the arts. Jasmin Samat Simon, one of the

A patron watches as the library staff scans the barcode on his new library membership card, 1980s. PictureSG, National Library, Singapore.



(Below) Patrons queuing up for library services at Queenstown Branch Library, 1970s. The counter is manned by three teenagers. PictureSG, National Library, Singapore.

(Bottom) The packed reading room of Queenstown Branch Library, 1970s. PictureSG, National Library, Singapore.



founders of local children’s theatre and drama company ACT 3 (now two entities: ACT 3 International and ACT 3 Theatrics), recalled putting on a small Christmas production in the library with members of the Friends of the Library group.<sup>27</sup>

### Modernising the Library

To keep pace with technological advancements, Queenstown Branch Library upgraded its facilities over the years. In 1978, it became the first branch to become fully air-conditioned. Five years later, the library began offering audio-visual services where patrons could listen to music, watch feature films, slides and cartoons, and access newspapers on microfilm in specially equipped rooms.<sup>28</sup> In 1984, the library was renovated again, reopening after three months with new facilities such as a lecture hall that had a stage, spotlights and a dressing room, and refurbished children’s and adults’ sections.

One of the biggest upgrades was not made to the physical infrastructure though. In 1987, Queenstown became the first branch library in the National Library’s network to computerise its loan

and membership services, and to have a computerised public access catalogue.<sup>29</sup> Books and periodicals were barcoded, and patrons could now borrow these items using just one credit card-size library card with a unique barcode on it (i.e. the library membership number). Using the computerised catalogue system, patrons could also search for books throughout the National Library’s network.<sup>30</sup>

The 1990s saw a big change to the role of libraries in Singapore. In June 1992, the Library 2000 Review Committee headed by Tan Chin Nam, Chairman of the National Computer Board and Managing Director of the Economic Development Board, was convened to review the public library system in Singapore. To lead public libraries into the information age, the National Library became a statutory board on 1 September 1995 with Tan as its first chairman and Christopher Chia as the first chief executive.

The newly formed National Library Board (NLB) aimed to “expand continuously the nation’s capacity to learn” and to “educate [the] people to maximum potential throughout life”.<sup>31</sup> This marked a new era

for library services in Singapore and as part of that, all branch libraries were renamed community libraries. Queenstown Branch Library became known as Queenstown Community Library (all community libraries were later renamed public libraries).

After the NLB was set up, the automation of library services picked up the pace. In 1996, self-borrowing stations and the book-drop service were introduced in all community libraries, including Queenstown. With multiple automated self-borrowing stations, the process of borrowing books became much faster. The introduction of a bookdrop service allowed people to return library books easily and quickly, even when the library was closed. The snaking queues to borrow and return books seen on weekends became a thing of the past.

In 1998, NLB became the first public library system in the world to use radio-frequency identification (RFID) technology for its Electronic Library Management System to manage the tracking, distribution, circulation and flow of library materials.<sup>32</sup> RFID tags were affixed in all books, making NLB one of the largest users of the technology at the time. The bookdrop became automated and allowed returns to be recorded almost immediately. In addition, patrons no longer needed to return items to the library they had borrowed them from. Patrons of Queenstown Library, as well as all the other NLB libraries, benefitted from these improved processes.<sup>33</sup>

In the following decade, community libraries took turns to undergo upgrading and renovation works in line with the recommendation by the Library 2000 report to create “a stimulating and lively environment” in libraries and to make “a visit to the library an enjoyable and enriching experience”.<sup>34</sup>

In 2003, Queenstown Library underwent a nine-month renovation to do just that. The auditorium was removed, a lift was installed for elderly patrons and persons with disabilities, and the storytelling room was replaced with a cafe. The staircase was moved from the centre to the corner of the building so that there was more space for exhibitions. The service counter was also relocated nearer the entrance to welcome visitors. “The patrons were very happy with the renovation” said Goh Siew Han, who joined Queenstown Community Library in 1998 and is currently its Head Library Officer.<sup>35</sup>

### New Developments in Queenstown

While the Queenstown Library was undergoing physical changes, the neighbour-

hood was also due for major redevelopment. In 1994, the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) issued a Development Guide Plan for Queenstown that included proposals for a new sub-regional centre in Buona Vista, new infrastructure to link nearby tertiary educational institutions to business parks, and new high-density housing. Many of the older flats in the area were also selected for the Selective Enbloc Redevelopment Scheme, with many blocks making way for rejuvenated housing, both public and private.<sup>36</sup>

In the following two decades, a number of iconic landmarks and buildings in Queenstown were demolished, such as Tah Chung Emporium and the Queenstown Remand Prison. Goh, the Head Library Officer, recalled: “There was an NTUC and the old cinema. We used to have KFC for lunch at the bowling alley, watching people bowl while we ate. A few banks as well. They were all there until 2011 or 2012. When all the buildings were torn down, there was nothing to eat.”<sup>37</sup>

In 2013, the URA announced that three buildings in the area – Queenstown Library, the former Commonwealth Avenue Wet Market and Alexandra Hospital – would be gazetted for conservation under its 2014 Master Plan.<sup>38</sup> While the library was now safe from the wrecking ball, many old buildings in Queenstown made way for the new Dawson housing estate and other private residential projects. The library became a quieter place, still busy on weekends and averaging hundreds of thousands of loans every year, but a far cry from

the snaking queues and packed reading rooms of yesteryear.

In 2014, an underused foot reflexology path behind the library was removed and a garden set up with the help of the National Parks Board’s Community in Bloom project. Edible plants, herbs, spices and fruit trees were planted in the garden, which is managed by volunteers. Today, Queenstown Public Library is the only library with a gardening programme.

The library continues to support the community, which includes students from two nearby schools for the disabled: Rainbow Centre and the Movement for the Intellectually Disabled of Singapore Lee Kong Chian Gardens School (MINDS LGS). Students from Rainbow Centre help to create book displays, while those from MINDS LGS tend to the garden and have reading sessions in the library. Clients served by the Society for the Physically Disabled also visit the library to learn about library services, the history and heritage of the library, and to attend activities such as movie screenings, book talks, and arts and crafts sessions.

Initiatives to reinvent the library to keep up with the changing needs of library users are already in place. In 2020, the library will undergo further changes by implementing more digital services and creating social spaces for patrons. There will be more automation of basic services to free up library staff to take on new roles to better serve the information needs of patrons as well as create experiences to grow the library as a community space. Plans are also afoot to rejuvenate the library’s interior.

A library officer at Queenstown Public Library conducting a storytelling session, 2017. Such programmes are usually very well received by the public. Photo by Paddy Jonathan Ong.



An exterior view of Queenstown Public Library, 2020. The bow-tie canopies and lattices on the facade have not changed since the library opened in 1970. Photo by Paddy Jonathan Ong.



Although most of the old flats in Margaret Drive have been torn down, with those in nearby Tanglin Halt and Commonwealth Drive on the demolition list, upcoming housing developments in the area will, undoubtedly, bring new

patrons to the library. Von Tjong, an educator and artist-designer in her 40s, is waiting to move into her new flat in Dawson, but has already begun volunteering with the library. She is presently conducting free art jamming sessions for

adults and is looking forward to living just across the road from Queenstown Library because it “provides us with simple pleasures; doing some gardening or just having some quiet time and a sense of peace”.<sup>39</sup> ♦

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# PLANNING BUILDING

# TO BUILD TO PLAN

**Yap Jo Lin** is an Archivist with the National Archives of Singapore. Her portfolio includes taking care of the archives' collection of building plans.

The collection of building plans in the National Archives of Singapore is a treasure trove of information about the history of urban Singapore, says **Yap Jo Lin**.

In *Pastel Portraits*, a book documenting Singapore's pre-war architecture, editor and author Gretchen Liu writes that "it is difficult to imagine a city of such homes today but the building plans housed in National Archives' records centre give some indication of the variety and richness of these homes, from the more humble single-storey kampong house with Malay fretwork eaves built on low brick piers with a front verandah, to the elaborate two-storey villas with Venetian windows, Corinthian style columns and ornate plasterwork".<sup>1</sup>

Liu was referring to the collection of building plans held by the National Archives of Singapore (NAS) that date

back to the late 19th century. At the heart of this building plan collection is the Building Control Division (BCD) Collection, which consists of around 246,000 plans prepared between 1884 and 1969.<sup>2</sup> These were submitted for approval as part of the government's effort to ensure that buildings erected in Singapore were structurally sound. Although only a handful of these plans have been digitised, the collection has been microfilmed and can be accessed at the Archives Reading Room in the NAS building.

The collection is a valuable resource for those interested in Singapore's architectural history. In his book on black-and-white houses, architectural historian Julian Davi-

son notes that "several months of winding through furlongs of microfilm" produced a more complete picture of black-and-white dwellings only focused on houses built by the Public Works Department.<sup>3</sup>

The hand-drawn shading on the plans – especially plans depicting planned additions and alterations to a building – are also useful for historical research. As the shading conveys the extant parts of the structure at the time of planning, it provides important clues to a building's history. Such clues allow for more sensitive preservation work, especially when the intention is to restore the buildings to their original condition.

Beyond the buildings themselves, the plans hint at the surrounding area as well, providing an invaluable glimpse into a constantly changing Singapore. As Liu notes in *Pastel Portraits*, "[n]early all of the early plans have these roughly drawn maps [key plans or site plans] which give countless clues to the growth and development of the city".<sup>4</sup>

### Hidden Gems

Considering that these building plans were drawn up to fulfil a prosaic function, their beauty is often surprising. The intricacy of the hand-drawn and hand-coloured detail is stunning, especially compared to the computer-generated imagery of today.

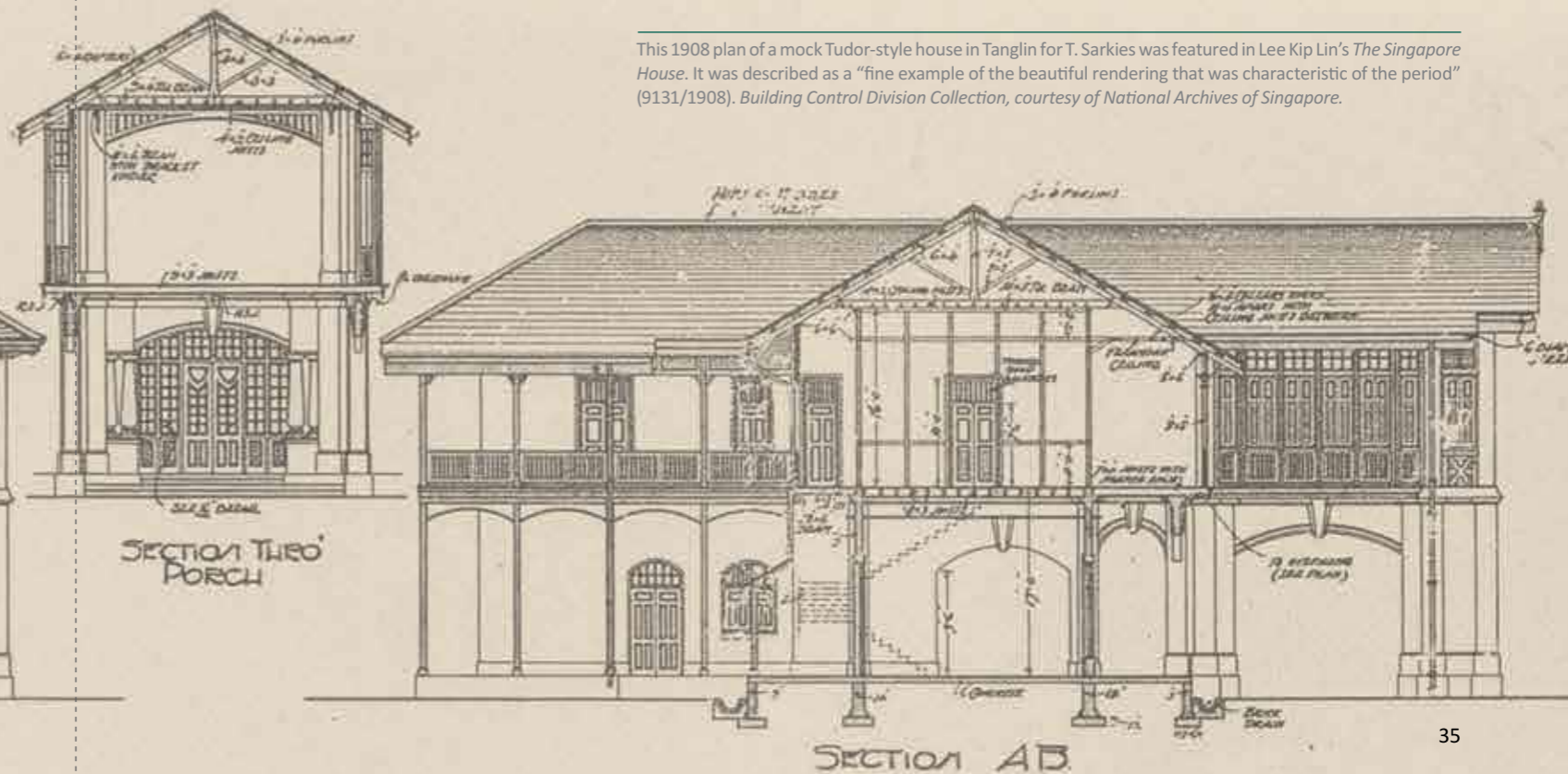
One plan for a mock Tudor-style house has been described by the architect Lee Kip Lin as "a fine example of the beautiful rendering that was characteristic of the period".<sup>5</sup> The plan was reproduced in Lee's landmark 1988 publication, *The Singapore House, 1819–1942*.

Most of the plans belonging to the BCD, a predecessor of today's Building and Construction Authority, reflect the stamp of the approving authority of the day, whose names mirror the changes in Singapore's governing administrative body. In the initial years, the plans were approved by various entities within the Municipal Office such as the Municipal Engineer's Office, the Municipal Archi-

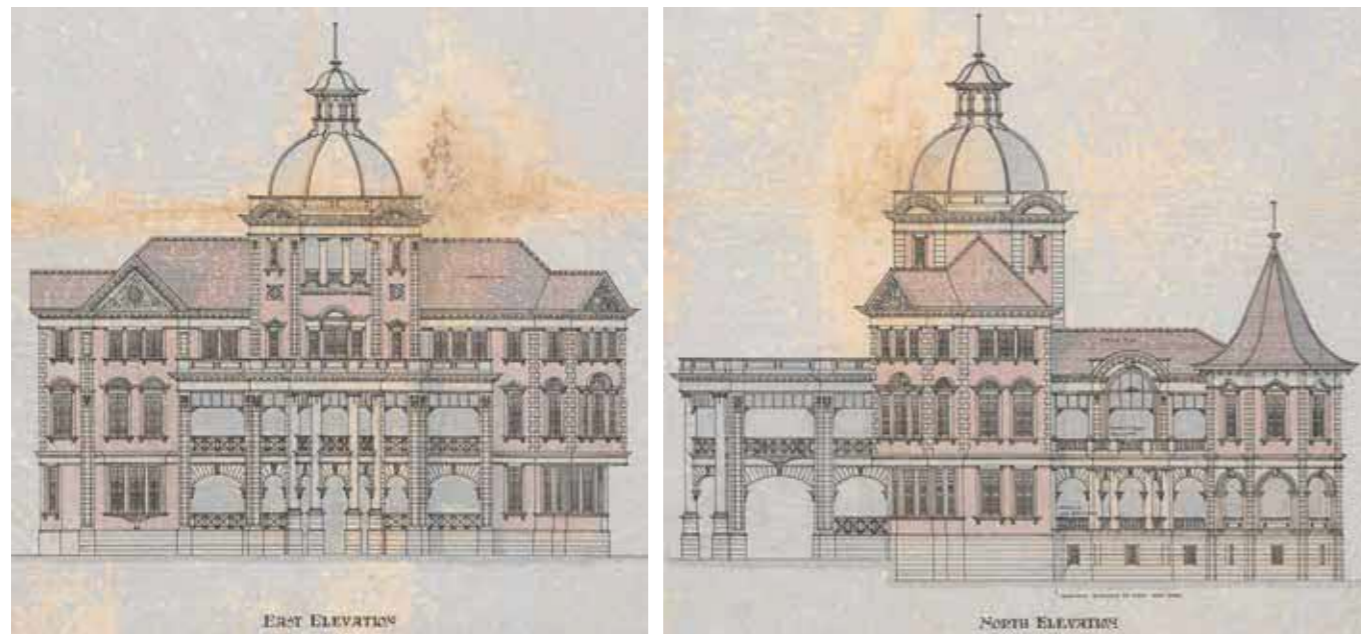
tect's Office and the Municipal Building Surveyor's Office.

Following the reconstitution of the Municipal Commission into the City Council in 1951, the approving authority became the City Council's Architect and Building Surveyor's Department the following year. The next major changes took place in the 1960s. Following the dissolution of the City Council in 1959, the stamp "City Council of Singapore, Chief Building Surveyor's Department" was replaced with "State of Singapore, Chief Building Surveyor's Department". After Singapore gained independence in 1965, "State of Singapore" was replaced with "Republic of Singapore".

This 1908 plan of a mock Tudor-style house in Tanglin for T. Sarkies was featured in Lee Kip Lin's *The Singapore House*. It was described as a "fine example of the beautiful rendering that was characteristic of the period" (9131/1908). *Building Control Division Collection*, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



The 1913 building plan of Eu Tong Sen's Eu Villa showing the east and north elevations (1413-7/1913). Below that is an aerial view of the villa on Mount Sophia, 1940s. Eu, whose portrait appears below, built up Eu Yan Sang, a company specialising in traditional Chinese medicine set up by his father Eu Kong, into a very successful business. *Building plan from the Building Control Division Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore; aerial view of Eu Villa courtesy of National Archives of Singapore; portrait of Eu Tong Sen reproduced from Song, O.S. (1923). One Hundred Years' History of the Chinese in Singapore (p. 332). London: John Murray. Collection of the National Library, Singapore. (Accession no.: B20048226B).*



The earlier building plans in the collection bear the signatures of various municipal engineers and municipal commissioners who, fittingly enough, continue to be memorialised in Singapore's landscape. These individuals include Henry Edward McCallum (McCallum Street), James MacRitchie (MacRitchie Reservoir), Alfred Howard Vincent Newton (Newton Road and Newton Circus), Samuel Dunlop (Dunlop Street), Alex Gentle (Gentle Road) and Samuel Tomlinson (Tomlinson Road).

These building plans are also a testament to early attempts to keep track of Singapore's built environment. It appears

that a survey of sorts was conducted in the 1930s and 40s to ascertain the state of the buildings after their plans had been approved. As a result, many of the plans in the BCD Collection bear the records of one "V S Rasiah", whose notes included an updated address for a building, whether the building had actually "not (been) erected", or (sadly) if the building had been "demolished" or was "not in existence". Unfortunately, there is no further information about this person.

**A Variety of Building Types**

Given that any private application to erect a building in Singapore had to be

submitted to the authorities, the plans in the BCD Collection cover a wide array of building types. A prime example is the set of building plans for Eu Villa – the lavish Mount Sophia residence of Chinese businessman and community leader Eu Tong Sen.<sup>6</sup> Eu is best remembered as the man behind traditional Chinese medicine purveyor Eu Yan Sang, which still exists today. His name also lives on in the busy Chinatown thoroughfare named after him – Eu Tong Sen Street. Eu commissioned architectural firm Swan & Maclaren to build Eu Villa. The palatial property was designed in a melange of European styles, with its most prominent feature

being the Renaissance-style dome, topped with a cupola, on the main building. Over the years, Eu submitted plans to make improvements to his mansion, including one in 1923 for kennels for his pet dogs.

The houses built for a L.R.M.R.M. Veerappa Chitty are described in *The Singapore House* as "typical of the kind that proliferated particularly in the suburbs of Katong, Geylang and Serangoon".<sup>7</sup> The plan he submitted was for three bungalows, which were raised on low piers and topped with a sloped roof. Each bungalow had three bedrooms with ensuite bathrooms, and a rear passageway leading to the kitchen and servants' quarters.

The building plans of commercial properties in the BCD Collection include office buildings, luxury hotels and the occasional cinema and department store. A 1909 plan from the collection is for proposed alterations to the Alhambra cinema on Beach Road. Its floor plan is immediately recognisable although a "band space" had been included, possibly to provide musical accompaniment in the era of silent films.

The BCD Collection is also a good starting point to research old places in

Singapore such as Commercial Square (now Raffles Place). It allows one to see in greater detail buildings that no longer exist like the former Hongkong and Shanghai Banking Corporation building and the John Little department store (see page 41). Although both structures have been demolished, the facade of John Little is memorialised in the entrances of Raffles Place MRT station.

From the BCD Collection, one can also track the evolution of shophouse design in Singapore, from the earlier iterations at the start of the collection in 1884 to the subsequent "Chinese Baroque" style in the early 1900s and Art Deco-inspired style from the 1930s.

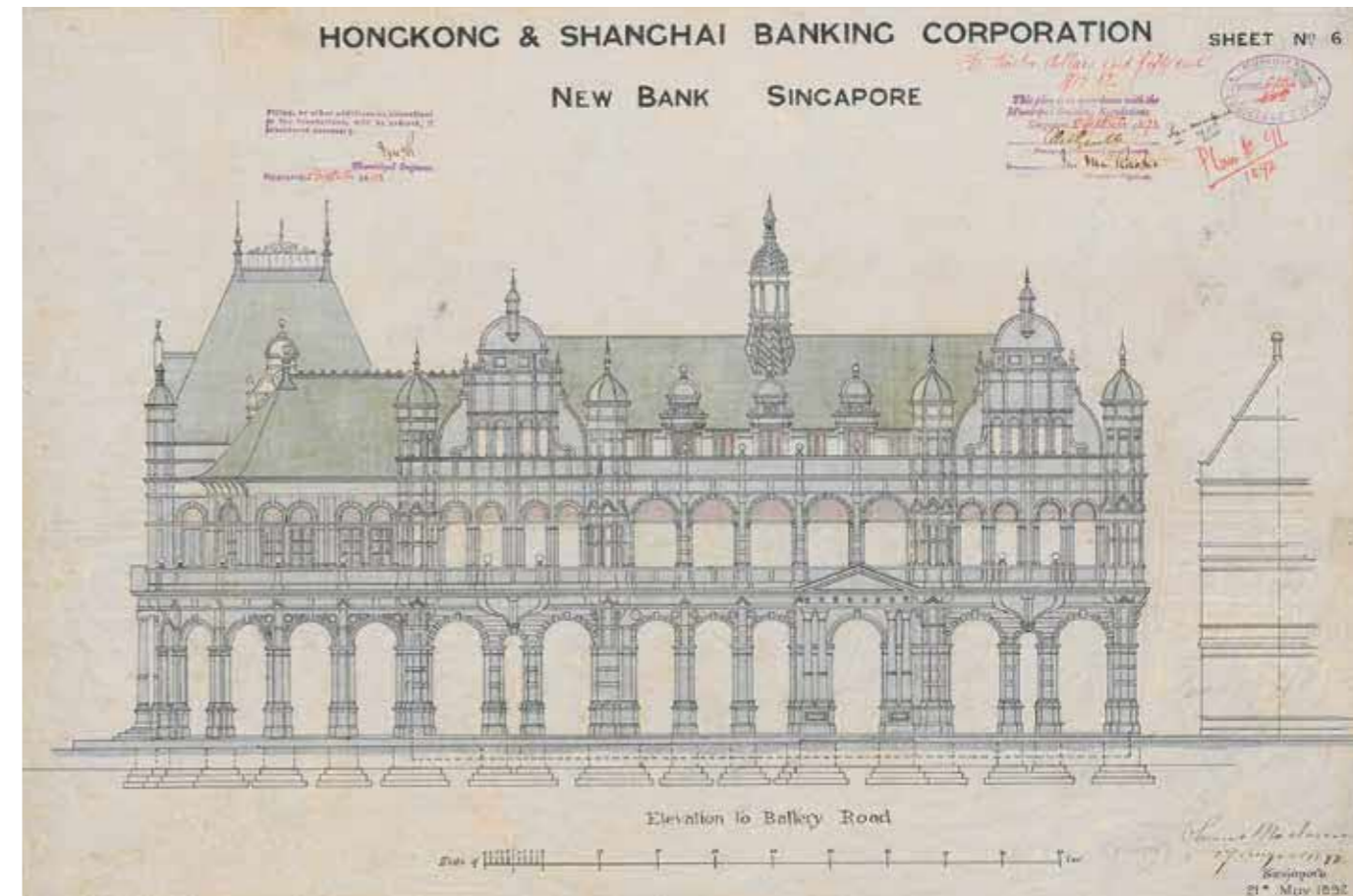
Shophouse plans from the late 1800s were generally for two-storey buildings with minimal or no decorations on their facade. At the turn of the 20th century, these somewhat prosaic shophouses gave way to three-storey buildings with elaborate plasterwork, fanlights and pilasters. As the 20th century progressed, shophouse facades reverted to the stripped down simplicity of Art Deco and other modern styles.<sup>8</sup> These

shophouse plans showcase the talents of local architects and architectural firms such as W.T. Moh, Yeo Hock Siang, Loh Kiam Siew, W.T. Foo, and Almeida & Kassim. W.T. Moh designed many of the shophouses in Emerald Hill, which is today a gazetted conservation area.

Finally, there are building plans of social, cultural and religious spaces, such as schools, temples, mosques and churches. One example is the plan for an *attap* mosque on Tanglin Road built for a Haji Abdulrahman Glas in 1911. The mosque is a simple structure raised on stilts, with a generous open-air verandah in front that takes up more than a quarter of the building's length.

The collection also has building plans for the boarding house of Anglo-Chinese School. Known as Bellevue, it was sited near present-day Plaza Singapura. Bellevue was renamed Oldham Hall in 1902, in honour of Bishop William Fitzjames Oldham who founded the school in 1886. Oldham Hall still exists as a boarding house, but it is now situated near the school's Barker Road premises.<sup>9</sup>

The plan of the long-demolished Hongkong and Shanghai Bank building in Collyer Quay shows the elevation to Battery Road, 1892 (91/1892). *Building plan from the Building Control Division Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*



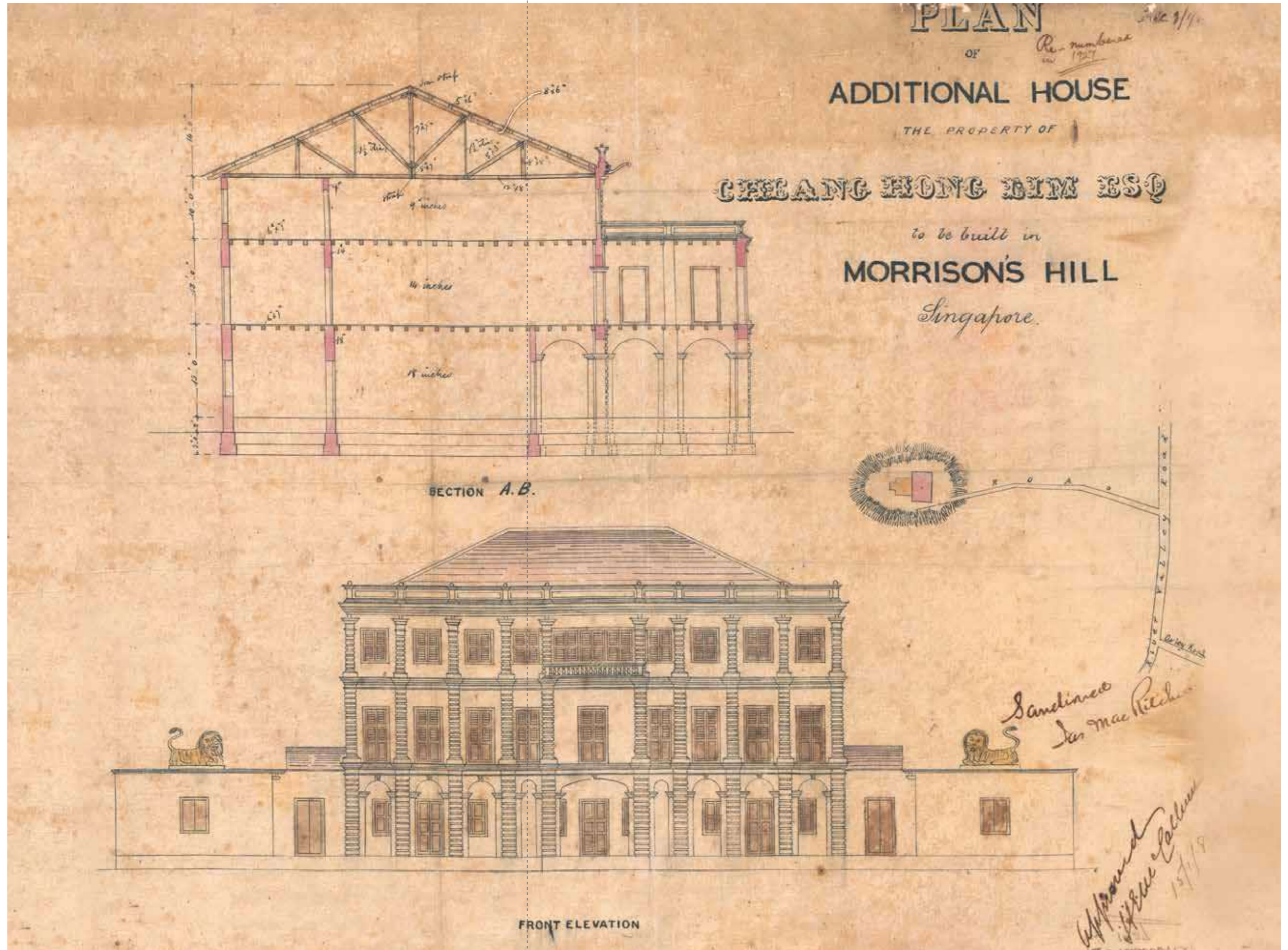
**The Building Plans of 1884**

As the earliest building plans in the BCD Collection date to 1884, it is interesting to look at some of the 107 plans that were submitted that year. The earliest plan in the collection is for a house on Morrison's Hill – an area in the vicinity of River Valley Road and Martin Road, and a locale (then and now) of high-end residences.<sup>10</sup> The plan was submitted by Cheang Hong Lim, the businessman and philanthropist after whom Hong Lim Park is named. The plan shows a three-storey house flanked on either side by what looks like statues of lions, their tails raised in artful symmetry.

Other notable personalities who applied to make various additions to their properties that year include Chinese merchants Tan Quee Lan, Hoo Ah Kay (better known as Whampoa)<sup>11</sup> and Low Kim Pong.

Tan Quee Lan, who has a street named after him, applied to build a two-storey house on the now expunged Rama Street – near where Club Street and Mohamed Ali Lane meet today. The house has an unusual triangular-shaped floor plan, explained by its location on a similarly shaped plot of land at the junction of two roads.<sup>12</sup>

Plan of a house on Morrison's Hill for Cheang Hong Lim, 1884 (1/1884). This is the earliest plan in the Building Control Division Collection. Cheang (below) was a businessman and philanthropist after whom Hong Lim Park is named. *Portrait of Cheang Hong Lim from Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore; building plan from the Building Control Division Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*



Whampoa's building plan was for an additional storehouse to be constructed on Havelock Road, across the road from his bakery. This famous establishment was mentioned in Song Ong Siang's seminal work, *One Hundred Years' History of the Chinese in Singapore*, as being "for many years the most extensive in the Colony".<sup>13</sup>

Low Kim Pong – who is best known for having provided land and funding for the construction of the Lian Shan Shuang Lin Monastery in Toa Payoh<sup>14</sup> – was the most ambitious of the three merchants in 1884. That year, he made three separate applications to build six shophouses, one shop, one timber depot and additions to

two stables. However, a note on the building plan of the shop and stables indicates that by 1931, these structures were "not in existence".

There are two building plans in the collection attributed to one or two men with the surname Desker for new developments on Waterloo Street: one for a dwelling for a Mr Desker and another for six houses for a Mr H. Desker. It is possible that the Desker in question refers to either Andre Filipe Desker, a very successful Eurasian butcher after whom Desker Road is named, or his son Armenisgild Stanislaus Desker, who is known to have lived on Waterloo Street. Andre Filipe Desker was also known as Henry Filipe Desker, so the plan for the six houses was most likely submitted on his behalf.<sup>15</sup>

The New Harbour Dock Company, which was based at New Harbour (now known as Keppel Harbour), submitted three building plans in 1884 – for an addition to an engine house, a "quarter" and for a "property" (most likely a house). The engine house plan is meticulously drawn and coloured, with fanlights added above the doors and windows to enhance the aesthetics of the building. The other two plans are simpler in design and depict what look like basic wooden structures. (The New Harbour Dock Company subsequently merged with another private operator, the Tanjong Pagar Dock Company, and eventually became the Port of Singapore Authority.<sup>16</sup>)

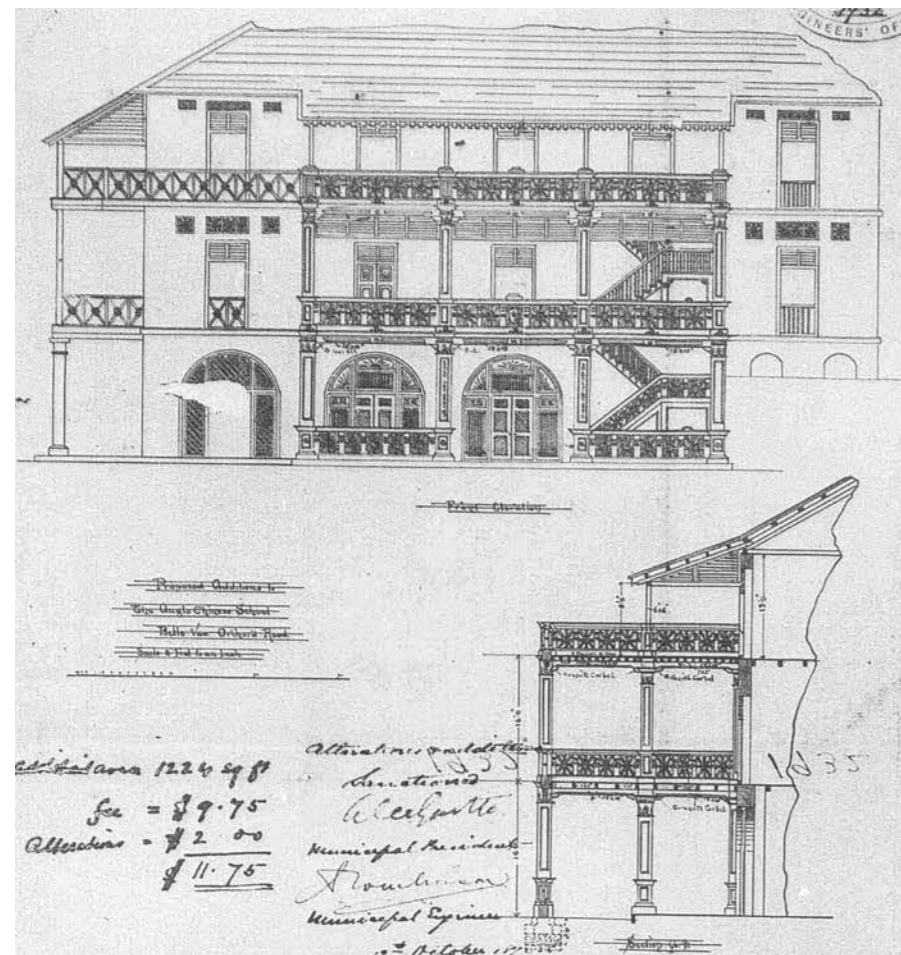
**Shophouse Design**

The majority of the building plans submitted in 1884 were residential in nature. Almost half of the plans were for shophouses, the architectural style of which was relatively simple.

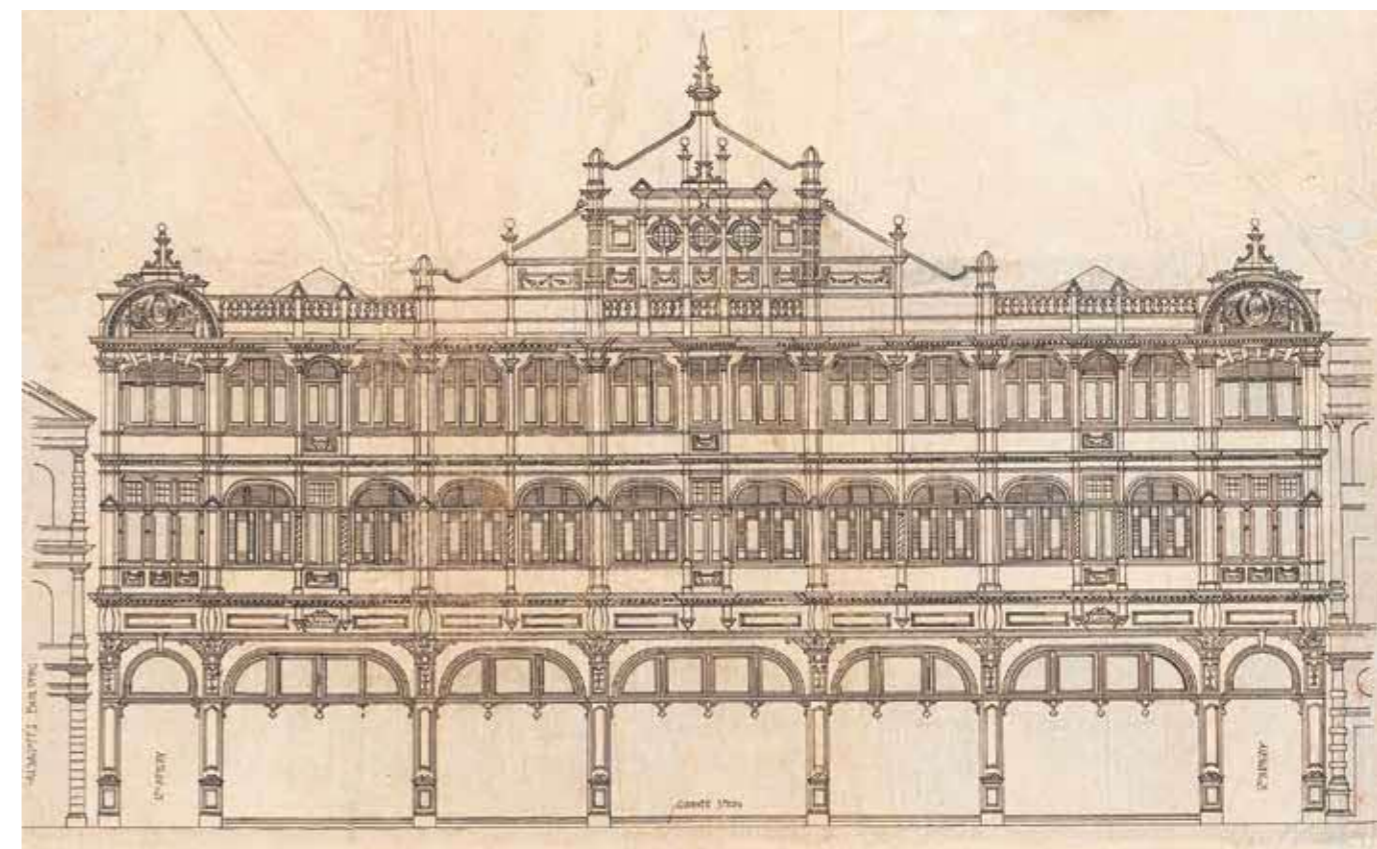
One example is the plan for a row of shophouses along Beach Road. The front elevation shows a simple facade, with a five-footway that is more visible from the sectional plan. The plan includes a skylight to let in much-needed light and air into the house. The air-well below the skylight has a sunken floor to collect rainwater that would have come through the opening.

While rudimentary facades were the norm for shophouses built in 1884, there are two building plans depicting more elaborate ornamentation. One was for a row of shophouses along Serangoon Road, each adorned with a pair of thin minarets, while the other was for a shophouse on Trengganu Street that had extended eaves designed along the style of Malay wooden fretwork.

Oldham Hall (formerly known as Bellevue and occupying a site near Plaza Singapura), was the boarding house for Anglo-Chinese School, 1900s. The plan shows the front elevation and sectional view, 1896 (211–2/1896). Photo courtesy of National Archives of Singapore; building plan from the Building Control Division Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



John Little department store after the rebuilding of their Raffles Place premises, c. 1910. Established in 1842, the brand lasted 174 years. Its last store was shuttered in 2016. The plan shows the front elevation of the building, 1908 (9261–9/1908). Photo from the Lim Kheng Chye Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore; building plan from the Building Control Division Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



### Other Building Designs from 1884

About a quarter of the plans were for other types of houses, which ranged from simple structures raised above ground in the style of traditional Malay houses to grander affairs like the pair of semi-detached houses on River Valley Road for Henry D. Richards. Richards was a civil engineer and surveyor, and the plan bears his official stamp at the bottom right corner.

The floor plan of Richards' house shows a terrace and portico on the ground floor, and two verandahs above – for residents to enjoy the breeze. The main entrance opens to a long corridor leading to a dining room on the ground floor, while the drawing room or living room is on the second floor. The main house has three bedrooms and one bathroom, with an outhouse at the back for the kitchen and rooms for servants. The building plan also features a stall, a carriage shed and a room for the syce (a groom or stable attendant).

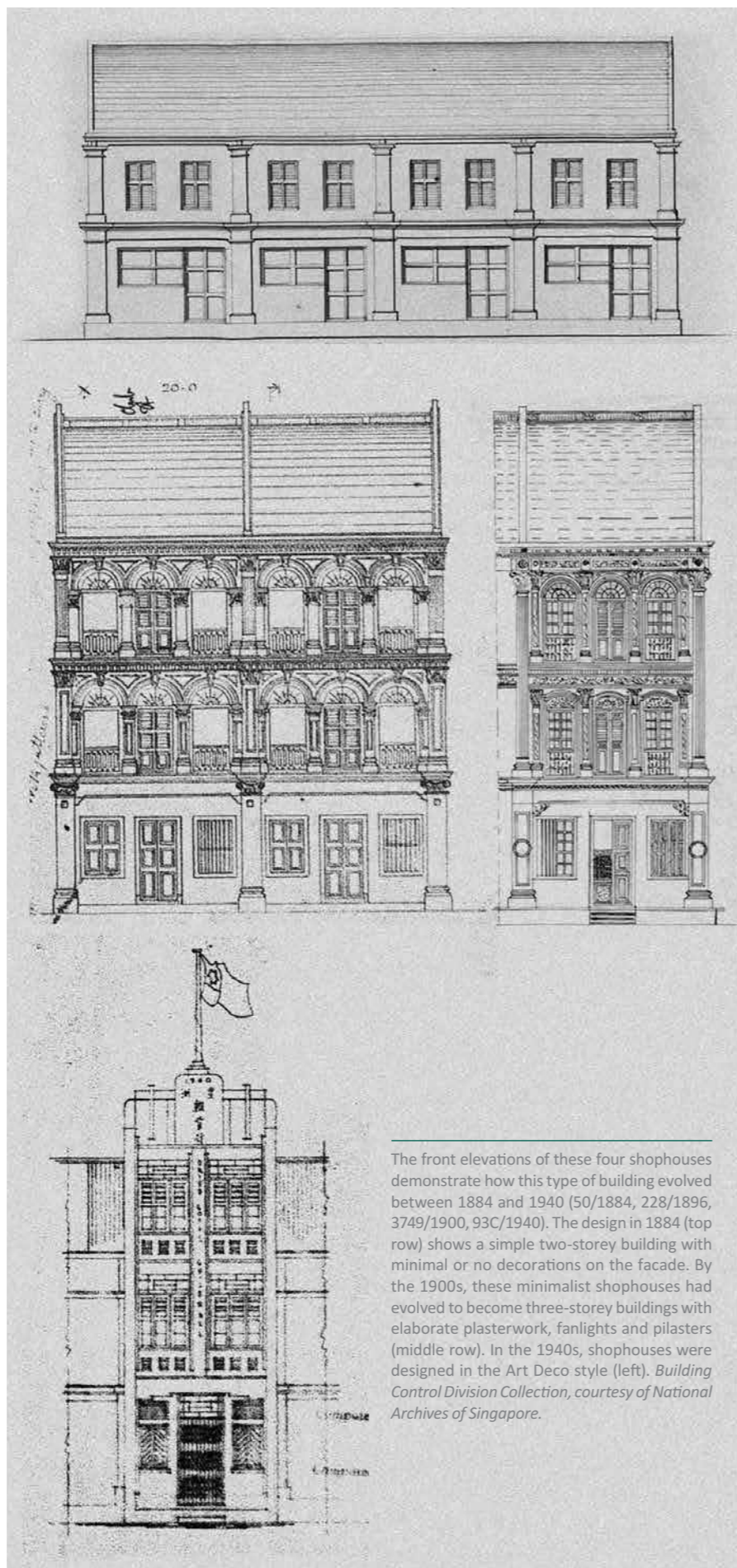
Buffaloes and horses were essential means of transportation in the late 19th century. Quite a number of the 1884 building plans include housing for animals; eight plans specifically mention carriage sheds, stalls and stables in their titles. The plan for Desker's house on Waterloo Street also includes a section labelled "Fowl House". Rather worryingly, this is located between the bathroom and the water closet – both presumably for humans.

Another example of the reliance on animals during this period can be seen in the plans to build a carriage shed and bullock and pony stalls near the junction of Serangoon Road and Buffalo Road. This was a popular place for cattle rearing because nearby water sources like the Rochor River provided bathing areas for water buffaloes.<sup>17</sup>

Only one of the plans submitted in 1884 was for a school, "to be erected in the compound of the Church of St Jose", present-day St Joseph's Church on Victoria Street. The school in question was actually a new building for St Anna's School, the predecessor of St Anthony's Convent.<sup>18</sup> Based on the school's site plan, it was to have been located at the junction of Middle Road and Queen Street.

### A Valuable Resource

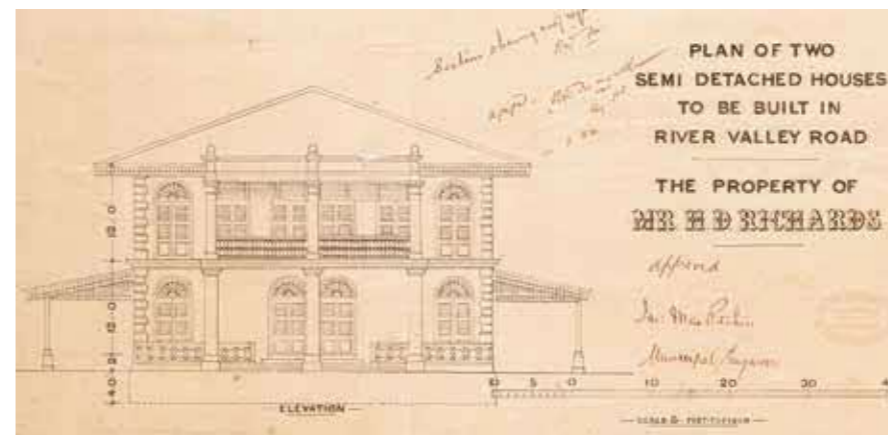
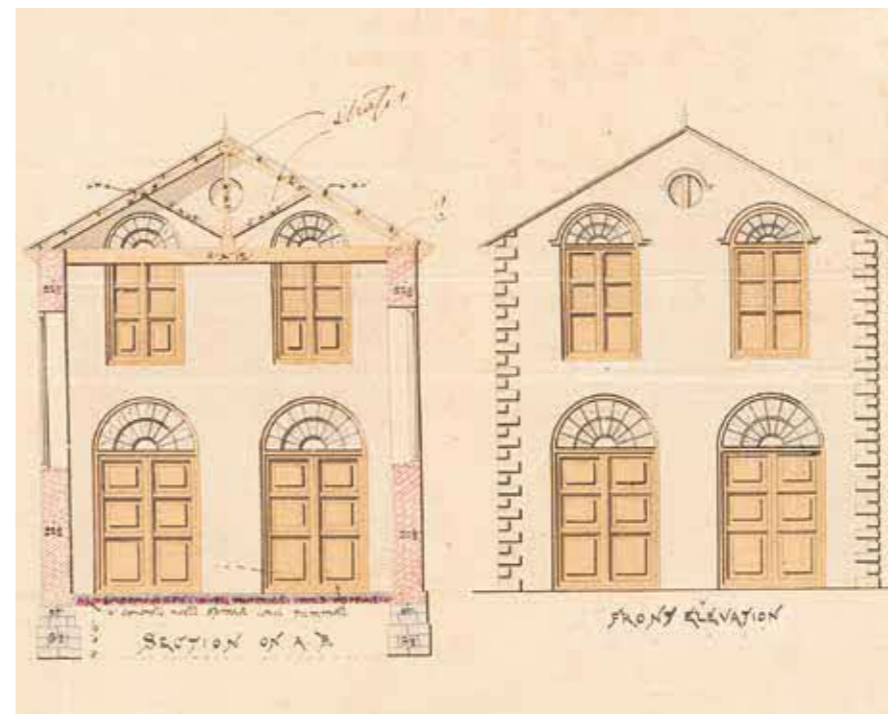
The aesthetic quality of the building plans, their breadth and comprehensiveness, and the fact that they represent close to a century's worth



The front elevations of these four shophouses demonstrate how this type of building evolved between 1884 and 1940 (50/1884, 228/1896, 3749/1900, 93C/1940). The design in 1884 (top row) shows a simple two-storey building with minimal or no decorations on the facade. By the 1900s, these minimalist shophouses had evolved to become three-storey buildings with elaborate plasterwork, fanlights and pilasters (middle row). In the 1940s, shophouses were designed in the Art Deco style (left). *Building Control Division Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

(Below) The plan for an addition to an engine house for the New Harbour Dock Company, 1884. (86/1884). *Building Control Division Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

(Bottom) The front elevation plan of two semi-detached houses on River Valley Road for Henry D. Richards, 1884 (25/1884). Richards was a civil engineer and surveyor, and the plan bears his official stamp at the bottom right corner. *Building Control Division Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*



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- Liu, 1984, p. 148.
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- Interestingly, this building plan bears the rubber stamp of the architects and surveyors, Lermitt & Annamalai. Alfred Lermitt eventually went on to partner with engineer Archibald Swan who, in turn, set up Swan & Maclaren with civil engineer James Waddell Boyd Maclaren in 1892. The firm is Singapore's oldest architectural practice today and it celebrated its 125th anniversary in 2017.
- Song, O.S. (2020). *One hundred years' history of the Chinese in Singapore [electronic resource]: The annotated edition* (p. 75). Singapore: World Scientific Publishing Company. Retrieved from OverDrive. (myLibrary ID is required to access this ebook)

### STREET NAMES

The street names seen in the 1884 plans are, for the most part, similar to the street names of today, especially those that reference common English words like North Bridge Road or Beach Road.

There is more variation in names that have Malay origins. Kallang is spelt as Kalang, Serangoon is spelt as Serangong or Sirangoon, Trengganu is spelt as Tringanu. Bras Basah is spelt as Brass Bassa or Brass Bassah; Brass Bassa was the official name until it was formally changed in 1899. One plan for a shophouse mentions a street name that has changed entirely since 1884 – Kling Street, the old name for Chulia Street. The road was renamed in 1922 in response to objections from the Indian community that the original name was derogatory.

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 Untitled. (1899, June 1). *The Singapore Free Press*, p. 6. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

of Singapore's urban and architectural history make the BCD Collection valuable and unique. Many writers, scholars, architects and historians have conducted research using the collection. One recent publication featuring the BCD Collection is a history of Swan & Maclaren by Julian Davison.<sup>19</sup> There are undoubtedly more gems waiting to be uncovered, especially when explored together with other resources of the National Archives of Singapore and at the National Library. ♦

- National Library Board. (2014, December 12). *Lian Shan Shuang Lin Monastery (Siong Lim Temple)* written by Kaylene Tan. Retrieved from Singapore Infopedia website.
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**Meira Chand** recounts how hours of listening to oral history interviews permeated her subconscious and created a memory that she could call her own when writing her novel.

It has been said the past is a foreign country. Yet, like all remote places, it is possible to travel there if transportation is available. Historical fiction is the conveyance we can use to journey back in time to understand another era. It is a genre of literature that carries the reader on a journey of experience, one that expands our empathy for others and reaffirms our common humanity. It leads us into lives and cultures we might otherwise not know, or into emotional situations we might never face in our own lives.

In this respect, the historical novel is no different from any novel, except it is furnished by actual events of the past. Historical truth rests not only upon recorded facts, but also upon our imaginative understanding of those facts. Accordingly, the value of historical fiction lies in its ability to bring to life for the reader what was thought dead. As a conduit across time, its power to help us understand the past is undeniable.

**Dr Meira Chand's** multicultural heritage is reflected in the nine novels she has published. *A Different Sky* made it to Oprah Winfrey's reading list for November 2011, and was long-listed for the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award in 2012. Her latest book, *Sacred Waters*, was published in 2018. She has a PhD in Creative Writing, and lived in Japan and India before moving to Singapore in 1997.

### Borrowing From History

Admittedly, history written in the form of the historical novel can only be viewed as unofficial history. This is why the genre is an area of contention for many academics, its value continually debated and its worth often demeaned by formal historians.

Part of the contention arises because, at the nexus of history and fiction, historians and novelists share common ground, often relying on the same sources. This can produce friction, as seen in the public debate in 2006 between Australian historian Inga Clendinnen, who deplores the free use of factual history by novelists, and the writer Kate Grenville, whose best-selling novel, *The Secret River*, recreates the life and choices of early Australian settlers.<sup>1</sup>

As the writer of several historical novels myself, I freely admit that I regard history as a story bank to pillage—a place to carry out a smash-and-grab raid and run off with the spoils—albeit done with integrity. All historical novelists regard the rewriting of history within the fictional framework as a legitimate exercise. The fundamental nature of the historical novel is to unlock the past to the present.

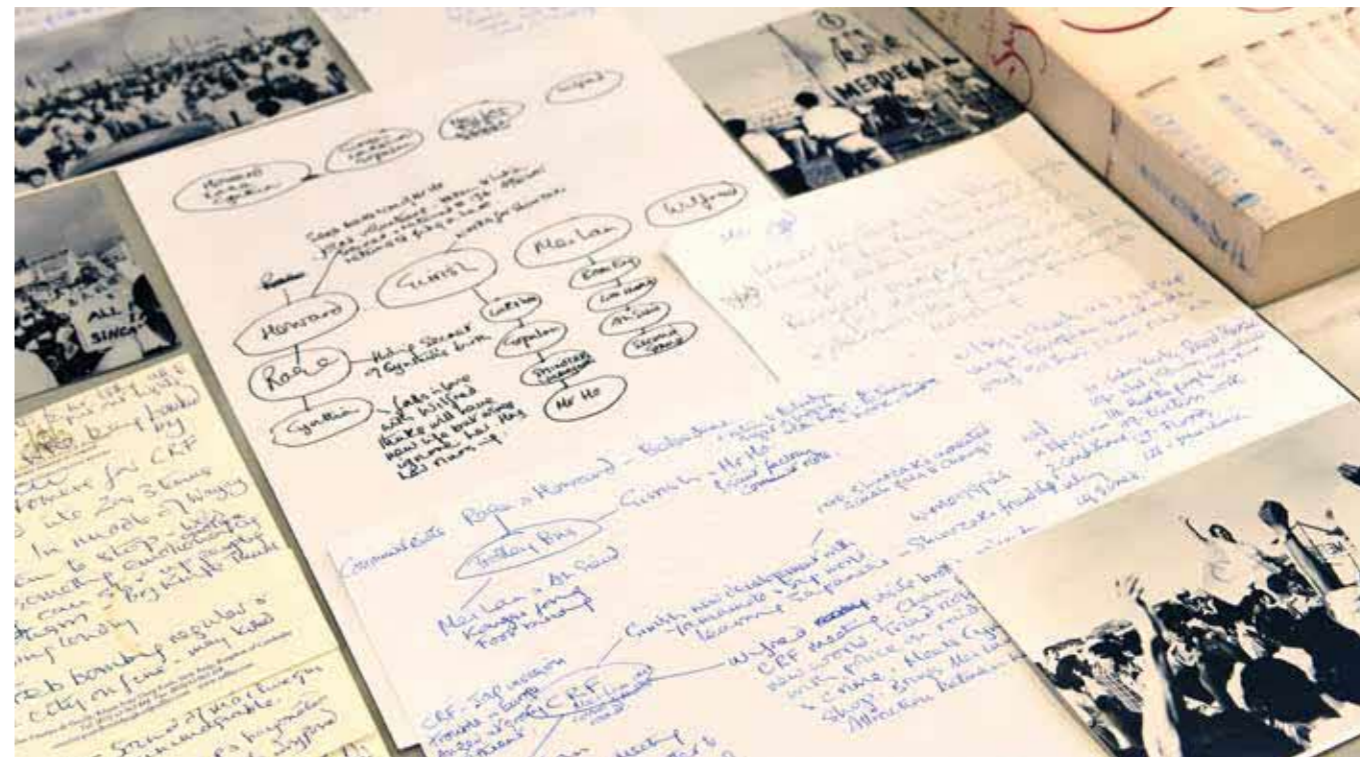
Historical fiction is also a form of literary archaeology. The writer journeys to a

Meira Chand is an award-winning novelist of Swiss-Indian parentage. She is now a Singaporean citizen.



site, examines its remains and reconstructs the world that these remains imply. The writer must rely upon the images found in these sites, often remoulding them and even adding to them, to produce a creative picture of the past, to understand it anew, and possibly even change our relationship with it. The historical novel is a place between fact and fantasy into which the novelist slips, to seed characters and embody them against a historical backdrop, with the timeless details of our human life journey.

In preparation for writing her book, *A Different Sky*, Meira Chand conducted extensive research. She subsequently donated her research materials to the National Library. These include notes written on hotel stationery, character sketches, photographs ordered from the National Archives and printouts of emails. The donation also includes a full draft of her novel that she had printed out.



Academic history texts provide important information, for example dates and details of events, how many soldiers were in an army, how many people died in a flood, or the price of bread and cabbages 200 years ago. Only fiction can create a sense of experience, describing the grief of a family when a flood sweeps away a child, or the terror of a soldier as the enemy charges. Historical fiction not only brings the past alive, it illuminates our shared humanity, showing us that our ancestors were little different from ourselves.

If historical fiction is somewhat problematic for some readers, I speak from experience when I say its creation is no less challenging for the writer. After writing his classic *War and Peace*, Leo Tolstoy declared that the subject of history is the life of peoples and of humanity. It would seem that Tolstoy saw the common people—attending to their everyday lives and unaware of great events—as furthering the unconscious motions of history, rather than the Genghis Khans and Napoleons who only appear to control historical forces.

Tolstoy knew it is the job of fiction to reveal the uncommonness in each common life, and this is a point the writer of historical fiction must always keep in mind. If historical facts are elevated above the characters' lives in a novel, then there is the danger that the finished work will read

like a history book, rather than a novel that illuminates history through the lives and emotions of its characters.

### Drawing the Line Between Fiction and Fact

History would seem to provide a ready-made story that the inventive novelist need only write up through the imagined lives of make-believe characters. In reality, the task is quite the opposite: fiction creates a parallel world, and all the facts and emotions in that alternate reality must correspond exactly to the real world, otherwise the work will not carry conviction for either the writer or the reader.

This authenticity is particularly important in the writing of historical narratives. Historical facts must be scrupulously heeded, not only in the matter of dates and events, but in the small details of living and dressing, manners and speech and more; the flavour and colour of a past world must be faithfully and correctly created.

It is at this crossroad of fact and fiction that the writer's problem is found. Facts are dry and unmovable things and can weigh as heavy as concrete upon the volatile essence that is the imagination. Facts work to tether the imagination, while the imagination, ever restless, agitates to soar free into fantasy.

The imagination does not listen to the rules and principles devised in the writer's

head and written up in ordered plans; it is bold and free, obeying only itself. This liberty of the imagination is a writer's most precious possession. Through it, a book once underway, will usually take on a life of its own. It will demand that the writer puts in situations, characters and complications never anticipated earlier. The dry historical facts of research, waiting to be incorporated in the developing fiction, do not take kindly to the writer's cavalier imagination.

If a novel fails to take flight, if the imagination is cramped, the finished work will reflect this loss and will be without flow or vitality. In the course of writing, the world the writer creates, like the other side of the looking glass, produces a logic that is entirely its own, and this logic must be unhesitatingly embraced.

### The Problem of Memory

There is a further challenge confronting the writer of historical fiction—that of memory. All writers write from a place of memory, whether personal, national, or a greater collective or archetypal memory. We are all surrounded by our own lives and personal memories, of where we were born, and where we have travelled to, both geographically and emotionally.

However, with the historical novel, the issue of memory presents a special problem because, in most instances, the

writer usually lacks a personal memory of the period being written about. In my own historical novels, this problem of memory has always been present. My novel, *A Different Sky*, set against the backdrop of modern Singapore between 1927 and 1957, is a good example of the challenges that beset the historical novelist.

When I began my research for *A Different Sky* in 2002, I was relatively new to Singapore and was still learning about the country, its people and history, and its ethnic mix of cultures and communities. I began my research through history books, old newspapers, personal interviews, archival material, memoirs, fiction and anything else I could find.

One marvellous and constant resource was the Oral History Centre of the National Archives of Singapore. There, in hundreds of interviews, a cross section of every community in Singapore has been recorded. There were transcripts of these oral interviews which were, of course, very useful. But most of all, I liked to put on the headphones, play the tapes and hear the multiple voices of diverse peoples and their colourful stories coming at me, working through me.

As I collected more material, other problems began to emerge. To absorb the atmosphere of the times I was writing about, I visited various locations important in the past, only to discover that landmarks of the era had all but disappeared, razed by the building of modern Singapore.

Sago Lane in Chinatown – once a street of funeral parlours, undertakers and death houses – is today a narrow alley between high-rise HDB flats on one side and a construction site on another. Yet, in the period I was writing about, it was thick with the traffic of the bereaved, itinerant hawkers and keening women. Food stalls and confectioners would have catered to the never-ending wakes on the street, and the aroma of burnt sugar and roasting pork would have mixed with the perfume of incense. My description of this long-ago place in *A Different Sky* had to be found from old photographs, the odd depiction in an old book, and my imagination of course.

Another problem was that the amount of material to be considered for inclusion in the book was overwhelming. It was difficult to know what historical events to put into the novel and what to leave out, and still remain true to the historical thread of the narrative. I am not a trained researcher; my methods are thoroughly disorganised, but in an organised way that only I understand. I have never used an assistant, but have to absorb my research personally, quietly, by a strange kind of osmosis. I hold a lot in my head, making strange connections. The details I pick upon to enlarge might appear irrelevant to everyone but they hold illuminating insights for me. Often, the things I see directly before me are less interesting than the things I see out of the corner of my eye. As I read dry history books, I am

always hoping to stumble upon comments or incidents that will give life to my novel.

Such morsels are more easily found in memoirs than in history books. One such work, *Singapore Patrol*, written by an English detective employed by the colonial Singapore police force in the 1920s, helped me find an entry point into *A Different Sky*.<sup>2</sup>

Detective Alec Dixon had observed Singapore's first communist riot in 1927 and, in a few brief sentences in his memoir, described where the mob had come from and how they had rocked a trolley bus with the terrified passengers inside. After reading about the incident – given no more than passing references in history books – it stuck obstinately in my mind until I decided to use the incident. Or, more correctly, the incident decided to use me.

I had spent many months trying to find my way into my new book. Even when I had written almost 200 pages, the novel did not feel right. I repeatedly reworked my manuscript, but nothing seemed to help. I started with an Indian character. I started with a Chinese character. I worked with characters that now do not even appear in the book, and events that were subsequently edited out of the story. Eventually, I realised I had fallen into a trap – I was so weighed down by historical facts that I was writing a history book, and the living breathing novel I wished to write was buried beneath all that minutiae. I had been so exacting about the presentation of facts that my imagination

In her novel *A Different Sky*, Meira Chand references a communist riot taking place around a trolley bus in 1927. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



had become imprisoned in a dark basement. In despair, I gave up and decided I could not write this book.

The problems I faced so acutely in *A Different Sky* were largely derived from having no inner memory of the place I was writing about – a problem that has also troubled me in varying degrees in my previous works of historical fiction. If I had been born in Singapore and had lived here in my formative years, I would have had my own personal memory, filled by sights and sounds and smells, by trauma, trivial incidents and cultural uniqueness. I would have an inner memory from the tales, gossip or irrelevant information my mother or grandmother, father, uncles or passing acquaintances would have told me. Such a well of memory upon which to intuitively draw is a prerequisite for the writer of fiction.

Much later, I realised that this was why I had enjoyed listening to oral history interview tapes at the National Archives. I had been building a memory upon other people's memories. I had so much preferred the recordings, with their vivid personal recounting, to the reading of memoirs and history books because this oral history was a live and direct personal transmission of memory straight into my own mind.

#### Appropriating Memories for Myself

These realisations came to me much later. For a while, I stopped writing and had given up all hope that I could produce the book I had originally planned to write. Months went by.

Then, one night, I awoke at 2 am with words crowding my head and a group of characters waiting for me in a place I had not anticipated meeting them – on a trolley

bus trapped in that first communist riot of 1927. That incident I had read about in the policeman's memoir had been tucked away in my subconscious but had now risen to the surface of my mind. I had, in fact, all but forgotten the episode and had not even included it in my original plan for *A Different Sky*. Yet now, the event was demanding that I make immediate use of it.

In the dead of night, I got up and went to my desk and began at once to write, buoyed by the words in my head that soared ahead of me, picking up with ease the strangest of details. And I knew I had to discard my earlier 200 laboured pages and start again from this new beginning, for now I had found my writer's voice. Much of what I wrote that night remains in the first chapter of *A Different Sky*.

It was only when I had completed the task of writing *A Different Sky*, and the novel published, that I found I was free to unravel the conundrum of its writing and the issue of memory. I realised I had initially started writing before I had fully digested the "memory" I had accumulated so carefully through my research. In order to write fiction, the fabricated historical memory had to be absorbed to such a degree that it could have been my own personal recall. Only then could I unconsciously draw upon it as if it were my own memory in the historical context of *A Different Sky*.

Like all historical novels, *A Different Sky* is a re-creation of what might have been. Within this imaginary space, the historical novel often establishes an alternative interpretation of a past that in some instances might have been distorted or even silenced. Between the past being written about and the present in which the writer lives, it is inevitable that history will be rewritten, and

this rewriting will, to some extent, reflect the image of the writer.

In spite of such possible variance, making sense of the complexities of the past is one of the prime inspirations and responsibilities of a historical novelist. As a means by which the past can be opened up to the present, the historical novel is uniquely positioned to illuminate and re-examine historical events. The great achievement of successful historical fiction is that it becomes a literary archive from which the reader can retrieve not only lost memories, but also capture new fields of experience, connecting with the past to understand it anew. ♦

In 2014, Dr Meira Chand donated her manuscripts, typescripts and research materials relating to *A Different Sky* to the National Library, Singapore. The book is available for reference at the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library and for loan at selected public libraries (Call nos.: RSING S823 CHA and CHA) as well as for digital loan on nlb.overdrive.com. It also retails at major bookshops in Singapore.



Mahjong players outside a death house on Sago Lane, 1962. The road is named after the sago factories located in the area in the 1840s. Sago Lane was also known for its Chinese death houses. Poor Chinese migrants facing imminent death would live out their final days on the upper floor. The lower floors of these houses functioned as funeral parlours. Meira Chand relied on old photographs, old books and her imagination for a description of the road in her novel, *A Different Sky*. Photo by Wong Ken Foo (K.F. Wong). Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



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# KARIKAL MAHAL

## The Lost Palace of A Fallen Cattle King

**William L. Gibson** uncovers the story behind the pair of grand buildings along Still Road South and their transformation over the last century.

A stately, two-storey mansion stretches impressively along Still Road South in the eastern part of Singapore. On the opposite side of the busy, arterial road lies a no less spectacular building.

Now occupied by two preschools, these impeccably maintained structures are located on generous, manicured plots of land that were once just steps away from the sea. Some residents of the neighbourhood, however, will remember a time before land reclamation when these buildings looked very different.

Older residents will recall the presence of a third building on this massive plot of land, sitting between these two structures, that was bulldozed to make way for the construction of Still Road South when the

government acquired part of the land in the early 1970s. The three buildings were collectively known as The Grand Hotel for a time.

The two remaining buildings on opposite sides of Still Road South was left derelict for more than a decade until the preschools took over the premises in 2016. For years rumours swirled about these abandoned buildings, and few knew that they were originally built as a private residence before becoming a hotel. Named Karikal Mahal, the buildings have played hosts to both high-society garden parties and illicit bedroom trysts for over a century. Karikal Mahal's fascinating history is intertwined with stories of unimaginable wealth, allegations of murder and even feats of magic.

### The Cattle King

Towards the close of World War I, successful Tamil Muslim businessman Moona Kader Sultan acquired a large plot of land not far from Telok Kurau.<sup>1</sup> Formerly verdant coconut estates, the area was becoming a popular destination for seaside living, with bungalows and luxurious houses sprouting up among the palm trees as old plantation lands were sold off in small allotments in the area we now know as Katong. Although Kader Sultan owned many properties in Singapore, he chose this breezy seafront land to build a personal Shangri-La – which he named Karikal Mahal – a testament to his wealth and status as much as a monument to his business acumen or, as some would say, his folly.

Kader Sultan did not start out wealthy. Born in Karikal, part of France's colonial possessions in India, he arrived in Singapore as a teenager in 1879 and started out as a moneychanger near the docks.<sup>2</sup> He later claimed that at the time, the remuneration for his hard work was his "food and three dollars a month".<sup>3</sup>

Witnessing the wealth being made by other Tamil Muslims in the cattle and sheep importation business, Kader Sultan turned his hand to the trade. Over the ensuing decades, he bought, bullied and buried rivals to his Straits Cattle Trading Company, which he had established with a handful of partners until he acquired the firm in 1914 to become the dominant cattle trader in Singapore.<sup>4</sup> The press dubbed him the "Cattle King", a title he held for the next 20 years. He was also one of the wealthiest men in Singapore then.

Kader Sultan soon became a prominent member of the Indian community

in Singapore. He was one of the first members of the Mohammedan Advisory Board, created in 1915 to represent Muslim community interests to the colonial authorities. Four years later, he was named a Justice of the Peace.<sup>5</sup>

Kader Sultan was an avid football fan and established a football team for his company. For many years, he was President of the Malaya Football Association and launched the "Kader Sultan Cup".<sup>6</sup>

Not forgetting his humble beginnings, Kader Sultan donated \$10,000 to the Red Cross during World War I and a large amount to the Raffles College endowment fund, possibly over \$20,000, during Singapore's centenary in 1919.

He was loyal to his adopted home, noting in his speech to Muslim community leaders during the centenary that "living in a country which protects our persons, homes and hearths, and allows us privileges to practice our religion and customs as no other Government would do, we should contribute – the rich his thousands and the poor his mite – to make the Centenary a great success".<sup>7</sup>

In 1923, Kader Sultan was issued with a Certificate of Naturalisation to honour his 45 years in the Straits Settlements.<sup>8</sup> The highest accolade came in 1925 when he was made a Chevalier of the Légion d'Honneur. French Consul Andre Danjou presented Kader Sultan with the award at a garden party held on the grounds of his seaside Karikal Mahal home, an event covered not only in the local press but also in Paris by the weekly French newspaper *L'Illustration*.<sup>9</sup> Singapore's Cattle King had achieved international recognition.

But there was another side to the man. The livestock trade was a rough-and-tumble business and as Kader Sultan consolidated his position, rumours swirled of his nefarious dealings. As early as 1897, the Straits Cattle Trading Company was investigated for illegally exporting livestock.<sup>10</sup> In 1906, in a case that dragged on for a year, the company was charged with supplying adulterated milk to hospitals.<sup>11</sup>

In 1920, the Commission on Profiteering launched investigations into profiteering and price-gouging by various cattle companies, including the Straits Trading Cattle Company.<sup>12</sup> That same year, Kader Sultan's name was prominently mentioned in relation to an attempted murder of a law clerk by mail bomb.<sup>13</sup> In each instance, the Cattle King managed to stay above the fray, but the cut-throat nature of the livestock trade would eventually prove to be his undoing.

### A Residence Fit for a (Cattle) King

On the land he bought in Katong, Kader Sultan developed a palatial estate for himself and his many wives, and one befitting his stature. He constructed three sprawling bungalows, one of which featured a three-storey tower, built in a mixture of late-Victorian, Italianate and Indian architectural styles, on adjoining plots of freehold land. Altogether, the land comprised a total 202,536 sq ft (roughly two-and-a-half football fields), not including adjacent lots he owned.<sup>14</sup> The bungalows were connected by a neat square of walkways cutting through a sprawling garden. A fountain and fishpond were situated in the centre, surrounded by a circular pavilion. Just beyond the ornate seawalls, the surf rolled onto the beach.

Kader Sultan claimed that it cost him \$500,000 to develop the site and build the bungalows (see text box on page 51). He named his lavish estate Karikal Mahal – Karikal (or Karaikal) being the town of his

birth in southern India and Mahal meaning "palace" in Hindi and, perhaps with a wry sense of humour, also the Malay word for "expensive".

In June 1930, the Singapore Municipal Commissioners approved the name Karikal Road for a private road between East Coast Road and Kader Sultan's home. Two months later, the commissioners gave the name Karikal Lane to another parallel road between East Coast Road and Kader Sultan's residence.<sup>15</sup> (Running west of Karikal Lane, Karikal Road subsequently became part of Still Road South after land reclamation works in the 1970s.<sup>16</sup>)

Kader Sultan also owned the adjacent plots of land and on one of the lots fronting East Coast Road, he erected a bandstand and maintained the land as a football pitch and park for the community. The site was even used to host a travelling circus in October 1935.<sup>17</sup>

It is not clear exactly when Karikal Mahal was completed, although two dates have been suggested – 1920 and 1922.<sup>18</sup> The earliest mention of it is found in newspaper reports from December 1922, when the "palatial residence" and grounds were used to host a farewell gathering for Captain A.R. Chancellor, the Inspector-General of Police, on his retirement and return to Europe.<sup>19</sup> It was not the last high-society event that Karikal Mahal would host for a local luminary.

In January 1930, the Muslim community threw a tea party in honour of Roland John Farrer, President of the Municipality – a position equivalent to Mayor of Singapore – on being made a Companion of the Most Distinguished Order of Saint Michael and Saint George. Farrer was highly regarded by the Muslim community for his work as Chairman of the Mohammedan Advisory Board and for lobbying to have Hari Raya Haji declared a public holiday. The band of the Johore Military Forces performed for over 1,000 guests and photographs of the event in the *Malayan Saturday Post* show long tables draped in white set in the garden of Karikal Mahal.<sup>20</sup>

Despite hobnobbing with high officials and the upper echelons of society, Kader Sultan's cattle business was slowly unravelling. In the late 1920s, the livestock trade suffered a debilitating blow due to an outbreak of rinderpest and foot-and-mouth disease that severely restricted the importation of sheep and cattle.<sup>21</sup>



(Facing page) A rare colour photo of The Grand Hotel with its striking tower (building No. 26) taken by an unknown serviceman from RAF Changi before land reclamation works began, c. 1958. The round fountain pavilion where Moona Kader Sultan received his Legion d'Honneur is seen on the left. Courtesy of RAF Changi Association.

The beginning of the end came in early 1934 when Kader Sultan was implicated in a murder. Two of his employees had assaulted a man named Ferthal Khan, who worked for a rival cattle firm. Khan later died from his injuries. During court proceedings, the Cattle King denied ordering the assault. Although subsequently cleared of any wrongdoing, the scandal was hard to live down. Kader Sultan's appointment as Justice of the Peace was revoked at the end of that year. In 1935, his Straits Cattle Trading Company shuttered permanently, and a year later he was declared bankrupt after failing to pay his creditor just over \$50,000.<sup>22</sup>

Kader Sultan died in June 1937, aged 74, while visiting his hometown in India. He left behind six sons, five daughters and numerous grandchildren.<sup>23</sup>

Just before his death, Karikal Mahal was put up for sale at an auction to clear his debt. The property was valued at \$150,000 but the highest bid received was \$90,000.<sup>24</sup> According to records at the

Singapore Land Authority, the property was acquired in probate in 1938 by The Chartered Bank of India, Australia and China, a predecessor of today's Standard Chartered. The buildings were emptied, but they would not stay vacant for long.

### The Malayan Magic Circle

In August 1939, the Malayan Magic Circle located its new headquarters at Karikal Mahal. A branch of a British organisation founded in 1905, the Malayan Magic Circle started out in 1935 as a club for the settlement's resident magicians. Proceeds from their performances were donated to charitable organisations and by 1939, they had disbursed over \$25,000. They also put up free shows in hospitals and military barracks.<sup>25</sup> One of their most popular tricks was performed by founding member Armand Joseph Braga, a prominent lawyer and later Minister for Health under the David Marshall and Lim Yew Hock governments after the war. The trick involved Braga es-

caping from a full-sized coffin after being chained inside.

The Malayan Magic Circle most likely occupied the now-demolished building at 24 Karikal Road. The tenants were certainly happy in their new home, boasting of the "commodiousness" of the property in their newsletter, *The Magic Fan*, and noting that a "large and well-appointed stage" had been installed.<sup>26</sup>

The good times would not last long. By October 1941, with the war looming, the group decided to shutter its clubhouse due to gasoline rationing and members' pressing wartime duties. But the club remained active, with performances at the Victoria Theatre and military garrisons to help boost wartime morale. It even staged a show on the night when the first Japanese bombs dropped on Singapore on 8 December 1941.<sup>27</sup> The island fell two months later.

### The Japanese Occupation

During the Japanese Occupation (1942–45), Karikal Mahal was appropriated by the Japanese military. Following the British surrender in February 1942, some members of the city's European community were herded together on the Padang before being forced to march 8 km to Karikal Mahal, which had been transformed into a concentration camp surrounded by barbed wire. A pit latrine was dug on the beach where the D'Ecosia condominium is now located.

Within days, the internees started printing a camp newsletter produced by Australian Guy Wade and British-born Harry Miller, a former editor with *The Straits Times*, titled *Karikal Chronicle*.<sup>28</sup>

The men did their best to settle into what they thought would be their home for the next few years. Labour was divided, rules laid out and plans were made to plant the gardens. Props left behind by The Malayan Magic Circle were used to liven up the place. A library was created using books taken from the Kelly & Walsh bookstore (with the blessing of the manager), with the coffin from Braga's escape act employed as an unconventional bookcase.<sup>29</sup>

Nonetheless, the going was tough as food rations were often short. A standard joke was "I'm getting so thin I don't know if I have stomach ache or back ache!", but the men did their best to keep up their spirits. The *Karikal Chronicle* of 4 March 1942 announced a new light-hearted supplement titled *Kurri-kal Sambals* that would feature jokes and anecdotes of camp life with a "Karikal flavour".<sup>30</sup>

However, the following day, a little over a fortnight after they first arrived, the

Japanese announced that Karikal Camp would be vacated and the internees were marched to their new home in Changi Prison. The removal came as a shock but the editors of the *Karikal Chronicle* managed to put out an issue that day, scrawling "Special Edition" in pencil across the top.<sup>31</sup> They would establish a sister paper, *Changi Guardian*, which they kept in print over the torturous years ahead.

The fate of the building throughout the Occupation years is unknown. After the war, the buildings remained vacant for several years as Singapore sought to recover from the terrible ordeal.

### The Grand Hotel

In 1947, the Lee Rubber Company acquired the property along with the football field and an empty lot to the west. The company had been set up in 1931 by Lee Kong Chian, later Chairman of the Oversea Chinese Banking Corporation and Chancellor of the University of Singapore, and a highly respected philanthropist who established the Lee Foundation.<sup>32</sup> Prior to the war, on the lot adjacent to Karikal Mahal, a road was laid and named Kuo Chuan Avenue, after Lee's father, with quaint black-and-white bungalows built on either side.

The buildings of Karikal Mahal were renovated into a residential guest house

"KURRI-KAL SAMBALS". A plethora of legitimate news - quite unexpectedly, we might add - which leaves us scarcely any space to put at the disposal of our ever-growing stream of contributors, has caused us to consider how best we can cater for them. We have decided that the publication of "Kurri-kal Sambals" is timely, and we hereby announce the first issue on Sunday, and invite contributions. This august sheet will be in no sense a newspaper, and we want it to be crisp, bright, and, as far as possible, confined to Camp interests, and filled by Campers. So, contributors, please give your verse, prose, jokes, or what you will, a Karikal flavour, and "keep it down."

Karikal Mahal was initially used as an internment camp for Europeans after the fall of Singapore in 1942. The prisoners began publishing a newsletter titled *Karikal Chronicle* and in its 4 March 1942 issue, announced plans for a supplement called *Kurri-kal Sambals* featuring jokes, prose and verse. However, the move to Changi Prison put paid to this plan. Retrieved from Cambridge University Library website.

called The Grand Hotel,<sup>33</sup> which offered "seaside accommodation on reasonable monthly terms", with "continental cuisine" and "new furniture". Among its enticements was "Neptune's Bar" serving "special Sunday tiffins".<sup>34</sup> The first European manager was replaced after a few years by James Tan, who would oversee the property for the next four decades.

The field just north of the property remained an open space used by the neighbourhood kids for football matches and kite-fighting competitions.<sup>35</sup>

Newspaper advertisements from 1961 show one of the buildings nestled in a leafy garden; it had become an idyllic seaside retreat popular with servicemen from Changi Air Base.

### The End of an Era

The beachfront oasis met an untimely end when land reclamation works began in 1966.<sup>36</sup> The government mounted an ambitious modernisation campaign that included the reclamation of most of the southeastern coast of the island, with plans to build a new airport and a coastal highway leading to the city.

The massive reclamation project pushed the shoreline out, landlocking The Grand Hotel and replacing the seaside promenade with a busy thoroughfare - Marine Parade Road.

In anticipation of an interchange at Still Road leading into East Coast Parkway, Karikal Road was widened to accommodate increased vehicular traffic. The expansion

(Below) A view of the still standing building No. 25 on Still Road South as it appeared in 1985. Lee Kip Lin Collection, PictureSG, National Library, Singapore.

(Bottom) A view of the now demolished building No. 24, 1967. It was torn down when the government acquired part of the land in the early 1970s to construct Still Road South. Lee Kip Lin Collection, PictureSG, National Library, Singapore.



### THE INSPECTOR-GENERAL AND THE CATTLE KING

The closest we have to a biography of Moona Kader Sultan by someone who knew him is a brief description published 10 years after his death in a memoir by René Onraet, Inspector-General of the Straits Settlements Police from 1935 to 1939.

Onraet used the story of Kader Sultan to illustrate a point that "Asiatics" weave together "personal interests" with "loyalty to a higher cause" as a regular course of business.

The bulk of the sketch of Kader Sultan is a confessional conversation that the Cattle King shared with Onraet after his fall from grace in 1936. It paints the picture of a bitter, broken man.

Kader Sultan regretted the extravagance of Karikal Mahal. He said: "This house made living very expensive for me. The marriages of my sons from under its roof cost me a fortune. It has proved 'mahal'

[expensive] indeed. Having to live up to it has helped to ruin me."

As for the civic accolades he received, Kader Sultan was cynical. "In Karikal, I was persuaded to back some unknown man at the municipal elections, and later was awarded the Légion d'Honneur, as my candidate was elected! I think I got my J.P. [Justice of the Peace] in Singapore not only for being a leading Indian but for giving 10,000 dollars to the Red Cross fund in 1917. I also gave 20,000 dollars for Raffles College. The Government did not return these sums to me when they deprived me of my J.P.-ship."

Onraet presents the quotes as though they were transcriptions of an actual conversation, but how accurate are the details? Did Onraet recall these words from memory? Did he embellish the story? We have no way of knowing. While this sketch appears to open a window into Kader Sultan's final years, it must be taken with a pinch of salt.

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Kader Sultan was declared bankrupt in 1936 after failing to pay his creditor just over \$50,000. His Straits Cattle Trading company had shut down the year before. *The Malaya Tribune*, 9 January 1937, p. 12. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

**BANKRUPTCY OF  
"CATTLE KING"  
A SCHEME  
Affairs Of Moona  
Kader Sultan**

Singapore, Friday.

**A**N application for the approval of the court for a scheme of arrangement in the bankruptcy of Moona Kader Sultan, at one time a "cattle king," came up in the Bankruptcy Court to-day before Mr. Justice Adrian Clark.

Mr. E. B. Williams, the Official Assignee, appeared in support of the application, and Mr. F. J. Hayden

bifurcated the property, obliterating the fountain, pavilion and walkways. Building No. 24 was demolished, and the remaining two structures isolated from one another by six lanes of a busy roadway. Towards the end of the decade, Karikal Road was renamed Still Road South.

By the early 1970s, it appears that The Grand Hotel limped on and was promoted as a 20-room budget hotel offering long-term rental packages at cheap rates. Its former grandeur lost, the place soon fell on hard times. In 1985, to keep the hotel afloat, long-time manager James Tan began charging a special rate of \$50 for four hours of use, and the hotel soon developed a reputation as a destination for clandestine rendezvous.<sup>37</sup>

In 1993, *The New Paper* tabloid ran an exposé on “short time” love hotels in Katong, including The Grand Hotel. When interviewed, Tan, then 82, and living in the hotel, explained that business had declined during the 1970s and early 80s. To counter this, he introduced the new rate. “Now, the hotel is 80 percent full on the average. Business is good. Most of our income comes from these hourly bookings. On a good day, as many as six couples check into the hotel



(Above right) An aerial photograph from 1958 shows The Grand Hotel and its tower (No. 26; bottom left of photo), as well as Nos. 24 and 25, with only some modifications from Kader Sultan’s time. The tower was demolished sometime in the 1960s. *British Royal Air Force, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

(Right) A map of the old Karikal Mahal estate, together with Nos. 24, 25 and 26, superimposed on a Google Maps image of the area today. Building no. 24 was torn down to make way for Still Road South. Land reclamation has also pushed the shoreline further south and much of Marine Parade now is built on reclaimed land.

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for a few hours... On weekdays, the hourly booking is more popular. During weekends, we have 100 percent occupancy, but most are here for a day.”<sup>38</sup>

Tan added there was one occasion when a woman stormed into the hotel with a private investigator and demanded to see her husband, who had booked a room to have a tryst with his mistress. Due to the ruckus created by the woman and her husband at the hotel reception, both were ordered to leave immediately.

Despite Tan’s best efforts, the hotel’s days were numbered. As the area became gentrified with luxury condominiums rising where seaside bungalows once stood, the seedy hotel became an embarrassment. In 2000, it lost its operating licence and closed down. The two buildings would spend the next 15 years lying vacant, slowly degrading from the humidity and the exhaust fumes from the increasingly busy road in front.

## A New Chapter

In December 2003, the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) gave the building at 26 Still Road South conservation status under its “Conservation Initiated by Private Owners” scheme. This meant that the building could not be demolished and renovations had to be approved by the URA.<sup>39</sup>

In the meantime, the value of the property continued to soar. *The Sunday Times* noted in 2007 that the 60,000-square-foot plot of land at 25 Still Road South was valued at \$300 million. Despite the eye-watering valuation, a representative of Lee Rubber said the company was using the building to store furniture. In 2009, the URA also granted conservation status to No. 25 under a new initiative for the creation of a Joo Chiat/Katong historical district, preserving what was left of Karikal Mahal. Lee Rub-

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Pat’s Schoolhouse Katong now occupies one of Karikal Mahal’s buildings at 26 Still Road South. *Courtesy of William L. Gibson*



ber, however, still had no plans for the two buildings at the time.<sup>40</sup>

It was only in 2016 that the buildings were given a new lease of life. Following a \$5-million renovation, the two stately bungalows are now home to Odyssey The Global Preschool and Pat’s Schoolhouse Katong (at 25 and 26 Still Road South respectively), both operated by Busy Bees Asia which leased the buildings from Lee Rubber.<sup>41</sup>

The grounds of the two preschools are not open to the public but a wander around the site offers glimpses of the grandeur of the old estate. A portion of the original seawall still runs along Marine Parade, in front of No. 26. The football field on East Coast Road remains vacant, but greatly diminished in size due to road expansion works.

The initials “MKS” that were once emblazoned in a crest on the pediment above the main door of No. 25 no longer exist. The letterings were removed during the recent makeover, effectively erasing all traces of Moona Kader Sultan a century after he first built his Singaporean Xanadu. Karikal Lane is the only remaining vestige of the name that the Cattle King had given his palace. ♦

The author is continuing his research into Karikal Mahal and The Grand Hotel, and seeks photographs or stories about the site. Please contact him at cesasia21@gmail.com if you would like to help.

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# THE BOROBUDUR, MYSTERIOUS GOLD PLATES AND SINGING MAPS

Unsolved historical puzzles from Southeast Asia are key elements of the recently published thriller *The Java Enigma* by debut novelist **Erni Salleh**.

Watching the sun rise from Borobudur is a magnificent experience.

The climb to the summit starts at 4 am. As your eyes become accustomed to the darkness, you might spot offerings of flowers and incense at the base of the 9th-century Buddhist monument as the call of prayers from the nearby village mosques serenades your ascent.

When you reach the top, you are greeted by a large central stupa, surrounded by 72 smaller ones. Two of these are exposed, showing a seated Buddha in a lotus pose, one facing the east and the other, west. I like to think these statues are privy to the many secrets still waiting to be uncovered in the region – mysteries and forgotten histories that inspire writers such as myself to speculate and to weave stories around them.

**Erni Salleh** is a trained librarian who currently manages the Mobile Library Services at the National Library Board. She is the author of *The Java Enigma*, which was shortlisted for the 2020 Epigram Book Fiction Prize. An avid traveller, she collects bits of the past – from 19th-century Laotian ceremonial scrolls to generations-old keris from Yogyakarta.

## Inspiration for *The Java Enigma*

It was during such a climb in July 2017 that the inspiration for my novel, *The Java Enigma*, took root. Just like Irin, the main character of the story, I had received devastating news of my father's passing while I was away from home. In my case, I was neck-deep in field research at the Borobudur Archaeological Park in Central Java for my post-graduate degree in Southeast Asian Studies, and it was impossible for me to get home in time for his funeral. (Muslim tradition mandates that the deceased be buried within 24 hours of a person's passing.)

However, unlike Irin, my late father did not leave me a secret safe deposit box with codes that sent me chasing for clues around the world. Instead, his passing prompted me to dig into his past and his work on marine

salvage projects overseas. It brought to memory his adventures navigating treacherous waters and uncovering priceless treasures around the world, from the Java Sea all the way to the Gulf of Mexico. This man, who always seemed larger than life to me, provided the inspiration as well as the starting point for many of the mysteries the reader encounters in my book.

As a librarian, access to this wealth of knowledge felt like being immersed in my own personal archive. I spent hours cataloguing items from my father's past, piecing together the where, the when and the why. I found some of his earliest moments as a salvage diver captured in

Sunrise as seen from the summit of Borobudur, with Mount Merapi in the horizon, 2017. Photo by Erni Salleh.

(Below) Librarian and debut novelist Erni Salleh. Courtesy of Epigram Books.

(Below right) The writer's father Mohd Salleh (left) posing with a friend in front of Borobudur a few days before a dive, 1982. Courtesy of Erni Salleh.



photos and discovered that he, too, had spent time at Borobudur.

In October 2018, when I had to write a paper on tangible and intangible heritage for my postgraduate course, Borobudur was the natural choice. I visited numerous other temples, as well as plantations and local homestays, and spoke to countless locals and tourists. Returning to Borobudur was cathartic, bringing me closure but also continuity.

In January 2019, armed with research materials about Borobudur and my father's adventures, I began writing *The Java Enigma*, which I completed seven months later.

*The Java Enigma* is a thriller centred around the origins of Borobudur. Irin, the novel's main protagonist, is a librarian who uncovers the real reason for the hidden panels – known as the Karmawibhanga Reliefs and chanced upon in 1885 – at the base of what is said to be the biggest Buddhist temple in the world. The discovery pits her against those fighting to guard its ancient secrets.

## The Research Process

Back in Singapore, I relied heavily on reference materials at the regional libraries and the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library. I also consulted scholarly journals via the library's access to JSTOR, a digital library of academic journals and books. Not many people know this but reference books at Jurong, Woodlands and Tampines regional libraries can be borrowed, a blessing for time-strapped professionals like me. However, my all-time favourite resource was BookSG – a repository of digitised books and other print materials – because of its amazing collection of digital maps that includes items from The British Library.

All these resources are equally available to the public. My access to rare documents at the National Library was the same as any other library user. Even though I work for the library, I did not get preferential treatment (in fact, I got a minor dressing-down once when I mistakenly brought a pen instead of a pencil into the reading room).

## The Writer's Challenge

My job as a librarian requires me to approach information as a science, classifying and packaging it to meet the needs of users; impartiality being the primary guiding principle. Although my training in history requires me to make inferences, historians are also preoccupied with facts. As a writer of fiction though, I have to distill the essence of my research into an interesting narrative that moves the plot along. This is sometimes at odds with the librarian-historian in me who wants to ensure that the facts are accurate.

How did I resolve this conundrum? I'd like to think that I see information as a piece of a larger puzzle. The librarian in me presents these pieces, the historian connects them, while the writer creates new ones to add on to or disrupt our understanding of that puzzle. The challenge is to know when to hold back one impulse and to let the other have the limelight. You wouldn't believe the number of times my editor had to remind me that I wasn't writing a thesis.

I found that immersing myself in fiction was one of the best ways to unleash my fun, creative side. My job with Molly, the mobile library bus, was also good training as it gave me the chance to read with, and read to, children and parents on board the bus. My genre of choice: wordless picture books. You can change the story to suit any

audience and make up your own plot along the way – what better way to practise the art of developing a narrative?

## Bridging the Historical Gap with Fiction

It is perhaps not surprising that the daughter of a salvage diver would find joy in uncovering the hidden. And the history of the region has no shortage of hidden or unknown aspects. Doing my Masters in Southeast Asian studies opened my eyes to the many gaps in scholarship in this area: narratives lost over the centuries due to the death of ancient languages and ancient cultures, and from perishable records. I used some of these as plot devices in *The Java Enigma*, from lost 15th-century indigenous maps to the mysterious location of the shipwreck of the Portuguese carrack *Flor de la Mar* and, of course, the *raison d'être* of the book's namesake – the biggest enigma on the island of Java – Borobudur.

Borobudur is the only surviving monument of its kind in Java and, possibly, Southeast Asia.<sup>1</sup> In ancient times, a pilgrim would make his way up to the summit, meditating and praying as he circumambulates 10 rounds past the 1,460 relief panels centering around the themes of punishment and reward, the life of Buddha and the search for the ultimate wisdom – symbolic of the 10 stages of existence that a *bodhisattva* goes through to attain enlightenment.

What a pilgrim today would not see, however, is an additional 160 panels at the base of the monument showing scenes of heaven and hell from Buddhist mythology, illustrating the rewards or punishment of one's actions. These were concealed by stone slabs at some point, then discovered by accident in 1885 and were covered up

again five years later after photographic records were made. What is visible now are four panels in the southeastern corner of the monument, exposed by curious members of the Japanese occupation forces in the early 1940s.

Why were these panels hidden? When was this done and under whose instruction?

Conservationists generally agree that the panels were erected to shore up the sagging stones and provide a broader base to hold up the weight of the upper levels. The lack of a cornice to prevent rain damage or a plinth for added support has led some scholars to believe that “the stone covering had already been foreseen before the whole project was executed”.<sup>2</sup> (The reliefs on the other levels of Borobudur have cornices to protect them from the rain.) Of course, the writer of a thriller might have entirely different ideas about why someone would want these panels covered up, and this is why these hidden panels form a major plot element in my book.

One real-life mystery I use for my novel is a set of inscriptions carved into 11

rectangular gold plates that mysteriously appeared at Jakarta’s Museum Nasional Indonesia in 1946. The provenance of these plates and how they suddenly came to be at the museum are an unsolved puzzle to this day. The engravings were copied between 650 and 800 CE from a much earlier scripture that reached Java in the early 5th century. The plates contain well-known Buddhist teachings about the 12 causes of suffering and how to break this chain to attain enlightenment. It was written in a language that transitions between the sacred Pallava script and that of vernacular Old Javanese, or Kawi.<sup>3</sup> Bereft of complicated grammatical sentences, the text seems to have been written for commoners rather than for priests or the ruling class.

The most intriguing aspect of these gold plates is the presence of a particular verse that does not have an equivalent in any Buddhist text, whether in the original Indic languages, or in Tibetan or Chinese translations. Yet, this same verse is echoed in artefacts found at eight other locations

in Southeast Asia, including three stone slabs discovered in Peninsular Malaysia, and stone stupas in Brunei, Sarawak and Kalimantan. The text reads:

“*Ajñānāc cīyate karma janmanaḥ  
karma kāraṇam  
Jñānān na kṛitate karma  
karmābhāvān na jāyate.*”

[Translation: Through ignorance, karma is accumulated; Karma is the cause of rebirth. Through wisdom, karma is not accumulated; In the absence of karma, one is not reborn.]<sup>4</sup>

Because this verse is not found in the Buddhist canon, researchers have suggested the possibility of it originating from a local text that was circulated in the region but then was later redacted. This prompts further questions: who selected this verse and chose to associate it with the various artefacts in Southeast Asia? And who sponsored the valuable Javanese gold plates?

What we do know is that the gold plates had likely “served as relics—inscribed to constitute a deposit in a religious foundation such as a stupa” or “one of the large Buddhist temples in Indonesia”.<sup>5</sup> But seeing that the origins of the verse are unknown, a writer has the luxury to speculate if it could link to Borobudur. And so the mysterious local text ended up as grist for my literary mill.

### Making Sense of Ancient Maps

The artefacts carrying the mysterious verses were discovered at nodal points along the maritime trade routes from India to China. However, this is not to suggest that the verses moved in a single direction, seeing that trade routes are complex and multidirectional, and texts are open to indigenous interpretations and circulation. Glimpses of Southeast Asian mariners—along with their technology of shipbuilding, navigation and cartography—have been preserved in Borobudur’s stone reliefs, which prompted me to make an unexplored connection between sea travels, the origins of Borobudur’s architecture and the meaning behind the untraceable verses.

The researcher and curator Thomas Suárez notes that “[i]n early Southeast Asia, there was no absolute distinction between the physical, the metaphysical and the religious. Southeast Asian geographic thought, like Southeast Asian life, could be at once, both empirical and transcendental”.<sup>6</sup>

Detail from a 16th-century map of a district in West Java. This detailed map is drawn in ink on cloth and shows what indigenous mapmaking in Java looks like. Image reproduced from Holle, K.F. (1876). *De Kaart van Tjiela of Timbanganten. Tijdschrift voor Indische Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde, Deel 24. Batavia: Lange & Co.*



This fluidity in time and space is an element I have incorporated into my novel as a way to remind readers to situate their appreciation of these histories and mysteries outside of familiar Western modes of measurements and methods of mapmaking. This is an important consideration so that we don’t see the limited number of extant Southeast Asian maps as inaccurate or having no practical value simply because we are viewing it through the lens of current cartographic conventions.

In his letter to King Manuel of Portugal dated 1 April 1512, Alfonso de Albuquerque, founder of Portugal’s empire in Southeast Asia, wrote that the Bugis of Sulawesi and the maritime traders in Java and Sumatra have been recorded as having maps so detailed that they contained references to “the Clove islands, the navigation of the Chinese and the Gores [people of Formosa], with their rhumbs and direct routes followed by the ships, and the hinterland, and how the kingdoms border on each other”.<sup>7</sup>

However, the Bugis also relied on unwritten itineraries that were committed to memory in the form of songs so that navigators could construct a mental image of time and space, topography and even landmarks. This might have been the preferred mode of mapmaking by the Bugis, in an attempt to keep their navigational aids confidential, after witnessing “the aggressive commercial spirit of their European visitors”.<sup>8</sup> Many of their physical maps, like the one described earlier, ended up in the hands of Europeans or were lost at sea. One such map went missing when

the *Flor de la Mar* sank during its voyage from Melaka to Portugal in 1511. While a copy of this map might have survived thanks to the efforts of Portuguese pilot Francisco Rodrigues in 1513, any mention of European reliance on native Southeast Asian maps seem to have disappeared from written records from this point on.

### Historical Mysteries or Forgotten Narratives?

The loss of a large corpus of indigenous maps was not as disconcerting as my realisation that despite being a seaman’s daughter, I have never once heard a “map” being sung to me. Surely such a map exists out there, waiting to be documented, if it hasn’t already disappeared from our cultural consciousness? Who’s to say that these lost maps do not provide clues to the secrets and mysteries in the region that remain unsolved today?

As an academic and a writer, I feel the responsibility of bringing to the fore unknown stories that have not made their presence in history books; the literary space being a safe place to explore and present these narratives. *The Java Enigma* is my attempt at addressing these forgotten histories while bringing the mysteries of our region into a meaningful dialogue with one another. At the same time, to me, the real challenge of using history in fiction is whether in the end you’ve been able to guide your readers to engage with your story emotionally and cognitively, letting them ask their own questions and make their own decisions about the “what-ifs” of our pasts. ♦

*The Java Enigma* is available for reference at the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library and for loan at selected public libraries (Call nos.: RS-ING S823 ERN and ERN). It also retails at major bookshops in Singapore.



### NOTES

- 1 Most ancient Javanese or Buddhist temples have rooms designed to house special objects of worship. Only priests were allowed to enter. Conversely, Borobudur is not intended as a devotional monument to Buddha but a place for pilgrims to achieve enlightenment.
- 2 Stutterheim, W.F. (1956). *Studies in Indonesian archaeology* (p. 33). The Hague: M. Nijhoff. (Call no.: RCLOS 992.2 STU). [A plinth is a pedestal or support for a statue or a column in architecture.]
- 3 The Pallava script is a Brahmic script named after the Pallava dynasty (275 CE to 897 CE) of Southern India. It later influenced the development of languages in Southeast Asia such as Cham (spoken in Cambodia and Vietnam) and Kawi (Old Javanese). Pallava was likely spoken by the religious and ruling classes at the time.
- 4 Skilling, P. (2015). An untraced Buddhist verse inscription from Peninsular Southeast Asia (p. 33). In D.C. Lammerts (Ed.), *Buddhist dynamics in premodern and early modern Southeast Asia*. Singapore: ISEAS Publishing. (Call no.: RSEA 294.30959 BUD)
- 5 De Casparis, J.G. (1956). *Selected Inscriptions from the 7th to the 9th century A.D.* (pp. 48, 52, 55–56). Bandung: Masa Baru. (Call no.: RU 499.2017 CAS)
- 6 Suárez, T. (1999). *Early mapping of Southeast Asia: The epic story of seafarers, adventurers, and cartographers who first mapped the regions between China and India* (p. 27). Hong Kong: Periplus Editions. (Call no.: RSING q912.59 SUA)
- 7 Suárez, 1999, p. 39. Albuquerque was a military genius and a great naval commander who helped to build and expand the Portuguese Empire. He conquered Ormuz in 1507, Goa in 1510 and Melaka in 1511.
- 8 Suárez, 1999, p. 32.



The four previously hidden panels located at the base of the southeastern corner of Borobudur, 2017. Photo by Erni Salleh.

# LIFE IN A TIME OF COVID-19

Janice Loo explains why and how the National Library is crowdsourcing materials on the impact of COVID-19 on life in Singapore.

For much of 2020, the world has been struggling to contain COVID-19, the disease caused by a novel coronavirus that emerged late last year. At the time of writing, the global pandemic has infected more than 34 million people and killed over 1.03 million.<sup>1</sup>

Singapore saw its first case of COVID-19 on 23 January 2020, marking the start of an extraordinary period that saw the issuing of stringent measures to contain the spread of the virus. From 7 April to 1 June, the government imposed a “circuit breaker” to pre-empt further transmissions. Schools, offices and most retail outlets were closed and social gatherings prohibited. Everyone in Singapore was advised to stay home unless they had to step out for essential purposes.

Life has entered a new normal. While some restrictions have since

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been relaxed, it is mandatory for people to wear face masks when they leave home, places of worship have a cap on the number of congregants and large gatherings remain curtailed.

To document this extraordinary period, the National Library Board and the National Museum of Singapore issued a call in May 2020 for materials that capture how lives have changed as a result of the ongoing pandemic.

“Documenting COVID-19 in Singapore” invites the public to contribute content under two categories: daily life during the pandemic, and the experiences of frontline and essential workers as well as those who have demonstrated kindness or gone the extra mile to help the community.

So far, over 400 submissions comprising more than 2,600 photographs, stories, videos and nominations of websites relating to COVID-19 have been received by the National Library.

The photographs capture scenes such as shuttered retail shops and restaurants, deserted streets and empty buses and trains. There are also snapshots of daily life showing how people have adapted to the restrictions, how they found creative ways

This photo was taken by doctor and avid photographer Shyamala Thilagaratnam, whose team at the Health Promotion Board organised and implemented swab operations at migrant worker dormitories. Before administering the swab test, the team dons personal protective equipment and carefully checks the particulars of the workers. This photo forms part of a photo essay titled “COVID Chronicles”. Photo contributed by Dr Shyamala Thilagaratnam.

to spend time at home and how they stayed in touch with family and friends. The collection also features stories and photographs of those working on the frontlines to keep Singapore safe as well as individuals whose acts of giving have made a difference in the community.

The National Library will continue to collect photos and stories until the end of the year. To contribute, please visit <https://go.gov.sg/documenting-COVID19>. ♦

#### NOTE

- <sup>1</sup> World Health Organization. (2020). *WHO Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dashboard*. Retrieved 5 October 2020 from <https://covid19.who.int/>



# 跨境影响 情系侨乡

## 新加坡金门会馆特藏

The National Library recently received a sizable collection of letters, documents, books and other paper ephemera from the Kim Mui Hoey Kuan. **Lee Mei-yu** examines the historical links the clan association has forged between Singapore and Kinmen.

**李梅瑜**是新加坡国家图书馆新加坡与东南亚馆藏的图书馆员。她的研究兴趣包括新加坡华人社群。她也是2012年“家书抵万金：新加坡侨批文化展”以及2013年“根：追溯家族历史”展览指南的作者之一。

战前金门移民主要遍布于东南亚，部分散居于日本和香港。最早移居东南亚的金门人可以追溯到16世纪中叶。从19世纪到20世纪中叶，金门出现了四次主要的海外移民潮。这时期中国战争频繁、治安败坏，而东南亚商业发达，导致许多金门人外出谋生。新加坡是这段时期最多金门人移居的地方。据一项2010年的调查，现存由新加坡金门人创建的宗亲会共有24间。两个主要团体分别为由早期商绅阶层组成的金门会馆和由早期劳动阶层组成的浯江公会。两间宗亲会皆于1870年代成立。<sup>1</sup>

新加坡金门会馆在2019年和2020年捐赠了超过1000册书籍与文件给新加坡国家图书馆。作为重要的国家文献遗产，金门会馆允许图书馆为这批书籍与文件进行整理、修复和保存工作，并授权数

原址于史密斯街的金门会馆在1974年因政府市区重建计划被征用。金门会馆于1985年迁进建于庆利路72号的新大厦，使用至今。图为位于庆利路的金门会馆大厦。

图片由新加坡金门会馆提供。

码化和电子版全文开放，以推广新加坡宗亲会和新加坡金门人历史的研究。这些书籍与文件包括了会馆出版物以及战前至战后会馆内部文件（例如议案簿、会议记录、账簿、来往书信等等）。其中包含了一批记载浯江孚济庙、金门轮船公司、金门公司旅社部和金门会馆的战前文件，弥足珍贵。<sup>2</sup> 浯江孚济庙（简称“孚济庙”）是现今金门会馆的前身。金门轮船公司则是由金门会馆在20世纪初所成立的一家轮船公司。金门公司旅社部是金门会馆与轮船公司同时设立的旅社。从功能方面来看，孚济庙和金门会馆是承载信仰和心怀乡梓的社会团体（80年代之后亦有传承文化的新功能），而轮船公司和旅社部则是商业机构。

金门会馆的战前文件目前寥若晨星。新加坡沦陷之后，金门会馆因在中

日战争期间捐献抗日后援会、抵制日货和救济难民，不得不将文件或投水或焚烧，避免被日军追查。<sup>3</sup> 所捐赠的战前文件也有烧灼痕迹，估计是当时幸存下来的。

### 祭祀、协助乡民和文化传播团体——从浯江孚济庙、金门公司到金门会馆

金门会馆的前身为金门公司，或称孚济庙。1870年，南来经商的李仕挹等数位金门（旧名浯江）侨领以祭祀神明和联络、协助乡民为由，提议建设祠庙。从存于金门会馆的《浯江孚济庙碑记》可看出当时已有不少在新加坡经商致富的金门人，踊跃参与募捐活动，金额亦高。经六年的筹备，孚济庙1876年于史密斯街49号和51号成立。庙里崇祀开渑恩主陈渊及其夫人。相传陈渊乃唐代

牧马（为朝廷掌管牧马区的官员），曾率十二姓入金门开垦。陈渊生前利益民生，死后显灵驱寇。金门乡民为其祀功立庙，奉之为神。其庙曰孚济。陈渊为开垦金门的始祖，对其的信仰崇拜是金门独有。李仕挹于1911年逝世后，由黄良檀负责孚济庙事宜。黄良檀设办事处于庙后矮屋，作为同乡往来寄寓之所。此后，孚济庙亦有金门公司之称。

除了对侨民的援助，孚济庙也关注原乡金门，为其开发、发展经济与赈济方面的活动不遗余力。其中最广为人知乃1913年，黄安基以金门会馆总理名义，联合陈芳岁等新加坡商绅123人函呈福建巡按许世英，请愿金门岛设立县治。由于新加坡金门商贾的大力推动，金门终于成立二等县治，设立县知事。<sup>4</sup> 此举提高了金门在福建省的政治地位。

### 《金门孚济庙会社新加坡议程存记》（一册） 1925、1926、1940年<sup>5</sup>

此议程存记为孚济庙董事部会议记录。里头记载了各大小事项，例如委派五人代表参加祖国国民代表会选举、共议金门商业学校募捐进行事项等等。议程存记记录了孚济庙的发展史，是一份重要的历史文件。

新加坡金门会馆特藏，新加坡国家图书馆。

### 《董事议案簿》（二册） 1929、1933年

此议案簿记录了金门会馆董事部的会议事项。其中包括了大会选举、财务报告等等。议案簿记录了金门会馆的早期发展史，是一份重要的历史文件。

新加坡金门会馆特藏，新加坡国家图书馆。



《为图今后金门航行便利劝请乡人》  
年份不详

(右上图) 此布告由23间金门机构与学校(例如教育局、金门商会、金山保董公会、金门公学、金门高阳学校等等)所发。布告叙述“金门公司为便利金门交通而创置金星轮船, 金门旅社应为金星轮船住宿”。布告也痛诉其他轮船服务“出自异乡人之手……惟一目的在乎营利故不恤吾乡人……南洋乡侨……特出而组织金门轮船公司”。因此, 布告劝请金门乡人支持金星轮。此布告不只是一份记录了轮船公司和旅社部成立缘由的重要文献, 还显示了当时新加坡金门会馆对于原侨乡福利的关怀以及金门官方与非官方机构所给予的支持。

新加坡金门会馆特藏, 新加坡国家图书馆。



(右下图) 新加坡金门籍的作家为新加坡华族文化贡献良多。捐献资料中也包括了他们的文艺作品。左起: 剧作家关新艺的《关新艺鳞爪集》; 作家方然的《岩下草》; 诗人寒川的《山山皆秀色》; 书法家邱少华的《墨海寄余生》。

新加坡金门会馆特藏, 新加坡国家图书馆。



(左下图) 金门会馆的出版物和战后内部文件不但详述了会馆的发展史, 还记录了战后会馆是如何继续在金门与新加坡华社中扮演了重要的角色。图为《筹建金门会馆大厦记录簿》和《金门会馆会员大会记录》。

新加坡金门会馆特藏, 新加坡国家图书馆。



1927年6月17日，海峡殖民地政府宪报刊登消息，宣布于当年5月30日始，“在《第116号条例（社团）》下，辅政司豁免金门会馆（孚济庙）注册”。<sup>5</sup> 此举标志着新加坡金门侨社群的总理机构从浯江孚济庙正式过渡到金门会馆。

无论是战前或战后，金门会馆在新加坡和金门都有许多公益事业。早期史料显示了这些事业主要集中在教育文化、福利慈善、祭祀和联谊活动，还有金门的治安、基础建设和实业开办等等。<sup>7</sup> 如今的金门会馆仍以服务社会、联系乡情、传承文化为己任。金门会馆设有奖学金，并不时举办和出版有关华族文化的活动和书籍。金门会馆接待世界各地同乡团体，并积极参与新加坡文化艺术与慈善活动。金门会馆在1998年成立了文教部和青年团，大力推广文化教育。<sup>8</sup> 董事部历来亦有多位华社领袖以个人名义参与公益，例如李仕堃、黄良檀、黄安基（黄良檀之子）、郑古悦、黄祖耀、蔡其生、陈笃汉等等。金门也出了很多文人，成为新加坡华社文化群体的先驱者和名人，例如林衡南、许允之、薛残白、陈荣照、寒川、方百成等等，其中不乏热心参与金门会馆领导工作的人士。<sup>9</sup>

原址于史密斯街的金门会馆在1974年因政府市区重建计划被征用。金门会馆于1985年迁进建于庆利路72号的新大厦，<sup>10</sup> 同时孚济庙也迁至金门会馆四楼。现今，金门会馆仍定时于每年农历二月初二及初三举行开浯恩主祭祀仪式。<sup>11</sup>

**（左图）金门十保乡长与晋省代表三人写信给金门轮船公司叙述因金门各项捐税多为外人包办，导致物价昂贵，民生痛苦。因此提议设立金门县财政经理处，往后捐税自办。而目前县政府分文俱无，新任黄祖熙县长提出要借款两千元，但商会无人担承。因此斗胆向金门轮船公司借。黄县长请金门会馆董事部介绍两人作为财政委员会。1930年，黄县长辞职。金门会馆向县政府收回借款，无奈不被批准。**

**1929—1930年**

1929年，金门十保乡长和晋省代表三人写信给金门轮船公司叙述因金门各项捐税多为外人包办，导致物价昂贵，民生痛苦。因此提议设立金门县财政经理处，往后捐税自办。而目前县政府分文俱无，新任黄祖熙县长提出要借款两千元，但商会无人担承。因此斗胆向金门轮船公司借。黄县长请金门会馆董事部介绍两人作为财政委员会。1930年，黄县长辞职。金门会馆向县政府收回借款，无奈不被批准。

新加坡金门会馆特藏，新加坡国家图书馆。

## 商业机构——金门轮船公司和金门公司旅社部的成立

1922年，因金门交通不便，金门会馆决定成立金门轮船股份有限公司，并在香港建造金星轮，为乡民提供每日川行于厦门和金门的轮船服务。办事处设于新加坡，而事务所设于厦门。轮船公司以四千股、每股十元，总额四万元叻币作为资金。与此同时，金门公司设立金门公司旅社部于厦门铁路头（后迁至海后路），为旅人提供住宿服务。金星轮于1923年正式启用。此举不但为返乡的侨民与乡民带来了诸多便利，还因侨汇能够由金星轮一并带回金门，加快了侨汇汇款速度。这在当时金门侨民家人等待侨汇以维持生计或进行各种建设项目极其重要。

中日战争期间，金星轮曾被金门县政府征用，后短暂被其他轮船公司接手。金门会馆于1948年收回，金星轮继续提供轮船服务于金厦水域。1954年之后，改航于澎湖列岛。至于旅社部则在战乱时期，收容难民，最后在厦门沦陷之后，于1938年停止营业。<sup>13</sup>

从筹划至今，新加坡金门会馆已有长达150年的历史。从早期会馆先辈以祭神明和联络、协助侨民乡民为目的所成立的地缘性团体，如今已发展成一个华族社团。金门会馆的发展史反映了新加坡金门籍先辈们披荆斩棘，勇于创业和心系社稷的精神。它也代表了在新加坡以地缘和血缘所成立的各种团体如何在时代变迁下蜕变，以崭新的样貌继续在新加坡华族群体中扮演着重要的华族文化艺术传承的角色。捐赠文献体现了金门会馆本身的跨国性质和影响。在这方面尤其以轮船公司和旅社部的成立最为明显。轮船公司和旅社部是新加坡金门籍商绅以其商业才能成立和经营，并直接参与原侨乡交通运输事业的最佳跨境影响案例。新发现的第一手资料正由新加坡国家图书馆进行整理、修复和保存工作。一旦完成，这批宝贵文献将让学者们进一步了解新加坡金门人如何情系侨乡，建立起一个跨越新加坡和金门的商业网络。◆

作者感谢蔡其生（金门会馆主席）、许振义博士（金门会馆副外事主任，《金门先贤录》及金门会馆150周年庆图文集主编）和陈成欣（金门会馆文教部主任）审阅此文。

### 注释

- 江柏炜（2015年12月）。〈“两座岛、一群人”：1949年以前新加坡金门会馆的跨境运作〉，载《华人研究国际学报》第7卷，第2期，页3-4。（索书号：RSING 09.05951 IJDCS）；江柏炜（2010）。《星洲活民：新加坡金门人的宗乡会馆》（页1-3, 71, 73）。金门：金门县文化局。（索书号：RSING 369.25957 JBW）。
- 因篇幅所限，文章将重点介绍战前文献和部分战后文献。有兴趣的读者，请联系新加坡国家图书馆参阅由新加坡金门会馆所捐赠超过1000册的书籍和文件。
- 薛残白主编（1986）。《新加坡金门会馆大厦落成暨成立壹一六周年纪念特刊》（页31）。新加坡：新加坡金门会馆。（索书号：RSING 369.25957 XJP）；江柏炜，2010，页79。
- 薛残白，1986，页29, 52；江柏炜，2010，页79-82, 200-201。
- Straits Settlements. *Government Gazette*. (1927, June 17), (G.N. 1110, p. 1176). Singapore: [s.n.].
- 笔者曾在新加坡国家档案馆的联机目录查找到一份记录，名为“Minutes of meetings of Kim Mui Fu Chi Miao (or Temple) Committee”。时间范围注明在1923至1955年之间，与国家图书馆所藏的年份不同。有兴趣的读者，请联系新加坡国家档案馆。
- 关于金门会馆在金门和新加坡公益事业的详细叙述，请见江柏炜的《星洲活民：新加坡金门人的宗乡会馆》和许振义主编的《金门先贤录·新加坡篇》。
- 江柏炜，2010，页110。
- 原籍金门的新加坡华人在各个领域大放异彩，贡献良多。这些领域包括政治、金融、文化、教育等等。个别名人传记收录在《金门先贤录·新加坡篇》，也可在本篇文章所列出的其他参考文献中读到。新加坡国家档案馆也保存了个别人士的口述历史访谈，其中有提及他们在金门会馆所担当的职务。
- 江柏炜，2010，页103-104。
- 薛残白主编，1986，页29, 52；江柏炜，2010，页79-82, 200-201；许振义主编（2015）。《金门先贤录·新加坡篇》（页222）。新加坡：新加坡金门会馆。（索书号：RCO 305.895105957 KIN）。
- 2019年，金门会馆发现一盒封尘已久的文件。经图书馆员整理，发现超过200份关于金门轮船公司和金门公司旅社部的内部文件。文件年份介于1922年至1930年之间，弥补了已知现存文件的缺稀年份。文件包括了收据、营业报告、结册簿、华侨银行有限公司的存款条目、对数单等等。多数为来往书信。书信内容是当时轮船公司与旅社部向董事部所发的报告或需商讨的事项。其中包括各类财务报告，还有有关船务、人事、贷款、救济、公司注册等事项。所发现的各类财务报告，将有助于学者们了解轮船公司和旅社部成立初期的财政情况。
- 江柏炜，2010，页83-84；许振义，2015，页187, 227；戚常卉（2001年4月）。〈国家、宗族与新加坡金门人的国家认同研究计划简介〉。载《东南亚区域研究通讯》第13期，页38。

# AN ARCHIVE OF SINGAPORE WEBSITES

## Preserving the Digital

The National Library's effort to archive Singapore-related websites creates a snapshot of the present that is valuable to both scholars and nostalgia buffs, says **Shereen Tay**.

As an adult, passing by one's old school usually brings back strong memories. School is where we made lifelong friends, where caring teachers inspired us and where shared experiences in the classroom and on the playing field brought everyone closer together. It is not surprising then that people are very sentimental about their old schools.

In Singapore, however, few things stand still. Sometimes, schools move to new, improved premises in a different location – to the dismay of alumni who are attached to the familiar old buildings. Some schools, on the other hand, have had to merge with others because of falling birth rates and the changing demographic profile of housing estates.

However, if you are an old boy or girl of now-defunct Anderson Junior College, Balestier Hill Primary School, First Toa Payoh Secondary School, Loyang Primary School or Telok Kurau Secondary School, not all is lost. You can still explore your alma mater's digital footprint on the National Library's Web Archive (WAS) portal. Currently, the portal has the websites of 43 defunct schools in its archive, which can be found on [eresources.nlb.gov.sg/webarchives](https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/webarchives).

**Shereen Tay** is an Associate Librarian with the National Library, Singapore. She is part of the team that oversees the statutory functions of the National Library Board, particularly web archiving.

These websites offer a peek into the 30,000-strong collection on the WAS portal. The National Library collects and archives Singapore-related websites because preserving the country's documentary heritage is part of its mission, and these days, documents are as much digital as they are pieces of paper.

To help people find information, the WAS portal employs full-text search capability that allows search by keyword or URL. In addition to this, the National Library has also organised some of these websites into themes that may be of interest to researchers or the public at large. These are found in the Special Collection section of the portal. Besides defunct schools, you can view past events like the 2015 Southeast Asian Games and ASEAN Para Games, the 2018 Trump-Kim Summit, National Day parades and even the Singapore Budget.

The National Library is constantly on the lookout for new collections to add to the portal. The most recent addition has to do with the COVID-19 pandemic in Singapore. The library has been documenting the impact of the pandemic here since January 2020 when the government set up the COVID-19 task force. Today, the portal is a trove of archived pages

and websites containing news, commentaries and stories pertaining to the pandemic.<sup>1</sup> These include the websites of the Ministry of Health as well as news providers such as Mothership.

### Collecting Today for Tomorrow

The National Library began collecting websites in 2006. In the early years, one obstacle was that the library needed the written consent of website owners, which slowed down the archival process considerably. A further problem was that only a small percentage of website owners gave the green light to go ahead with the archiving.

In order to create a more comprehensive database of websites, the National Library Board Act was amended in 2019 to allow the library to archive websites without the consent of their owners. This move was in line with similar measures adopted in countries such as the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, Japan and South Korea, among others. Globally, there is growing recognition that websites – as important records of a country's knowledge, history and memory – must be systematically archived and preserved for future generations.

Since then, the pace of web archiving in Singapore has picked up significantly, aided by a Memorandum of Understanding inked between the National Library

and the national registry of .sg websites, Singapore Network Information Centre (SGNIC). Under this agreement, SGNIC sends the library a yearly list of registered .sg websites. There are currently more than 180,000 websites using the .sg domain.

To date, the library has conducted two annual exercises to archive .sg websites. These include websites of associations, businesses and cultural institutions that reflect various aspects of Singaporean life, culture and heritage.

Apart from this, the library also selects websites with substantial heritage value to be archived quarterly. These

include government websites, those belonging to arts groups such as the Singapore Dance Theatre, websites on heritage and culture such as the Singapore Heritage Society, and informational websites on current affairs such as Rice Media, and lifestyle and interest groups such as ZeroWasteSG.

Websites on topics of national and social interests are also regularly selected by librarians so that the information can be preserved before the websites are taken down or their content is changed. Examples include websites for the National Day Parade, the 2020 General Election,

the Chingay Parade, the Singapore Writers Festival as well as websites detailing policies that affect the general population, and trending events that have generated substantial media coverage.

For copyright reasons, a majority of these websites can only be viewed from a designated computer terminal on level 11 of the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library at the National Library Building. Archived websites that are freely accessible over the internet on WAS include government websites and websites whose owners have given permission to do so. The library will progressively seek permission from more owners so that the information on the portal can be more easily accessible.

### From Websites to Social Media

To supplement its digital collection efforts, the library is now looking at preserving Singapore-related content on popular social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. However, collecting social media posts is not a straightforward matter. Besides the technical difficulties, there are also legal, copyright and privacy concerns.

The National Library is not alone in facing these challenges however, as many major cultural institutions abroad are also grappling with similar issues. The National Library has been communicating with its overseas counterparts to learn from their experience in collecting social media posts that is both respectful and within the confines of the law. The library is now conducting a feasibility study and learning from the experience of its counterpart in New Zealand.<sup>2</sup>

But ahead of this, the library has already begun archiving selective Twitter hashtags related to the COVID-19 pandemic in Singapore, such as #SGUnited, #CircuitBreaker and #StayHomeForSG.

By preserving websites and social media posts related to Singapore, the National Library is building a rich repository of primary materials that reflects life in the country today. In future, scholars and interested citizens will be able to turn to this invaluable resource to discover what Singapore used to look like in the early 21st century. ♦

(Below) Anderson Junior College (Archived on 4 April 2008)

Anderson Junior College (AJC) was one of the eight junior colleges that merged in 2019 due to declining intakes. The school combined with Serangoon Junior College to form Anderson Serangoon Junior College. The WAS portal has archived several iterations of AJC's website over the years. The earliest was archived in 2006.

(Bottom) Nature Society (Singapore) (Archived in March 2019)

The Nature Society is a non-governmental organisation advocating nature conservation in Singapore. Its website contains important information about the society – such as news, publications and reports, projects and activities of its special-interest groups – that is not easily available from other sources.



### NOTES

- 1 Access the special collection on the COVID-19 pandemic in Singapore at <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/webarchives/special-collection/detail/10252>.
- 2 National Library of New Zealand. (2019). *Is your Facebook account an archive of the future?* Retrieved from the National Library of New Zealand website.

## BOOK REVIEW

# The Year 1000

## When Explorers Connected the World and Globalization Began

Reviewed by Wan Wee Pin

With China and the United States locking horns over trade, an increasing tendency towards nativism around the world and a recognition that globalisation is not always a good thing, the publication of Valerie Hansen's *The Year 1000* is a timely one.

In this vivid and edifying account, the Yale history professor traces the roots of globalisation to the end of the first millennium. She contends that it was the trade networks and channels established during this period that set the stage for Europe's golden age of exploration five centuries later.

Given that a thousand years ago, as it is now, China was a major global power, a third of the book covers the Middle Kingdom's relationships with Central Asia, the Indian subcontinent as well as Southeast Asia.

Long before Columbus, the trade routes that connected the southern ports in China to the Persian Gulf served as the world's busiest superhighways for many centuries. The routes lost their importance over time when traders in the Middle East switched to exporting cheaper and better aromatic products from Southeast Asia

Wan Wee Pin is Programme Director, National Reading Movement, National Library Board. Valerie Hansen's *The Year 1000* is available for reference at the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library, and for loan at selected public libraries (Call nos.: R909.1 HAN; 909.1 HAN) and on Overdrive (nlb.overdrive.com).

instead. This shift in sourcing patterns had a tremendous impact on the indigenous societies in this region as they transformed from hunter-gatherers to agriculturalists.

This book is not just about China of course. Hansen has written a riveting story highlighting the changes taking place in other parts of the world during the same period: from Viking voyages to North America to the movement of goods and information between the Mayan city of Chichén Itzá and Chaco Canyon in present-day New Mexico. Hansen never allows her account to be bogged down by too much detail. Her scholarship and research shine through in vignettes and accounts that delight as well as inform.

In one chapter, she recounts how the Rus, a band of fur and slave traders of Swedish origin, helped to found the domains that still commemorate their name (Russia). Another nugget of information is the etymology of the word "slave" which is derived from the Slavs, a people who inhabited a large part of Eastern Europe and who were trafficked as the original human cargo, predating the African slave trade.

Particularly fascinating is the account of how representatives from the major religions at the time – Judaism, Islam, Latin-rite Christianity (centred in Rome) and Eastern-rite Christianity (based in Constantinople) – attempted to convert the Rus leader, Prince Vladimir, a follower of Slavic paganism (he eventually converted to Eastern-rite Christianity in 988). Hansen cites this as an example of the enormous impact religion had on global affairs during that period. It is her ability to toggle between the big picture and small details – while retaining a breezy

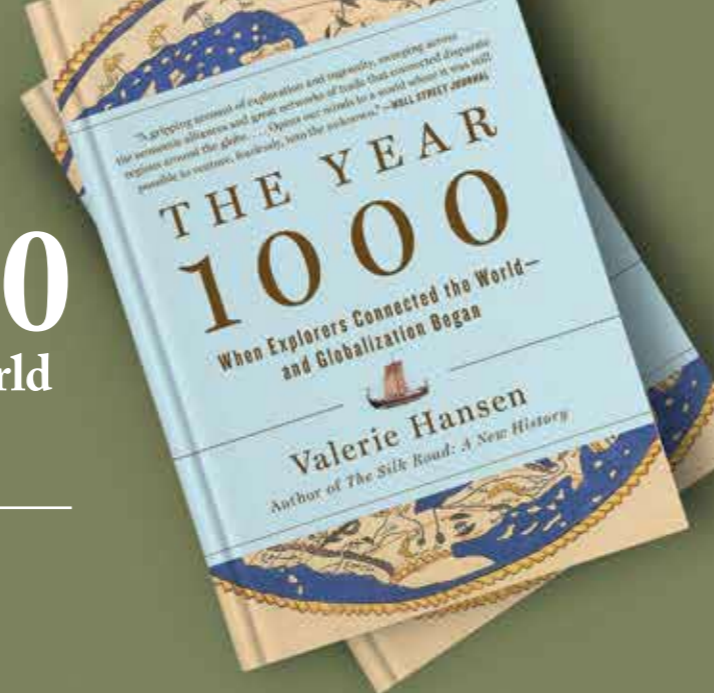
writing style – that makes this book such a pleasure to read.

What lessons can we draw from Hansen's account? The words of philosopher and novelist George Santayana – "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it" – come to mind. Hansen acknowledges that as early as the year 1000, globalisation resulted in winners and losers, citing the Guangzhou Massacre (878–79),<sup>1</sup> the massacre in Cairo (996)<sup>2</sup> and the Massacre of the Latins (1182).<sup>3</sup> In each instance, the root causes were similar: "The locals resented the wealth of the foreign expats and believed that the outsiders had profited at their expense."

Hansen says the solution lies in how we respond to these shifts in society. History has shown that increased contact with the external world will bring about new opportunities; what is needed is to be prepared for the unfamiliar, to learn from the Other and to treat the challenges as incentives to improve. Hansen's caution that "(t)hose who remained open to the unfamiliar did much better than those who rejected anything new" is sound advice that should be heeded as we navigate the challenges of an increasingly uncertain world.

## NOTES

- 1 The Guangzhou Massacre saw the slaying of the inhabitants of Guangzhou in 878–79 by the rebel army of Huang Chao, who attempted to overthrow the Tang dynasty. Most of the victims were wealthy foreign merchants, mainly Arabs and Persians.
- 2 In 996, merchants from Amalfi, a region in what is now Italy, were accused of starting a fire that destroyed an arsenal in Cairo. In retaliation, the people from Amalfi were killed and their churches ransacked.
- 3 The Massacre of the Latins refers to the killing of the Roman Catholic (called "Latin") inhabitants of Constantinople, the first city of the Byzantine Empire. The Byzantines resented the Latins, who were mainly from regions of what is now Italy. In 1182, a mob embarked on a brutal killing spree.



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