

# biblioasia

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Cantonese  
black-and-white

*Amahs*  
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**CULTURE &  
COMMUNITIES**

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## Director's Note

"A nation's culture resides in the hearts and in the soul of its people", said the great Mahatma Gandhi, who led India's nationalist movement against British colonial rule.

Gandhi's wise words certainly ring true of Singapore, whose multi-ethnic and multicultural society is the product of colonialism as well as successive waves of immigration that began in the early 19th century. These immigrants brought with them their culture, traditions and customs along with qualities such as resilience, thrift, kinship and entrepreneurship, which together have left behind an indelible stamp on Singapore society.

This issue of *BiblioAsia* on "Culture & Communities" highlights the contributions of some of Singapore's early migrants: Cantonese *amahs* from Guangdong province, Chettiar from Tamil Nadu, Armenians of Persian stock, and Scots from where else but Scotland.

The cover story by Janice Loo pays tribute to the once ubiquitous black-and-white *amah* – who was highly valued for her superior domestic skills – from China's Pearl River Delta region, while Peter Lee pays homage to Ah Sim, the *amah* who tenderly raised him from child to adulthood.

The strong kinship ties shared by these unmarried domestic servants were also evident among the Chettiar from Chettinad in Tamil Nadu. Marcus Ng writes about this close-knit community who once ran a thriving moneylending business at Market Street, Singapore's first banks, as it were.

The Scots have similarly left their imprint here in landmarks and streets named after Scotsmen, such as John Crawfurd, John Anderson, James MacRitchie and Robert Fullerton. Graham Berry remembers the legacy of his fellow Scots in an excerpt from his book, *From Kilts to Sarongs: Scottish Pioneers of Singapore*.

In the 1830s, a small but thriving Armenian community in Singapore led to the construction of the Armenian Church, which is today a national monument and tourist icon. Unfortunately, its counterpart in Penang – which was consecrated earlier in 1824 – no longer exists, as Nadia Wright tells us.

We also highlight the creative arts of the Peranakan and Malay communities in this issue. Cheah Hwei-Fen presents a small selection of exquisite Peranakan beadwork inspired by print media, while Mazelan Anuar takes us back to the advent of Malay printing in late 19th-century Singapore. Don't miss the opportunity of seeing some of these rare printed works on display at the "Tales of the Malay World: Manuscripts and Early Books" exhibition on level 10 of the National Library Building.

Other essays in this issue include a short history of the nationalisation of Singapore's bus industry in the 1970s by Lee Meiyu; a thoughtful reflection on Bras Basah Road and its environs by Yu-Mei Balasingamchow; and Kevin Khoo's explanation on the symbolism behind the colonial-era Third Charter of Justice document.

Last but not least are three highlights from the National Library's collections: Vicky Gao traces the history of Traditional Chinese Medicine in Singapore; Ong Eng Chuan previews a collection of postcards written by the Peranakan luminary Song Ong Siang (and his wife) during their European holiday in the 1920s; and Zoe Yeo traces the evolution of Singaporean fashion through related publications from the Legal Deposit Collection.

We hope you enjoy reading this edition of *BiblioAsia*.

### Mrs Wai Yin Pryke

Director  
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**On the cover:**  
Image taken from a black-and-white postcard entitled "Chinese women to the market, Singapore" c. 1938. The women are likely *amahs*, or Cantonese domestic servants, dressed in their signature black trousers paired with white blouses, and hair typically coiled up into a bun or worn as a single long plait.  
Note: the postcard image has been digitally coloured and enhanced for this cover illustration. *From an original postcard courtesy of Cheah Jin Seng.*

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# A Lifetime OF Labour

## CANTONESE AMAHS IN SINGAPORE

The black-and-white *amah*, renowned for her domestic skills, has left a mark on history in more ways than one, as **Janice Loo** tells us.



Pearl River Delta

**Janice Loo** is an Associate Librarian with the National Library, Singapore. Her responsibilities include collection management and content development as well as research and reference assistance on topics relating to Singapore and Southeast Asia.

Hair coiled up in an elegant bun or worn in a single plait down the back, a white blouse paired with ankle-length black trousers, and black slippers – this was the quintessential look of the *amah*, or Chinese female domestic servant, from bygone days.<sup>1</sup>

Apart from their iconic black-and-white *samfu* attire, *amahs* have earned a place in popular memory for their strong work ethic and steadfast loyalty. Many were former silk production workers from the Pearl River Delta of Guangdong province in China.<sup>2</sup> The majority never married and were part of an anti-marriage tradition unique to the silk-producing areas of the region, particularly the dis-

trict of Shunde, where the phenomenon originated.<sup>3</sup>

Seeking a better life, these women came to this part of the world in the 1930s to work in the homes of wealthy families, eventually dominating the field of paid domestic service well into the 1960s and 70s.<sup>4</sup> At a time when women in Chinese society were bound by traditional Confucian values to be “dutiful wives and virtuous mothers” (贤妻良母, *xian qi liang mu*), Cantonese *amahs* broke the mould by carving an independent livelihood away from home and determining their own destiny.

### Daughters of the Delta

Compared with other parts of China where the birth of a girl would be greeted with dismay – female infanticide was tragically common then – women in the Pearl River Delta were valued by their families for their ability to contribute to the household income.<sup>5</sup> In the early 1900s, the Pearl River Delta was a major centre for silk production, especially in Shunde. By 1925, about 70 percent of the land there and 80 percent of its population were devoted to the cultivation of silkworms (or sericulture).<sup>6</sup> Women made up a substantial proportion of the labour force engaged in the silk cottage industry.<sup>7</sup>

**(Facing page)** An *amah* in her black-and-white *samfu* attire cooking on a gas stove, 1950. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.  
**(Below)** A scene depicting silk production in 17th-century China. By the early 1900s, the Pearl River Delta had become a major production centre for silk. Photo by Peter Horree/Alamy Stock Photo.



The Pearl River Delta region was also conducive for a form of agriculture that combined fish breeding with mulberry cultivation. Mulberry trees were important because their leaves were fed to the silkworm larvae, whose excrement in turn became food for the fishes. The region's balmy tropical climate spurred the rapid growth of mulberry trees such that up to seven broods of silkworms could be produced annually, surpassing the norm of two broods a year in other silk-producing areas of China.<sup>8</sup>

There was a division of labour between the sexes across the different stages of silk production. Men handled the heavier aspects of farm work which, along with fish rearing, included the transport and marketing of mulberry leaves, silkworm eggs and cocoons. Women harvested the mulberry leaves, raised silkworms, and produced silk threads by soaking the cocoons in hot water to loosen the fibres before reeling or spinning them into strands.<sup>9</sup> In some locales, men also helped to weave the silk threads into cloth; such work was an important source of income for many families.<sup>10</sup>

Typically, there were more unmarried women engaged in the silk cottage industry than married ones. With their heavy domestic responsibilities, married women were less likely to participate in sericulture, particularly the stage where silkworm eggs were hatching and turning into larvae, because of the taboo associated with notions about the impurity of the female body during pregnancy and childbirth. In Shunde, married women were also excluded from the thread-loosening process as the constant association with water was believed to affect fertility. Therefore, unmarried women had a higher economic value to their families, and some parents found it more worthwhile to keep a daughter at home for as long as she wished than to marry her off and forgo a key source of income.<sup>11</sup>

Industrialisation changed the face of silk production and strengthened the impetus for women to remain single. Factories, or factories where silk is reeled, were set up and these employed an all-female workforce as women were found to be more careful when handling silkworm cocoons and processing them into silk threads. Younger women were also preferred for their smooth hands, nimble fingers and good eyesight that made for skilful work. On top of these physical traits, single or married but childless women were favoured as they were perceived to be less encumbered by family commitments that could interfere with their ability to work.<sup>12</sup>

As more women migrated to the towns to work in industrial establishments, sericulture in the villages declined as a result of the dwindling labour pool. Mechanisation also obviated the need for male labour in silk production and, with fewer jobs available at home, large numbers of men began to seek employment outside of China, in places such as Singapore, Malaya and Hong Kong. As a result of this exodus, women became the main providers for their families and wielded greater influence over domestic affairs than ever before.<sup>13</sup>

In her study of marriage resistance in rural Guangdong, anthropologist Marjorie Topley identified the local economic system as a key factor behind the growth of the anti-marriage practice because it gave single women the means to support themselves through paid work outside of the home. With economic self-sufficiency, these women began to question marriage and childbearing as their accepted fate.<sup>14</sup>



### An Independent Streak

Writing in the 1930s, American journalist Agnes Smedley observed that "thousands of peasant homes depend for a large part of their livelihood upon the modest earnings of a wife or daughter and this important productive role played by women has struck a serious blow at the old idea of the inferiority of women." She further noted that the silk workers, conscious of their own worth, carried themselves with a "dignified and independent air".<sup>15</sup> Yet, this outlook did not stem from changes in the local economic climate alone, but was rooted in long-standing socio-cultural practices that shaped the women's resistance towards marriage.

One unique feature of the Pearl River Delta region was the establishment of "girls' houses" (女仔屋, *nǚ zai wū*) in villages. These functioned as a place for adolescent girls from the same village to gather, socialise and learn from one another. They worked during the day and would meet at the girls' house in the evenings to chat, tell stories, play games and sing ballads. It was common to see girls spending their nights at the house, partly to escape the cramped living conditions and lack of privacy in their own homes. These houses facilitated the informal education and interaction of the girls: older girls would instruct the younger ones in sewing, embroidery, reading, writing, social etiquette as well as religious rites and customs. Girls from the same house formed strong bonds from the experience and would pledge to treat each other like "sisters" (姐妹, *jie mei*).<sup>16</sup>

The girls' house also played an instrumental role in the shaping of attitudes against marriage among the women of the Pearl River Delta. Married life, particularly its trials and tribulations, was a topic of discussion among the girls when they reached marriageable age. From having to obey one's husband and in-laws to the obligatory duty of producing many offspring, especially sons, it was no surprise that many young women came to fear and resent the prospect of being a wife and mother. Marriage and motherhood meant

**(Top)** A close-up of a bun that is secured with a hairnet and pin. *Kouo Shang-Wei Collection (郭尚慰收集). Family of Kouo Shang-Wei and National Library Board, Singapore.*

**(Left)** Letter writers such as this man were once a common sight along "five-foot ways" in Chinatown. They provided an indispensable service in helping illiterate amahs communicate with their families back home. *Kouo Shang-Wei Collection (郭尚慰收集). Family of Kouo Shang-Wei and National Library Board, Singapore.*

a severe curtailment of their freedom and independence. The improved economic position of unmarried women further strengthened such sentiments, giving rise to unique marriage-resistance practices, of which sworn spinsterhood was one.<sup>17</sup>

In fact there was a special rite that initiated one into spinsterhood. A woman became a sworn spinster through an elaborate ceremony comprising a hairdressing ritual, a vow of celibacy, and worship of domestic gods and ancestors. A sworn spinster then became known as "a woman who combed her own hair up" (自梳女, *zi shu nǚ*), in reference to the hairdressing ritual *sor hei* (梳起, *shu qi*; which literally means "comb up") during which her hair would be combed into a bun at the back of her head to symbolise the attainment of social maturity. This ritual was akin to the one traditionally performed to mark a girl's transition into adulthood upon marriage. Similar to a wedding, the ceremony was an occasion to be celebrated and would be held on an auspicious day and conclude with a banquet for family, friends and fellow "sisters".<sup>18</sup>

A sworn spinster was treated like a married daughter and could no longer live with her family or count on parental support. She was forbidden from returning to her village even in old age because of the belief that her death at home would bring misfortune to the family. Spinsters who moved to larger villages and towns for employment typically shared a rented room with other "sisters". When they grew too old to work, those with the financial means would pay to take up residence in an established "spinsters' house" (姑婆屋, *gu po wū*) – the equivalent of a girls' house for older, unmarried females – or combine resources with their "sisters" to buy or build one. Another option was retirement in a "vegetarian hall" (斋堂, *zhai tang*), which was by and large similar to a spinsters' house except for the observance of a vegetarian diet and heavier emphasis on religious activities.<sup>19</sup>

Assuming the status of a sworn spinster represented the ultimate strategy by a woman to remain single and pursue an independent life that was socially acceptable and even admired in this part of China. Her decision to remain chaste, to emigrate for employment and to remit part of her wages home to support her family was seen as an honourable sacrifice.<sup>20</sup>

### Becoming an Amah

The decline of the silk industry in the 1930s prompted thousands of Cantonese



An amah with her employer's children, 1942. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

women to leave the Pearl River Delta in search of employment away from home. Meanwhile, as a result of the Great Depression, immigration restrictions were enforced to control the supply of Chinese male labour in Singapore and Malaya. The Aliens Ordinance 1933 enabled the government to adjust the monthly quota of Chinese male immigrants as and when necessary according to the political, social and economic needs of the colony. The immediate effect of the quota – initially set at 1,000 monthly – was to drive up the cost of passage for Chinese males due to stiff competition for limited tickets.<sup>21</sup>

Since the quota did not apply to Chinese females, shiploads of Cantonese women came to work and support their families in place of their menfolk. Enterprising ticket brokers at the ports in China would sell a ticket for a male passenger only if three to four tickets for female passengers were purchased along with it. As a result, this led to a net increase of over 190,000 Chinese female immigrants to Singapore and Malaya between 1934 and 1938.<sup>22</sup> This state of affairs continued until May 1938, when a monthly quota of 500 was imposed on women.

There was a wider range of employment opportunities available in Malaya for these women, who found work in agriculture, tin mining and rubber-tapping, especially in the states of Perak and Selangor. However, in urban

areas like Singapore and other parts of Malaya such as Penang, Ipoh and Kuala Lumpur, the majority worked as domestic servants for affluent Chinese and European households.<sup>23</sup> Domestic service was a popular and practical choice as employment was easy to find and the work was seen as respectable and neither too difficult nor unfamiliar.<sup>24</sup> Prior to the 1930s, paid domestic work was mainly carried out by Hainanese men called houseboys. These men were displaced by the arrival of the amah, whose subsequent domination of the industry effectively cemented the association between domestic service and women's work.<sup>25</sup>

The pattern of social affiliation and mutual assistance organised along the lines of sisterhood and territorial origins in China was replicated in Singapore and Malaya. *Amahs* from the same village or district banded to form associations known as *kongsi* (公司). They pooled their wages to rent accommodations, known as *kongsi fong* (公司房), which ranged in size from a cubicle to a shophouse with a number of rooms, and in membership from two to as many as 50 women. Some *kongsi fong* functioned as a place for sleeping and storage of personal belongings, while others were elaborate clubhouses with benefit schemes and social activities for members. A well-organised *kongsi fong* also served as a recruitment agency and trade guild

that helped to connect members with prospective employers as well as to help them negotiate for better employment terms.<sup>26</sup>

A woman intending to emigrate would usually engage the services of a *sui haak* (水客, *shui ke*; literally “water guest”), a middleman from the same district or village who, for an agreed fee, would make the necessary travel arrangements and provide advice on all matters relating to immigration and employment in the foreign land.<sup>27</sup>

Upon arrival at her destination, the newcomer would put up in the home of a friend or relative, or pay a small fee to lodge at a *kongsi fong* until she found work – most likely through recommendation by a fellow *amah*. At the same time, it was not unusual for employers needing a servant to enquire directly at the *kongsi fong*, where a list of the jobs available would be displayed on a board. If several women were keen on the same position,

the unwritten rule was to give priority to the one who had been unemployed the longest to be interviewed first.<sup>28</sup>

### A Lifetime of Labour and Love

Many *amahs* started out working for less affluent households as an “all-purpose servant”, or *yat keok tek* (in Cantonese, literally “one-leg-kick”), who managed all domestic tasks single-handedly. More well-to-do families could afford to hire a servant for each area of domestic activity – cooking, cleaning, childcare and general housekeeping – which was usually the case in European households. Working for an expatriate family had its perks in terms of higher wages, better accommodations, well-defined hours and a fixed job scope.<sup>29</sup>

Those working for European employers could expect to earn about twice as much compared with their counterparts employed by local families. However,

*amahs* working in European households were expected to take care of their own meals and pay for this expense from their own purses. Another drawback was having to deal with a foreign culture and unfamiliar lifestyle. Tang Ah Thye, a former *amah* said, “I didn’t like the idea of working for Europeans. You’d have to bring your pots and pans to do your own cooking. Also rice, oil, etc. It’s like a major move. Also, I didn’t understand their language. I just didn’t like working for them in spite of higher salaries.”<sup>30</sup>

The most pressing concerns for an *amah* starting a new job were the pay, nature of work, size of the family, type of dwelling and their accommodations. As she gained experience and became familiar with the work, the ability to get along with her employer and family became more important since the work itself was more or less the same everywhere.<sup>31</sup>

Although the average employment term for an *amah* was 10 years, there were some who grew close to the families they served and worked for them until retirement, at around 60 years of age.<sup>32</sup> Families were, likewise, fond of their *amahs* too. When expatriate housewife Marjorie Monks was interviewed by *The Straits Times* in 1957, she had this to say about her *amah*: “She has a loving loyalty. The children love her and you have only to say that Ah Loke is returning to Singapore to bring streams of tears into the house.” Four years earlier, the Monks and their three children had returned to England, taking Ah Loke with them. When Ah Loke was later offered a six-month paid leave while working in England, she put it off, saying, “Maybe next year if children no cry so much when I go.”<sup>33</sup>

*Amahs* who took care of children would dote on them like their own. Many of those who had been raised by *amahs* continue to regard them with great affection. Peranakan curator Peter Lee, for instance, recalls his *amah* Yip Ching Sim with fondness (see text box opposite).

When it came to their kin in China, *amahs* fulfilled their filial duties through remittances, letters and occasional visits. It was estimated that up to 70 percent of their wages was saved or remitted. *Amahs* were known for being frugal when it came to their own expenses but generous to their close friends and relatives, especially

An *amah* entering a *kongsi fong*, 1962. *Amahs* pooled their wages to rent accommodations, known as *kongsi fong* (公司房), which ranged in size from a cubicle to a shophouse with a number of rooms. *Kongsi fong* were typically located in tenement blocks in Chinatown. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



### MY LIFE WITH AH SIM

Ah Sim, or Yip Ching Sim, was my *amah*. Every morning, at the break of dawn, she would slip quietly into the bedroom I shared with my brothers and rearrange our cotton blankets, making sure we were all properly covered. As silent as she tried to be, the jarring stream of light from the gap in between the door would wake me up, and through partially opened eyes, I would glimpse her approaching silhouette. I would shut my eyes tight and wait for that reassuring moment when I could feel the crumpled blanket being gently rearranged over my body.

I looked forward to that moment every day.

The first morning Ah Sim did not appear led to a wave of panic and a flood of tears, until another household helper, Siew Chan, a young Malaysian girl, told us that Ah Sim was merely feeling unwell. The next day the morning routine continued, much to my relief. Ah Sim must have been in her late 50s at that time, which to a child, seemed positively ancient. The reality is that Ah Sim lived to 106 years, passing away on 24 July 2017.

### Canter to Singapore

Yip Ching Sim (叶静婵) was born in the Pun-yue (番禹, Panyu) district of Canton in 1911. Ah Sim's parents were poor farmers, but she abhorred the farming life and when she was in her late teens, tagged along with her paternal aunt to Singapore to become an *amah*, a domestic servant.

Ah Sim always kept an old album of photos, and I remember her showing me an image taken when she arrived in Singapore in the late 1920s: her portly, middle-aged aunt dressed in black blouse and trousers, and next to her, attired in similar fashion, a gaunt and dishevelled young girl, looking uncertain and afraid. Photographs of the same girl taken in the 1930s and 1940s reveal a different person: a decidedly more confident woman, with hair neatly combed back into a long ponytail.

Ah Sim worked for several families before joining mine in 1958 as our cook. Just three years earlier, my father, Lee Kip Lee, a sixth-generation Peranakan working for the family business, had married my mother, a young nurse who was herself half-Peranakan and half-Cantonese. My parents had just moved into a new house in Bukit Timah, a gift from my paternal grandmother. At that time, we did not need a nanny. My eldest

brother Dick who was barely two years old, was the only child then, and he was looked after by a grandaunt we all called Nenek (“grandmother” in Malay).

The rest of the children in the Lee household followed in quick succession and as it became increasingly difficult for my mother and Nenek to look after the brood, Ah Sim was asked to look after me and my younger brother Andrew. Not surprisingly, Dick’s first language – thanks to Nenek’s influence – was Baba Malay, while Andrew’s and mine was Cantonese. We spoke a multicultural melange of Baba Malay, Cantonese and English at home, and somehow we all understood each other.

Parenting in the 1960s was not like it is today, and in our family it can best be summed up as benign neglect. Everyone had their basic needs taken care of, and children were left to play and study together; as long as your school report card wasn’t a sea of red ink, you were considered a good child. My childhood was filled with fun and laughter, and the company of a motley rabble of siblings, cousins and the children of my parents’ friends. My parents created a liberal and loving domestic environment.

The author, Peter Lee, with his beloved Ah Sim. This photograph was taken while on holiday in Cameron Highlands, Malaysia, in 1969. Courtesy of Peter Lee.



But, it was Ah Sim who bathed, clothed and fed me and Andrew – and was there whenever she was needed.

### Growing Up with Ah Sim

Ah Sim was an obsessively tidy person, and I was drawn to spending time with her in the servant’s quarters, observing her daily rituals with fascination. She would wash her hair in an enamel basin filled with what appeared to be preserved citrus fruit. Dressing her hair in a neat bun was another fastidious exercise: she would tie cotton tape around her head to hold the hair in place while tugging and combing her tresses before lacquering it with a special oil.

Ah Sim hand-sewed all her own clothes, including the knotted buttons she made for her blouses. On the first and 15th day of each lunar month she would prepare her own vegetarian meal, as was common among *amahs* as a form of religious devotion. The meal was spartan, comprising fried vegetables, a dish of roasted peanuts drizzled with thick soya sauce, and some boiled rice.



# MICRO INDIA

## THE CHETTIARS OF MARKET STREET

Market Street, in the heart of the business district, is where Indian moneylenders ran a thriving trade during the colonial era. **Marcus Ng** traces the imprint left by the Chettiar.



**Marcus Ng** is a freelance writer, editor and curator interested in biodiversity, ethnobiology and the intersection between natural and human histories. His work includes the book *Habitats in Harmony: The Story of Semakau Landfill* (2009 and 2012), and two exhibitions at the National Museum of Singapore: "Balik Pulau: Stories from Singapore's Islands" and "Danger and Desire".

floor by low desks, bent over and writing on open ledgers with total concentration," recounts Subbiah.

These men were Chettiar from Chettinad in India's Tamil Nadu state, a caste of Tamil moneylenders (and devotees of Lord Siva<sup>6</sup>) who served as vital links in the entrepreneurial food chain in times past when capital and credit were scarce, and big international banks<sup>7</sup> catered largely to commercial trading houses – having little time for small local businessmen with neither capital nor collateral.

This was a niche in Singapore's financial sector that was begging to be filled, and the Chettiar did just so for a century-and-a-half, providing sundry merchants and middlemen with the funds they needed to fuel the port's early growth as a pitstop in the opium route between the Bay of Bengal and the South China Sea, and later as a global emporium for tin, rubber and other tropical commodities.<sup>8</sup>

Though still vivid in Subbiah's memory, these *kittangi*, along with an entire community of South Asian businesses centred around Market Street, vanished in 1977 when the entire quarter was redeveloped into a multi-storey complex named after the Golden Shoe – the old, and no doubt propitious, label for Singapore's financial district.<sup>9</sup> Today, the only vestige of old Market Street, which served as the main artery of Micro India (a moniker coined by Subbiah as a nod to Serangoon Road's "Little India"), is Masjid Moulana Mohamed Ali, a mosque of Indian Muslim origin in the basement of UOB Plaza. The muezzin no longer calls at prayer time, but a bargain struck with the bankers has ensured that a room for prayer remains in a zone dedicated to worldly gains.<sup>10</sup>

**A**s a boy, Lakshmanan Subbiah, a fourth-generation Chettiar, recalls walking down a street in the heart of the city near Raffles Place, a stroll that brought him past a mosque, where the cry of the muezzin<sup>1</sup> would herald a throng of men in sarongs and skullcaps rushing to prayer.<sup>2</sup> At the end of the road, towards the river, entrenched in the corner of a stately colonial building,<sup>3</sup> moneychangers could be heard hollering, "US dollars, pounds, US dollars..."

As Subbiah forded a small crossing, the scene changed to rows of shophouses – not the familiar coffeeshops, traditional medicine halls and clan associations of Telok Ayer,<sup>4</sup> but a different blend of sights, smells and sounds: the sharp fragrance of cinnamon and cardamom; the pungent bite of garlic and onions; aisles of silk *sarees* spilling onto the "five-foot way"; curries and chutneys splashed across banana leaves; and the dust of urban mills as grains, grams<sup>5</sup> and raw spices were ground into flour, pastes and finer mixtures.

Amid these louder establishments were half a dozen more austere premises: communal offices called *kittangi* (derived from "warehouse" in Tamil), which served as both bank and bunk for the men who lived and worked in them. "There, you would see some shaven Indian men, sitting on the

**(Facing page)** An 1890s photograph taken by G.R Lambert of Market Street, which took its name from the nearby Telok Ayer Market. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the street was well known for its community of Chettiar, who ran their moneylending business in *kittangi* – shophouses which served as both their offices and lodgings. *Lee Kip Lin Collection. Lee Kip Lin and National Library Board, Singapore.*

**(Right)** A studio shot of R.M. V. Supramaniam, great-grandfather of Lakshmanan Subbiah, 1920. *Nachiappa Chettiar collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*





Chettiar legal documents provide a glimpse into the business practices of the Chettiar. Clockwise from left: A promissory note, bearing interest at 24 percent per annum, to be paid in equal monthly instalments; failure to pay any one instalment would render the entire sum due and payable. [Title ID: 040000500]; affidavit by the plaintiff in a suit where the defendant had been appointed to manage the plaintiff's firm but failed to render the accounts [Title ID: 170005179]; and a promissory note [partially hidden] bearing interest at 24 percent per annum [Title ID: 040000506]. *Koh Seow Chuan Collection, National Library, Singapore.*

### From Madras to Market Street

Market Street first appeared in a town plan by Lieutenant Philip Jackson published in 1828, which shows the road ending at the original Telok Ayer Market facing Telok Ayer Bay.<sup>11</sup> In 1894, due to reclamation works that pushed the shoreline farther, the market (better known as Lau Pa Sat today) was relocated to its present site.<sup>12</sup> Locals, however, dubbed this thoroughfare *Chetty theruvu* or "Chetties' Street" after the Chettiar who, along with other South Asian migrants, had established one of modern Singapore's first Indian settlements here by the 1820s.<sup>13</sup> The road was also known as *Tiong koi* ("Central Street") or *Lau pa sat khau* ("Old market mouth") to the Hokkiens, who maintained a long presence in the area as importer-exporters and commission agents.<sup>14</sup>

By Subbiah's reckoning, Market Street had, in its heyday, as many as

seven *kittangi*, and housed some 300 to 400 Chettiar firms. As recently as the 1970s, when the Chettiar were already losing ground to homegrown banks, Market Street still had six *kittangi* as well as 30 to 40 Indian-owned businesses. Nearly 500 people (about half of whom were Chettiar) called the area home, for the *kittangi* doubled as dorms. Each proprietor leased a few square feet of floor space along a narrow hallway, just enough to store a cupboard, a safe and a chest that also served as a table where the Chettiar met customers and balanced his books. Come evening, a cook dished out meals from a kitchen at the rear, and before turning in, the bankers rolled out mattresses for a spartan sleep-in before the next trading day.

In Chettinad, the Chettiar are known as the Nattukottai Chettiar ("people with palatial houses in the countryside"). The word Chettiar is derived from *chetty*, the Tamil translation of *shreshti*, the

Sanskrit word for "merchant". Though few families in Chettinad today have the means to maintain their mansions, many of these dwellings still survive in inland villages, a geographical anomaly Subbiah traces to a likely tsunami that destroyed the Chettiar's original maritime bases some 700 years ago, leading the community to avoid coastal settlements thereafter. Oral traditions suggest that Chettiar were already trading with Southeast Asia some 2,000 years ago.<sup>15</sup> Much later, when the British established a foothold in Madras (now Chennai) in 1644, they found willing and able business partners in the Chettiar, who followed in the wake of the East India Company as ports were established in Ceylon, Calcutta, Penang, Melaka, Singapore, Burma, Vietnam and Medan.<sup>16</sup>

In the wild west economic environment of early Singapore, when few European banks were willing to risk malaria and pirates to set up shop at Commercial Square (now Raffles Place),

the Chettiar offered much-needed liquidity to local merchants, opium traders, miners, planters, contractors and petty traders. Even civil servants and Malay royalty were known to have sought out the *kittangi* in order to finance their big-ticket purchases.<sup>17</sup>

Thanks to their long-standing commercial ties with the British in India, the Chettiar were among the few non-Europeans with sufficient clout to obtain credit at favourable rates from European financial establishments. "They would borrow the money, come to Market Street and give it out as small loans," explains Subbiah, who grew up in one of Market Street's *kittangi* and now works as a financial controller in a multinational firm. Little or no collateral was sought, so interest rates of 24 to 36 percent (as high as 48 percent during World War II) were charged, and the Chettiar took pains to personally appraise each potential borrower and his credit-worthiness.

"It was a simple, non-bureaucratic process," recalls Subbiah. Visiting a *kittangi*, where one was greeted and served by a (usually) shirtless man in a white *dhoti* and *vibuthi*-smeared forehead<sup>18</sup> who was conversant in Tamil and Malay, was no doubt a far less intimidating, and likely more fruitful, experience for the average *towkay* than having to brave the stiff regard of colonial banks. Indeed, until the 1970s, it was said that "many

a successful Chinese *towkay* began his climb on a loan from a Chettiar".<sup>19</sup>

Throughout the 19th century and much of the early 20th, Chettiar across Southeast Asia acted as full service bankers, providing liquidity in the form of working capital loans, syndicated loans, investment capital and demand drafts. These injections of capital helped to drive trade wherever they settled: coconut, rubber, coffee and tea in Ceylon; rice, gems and teak in Burma; tin, rubber and rice in Malaya; rice in Vietnam; and sugar in South Africa and Mauritius.

### The Rise and Decline of the Chettiar

As a community, the Chettiar punched far above their demographic weight. In the 1920s, the Chettiar were reported to have amassed about 1.2 billion rupees in wealth, despite numbering no more than 30,000 worldwide. There were never sizable communities of Chettiar at any one Asian outpost; the typical Chettiar undertook a series of three-year sojourns in a foreign port before returning to his ancestral village with the funds to build a vast mansion for his extended family and assume the role of patron of culture and the culinary arts. (The rich Chettinad food of Tamil Nadu, notes Subbiah, gained its fame from the patronage of Chettiar.) The Chettiar tour of duty was largely the province of bachelors; young boys often accompanied their elders as

apprentices, and only after the 1950s did Chettiar womenfolk join their male kin in the Malay Peninsula.<sup>20</sup>

The close-knit, almost insular, nature of overseas Chettiar communities, a source of mutual strength in colonial times, was to prove a liability in the mid-20th century, when the Great Depression and a growing wave of nationalism turned the tide against these expatriate bankers. "They were making huge amounts of profit and sending it all back to India," observes Subbiah. "They didn't invest anything locally because they were sojourners."

Never populous nor politically powerful – but closely associated with British overlords, and perceived as Shylocks<sup>21</sup> who drained economies of their surpluses – the Chettiar became easy targets in the post-war years. When boom turned to sustained bust, widespread defaults by clients and the consequent takeover of borrowers' assets rewarded the Chettiar with vast tracts of land and property across Southeast Asia. In Lower Burma, Chettiar were reported to have controlled between a quarter to nearly half of all productive land in 1937.<sup>22</sup> When the nationalists assumed power, first in Rangoon, then in Colombo, Saigon and Jakarta, the Chettiar had their possessions nationalised and were given marching orders. "Some walked back across the border", says Subbiah of this enforced exodus.

**(Below)** A 1960 photo of three Chettiar inside a *kittangi* at 49 Market Street. *Nachiappa Chettiar Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

**(Right)** An undated image of a bare-chested Chettiar moneylender with holy ash smeared across his forehead (likely from the 1950s or 60s). He is pictured at his work desk. *Sharon Siddique Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*



Only in Malaya did the Chettiaras emerge relatively unscathed. But even in Singapore, the tea leaves bode ill as the island embarked on a post-colonial trajectory. From the 1950s, greater regulation of banks and moneylenders reduced official interest rates to unprofitable margins, although some borrowers sweetened the deal with off-the-record mark-ups. As Singapore prepared to enter an era of internal self-rule in 1959, there were fears of a looming socialist regime similar to those in Indochina and Burma.<sup>23</sup> Many Chettiaras called in their options, and sold their properties and other assets before returning to India for good. For those who remained and found a nation that veered neither left nor right along the ideological scale, the advent of easy credit and new domestic players in the 1970s chipped away at their historical dominance as bankers to small-to-medium enterprises.<sup>24</sup>

By the mid-1970s, the Chettiaras found themselves in an unusual position. Although their business was dwindling, they still owned much land and enjoyed financial strength. So when the government asked the community to redevelop their properties around Market Street into modern buildings either individually or jointly with local banks, they agreed, fearing in part that the

alternative was to have their land forcibly acquired or nationalised.

The *kittangi* were sold for a song and many older Chettiaras called it a day, selling off all their properties in Singapore to carve a comfortable retirement in their homeland. Others moved to premises at Cantonment Road, Serangoon Road and Tank Road, where a lone *kittangi* still holds fort in the shadow of Sri Thendayuthapani (more popularly known as Chettiaras' Temple). Established in 1859, this shrine is probably the most significant landmark associated with the Chettiaras, who erected temples to Lord Murugan wherever they went.<sup>25</sup> For most Singaporeans, the Tank Road temple is better known as the end point of the annual Thaipusam procession, perhaps the only tangible manifestation of Chettiar religious culture in the Singapore landscape.

"It was the end of an era," declares Subbiah. Shorn of their downtown enclave and with surviving *kittangi*s sidelined, "the old communal life was over."

For a time, the local Chettiar community dwindled to as few as 30 families, before a new wave of migrants from Tamil Nadu from the 1990s onwards, mostly engineers or IT professionals, bolstered their numbers to the present thousand or so. Back in India, enterprising Chettiaras had long diversified, becoming industrialists, manufacturers,

publishers and owners of Tamil film studios. But other members of the community floundered in the post-colonial era, lacking both capital and formal education. To make ends meet, they sold their heirlooms and once-palatial homes, while younger Chettiaras settled into new roles as professionals and entrepreneurs.

### A Forgotten Street

With the demise of Market Street's *kittangi* and other shophouses, the city lost what Subbiah called a neighbourhood "with a clear identity as an Indian area". This "Micro India" of his childhood, he adds, consisted of Tamil Hindu as well as Muslim establishments along with North Indian and Chinese businesses. "In that sense I think it was a real 'Little India' – much more so than even Serangoon Road today," he declares.

In the early 1970s, Market Street was a one-stop shop where local Indians would spend a day out, perhaps settling accounts with their Chettiar before visiting a barber or *saree* dealer, stocking up on provisions, lunching at a banana leaf restaurant, and spending the remaining daylight hours at the waterfront. "The waves used to come up all the way," recounts Subbiah of a time when the Singapore River emptied into the



**[Facing page]** Punar Pusam procession with traditional stilt-walkers, and Fort Canning in the background [c. 1920s-30s]. This lesser known annual procession takes place on the eve of Thaipusam. Early in the morning, the chariot bearing Lord Murugan leaves Chettiaras' Temple at Tank Road for Sri Layan Sithi Vinayagar Temple at Keong Saik Road. The chariot then returns to Tank Road in the evening accompanied by a retinue of *kavadi* bearers and passing Market Street along the way. Courtesy of Lakshmanan Subbiah.

**[Top]** Chettiar men posing for a photograph in front of the Mercantile Bank in Raffles Place, 1960. Nachiappa Chettiar Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

**[Above]** Members of the Chettiar community at the entrance of the Sri Thendayuthapani Temple at Tank Road (Chettiaras' Temple), c.1930s. Nachiappa Chettiar Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

open strait, before the sea was tamed and fenced in by an urban bay. "People walked over to the Esplanade, they'd buy peanuts and balloons, lie down and relax, and then at sunset they'd go back."

Other than the Chettiaras, Market Street was an "incubator" site for other Indian as well as non-Indian enterprises. Subbiah recalls being asked by his elders to buy tea from a young *wallah* named Mustaq Ahmad, who

helped his father man a pushcart at a corner of Market Street and Battery Road before going on to helm the outfit now known as Mohamed Mustafa & Shamsudin.<sup>26</sup> Textile retailer Second Chance occupied a shop lot along Chulia Street in the 1970s, while the headquarters of PGP, a chain of provision stores owned by philanthropist P. Govindasamy Pillai, was located on the upper reaches of Market Street.<sup>27</sup>

Tat Lee Bank<sup>28</sup> had its headquarters, as well as an iron and steel rolling mill, between two *kittangi*, while various law firms and shipchandlers operated from Chulia (previously Kling) Street, now a mere laneway unlike its sprawling namesake in Georgetown, Penang. Along Malacca Street, the Portuguese Mission owned the neoclassical Nunes Building, designed by Swan & Maclarens<sup>29</sup> with decorative panels on its façade by Italian sculptor Cavalieri Nolli,<sup>30</sup> next to which stood the offices of the Lee & Lee legal firm between 1955 and 1969.<sup>31</sup> Market and Malacca streets also housed the spice trading business of the Jumabhoys from Gujarat, which later expanded into Scotts Holdings.<sup>32</sup>

For the young Subbiah, these luminaries were probably mere footnotes, fleeting faces and impressions preserved amid memories of Market Street and playing football on Raffles Place green<sup>33</sup> after the city was deserted by its workers early in the evening. "The *kittangi* was a fun place to stay," he muses. Market Street was also part of the route taken by traditional Chingay revellers before the parade took on a less pugilistic turn.<sup>34</sup> To this day, a *kavadi*/procession known as Punar Pusam (see text box overleaf), which begins at the Sri Layan Sithi Vinayagar Temple at Keong Saik Road and ends at Tank Road on the evening before Thaipusam, passes Market Street on its annual circuit.

Another occasion that sticks in Subbiah's mind is a different assembly that took place upon the death of Mao Zedong, founding father of the People's Republic of China, on 9 September 1976. News of this saw Market Street thronging with people all the way to the Bank of China building on Battery Road (then one of the few local conduits to the People's Republic of China), prompting the curious boy to join the crowd and ink a note in a condolence book in the Chinese bank. "I was 12 years old; I can't even remember what I wrote," Subbiah quips. "Everyone was signing and when it was my turn, I couldn't even reach the book so the man behind me lifted me up."

"Memory's images, once they are fixed in words, are erased," observed Marco Polo in *Invisible Cities*, Italo Calvino's fable on the eternal yet ephemeral nature of place making. But it could also be argued that the very act of remembering is one that resists decay and deconstruction – in this case the literal tearing-down of spaces to which incomes, and identities, were tethered. For Singapore's Micro India, this is perhaps all that remains, as the Chettiaras bid farewell to homes that doubled as offices and retreated from the frontlines of commerce into the margins of living memory. ♦

### OF FAITH, ON FOOT: THE PUNAR PUSAM PROCESSION

Many are familiar, or at least acquainted, with the annual Thaipusam procession that begins at Sri Srinivasa Perumal Temple along Serangoon Road and ends at Chettiar's Temple at Tank Road. This procession, dominated by believers who bear elaborate *kavadi*<sup>1</sup> as a visible sign of their devotion, takes place on the full moon of the Tamil month of Thai, which falls in January or February each year.

Few, however, have any inkling that on the eve of Thaipusam, an equally hallowed procession commences late in the day from the Sri Layan Siti Vinayagar Temple at Keong Saik Road. Known as Punar Pusam or

(Below) On the eve of Thaipusam, the Punar Pusam or Chetty Pusam procession, which involves *kavadi*-bearers from the Chettiar community, commences late in the day from the Sri Layan Siti Vinayagar Temple at Keong Saik Street and winds its way through Chinatown, the Central Business District and City Hall, before ending at the Thendayuthapani Temple (Chettiar's Temple) at Tank Road. Photo by Marcus Ng taken at Keong Saik Street on 8 February 2017.

(Right) A 1920s photograph of a bullock-drawn silver chariot bearing a statue of Lord Murugan during the annual Punar Pusam procession. Gwee Thian Hock Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



Chetty Pusam, this march involves *kavadi* bearers from the Chettiar community who wind their way through Chinatown, the Central Business District and City Hall.

For the Chettiar, Punar Pusam commemorates the only time of the year when Lord Murugan leaves the Tank Road temple. borne in a silver chariot, Lord Murugan first visits his elder brother Lord Ganesha at Sri Layan Siti Vinayagar Temple, before returning in the evening by way of Sri Mariamman Temple,<sup>2</sup> abode of the Mother Goddess of South Indian Hindus. In the past, the chariot, accompanied by a human chain of *kavadi* bearers, would meander along Robinson Road, D'Almeida Street and Market Street, where Lord Murugan would give his blessings to the Chettiar businesses

in the area. The *kittangi*<sup>3</sup> are long gone, but the entourage still pauses to dance and whirl before the landmarks of their faith and forefathers, and in the shadow of their financial heirs, the modern towers housing the Indian Bank and Indian Overseas Bank.

A lorry pulls the deity today; there are no more bullocks for the task. Neither are there stilt-walkers, clowns in costumes and musical bands, which in times past cheered the marchers on and brought the town to a halt with pomp and ceremony. According to Lakshmanan Subbiah, a fourth-generation Chettiar, the Chettiar would even pay for the trams along South Bridge Road to stop for a few hours so that the road was clear for the procession. Before the war, fireworks were de rigueur. And until Dhoby Ghaut was dug up, the chariot also stopped by a shrine to Lord Siva at Orchard Road<sup>4</sup> before the final leg towards Tank Road.

Accompanied by families and well-wishers, and under the watchful eyes of minders and police outriders, the devotees today take up a mere lane or slightly more. For the most part, the city rushes on in its usual headlong fashion as the procession snakes past, as if bystanders eschew the power of faith, or are unwilling to indulge in the vague rites of a forgotten migrant community. The *kavadi* cavalcade continues on regardless, through dust and rain, sweat and stain, on bare soles and to the encouragement of pipes and drums. Dusk turns to dark and the streets ring with the steps of the *kavadi* carriers, telling of their story, strength and spirit.

#### Notes

- 1 The *kavadi* is a semi-circular metal structure decorated with peacock feathers, flowers and palm leaves, which devotees carry during the Thaipusam procession, often in fulfilment of a vow. See Hindu Endowments Board. (2016). *Thaipusam*. Retrieved from Hindu Endowments Board website
- 2 Soundararajan & Sri Asrina Tanuri. (2016, October–December). Time-honoured temple design. *BiblioAsia*, 12(3), 36–39, p. 36. Retrieved from BiblioAsia website.
- 3 This was the Sri Sivan Temple at Dhoby Ghaut, which was relocated to Geylang East to make way for the MRT station in 1983. See Hindu Endowments Board. (2016). *Sri Sivan Temple*. Retrieved from Hindu Endowments Board website.
- 4 Savage, V. R., & Yeoh, B. S. A. (2013). *Singapore street names: A study of toponymics* (pp. 248–250). Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Editions. [Call no.: RSING 915.9570014 SAV-[TRA]]
- 5 Thinappan, S. P., & Vairavan, S. N. (2010). *Nagarathars in Singapore* (p. 15). Singapore: Navaso. [Call no.: RSING 305.8914105957 THI]
- 6 Muthiah, S., et al. (2000). *The Chettiar heritage* (p. vii). Chennai: The Chettiar Heritage. [Call no.: R 954.089 CHE]
- 7 Sandhu & Sandhu, Sep 1969, p. 199. The extent of loans to Malay royalty is illustrated by Winstedt who records that “in 1862 being heavily indebted to a Kavana Chana Shellapa Chetty, Sultan Ali [of Singapore] gave this Tamil money-lender the right to sell Muar to the British or the Temengong of Johor.” See Winstedt, R. O. (1932, December). A history of Johore: 1365–1895 A.D [Microfilm no.: NL 1577]. *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 10(3 [115]), p. 113.
- 8 Vibuthi is the holy ash applied on the foreheads of Saivite Hindus to honour Lord Siva.
- 9 Sandhu & Sandhu, Sep 1969, p. 199.
- 10 Thinnappan & Vairavan, 2010, p. 33.
- 11 Shylock, an avaricious Jewish moneylender, is a character in William Shakespeare's play, *The Merchant of Venice*.
- 12 Adas, M. (1974, May). Immigrant Asians and the economic impact of European imperialism: The role of the South Indian Chettiar in British Burma. *Journal of Asian Studies*, 33(3), 385–401, p. 400. Retrieved from JSTOR NLB's eResources website.
- 13 Ministry of Culture. (1964, August 16). Transcript of the prime minister, Mr Lee Kuan Yew's speech at the political study centre on 16th August, 1964 in connection with the seminar on “the concept of democracy” organised by the joint committee for radio courses. Retrieved from National Archives of Singapore website.
- 14 Thinnappan & Vairavan, 2010, p. 25.
- 15 Lord Murugan, also known as Sri Thendayuthapani, is a son of Lord Siva and the principal deity at the Chettiar's Temple. Over a 150-year period, the Chettiar are estimated to have built about 105 temples in Southeast Asia: 59 in Burma, 25 in Ceylon, 18 in Malay, and one each in Vietnam, Singapore and Medan.
- 16 National Library Board. (2016). *Mohamed Mustafa and Samsudin Co Pte Ltd* written by Nureza Ahmad & Noorain Aziz. Retrieved from Singapore Infopedia.
- 17 See Boo, K. (1999, September 24). End of an era. *The Straits Times*, p. 47. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 18 Tat Lee Bank opened at Market Street in 1974 and merged with Keppel Bank in 1998.
- 19 T. F. Hwang takes you down memory. (1988, June 25). *The Straits Times*, p. 25; Colony cavalcade. (1936, April 26). *The Straits Times*, p. 2. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 20 Materials used in constructing Nunes and Medeiros. (1937, October 5). *The Straits Times*, p. 2. Retrieved from NewspaperSG; Davison, J. (2017, Jul–Sep). Swan & McLaren: Pioneers of Modernist architecture. *BiblioAsia*, 13(2), 24–31, p. 28. Retrieved from National Library Board website.
- 21 Lee & Lee. (2017). Retrieved from Lee & Lee website.
- 22 Jumaboy, R. (1982, August 7). The spice trade article and my family. *The Straits Times*, p. 17. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 23 Raffles Place was converted to house an underground carpark in 1961 and became a pedestrian zone in 1972. See National Library Board, 1999.
- 24 Sam, J. (1985, February 24). Fiery start to 1830 lunar year. *Singapore Monitor*, p. 2. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

# SCOTS IN SINGAPORE

*Remembering  
their Legacy*



The Scots in colonial Singapore lent their names to many of the city's famous landmarks. **Graham Berry** pays tribute to the contributions of his fellow men.

**S**ingapore's roots as a trading hub were planted along the banks of the Singapore River in 1819 when Stamford Raffles, together with William Farquhar, established a port for the British East India Company (EIC). Shortly after, civic institutions were set up by colonial administrators and merchants founded trading houses near the river, along with plantations further inland where they built palatial mansions with sprawling gardens.

Initially, trading in Singapore was dominated by the EIC, which held a monopoly jealously guarded by its own powerful armed forces, engineers and aggressive administration. Following in the wake of the EIC were independent traders, privateers and explorers, eager to reap the riches from the settlement's vantage position as a trading hub and transform the island into a prized colony of the British Empire.

As the settlement developed from 1819 onwards, districts, features, thoroughfares and bridges all demanded to be named. In modern Singapore, many of these places and landmarks still bear the names given by EIC officials and their successors. As large numbers of EIC merchants, military personnel and administrative staff were Scots, it is no surprise that Scottish names dominate Singapore's iconic town centre, the river environs as well as several prime residential areas.

James MacRitchie, John Turnbull Thomson, John Crawfurd, John Anderson, Robert Fullerton, Thomas Murray Robertson and William George Scott. These names – which read like the who's who of the early Scottish community in Singapore – have left an indelible mark on the island. Who were these men and what were their contributions to Singapore? These are themes that I explore in my book, *From Kilts to Sarongs: Scottish Pioneers of Singapore*. This essay considers a small selection of the city's more prominent landmarks and place names that reflect the heritage of its Scottish pioneers.

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Residents of Singapore:  
Farquhar and Crawfurd

It is a travesty that Singapore bears no mark of William Farquhar – the man who arguably did more than any other colonial officer to establish the nascent trading settlement in 1819 and manage its early progress in the face of doubts from home and dangers from hostile territories. Born on February 1774 in Fetteresso, near Aberdeen, Scotland, Farquhar was appointed as Resident and Commandant of Singapore soon after its founding.

Much has been written in history books about Raffles and not enough about Farquhar and his role in the early success of Singapore. Farquhar was present from the outset of the development of colonial Singapore. He was involved in the deliberations that resulted in Singapore being chosen as the new settlement of the EIC and at the negotiation of key treaties. Most importantly, in the absence of Raffles (who was stationed in Bencoolen), Farquhar ably administered what became a successful port and settlement. Unfortunately, Raffles and Farquhar fell out in grand fashion and the latter was summarily dismissed by Raffles on 1 May 1823.

Farquhar lived in the Kampong Glam area and the road where he lived was named Farquhar Street. The inexorable march of progress in modern Singapore, however, has obliterated this thoroughfare and no memorial remains of Farquhar today.

Farquhar's successor as Resident in 1823 was also a Scot. Dr John Crawfurd was a physician born in 1783 on Islay, an island off the west coast of Scotland famed for its whisky distilleries. He joined the EIC as a surgeon and like Farquhar, quickly rose to a position of prominence. He knew Raffles and Farquhar as well as Lord Minto, another Scot, who was then Governor-General of India. Together these men embarked on the invasion of Dutch-controlled Java in 1811.

By all accounts, Crawfurd was a typical dour Scot with a reputation for parsimony. But he was an able diplomat and a highly professional administrator who not only built on the solid foundation laid down by Farquhar but had, by 1824, negotiated the Anglo-Dutch Treaty. This agreement ceded Singapore to the British, thereby removing any doubts about the future security of the settlement and its longevity.

Crawfurd is remembered in Singapore in the naming of Crawford Street, Crawford Lane and Crawford Bridge – albeit spelt with an "o" instead of the original "u" – that spans the Kallang River. The bridge was named so sometime at the turn of the 20th century when it was a timber structure supported by cast iron beams. In the 1920s, the bridge was replaced with a reinforced concrete structure embellished with a series of bow-string arches, and, in the early 1990s, it was expanded to accommodate a higher volume of traffic.

#### Horsburgh and Thomson

Many significant landmarks in Singapore bear the name of Scotsmen. One, which few people would have had a chance to visit, is the Horsburgh Lighthouse on the rocky ledge of Pedra Branca guarding the eastern approaches of the Singapore Strait. For many years, the sovereignty of this speck of land was a cause of territorial dispute until the International Court of Justice ruled in Singapore's favour in 2008.

The 34-metre high lighthouse, named after James Horsburgh, was completed in 1851. Horsburgh was born in Fife, Scotland, in 1762. At the age of 16, he became a seaman and through a combination of skill and hard work, rose through the ranks to become a talented hydrographer with the EIC. He charted sea routes between India and China, thus easing the way for ships to voyage to the east. Merchants in Hong Kong and Singapore recognised Horsburgh's contribution in making the long and hazardous journey to the east less dangerous, and commissioned the lighthouse to be built in his memory.

The lighthouse, which bears a commemorative tablet dedicated to Horsburgh, was designed and built by another Scotsman, John Turnbull Thomson, who himself left a significant legacy to the built heritage of Singapore. Thomson was born in 1821 in the north of England to Scottish parents who had travelled south to find work. He was educated in Scotland and was appointed Government Surveyor for the Straits Settlements in 1841. For the next 12 years, Thomson served as both surveyor and engineer in Singapore. The many landmarks for which he was responsible

(Facing page) A photo of a European man wearing a sarong in a print resembling a Scottish tartan pattern, c.1900. All rights reserved, Falconer, J. (1987). *A Vision of the Past: A History of Early Photography in Singapore and Malaya: The Photographs of G. R. Lambert & Co., 1880–1910* (p. 154). Singapore: Times Editions. [Call no.: RSING 95.570049163 BER]

(Left) Portrait of John Turnbull Thomson, at 25 years of age, by Beyerhaus in 1845. Thomson was appointed Government Surveyor for the Straits Settlements in 1841, and served as both surveyor and engineer to Singapore for the next 12 years. All rights reserved, Hall-Jones, J., & Hooi, C. (1979). *An Early Surveyor in Singapore: John Turnbull Thomson in Singapore, 1841–1853* (p. 35). Singapore: National Museum. [Call no.: RSING S26.90924 THO]

(Below) An 1851 painting of Horsburgh Lighthouse on Pedra Branca by John Turnbull Thomson, Government Surveyor for the Straits Settlements. The lighthouse, which was designed and built by Thomson in 1851, was named after James Horsburgh, a hydrographer with the East India Company. Courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.



include Dalhousie Obelisk, the tower and spire of the original St Andrew's Church (later replaced by St Andrew's Cathedral) and Thomson's Bridge, which replaced Presentment Bridge – the first bridge built across the Singapore River in 1822. Thomson's Bridge in turn was replaced by Elgin Bridge in 1862.

Thomson Road is also named after him, and it is believed that he was the "ang mo" in Ang Mo Kio, having also constructed a bridge in that area. Ang Mo Kio in Hokkien literally translates into "Red-haired Man's Bridge" – in reference to the bridge that once spanned Kallang River, close to what is today the junction of Upper Thomson Road and Ang Mo Kio Avenue 1.

### Recreational Spaces

Despite its high population density, Singapore's vision of becoming a City in a Garden is now a reality thanks to a combination of enlightened planning and the efforts of the National Parks Board. The benefits of having public spaces was recognised early in the colonial period; and two Scotsmen – James MacRitchie and Lawrence Niven – in particular, were instrumental in laying the foundations for the planners who came after them.

James MacRitchie was an engineer born in Southampton, England, to Scottish parents. He was sent to school in Scotland and then studied at Edinburgh University before training as an engineer in Glasgow. MacRitchie's career took him to China, Japan and Brazil before he was appointed Municipal Engineer in Singapore in 1883, a post he held until his death in 1895. During those 12 years, MacRitchie was responsible for developing much of the infrastructure of the colony. His name, however, is associated principally with the much-loved MacRitchie Reservoir, which is now surrounded by nature reserves and enjoyed by both wildlife and recreational enthusiasts. MacRitchie was responsible for the enlargement of the reservoir as well as the development of its pumping and purification systems.

The name Lawrence Niven is less known in Singapore, but he stands as MacRitchie's equal in creating another much loved recreational space. In 1860, Niven, who worked as a manager of a nutmeg plantation belonging to Charles Robert Prinsep, in the area of the present Prinsep Street, was recruited to develop a 23-hectare site in Tanglin into a garden. Niven dedicated himself to this task over the next 15 years while managing the Prinsep plantation at the same time. The eventual result was the Singapore Botanic Gardens,

which was inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in July 2015.

Niven's design laid the foundation of the gardens and he created many of its distinctive features, many of which are still apparent to this day. According to a 2014 article by Nigel P. Taylor,<sup>1</sup> the Director of the Singapore Botanic Gardens, Niven "was almost certainly responsible for the classic English-style landscape design that the garden celebrates today". Niven Road, close to the Prinsep plantation where he started his career in Singapore, is named after him.

There is another Scot whom we have to thank for preserving recreational space in Singapore – the first Resident, William Farquhar. The area

ceded to the EIC to establish the settlement was limited, and much of the swampy land was unusable. Raffles had planned to reserve land north of the Singapore River for government buildings and use the adjoining parcel of land for European merchants. The merchants, however, pointed out to Farquhar that it would be more convenient if they could build their godowns next to the river to facilitate the loading and unloading of goods. Seeing the wisdom of this advice, Farquhar reserved the strip of land that eventually became known as the Esplanade. The Esplanade and Padang could have been built-up areas today had it not been for Farquhar's far-sighted intervention.

**(Below)** Two European gentlemen sitting by the lake at the Botanic Gardens in Singapore, c.1900. Courtesy of Cheah Jin Seng.

**(Bottom)** View of Anderson Bridge with the clock tower of Victoria Memorial Hall in the background, undated. The bridge is named after John Anderson, Governor of the Straits Settlements from 1904 to 1911. Courtesy of Cheah Jin Seng.



### Hotel, Quay and Bridges

At least one landmark hotel and prominent bridges and quays along the Singapore River bear the name of Scotsmen. The aforementioned Dalhousie Obelisk commemorates the visit of fellow Scot and then Governor-General of India, James Andrew Broun-Ramsay, the 10th Earl of Dalhousie, to Singapore in 1850. The Earl was born in Dalhousie Castle, the seat of the Earls of Dalhousie, located south of the capital city of Edinburgh.

The luxury Fullerton Hotel derives its name from Sir Robert Fullerton, born in Edinburgh in 1773. Fullerton was the first Governor of the Straits Settlements in 1826 when Penang, Singapore and Melaka were grouped together for ease of administration. The hotel occupies the former Fullerton Building (declared opened in 1928), which in turn took over the site of Fort Fullerton, built sometime in the first decade of the colony's founding to guard the mouth of the Singapore River. Fullerton Road and Fullerton Square are also named after the same Scotsman.

Robertson Quay is named after the highly regarded Dr Thomas Murray Robertson. He trained as a physician in Edinburgh before practising at The Dispensary medical clinic at Commercial Square (now Raffles Place) with Dr Lim Boon Keng, a prominent Straits Chinese. The clinic was founded in 1879 by Robertson's father, Dr J.H. Robertson.

Sir John Anderson, born in Aberdeen in 1858, was Governor of the Straits Settlements from 1904 to 1911. Anderson Bridge across the Singapore River and Anderson Road are named after him. James Bruce, the 8th Earl of

Elgin, was appointed Viceroy of India in 1862 He lent his name to the Elgin Bridge mentioned earlier. This bridge, which replaced Thomson's Bridge in 1862, was dismantled in 1927 to make way for the present Elgin Bridge that opened two years later. Elgin Bridge straddles the Singapore River, and joins North Bridge Road to South Bridge Road.

### Residential Areas

The name Scott appears frequently in Singapore. One of the most sought-after pieces of real estate in modern Singapore is the site at the junction of Orchard Road and Scotts Road, stretching to that one-time haunt and watering hole of well-heeled colonials – the Tanglin Club. This was the estate of Captain William George Scott, a wealthy Scottish landowner who claimed to be a first cousin of the famous novelist and poet Sir Walter Scott. The picturesque and expansive gardens of Scott's estate, a popular place for residents to gather and enjoy the cool of the evening and socialise, is a far cry from the Scotts Road of today with its upmarket malls and jostling shoppers.

Scott, who became the Harbour Master Attendant and Post Master in Singapore in 1836, gives his name to Scotts Road, while Claymore Road takes its name from the name of his house and estate. Claymore is an anglicisation of the Gaelic *claidheamh-mór*, which means "broad sword".

The densely urbanised district of MacPherson, with its busy main thoroughfare and MRT station, could not be further from the misty mountains of the Island of Skye, off the northwest coast of Scotland. Yet it was here in 1817 that the man whose name still resonates in

The interior of Telok Ayer Market showing the cast iron by MacFarlane and Company in Glasgow, 1910s. The market (more popularly known today as Lau Pa Sat or "Old Market" in Hokkien) opened in 1894. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Singapore, Ronald MacPherson, was born. Like many young men from Skye, MacPherson's options were limited and so he entered into military service with the Madras Artillery regiment of the EIC in 1836 when he was 19. In 1842, MacPherson was posted to Penang where he spent six years before being transferred in 1855 to Singapore as the Executive Engineer and Superintendent of Convicts.

As the city engineer, MacPherson was responsible, like John Turnbull Thomson before him, for developing infrastructure and constructing functional civic buildings. Accomplishing this brief with flair, MacPherson's legacy includes St Andrew's Cathedral (1861) – incidentally named after the patron saint of Scotland. MacPherson designed the cathedral, which was built by Indian convict labour, in a Neo-Gothic architectural style inspired by Netley Abbey in Hampshire, England. In the cathedral grounds is a monument with a Maltese cross erected in his memory.

### Scottish Ironwork

The bulk of the iron and steel produced for the British Empire was forged in Scottish foundries. Singapore, which had little or no domestic production, imported most of the ironwork it needed from Scotland. Glasgow-based companies like MacFarlane and Company and P & W MacLellan provided construction materials that enhance the built heritage of Singapore to this day. The best-known is Cavenagh Bridge, which spans the Singapore River with its elegant lines and stout pillars. Commissioned by John Turnbull Thomson, the bridge, which was constructed by MacLellan and opened in 1870, has stood the test of time for almost 150 years. It is now used as a footbridge.

The former Telok Ayer Market in the central business district attracts lunchtime crowds from nearby offices to its food court, who are seemingly unaware of the illustrious history of this octagonal-shaped landmark. The aforementioned James MacRitchie was the engineer who designed the current building and arranged for its construction in cast iron by MacFarlane and Company in Glasgow.<sup>2</sup> The market (more popularly known today as Lau Pa Sat or "Old Market" in Hokkien) opened in 1894.



Other examples of Scottish iron-work in Singapore include an ornate drinking fountain which, in the early part of the 20th century, was sited in front of Orchard Road Market but now graces a courtyard of Raffles Hotel; the balconies and verandahs in Raffles Hotel and the Singapore Cricket Club; the railings around Old Parliament House (since converted into The Arts House); and the ornamental balustrades protecting the sluice control mechanisms of MacRitchie Reservoir. The Scottish roots of Old Parliament House can be traced to its first owner, the Scottish merchant John Argyle Maxwell, who originally intended to use the building as his private residence.

#### More Scottish Architects

Archibald Alexander Swan, born in Glasgow in 1857, and James Waddell Boyd Maclaren, born in Edinburgh in 1863, were both Scottish trained civil engineers who together formed the partnership of Swan & Maclaren in 1890. The company – working with a team of architects – was responsible for many familiar landmark buildings in the city, such as the main building of Raffles Hotel, Stamford House, Teutonia Club (now Goodwood Park Hotel), Adelphi Hotel and the former John Little building at Commercial Square (today's Raffles Place).

Other buildings with strong Scottish connections include City Hall, designed in

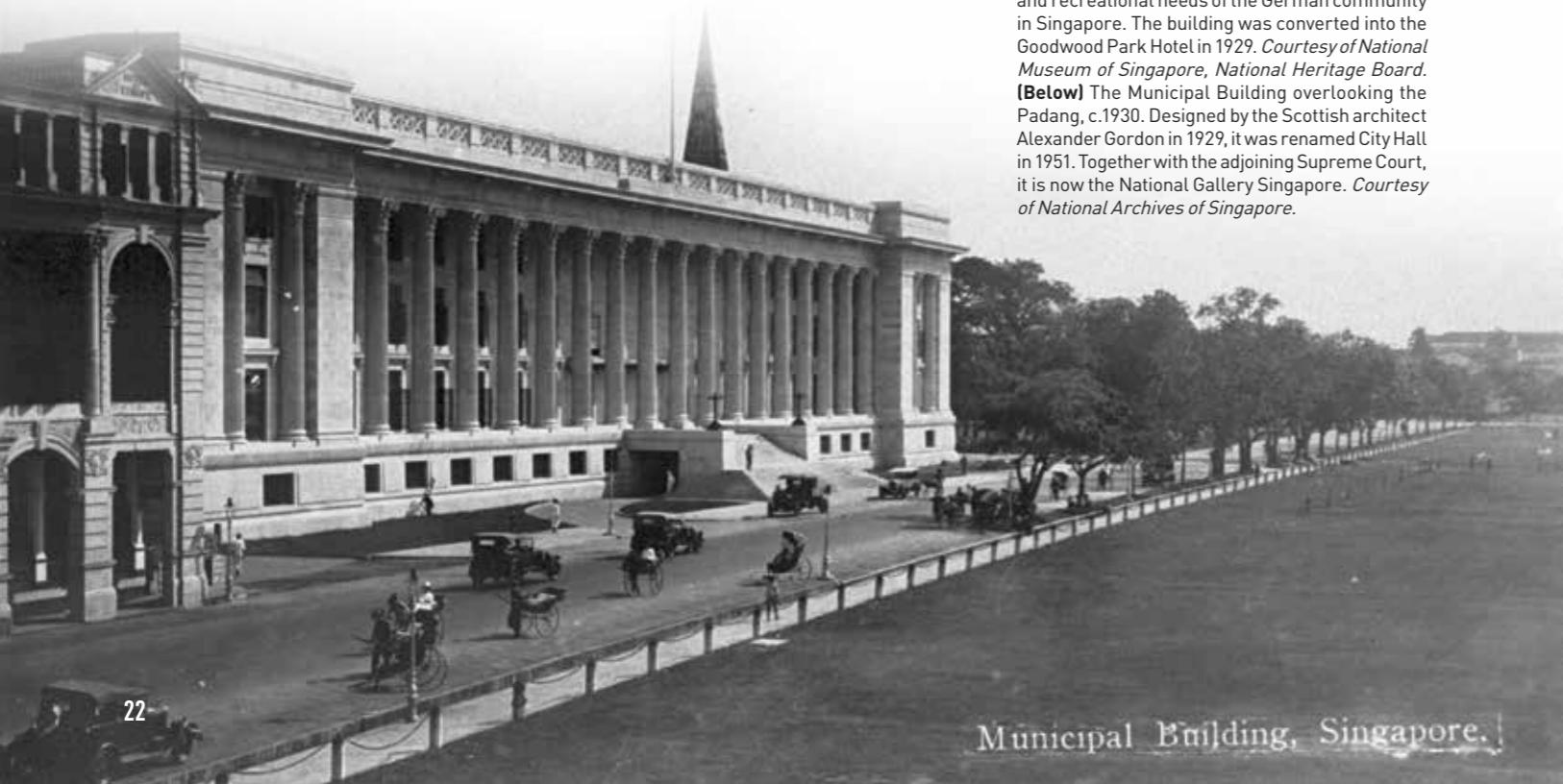
1929 by the Scottish architect Alexander Gordon (which together with the adjoining Supreme Court is now the National Gallery Singapore); and the 1930s Tiong Bahru estate by fellow Scots James Milner Fraser, whose art deco-influenced design has stood the test of time. Fraser, incidentally, formed the Singapore branch of the Boys' Brigade, thus leaving behind an intangible legacy.

#### A Lasting Legacy

Connections to Scotland and the Scottish pioneers of early Singapore are indelibly imprinted on the face of Singapore in a plethora of place, street and district names, and also evidenced by much of its built heritage. It is a credit to the builders of modern Singapore that so much remains of the heritage introduced and inspired by Scottish merchants, engineers, doctors, administrators and soldiers – names that echo both the romantic misty glens as well as the mills, shipyards, factories and foundries of 19th-century Scotland.

It is not possible to explore every Scottish link to Singapore's past in this short essay but streets have been named after Scottish officials such as Minto, Anderson, Elgin and Crawford; soldiers such as Haig and Neill; merchants like Bain, Angus, Hamilton, Gray, MacTaggart, Purvis and Campbell; engineers MacRitchie, MacPherson and Thomson;

**(Top)** Built in 1900, the former Teutonia Club on Scotts Road was designed by R.A.J. Bidwell of the Scottish architectural firm, Swan and Maclaren. The club was established to cater to the social and recreational needs of the German community in Singapore. The building was converted into the Goodwood Park Hotel in 1929. *Courtesy of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.*  
**(Below)** The Municipal Building overlooking the Padang, c.1930. Designed by the Scottish architect Alexander Gordon in 1929, it was renamed City Hall in 1951. Together with the adjoining Supreme Court, it is now the National Gallery Singapore. *Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*



Municipal Building, Singapore.

a newspaper editor, Still; doctors such as Cumming and Robertson; and businessman Read who was co-founder, along with several other Scots, of the first library and was a trustee of Raffles Institution, which itself was co-founded by a Scottish minister of religion, Dr Morrison, and based on principles of Scottish education. The Scottish influence in the names of Singapore streets is also seen in the use of the word Dunearn,<sup>3</sup> connections to the church such as Kirk, towns and villages like Balmoral, Coldstream, Dundee and Dunbar, and Scottish rivers such as Ettrick and Yarrow. The list is extensive.

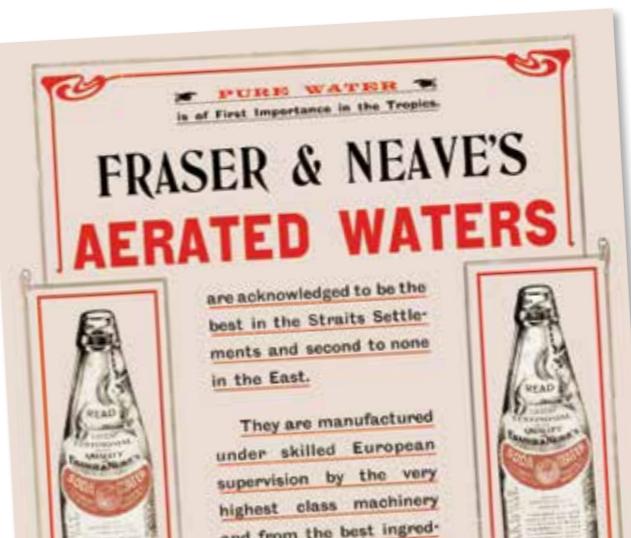
Scots also brought with them to Singapore their distinctive views on religion and education, and while their main aim was to make money from their colonial ventures, they were more than willing to develop places where they had made their home, even if they were only there temporarily. Churches, schools, libraries, freemasonry lodges, chambers of commerce, yacht clubs and of course the Singapore St Andrew's Society, formed in 1836 and which continues to thrive to this day – all founded by Scots – brought the distinctive Scottish culture and tradition to the East.

The Scottish legacy also extends to a number of major business conglomerates that created a foundation for the prosperity that continues to survive to this day in the East. Guthrie, one of Singapore's first



**(Left)** Farquhar Street, named after William Farquhar, the first Resident and Commandant of Singapore, disappeared in 1994 after the roads in the area were realigned. *All rights reserved, Singapore Street Directory. (1993, 17th edition). Singapore: SNP Corporation Ltd.* (Call no.: RSING 959.57 SSD)

**(Below)** An early advertisement by Fraser & Neave, founded by two Scotsmen, John Fraser and David C. Neave in 1883. *Straits & F.M.S. Annual 1907–8. Collection of the National Library, Singapore.* (Accession no: B03014243F).



This essay contains extracts from the book, *From Kilts to Sarongs: Scottish Pioneers of Singapore* (2015), by Graham Berry. Published by Landmark Books, the book retails at S\$59.90 and is available at major bookshops. It is also available for reference and loan at the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library and selected public libraries [Call nos.: RSING 959.570049163 BER and SING 959.570049163 BER].

#### Notes

1 Taylor, N. P. [2013, August]. What do we know about Lawrence Niven, the man who first developed SBG? *Gardenwise*, 41, 2–3. Retrieved from Singapore Botanic Gardens website.

2 The cast iron work was shipped out from Glasgow by P & W MacLellan. The cast-iron columns which support the structure, however, bear the maker's mark of MacFarlane and Company.

3 Dunearn is a composite word formed from two words: Dun and Earn. *Dùn* in Scottish Gaelic means "fort". Loch Earn is a freshwater loch in the central highlands of Scotland.

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# THE ROAD TO NATIONALISATION PUBLIC BUSES IN SINGAPORE

From as many as 11 bus companies to just one bus operator by 1973. Lee Meiyu chronicles the early turbulent days of Singapore's bus industry.



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*"We went to their workshops. We audited their books. In three months, we... revealed that despite the alleged amalgamation of the old bus companies, this was only a paper unification – the old owners were still running little fiefdoms within the company."<sup>1</sup>*

– Wong Hung Khim, Chair of the Government Team of Officials

This was the scenario that government officials faced in May 1974 when they reviewed the workings of Singapore Bus Service (SBS) – formed just a year earlier to consolidate and provide better bus services for the public. When the government found out that SBS was dragging its feet over the restructuring process, it took matters into its own hands by assembling a team of civil servants (known as the Government Team of Officials or GTO) to take over the management of the bus company. This action essentially triggered the nationalisation of Singapore's public bus service system.<sup>2</sup>

The clean and air-conditioned public buses that we take for granted today were unheard of back in the 1950s and 60s. Commuters recalled being "fried in the sun" or "soaked in the rain" by turns as they battled with grimy and scratched bus windows that could not be properly opened or shut. Crowded buses were also a haven for pickpockets, and the cramped conditions became worse when people squeezed themselves through open windows in order to hitch a ride during peak hours. Not surprisingly, tempers would fray and scuffles break out on board.<sup>3</sup>

To add to the passengers' woes, these creaky and hot (read, non-air-conditioned) buses spewed choking exhaust fumes as they rattled and honked their way up and

**[Facing page top]** A trolley bus at the junction of Stamford Road and Hill Street in the late 1920s advertising its services as an economical way of commuting. Trolley buses, which operated between 1926 and 1962 in Singapore, were electric buses that drew power from overhead wires suspended from roadside posts using trolley poles. They were eventually replaced by buses with motor engines. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

**[Facing page bottom]** Two buses belonging to the Singapore Traction Company, 1950s. FW York Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

down busy streets. Buses would break down frequently, and often arrived late or did not show up at bus stops at the designated time. To make matters worse, the drivers' punishing schedules – working two shifts a day with no breaks – led some to resort to desperate measures, such as puncturing their own bus tyres, so as to get some rest while awaiting repairs. In early 1974, it was reported that 400 buses were out of service at any one time, and out of 1,450 buses in operation, an average of 800 buses would break down in a day.<sup>4</sup> In short, the bus transport system was in shambles.

In the meantime, SBS's management team had other, more pressing problems to resolve. Before 1971, buses here were operated by the British-owned Singapore Traction Company (STC) and another 10 Chinese-owned companies. These 11 bus companies were later merged into four, and finally into one – SBS – in 1973 under the directive of the government.

However, as the leader of the GTO, Wong Hung Khim, later recalled, the gangster connections and thuggish behaviour of these Chinese-owned companies of the past persisted when SBS was created. Wong personally received an anonymous letter threatening harm to him and his family if the GTO probed too deeply. High-ranking law enforcement officers such as Yap Boon Keng, then Assistant Commissioner of Police, were brought in to beef up the team so that the GTO had the clout and political heft to get down to the serious business of restructuring the company.<sup>5</sup>

## A Chaotic Start

Public motor buses for commuters were introduced into Singapore as early as 1919. Nicknamed "mosquito buses", these unlicensed vehicles were small, seven-seater omnibuses that weaved dangerously in and out of traffic, frantically looking out for passengers – much like bloodthirsty mosquitoes looking for prospective prey. Operated by enterprising Chinese individuals, the mosquito buses primarily serviced rural and suburban areas that were out of the reach of STC's trolley buses,<sup>6</sup> at times even encroaching on the latter's routes.

In 1929, STC introduced its own motor bus fleet to compete against the mosquito buses. Singapore's public bus transport system became a rapidly growing network radiating from the city centre, with STC buses operating in town and mosquito buses servicing the outskirts. Despite this seemingly well-connected system, commuters found it a nightmare to travel by bus. Each bus company controlled its own territory and set its own rules and

regulations, timetables, as well as routes and fares. As a result, commuters wasted time and money waiting and transferring between different buses just to get to their final destinations.<sup>7</sup>

## BUS COMPANIES IN SINGAPORE (1919–1973)



### 1919–1930s

- Singapore Traction Company (established in 1925)
- Mosquito buses (unlicensed)

### 1930s–1970

- Singapore Traction Company
- Kampong Bahru Bus Service (established in the 1930s)
- Tay Koh Yat Bus Company (established in 1932; absorbed Seletar Motor Bus Company by 1940)
- Changi Bus Company (established in 1933)
- Green Bus Company (established in 1934; absorbed Jurong Omnibus Service in 1945)
- Katong-Bedok Bus Service Company (established in 1935)
- Paya Lebar Bus Service (established in 1935)
- Keppel Bus Company (established in 1936)
- Punggol Bus Service (established in 1936)
- Easy Bus Company (established in 1946)
- Hock Lee Amalgamated Bus Company (formed in 1951 from a merger between Ngo Hock Motor Bus Company, established in 1929, and Soon Lee Bus Company, established in 1931)

### 1971–1972

- Singapore Traction Company (ceased operations in 1971)
- Amalgamated Bus Company (formed from a merger of Hock Lee, Keppel Bus and Kampong Bahru in 1971)
- Associated Bus Services (formed from a merger of Paya Lebar, Changi, Katong-Bedok and Punggol in 1971)
- United Bus Company (formed from a merger of Tay Koh Yat, Green Bus and Easy Bus in 1971)

### 1973

- Singapore Bus Service (merger of Amalgamated, Associated and United bus companies)

In an attempt to regulate the mosquito buses, the Registrar of Vehicles issued Chinese bus operators with licences to legally ply routes not serviced by STC. However, as the Municipal Ordinance of 1935 ruled that only certified companies could be issued with licences, this forced individual operators to organise themselves into 12 bus companies – STC and 11 Chinese bus companies.

A period of expansion soon followed, but this was accompanied by failed attempts at further regulatory controls, as well as growing public dissatisfaction with the bus transport service. There was a lull period when Singapore fell to the Japanese on 15 February 1942. After the war, whatever bus companies that survived the Japanese Occupation

scrambled to get back on their feet.<sup>8</sup> This situation continued until 1951, with 10 Chinese bus companies, along with STC, servicing commuters.<sup>9</sup>

#### 1940s and 50s: A Tumultuous Era

Public bus services in the late 1940s and 50s were marred by corruption and worker strikes. Dubbed as "The Squeeze", the corruption took many forms:

"... with the most common being the issue of a ticket of a lower face value than of an actual fare being paid, with the difference being pocketed by the conductor. Then there was the collecting of used tickets from passengers as they

alighted in anticipation of resale, time and time again... A third method was for the collection of fares as the passengers alighted, without the issue of any ticket... This was a highly organised system of theft, and those involved would need the cooperation of other employees... and shares for drivers, ticket clerks, time keepers and the like had to be allowed for... so lucrative... that it was said at the time that any man seeking to be employed as a conductor would be willing to pay something like fifty dollars 'coffee money' to the right person in order to obtain a job."<sup>10</sup>

Worker strikes supported by two trade unions – Singapore Traction Company Employees' Union and Singapore Bus Workers' Union – were common, the most serious being the "Great STC Strike" of 1955. STC's refusal to increase wages in July 1955 resulted in a 142-day strike by workers demanding increased pay and better welfare, with employees from Chinese bus companies joining the fray in November.

STC's union had earlier given formal notice to management that if their demands were not met, all its workers would go on strike in September. Bus garage entrances were blocked by picket lines and banners depicting the wicked actions of greedy shareholders (such as European bosses whipping cowed employees harnessed to buses) were hung along boundary fences.<sup>11</sup>

The Chinese bus companies were the first to reach an agreement with the Singapore Bus Workers' Union and resumed their bus services in December 1955, while protracted negotiations with STC workers continued. An agreement to end the STC strike was finally reached on 15 February 1956, and its workers resumed work the following day. At the time, no one would have guessed that these events would put an end to the 30-year monopoly held by STC, and subsequently contribute to its demise some 16 years later.<sup>12</sup>

The Commission of Inquiry formed by the government to review Singapore's public transportation system observed a number of issues with the public bus service, including overcrowding, corruption, lack of coordination among the different bus companies on routes and fares, inadequate staff training, long working hours, and poorly maintained buses. The *Report of the*

#### "PIRATES" TO THE RESCUE!

Imagine having no public buses or trains running for a month. How would you travel to work or school?

This is what happened during the "Great Strike" of 1955 when bus workers in Singapore refused to turn up for work. Commuters resorted to one of the earliest modes of passenger transport in the colonial history of Singapore – trishaws – and another, more recent service: "pirate" taxis.



A mosquito bus in between a taxi and a cyclist, 1935. FW York Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

#### CHINESE BUS COMPANIES

Chinese-owned bus companies in Singapore have a long history that predates the 1930s. The early owners were mainly immigrants of Fuqing and Henghua origins from Fujian province in China. Most started out as rickshaw drivers, menial labourers or hawkers and, after several years of hard work and frugal living, ventured into the transport business.

The "business" began by a few trusted "insiders" pooling their capital – family members or individuals from the same village area in China, for example. Often, the money was used to buy a mosquito bus and, depending on the amount of funds contributed, one person could own half the vehicle while another owned two wheels. Profits were prorated according to the amount invested.

models, design infrastructure for bus stops and terminals, and maintenance standards.<sup>16</sup>

On 11 April 1971, the 11 existing bus companies were reorganised into four entities: Amalgamated Bus Company, Associated Bus Services, United Bus Company and STC. In a sudden turn of events, STC, the oldest bus company among the four, announced in December the same year, only nine months after the amalgamation, that it would cease operations. STC – which once owned the largest fleet of trolley buses in the world – had suffered staggering losses, contributed in part by its own systemic organisational problems and increasing competition as a result of losing its business monopoly.<sup>17</sup> STC's demise was sealed when it was acquired by the other three bus companies.<sup>18</sup>

The fate of the remaining three companies also hung in the balance: they competed instead of cooperating with one another, and there was no standardisation of fares, services and schedules. In short, the amalgamation of public bus services was only in name but not in spirit, and the government was fast losing its patience.<sup>19</sup>

*Commission of Inquiry into the Public Passenger Transport System of Singapore*, published in 1956, also known as the Hawkins Report, recommended a radical move<sup>13</sup> – the nationalisation of Singapore's public bus service. This would set off a chain of events over the next 17 years.<sup>14</sup>

#### From Eleven Companies to Three

Singapore's changing political landscape over the next decade would delay the nationalisation process as the newly formed government paid attention to more urgent issues such as housing. The next landmark study on public bus services was the 1970 White Paper titled *Reorganisation of the Motor Transport*

Compared with the Singapore Traction Company, which was run by an international company based in London, Chinese bus companies were organised along "clannish" and informal lines – and managed in a laissez-faire manner based on trust among friends and kinsmen. It was only in the 1930s that other Chinese dialect groups were able to penetrate the Fuqing- and Henghua-controlled Chinese bus service industry.

Despite the growth of Singapore's public transport industry over the next 40 years, the informal management style of Chinese bus companies persisted. This became a problem in the 1970s when there was a dire need to modernise the public bus system to support Singapore's rapidly growing population and economy.

*Service of Singapore*, which also recommended conducting a separate study on the coordination and rationalisation of bus routes. This led to the Wilson Report, or *A Study of the Public Bus Transport System of Singapore*, in the same year.<sup>15</sup>

Both reports recommended that the first step towards nationalising public bus services was to merge the 10 Chinese bus companies into three regional companies servicing the eastern, northern and western parts of Singapore, alongside a reorganisation of STC [to continue servicing the central sector], which had been suffering severe operating losses. In addition, the Wilson Report also provided detailed recommendations for bus routes, frequencies, fares, vehicle design and

#### From Three Companies to One

"The picture as presented during 1972... Everywhere the traveller went there were breakdowns: a broken down bus did little to assist the concept of the "green" city... the conductor was required to remove a seat cushion to place some distance behind the failed bus, adding a branch of a tree to act as an additional marker. The

(Below) The scene at a bus stop before the queue campaign by the Singapore Traction Company, 1960s. FW York Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore. (Right) A bus conductor of the Singapore Traction Company at work, 1960s. FW York Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.





(Left) A bus conductor on duty in the 1970s. *The Theatre Practice Ltd Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*  
(Middle first row) Pre-1971 bus tickets issued by the 10 Chinese bus companies; (second row) Bus tickets issued by United Bus Company, Associated Bus Services and Amalgamated Bus Company between 1971 and 1973. All rights reserved, York, F. W., & Philips, A. R. (1996). *Singapore: A History of its Trams, Trolleybuses and Buses Vol 2: 1970s and 1990s* (pp. 18, 45). Surrey: DTS Publishing. (Call no.: RSING 388.41322095957 YOR)  
(Bottom) A bus conductor's ticket punch from the 1960s. *F W York Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

roadside vegetation took terrible punishment for a time, whilst personal experience was to reveal that not always were the cushions returned once the bus was back in service.”<sup>20</sup>

With little progress made by bus companies on the recommendations put forward by the aforementioned reports, deteriorating bus services became the subject of a parliamentary debate on 12 March 1973. Several members of parliament pointed out the frequent breakdowns, reckless driving and the poor service mentality of bus workers in general. A letter by a L.P.H published in *The Straits Times* on 16 March 1973 also noted that long drives without rest, made worse by “boneshaker buses”, the tropical heat, traffic congestion, and the smell and fumes from old engines contributed to drivers’ fatigue and did little to boost the morale of bus workers.<sup>21</sup>

Left with no choice, the government announced the merger of the three bus companies to form Singapore Bus Service (SBS) on 1 July 1973.

It was believed that a single bus operator would help eliminate the problems of wasteful competition, lack of standardisation, and duplication in route services that had dogged public bus services since the very beginning. Not unexpectedly, the merger began on a rocky note as shares of SBS were still held by the former Chinese bus companies, with allocation based on the relative sizes of the companies prior to the amalgamation in 1971. In other words, SBS was a cooperative – and not a single entity – run by 10 different companies.

The mammoth task of reorganising and overhauling SBS’s operating structure and culture was left to a task force of senior civil servants known as the Government Team of Officials (GTO)

in May 1974. Appointed by then Minister for Communications Yong Nyuk Lin, the team – comprising Wong Hung Khim, Yap Boon Keng, Ang Teck Leong, Yeo Seng Teck, Lo Wing Fai, Ong Chuan Tat and Mah Bow Tan – was seconded to SBS to oversee the transformation.<sup>22</sup>

### A New Beginning

On 20 July 1974, the GTO submitted its report, *Management and Operations of Singapore Bus Service Ltd: Report of Government Team of Officials*, to Yong, recommending that SBS be nationalised. The report summed up the findings thus:

“It is clear that while many of the problems facing SBS were inherited, management weakness resulting in lack of control and supervision at every level is the root cause of its inability to provide a clean and efficient service. Staff morale is low because of poor working conditions. On the other hand, slack discipline has resulted in wide-spread malingering, unjustifiably high charges on overtime and poor standards of maintenance and service... we are of the opinion that if SBS is left to run on its own, the quality of our public bus service will deteriorate still further... There appears, therefore, no other option at the moment but for the Government to assist by seconding such number of Government Officials as it can spare while the rest can be directly recruited.”<sup>23</sup>

The government accepted the findings and recommendations of the GTO. The first priority was to institute a new organisational structure with checks and balances in place to break up the “little conglomerates” formed under the previous structure. New departments, such as human resources, finance, operations and planning, and warehouse and logistics, were also established.<sup>24</sup>

Corruption and unaccountability rampant at all levels had to be quickly eradicated. For example, the GTO discovered, to their horror, that the daily collections of coins, concession cards and bus tickets were kept unlocked in branch offices and depots without proper accounting and security measures in place. Anyone could help themselves to the money and items.

Section managers had their own vested interests; they ran their own hardware businesses or petrol stations outside of work, and frequently made purchases on behalf of the company without proper quotes or tenders.<sup>25</sup>

The GTO went to work. One of the first things they did was to destroy all bus tickets and print new ones, after which takings went up dramatically. They kept records, computerised takings and closely monitored staff. There was some initial resistance at first from not just SBS management and staff, but also from government departments. With the backing of then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, the GTO managed to resolve matters with the government departments, and also worked closely with the unions to bring order and discipline back to the workforce. Khoo Ban Tian of Malayan Banking was approached to provide a loan of several million dollars as an emergency fund to tide the company over.<sup>26</sup>

The government mobilised a team of trained mechanics from the Singapore Armed Forces to repair and maintain the company’s buses and equipment. The SAF team did such a good job that the number of breakdowns was reduced drastically, from 800 a day in 1974 to just 145 in 1976.

Other government departments were pulled in to help as well. A former Registry of Vehicles staff, Phua Tiong Lim, recalled the confusion when many bus routes were changed to streamline the network of services. When printed copies of the new bus guides ran short, the army’s Transport Logistics Unit was enlisted to roam the streets and pick up hapless passengers who did not know how to get home.<sup>27</sup>

To address the issue of low staff morale, staff facilities and training were provided, incentives for honest and hard work were established, and a standardised structure of salary and staff benefits was introduced. The addition of new buses and workshops, and the rationalisation of bus routes, took longer to achieve, but when these improvements kicked in, they vastly improved SBS’s service standards and enhanced passengers’ experiences.

The transformation of SBS was so successful that the government decided to list it on the Singapore Stock Exchange in 1978 as Singapore Bus Service Limited. By the end of 1979, the government decided that SBS was in good hands and withdrew its team of 38 officers (of whom 19 chose to remain) seconded to the company.<sup>28</sup> In 2001, SBS was renamed SBS Transit Limited to reflect its new status as a bus and rail operator.

### Notes

- 1 Sharp, I. [2005]. *The journey: Singapore’s land transport story* (p. 49). Singapore: SNP International Publishing Pte Ltd. [Call no.: RSING 388.4095957 SHA]
- 2 Sharp, 2005, pp. 48–49.
- 3 Sharp, 2005, pp. 46, 51.
- 4 Sharp, 2005, pp. 47–49.
- 5 Sharp, 2005, pp. 47–49; Ng, G. P. (2002). *The Green Bus Co. Ltd. (1919–1971): A Chinese family business in Singapore* (p. 24). Unpublished honours dissertation, National University of Singapore.
- 6 Trolley buses, which were in operation in Singapore from 1926–1962, were electric buses that drew power from overhead wires suspended from roadside posts using trolley poles.
- 7 York, F. W., & Philips, A. R. (1996). *Singapore: A history of its trams, trolleybuses and buses vol 1: 1880’s to 1960’s* (p. 43). Surrey: DTS Publishing Ltd. [Call no.: RSING 388.41322095957 YOR]; Sharp, 2005, p. 47; Ng, 2002, pp. 8–9.
- 8 Bus companies that used to provide express services from Singapore to Malaysia (such as the Kuala-Lumpur-Singapore Express Limited, Sing Lian Express Limited, Singapore-Johore Express Limited) and school buses are not covered within the scope of this essay.
- 9 Ng, 2002, pp. 9–10; York, F. W., Davis, M., & Osborne, J. (2009). *Singapore: A history of its trams, trolleybuses and buses vol 2: Buses*
- and bus services 1970s and 1990s (pp. 8, 53, 67). Croydon: DTS Publishing Ltd. [Call no.: RSING 388.41322095957 YOR]
- 10 York & Philips, 1996, p. 71.
- 11 York & Philips, 1996, pp. 93, 99, 110.
- 12 York & Philips, 1996, pp. 95, 96, 100, 108, 112, 116.
- 13 The nationalisation of Singapore’s public bus service was first mentioned in a 1953 report by the Public Passenger Transport Committee of the City Council, which recommended acquiring the STC and bringing the private bus companies together under the control of a single government entity. However, no concrete actions were taken.
- 14 Colony of Singapore. (1956). *Report of the Commission of inquiry into the public passenger transport system of Singapore* (pp. 1, 26, 31, 35, 44, 47, 69, 71, 74). Singapore: Printed at the Government Printing Office. [Call no.: RCLOS 388.3 SIN-[RFL]]
- 15 Wilson, R. P. (1970). *A study of the public bus transport system of Singapore* (p. 1). Singapore: Government Printer. [Call no.: RCLOS 388.3220655957 WIL]; Singapore Registry of Vehicles. (1970). *Reorganisation of the motor transport service of Singapore* (p. 11). Singapore: Printed by the Government Printer Office. [Call no.: RCLOS 388.31 SIN]
- 16 Wilson, 1970, pp. 3, 7; Singapore Registry of Vehicles, 1970, pp. 6–11; York & Philips, 1996, p. 144.
- 17 To read up on the history of STC, refer to the two-volume work, York & Philips (1996) and York, Davis & Osborne (2009).
- 18 York, Davis & Osborne, 2009, pp. 82–83, 106.
- 19 York, Davis & Osborne, 2009, p. 53–56, 82.
- 20 York, Davis & Osborne, 2009, p. 44.
- 21 York, Davis & Osborne, 2009, p. 47.
- 22 York, Davis & Osborne, 2009, pp. 47–51.
- 23 Singapore. Ministry of Communications (1974). *Management and operations of Singapore Bus Service Ltd: Report of Government Team of Officials* (p. 27). Singapore: Printed by Singapore National Printers. [Call no.: RSING 388.322 MAN]
- 24 York, Davis & Osborne, 2009, p. 81; Ng, 2002, pp. 24–25; Looi, T. S., & Chi, C. C. (2016). An evolving public transport eco-system. In T. F. Fwa [Ed], *50 years of transportation in Singapore: Achievements and challenges* (p. 83). Singapore: World Scientific Publishing Co. Pte. Ltd. [Call no.: RSING 388.095957 FIF]
- 25 Sharp, 2005, p. 49; Singapore. Ministry of Communications, 1974, pp. 11, 18, 20.
- 26 Sharp, 2005, p. 49.
- 27 York, Davis & Osborne, 2009, p. 83; Sharp, 2005, p. 50.
- 28 York, Davis & Osborne, 2009, pp. 82–83, 106.



### Making a Case for Nationalisation

Before the 1970s, Singapore’s public bus industry was a freewheeling, unregulated market controlled by 11 rival bus companies vying for passengers. Each company jealously guarded its own turf, and determined its own rules, schedules and fares. Commuters had to put up with frequent vehicle breakdowns, cramped buses and confusing routes. Corruption was rife among bus workers, and labour unrest resulting in worker strikes and stoppage of work was commonplace.

The nationalisation of the public bus service in 1973 was a key milestone in the history of public transport in Singapore. More significantly, it marked the government’s first – and much needed – intervention in the affairs of privately owned companies that could not competently provide essential public services.

This episode in Singapore’s history is also an example of the bold and decisive moves taken by the nation’s first generation of civil servants in ensuring the survival of a resource-poor and newly independent island. Singapore’s public transportation system would not be the model of efficiency it is today without such top-down intervention in the nascent days of its history. ♦

# NYONYA NEEDLEWORK AND THE PRINTED PAGE



Cheah Hwei-Fe'n examines the impact of print media on the time-honoured craft of Peranakan embroidery and beadwork.

**S**ingapore's national repository of nyonya needlework, comprising the embroidery and beadwork of the Peranakan<sup>1</sup> (or Straits Chinese) community from Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia and Myanmar, is unsurpassed as a public collection. Enhanced in recent years through acquisitions and gifts, the quality of the objects and their diversity of styles show how imitation, innovation and cultural borrowing have all contributed to the art of nyonya needlework.<sup>2</sup>

Nyonya needlework has its roots in the aesthetics of Chinese embroidery, drawing on a well-established set of symbols to convey form and meaning. But embroiderers have also turned to other sources for novel patterns and inspiration. Some of the beadwork and embroidery on display at the Peranakan Museum in Singapore illustrate the connections between print and pattern in nyonya needlework, highlighting the role of the print media.

Pattern books, fashion magazines, journals, Chinese classical texts, and even children's books have played a role in introducing new motifs as well as the translation of information into visual form.

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## Symbolism and Ornamentation

Nyonya needlework is characterised by exquisite workmanship, complex textures and fine motifs, often out of scale with each other. Patterns were often worked in silk floss and twisted silk yarns, iridescent peacock feathers, glass and metal beads, and gold and silver threads of different textures. The interplay of luxurious materials and kaleidoscopic colours have all conspired to create highly decorative, tactile and scintillating surfaces.

Whether they were stitched by Peranakan Chinese women in a domestic setting or by professional craftspeople, nyonya needlework embodied labour and expensive materials, communicating both wealth and fine taste. Their designs also incorporated the use of symbols, stories and customs. In the closely-knit circles of Peranakan Chinese society, family reputations were fiercely guarded and a person's behaviour was closely scrutinised and often critiqued. In such an environment, symbolic and non-verbal cues were equally indicative of one's upbringing, understanding of tradition and family background, and some of these aspects filtered into nyonya needlework designs.

The practice of embroidery in Peranakan Chinese culture goes back at least 300 years, although the oldest

extant nyonya embroideries we know of date to the mid-19th century. Women's footwear and purses were the most commonly embroidered items, but it was at wedding celebrations that nyonya needlework was at its most glorious, taking the form of soft furnishings in the nuptial chamber and accessories for the wedding couple and their entourage (see figure 1).

Befitting such occasions, nyonya needlework was typically decorated with auspicious images of flowers, animals and precious objects drawn from Chinese art and symbols. Chinese embroidered textiles provided the models for many designs. Imagery for needlework could also have been copied from furniture, silverwork and ceramics found in the homes of Peranakan Chinese families. These familiar motifs conveyed wishes for good fortune, longevity, a blissful marriage, successful progeny and good health.

Print media offered yet another exciting visual resource, opening up a new treasure trove of designs and facilitating the spread of new themes and ideas in nyonya needlework.

## Embroidery and Printed Patterns

For centuries now, the printed page has offered prototypes for embroidery designs. Chinese books of embroidery

**(Facing page)** Figure 4: A panel with glass bead embroidery on counted thread canvas, probably from Penang, early 20th century. The crested cockatoos, pansies, dahlias and forget-me-nots are motifs adopted from European woolwork patterns. *Collection of the Asian Civilisations Museum*.

**(Below)** Figure 1: A Peranakan wedding couple with a child attendant, early 20th century. Wedding celebrations often showcased nyonya needlework in the form of accessories for the wedding couple and their entourage, and soft furnishings in the nuptial chamber. *Photograph by Che Lan & Co, Jogyakarta. Collection of the Peranakan Museum. Gift of Mr and Mrs Lee Kip Lee*.



patterns, typically from woodblocks, made it easier for embroiderers to reproduce conventional imagery in thread. However, few have managed to survive as these printed papers have degraded over time when designs were transferred onto fabric.<sup>3</sup> Extant Qing dynasty (1644–1911) pattern books carried a range of archetypal designs, from individual motifs of birds and flowers that could be arranged by the embroiderer to more intricate and completed compositions for purses and shoes. These pattern books also included complex scenes featuring mythological figures, warriors and Taoist deities.

Since the 16th century, European artisans, including professional and amateur embroiderers, have adapted illustrations from printed herbals (treatises on plants as medicine and food) and bestiaries (descriptions of real and mythical animals) as well as engravings in bibles and almanacs.<sup>4</sup> Pattern books for embroiderers were also published around this time, becoming an enduring source for contemporary sewing cultures.<sup>5</sup> Later, embroidery patterns, influenced by current fashion trends and accompanied by stitching instructions, were published in European women's magazines.

Historian Dagmar Schäfer argues that printed patterns and guide books can be understood as part of "an incipient knowledge codification process".<sup>6</sup> Their portable format enabled information to be transferred between merchants, craftsmen and customers as well as across "cultural and knowledge spheres." It did not matter if the audience was illiterate because historical pattern books contained minimal text.<sup>7</sup> Printed images – in books, magazines and newspapers, calendars, and even packaging paper – facilitated the dissemination and transmission of designs both within and across cultures.

The first instructional text on nyonya beadwork was published only as recently as 2009 by a Singaporean beader Bebe Seet.<sup>8</sup> But the impact of the printed page can be found much earlier in nyonya needlework. Books and fashion magazines were imported into the Straits Settlements (comprising Penang, Melaka and Singapore) and the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia) in the 1800s, as were Berlin woolwork (see text box overleaf) patterns where designs were marked out on point paper (similar to graph paper).

Initially sold through shops catering to Europeans, these woolwork patterns would have become more widely available

over time and crossed the seas into this part of the world. The names handwritten inside some books indicate that the nyonyas had in their possession pattern books and stitch guides such as the 1920s Chinese *Sun Sun Cross Stitch Book* series and Thérèse de Dillmont's *Encyclopedia of Needlework*.<sup>9</sup> These publications would surely have had an impact on nyonya embroidery and beading. The following examples illustrate how print media enlarged the design world of nyonya needlework.

#### Cross-Cultural Peonies

In Chinese paintings and embroideries, the peony is usually depicted in full bloom with frilly- or wavy-edged petals. They can be depicted in the manner commonly seen in nyonya embroideries, or with more stylised smooth-edged petals.<sup>10</sup> A third variation of the “peony”, especially in the gold embroideries of Java, is associated with designs found in European fashion journals, as in figure 2.

Figure 2 shows a handkerchief or tray cover embroidered with floral stems at each corner. The petals have scalloped edges and are arranged neatly around the core of the flower, much like the printed models in the Dutch magazine *Gracieuse* (see figure 3). This type of stylised “peony”, intertwined with the presentation of floral sprays in a bouquet (popularly known in batik terminology as *buketan*), continued to be applied to embroidery right into the 1930s.<sup>11</sup>

The gold embroidery technique on this work and another similar cloth largely corresponds to what is found in European military and ceremonial embroidery. The latter has a heart-shaped motif surmounted by a fruiting stem at each of the four corners.<sup>12</sup> The heart-shaped design is atypical and was probably adapted from European publications.

Similar styles of floral decoration are found on late 19th century batiks from the northern coast of Java. Certain Indo-Dutch batik designers held exclusive rights to reproduce designs from Dutch fashion journals, but artisans also copied the designs from printed sources for re-sale, resulting in the spread of popular imagery.<sup>13</sup> In the case of needlework, embroiderers may have adapted patterns directly from the magazines themselves, or they may have purchased samplers (see figure 5) or sheet patterns from the artisans.



Figure 2: Tray cover or handkerchief with gold embroidery of floral stems at each corner, probably from Java, late 19th or early 20th century. Courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

#### BERLIN WOOLWORK

A large number of sheet patterns were created to cater to the growing interest in Berlin wool embroidery on counted thread canvas in 19th-century Europe. The threads of the canvas formed a grid-like ground for embroidery. At first, the designs, produced in Germany, were printed in black and white and then coloured by hand on a printed grid rather like graph paper. Each coloured square corresponded to a stitch of the same colour on the canvas. Rather like a pixelated image, more subtle shading could be achieved with a wider range of colours and more stitches (or squares) per centimetre.

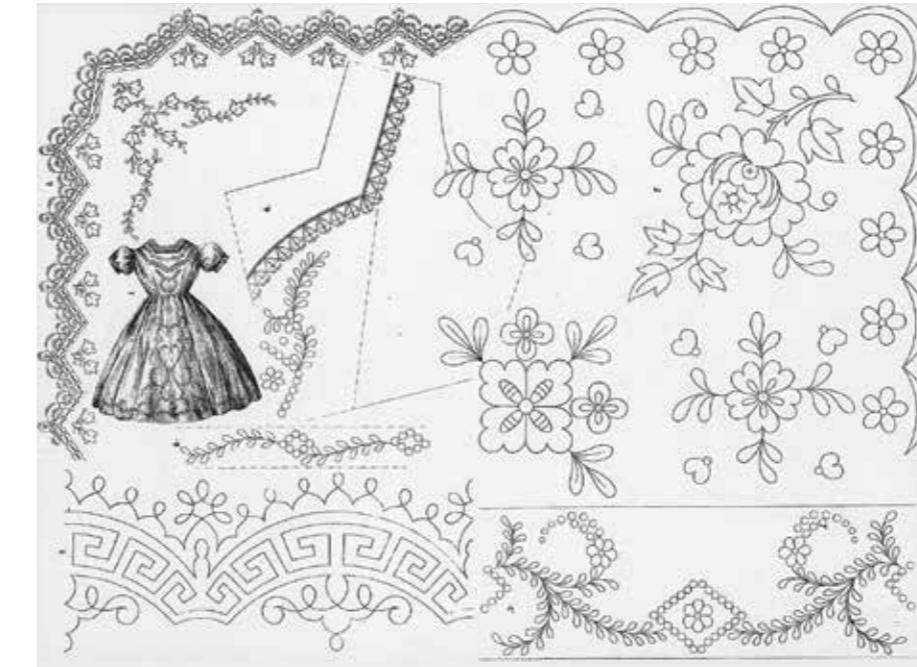
The earliest themes were floral, but rapidly expanded to landscapes, historical ruins and mythical figures, and included designs based on paintings, such as English artist Edwin Landseer's animal studies.<sup>14</sup> The number of patterns grew equally quickly. In England alone, some 14,000 patterns were available by the late 1830s.<sup>2</sup>

Although its popularity had waned by the 1880s, Berlin woolwork was still carried out. In Singapore, imported printed patterns and sewing materials were distributed throughout department stores such as Robinson

& Co.<sup>3</sup> Probably aimed at a European clientele, these patterns soon penetrated the design repertoire of the nyonyas. Indicated by coloured squares, designs were easily copied on paper, or as embroidered samplers,<sup>4</sup> many of which still survive to this day (see figure 5).

#### Notes

- 1 Barbara J. Morris (2003), *Victorian embroidery: An authoritative guide* (pp. 20–21). Mineola, New York: Dover. (Not available in NLB holdings)
- 2 See Ledbetter, K. (2012). *Victorian needlework* (p. 104). Santa Barbara, California: Praeger. (Not available in NLB holdings)
- 3 Frederick Lender & Co. advertised *Berlin Wool and Patterns, for Embroidery* in *The Straits Times*, 26 November 1850, p. 2 [See Page 2 advertisements column 2]; W. J. Allan & Co. at Raffles Place offered *Madame Gouband's Berlin-wool Instructions* in *The Straits Times*, 21 September 1886, p. 2 [See Page 2 advertisements column 1]; and Robinson & Co. advertised canvas (an evenweave fabric) for wool work in *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle*, 18 September 1888, p. 1.
- 4 A sampler refers to a piece of embroidery that features a variety of stitches or motifs that serves as a model or reference. For examples, see Victoria and Albert Museum, London (2016). *A history of samplers*. Retrieved from Victoria and Albert Museum website.



An Expanding World: Fairy Tales and Furry Animals

In the early 20th century, beadwork on counted thread canvas (fabric with a regular weave and small, regularly spaced “holes”) became widespread among nyonya embroiderers (see figure 4 on page 30). The bright hues and wide colour spectrum of glass beads that could be purchased must have attracted Peranakan weavers, and the novelty and range of sheet patterns available likely also encouraged the adoption of this method.

The nyonyas' favourite designs of cabbage roses and rosebuds, lilies, flower baskets, birds, furry animals and girls in frocks circulated through samplers, either copied from friends or purchased, rather than in printed form (see figure 5). Based on designs that had been popular in Europe half a century earlier, the patterns may be considered anachronistic, but the themes and motifs are entirely consistent with the stories that were being introduced to the nyonyas at the time. A little background history is pertinent to our understanding here.

This coincided with the period when local intelligentsia such as Dr Lim Boon Keng and Song Ong Siang, founders of the progressive *Straits Chinese Magazine* (1897–1907), were making efforts to champion education and literacy for women. But the idea faced resistance. Many Peranakan Chinese parents were concerned that formal education was either irrelevant or would lead to inappropriate or unbecoming modern



(Left) Figure 3: Embroidery designs from the Dutch magazine *Gracieuse: Geillustreerd Agleja*, 1868, installment 3, p. 28. The floral motif at the top right-hand corner is similar to the design found at the four corners of the embroidered square in figure 2. (Above) Figure 5: A beadwork sampler is a piece of embroidery that features a variety of stitches or motifs that serve as a model or reference. This sampler from either Singapore or Penang (c. 20th century) features a girl, a duck and flowe... Collection of the Asian Civilisations Museum.

Anthologies of fairy tales, nursery rhymes and female explorers were distributed as prizes.

Local bookstores, such as G.H. Kiat at Change Alley and the Peranakan Chinese-owned Koh & Co at Bras Basah Road, sold similar titles.<sup>17</sup> The motifs of puppies, kittens, swans, and little girls and boys, found in the imagery of rhymes, fairy tales and children's stories, represented an extension of the expanding imaginary and real worlds of the young nyonya in the early 20th century.

#### From Images to Text: Cultural and Self Expressions

Around this time, the nyonyas' newly acquired literacy also expressed itself more directly. A table cover (not illustrated in this article) in a private collection is beaded with unusually long text that reads:

Here's to the bride and the bridegroom  
We'll ask their success in our prayers,  
Through life's dark shadow  
and sunshine  
That good luck may ever be theirs.

Don't worry about the future,  
The present is all thou hast,  
The future will soon be present  
And the present will very soon be past.

The quatrains, relating to marriage and the passing of time, suggest the piece was made for a wedding and appear to have been copied verbatim, probably from a book of quotes and speeches.<sup>18</sup> Supplementing or substituting conventional

Chinese motifs, such phrases reiterate the nature of needlework designs as vehicles that conveyed benediction and good tidings.

Occasionally, embroidered text speaks of an individual's identity. Figure 6 shows a beaded belt from Sumatra. At the upper border in the middle of the belt, two hands depicted in black emerge from a sawtooth pattern; the hands are clearly derived from newspaper advertisements where they were frequently used to draw attention to a headline. Here, they point to "KWEENGSOEN", probably the name of the beader or the intended recipient of the belt, Kwee Ng Soen. Pots of flowers – all Chinese auspicious symbols – are aligned across the belt and identify it as culturally Chinese.

But look closely and a pair of Dutch flags in the central cartouche declares Kwee Ng Soen's allegiance to the Dutch colonial government. They flank the number "1912" – the year after the Dutch and Chinese governments resolved their dispute over the nationality status of Dutch East Indies-born Chinese, allowing them to be considered as Dutch subjects rather than Chinese citizens within Dutch territory. Expressed through word and image, the belt is a striking comment on the tensions between cultural and political identity that confronted the overseas Chinese.

Much less complicated is figure 7, where the words "Good Luck" are embroidered amidst floral decoration on this pair of men's slippers dating from the 1920s and 1930s.

## Baba Malay Books and Nyonya Needlework

The Peranakan Museum has a small but significant number of nyonya accessories with beaded and embroidered figures from popular Chinese myths and legends. The most well-known figures in the Straits Settlements were the *baxian* or Eight Immortals, and *Xiwangmu*, the Queen Mother of the West, while a wider selection was represented in needlework from the Dutch East Indies. Apart from Chinese embroidery pattern books, images found in Peranakan patois (Baba Malay) translations of popular Chinese classics may have provided ideas and inspiration for their depictions [see text box opposite].

The Baba Malay translations included full-page illustrations, sometimes by local artists, following the format of Chinese woodblock pictures.<sup>19</sup> The names of the characters could be inscribed on the page to aid the reader, thus making them familiar with the iconography and depictions of figures from Chinese historical novels and legends.

Figures in flowing Chinese period robes and military costumes appear more frequently on needlework from the north coast of Java and Sumatra. Usually lacking specific attributes, most figures are difficult to identify. However, the imagery on a beadwork case from West Sumatra (see figure 8) can be discerned by the following text: "TJERiTALOTON" and "TjERIThOLOSiOE" [on the flip side]. These refer to *Cerita Luotong*, or *Luo Tong Sweeps the North*, a Tang dynasty military adventure. Courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

Fulushou, the Daoist deities representing prosperity, happiness and longevity.<sup>20</sup>

Figure 9 shows a set of three-dimensional beadwork figurines and flowers used to decorate a sweetmeat box (*chanab*) for the altar table. Acquired from a Peranakan Chinese family in Batavia (now Jakarta), these exceptional and delightful figures come replete with beards made of hair and crowns of beads and gold thread. The figures are said to represent the various male and female

[Anti-clockwise from top]

Figure 6: Belt with bead embroidery, West Sumatra, 1912. Pots of flowers – all Chinese auspicious symbols – are aligned across the belt and identify it as culturally Chinese in origin. Courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

Figure 7: A pair of men's slippers with silver and silk thread embroidery, Penang, early 20th century. The words "Good Luck" are embroidered amidst the floral decorations. Collection of the Asian Civilisations Museum.

Figure 8: A beaded carrying case from West Sumatra, early 20th century. The text "TJERiTALOTON" on this side of the case refers to *Cerita Luotong*, or *Luo Tong Sweeps the North*, a Tang dynasty military adventure. Courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

Figure 9: Three-dimensional figurines and flowers made of wire, glass beads and gold thread [from a set of 14 pieces] used to decorate a sweetmeat box for the altar table. From Batavia (Jakarta), late 19th century. Collection of the Peranakan Museum.



## PERANAKAN TRANSLATIONS OF CHINESE CLASSICS

Before the advent of cinema, outdoor performances and narrations by itinerant storytellers of excerpts from Chinese literature were popular entertainment for the Peranakan Chinese. In the late 19th century, local publishers began issuing translations of Chinese classics such as *Water Margin* (*Song Kang*) and *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (*Sam Kok*) in Baba Malay vernacular for a Peranakan Chinese reading public.

In the Dutch East Indies, children from wealthier Peranakan Chinese families were taught to read, and "women [nyonyas] quickly shared a taste for reading with the men".<sup>1</sup>

The translations also found favour in the Straits Settlements. Lim Kim San, a former government minister in Singapore, recalls that his mother, a

nyonya whose family was from Bengkalis in Sumatra, read Baba Malay translations of the Chinese classics.<sup>2</sup>

Chinese myths and legends have provided inspiration for nyonya needlework designs. This is an illustration of Cao Ren (spelled as Cho Jin in the book) from volume 2 of *Chrita Dahulu-kala, Namanya Sam Kok, Atau, Tiga Negri Ber-prang: Siok, Gwi, Sama Gor di Jaman "Han Teow"*. Cao Ren was a military general from the late Eastern Han dynasty. All rights reserved, Chan, K. B. (1892-1896). *Chrita Dahulu-kala, Namanya Sam Kok, Atau, Tiga Negri Ber-prang: Siok, Gwi, Sama Gor di Jaman "Han Teow"*. Singapore: Kim Sek Chye Press. Collection of the National Library, Singapore. [Accession no.: B00607830B]

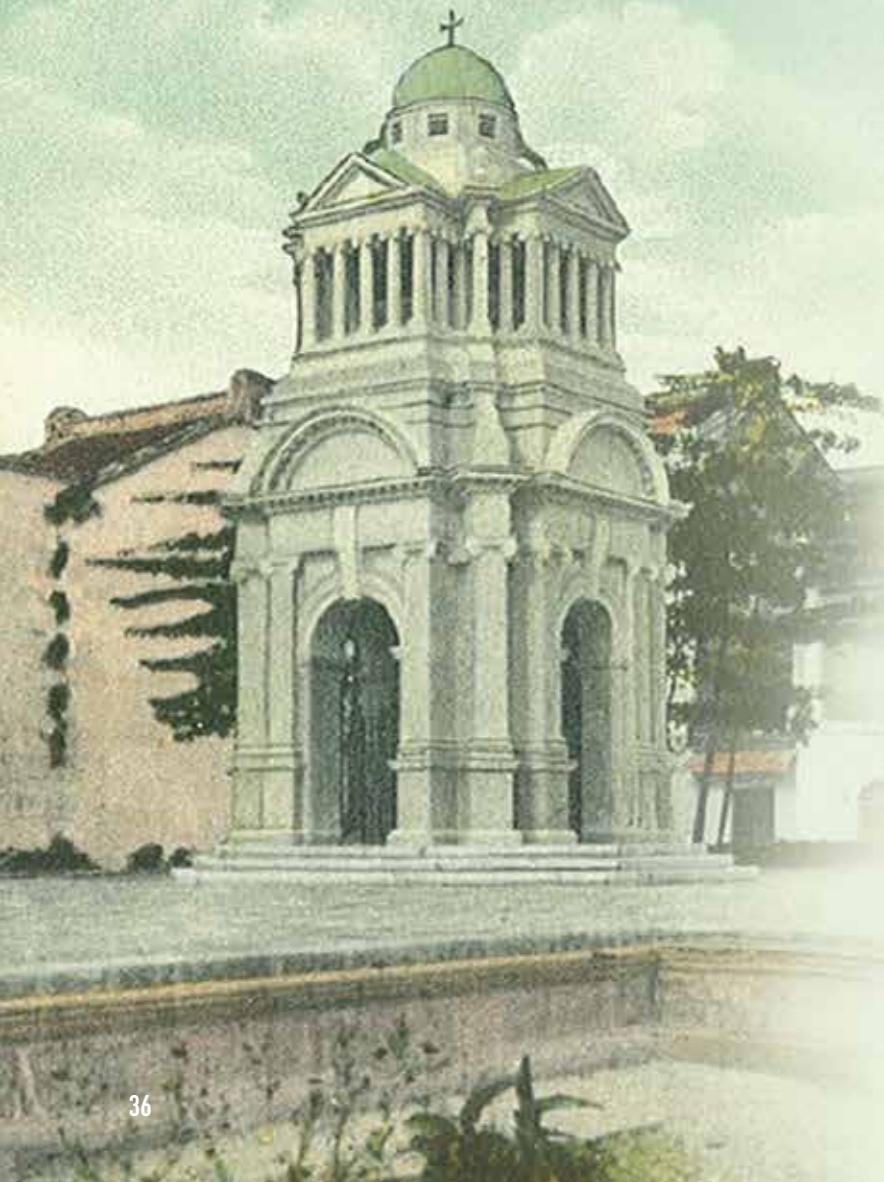
### Notes

- 1 Salmon, C. (Ed.). [2013]. *Literary migrations: Traditional Chinese fiction in Asia (17th–20th centuries)* [p. 258]. Singapore: ISEAS Publishing. [Call no.: R895.134809 LIT]
- 2 Asad Latiff. [2009]. *Lim Kim San: A builder of Singapore* [p. 13]. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies [Call no.: RSING 363.585092 ASA]
- 3 Veldhuisen, H. C. (1993). *Batik Belanda 1840–1940 = Dutch influence in Batik from Java history and stories* [pp. 40–41]. Jakarta: Gaya Favorit Press. [Call no.: RART q746.6620958 VEL]
- 4 Neo, P.N. [1907, December]. Gambling amongst our nyonyas [Microfilm no. NL 268]. *The Straits Chinese Magazine: A Quarterly Journal of Oriental and Occidental Culture*, 11[4], 150–153, p. 153. Singapore: Koh Yew Hean Press.
- 5 The Teluk Ayer Chinese Girls' School (1906, January 20). *Eastern Daily Mail and Straits Morning Advertiser*, p. 3. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 6 The Singapore Chinese Girls' School. (1914, January 26). *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, p. 12. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 7 Schäfer, D. [2015]. Patterns of design in Qing-China and Britain during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In M. Berg, et al., *Goods from the East, 1600–1800: Trading Eurasia* [p. 107]. Hounds mills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan. [Call no.: RSEA 382.09504 GOO]
- 8 Seet, B. [2009]. *Peranakan beadwork: My heritage*. Singapore: Bebe Seet. [Call no.: RSING 746.508995 SEE]
- 9 De Dillmont's guide was first published by the producer of embroidery threads, Dollfus-Mieg & Cie (now DMCI), in France in 1884. The English edition was released in 1886. See De Dillmont, T. (1996). *The complete encyclopedia of needlework*. Philadelphia: Running Press. [Call no.: RART 746.403 DIL]
- 10 See for example, a handkerchief or tray cover with silk thread embroidery [Accession no.: 1995-2461], and two panels, possibly table covers, each with silk thread and gold thread embroidery, and a netted beadwork fringe along one edge [Accession nos.: 2005-1292 and 2005-1328]. Retrieved from Roots.sg, National Heritage Board.
- 11 For examples, see a pair of slipper faces with silver thread embroidery [Accession no.: 2015-02101] and slipper faces embroidered with glass beads [Accession no.: 2015-02100]. Retrieved from Roots.sg, National Heritage Board; Cheah, H.-F. (2017). *Nyonya needlework: Embroidery and beadwork in the Peranakan world* [fig. 2.16, p. 39]. Singapore: BiblioAsia website.
- 12 See tray cover embroidered with gold and silver thread [Accession no.: 2012-00875]. Retrieved from Roots.sg, National Heritage Board.
- 13 G.H. Kiat stocked a range of books and magazines, including *Weldon's Ladies' Journal* and "English Fashion Books", as well as Bible stories for children, fairy tales and nursery rhymes. See advertisements: Page 4 Advertisements column 1: Kim Kiat & Co. [1918, December 31]. *The Malaya Tribune*, p. 4; Page 6 advertisements column 2: Beautiful gift books. [1923, December 11]. *The Straits Times*, p. 6. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 14 Titles offered by Koh & Co on Bras Basah Road included *Bo-Peep, Aesop's Fables*, and *My book of Best Fairy Tales*. See Page 5 advertisements column 6: Gift books for X'mas presents. [1919, December 17]. *The Straits Times*, p. 5. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 15 Cheah, 2017, p. 249.
- 16 Salmon, 2013, pp. 257–258. On Chan Kim Boon's translations of *Song Kang* and *Sam Kok*, see also Mazelan Anuar. (2015). A Chinese classic in Baba Malay. *BiblioAsia*, 11[4], 54–55. Retrieved from BiblioAsia website.
- 17 Mazelan Anuar. (2015). A Chinese classic in Baba Malay. *BiblioAsia*, 11[4], 54–55. Retrieved from BiblioAsia website.
- 18 Cheah, 2017, p. 220.



# A TALE of TWO CHURCHES

Penang's Armenian church was demolished in the early 1900s while the one in Singapore still thrives. **Nadia Wright** looks at the vastly different fates of these two churches.



**Dr Nadia Wright** is a retired teacher and now active historian who lives in Melbourne. She specialises in Singapore's colonial history and the Armenian community in Southeast Asia and Australia. She has written books and scholarly articles on Armenians, Singapore's national flower, the *Vanda Miss Joaquim*, and the roles of Stamford Raffles and William Farquhar in Singapore's history.

In Penang, the Armenian Apostolic Church of St Gregory the Illuminator was consecrated in 1824; nearly 12 years later in Singapore, another church bearing the same name was consecrated.

The futures of these two churches could not have been more different: while the Penang church was demolished in 1909, the Singapore church continues to exist to this day as the focal point for a small but thriving Armenian community, besides being a tourist attraction.

## The Armenian Church in Penang

Around 301 AD, Armenia became the first country in the world to adopt Christianity as the state religion after the apostle Gregory converted its king, Tiridates III. This would cause much strife in later years as Armenia stood between two great Muslim powers: Persia and the Ottoman Empire. In the early 16th century, in his war against the Ottomans, the Persian king Shah Abbas razed the Armenian city of Julfa and deported some 25,000 Armenians to Persia (present-day Iran), mainly to his new capital Isfahan. He resettled most of the Armenians in an area that became known as New Julfa.

It was the descendants of these Persian Armenians, renowned for their acumen as merchants, who subsequently settled in India and later, Java, Penang and Singapore.<sup>1</sup> As religion was integral to their lives, these diasporic merchants built churches in their new settlements as soon as they had the means. Penang and Singapore were no exception.

In 1786, Francis Light acquired the island of Penang from the Sultan of Kedah on behalf of the British East India Company (EIC) and established the settlement of George Town. The colony soon developed into a bustling entrepôt and attracted Armenian merchants from India and Java. Initially, these Armenians used the services of the Catholic and Anglican clergy for worship; however, as their numbers increased, they felt the need to have a church of their own.

In February 1821, an Armenian delegation met the British Governor of Penang, William Phillips, who asked for a plan and an estimate of costs. The sum needed was \$7,000. Armenian philanthropist Carapet Arrackell bequeathed \$2,000 of this amount, and the community raised another \$2,000. As they were short of \$3,000, the Armenians petitioned Governor Phillips for a donation in 1822.

Phillips was of the view that hard-working Christian people would be an asset to the colony and to encourage more Armenians to settle in Penang, he donated \$500 on behalf of the EIC, while recognising that this amount was much less than what the Armenians were anticipating. Indeed, this was a paltry sum compared with the \$60,000 the EIC had donated towards the building of the Anglican St George's Church in Penang. The directors of the EIC readily approved the donation

**(Facing page)** A postcard featuring the Armenian Commemorative Monument in Penang, c.1909. **(Below)** A painting of the Armenian Church in Singapore by John Turnbull Thomson, 1847. This view shows the original chancel and the second turret. All rights reserved, Hall-Jones, J. (1983). *The Thomson Paintings: Mid-nineteenth Century Paintings of the Straits Settlements and Malaya* (p. 43). Singapore: Oxford University Press. [Call no.: RSING 759.2 THO]

seeing that it would encourage these hardworking and peace-loving people to settle in Penang.

The Armenian merchant Catcha-toor Galastaun not only made good the shortfall, but additionally purchased a plot of land in September 1821 at Bishop Street between Penang Street and King Street. Construction of the church commenced under the supervision of British merchant and shipwright, Richard Snadden, and, in 1822, Bishop Abraham of Jerusalem officiated the laying of the foundation stone. In May 1824, the community bought the neighbouring site that had housed the government dispensary, thus enlarging the church compound and providing space to build lodgings for the priest.

On 4 November 1824, the church was consecrated in a service led by Bishop Jacob of Jerusalem and assisted by Reverend Iliazor Ingerolie, Penang's first fulltime Armenian priest. The church was officially named the Armenian Apostolic Church of St Gregory the Illuminator. The local press described the church as the project of a "public spirited individual" (in reference to Galastaun), proclaiming it to be "one of the best proportioned and most elegant" buildings in Penang, adding that it "reflects much credit on the Armenian population".<sup>2</sup>

Galastaun and his peers must have envisaged a much larger Armenian community settling in Penang when they pressed for a church. But this, unfortunately, did not materialise: Armenian numbers in Penang never surpassed more than 30. The success of rival Singapore spelled the end of the Penang church. After Singapore became the capital of the Straits Settlements in 1832 and surged ahead as its commercial centre, there was little incentive for Armenian entrepreneurs to sink their roots in Penang. The community shrank as members left, and the remaining few struggled to support the church.

Despite Penang's tiny Armenian congregation, priests were sent out from Persia approximately every three years until 1885. After that, church services were held only when a priest visited Penang. The last was conducted in 1906 by Archbishop Sahak Ayvatian from the Mother church in Isfahan. On his visit, Archbishop Ayvatian discussed the future of the deteriorating church building with key members of the Armenian community. Whatever their decision, the church's fate was sealed in February 1909 when decaying beams caused the collapse of a major balustrade, and large sections of the walls caved in. There was no option but to raze the building, retaining only the churchyard and parsonage.<sup>3</sup>



As a memorial to the church, Armenians Joseph Anthony and Arshak Sarkies commissioned German architect Henry Neubronner to design a commemorative monument that was erected in 1909.<sup>4</sup> Over the years, the monument as well as the garden surrounding it and the tombstones in the graveyard became neglected, leading the press to report that this made a mockery of those who had erected the memorial.

In the late-1930s, the trustees of St Gregory's Church in Singapore sold the site, on the instructions of the Mother church in Persia, and the monument was demolished. In August 1937, the 20 Armenians buried in the churchyard were re-interred in Western Road Cemetery (Penang's municipal cemetery at the time) in a service conducted by Reverend Shamaian from Singapore.<sup>5</sup> The money received from the sale of the church land was invested in the Catchatoor Galastaun Memorial Fund and managed by the church trustees in Singapore. The church's silverware and its foundation plaque dated 1822 were given to the Armenian church in Singapore.<sup>6</sup>

Unfortunately, no image of the Armenian church in Penang has been found even though the building survived until 1909. Presumably it displayed all the customary features of an Armenian church – built of stone, with a vaulted ceiling, a dome and an east-facing chancel – as does the one in Singapore.<sup>7</sup> References to the church building are scarce. Writing in 1839, Thomas Newbold commented that the Armenian chapel was one of the principal buildings in George Town, while James Low described it as “handsome”.<sup>8</sup> Today, not even a marker indicates where this church once stood.

### The Armenian Church in Singapore

The fate of the Armenian church in Singapore took a different trajectory altogether. Within a year of the establishment of a trading post in Singapore in 1819 by Stamford Raffles, Armenians began arriving. Initially, Reverend Iliazor Ingergolie travelled from Penang to conduct services for the Armenian community in Singapore. But after the community grew to around 20 in 1825, the Armenians wrote to the Archbishop in Persia asking that a priest be sent to serve their spiritual needs. In 1827, Reverend Gregory Ter Johannes arrived in Singapore.

At first, Reverend Ter Johannes conducted services in the premises of an Armenian merchant named Isaiah Zechariah, but soon, as in Penang, the community wanted its own church. In March 1833, Zechariah began petitioning Samuel Bonham, the Resident Councillor in Singapore, for a grant of land. Eventually a suitable site was agreed upon at the foot of Fort Canning. This land had earlier been granted to Dr Nathaniel Wallich to establish an experimental botanical garden, but this particular site facing Hill Street was left unused.<sup>9</sup>

Bonham sent the request for land along the bureaucratic path to Thomas Church, the Acting Governor in Penang, who then forwarded it to the government in Calcutta (Kolkata), hoping it would be approved as the Armenians were “peculiarly docile and diligent and in every respect desirable colonists”.<sup>10</sup> In July 1834, approval for the land was granted; the welcome news reaching Singapore in September, whereupon the Armenians sprang into action.

The leading British architect of the time, George D. Coleman was com-



**(Above)** Arshak Sarkies [pictured here], along with Joseph Anthony, commissioned German architect Henry Neubronner to design a commemorative monument for the Armenian Church in Penang. The monument was erected in 1909. *Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.*  
**(Below)** View of Government Hill, the English Burial Ground and the Armenian Church in Singapore, in 1840. This view shows the original dome of the church with the gold cross on top and the pitched roof. *Courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.*

sioned to design the church and oversee its construction. Work commenced at a rapid pace. The foundation ceremony was conducted on 1 January 1835 by the Very Reverend Thomas Gregorian who travelled from Isfahan for the occasion, and the local priest Reverend Johannes Catchick.

The total cost of the construction, as well as accessories and regalia for the priest, amounted to \$5,058.30. While the Penang church benefited from two wealthy donors, Singapore was not so fortunate. A public subscription was launched and, by mid-1836, some \$3,120 had been donated, mostly by local Armenians. This left a shortfall of nearly \$2,000 as well as the further \$600 that was required to build a parsonage.

The paucity of donations from non-Armenians led to a sharp rebuke from *The Singapore Chronicle* newspaper, which had hoped that the meagre \$370 donated by the Europeans and others would be supplemented; after all, Armenians had generously donated when the call was made to raise funds to build St Andrew's Cathedral.<sup>11</sup> But the plea largely fell on deaf ears. Fortunately, the 12 or so local Armenian families managed to raise the money, and also promised to cover ongoing costs.<sup>12</sup>

On 26 March 1836, the church was consecrated and dedicated to St Gregory, sharing the same name as the Penang church – the Armenian Apostolic Church of St Gregory the Illuminator. *The Singapore Free Press* declared it as one of Coleman's “most ornate and best finished pieces of architecture.” The paper reported in glowing terms:

“This small but elegant building does great credit to the public spirit and religious feeling of the Armenians of this settlement; for we believe that few instances could be shown where so small a community have contributed funds sufficient for the erection of a similar edifice”.<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, the church relied on a very small community (which never numbered more than 100 at its peak) to maintain it, as well as pay for the services of a priest. The burden of supporting the church was one continuously faced by the Armenians in Penang and Singapore. In Penang, the Anthony family supported the priest for many years, while in Singapore in the 1930s, that task was taken on by Mrs Mary Anne Martin.

In the 1840s and in 1853, the Singapore community raised money for major modifications to the roof and dome. Over the years, generous individuals further contributed to improvements and additions. For example, in 1861, Peter Seth donated the bell in the steeple, although this was not hung until the 1880s. In that same decade, Catchick Moses paid for the back porch and a new fence around the compound.

As in Penang, the priest lived in a parsonage within the church grounds. The original small building paid for by Simon Stephens was replaced in 1905 by a splendid Edwardian edifice commissioned by Mrs Anna Sarkies in memory of her husband, John Shanazar Sarkies.

The church, parsonage and grounds were damaged during World War II when the British military occupied the premises. After the war, the church trustees requested compensation to pay for repairs, but in the end the War Damages Commission paid only part of the claim. In the meantime, the church and parsonage deteriorated further. Local and visiting Armenians did their best to raise funds for renovations, their efforts augmented by generous donations from the Martin family and from church funds.

The last full service by a resident priest was held in 1938, although services were led by a deacon until the onset of the war in 1942. After the war ended, arrangements were made for priests to fly over from Australia, but these visits became more infrequent as the Armenian community shrank over the years. This did not mean the church lay idle. Since 1946, other Christian denominations have been allowed to worship at the Armenian church, while occasionally a visiting



The Armenian Church in Singapore as it looks today with major alterations made around 1853 by George Maddock – the new steeple, new east portico and the flat roof. *Courtesy of the Armenian Church.*

Armenian cleric would conduct a special service for the community.

By 1970, the congregation had diminished to about 10 people and the church was in dire need of repair. The government decided that the church was worth preserving and gazetted it as a National Monument in June 1973, thus securing its future. Augmenting this sense of permanence was the arrival of Armenian expatriates from America and Europe from the 1980s onwards who were posted to Singapore for work. Breathing new life to the small and ageing Persian Armenian community, these newcomers took an active interest in the church. The church was spruced up for its 150th anniversary in 1986, and Archbishop Baliozian from Sydney and Armenians from the region took part in the celebration. Over the years, the church has remained in the public eye through articles in the

media and postage stamps released in Singapore (1978) and Armenia (1999).

After the 1990s, the size of the congregation further increased as Armenians, especially from Armenia and Russia, began to settle in Singapore. In 2016, the church trustees arranged for a priest to regularly visit from Calcutta to conduct services. The church also organises cultural events and has continued the practice of allowing weddings to be celebrated in its premises for a donation. All these activities, plus a steady flow of tourists, ensure that the church maintains a high public profile.

Unlike Penang's Armenian church which has disappeared from living memory, its counterpart in Singapore is a national monument and tourist icon. More importantly, it remains the functioning church of one of Singapore's smallest minorities. ♦



- 7 HyeEtch. [1999, August 30]. *Formation of a national style*. Retrieved from Hye Etch Arts & Culture website.
- 8 Newbold, T. J. (1839). *Political and statistical account of the British settlements in the Straits of Malacca* (vol. 1) (p. 49). London: John Murray. Retrieved from BookSG; Low, J. (1836). A dissertation on the soil & agriculture of the British settlement of Penang, or Prince of Wales Island, in the Straits of Malacca (p. 315). Singapore: Printed at the Singapore Free Press Office. Retrieved from BookSG.
- 9 Dr Nathaniel Wallich (1786–1854) was responsible for establishing Singapore's botanic gardens at Fort Canning.
- 10 Thomas Church to the Secretary to Government, Fort William 17 June 1834, R. 2, Straits Settlements Records.
- 11 Singapore. [1835, March 7]. *Singapore Chronicle and Commercial Register*.
- 12 Translation of Minutes by the late Arshak Galstaun.
- 13 Armenian Church. [1836, March 17]. *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, p. 3. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

# Early Malay Printing in Singapore

**Mazelan Anuar** tracks the rise and decline of Malay printing and publishing in 19th-century Singapore, and profiles two of the most prolific printers of that period.

Inscriptions in Old Malay can be traced back to the 7th century. These inscriptions from the pre-Islamic Malay world, such as the ones found on a small stone in Kedukan Bukit in Palembang, Indonesia, used vocabulary and scripts that are of Indian origin. The expansion of the Srivijaya kingdom from Sumatra to other parts of the Malay Archipelago resulted in the process of Indianisation that first shaped the cultural and religious practices of the Malays, including language and the art of writing.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, words borrowed from Indian languages, especially Sanskrit, were introduced into the Malay vernacular and widely used in ritual, law and court documents.<sup>2</sup>

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A composite image showing Kampong Glam from a cropped section of *Plan of the Town of Singapore, 1843*. Urban Redevelopment Authority, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore; and Sultan Mosque, c. 1928. Denis Santry Collection, National Library Board. Courtesy of Glen Christian.

the Terengganu Stone<sup>3</sup> and gravestones of a princess in Minye Tujuh (or Tujuh) in Aceh, Indonesia.<sup>4</sup>

The earliest compilations of Malay vocabulary by non-Malays were believed to have been undertaken by the Chinese in the 15th century, as well as the Italian scholar and explorer Antonio Pigafetta between 1519 and 1522, on his voyage around the world with the Portuguese explorer Ferdinand Magellan. The listing of 482 Malay words and phrases by the Chinese was carried out after 1403 when diplomatic relations between China and Melaka were established.<sup>5</sup> Pigafetta's efforts at compiling more than 400 entries took place after the fall of Melaka to the Portuguese in 1511.<sup>6</sup>



## The Proliferation of Malay Works

Publications in the Malay language were printed as early as the 17th century in Europe. Frederick de Houtman's Dutch-Malay phrasebook, *Spraecck ende woord-boeck, Inde Maleysche ende Madagaskarsche Talen*, published in 1603, is the first of such works. Apart from vocabularies and phrasebooks, translations of the Bible and other Christian tracts into Malay was also undertaken. Due to the influence of colonialisation by Western powers, European-Malay imprints adopted romanised Malay script in these publications. By the 19th century, school textbooks as well as literary and general works in romanised Malay were published.<sup>7</sup>

Although the printing press<sup>8</sup> was introduced in Southeast Asia in the late 16th century, the first Malay book was printed in Batavia (now Jakarta) in the Malay archipelago only in 1677; it was a Malay-Dutch dictionary, a new edition by Frederick Gueynier based on Caspar Wiltens' *Vocabularium, ofte Woort-boeck, naer ordre van den Alphabet int't Duytsch-Maleysch ende Maleysch-Duytsch* (1623).

In 1758, the first complete Malay Bible in Jawi was published by Seminary Press, a printing house established in Batavia in 1746. Stricter controls imposed by the Dutch East India Company in the second half of the 18th century saw no other Malay books being printed after this period.<sup>9</sup>

In the early 19th century, the missionaries of the London Missionary Society – a non-denominational Protestant society founded in 1795 in England – set up stations in Melaka, Penang, Singapore and Batavia, with the ultimate aim of penetrating China and converting the Chinese to Christianity. Missionary activity in China was frowned upon by the authorities and Europeans were barred from living and travelling in the country; Canton (now Guangzhou) was the only port opened to European traders.

These locales in the Far East, which served as popular ports-of-call for the large numbers of Chinese junks sailing from Southern China, were seen as ideal interim bases for proselytising because of their huge Chinese populations. In Singapore alone, no fewer than 100 Chinese junks visited every year. The missionaries would take the opportunity to visit and proselytise to those on board, supplying them with religious texts and scriptures for distribution in China.

The missionaries also set up printing presses at these locales to publish Christian works in the languages of the local populace.<sup>10</sup> Printing in Singapore began with the arrival of Danish missionary, Reverend Claudius Henry Thomsen, and Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir (better known as Munshi Abdullah), the learned Malay teacher and translator from Melaka. Both men had collaborated on a number of Malay-language works together. In 1823, along with another missionary, Samuel Milton, Thomsen established Mission Press, the first printing press in Singapore, after being granted approval by the colonial authorities.<sup>11</sup>

Thomsen returned to England in 1834, and the printing of Malay works was taken over by the Protestant missionary, Reverend Benjamin Keasberry, who arrived in Singapore in 1839. Keasberry also engaged the services of Munshi Abdullah who helped with the translation of works into Malay and the operation of the press. Munshi Abdullah's original literary works, such as the famous *Hikayat Abdullah* (Stories of Abdullah), were also published by Keasberry. The latter continued to print in Malay until the 1860s when the first indigenous Malay/Muslim printers and publishers emerged in Singapore.<sup>12</sup>

## FROM MANUSCRIPT TO PRINT

Before the adoption of Islam as a religion by Malay rulers in the 13th century, literacy was the reserve of the royal, noble and priestly classes. A core injunction for Muslims to read the Qur'an subsequently encouraged literacy among the masses and stimulated a new avenue of output for scribes, who painstakingly copied religious texts (*kitab*) so that more people could have access to them.

Scribes and copyists continued to play an important role until the 19th century where lithography printing – which reproduced the physical characteristics of a handwritten manuscript cheaply and in large quantities – still required the ability to write in Jawi. Further improvements to printing technology from the 20th century onwards, however, rendered scribes and copyists obsolete as their role was taken over by technicians who were proficient in operating printing presses.

## Printers of Kampong Glam

The Malay printing and publishing houses were established mainly by immigrants from Java. They settled in the Kampong Glam (or Glam) area – in the vicinity of Sultan Mosque – a bustling commercial centre where the local Muslim community would gather on Fridays after their prayers at the mosque. It was also an area that served many Hajj pilgrims, especially those from Indonesia, on their stopover in Singapore on the way to Mecca.<sup>13</sup>

Two of the most prolific Malay printers in mid- to late- 19th-century Singapore were Haji Muhammad Said bin Haji Arsyad of Semarang and Haji Muhammad Siraj bin Haji Salih of Rembang. It was the practice at the time to mention the places of origin – both Semarang and Rembang were towns in Java, Indonesia – after their names. Haji Muhammad Said and his sons published more than 200 Malay-language publications between 1873 and 1918. In the same period, Haji Muhammad Siraj published around 80 books.<sup>14</sup>

Haji Muhammad Said, along with fellow Javanese Haji Muhammad Nuh bin Haji Ismail ahl al-Badawi of Juwana, Syaikh Haji Muhammad Ali bin Haji Mustafa of Purbalingga, Haji Muhammad Salih of Rembang (Haji Muhammad Siraj's father), Haji Muhammad Tahir and Encik Muhammad Sidin, were the pre-eminent Malay printers in Singapore between 1860 and 1880. Early lithographic publications of this period tend to be jointly produced with contributions from copyists and owners of the text and press, with the printers and sellers duly acknowledged in the colophon (a statement providing information on the authorship and printing of the book, often accompanied by an emblem). The printers tended to produce books that resembled the form of the Malay manuscript.<sup>15</sup>

The Malay printing industry in Singapore continued to flourish in the following two decades, with printing activity peaking in the 1880s. Haji Muhammad Said retained his position as the leading printer alongside other second-generation printers, such as Haji Muhammad Siraj and his brother, Haji Muhammad Sidik; Haji Muhammad Amin bin Abdullah; and Haji Muhammad Taib bin Zain, who later became more prominent in the industry.<sup>16</sup>

## Haji Muhammad Said bin Haji Arsyad

Much of Haji Muhammad Said's printing and publishing activities were researched and documented by the late Dr Ian Proudfoot, one of the greatest scholars on early Malay printing. Proudfoot studied information

found in the *Straits Settlements Government Gazette*, publications produced by Haji Muhammad Said and his sons as well as other contemporaneous literature.

Haji Muhammad Said's business went by several names, such as Matbaah/Matba' Haji Muhammad Said, Matbaah al-Saidi, Haji Muhammad Said Press and Saidiah Press. Haji Muhammad Said operated out of a few locations in the vicinity of Kampong Gelam. His early publications produced before the 20th century indicate that his business was located at 47, 48 and 51 Jalan Sultan. Sometime in 1907, his shop and press moved to 82 Arab Street which was also known as Kampung Silung.<sup>17</sup>

Haji Muhammad Said had four sons: Haji Muhammad Majtahid, Haji Abdullah, Khalid and Haji Hamzah, all of whom followed in their father's footsteps in the book printing business. In 1892, the family established a branch office in Penang. By 1898, Haji Muhammad Majtahid was entrusted to run the branch office. He also set up a bookshop in Penang.<sup>18</sup>

In the beginning of the 20th century, the family business shifted its focus from printing to retailing books. Haji Abdullah, another son, assumed the main responsibility of running the bookshop in Singapore and marketing its publications. For instance, in 1912, the family publicised that their bookshop carried Malay books printed in Mecca, Istanbul, Russia, Egypt and Bombay. By 1917, the business was operating from 124 Arab Street.<sup>19</sup>

#### (Clockwise from top)

Haji Muhammad Siraj bin Haji Salih was the editor of *Jawi Peranakan*, the first Malay-language newspaper in Singapore, from 1889 to 1891. The newspaper was set up in 1876 by a group of prominent Jawi Peranakan, the Straits-born children of Malay-Indian parentage. The weekly newspaper was published every Monday in Jawi. It carried official government notices, letters from readers, editorials and *syair* (poems), and was in circulation until 1895. Pictured here is the 28 March 1881 (vol. 5, no. 214) edition. Collection of The British Library, OP434.

One al-haqir Munshi Muhammad Ja'afar bin Abdul Karim witnessed the festivities held in Melaka to celebrate the golden jubilee of Queen Victoria's accession, and requested Haji Muhammad Siraj to print this commemorative book titled *Sha'ir dan Ucapan Queen 50 Tahun Jubilee Sambutan Daripada Isi Negeri Melaka Pada 27 dan 28 June 1887*. Collection of the National Library, Singapore. (Accession no. B29362101B).

In 1895, Haji Muhamad Siraj bin Haji Salih engaged the American Mission Press to print *Peraturan Bola Sepak*, a guidebook of football rules, for the Darul Adab Club. Pictured here is a fold-out plan of a football field showing the position of the players. Collection of The British Library, 14628.b.2.

#### Haji Muhammad Siraj bin Haji Salih

It is not known when Haji Muhammad Siraj arrived in Singapore. His father, Haji Salih and his brother, Yahya, were also printers. He may have printed books in Singapore as early as 1868. Proudfoot identified publications by Siraj up to 1918, but some of these could have been produced by his successors.<sup>20</sup>

Haji Muhammad Siraj initially operated out of 44 Jalan Sultan but moved to No. 43 in 1887. Although he was a prolific printer, he was better known for his entrepreneurial endeavours. By 1891, Haji Muhammad Siraj had become the largest Muslim bookseller in Singapore and employed 10 staff in his publishing house. He sold a variety of publications at his bookshop, ranging from government school textbooks to newspapers from Cairo as well as *syair* (poems) and *hikayat* (stories) produced by his own printing press and other Kampong Gelam publishers.<sup>21</sup>

Haji Muhammad Siraj advertised and frequently produced catalogues of his stocks. This helped to attract customers and build his business, prompting orders to come through by mail and the network of agents he had established in Melaka, Penang, Perak, Batavia and Sarawak.<sup>22</sup>

Haji Muhammad Siraj was also a competent copyist-editor. He specialised in *syair*, *hikayat* and *kitab* (religious texts). Among the works he was credited as copyist include *Yatim Mustafa* (1887), *Terasul* (1894), *Abdul Muluk* (1901) and *Indera Sebaha*

(1901). These were not all produced by his own printing press. Apart from Malay and Arabic texts, Haji Muhammad Siraj was also the copyist for several *kitab* written in Javanese *pegon* script, a system of writing that uses the Arabic alphabet.<sup>23</sup>

Between 1889 and 1891, Haji Muhammad Siraj was editor of *Jawi Peranakan* (1876-95), the first Malay language newspaper in Singapore. He advertised his bookshop and the various titles it carried in the weekly paper during this period.<sup>24</sup>

Haji Muhammad Siraj was an astute and resourceful businessman. He accepted printing commissions from Melaka and carried out letterpress printing for his clients, a method that allows selected parts of the page to be printed instead of printing the entire page. In 1895, he engaged the services of the American Mission Press – which owned a letterpress printer – to print *Peraturan Bola Sepak*, a guidebook of football rules, for the Darul Adab Club, a social and recreational body. The guidebook combined letterpress text and lithographed diagrams.<sup>25</sup>

Haji Muhammad Siraj held various positions in the club, including the role of vice-president, honorary secretary and assistant secretary. At a special meeting of the club held on 4 February 1901, he read out the special prayer that he had penned to observe the passing of Queen Victoria in January 1901. The prayer was published in *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser* on 5 February 1901.<sup>26</sup> In 1907, he composed a poem to commemorate the



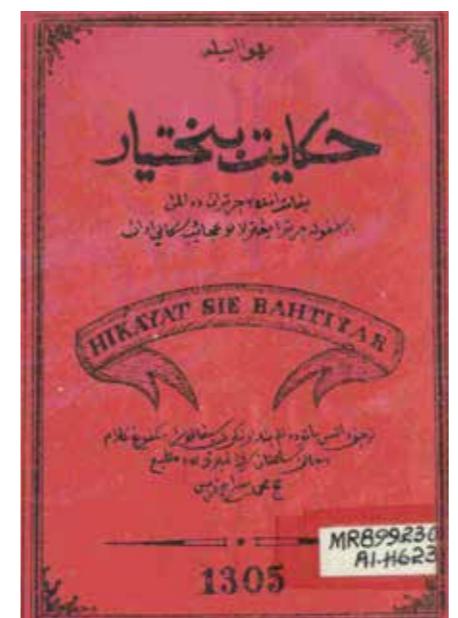
(Left) *Hambalah Yang Bernama Shaer Pantun Seloka Adanya* was printed by Haji Muhammad Said in 1900. This book of poems mentions that his shop was located in front of Sultan Mosque. Collection of the National Library, Singapore. (Accession no. B18153100H)

(Below) Printed by Haji Muhammad Siraj in 1888, *Hikayat Bakhtiari* is a collection of 10 popular stories found in both manuscripts and printed books. This book is the second edition of the *hikayat*. Collection of the National Library, Singapore. (Accession no. B03013464J)

visit of the Sumatran king, Sultan El Syed Al Sharif Hashim Abdul Jalil Saif Al Din of Siak, Sri Indra Pura, to the Darul Adab clubhouse. The sultan was an honorary member of the club and the visit on 30 August was his first.<sup>27</sup>

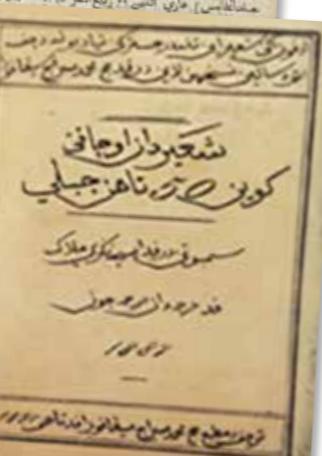
In his various correspondences in English, Haji Muhammad Siraj signed off as H. M. Sirat, for reasons known only to himself.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, this has enabled us to locate information on him in English newspapers such as *The Singapore Free Press* and *The Straits Times*.

Haji Muhammad Siraj passed away on 28 October 1909, and was laid to rest at the River Valley Road Mohammedan Cemetery. *The Straits Times* reported the news on 29 October, and declared that he was "one of the best known of the Malays in Singapore, who carried on the business of a book-seller and stationer in Sultan Rd and was well-known as a leader in Malay clubdom". It was estimated that over 4,000 people turned up for the funeral procession.<sup>29</sup>



After 1900, there was a decline in Malay lithographic printing output. Between 1890 and 1899, a total of 99 titles were registered with the colonial authorities.

In the next decade, from 1900 to 1909, the



#### Notes

- Juffri Supa'at & Gopaul, N. [Eds.]. (2009). *Aksara: Menjejaki tulisan Melayu = Aksara: The passage of Malay scripts*. Singapore: National Library Board, p. 37. [Call no.: RSING Malay 49.2811 AKS]
- Winstedt, R. [October, 1944]. Indian influence in the Malay world. *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, [2], 186–195, p. 186–7. Retrieved from JSTOR via NLB's eResources website.
- The Terengganu Stone constitutes the earliest evidence of Jawi writing (Malay writing based on Arabic alphabet) in the Malay Muslim world of Southeast Asia.
- Teeuw, A. (1959). The history of the Malay language: A preliminary survey. *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde*, Deel, 115[2], 138–156, pp. 140, 149. Retrieved from JSTOR via NLB's eResources website.
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- Gallop, A. T. [1990]. Early Malay printing: An introduction to the British Library collections. *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 63[1] (258), 85–124, p. 85. Retrieved from UKM Journal Article Repository website.
- Proudfoot, 1993, p. 40–41.
- Proudfoot, 1993, p. 40.
- Wark, 2010, p. 104.
- Proudfoot, 1993, p. 41.
- Terengganu queen. (1901, February 5). *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, p. 2. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- Darul Adab Club. (1907, September 2). *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, p. 8. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- Proudfoot, I. (1987, Disember). A nineteenth-century Malay bookseller's catalogue. *Kekal abadi: Berita Perpustakaan Universiti Malaya*, 6(4), 1–11, p. 11. Kuala Lumpur: Perpustakaan Universiti Malaya. [Call no.: RSEA Malay 027.7595 UMPKA-[LIB]]
- Social and personal. (1909, October 29). *The Straits Times*, p. 6. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- Warnk, 2010, p. 105.

number fell to 50 titles, and this dropped further to only 12 between 1910 and 1919. Lithographic printing was eventually overtaken by letterpress printing, which proved to be a more efficient method that produced better quality printing.

Furthermore, the Malay book market was flooded with publications imported from India and the Middle East by Malay booksellers. The competition affected the business of many local publishers who were forced to scale back and decrease their print output. Eventually, many ceased operations. At the same time, newspapers such as *Utusan Malaya* and *Lembaga Melayu* became more popular with the rising number of urban Malays; the new medium was better able to fulfil the information needs of the community as well as adapt to their changing reading patterns.<sup>30</sup>

After the 1920s, Malay lithographic book production became a lost art. However, the role that early Malay printers played in ushering a new era from the manuscript tradition should not be forgotten. Their important legacy has been preserved in the works they produced from the mid- to late- 19th-century, during the nascent period of Malay printing and publishing in Singapore. ♦

#### Tales of the Malay World: Manuscripts and Early Books

Be sure to catch this exhibition of old Malay manuscripts and printed books from the 18th to early 20th centuries at level 10 of the National Library Building. The exhibition ends on 25 February 2018. For more information, go to [www.nlb.gov.sg/exhibitions/](http://www.nlb.gov.sg/exhibitions/)

<sup>18</sup> Proudfoot, 1993, pp. 40, 43.

<sup>19</sup> Proudfoot, 1993, p. 43.

<sup>20</sup> Warnk, H. (2010). The collection of 19th century printed Malay books of Emil Lüring. *Sari - International Journal of the Malay World and Civilisation*, 28(1), 99–128, p. 104. Retrieved from UKM Journal Article Repository website.

<sup>21</sup> Proudfoot, 1993, pp. 40–41.

<sup>22</sup> Proudfoot, 1993, p. 40.

<sup>23</sup> Proudfoot, 1993, pp. 40–41.

<sup>24</sup> Warnk, 2010, p. 104.

<sup>25</sup> Proudfoot, 1993, p. 41.

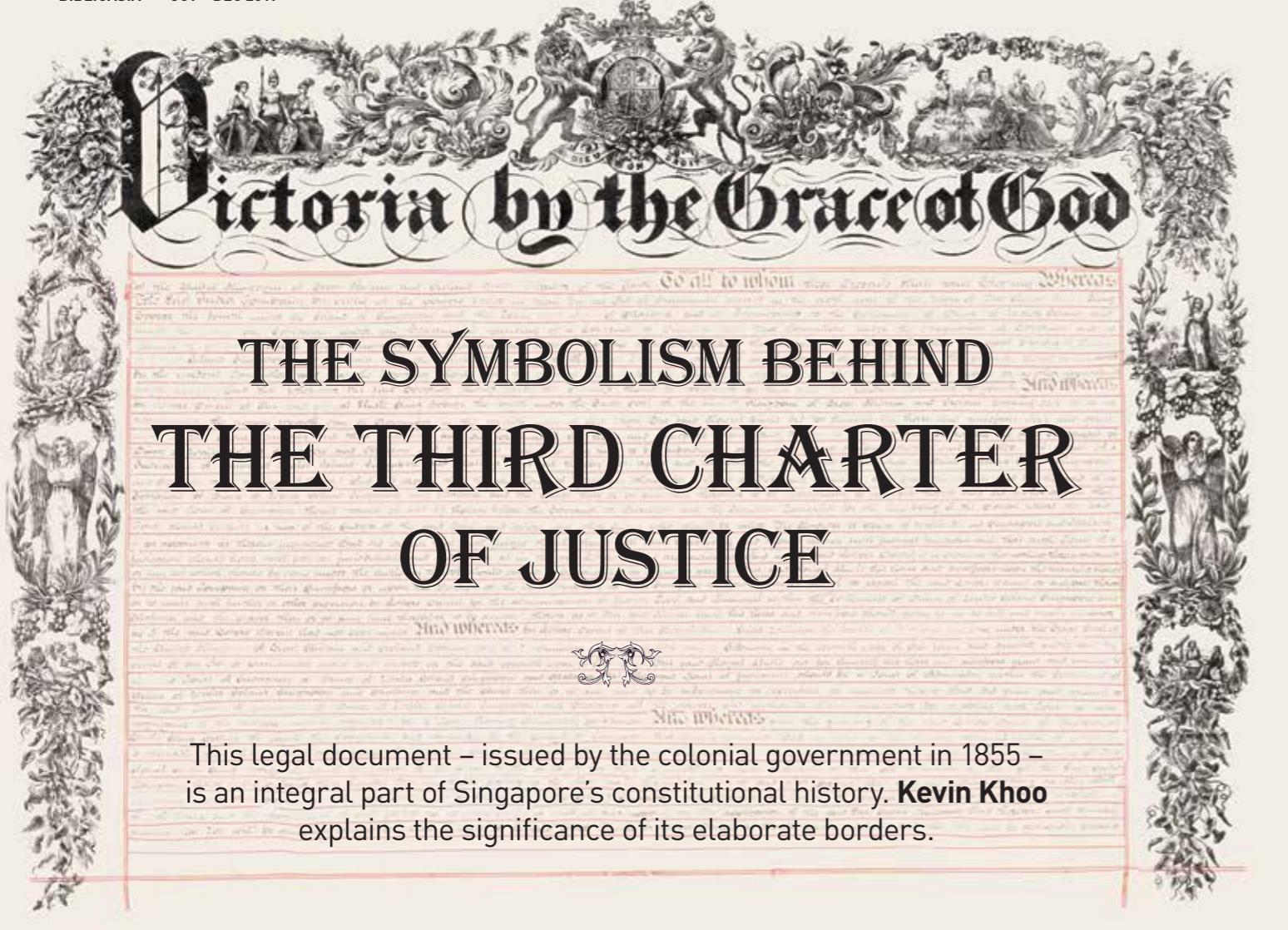
<sup>26</sup> The late queen. (1901, February 5). *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, p. 2. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

<sup>27</sup> Darul Adab Club. (1907, September 2). *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, p. 8. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

<sup>28</sup> Proudfoot, I. (1987, Disember). A nineteenth-century Malay bookseller's catalogue. *Kekal abadi: Berita Perpustakaan Universiti Malaya*, 6(4), 1–11, p. 11. Kuala Lumpur: Perpustakaan Universiti Malaya. [Call no.: RSEA Malay 027.7595 UMPKA-[LIB]]

<sup>29</sup> Social and personal. (1909, October 29). *The Straits Times*, p. 6. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

<sup>30</sup> Warnk, 2010, p. 105.



This legal document – issued by the colonial government in 1855 – is an integral part of Singapore's constitutional history. **Kevin Khoo** explains the significance of its elaborate borders.

## S

The roots of Singapore's legal system can be traced back to the British colonial era, when English common law was first adopted. English law was first introduced to Malaya through a Royal Charter<sup>1</sup> of Justice issued in Penang in 1807.

The Second Charter of Justice was issued in 1826 when Singapore, along with Melaka and Penang, became part of the Straits Settlements. The Second Charter extended the jurisdiction of the Court of Penang to Singapore and Melaka, thereby establishing a legal system based on English common law throughout the Straits Settlements.

The Third Charter of Justice of 12 August 1855 reaffirmed the reception

of English law, and resulted in the first formally constituted court in Singapore.

As a "letters patent" or public written order issued by the British Crown, the Third Charter of Justice embodied the sovereign authority of the monarchy and was richly adorned with symbolism. We take a look at the design elements decorating the physical charter document, and explore the significance and meaning behind its many symbols.

### The Royal Coat of Arms of the United Kingdoms, 1855

This royal coat of arms, which may only be used by the reigning monarch, takes centre stage at the top of the document. At the heart of the royal arms is a shield divided into four quadrants. The first and fourth quadrants each depict the three guardian lions that represent England, Normandy (northern France) and Aquitaine (south-



western France) – territories traditionally associated with the British Crown. The second contains a single lion rearing on its hind legs representing Scotland, while the third has a harp representing Ireland.

Encircling the shield is a garter or belt with the French motto, *Honi soit qui mal y pense*, which translates as "Shame on whosoever thinks evil of it". The shield is flanked by a lion crowned with a cross and a chained unicorn, which represent England and Scotland respectively. The lion is associated with Christianity and the

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virtues of Kingship – dauntless courage, valour, strength, justice and righteous power – while the unicorn symbolises the ideals of purity, grace and power.

A crown, which represents the British monarchy, sits atop the shield with a small lion perched on it. Emblazoned on a banner at the base is a second French motto, *Dieu et Mon Droit*, which means "God and My Right".<sup>2</sup>



### Justice

Lady Justice in the left hand border is blindfolded to denote her objectivity and impartiality. In her left hand, she holds a balance scale to weigh the merits and deficiencies of arguments laid before her. In her right hand, she is armed with a double-edged sword that represents the power of reason and justice.



### The Three Women of Antiquity

On the top left corner of the document is an image of the three women of antiquity garbed in Greco-Roman attire. The first woman on the left holding a harp represents Hibernia, the Latin name for Ireland. In the middle is Britannia – wearing a Greek Corinthian helmet and bearing a shield and spear – who personifies the united kingdoms that form Great Britain. The last woman with a feathered cap represents Caledonia, the Latin name for Scotland.



### Faith

The image of faith in the right hand border is represented by a missionary holding a Christian cross and evangelising to a child kneeling in reverence and prayer. The image reflects the importance placed by the British monarchy on the patronage, defence and propagation of Christianity.



### The Three Victorian Women

The three women on the top right corner – clothed in the fashion of the Victorian era – are allegorical figures representing abundant agriculture, peace and commerce. The woman on the left holding the sickle and sheaf of wheat represents a bountiful harvest, the woman in the middle wielding an olive branch symbolises peace and friendship, while the last woman with a shawl, sextant and compass represents wealth from the sea trade.



### Arts and Humanities

The depiction of individuals on the left hand border engaged in reading, painting and conversation represents culture, refinement and self-cultivation associated with the liberal arts and humanities.



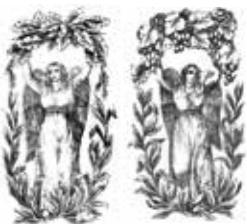
### The Four Frames

The four frames found along the left and right borders (two on each side) of the document are symbolic representations of justice, faith, the arts and humanities, and the sciences and exploration. These represent the ideals and activities protected and patronised by the British sovereign.



### Sciences and Exploration

This scene in the right hand border representing the sciences and exploration shows scholars engaged in serious study, surrounded by instruments representing the scientific knowledge and navigational technologies of the time, such as a sextant, a telescope, a globe, a book and a chart.



### The Angels

The two angels in the left and right hand borders are depicted holding their arms up in support, indicating the divine favour bestowed upon the British monarchy. The angels represent divine power, glory, honour and dignity, and are also regarded as bearers of joyful news. The angel in the left hand border is holding up a wreath of acorns symbolising antiquity and strength, while the other angel is holding up a wreath of pomegranates, symbolising fertility and abundance. ♦

The original Third Charter of Justice, along with other rare materials from the National Archives of Singapore, are on display at a permanent exhibition entitled "Law of the Land: Highlights of Singapore's Constitutional Documents". The exhibition takes place at the Chief Justice's Chamber & Office, National Gallery Singapore.

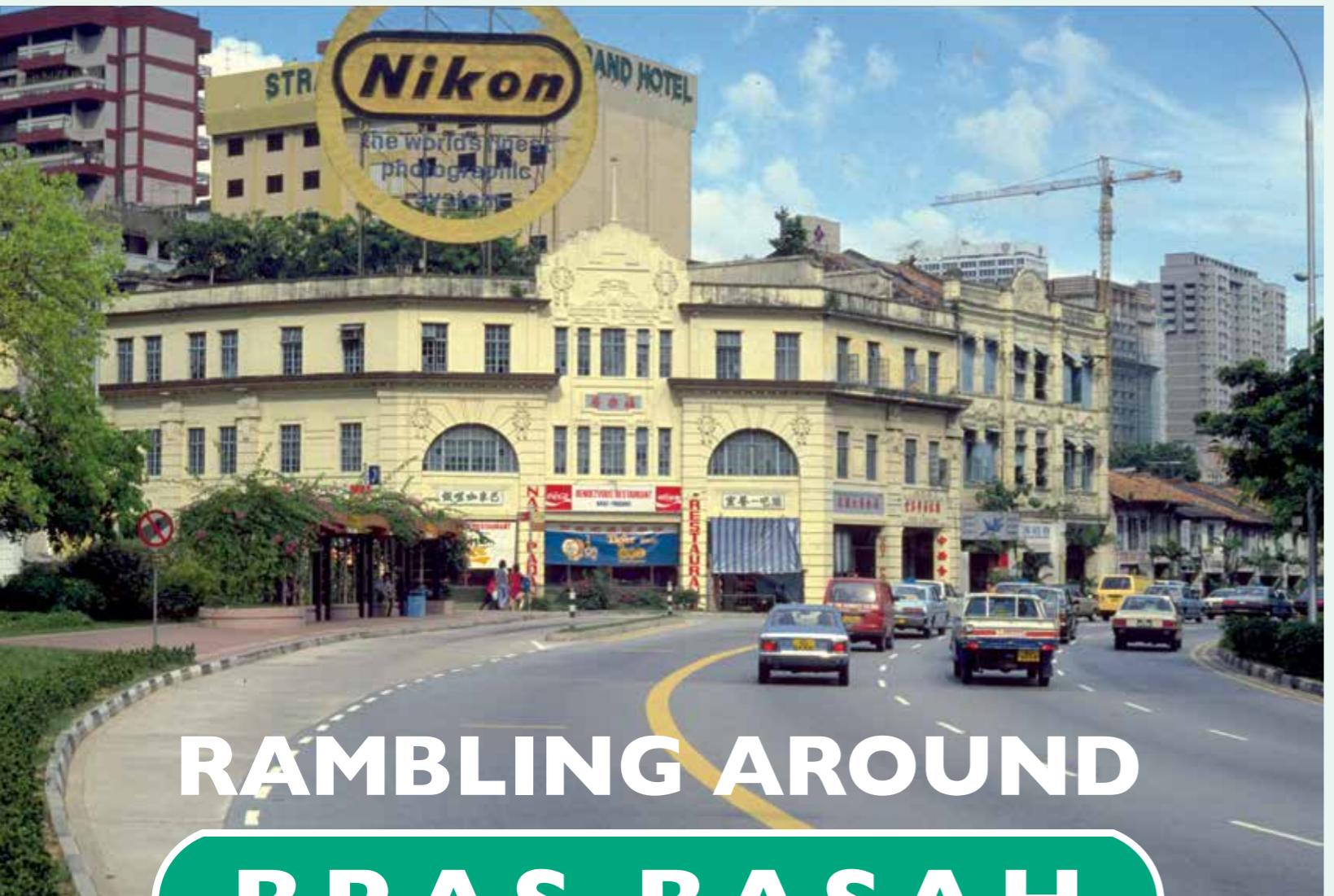
### Notes

1 A charter is a document issued by a sovereign or state outlining the conditions under which a corporation, colony, city, or other corporate body is organised, defining its rights and privileges. Retrieved from Dictionary.com.

2 Fox-Davies, A.C. (1909). *A complete guide to heraldry* [p. 190, 219–222]. London: T.C. & E.C. Jack. (Not available in NLB holdings); Crown Copyright. (n.d.). *Coats of Arms*. Retrieved from the official website of the British Royal Family.

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# RAMBLING AROUND BRAS BASAH

It's just a street to many, but for **Yu-Mei Balasingamchow**, the Bras Basah area is emblematic of how redevelopment can sometimes radically change the identity of an area.

In the last 10 years that I've been working as an independent writer and curator on Singapore history, I've spent more time in the Bras Basah area than anywhere else on the island. I often spend weekdays at the National Library, National Museum or National Archives, and on weekends I'm often in the area too, at an art exhibition or a talk, or some other public event.

Until recently, my only childhood memory of Bras Basah was having Sunday lunch with my family at Rendezvous Restaurant in the early 1980s. The no-frills restaurant was located in a shophouse along the curve at the top end of Bras Basah Road, where Rendezvous Hotel stands today. Inside the restaurant – a fan-cooled coffee shop really – we would wash

down plates of chicken *korma* and *sayur lodeh* with glasses of sweetened lime juice. Sometimes, after lunch we would take a gander at the second-hand bookshops a few shophouses down the road.

Does that paragraph sound nostalgic? I didn't mean it that way, but given the speed of urban change in Singapore, it's difficult to write about the recent past without inadvertently conjuring a world that is no more. Coffee shops selling local fare have been almost entirely expunged from the Bras Basah area, while the only "old" buildings left are those protected

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as heritage sites or national monuments. And in an age where digital media is king, the area's bookshops have mostly vanished, though a handful still soldier on inside Bras Basah Complex.

When I think about Bras Basah, however, I don't feel nostalgic or wistful. The Bras Basah I've come to know in the last 10 years has its own character – a living, functioning neighbourhood, very much of the present, that just happens to be found in an area shot through with history, even if much of it has been obscured by time, bias or neglect.

## Exploring Bras Basah

I've come to know Bras Basah and the roads that lead off it from wandering around on foot. Due to the preponderance of one-way streets and no-right-turn signs in the area, not to mention heavy traffic, it's often easier and faster to walk than to take public transport over a short distance.

At first glance, Bras Basah doesn't seem particularly walkable in our sweltering climate: there is little shelter and one is largely confined to walking along the busy main roads. Still, there is some respite. St Joseph's Church offers a serene little byway between Victoria Street and Queen Street, as does a side-lane that runs through the Singapore Management University (SMU) administration building, just behind NTUC Income Centre. On a rainy day, the underground walkways of Bras Basah MRT station offer a dry connection between Stamford Road and Bras Basah Road, but unless it's absolutely bucketing down, I prefer to traverse the grassy lawns of the SMU campus aboveground. And if I'm walking south along Bras Basah Road towards Raffles City, I usually nip inside Chijmes, rather than take the well-shaded but narrow pavement that's a little too close to traffic for my liking.

Above all, what makes Bras Basah so walkable is the pleasing symmetry of the distances between the streets. Each road or street is about 100 metres from the next, with wider sections no more than 200 metres long. On average, it takes 60 to 90 seconds for someone to walk an unobstructed 100 metres, which means that a pedestrian encounters, every so often, and with unfailing regularity, a new street and all that it entails: different architecture, a variety of sensory stimulation, a feeling of progress towards one's destination, or, if nothing else, a sense of change and movement, even for someone walking aimlessly.



(Facing page) The Rendezvous Restaurant at 4 Bras Basah Road was famous for its *nasi padang* cuisine. Photographed in 1982. Occupying the site today is the Rendezvous Hotel. Ronni Pinsler Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

(Above) G. R. Lambert print of prisoners in the convict jail compound at Bras Basah, c.1900. Illustrated London News Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

congregating for at least 200 years, if not more, the street has accumulated too many histories to be recounted here. Still, a few historical moments come to mind.

First, there is its name: Bras Basah is derived from *beras basah*, so the story goes, Malay for "wet rice" – referring to the rice grains left to dry on the banks of the stream that ran beside what is now Stamford Road.<sup>2</sup> What stream, you ask? The stream that was engineered into the Stamford Canal in the 1870s, and thereafter rerouted, covered up and concealed from view.<sup>3</sup> It flared briefly into public consciousness in 2010, when Orchard Road experienced a flash flood because part of the canal upstream was clogged by debris – a rather soggy reminder that for all of Singapore's weatherproofing, there is a geographical, and specifically riverine, logic to this island that our modern systems of drainage ultimately depend on.<sup>4</sup>

Another longstanding but forgotten feature of Bras Basah is the 19th-century prison for convict labourers transported from British India. The prison complex was established between Bras Basah Road and Stamford Road in 1841, and expanded by the 1850s to occupy almost the entire site where SMU now stands. As architectural historian Anoma Pieris records in her book, *Hidden Hands and Divided Landscapes: A Penal History of Singapore's Plural Society*, Singapore was – at the peak of convict movement in the 1850s – home to over 2,000 convict labourers, mostly men, though there were women too.<sup>5</sup>



(Above) The former St Joseph's Institution building at Bras Basah Road facing the field which later became Bras Basah Park, c.1910. The building is currently occupied by the Singapore Art Museum. *Lim Kheng Chye Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore*.

(Right) This 1984 photograph shows Eu Court at the corner of Stamford Road and Hill Street. Built in the late 1920s by prominent businessman Eu Tong Sen, it was demolished in 1992 to make way for road widening. *Lee Kip Lin Collection. Lee Kip Lin and National Library Board, Singapore*.



Their backbreaking, unglamorous labour was the bedrock of numerous colonial construction projects, landmarks that we take for granted today: the roads near the Singapore River; the swampy land that was reclaimed into what is now Raffles Place and Collyer Quay; major roads from the town leading to Bukit Timah, Keppel, Thomson, Serangoon and Bedok; the Horsburgh and Raffles lighthouses; and, closer to Bras Basah Road, what are now national monuments such as the Istana, St Andrew's Cathedral and Asian Civilisations Museum.<sup>6</sup>

Although the last group of convict labourers left Singapore in 1873, some of the prison buildings in Bras Basah remained intact until at least 1979 and were used for other purposes, notably military ones.<sup>7</sup> As heritage blogger Jerome Lim discovered, prison buildings were used in the pre-war years by the Malay Company of the Singapore Volunteers Corps, during the Japanese Occupation by the Indian National Army, and after the war by British Indian troops and later their Malayan successors.<sup>8</sup>

SMU, which occupies a large swathe of Bras Basah today, bears no reference to the complex history of the area. This is not surprising as older, and accepted, narratives of Singapore history are known for overlooking, marginalising or even ignoring the experiences of early migrants, particularly non-Chinese ones, who did not put down roots or luck out with a rags-to-riches

success story in Singapore. Those who spent a significant amount of time here slaving away on roads and buildings but left no family, wealth, roads or place names behind, barely merit a mention in that narrative.

Interestingly, some Indian convict labourers – notably “First Class” convicts with exemplary track records – did settle down in Singapore after completing

their prison sentences. They became, the British observed, “very useful men in the place – cart owners, milk sellers, road contractors and so on: many of them comfortably off.”<sup>9</sup> Perversely, there are no bronze sculptures commemorating their labour and history at Bras Basah or near the Singapore River, where their human toil was so essential to the smooth functioning of the colonial port in its early years.<sup>10</sup>

So much for the past. The latest state-decreed incarnation of Bras Basah proclaims it as the “arts, culture, learning and entertainment hub for the city centre.”<sup>11</sup> Around 2005, urban planners came up with the clumsy portmanteau Bras Basah.Bugis (the self-conscious full-stop immediately dooming whatever “hip” quotient the planners were trying to inject to the area).<sup>12</sup> After deliberate efforts in the 1980s to move schools such as St Joseph’s Institution and Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus away from this part of the city, the government introduced new ones – the School of the Arts, LASALLE College

of the Arts and SMU – in a deliberate strategy to bring artistic endeavour and young people back into the area.<sup>13</sup> With events such as the National Museum’s Night Festival – which gets bigger and seems to require more road closures each year – there are plenty of official efforts to entice people into spending time here again.

But it is difficult to love a place when you know it can be snatched away by the powers that be. In my mind, two related offences have been wrought on Bras Basah in the last 20 years. The first was the demolition of the much-loved National Library building at Stamford Road, which was carried out in 2005 despite a groundswell of public protestations, a flurry of newspaper articles and parliamentary debates, and viable alternatives proposed by knowledgeable architects.<sup>14</sup>

Did it matter that the building had been funded by philanthropist and community leader Lee Kong Chian, thus creating Singapore’s first free public library? Did it matter that the library had provided a haven for the post-war generation of students from schools in the area – a place where they studied and eventually acquired the knowledge and skills that contributed to their young nation’s development?<sup>15</sup>

But it was more important, according to transport planners, to have a concrete tunnel bored through Fort Canning Hill in order to create “the most direct

route for traffic moving from Marina Centre and the Central Business District to Orchard Road”, and also to “open up the vista” to the hill. Moreover, the government would re-align Stamford Road to “provide SMU with more regular land parcels to work with”.<sup>16</sup>

Walking along the right (northeast) side of Stamford Road from Raffles City, over the paved-over Stamford Canal past the Land Transport Authority and SMU buildings, one sees no such vista of the hill today. At the foot of the hill, a pair of despondent pillars from the original compound commemorate the former National Library. They sit mutely at the rear of SMU, which in 2005 took over the open fields between Bras Basah Road and Stamford Road. Before that, Bras Basah Park was a much appreciated green lung in the city; its grounds were used by both the boys of nearby St Joseph’s Institution (which now houses the Singapore Art Museum) and the public for sports events, school camps, romantic liaisons or other tomfoolery.

In a parliamentary debate in 2000 on the planned demolition of the National Library, then Minister for National Development Mah Bow Tan added, by way of consolation, “We will also encourage SMU to incorporate in the design of its buildings features that would help Singaporeans evoke memories of the Library.”<sup>17</sup> There was talk that SMU would become the New

#### Notes

- 1 See for instance Ellard, C. (2015, September 1). Streets with no game. *Aeon*. Retrieved from Aeon Media Group Ltd. website.
- 2 Victor R. Savage and Brenda Yeoh offer a more thorough explanation in their book. See Savage, V. R., & Yeoh, B. S. A. (2013). *Singapore street names: A study of toponymics* (p. 47). Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Editions. (Call no.: RSING 915.9570014 SAV-[TRA])
- 3 For details, see Chng, G. (1984, April 22). The disappearing canal. *The Straits Times*, p. 10. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 4 Liang, A. (2010, June 18). Blocked drain caused Orchard Road flood. *My paper*. Retrieved from Factiva via NLB’s eResources website.
- 5 Pieris, A. (2009). *Hidden hands and divided landscapes: A penal history of Singapore’s plural society* (pp. 87, 89, 243). Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press. (Call no.: RSING 365.95957 PIE)
- 6 Pieris, 2009, pp. 33, 99; National Library Board. (2016). *Indian convicts’ contributions to early Singapore (1825–1873)* written by Vernon Cornelius-Takahama. Retrieved from Singapore Infopedia. Historian Clare Anderson writes that in the 19th century, “the East India Company used and supplied convicts *in preference to* and *to replace slaves*” in Southeast Asia (italics original); “convicts were not an alternative to free labour, but the first choice to build infrastructure”
- 7 Pieris, 2009, p. 192; T. F. Hwang takes you down memory lane. (1979, April 7). *The Straits Times*, p. 16. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 8 Lim, J. (2016, February 20). *The fight for freedom from where freedom had once been curtailed*. Retrieved from The Long and Winding Road blog.
- 9 Pieris, 2009, p. 110.
- 10 The bronze sculptures along the Singapore River are primarily about European and Chinese traders, with Chinese and Indian labourers working in the background. Indians are depicted as coolies, although there is one Chettiar.
- 11 Tor, C. L. (2005, July 5). \$46m makeover for Bugis. *Today*, p. 6. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 12 The first mention of “Bras Basah.Bugis” in the English press is in Tee, H. C. (2004, December 11). Model City. *The Straits Times*, p. 18. Retrieved from NewspaperSG. See also Today, 5 Jul 2005, p. 6.
- 13 Tan, D. W. (2008, September 14). Old district a hive of activity. *The Straits Times*, p. 25. Retrieved from NewspaperSG. In the 1980s and 1990s, 13 schools were relocated from the Bras Basah area
- 14 Singapore Parliament. *Official reports – Parliamentary debates (Hansard)*. (2000, March 6]. National Library [Retention]. (Vol. 71, col. 1137). Retrieved from Parliament of Singapore website.
- 15 Singapore Parliament. *Official reports – Parliamentary debates (Hansard)*, 6 Mar 2000, cols. 1134, 1136.
- 16 Singapore Parliament. *Official reports – Parliamentary debates (Hansard)*, 6 Mar 2000, col. 1134.
- 17 Singapore Parliament. *Official reports – Parliamentary debates (Hansard)*, 6 Mar 2000, cols. 1134, 1136.
- 18 Ho, J. B. E. (1991, March 20). Re-examine once more plan to destroy Eu Court. *The Straits Times*, p. 30; Tan, C. (1992, August 18). Going, going... almost gone. *The Business Times*, p. 3. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

and Waterloo Centre have been there since 1980. I’m sure it’s only a matter of time before another urban planner comes up with a “masterplan” to make the area more “vibrant”, regardless of the desires or needs of the people who inhabit the space.

Yet, to walk the city is to know it in a way that is, arguably, antithetical to the way urban planners see it as a Cartesian or Euclidean space. When I walk around Bras Basah, I see the multiple layers of history – visible and invisible – and I am grateful for what *is* there that is real: Mary’s Kafe inside Kum Yam Methodist Church, where Eurasian aunties serve home-made Eurasian food and sugee cake; the stationery and bookshops of Bras Basah Complex, where the owners might chat about their grandchildren in between serving customers.

When I stand at the junction of Hill Street and Stamford Road outside Stamford Court – ironically, as you’ll see, the home of the National Heritage Board today – I think about the splendid

Eu Court that used to stand on the site. It was one of the first apartment buildings in Singapore and admired for its neoclassical architecture and hand-blown glass windows, before it was torn down in 1992 to make way for the widening of Hill Street – another victim of a certain vision of urban “development”.<sup>18</sup>

I stand, I look, I feel and I think. And I know it can all go away in a minute. ♦

(in alphabetical order): Anglo-Chinese School (Primary), Catholic High (primary and secondary), Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus (CHIJ, primary and secondary), CHIJ St Nicholas Girls’ School (primary and secondary), St Anthony’s Boys’ School, St Anthony’s Canossian (primary and secondary), St Joseph’s Institution, Stamford Primary School and Tao Nan School.

14 See for instance Ideas to save library building. (1999, March 20). *The Straits Times*, p. 42; Tan, S. S. (1999, March 20). Consider a change of plans before it is too late. *The Straits Times*, p. 57; Kraal, D. (1999, March 31). Hurrah for the new voices. *The Straits Times*, p. 4. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

15 Singapore Parliament. *Official reports – Parliamentary debates (Hansard)*. (2000, March 6]. National Library [Retention]. (Vol. 71, col. 1137). Retrieved from Parliament of Singapore website.

16 Singapore Parliament. *Official reports – Parliamentary debates (Hansard)*, 6 Mar 2000, cols. 1134, 1136.

17 Singapore Parliament. *Official reports – Parliamentary debates (Hansard)*, 6 Mar 2000, cols. 1134, 1136.

18 Ho, J. B. E. (1991, March 20). Re-examine once more plan to destroy Eu Court. *The Straits Times*, p. 30; Tan, C. (1992, August 18). Going, going... almost gone. *The Business Times*, p. 3. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

# MR SONG'S EUROPEAN ESCAPADE

**Ong Eng Chuan** pores through the faded colonial-era postcards of Peranakan luminary Song Ong Siang to piece together highlights of his 10-month European sojourn.



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On the evening of 21 March 1922, members of the Chinese community in Singapore gathered to host a lavish dinner at the Garden Club<sup>1</sup> in honour of Mr and Mrs Song Ong Siang, who were leaving shortly for Europe on a 10-month extended holiday. Close to one hundred of the who's who of the local Chinese community turned up at the event, a testament to the high regard and esteem in which Song was held in the colony.

Guests at the dinner included Lo Chong, the Consul-General for China; Lim Nee Soon, President of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce; Lee Chong Guan, who was provisionally appointed as Unofficial Member of the Straits Settlements Legislative Council during the time Song would be away; the businessman and philanthropist Eu Tong Sen; and other prominent members of the Chinese community.

## Song Ong Siang and His Accomplishments

Song Ong Siang (1871–1941) was the progeny of one of the oldest and most respected Peranakan (or Straits Chinese) families in Singapore. He was the third son of Song Hoot Kiam, founder of the Straits Chinese Church (present-day Prinsep Street Presbyterian Church), and after whom Hoot Kiam Road is named.

The younger Song, who studied at Raffles Institution and later pursued law at the University of Cambridge on a Queen's Scholarship, was called to the English bar in 1893. On his return the following year, Song became the first Chinese barrister to be admitted to the Singapore bar. Song was not only a successful lawyer – his law firm Aitken and Ong Siang was one of the leading legal firms in Singapore – he was also a respected community leader who dedicated most of his adult life to public service. In his toast to Song during the dinner, Lim Nee Soon paid tribute to Song's myriad contributions to society.

Even so, few people would have predicted that some 14 years later, Song would reach the pinnacle of society when he was conferred the title of Knight Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (KBE) for his achievements.

Chief among Song's contributions were the instrumental role he played in the formation of the Straits Chinese British Association (now known as The Peranakan Association) in 1900, which served as a voice for the Straits Chinese community; his appointment as a member of the Legislative Council from 1919 to 1927; and his enlistment in the Chinese Company of the Singapore Volunteer Infantry (later renamed Singapore Volunteer Corps) in 1901. The infantry unit helped to suppress lawlessness and maintain order during the Indian mutiny of 1915.

Another cause that Song was particularly passionate about was education. He championed educational opportunities for Straits Chinese girls by founding the Singapore Chinese Girls' School with Dr Lim Boon Keng in 1899. He also started *Bintang Timor*, the first Romanised Malay-language newspaper, in 1894, and together with Lim, published the *Straits Chinese Magazine* (1897–1907), a landmark English-language publication that provided a platform for literary expression and discussions on important issues of the day.

Song was an eloquent speaker and gifted with a flair for writing. His literary prowess is most evident in his seminal work, *One Hundred Years' History of the Chinese in Singapore*, which chronicles the lives of prominent Chinese in Singapore between 1819 and 1919. Song had been working on the hefty manuscript for three years prior to his European sojourn, and it was now finally completed.



(Facing page left) Portrait of Song Ong Siang, later Sir Ong Siang Song and his wife Lady Song (Helen Yeo Hee Neo), after he was conferred the Knight Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (KBE) in 1936. Song, who came from a prominent Peranakan family, was the first Malayan Chinese to receive a knighthood. This photo was taken by photographic studio Hills & Saunders in Cambridge during their European vacation.

Source: Song, O. S. (1923). *One Hundred Years' History of the Chinese in Singapore*. London: John Murray. Collection of the National Library, Singapore. (Accession no.: B20048226B)

(Facing page right) Mr and Mrs Tan Soo Bin accompanied Mr and Mrs Song Ong Siang on their European vacation. Mrs Song and Mrs Tan were sisters. Soo Bin (who also came from a wealthy Peranakan family) and Song Ong Siang were good friends and founding members of the Singapore Volunteer Infantry's Chinese Company. Source: Song, O. S. (1923). *One Hundred Years' History of the Chinese in Singapore* (p. 368). London: John Murray. Collection of the National Library, Singapore. (Accession no.: B20048226B)

(Above) The Dutch steamer *Prins der Nederlanden* set sail on 24 March 1922 from Singapore for Europe via the Suez Canal with Mr and Mrs Song Ong Siang on board. The couple took the same steamer back to Singapore in January 1923. The steamer was owned by Dutch shipping line Stoomvaart Maatschappij Nederland (Netherlands Steamship Company). Source: Stoomvaart Maatschappij Nederland.

Song's European trip was also significant because he would hand-carry his manuscript and have it printed overseas. The 600-page tome was subsequently published by John Murray in London in 1923. The book has since been reprinted three times, the last in 1984 by Oxford University Press. More recently in 2017, an annotated ebook version of the publication was produced by National Library, Singapore, and the Singapore Heritage Society.<sup>2</sup>

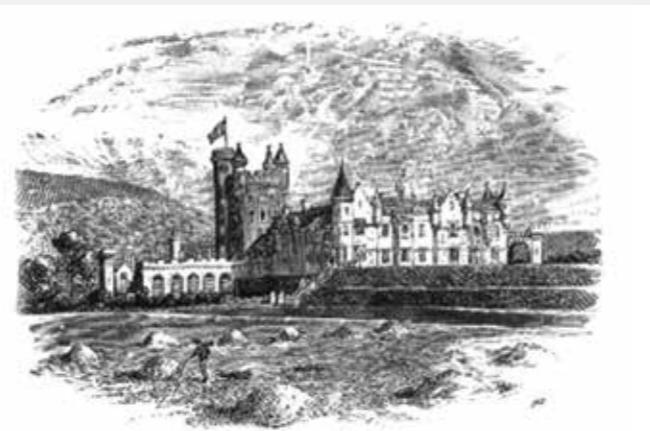
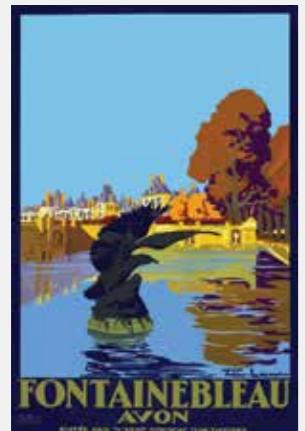
## Ahoy Europe!

On 24 March 1922, Song and his wife Helen boarded the Dutch mail steamer, *Prins der Nederlanden*, bound for Europe. The Suez Canal, which had opened some five decades earlier in 1869, had vastly shortened travel time between Europe and Asia by sea, and taking long holidays for weeks or months at a time had become a fashionable pastime for the well-heeled.

Accompanying the Songs were Mr and Mrs Tan Soo Bin; the latter was Mrs Song's sister. Soo Bin (whom Song referred to as "S.B." in the postcards) came from another prominent Straits Chinese family; he was the son of Tan Jiak Kim and great-grandson of Tan Kim Seng, a wealthy merchant and philanthropist who had contributed towards many social causes in Singapore.

While it's not possible to ascertain the Songs' precise travel itinerary and how long they stayed at each place, one can get a good sense of the places they travelled to by examining the collection of postcards written to family members in Singapore.

After a fortnight's travel on the high seas, the steamer reached the Suez Canal in Egypt, where the Songs made a brief stopover in Ismailia before continuing to Europe. The couple arrived in Italy – their first destination – in early spring, on 14 April 1922. Over the next



While it's not possible to ascertain the exact itinerary of the Songs on their 10-month European sojourn, one can get a good sense of the places they travelled to by examining the postcards they sent home. For instance we know the Songs arrived in Paris in early May 1922, and travelled to Fontainebleau to see the palace where Napoleon Bonaparte lived. We also know that the Songs spent the larger part of their holiday in Britain. In London, the couple attended a dinner hosted by the Association of British Malaya on 30 May 1922, a society founded by former British residents in Malaya. In Scotland, they visited Balmoral Castle (above right) in Aberdeenshire, one of the residences of the British royal family. *Image source: (from left) Wikimedia Commons, Shutterstock, Wikimedia Commons.*

#### Notes

1 The Garden Club was established in 1916 by the Straits Chinese in Singapore, and membership was limited to Chinese only. The club was originally located at Cairnhill but a "town branch" later opened at Raffles Chambers. Song Ong Siang described the club as "the leading Chinese club in Singapore and plays a prominent part in the social affairs of the settlement".

2 The annotated edition of Song Ong Siang's *One Hundred Years' History of the Chinese in Singapore* is available for public access on the National Library Board's BookSG website.

3 Lütschbergbahn. Bahnhof Goppenstein und Eingang in den grossen Tunnel [Postcard], 1 May 1922. Collection of the National Library, Singapore. (Accession no.: B29259959E)

4 Social and personal. (1923, January 27). *The Straits Times*, p. 8. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

two weeks, they visited Nervi, a picturesque seaside village, and other scenic mountain towns in the northwest region of Italy, before heading for their next destination – France.

The Songs had arrived in Paris in early May, and spent much of their time driving around, seeing the wide Parisian streets and boulevards, "where people sit all day in [sic] the pavement, taking tea or drinks".<sup>3</sup> They also visited famous landmarks such as Longchamp Racecourse along the Seine River and the Palace of Fontainebleau, where the French Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte lived, and saw one of his characteristic bicornes, or "cocked hat", preserved in a glass case.

At the end of May, with summer approaching, the Songs crossed the English Channel and made their way to Britain. Along with the Tans, the couple attended an important function in London on 30 May – the second annual dinner of the Association of British Malaya, a society founded by former British residents of Malaya. The dinner was attended by over 200 guests, including Sir Laurence Guillemard, then Governor of the Straits Settlements, and Lady Margaret Brooke, Ranee of Sarawak, who made a special mention of Song in her speech.

The Songs were clearly adventurous travellers. They journeyed long distances across Britain, covering places from the south coast of England to the highlands of Scotland. They visited Swanage, a lovely seaside town, and Lulworth, an area known for its castle and cove, both in the southwest coast of England. They also travelled to Tynemouth and Newcastle in northern England. Newcastle, however, did not leave a pleasant impression as the unemployed labourers, bare-foot children and "stuffy and dirty" air cast a gloomy pall on their visit.

In Scotland, the couple visited Abbotsford, where Scottish novelist and poet Sir Walter Scott lived and wrote his historical novel *Waverley*, and travelled 100 miles by motor car to Braemar and Balmoral, where they caught a view of stately Balmoral Castle, one

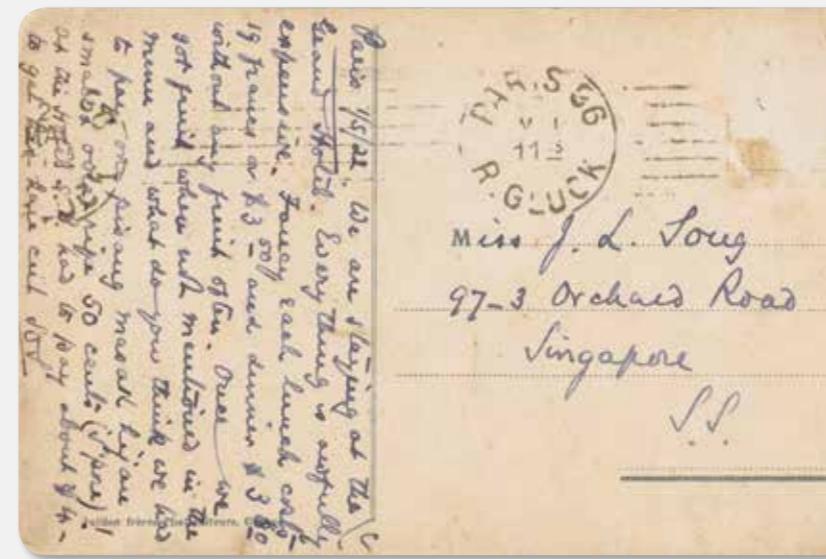
of the residences of the British royal family.

As the Songs were not used to temperate weather, there were occasional rumblings about the cold in the postcards: "Twa Kim [Mrs Song] has to wear sweater & woolen underwear" (Ismailia, Egypt, 8 April 1922); the "cold air in the bedroom is getting too much for my feet" (Newcastle, England, 14 July 1922); high prices: "Everything is awfully expensive. Fancy each lunch costs 19 francs or \$3.50 and dinner \$3.80 without any fruit often..." (Paris, 1 May 1922); as well as yearnings for the food from back home: "can you send me some itek sio & ikan goreng chili... so that I can take with cayenne pepper. I am quite tired with English food" (Melrose, Scotland, 19 July 1922). And while out fishing at Eastbourne one day, the Songs caught some 50 whiting, reminding them of the local "ikan kekek" from home (29 August 1922).

It was not all sightseeing, however. In October, the Songs caught the popular musical "Rockets" at the London Palladium, and attended a football match in a stadium packed with 60,000 spectators. The couple also made time to visit friends, one of whom was a Mrs Whyte, the sister-in-law of James Aitken. Aitken was Song's former schoolmate and partner in their law firm, Aitken and Ong Siang. Aitken was born in Australia, but spent almost his entire life in Singapore, where he received his education at Raffles Institution, and was one of the first recipients of the Queen's Scholarship in 1886. He went into partnership with Song in 1894, with whom he remained until his death in 1928.

After 10 months away in Europe, most of which was spent at leisure in Britain, the Songs and their travel companions, the Tans, boarded the *Prins der Nederlanden*, the same Dutch steamer that had brought them to Europe. The foursome arrived in Singapore on 25 January 1923, overladen with luggage but looking rested and "much benefited by their holiday in Europe".<sup>4</sup> ♦

Ismailia, Suez Canal 8/4/22.  
Have got some books of post cards  
for you & Lily at Suez. Look at  
the Map and find Suez and Port  
Said. Lily & you must work  
hard with help. Go and so that you  
can go back to school when we  
return. It is very cold. Twa Kim  
has to wear sweater & woolen  
underwear. Hope I will be with  
you in the house T. Koo.



1. This postcard shows the city of Port Said along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea, north of the Suez Canal. From the city of Ismailia on the west bank of the Suez Canal, Song Ong Siang wrote this postcard to his niece and adopted daughter, Song Siew Lian, also known as Darling Song, on 8 April 1922. Miss Song was the daughter of one of Song's sisters, as he had signed off as "T. Koo" (i.e. twa kool), which is a Hokkien term for addressing one's maternal uncle. In the postcard, Song also referred to his wife as "twa kin", the Hokkien term for the wife of one's maternal uncle. Besides English, Song spoke Baba Malay, a patois containing a mix of Malay and Hokkien words adopted by the Straits Chinese. Where necessary, the Straits Chinese used Chinese words, such as when addressing members of the family and extended family. *Collection of the National Library, Singapore. (Accession no.: B29259947C)*

2. This postcard, dated 1 May 1922, was addressed to a Miss J. L. Song. It was written from Paris, where Mr and Mrs Song Ong Siang were staying at the Grand Hotel. Song found items at the hotel expensive, and wrote in a hilarious mix of Malay and English that "one pisang masak hijau small & over ripe 50 cents [Spore]!". The postcard shows the Swiss town of Zermatt, with Le Cervin mountain (The Matterhorn) in the background. *Collection of the National Library, Singapore. (Accession no.: B29259932H)*



3. This postcard depicts Central Station on Neville Street in Newcastle upon Tyne in England. The cross on the picture marks the hotel where Mr and Mrs Song Ong Siang stayed for three nights. The postcard dated 14 July 1922 was addressed to Miss P. N. Song [Song Pian Neo], Song's sister. In the postcard, Song expressed his disappointment at the standards of the [unnamed] hotel they stayed at. *Collection of the National Library, Singapore. [Accession no.: B29259953K]*

4. Besides sightseeing, Mr and Mrs Song Ong Siang also visited friends in Britain. Deciding that they should take along some popular Straits Chinese snacks as gifts on their visits, Song wrote to Darling Song on 3 July 1922, requesting for a tin of *kueh blanda* to be shipped to them. *Kueh blanda*, or *kueh belanda*, commonly referred to as "love letters", is a crunchy wafer-thin roll offered to guests during Chinese New Year. The postcard shows Crystal Palace at Sydenham Hill. It was originally built in Hyde Park to house the Great Exhibition of 1851. In 1854, the structure was dismantled and rebuilt at Sydenham Hill in South London, where it stood until it was destroyed by a fire in 1936. *Collection of the National Library, Singapore. [Accession no.: B29259933I]*



5. On this postcard showing St Margaret's Church in Westminster Abbey, London, Song Ong Siang sent Darling Song news on 27 September 1922 that he had bought her the sheet music for the songs "A Song of Roses", "Big Lady Moon" and "To a Miniature", which she had wanted. Because of their regular contact with the European colonial community, many Straits Chinese acquired an appreciation for Western classical and popular music. It was the fashion among Straits Chinese families to sing popular Western songs – sometimes with the words translated into Malay – to the accompaniment of musical instruments such as the piano, violin, viola, banjo and mandolin. As a result, several Straits Chinese musical groups were formed in the first half of the 20th century, with names such as Wales Minstrels, Silver Star Minstrels, Merrilads, and Cornwall Minstrels. *Collection of the National Library, Singapore. [Accession no.: B29259973B]*
6. Dated 7 January 1923, this is the last postcard (with a view of Port Said's Arabian Quarter) on the other (unshown) side sent by the Songs to Darling Song before their return to Singapore on 25 January 1923. After many months of travel in Europe and Britain, their luggage had increased significantly. During their stopover in Port Said in Egypt, they sent a reminder home to request for a lorry to pick up all their bags, many of which were likely bursting at the seams, when they disembarked in Singapore. *Collection of the National Library, Singapore. [Accession no.: B29259940G]*



The postcards featured in this essay are part of a collection of 43 postcards written by Song Ong Siang and his wife during their vacation in Europe from March 1922 to January 1923. These postcards serve as research material on the life of Song Ong Siang and offer a peek into the lifestyles of wealthy members of the Straits Chinese community in early 20th-century Singapore. The postcards were donated by Dorothy and Joyce Tan to the National Library Board in 2017, in memory of their father, Tan Kek Tiam. The latter was married to Song Siew Lian, alias Darling Song, who passed away in 1933. She was the niece and adopted daughter of Mr and Mrs Song Ong Siang.

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## 从馆藏文献资料认识

# 中医药在新加坡的历史与发展

Traditional Chinese medicine in Singapore has a history that goes back to more than a century. **Vicky Gao** traces its development through the National Library's collection.

中医药在中国有着数千年的悠久历史，并已经根植在人们的日常生活习俗中。新加坡的中医药历史是和新加坡的华人移民史息息相关的。根据《新加坡华人通史》一书所述，开埠后不久，来自中国华南地区的移民飘洋过海来到新加坡。这些人包括闽南人、潮州人、广东人和客家人等。<sup>1</sup>中国传统医学也随着华人的南移和定居而传入新加坡。新加坡先贤宋旺相在《新加坡

**高小行**是新加坡国家图书馆高级图书馆员，她的责任包括中文馆藏的开发和提供参考服务。她对当代新加坡的发展有着浓厚的兴趣并在中国的学术刊物发表过多篇文章。

这篇文章由**吴玉美**编辑。她是新加坡国家图书馆的助理图书馆员，负责中文艺术与文学馆藏。

**Vicky Gao** is a Senior Librarian with the National Library, Singapore. Her responsibilities include managing and developing the Chinese collections as well as providing reference and research services. She has contributed research articles to academic journals in China.

This article was edited by **Goh Yu Mei**, an Associate Librarian with the National Library, Singapore. She works with the Chinese arts and literature collection.

华人百年史》一书中提到，在新加坡开埠后的第二个十年（1829年至1839年），新加坡就有一些中药材店，如开元[Kye Guan]、成得记[Seng Tek Kee]、同善[Tong Sian]和福安堂[Hok Ann Tong]。<sup>2</sup>区如柏在《祖先的行业》一书中也提到，客家人南来后最早从事的行业是药材店。周兰记和胡文虎、胡文豹开办的永安堂等中药行即是客家人所经营的。<sup>3</sup>

古人云：“不积跬步，无以至千里；不积小流，无以成江海”。今天，中医药在新加坡的普及和发展是与先辈们早期的辛勤耕耘分不开的。通过新加坡国家图书馆的馆藏中医药文献资料，我们可以领略到先贤们在设立中医药社团组织、创建中医药慈善机构和传播中医药文化方面所付出的努力。

**(上图)** 华人医师在同济医院内为病人看病。照片年代约1890年代。图片来源：Liu, G. (1999). *Singapore: A Pictorial History 1819-2000* [p.166]. Singapore: National Heritage Board and Editions Didier Millet (Call no.: RSING 959.57 LIU-[HIS]). 原图来自莱佛士酒店收藏。



新加坡国家图书馆保存的文化史料中，除了书籍之外，也包括手稿。2014年，新加坡宗乡会馆联合总会将新马著名史学家许云樵（Hsu Yun-Tsiao, 1905-1981年）5000多本珍贵的书册、日记手稿等捐赠给新加坡国家图书馆收藏。许云樵在他晚年的时候，将一部分精力花在研究和编辑中医药书籍，并通过手稿记述他研究中医学的心得。“赠人玫瑰，手留余香”，感谢新加坡宗乡会馆联合总会的慷慨捐赠，借此机会，我们也将许云樵先生的部分中医药研究手稿与大家分享，方便有兴趣的读者进一步地参考和研究。

因篇幅有限，本文不能一一列述新加坡国家图书馆丰富的中医药馆藏资料。欢迎读者到位于新加坡国家图书馆大厦9楼的中文“新加坡与东南亚资料”书架区查阅更多有关新加坡和本地区的中医药历史文献资料。

了解历史，是为了更好地传承和发展。透过新加坡国家图书馆的中医药馆藏文献资料，我们可以看到，百年来，新加坡中医药界突破地缘、血缘、方言和阶级的界限，扶弱济贫、惠及普通民众，凝聚族群和促进社会和谐。这种无私的奉献精神对今天的新加坡发展都具有重要的现实意义。

随着科技的进步，保持中医药特色，开展中医药现代化研究是中医药融入当前保健医疗服务的关键。新加坡人口迅速老龄化，到了2030年，将有超过20%人口的年龄超过65岁。此外，在40岁及以上的国人当中，25%将患有至少一种慢性疾病。许多国家十分重视替代医学在应对老龄化社会带来的挑战上所扮演的作用。中医药学无止境，只有不断地创新开放、兼容并蓄，才能在传承

中医药的道路上走的更远。为了满足热心中医药事业的读者终身学习的需求，新加坡国家图书馆中文馆藏区也设有“医药保健”专题，有兴趣的读者可以前来国家图书馆九楼浏览和阅读中医药理论和临床实践的参考书籍。新加坡国家图书馆也提供参考咨询服务，为读者推荐相关资料，国家图书馆一站式的参考咨询服务(Reference Point)的电邮是ref@nlb.gov.sg. ♦

1. 1929年，新加坡中医中药联合会成立。它是新加坡最早的中医药团体组织。它在促进中医药界同仁团结一致、相互切磋、宣传中医药方面发挥了重要的作用。1935年5月，该会创办出版了《医航》刊物，由新加坡早期中医药界领导者之一黎伯概（1872-1943年）主编，向中医药界人士和民众介绍医药学术和心得，阐扬中医学术真谛。新加坡国家图书馆善本书库[Rare Materials Collection]收有10期《医航》。版权所有，《医航》(第一期第二期合刊) [1935]。新加坡：中医药联合会。(收录号: B27705377E)

2. 1945年日本投降后，新加坡中医药界又开始活跃起来。当时许多资深中医师深感到中医师必须成立自己的组织，于是在1946年10月成立了中国医学会。1946年12月10日及28日分别于南洋商报与星洲日报增辟《医粹》和《医统先声》两个双周刊，以宣扬中医药学术及促进中医药的发展。1947年，中国医学会更名为新加坡中医师公会。1948年1月，新加坡中医师公会将《医粹》与《医统先声》之论文录集成册，书名为《医粹》，《医粹》合订本的发行在当时是新加坡医学界的一件盛事，该书汇集了战后初期许多新加坡老中医著作的佳作。版权所有，新加坡中医师公会主编[1948]。《医粹》(上集)。新加坡：新加坡中医师公会。(索书号: RCLOS Chinese 610.951 YC)

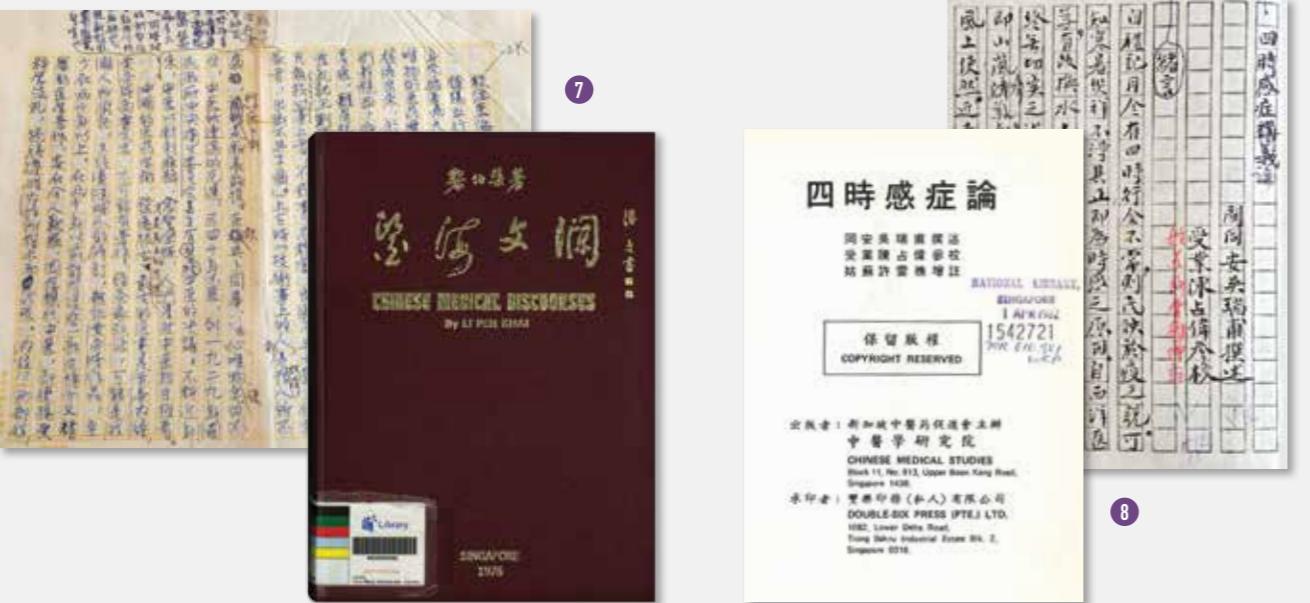
3. 新加坡中医中药联合会为纪念“三一七”国医节，发行该纪念专刊，内有关于纪念三一七国医节的文章、会员通讯录及探讨中医药功能的文章。版权所有，《新加坡中医中药联合会特刊》(第一期) [1948]。新加坡：新加坡中医中药联合会。(索书号: RCLOS Chinese 610.951 XJP)

4. 成立于1946年10月27日的中医药学术团体新加坡中医师公会在1954年至1955年期间，以普及中医药与卫生保健知识和宣扬中医药学术为宗旨，代表医刊为《医药与卫生》。《医药与卫生》在创刊词中这样写到：“……原子时代的医学已由个人治疗进到社会治疗；而技术使用亦由治疗医学进到预防医学。因此现代医师非仅要在医药知识技术上求深造，并须养成公共卫生服务的兴趣，藉以预防社会一切病害的发生。……本刊定名，便基于这个观点”，点出定名考量及编辑方针。版权所有，《医药与卫生》(创刊号) [1954]。新加坡：新加坡中医师公会。(索书号: RCLOS SER610.951 MHMJ)

5. 新加坡中医师公会在新加坡中医药发展史上扮演着非常重要的作用。早在1953年，新加坡中医师公会就致力于发展教育，培训中医药人才。1953年1月成立了“新加坡中医专门学校”。该校1976年更名为新加坡中医学院，迄今已经历了60多年的漫长岁月。（从左至右）版权所有，《医药与卫生》(第三期) [1955]。新加坡：新加坡中医师公会。(索书号: RCLOS SER 610.951 MHMJ); 版权所有，《新加坡中医师公会主办中医专门学校创办廿周年纪念刊1953-1973》[1974]。新加坡：新加坡中医师公会。(索书号: RCLOS Chinese 610.7115957 SIN); 版权所有，《新加坡中医师公会主办新加坡中医学院50周年纪念刊1953-2003》[2003]。新加坡：新加坡中医师公会。(索书号: RSING Chinese 610.7115957 SIN)
6. 1954年9月22日，马来亚联邦政府宣布中药入口征税25%，对新马中医药界影响深远。<sup>4</sup>这个时期中医药界的工作除了继续发扬中医药学术之外，也团结中医药界及争取共同利益为宗旨。1961年，新加坡中医师公会和马来亚华人医药总会联合出版《星马中医药学报》(季刊)，前后出版四期。新加坡国家图书馆闭架馆藏收有《星马中医药学报》创刊号。版权所有，《星马中医药学报》(第一期) [1961]。吉隆坡：星马华人医药总会。(索书号: RCLOS SER 610.951 CMJ)



7. 老一辈名医黎伯概(1872-1943年)是“中医中药联合会”的发起人之一。这个成立于1929年的社团，是东南亚第一个医药组织。黎伯概遗著很多，1933年他打算出版行医学论文集《医海文澜》，不过没有成功。1976年，这部著作由长子黎宽裕整理、许云樵校注后，编成《医海文澜》四集问世。四集的内容是：甲集——中国医学原理：原题“医科象数理化通论”，详述中医学与阴阳五行的关系；乙集——中医理论：论述阴阳五行学说、《内经》、《难经》和《伤寒论》的医学精义，也谈论中西医学的汇通方法；丙集——药理案：讨论中医药的科学性及医案医理的吻合性；丁集——医史文献：收录黎伯概对医学时事的观感和文献。<sup>5</sup>（从左至右）版权所有，《新加坡宗乡会馆联合总会(许云樵馆藏)[许云樵教授手稿][12]》。(索书号: RCLOS Chinese 959.007202 XYQ-[HYT]); 版权所有，黎伯概著，许云樵校注[1976]。《医海文澜》。新加坡：黎宽裕。(索书号: RCLOS Chinese 610.951 LPK)
8. 晚年任新加坡中医会会长并筹建新加坡中医专门学校(即新加坡中医学院的前身)的吴瑞甫(1872-1952年)，毕生致力于中医事业。他成书于1934年的《四时证论》后来于1979年由许云樵以其医学知识增注。许云樵增注版的手稿收藏于新加坡国家图书馆的闭架馆藏。（从左至右）版权所有，同安吴瑞甫撰述，受业陈占伟参校，姑苏许云樵增注[1981]。《四时证论》。新加坡：新加坡中医药促进会主办中医学院。(索书号: RCLOS Chinese 610.951 WRP); 版权所有，《新加坡宗乡会馆联合总会(许云樵馆藏)[许云樵教授手稿][15]》。(索书号: RCLOS Chinese 959.007202 XYQ-[HYT])



9. （从左至右）版权所有，《马来本草辞典》，收于《新加坡宗乡会馆联合总会(许云樵馆藏)[许云樵教授手稿][12]》。(索书号: RCLOS Chinese 959.007202 XYQ-[HYT]); 版权所有，《茅瓜叶根治糖尿病》，收于《新加坡宗乡会馆联合总会(许云樵馆藏)[许云樵教授手稿][12]》。(索书号: RCLOS Chinese 959.007202 XYQ-[HYT]); 版权所有，《癌方药物简释》，收于《新加坡宗乡会馆联合总会(许云樵馆藏)[许云樵教授手稿][12]》。(索书号: RCLOS Chinese 959.007202 XYQ-[HYT])

除了上述手稿之外，馆藏内许云樵教授有关中医药的手稿还包括：

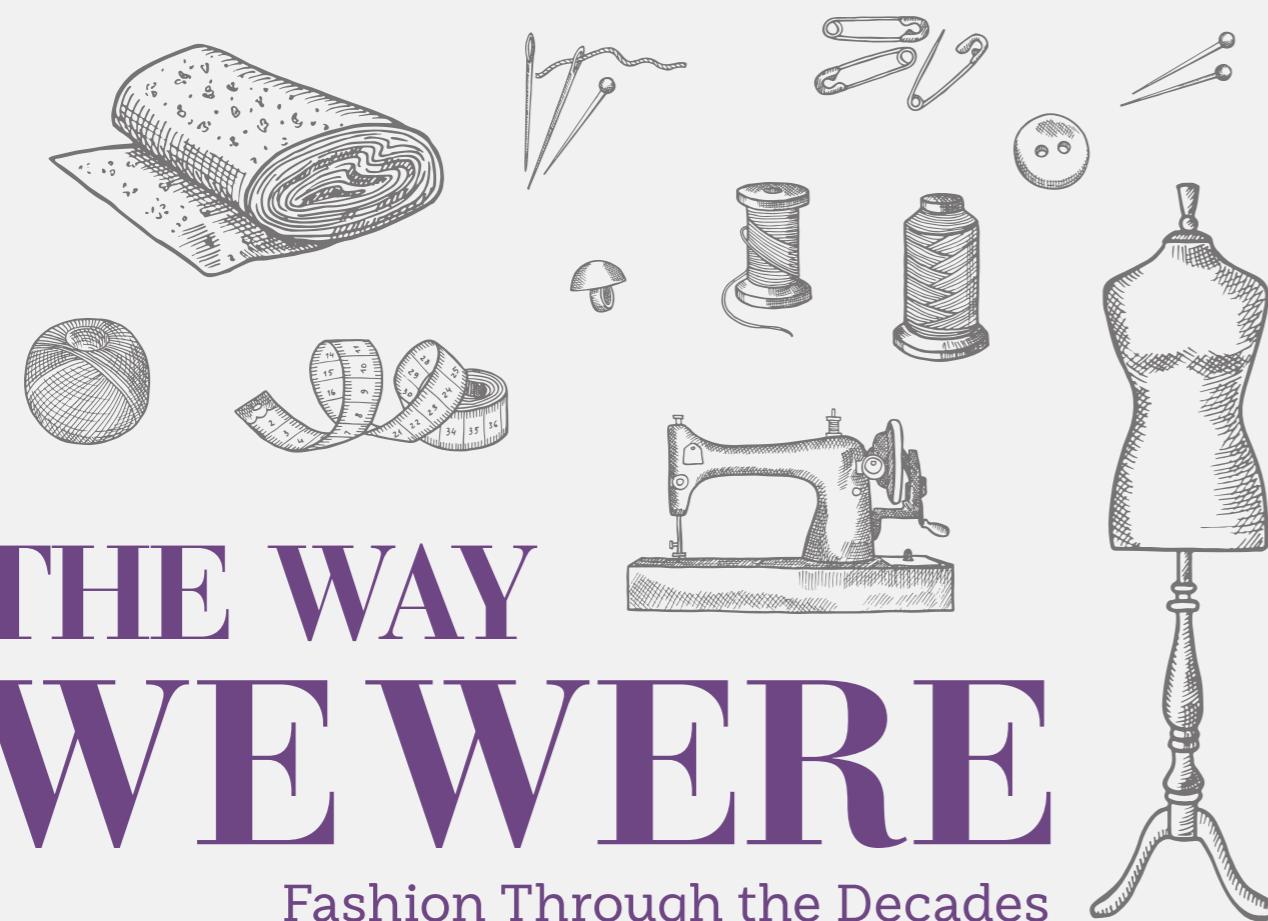
1. 阴阳五行学说的科学基础 (1976年8月1日在中医学研究院演讲稿)
2. 中医学研究院第四届毕业特刊献辞 (1980年1月4日，永久名誉顾问)
3. 中医学研究院第二届毕业班献辞
4. 中西医药学发展的异同及其交流 (1977年5月15日在中医学研究院演讲稿)
5. 新加坡糖尿病学会六周年纪念会长致辞
6. 为中医学研究药物展览会揭幕致词 (1977年1月8日)

10. 研究新加坡的中医药发展史，离不开中医药团体出版的各种纪念刊物。一百多年前，新加坡就开始有中医药团体和慈善机构，如1910年创办的广惠肇方便留医院<sup>6</sup>和1867年的成立的同济医社（同济医院前身）。<sup>7</sup>馆藏《同济医院120周年历史专集》、新加坡中医师公会主办的《大宝窑中华医院落成纪念特刊》、《新加坡中药公会五十周年纪念刊，1940-1990》等出版物内容极具历史研究价值。以同济医院为例，作为早期华人的中医慈善团体，同济医院的前身同济医社用中医药为贫苦大众治病，不收医资，体现同善相济的精神。（从左至右）版权所有，《大宝窑中华医院落成纪念特刊》[1979]。新加坡：中华医院。(索书号: RSING Chinese 610.951 TOA); 版权所有，区如柏[2010]。《广惠肇留医院100周年：广施惠民肇新百年》。新加坡：广惠肇留医院。(索书号: RSING Chinese 362.11095957 ORB); 版权所有，《新加坡中药公会五十周年纪念刊1940-1990》[1991]。新加坡：新加坡中药公会特刊编辑委员会。(索书号: RSING Chinese 610.6095957 SIN)

11. 同济医院自成立以来，始终秉承不分种族、不分宗教、不分国籍、施医赠药的宗旨，为社会大众服务。版权所有，《同济医院一百二十周年历史专集》[1989] (封面、页177)。新加坡：同济医院。(索书号: RSING Chinese 610.95957 TJY)

#### 注释

1. 柯木林[2015]。《新加坡华人通史》(页48)。新加坡：新加坡宗乡会馆联合总会。(索书号: RSING 959.57004951 GEN)
2. 宋相旺[1993]。《新加坡华人百年史》(页36)。新加坡：新加坡中华总商会。(索书号: RSING 959.57004951 SOS)
3. 区如柏[1991]。《祖先的行业》(页52)。新加坡：胜友书局。(索书号: RSING 338.08995105957 ORB)
4. 王平[2012]。《杏林行知录：亚细安(东盟)医药与国际传统医药文集[1867-2011]》(页42)。新加坡：新加坡中医学院毕业医师协会。(索书号: RCLOS RSEA 610.951 WP)
5. 陈鸿能[2001]。《新加坡中医学先驱人物与医药事业发展：1867年至1965年》(页32)。新加坡：新加坡中华医学学会。(索书号: RSING Chinese 610.9225957 CHN)
6. 区如柏[2010]。《广惠肇留医院100周年：广施惠民肇新百年》(页9)。新加坡：广惠肇留医院。(索书号: RSING Chinese 362.11095957 ORB)
7. 《同济医院一百二十周年历史专集》[1989] (页33)。新加坡：同济医院。(索书号: RSING Chinese 610.95957 TJY)



# THE WAY WE WERE

Fashion Through the Decades

Singapore has emerged as a leading Asian fashion capital in recent years. **Zoe Yeo** tracks its evolution through fashion publications from the Legal Deposit Collection.

**A**

Among other things, Singapore's multicultural and multi-ethnic society is reflected in the clothing we wear. The first ever official census conducted in 1824 recorded 10,683 residents, comprising 74 Europeans, 15 Arabs, 4,580 Malays, 3,317 Chinese, 756 Indian natives and 1,925 Bugis.<sup>1</sup> When the intrepid 19th-century travel writer Isabella Bird first stepped foot in Singapore in 1879, she was amazed at how the city was "ablaze with colors and motley with costume" and how the attire worn by locals made up "an irresistibly fascinating medley".<sup>2</sup>

The fashion scene in Singapore today is starkly different from what Bird witnessed in the 19th century but one thing hasn't changed: the Singaporean woman's penchant for dressing well and keeping up with the latest fashion. Looking through the National Library's Legal Deposit Collection of fashion magazines and books published in Singapore

over the past several decades, one is able to study changing trends not only in dress, but also hair and makeup.

## Traditional Costumes

Up until the 1950s, traditional attire was a common sight on the streets of Singapore. Wearing Western-style clothes was the preserve of those who had studied or travelled overseas, or who were wealthy enough to buy imported fashions sold at a handful of high-end boutiques.<sup>3</sup>

With comfort as a priority, Malays preferred loose clothing to combat the humid weather – the *baju kurong* (or *kurung*) being the traditional attire of choice for both men and women.<sup>4</sup> Men wear the *baju kurong* ensemble of loose-fitting shirt and pants with a *sampin* or sarong-like wrap around the waist, while women pair their knee-



length top with a matching skirt in the same material. The women's version is intricately embroidered with motifs such as those seen in *Baju Kurong Sulam Modern* (1952), a pattern book of popular embroidery designs inspired by flowers and birds. According to the author, C. Mahat, it is crucial to pick the right colour palette for the embroidery so that the colours do not clash.

In the eyes of author Katherine Sim, the *sari* (or *sareel*) worn by women of the Indian subcontinent was the most graceful of costumes, with its flowing lines and sculptured look. The *cheongsam* worn by Chinese women, on the other hand, was the most provocative, as it "shows off a woman's figure to the highest degree possible... short of a bikini". Sim's illustrated book, *Costumes of Malaya* (1963), provides vivid descriptions of the fashion scene and traditional attire worn by different racial groups in post-war Singapore.

## Women's Fashion Magazines

Following World War II, women's roles in society changed drastically. In 1948, women were

given the right to vote and, in 1961, the Women's Charter was passed to improve and protect the rights of females in Singapore.<sup>5</sup> As more women found employment in the workforce and their spending power increased, fashion choices broadened to include work attire, which in turn encouraged foreign brands to enter the local retail market.

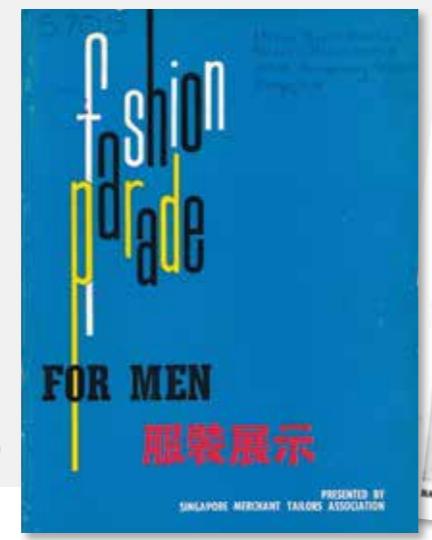
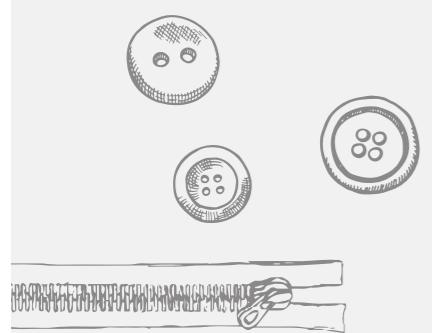
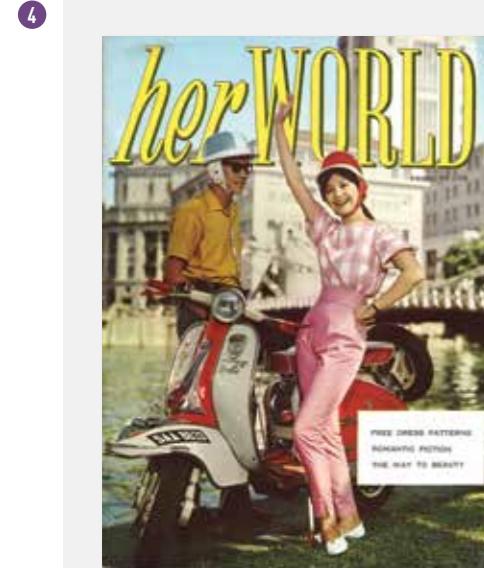
Although cinemas had been around in Singapore since the early 1900s, it was the advent of television in 1963 that inspired local women to follow the latest trends seen in the media, most of which were influenced by Western movies and celebrities. Women's fashion magazines started appearing in Singapore to cater to the increasing appetite for fashion news and trends.<sup>6</sup>

*Fashion* was the title of the first Malay weekly fashion magazine published in Malaya. The *kebaya* designs featured in the magazine had a more defined silhouette accentuated with interesting necklines and elements borrowed from Western-style dresses. The fashion forward *kebaya* designs also borrowed from other ethnic costumes, such as the body-hugging *cheongsam* with Chinese frog buttons.

1. This is the cover of the 20 February 1955 edition of *Fashion*, the first Malay weekly fashion magazine published in Malaya. On page 18 of this issue is a *cheongsam*-inspired body-hugging *kebaya* with Chinese frog buttons. All rights reserved, C. Mahat. (1955, February 20). *Fashion*. Singapore: R. M. Yusoff Ahmad: Harmy.

2. *Baju Kurong Sulam Modern* is a pattern book of popular embroidery designs inspired by flowers and birds. All rights reserved, Mahat, C. (1952). *Baju Kurong Sulam Modern*. Singapore: M. Salleh.

3. This illustrated book provides vivid descriptions of the fashion scene and traditional attire worn by the different racial groups in post-war Singapore. All rights reserved, Sim, K. (1963). *Costumes of Malaya*. Singapore: Published by Donald Moore for Eastern Universities Press Ltd.



4. *Fashion Mirror* was one of the pioneering publications that featured content on local fashion. First published in 1958, it was one of the most popular magazines among women in Singapore with articles specially written for Malayan readers. The magazine showcased clothing that was influenced by Western culture and infused with a dash of local flavour. One such outfit was the Chinese *samfu*, a blouse-and-trouser pairing using modern fabrics enhanced with "border" designs to create a "novel and striking effect", as seen in the May-June 1959 issue.
5. *Her World*, first launched in July 1960, is one of Singapore's longest-running women's magazines. The October 1961 edition – with Margaret Mok on the cover – featured on page 10 a *sarong kebaya* with Spanish-influenced "wide billowy bishop sleeves caught in cuffs at the wrist". All rights reserved, Straits Times Press. (1961, October). *Her World* (p. 10). Singapore: Straits Times Press (Malaya) Ltd.
6. The Western-style evening jacket featured in *Fashion Parade for Men* had been given an ethnic spin with *batik* material. All rights reserved, Singapore Merchant Tailors Association. (1961). *Fashion Parade for Men*: Presented by Singapore Merchant Tailors Association (p. 59). Singapore: Singapore Merchant Tailors Association.

#### Made-to-Measure

As Western culture made greater inroads into the local fashion scene, tailors who could replicate designs seen on television and film, and in fashion magazines were highly sought after by both women and men.<sup>7</sup> The first public fashion showcase for men was held in 1961 by the Singapore Merchant Tailors Association. The aim was to introduce the latest trends in bespoke suits to local consumers, "to show off" the high standard of tailoring in Singapore, and to improve dress sense among men. The publication, produced in conjunction with the event, featured on its cover a Western-style evening jacket that had been given an ethnic spin with *batik* material.

The popularity of made-to-measure clothing also led to a demand for sewing and tailoring classes. Mui Goi Ladies Dress-Making & Embroidering Institution was one of the pioneers offering dressmaking lessons in the 1950s and 1960s. To celebrate its ninth anniversary in 1962, a special exhibition of students' works was held in the school. These works were subsequently featured in a commemorative publication.

To cater to the increasing interest in fashion, dress design and dressmaking classes were introduced by the Adult Education Board in 1963. A total of 1,508 students were enrolled in the first and second batches of the six-month course. Their works were showcased in a souvenir magazine published in 1965.

Budding fashionistas also turned to dress pattern publications such as *Lucky Fashion Magazine* (幸福时装杂志) and *Shee Zee Fashion* (旭日时装) for inspiration. The inaugural issue of *Lucky Fashion Magazine* published in June 1965 proved so popular that it sold out within a few weeks, and went into three reprints before the second issue was published a year later. Home economics teachers also used the magazine as reference material for their sewing and handicraft lessons in school. *Shee Zee Fashion*, a publication of Shee Zee Institute of Tailoring, featured outfits designed for tropical weather such as the miniskirt, the 1960s runaway best-seller by British fashion icon Mary Quant.<sup>8</sup>

7. A special exhibition of students' works was held to commemorate the ninth anniversary of Mui Goi Ladies Dress-Making & Embroidering Institution. All rights reserved, Mui Goi Ladies' Dress-Making & Embroidering Institution. (1962). 美艺妇女缝纫车绣传习所第九周年纪念特刊: 主办第一届学员作品竞赛及教材展览会. Singapore: Mui Goi Ladies' Dress-Making & Embroidering Institution.

8. Dress design and dressmaking classes were introduced by the Adult Education Board in 1963. The students' works are showcased in this souvenir magazine. All rights reserved, Adult Education Board. (1965). Souvenir Magazine 1st and 2nd Batches Dress-Design and Dressmaking Classes (新嘉坡成人教育促进局第一、二届高级缝剪班及设计班结业特刊), Lembaga Gerakan Pelajaran Dewasa. Singapore: 1st and 2nd Batches Dress-Design and Dressmaking Classes.

9. The dress patterns in *Lucky Fashion Magazine* provided the inspiration for many budding fashionistas to sew their own clothes. It was also used by school teachers as reference material for their sewing and handicraft lessons. Outfits showcasing the popular "A-go-go" style of the early 1970s are featured in this second issue of the magazine. This dress on page 31 is described as "a pretty a-go-go with frills and flared sleeves, with smocking on the centre-front and sleeve". All rights reserved, Far Eastern Culture Co. Ltd. (1965). *Lucky Magazine of Fashion and Multi-Knotted Decorative Designs* (幸福时装杂志) (p. 31). Singapore: Far Eastern Culture Co. Ltd.

10. *Shee Zee Fashion*, a publication of Shee Zee Institute of Tailoring, featured outfits designed for our tropical weather, such as the miniskirt. The trendy outfit was popular with young girls as it portrayed "youthfulness and liveliness", and was comfortable to wear. All rights reserved, Shee Zee Institute of Tailoring. (1971). *Shee Zee Fashion* (旭日时装) (p. 33). Singapore: Shee Zee Institute of Tailoring.



## Singapore on the World Fashion Map

The local fashion industry received another boost in the 1970s when the manufacturing sector took off in Singapore. The opening of Japanese departmental stores, such as Yaohan, Isetan and Sogo, also enlivened the local shopping scene. Ready-to-wear outfits were sold in department stores and shopping centres that sprang up all over the island.<sup>9</sup>

In 1977, a group of 33 local designers collaborated to produce a book showcasing their works. Titled *Fashion Design: Containing Over 300 Fashion Designs by 33 Designers*, it was the first of its kind in Singapore. As opposed to the "fanciful dresses from foreign countries [that] are not acceptable to the great majority of people here", the creations featured in the publication were appropriate for the local climate and tailored to fit the petite Asian silhouette.

As homegrown labels grew in tandem with fashion imports, efforts were made to put Singapore on the global fashion map. Singapore

11. This 1977 publication showcases the creations by 33 local designers. All rights reserved. Koh, W. W. L. (1977). *Fashion Design: Containing Over 300 Fashion Designs by 33 Designers* (服装设计). Singapore: Circle One Design Centre.

12. The second instalment of the Singapore Apparel exhibition was held in November 1984 after a successful inaugural launch in 1983. The 1984 event was said to be a testimony of the "enthusiasm, creativity and talents of people in the trade" and aimed to establish the "Made-in-Singapore" hallmark of quality and reliability. All rights reserved, *Singapore Apparel: Fair Catalogue*. (1983). Singapore: Singapore Textile and Garment Manufacturers' Association.



Apparel '83, the city's first industry-wide garment trade show promoting local labels and designers, was hailed as a resounding success.<sup>10</sup>

In October 1983, *The Straits Times* reported that Singapore-made apparel had led to a \$20-million increase in exports for the first eight months of the year, raking in more than \$1.1 billion worth of sales for the year.<sup>11</sup> Local designers were cultivating a global audience and putting Singapore on the world fashion stage.<sup>12</sup>

Singapore has since set its sights on becoming the fashion capital of Asia.<sup>13</sup> The Singapore Fashion Festival was launched by the Singapore Tourism Board in 2001 to help achieve that goal. The festival was held annually until 2009, when it took a one-year hiatus, and was rebranded as the Asian Fashion Exchange (AFX) in 2010.

In 2015, Singapore Fashion Week became the core event of AFX,<sup>14</sup> garnering worldwide attention and participation by renowned international labels. In the 2016 edition, 13 homegrown designers shared the spotlight with other top Asian designers – the highest number yet at Singapore Fashion Week.<sup>15</sup>

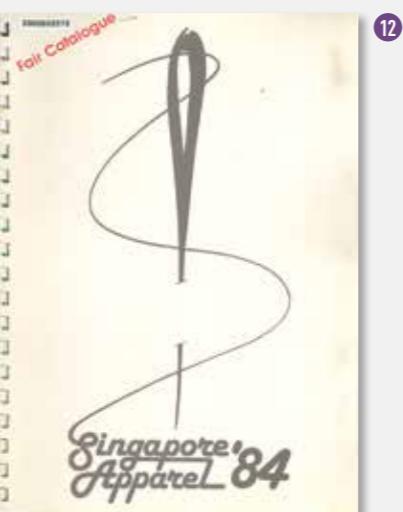
The efforts seem to have paid off. In 2011, Singapore was ranked number eight in the list of Top 50 Fashion Capitals in the World by the US-based Global Language Monitor. Although the city dropped to number 14 (out of 56 fashion capitals) in 2015, it was the third highest-ranked Asian city, after Tokyo (number 10) and Hong Kong (number 12)<sup>16</sup> – a lofty status it aims to maintain or better in years to come. ♦

### Notes

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- 2 Bird, I. L. (2000). *The Golden Chersonese* (p. 119). Köln: Könemann. [Call no.: RSING 915.951 BIR-[TRA]]
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- 7 Souza, Ong & Rao, 2016, pp. 14–15.
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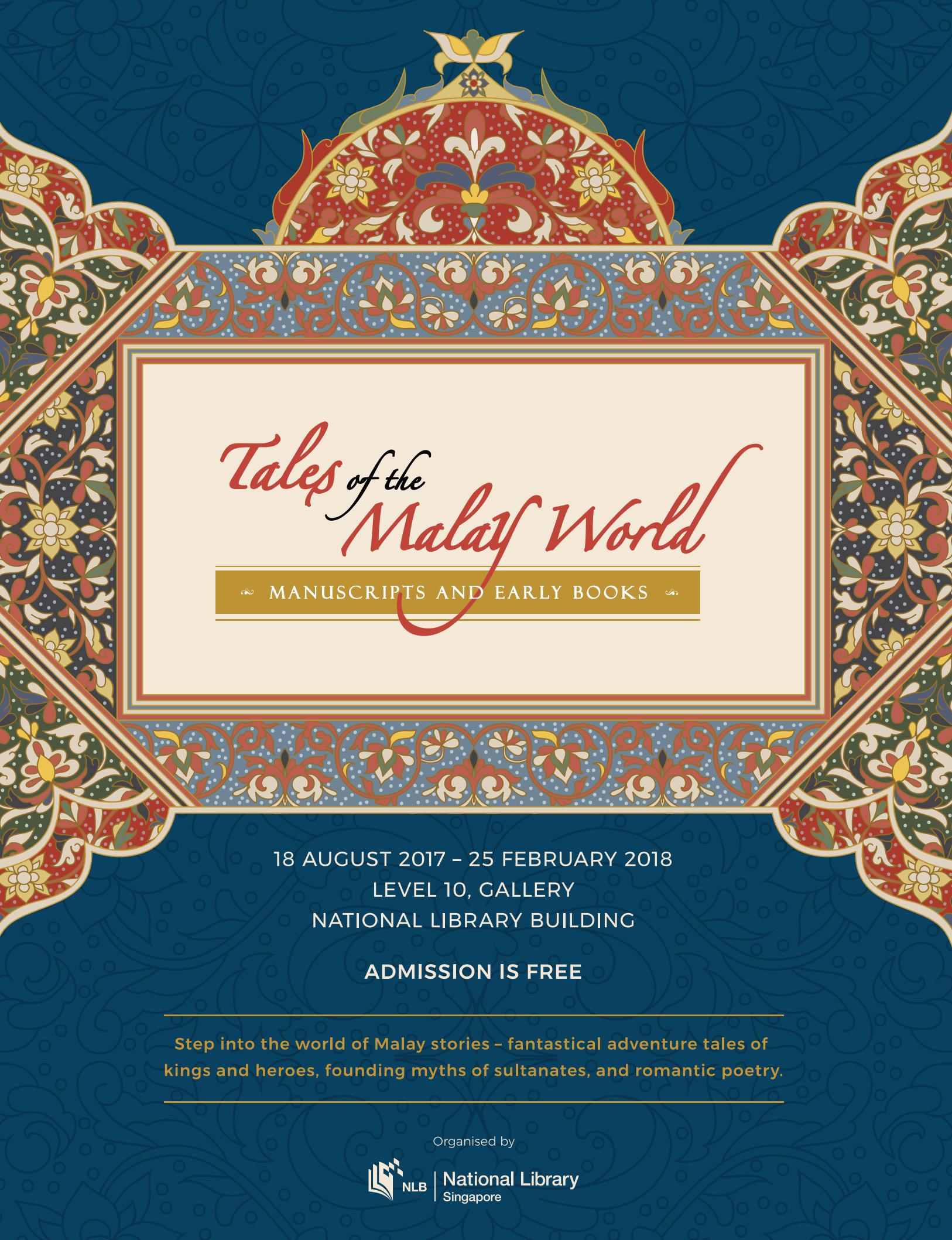
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