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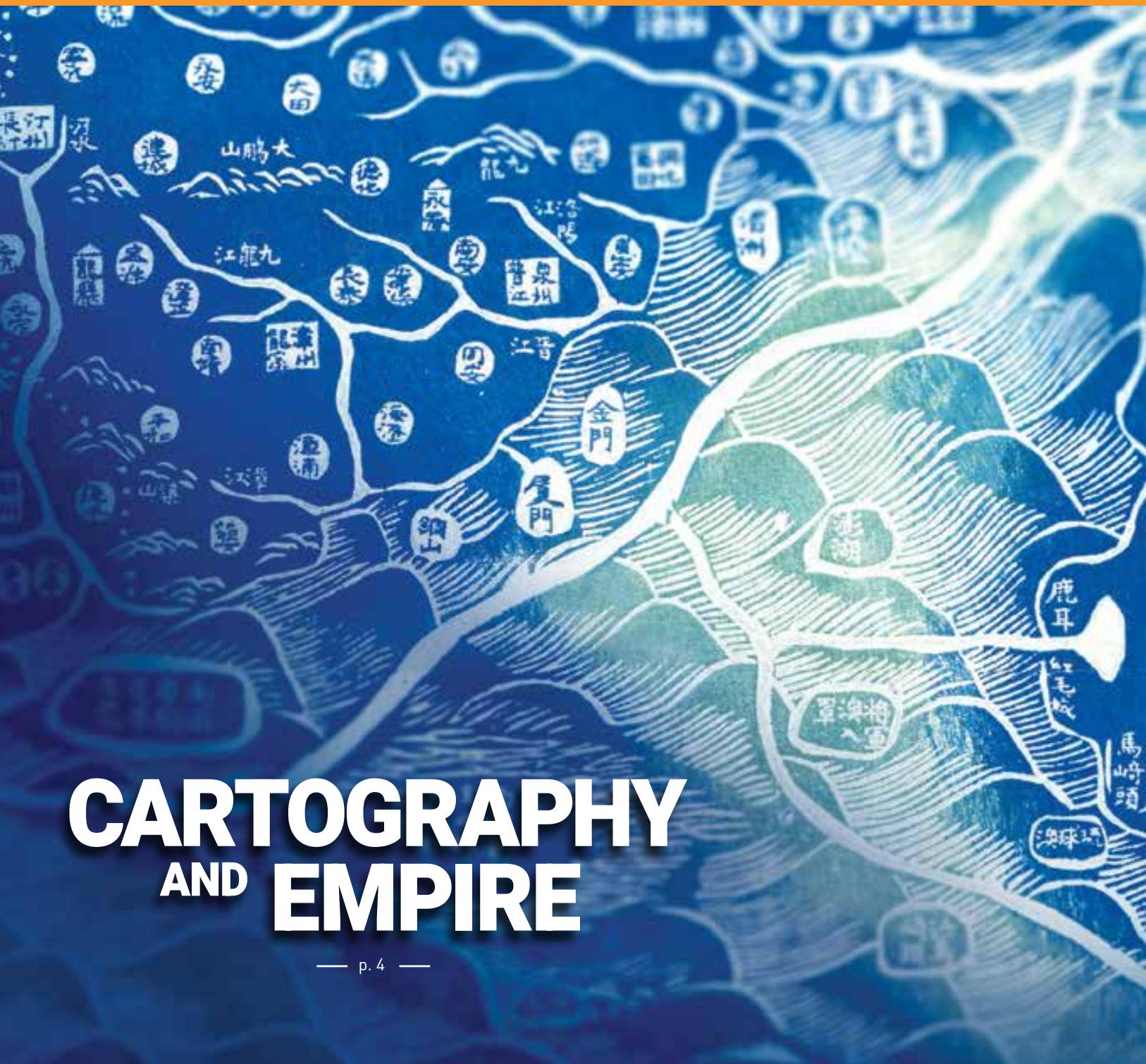
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MAPPING THE WORLD

Perspectives from Asian Cartography

Enter the world of Asian cartography and discover its rich history and diverse perspectives

11 Dec 2021 – 8 May 2022
Gallery, Level 10
National Library Building



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Director's Note

It is easy finding our way around today, even in a new place. Our phones have maps and built-in GPS so we never have to worry about getting anywhere. These maps in our pockets allow us to figuratively conquer space.

Maps, however, are also tools to help one literally conquer a place. Maps enable armies to gain new territories and subdue populations. The relationship with cartography and power is the focus of this issue's cover story by Chia Jie Lin. The essay ties in with our latest exhibition "Mapping the World: Perspectives from Asian Cartography", now taking place on level 10 of the National Library Building.

Speaking of foreign invasion, 2022 marks the 80th anniversary of the Fall of Singapore. Dan Black recounts the terrifying final hours of the troopship *Empress of Asia*, which was sunk by the Japanese near Sultan Shoal off Tuas in February 1942. The *Asia* carried over 2,000 soldiers who came to bolster Singapore's defences.

A happier anniversary was celebrated in 2021 though. Do join us on a trip down memory lane as Sharon Teng revisits the Jurong Drive-in Cinema, which opened in July 1971. Although it only lasted 14 years, it left indelible memories on those fortunate enough to catch a movie there.

While Sharon's trip was figurative, Faris Joraimi literally went on a boat-ride to Pulau Lingga in search of forgotten links to Singapore. His essay – part-travelogue, part-history – is well worth the price of the ticket.

Buying a ticket, however, is now a thing of the past at The Substation, which shut its doors at Armenian Street in 2021. To commemorate this one-of-a-kind arts space, Clarissa Oon speaks to the people who were there at its beginning.

Don't forget to check out the rest of the stories in this issue. Lim Tin Seng finds out how Tree Planting Day blossomed, Yap Jo Lin plays tour guide through the homes of famous towkays, Patricia Lim recalls the life of a trailblazer in education for Chinese girls and Toffa Abdul Wahed takes us through the cookbooks of Siti Radhiah. And last but not least, we also have a photo essay showing stunning natural history illustrations associated with Stamford Raffles some 200 years ago.

From cookbooks to shipwrecks, this issue is another collection of essays you will want to re-read over and over again. Wishing all our readers a brave new year! Here's hoping that 2022 will be better.

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On the cover

Detail from *Complete Geographical Map of the Everlasting Unified Qing Empire* (大清万年一统地理全图; *Daqing wanlian yitong dili quantu*), Huang Qianren, 1767 (post-1815 reprint), woodblock-printed, ink on paper. *MacLean Collection*, Illinois, USA.

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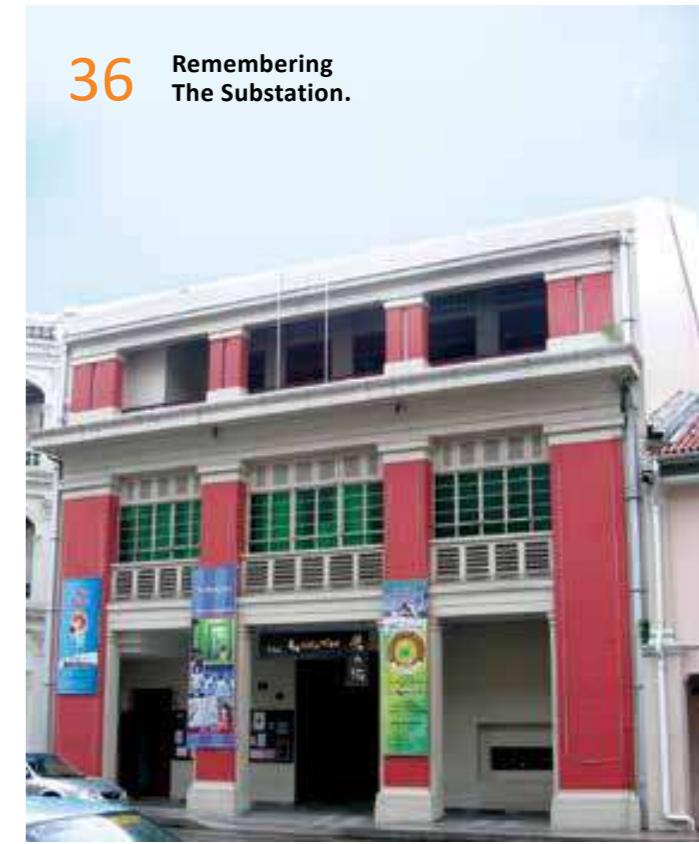
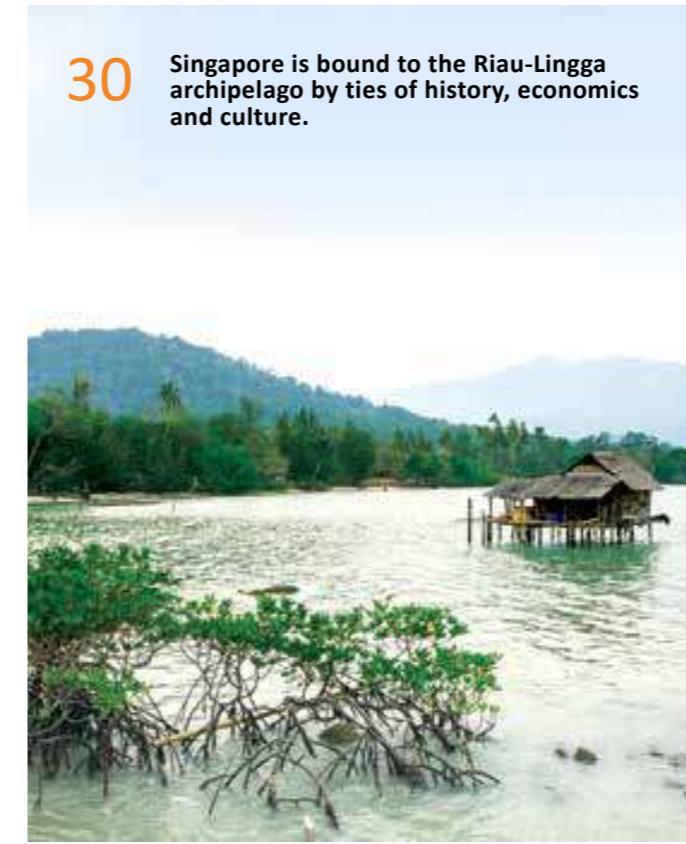
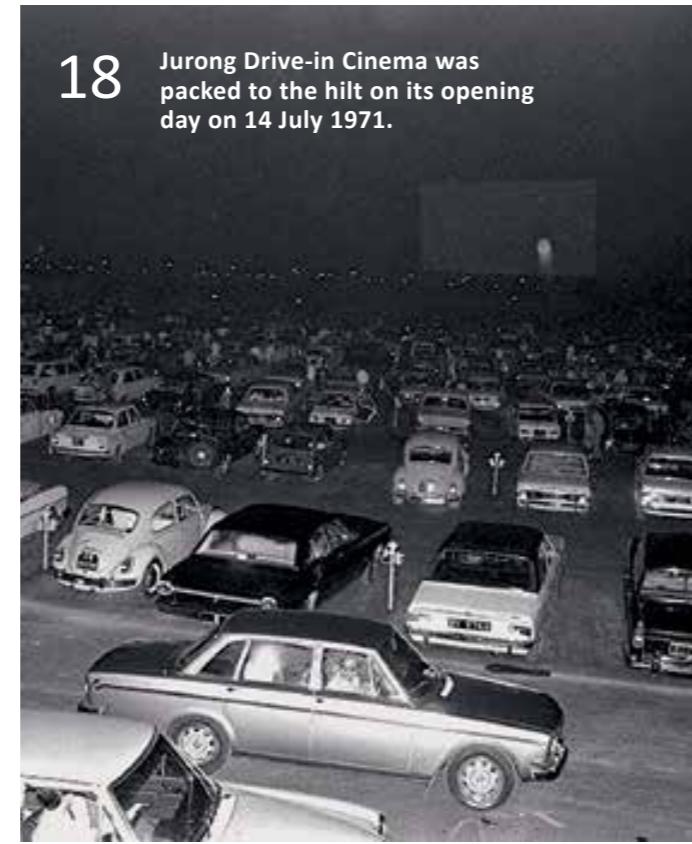
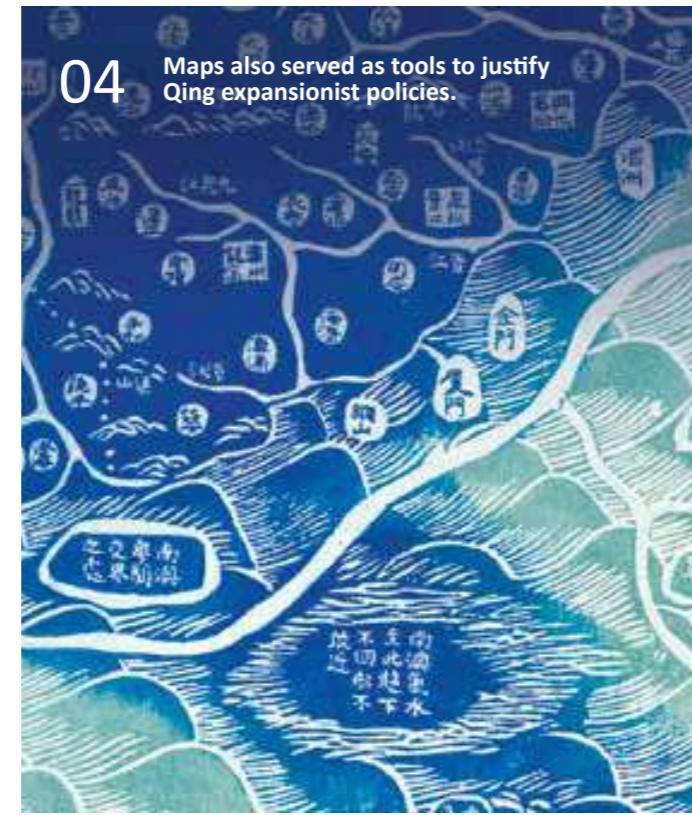
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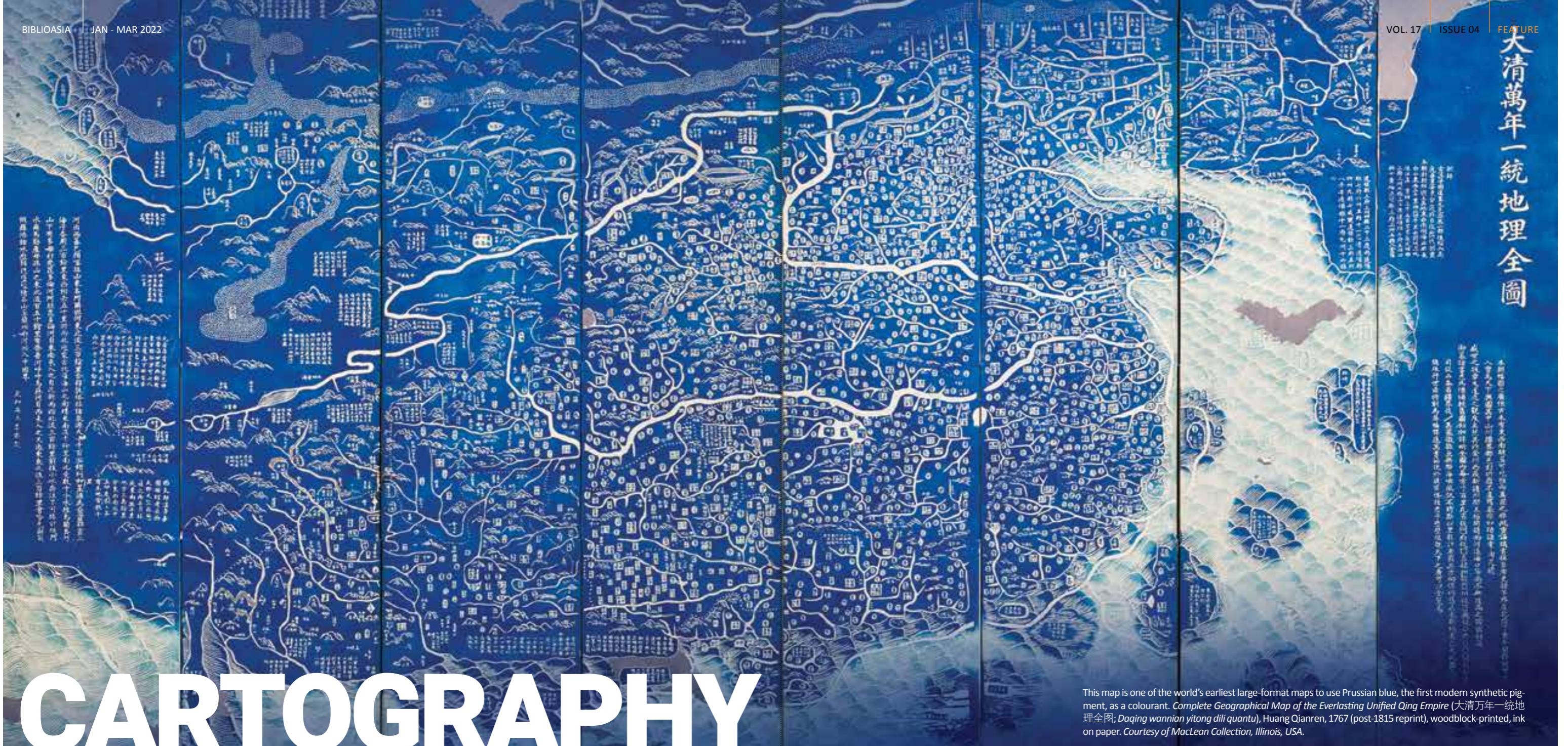
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CARTOGRAPHY AND THE RISE OF COLONIAL EMPIRES IN ASIA

Chia Jie Lin highlights interesting cartographic efforts from the National Library's latest exhibition on Asian maps.

Between the 17th and 20th centuries, Eastern and Western colonial empires expanded across the globe, carving up new territories for control, administration and economic exploitation. In East Asia, Manchu armies swept southwards from the Mongolian-Manchurian steppes and past the Great Wall of China to conquer Ming Chinese territories.¹

Meanwhile in Europe, the East India Companies – such as the Dutch, English and French – set sail for Asia in search of spices and other lucrative trade opportunities. These armed trading behemoths-turned-imperial states forcefully estab-

lished colonies across South and Southeast Asia, causing the deaths of thousands of indigenous peoples.

Cartography anticipated and perpetuated the expansion of these empires. In the metropole (the homeland of a colonial empire) and the colonies, emperors, kings, and colonial administrators commissioned extensive land surveys and cartographic projects to establish their power and articulate their claims of legitimate rule over newly conquered territories.

The relationship between cartography and colonial empires is one of the many stories in the National Library's latest exhibi-

bition, "Mapping the World: Perspectives from Asian Cartography". From the Indian Ocean to the Pacific, Asian cartography contains rich histories and diverse traditions. It represents centres of political and theocratic power, and embodies knowledge exchanges between the East and West. Maps were instruments of power and government,

Chia Jie Lin is an Assistant Curator with Programmes & Exhibitions at the National Library, Singapore. She is part of the France-Singapore curatorial team of the "Mapping the World: Perspectives from Asian Cartography" exhibition.



(Above) Detail from the map featuring the capital Beijing (京师; *jingshi*) in a square with a line denoting a province (省; *sheng*). Within it is the Shuntian (順天) administrative division and Wanping (宛平) district. The squares denote prefectures (府; *fu*) while the circles represent districts (县; *xian*). To the north of the capital is the Great Wall of China, shown winding around the landscape. *Complete Geographical Map of the Everlasting Unified Qing Empire* (大清万年一统地理全图; *Daqing wannian yitong dili quan*), Huang Qianren, 1767 (post-1815 reprint), woodblock-printed, ink on paper. Courtesy of MacLean Collection, Illinois, USA.

(Above right) In the mid- to late 18th century, Emperor Qianlong launched the Ten Great Campaigns (十全武功; *shiquanwugong*), which was a series of military campaigns to expand Qing control in Inner Asia and police frontier regions such as Burma and Tibet. *Portrait of Emperor Qianlong as a Young Man*, 19th century, China, hanging scroll, ink and colour on silk. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

borne out of the complex encounters between the “colonial and the colonised, the imperial center and the periphery, the modern and the indigenous”.²

Qing Imperial Expansion

The Qing dynasty (1644–1911) was one of the most successful colonial empires in the early modern period.³ The empire was founded by the Manchus, who claimed descent from the Jurchens of Northeastern China. In 1644, the Qing claimed the territory of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), forming a vast empire in the wake of the Ming’s dissolution.⁴ Between 1660 and 1760, the Qing doubled the extent of its territories by defeating and allying with neighbouring powers to encompass frontier zones, including Mongolia, Xinjiang and Manchuria.⁵

Early Qing rulers sponsored indigenous (Chinese) mapping practices at the court to record and communicate knowledge of Qing territories. In 1646, two years after the founding of the Qing dynasty, Prince Regent Dorgon (多爾袞, r. 1643–50) ordered an empire-wide cadastral survey. Although the survey was conducted to collect land use records and facilitate land-based tax reforms, it had other goals: to strengthen the court’s reach and control over Qing territories and populations.⁶ Qing rulers sought to legitimise foreign Manchu

rule over Chinese civilisation through such strategic mapping projects.

Dorgon’s empire-wide surveys were succeeded by Emperor Kangxi (康熙, r. 1662–1722) who, in 1684, commissioned “a systematic inspection... in each administrative division of the province [of Guangdong] to gain more accurate information on the names and locations of mountains and streams, the natural and artificial boundaries, the historic and scenic places and the distances between them”.⁷ As an alternative to Chinese mapmaking, Kangxi sponsored the development of European scientific surveys and cartographic techniques, with the goal of creating accurate to-scale maps for more effective administration of his domains.⁸

Between 1708 and 1715, Kangxi employed European Jesuit missionaries to conduct detailed surveys of his empire. The resulting maps, completed in 1718, were known as the *Imperially Commissioned Maps of All Surveyed* (皇輿全覽圖; *huangyu quanlan tu*), or the *Kangxi Atlas*. A year later, French Jesuit historian Jean-Baptiste Du Halde presented the *Kangxi Atlas* to Louis XV of France (r. 1715–74).⁹

Qing cartographic projects from the late 17th to 18th centuries were contemporaneous with national surveys and mapping activities sponsored by similarly ambi-



nal frontiers, and features neighbouring states such as Korea and Annam (central Vietnam). It situates China as the Middle Kingdom (中国; *zhongguo*) at the centre of the world, with Europe and the Near East on the far periphery (depicted at the topmost left of the map). Cartographic symbols of varying shapes denote the different administrative divisions and units.

The preface, located at the bottom right, notes that the map was produced to communicate the new shape and scope of the empire (天下之广可以全览焉; “the vastness of the empire can be seen”). Furthermore, the map prominently features the newly conquered frontier regions of Mongolia, Tibet and Chinese Turkestan. In his book, *Cartographic Traditions in East Asian Maps*, Richard A. Pegg, Director of the MacLean Collection in Illinois, USA, notes that this court-produced map “confirms the Qing notion of the world”, particularly of Qianlong’s worldview at the peak of his reign.¹²

Historian Laura Hostetler notes that at an impressive 1.3 by 2.35 m, the map served an “imperial purpose – to awe those who viewed it with the grandeur of the Qing”.¹³ Its title, containing the words “unification” (一统; *yitong*) and “everlasting” (万年; *wannian*), symbolised an empire whose influence extended outwards – from the emperor in Beijing to its ever-expanding margins of frontiers, vassal states and overseas (海外; *haiwai*) territories.

After Qianlong’s passing in 1799, his heir Emperor Jiaqing (嘉庆, r. 1796–1821) commissioned reprints of the *Complete Geographical Map of the Everlasting Unified Qing Empire* in 1800, likely to celebrate the empire unified by his father. The map went through at least eight reprints during the 19th century, likely due to relaxed restrictions on the dissemination of geographical knowledge during the reigns of Emperor Jiaqing and Emperor Daoguang (道光; r. 1821–51). Many extant copies later found their way to Japan and were mounted onto Japanese folding screens and sliding doors. One copy, belonging to the Yokohama City University Library and Information Center and on display at the “Mapping the World” exhibition, comprises a set of eight hanging scrolls that come together to form the full map.

Joseon Korea

This imagined Qing universality was not reflected in the maps from Joseon Korea (1392–1910), its neighbour and vassal. Instead, during the late Joseon period from the 18th to 20th centuries (largely contemporaneous with Qing rule of China), Korean cartographers turned inwards, depicting in most cases *only* Korean territories. The Joseon state produced maps (*chido*, “land picture”) of all scales. These included detailed renderings for national administration purposes to pictorial maps



(Left) This map, which was produced for general consumption, details the political geography of Korea. It depicts the administrative areas, from the provinces to the cities, at a scale of 1:700,000. The term *Haejwa* (“left of the sea”) is a traditional nickname for Korea. *Map of Korea* (海左全圖; *Haejwa Jeondo*), unknown, c. 1857–66, woodblock-printed, ink and colour on paper. Courtesy of MacLean Collection, Illinois, USA.

(Below) Detail from the map featuring Hanseong (then capital, present-day Inhyeon-dong, Jung-gu district in Seoul) in a red circle with the traditional Korean (*hanja*) character for “capital” (京; *gyeong*). The lines connecting administrative units are accompanied by their distances, allowing the viewer to calculate the exact distances between anywhere on the Korean peninsula. *Map of Korea* (海左全圖; *Haejwa Jeondo*), unknown, c. 1857–66, woodblock-printed, ink and colour on paper. Courtesy of MacLean Collection, Illinois, USA.



of cities like the capital Hanseong (in present-day Seoul).

In the early Joseon period (1392–c. 1506), Korean cartography was characterised by an interest to justify and legitimise the new Joseon order, and to map territories for surveillance and control. In 1424, Sejong the Great (r. 1418–50) commissioned a survey of the Joseon nation-state, with questionnaires sent to the governors and magistrates of 334 districts seeking information on “boundaries, population sizes, administrative history, distances to neighbouring district centres, and data on human and physical geography of local areas”.¹⁴ By 1434, Sejong was seeking “full and detailed maps” from local administrators to strengthen centralised geographical information and, by extension, central political power.¹⁵

Early Joseon maps feature Korea in a Sinocentric world. They reflect the view of Korea’s ruling elite that their country was a rising power next to Ming China, the centre of civilisation at the time, while Japan was a rival state. The 1402 *Map of Integrated Lands and Regions of Historical Countries and Capitals of China* (*Honil Gangni Yeokdae Gukdo Ji Do*), or the *Gangnido* world map for short, shows Ming China – with its Great Wall – at the centre of the world, and an enlarged Korea situated next to it.¹⁶ The rest of the world frames the periphery of the map.¹⁷

Conversely, late Joseon maps like the *Haejwa Jeondo* (海左全圖; *Map of Korea*) depart from early Joseon cartography, and with good reason. Major foreign incursions marked the transition from the middle to late Joseon period in the 16th and 17th centuries, scarring the nation for centuries to come.

The Japanese invasions of Korea (1592–98), or Imjin War, devastated the peninsula. By 9 June 1592, less than three weeks after the Japanese landing in Busan on 23 May, the capital Hanseong had fallen. Over the span of seven years, the incursions caused an estimated two million in casualties and abducted civilian figures, amounting to 20 percent of the Joseon population.¹⁸ Ninety percent of the population were also rendered homeless, while Japanese soldiers collected 38,000 ears of defeated Korean troops to bury in the “ear mounds” of Osaka as spoils of war.¹⁹ Korean scholar O Huimin described “roads lined with corpses, the destruction of farmland, mass rapes, suicides of women who sought to escape capture, and reports of cannibalism in the starved population”.²⁰

Admiral Yi Sun-shin (1545–98), often celebrated as Korea’s greatest war hero,

raised an armada of large armoured “turtle ships” (*Geobukseon* warships) and naval forces, fighting against the Japanese until his death in the war’s final campaign.²¹

Decades later, Manchu forces invaded the Korean peninsula, angered by the latter’s support of the weakening Ming dynasty. The Manchu first struck in 1627 to threaten King Injo (r. 1623–49) into severing diplomatic ties with the Ming, and again in 1636 to punish the Koreans for breaking their 1627 oath of allegiance—previously made under duress—to the Qing.²²

These invasions cast a long shadow over the Korean psyche. In their aftermath, Korea pursued a policy of seclusion that restricted relations with Japan, China and Europe until the mid-19th century. Korean cartographic interest turned from delineating the boundaries of national territory to asserting a sense of self-sovereignty as well as rejecting both Japanese and Chinese colonial ambitions over Korea. Joseon mapmaking “underwent groundbreaking developments, spurred on by an increased demand as the population was attempting to come to terms with the harmful effects of war,” writes Associate Curator Baik Seungmi of the National Museum of Korea.²³



On 23 May 1592, the 18,700-strong Japanese force arrived at the harbour of Busan on the eastern coast of Korea, marking the start of the Imjin War (1592–98). *Battle at Busanjin Fortress*, Korea, 1760. Retrieved from Wikimedia Commons.

In the mid-18th century, Korean cartographer Jeong Sanggi (1678–1752) produced the *Dongkuk jido* (*Map of Korea*), hailed as the first map to “truly describe the Korean territory”.²⁴ The *Dongkuk jido* was widely copied and disseminated by government officials and civilians, and later became the basis of block-printed national maps like the *Haejwa Jeondo*.²⁵

The French Conquest of Indochina

From the 17th to 20th centuries, maps facilitated the expansion of European colonial empires across the world. By the 19th century, while the Netherlands had colonised the Dutch East Indies, and the British had controlled parts of Malaya and Burma (Myanmar), France had little colonial presence in Asia. Also of concern were their waning political dominance and prestige in Europe, as well as their trade competitor England’s easy access to the lucrative Chinese trade, enabled by the latter’s victory in the First Opium War (1839–41).²⁶

China’s loss to Britain in the First Opium War marked the start of the Qing empire’s decline, with the latter forced to acquiesce to trade with the British via a series of unequal treaties.²⁷ The British subsequently dominated China’s eastern coast, including an “open door policy” in Canton (Guangzhou) and along the Yangzi River.²⁸

“The political control of this expedition,” the *Special Commission for Cochinchina* (*Commission de la Cochinchina*) noted in 1857, “arises from the force of circumstances propelling the Western nations toward the Far East. Are we to be the only ones who possess nothing in this area, while the English, the Dutch, the Spanish, and even the Russians establish themselves there?”²⁹

To bypass the treaty ports of China’s coastal provinces, the French needed another trade route, this time through the Chinese mainland. In order to achieve this, France set its sights on colonising Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. It sought to develop a “river policy” based on “exclusive, therefore colonial” control of the mouths of the Mekong and Red Rivers.³⁰ The rivers flowing through the territories of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos enabled trade and travel, and supplied the people with water for daily consumption. The goal of the French was to “make Saigon a French Singapore”, according to the Marseille Chamber of Commerce in 1865.³¹

Maps and plans played a pivotal role in the French invasion of Vietnam. As French forces swept across northern Vietnam, they



(Left) This map of Tonkin shows the Red River, depicted in red running downwards through northern Vietnam, between the Chinese border and the Hanoi region. *Map of Northwest Tonkin*, Vietnam, c. 1883–85, ink and colour on paper. Courtesy of Private Collection, France.

(Above) A detail from the map showing the fort of Hung Hoa, which was captured by the French in 1884 during the Tonkin Campaign (1883–86). *Map of Northwest Tonkin*, Vietnam, c. 1883–85, ink and colour on paper. Courtesy of Private Collection, France.

amassed local plans of fortresses, cities and frontier zones to gather knowledge of local terrains and peoples.

The *Map of Northwest Tonkin*, belonging to a French private collection, is one of the many maps collected during the 1880s. As early as the 1860s, the French had begun to covet Tonkin in northern Vietnam—which was then a vassal of China—as well as its capital and major port city Hanoi, and the Red River for their strategic trading access to China and the southern Vietnamese provinces. In 1883, French statesman Jules Ferry (1832–93) ordered an all-out invasion of Tonkin, leading to the Sino-French War (1883–85). While Qing Chinese forces retaliated to reclaim their tributary state, the French eventually won and affirmed its control of the protectorates of Tonkin and Annam (central Vietnam).

The presence of Latin romanised characters *Quốc ngữ* (“national language script”) alongside the Sino-Vietnamese *Chữ Nôm* (“southern characters”) script on the map likely facilitated its use by the French. Shown on the map are French flags marking the progression of French troops across northern Vietnam, making this Tonkin map a rare example of a Vietnamese map influenced by French colonisation.

The French conquest of Indochina spanned the late 19th century. In 1887, French Indochina—the collective Orientalist term for the French colonial territories of

Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos—was born.³² The conquest also succeeded in destroying the region’s tributary relationships to the Beijing court. This marked the end of the pre-modern “world system” of Asia, one where Qing China held sway over tributary states at its southern periphery, such as the Vietnamese and Khmer kingdoms, as well as Lao and Tai principalities.

Indochina Mapped

During the period of European colonial expansion, explorers and imperial cartographers were interested in collecting and producing maps that “focused on ways of communication, rivers and roads that were perceived as Indochina’s neuralgic network” for reconnaissance purposes.³³

Maps took on new roles after the establishment of French Indochina (1887–1954). Colonial maps, produced in situ by European and indigenous mapmakers, provided knowledge that allowed European administrators to govern their new colonial possessions more effectively, engendering a “progressively more invasive and direct administration over territory”.³⁴ For one, the mapping of forests and their resources allowed colonial authorities to impose greater control on the use of natural resources by indigenous populations.³⁵

Cartographic documents were also pivotal in defining and demarcating imagined national boundaries, allowing colonis-

ers to lay claim to territories. From 1884 to 1895, the French explorer and diplomat Auguste Pavie (1847–1925), dubbed “the grand doyen of Indochinese mapping”, led several missions, known as “Missions Pavie”, to explore Indochina and the surrounding regions, including Siam. Pavie surveyed 676,000 sq km of land (over 900 times the size of Singapore) around the Vietnam-Laos boundary and the Laotian-Siamese border, creating “fixed” national borders that had not existed previously.³⁶ In turn, his work paved the way for the French to identify Cambodian and Laotian territories upon which they could impose their authority.

Pavie’s cartographic exploits were so transformative that the lack of them apparently weakened colonial control, as historian Olivier Schouteden wrote:

“Indeed, on May 24 1897, the Commandant Superior of Higher Laos blamed his impossibility to enforce border control requested by the Government General of Indochina on Pavie himself, arguing that ‘Mister Pavie had recommended to not carry out a topographic study of the frontiers’, and as a consequence, the maps produced by the mission, which were then the only ones available, did not ‘indicate [such] limits’.”³⁷

In 1863, Cambodian King Norodom (r. 1860–1904) signed a treaty with France in exchange for military protection against the dual threats of Vietnam and Siam (Thailand). Cambodia subsequently became a French protectorate until 1954, with administrative power largely held by a French Resident-General. *Map of Khsach-Kandal*, Cambodia, 1880s, ink and colour on paper. Courtesy of the Bibliothèque de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient (Paris).



The unspecified colonial administrator was likely Louis Paul Luce (1856–1931), who served as Interim Commandant-Superior of Haut-Laos from May 1897 to October 1898. In his argument, the Commandant-Superior critiqued the

failure of Pavie's maps to indicate the "limits" of Indochina at its borderlands. The assumption seemed to be that had Pavie done so, the maps would have been able to effectively resolve Siam and Indochina's competing territorial claims.

NOTES

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Meanwhile, maps produced by indigenous mapmakers provided an in-depth look at the lives of local populations. The *Map of Khsach-Kandal* was produced by Cambodian elites at the behest of French authorities, and on paper supplied by the French military. It sensitively depicts the daily life of rural civilians in Khsach Kandal, near the capital Phnom Penh.

At close glance, we see civilians leading their cows around the villages, while Buddhist temples, pagodas and village dwellings nestle within the natural landscape featuring trees and wild animals. Marine life such as fishes and crocodiles can be seen in the water bodies (in dark grey), denoted by the term "pond" in Khmer. The larger of the two "ponds" at the bottom most likely depicts the nearby Mekong River that flows past the towns of Svay Romiet, Khsach Kandal and Lvea Aem, with all three depicted on the map.

This commissioned map is part of a collection of maps from the library of the École française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO; French School of Asian Studies). Headquartered in Hanoi, the EFEO was founded as the Indochina Archaeological Mission in 1898 before taking on its current name in 1900.

According to geographer Charles Robequain (1897–1963), who studied at the EFEO from 1924 to 1929, the EFEO sought to obtain "knowledge of native society, of the peasants' mental processes" via field work-based research to further colonial control.³⁸ Until the end of French colonial rule in Indochina in 1954, cartography remained pivotal for administrative purposes, providing

information on indigenous landscapes, population structures and distribution, as well as the lives of local populations.

Cartographic Legacies

Modern cartographic conceptions have often reduced maps to accurate representations of physical space and geographical realities. This narrow definition, however, could not be further from the truth for historical maps. Such maps can be forms of "world-making" as symbolic and graphical representations that embody and reflect complex understandings of the world, their makers' beliefs and cultural realities, among others. Under the auspices of colonialism, maps were also artefacts of "world-taking" that have modern-day ramifications.³⁹ The cartographic legacies of former colonial empires in Asia remain relevant and continue to shape contemporary geographical imaginaries alongside our understanding of their histories.

Today, the contours of the People's Republic of China correspond largely to Qing-era maps of the 17th and 18th centuries.⁴⁰ Closer to home, the formation of several Southeast Asian nations were similarly borne out of colonial-era cartography, the defining of national borders and the consolidation of previously semi-autonomous states. Even the creation of the modern Thai nation (previously Siam), which was spared European colonisation, was influenced by scientific mapping practices that displaced indigenous conceptions of space.⁴¹

The legacies of colonialism are still evident today. Asian maps, produced in-situ by indigenous cartographers, are

among countless artefacts located far away from their homelands and displaced from their original systems of knowledge. For example, under colonial expansion and subsequent French rule in Indochina, many Vietnamese maps made their way into the collections of French and other European institutions.⁴²

Such histories and discourses remain relevant to Singapore – our intellectual legacy as a former colony is intertwined

with those of other Asian nations. The "Mapping the World" exhibition grapples with the diverse and complex histories of maps and mapmaking in Asia. It brings to the fore an Asian-centric history of cartography and, in doing so, introduces its fascinating yet lesser-known stories for audiences in Singapore. ♦

The author thanks history student Jacqueline Yu for her research assistance.

MAPPING THE WORLD: PERSPECTIVES FROM ASIAN CARTOGRAPHY

Level 10 Gallery,
National Library Building
11 December 2021 – 8 May 2022

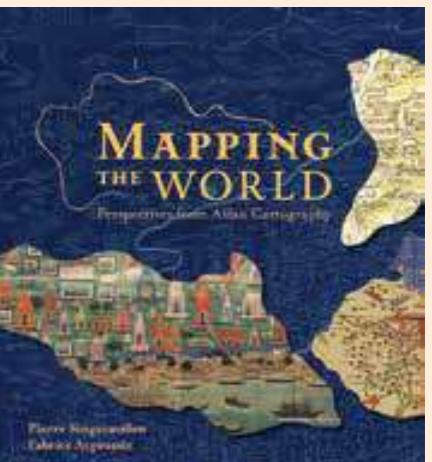
Discover the maps mentioned in this essay and more at the National Library's latest exhibition produced in partnership with the Embassy of France in Singapore, in association with the vOilah! France Singapore Festival 2021 and with the support of Temasek and Tikehau Capital.

The exhibition features over 60 cartographic treasures from institutions in France, the United States, Japan and Singapore.

The exhibition is open from 10 am to 9 pm daily, except on public holidays. Admission is free.

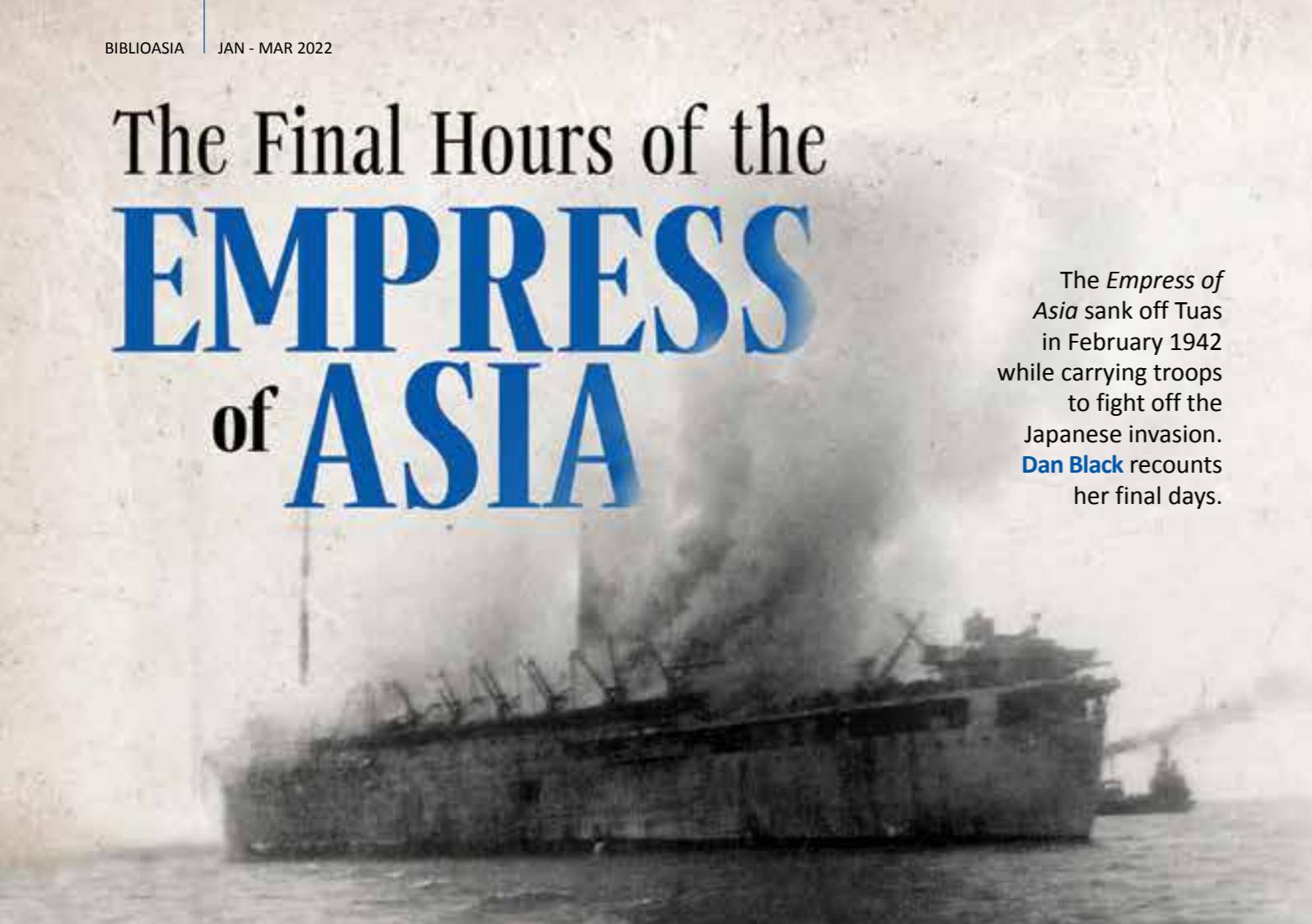
As an accompaniment to the exhibition, a book with the same title has

been published. It is written by curators Pierre Singavérou and Fabrice Argounès, with inputs from the National Library's curatorial team. *Mapping the World: Perspectives from Asian Cartography* is available for reference at the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library and for loan at selected public libraries (Call nos. RSING 526.095 SIN and SING 526.095 SIN).



The Final Hours of the **EMPEROR** of ASIA

The *Empress of Asia* sank off Tuas in February 1942 while carrying troops to fight off the Japanese invasion. **Dan Black** recounts her final days.



A huge iron anchor has been part of the permanent exhibition at the National Museum of Singapore since 2015. About 2.4 m tall, it is originally from the RMS Empress of Asia, which was destroyed off Singapore in February 1942. At the time, the ship was transporting Allied troops to help reinforce Singapore's defence during the Japanese invasion. The following story commemorates the 80th anniversary of this wartime loss.

Geoffrey Hosken's school exercise book was an odd choice for a seaman's diary on a 16,909-ton troopship. Stamped in big black letters are six danger points for

Dan Black is former editor of *Legion Magazine*, a publication on Canada's military history. He has written many editorials and feature articles on Canada's military past and present for the award-winning magazine. His third book, *Harry Livingstone's Forgotten Men: Canadians and the Chinese Labour Corps in the First World War*, was published in 2019. He is currently working on a book about the *Empress of Asia* with researcher Nelson Oliver.

schoolchildren, starting with "Don't run across the road without first looking both ways!" and ending with "Don't forget to walk on the foot-path, if there is one!"¹

The 25-year-old able seaman from Vancouver recognised the irony given his rough and tumble existence on the world's oceans. But he really didn't mind what others thought of his little green scribbler.

It was February 1942, and there were 30 pages to fill, several of which would describe the next 32 hours as his ship, the RMS *Empress of Asia*, steamed towards her death off Singapore.

With an unyielding pencil, Hosken wrote: "Wed., Feb. 4, 3 A.M... Lagging behind convoy as usual and cruiser keeps signalling to pick up speed for we are endangering the whole convoy."

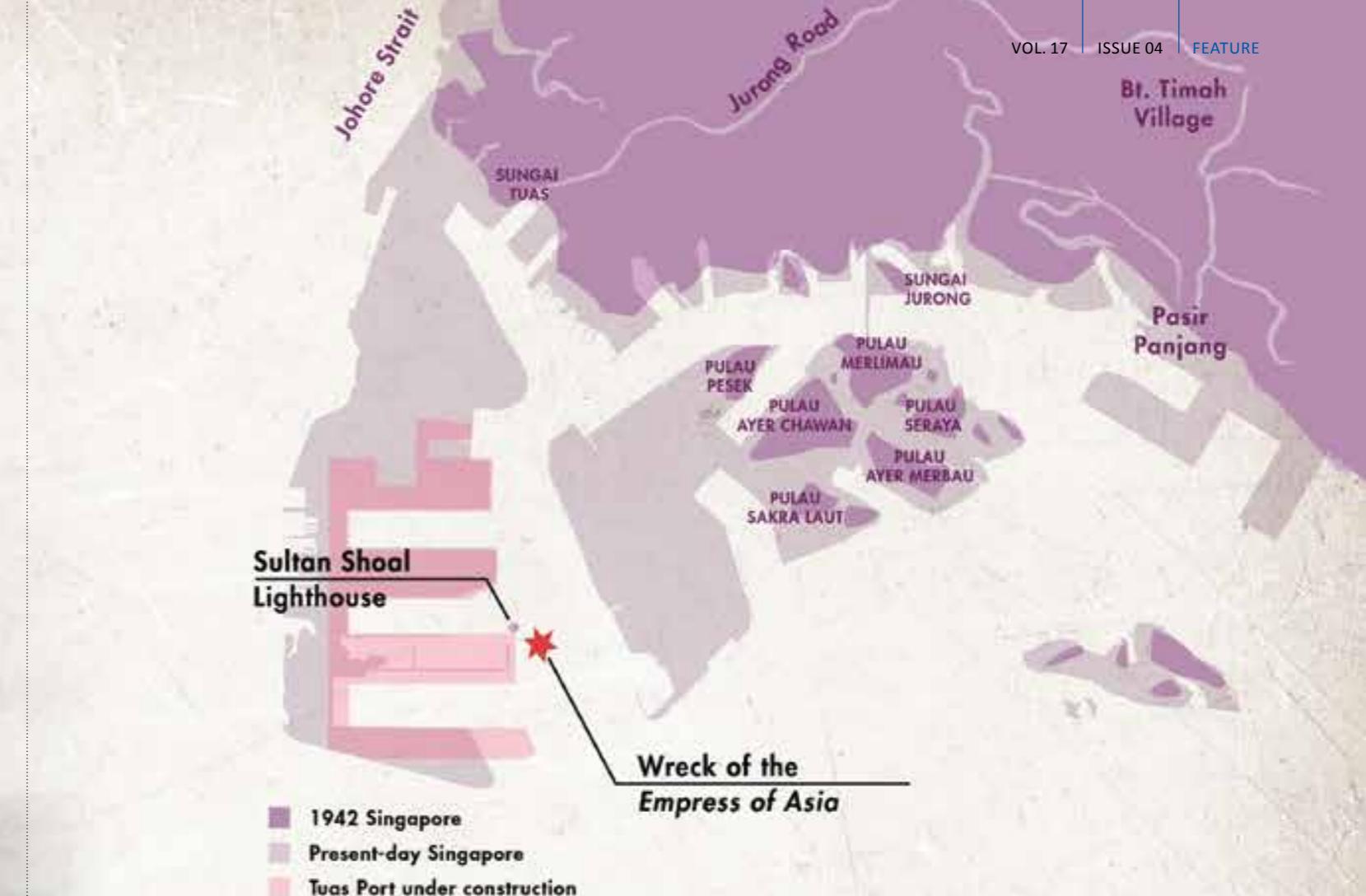
Worrisome words because the 30-year-old Canadian Pacific coal-burner was in dangerous waters off the east coast of Sumatra, in the narrow channel known as Bangka Strait. Just over a day's sail from Singapore's Keppel Harbour, the old "greyhound" of the Pacific was last in line with four other trooperships in Convoy

BM-12 which she had joined at Bombay (now Mumbai) on 23 January. The "firemen won't or can't get the steam," noted Hosken. "Doing 12–13 knots and about a mile behind." (Firemen are the men in the stokehold of a merchant ship who feed coal into the furnaces, heating the boilers that produce steam to drive the turbines.)

At the head of the convoy was the *City of Canterbury*, followed by the Dutch liner *Plancius*, the *Devonshire*, and the ex-French, 17,083-ton *Félix Roussèl*. Escorting were British cruisers HMS *Exeter* and HMS *Danae*, the Australian sloop HMAS *Yarra*, the Indian sloop HMIS *Sutlej* and two destroyers.

High above, a formation of twin-engine Japanese fighter-bombers scoured the sky and placid sea, paying attention to the islands and straits that forced convoys into single file.

In December 1941, while the *Asia* was off Africa between Freetown and the Cape of Good Hope, the Japanese shocked the world at Pearl Harbor and attacked the Philippines and Hong Kong. On 10 December, they sank Britain's two capital ships, HMS *Prince of Wales*



and HMS *Repulse*, based at Singapore. By Christmas, they had taken Kowloon Peninsula and Hong Kong, having forced British and Canadian troops to surrender after overwhelming them.

With Singapore as a major prize, the Japanese chose not to attack the island from the sea, avoiding the 15-inch guns, three of which could traverse 360 degrees. Instead, they landed in Thailand and northern Malaya on 8 December 1941 and advanced south with artillery, tanks and infantry on bicycles while aircraft attacked airfields and ground positions. By late January, around the time the *Asia* was collecting members of the British 18th Division at Bombay, the enemy had repeatedly bombed Singapore and was at the southern end of the peninsula.



(Facing page) Smoke billows from the *Empress of Asia* after she was attacked by Japanese dive bombers off Singapore, 5 February 1942. Australian War Memorial, P01604.001

(Top) A 1942 map superimposed onto a current map of Singapore, showing where the *Empress of Asia* sank.

(Above left) Able Seaman Geoffrey Hosken kept a detailed diary during his time on the *Empress of Asia*. This photo was taken well after the ship's destruction. Courtesy of Margaret Wallace.

(Above right) A page from Able Seaman Geoffrey Hosken's diary records the unfolding situation on 4 February 1942. Courtesy of Margaret Wallace.

12

13

While the *Asia* laboured through the Bangka Strait on 4 February, the Japanese were 11 days from forcing the British to surrender what many had thought was an impregnable fortress.

The night before Hosken noted the *Asia's* lack of steam, Ordinary Seaman Jack Ewart had been in the crow's nest 23 m above the water. At the time, Convoy BM-12, which had rendezvoused with Convoy DM-2, was in the Sunda Strait between Sumatra and Java. That was when the young Canadian thought he heard aircraft engines and picked up the phone to the bridge. Ewart was told he was probably hearing the engines of another ship off *Asia's* starboard beam. When the ships reached the northern end of the Sunda Strait, several broke off and headed east to Batavia (now Jakarta) to support the Dutch colony while five ships headed northwest towards Bangka Strait.

Fourth Officer Walter Oliver had sailed most of the world's oceans and earned the coveted master's certificate. He had helped transport oil from the Dutch East Indies and once kept a cabin at Palembang, Sumatra. Oliver was familiar with the Singapore approaches and on 4 February the *Asia's* position – "well in the rear" of the convoy – was apparent.²

Hosken, meanwhile, could see that his ship was not only last in line, but also

visible with three massive smoke stacks. She carried the most number of military personnel: 2,235 compared to the *Devonshire's* 1,673, had a crew of 413, and was heavy with military supplies.³

Painted wartime grey, the 180-metre-long *Empress of Asia* was not without firepower and her crew included 25 personnel drawn largely from the British Army and Royal Navy. To preserve the ship's merchant and non-combatant status, these men, known colloquially as DEMS (Defensively Equipped Merchant Ships), signed on as deckhands and were part of the crew. In addition to the DEMS, several crew members had gun training.

The anti-aircraft armament consisted of a 12-pounder (three-inch gun) fitted aft, close to the six-inch gun, six large-calibre Oerlikon guns, and 10 Hotchkiss light machine guns, six of which were secured within machine-gun nests near the bridge.⁴ The ship also had a parachute and cable anti-aircraft system launched by rockets. Missing was her Bofors anti-aircraft gun, which had been transferred to the British Army in North Africa.

The First Attack: Wednesday, 4 February

By 11 am, Hosken was helping prepare mooring lines for coming alongside at

Singapore, approximately 525 km to the northwest. He detected what Ewart thought he had heard the night before: aircraft engines. "About 11:30 gunfire started and I looked up and saw nine planes coming over at quite a height. Then there were eighteen of them. I started forward to get lifebelt and helmet. Was going along the starboard alleyway on A deck, just about the purser's office when bang, I thought the ship was broken in half."

Captain John Watts of the British 18th Div. saw the aircraft at high altitude in "V" formation "with the sun glinting on their silver bodies". He counted 27, nine to each "V" formation, proceeding north to south.⁵

Canadian Boy Seaman Geoff Tozer remembered five bombs hitting the water on the starboard side, three falling aft and two landing near the port side. Assigned to an anti-aircraft gun, he quickly realised the targets were beyond range.⁶

Hosken hurried aft to a gun position where he was sent below to an ammunition bunker. "2 of us went down (it was very scary). Had some boxes of shells hoisted up and we were told to come out...and keep a lookout by the gun." He counted five enemy bombs; none of which were direct hits. "Two were near hits. No. 2 and 2A lifeboats were splintered by shrapnel. One piece landed right beside [Ordinary Seaman] Mike [Costello] and one near the gun aft."

In her glory days – minus the rust and wartime grey paint – the *Empress of Asia* was a sight to behold. Resplendent in white, she is pictured here passing through the First Narrows at Vancouver during the late 1930s. James Crookall, City of Vancouver Archives – 260-994.



Sanitation Engineer John Drummond stated the concussion "smashed some large, square port glasses [windows] in the ship's dining saloon and split iron tables in two". The enemy, he added, was driven off by anti-aircraft fire and two Allied fighter planes. "But this gave away our position as we were only 24 hours sail from our Destination."⁷

In his diary, Hosken wrote "the bloody firemen came up when the first bomb was dropped", but returned below when told to do so by a priest.⁸ He does not identify the priest, but he was likely a chaplain attached to the British troops. Hosken did not specify how many of the firemen, who had signed on in the United Kingdom, appeared.⁹

Hosken wrote that 25 soldiers went below to keep watch. "It was a very scary episode and I hope never to experience it again."¹⁰

In his report, dictated while imprisoned by the Japanese after the fall of Singapore, Watts stated: "...at the sound of the exploding bombs in the water on each side of the ship, it brought these people dashing up... onto the Fiddley Deck [the raised deck on top of the ship] from the depths of the Stokehold." He stated this "worried us tremendously" and believed the absence of men from the stokehold for a "half hour"... reduced steam pressure and the ship "dropped considerably behind the main convoy".¹¹

In his official report, Captain John Bisset Smith, who commanded the *Asia*, made no mention of men in the stokehold leaving their posts when the bombing commenced on 4 February. He noted the ship was "allotted this position [last in line] on account of our steaming difficulties, the ship almost invariably dropping astern of station when fires were being cleaned".¹² Similarly, the report from *Asia's* Chief Officer Donald Smith does not mention a loss of steam on 4 February.

Other available accounts support Hosken's view or the claim that the ship had lost speed. One states that *Exeter* came alongside imploring the *Asia* to increase speed and another states some ex-miners among the troops went below to stoke the ship.¹³

"During the forenoon [4 February] the convoy split into two sections," recalled Oliver. Two of the faster ships, the *Devonshire* and *Plancius*, escorted by *Exeter* and *Sutlej*, pulled away from the other three escorted by *Danae* and *Yarra*. "Twilight until daylight... everything remained quiet, with the convoy proceeding towards Singapore at twelve knots in clear tropical weather."¹⁴

At 10:48 am, noted Oliver, the enemy scored its first hit. An incendiary bomb



(Above) Prior to the Singapore voyage, Fourth Officer Walter Oliver had sailed most of the world's oceans. He was one of the last crew members to leave the burning *Empress of Asia* on 5 February 1942. Courtesy of Nelson Oliver.



(Above right) Canadian Boy Seaman Geoff Tozer remembered five bombs hitting the water on the starboard side of the *Empress of Asia* on 4 February 1942. Courtesy of Hightail Tozer Papers.

The Second Attack: Thursday, 5 February

By around 10 am, the trailing section of Convoy BM-12 was approaching Sultan Shoal, 21 km from Keppel Harbour. The ships reduced speed as they prepared to embark harbour pilots. However, the pilot assigned to the *Asia* never made it on board.¹⁵ At 10:37 am, a large formation of aircraft was spotted, flying west to east.¹⁶

Minutes later, they attacked from all directions at low and high altitudes. The three trooperships and their escorts opened fire. "Bombs started falling... and it was evident the ship had been singled out to bear the brunt of the attack," reported the captain.¹⁷

Cadet Maurice Atkins was on the lower bridge during the attack. "There was this [enemy aircraft] coming down our bow with his machine-gun blazing, and I never felt so helpless in my life. He was heading straight for the ship – coming over the bow. All I could see was the machine-gun shells hitting the deck and bridge, and felt for sure one of them had my name on it."¹⁸

Although she got a pilot on board, the *Félix Roussel* suffered the first hit, but survived. The enemy aircraft then turned their attention on the *Asia*, which gave the two other trooperships the chance to make port.

"As each plane attacked, and when coming out of the dive, the bomb could be seen leaving the rack," recalled Oliver. "Next the explosion, followed by the concussion. All these aircraft attacked from forward in line with the bow at incredible speed."¹⁹

Watts described one bomb passing over the bridge before smashing through the fiddley deck and exploding in the officers' lounge. He noted it was an "oil bomb" weighing no more than 100 pounds (45 kg). The ship was "belching smoke from a short distance behind the bridge to the third funnel... We could see

penetrated the upper deck between No. 1 and No. 2 funnels, exploding in the lounge. The blast inflicted heavy casualties among the troops below.²⁰ Killed instantly was British soldier Ewen McKerchar, shy of his 28th birthday. "I had a firefighting crew working for me and while I was up in the lower bridge with the chief officer I was told to go and hook up the hoses to the hydrants and be ready to help," recalled Atkins. "When we got there, there was no water."²¹

"From the start... our guns put up an extremely good and steady barrage," stated Oliver. "The barrels of the Bren guns became so hot they had to be discarded and replaced..."

Another bomb struck close to No. 1 funnel and exploded below deck, knocking out communications between the bridge and the after part of the ship. The fiddley deck was thick with smoke forcing the Bren gunners to the upper bridge railing facing the bow. "The concussion of all this firing set off many of our own rockets," noted Oliver. "Some... flew horizontal around the bridge deck, adding... to the confusion. The rockets with the parachutes attached also took off on their own, at the wrong time, and landed with all the wiring back on deck."²²

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(Above) Prior to its conversion as a troopship in 1914, the *Empress of Asia* offered luxurious travel for first-class passengers. One feature was this domed lounge with beautiful furnishings and a grand piano. During the aerial attack on 5 February 1942, a bomb exploded in the lounge inflicting casualties. University of British Columbia Library, Rare Books and Special Collections – CC-PH-09390.

(Left) Maurice Atkins was a young cadet on board the *Empress of Asia*. He and Ordinary Seaman William McKinnon helped drop mooring lines over the side which enabled men to escape from the bow of the burning ship on 5 February 1942. Courtesy of Maurice Atkins.



officers and men, blackened and burned, being passed and assisted through open windows of cabins and recreation rooms on the promenade deck.”²³

Pantryman Douglas Elworthy, a member of the catering crew, was sprayed with hot, oily shrapnel. He was in the pantry below the lounge. In his diary, Hosken mentions a steward with a “belly full of shrapnel”.²⁴ This was likely Elworthy, who died five days later.

“I can remember standing on the portside boat deck as we were trying to get some lifeboats away, and looking down fifty feet to the water at him [Elworthy] hanging on to a swamped lifeboat,” recalled Tozer. “I didn’t realise he was injured.”²⁵

The Oerlikon guns ran out of ammunition while two Hotchkiss guns jammed,

leaving the ship with her three-inch gun and small arms. A third bomb struck the officers’ quarters creating a fire. With the wheelhouse full of smoke and the floor buckling from heat, the engine room reported “gas forming in the stokehold”. The captain ordered its evacuation.

The chief officer noted that while “fire parties were immediately on the scene... no water was available... presumably due to the damaged mains”.²⁶ By 11.25 am, the fires below decks were out of control.²⁷

With the ship’s midsection and lifeboats ablaze, survivors continued to muster on the fore and after decks. At 12.15 pm, the order was given to abandon the bridge. The damaged stairs and ladders were useless so ropes were strung over the port side where 36 men escaped. Those on the starboard wing could not see through the smoke to the ropes so many jumped nine metres to the foredeck or 25 metres into the sea.²⁸

Second Officer Cecil Crofts, one of the last to leave the bridge, fractured a leg jumping to the foredeck.

The fear of being machine-gunned was palpable. But “they left us alone and did not interfere... with the rescue work,” noted Oliver.

Atkins and Ordinary Seaman William McKinnon, 18, were ordered to lower loops of mooring line over the port side, an action that likely saved lives. When their time came, both slid down together.²⁹

Amid falling embers, Ewart and Seaman Tim Cameron helped Crofts over the side and into a raft that reached Sultan Shoal. Cameron and Ewart were removed on the *Danae*.

Meanwhile, the Australian sloop *Yarra*, commanded by Captain Wilfred Harrington, was manoeuvred next to the doomed ship. Hosken noted that 1,600 men, including him, were rescued by the sloop, although some estimates are higher.³⁰ Other vessels assisted, but without the *Yarra* hundreds could have perished.³¹

The *Asia* then drifted southeast of Sultan Shoal where anchors were dropped. “Before completely abandoning the after-deck, the ammunition for the six-inch gun and the remainder from the twelve-pounder had to be thrown overboard. Only two lifeboats were intact,” noted Oliver. “Both... were launched; one made it, one capsized.”³² Oliver boarded the *Yarra*, but while checking the *Asia*’s lower decks, he found a dedicated engine room crewman who said he had not received the evacuation order.

By 1 pm, the ship was abandoned. Of the 2,648 men on the *Asia*, 16 soldiers and four crew members died, and 238 were injured as a result of the attack. The enemy, it’s believed, lost two planes.³³ The *Asia* eventually sank in relatively shallow water.

On 9 February, the morning after the Japanese crossed the Johor Strait, the ship’s catering crew volunteered to work for the Civil Medical Services in Singapore. Most served at the General Hospital until 17 February, while seven others worked at the Miyako Hospital (previously known as the Mental Hospital) until 25 April; all were subsequently interned at Changi Prison until the war’s end. Other crew remained at a military camp until instructed to leave the island. On 11 February, before the British surrendered on 15 February, these men, including Hosken, Oliver, the captain and chief officer, escaped Singapore on three small coastal vessels. Two of these vessels managed to reach Batavia while the third ran out of fuel and ended its journey in Sumatra. Its passengers and crew fled overland through the jungle to the Sunda Strait and eventually reached Batavia.

As for the *Asia*, various salvage efforts were undertaken over the years. In 1998, one such effort retrieved, among other things, the ship’s anchor, which is now on display at the Singapore History Gallery of the National Museum of Singapore. In 2020, the Maritime and Port Authority of Singapore issued a notice of work to remove the wreck. The wreck has since been cleared. ♦

The full story of the *Empress of Asia*, including experiences of the Canadian crew who escaped the disaster or were imprisoned, is the subject of a forthcoming book by the author and researcher Nelson Oliver.

NOTES

- 1 Geoffrey Hosken, Diary, 3 November 1941 to 19 April 1942.
- 2 Walter Oliver, *Loss of the Empress of Asia* (Unpublished memoir, 1978), p. 98.
- 3 Some sources state 416, but three crewmen left prior to Singapore.
- 4 An account by *Asia* Captain John Bisset Smith lists six Oerlikons, eight Hotchkiss, a six-inch gun, three-inch anti-aircraft gun, four PAC rockets, and depth charges.
- 5 Manuscript of “Empress of Asia” story dictated by Captain J. Watts to J.T. Carney in River Valley Camp, 1942, courtesy of Helen Watts.
- 6 Geoff Tozer, Journal, 4 February 1942.
- 7 John Drummond, Journal, 4 February 1942, p. 1.
- 8 Hosken, 33.
- 9 There were 70 firemen in the stokehold, plus 48 trimmers and 18 greasers.
- 10 Hosken, 32–33.
- 11 Watts, 11.
- 12 Captain John Bisset Smith. 1942A. Commander’s Report, SS *Empress of Asia*. Voyage 151/3. Report to Canadian Pacific on final voyage, p. 1, 4 February 1942.
- 13 William Hanson, My War Experience, 1939–1945, Far East Prisoners of War website, Ron Taylor@far-eastern-heroes.org.uk; William Harris, Imperial War Museum, Conrad Wood interview, 15 May 1989, Cat. No. 10704.
- 14 Oliver, 98.
- 15 Oliver, 99.
- 16 Watts, 14; Oliver, 99.
- 17 Smith, 1.
- 18 Maurice Atkins, Interview, 29 January 2021.
- 19 Oliver, 99.
- 20 Oliver, 100.
- 21 Atkins, Interview.
- 22 Oliver, 100.
- 23 Watts, 17.
- 24 Hosken, 37.
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- 26 Chief Officer Donald Smith. 5 February 1942. SS *Empress of Asia* Voyage 155/3. Chief Officer’s Report to CPR.
- 27 Smith, Commander’s report.
- 28 Oliver, 101.
- 29 Atkins, Interview.
- 30 The profile of Captain Wilfred Harrington in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* states that 1,804 men were rescued.
- 31 The *Yarra* was destroyed on 4 March 1942 while defending a convoy in the Indian Ocean.
- 32 Oliver, 102.
- 33 Oliver, 102; Nelson Oliver, *Empress of Asia* files.

(Below) This illustration is a basic depiction of the *Empress of Asia*. It is not to scale and is presented to show the approximate location of where the three bombs mentioned in the essay hit the ship. Illustration: Janet Watson, Mejan Graphic Design. Copyright: Dan Black, Merrickville, Ontario, Canada.

(Bottom) The anchor salvaged from the *Empress of Asia* wreck in 1998, almost 60 years after the Allied troopship sank off Tuas while en route to Singapore to reinforce its defence. The anchor has been on permanent display at the National Museum of Singapore since 2015. Courtesy of Jimmy Yap.



MOVIES BENEATH A Starry, Starry Night



The Jurong Drive-in was Singapore's one and only drive-in cinema. In its heyday in the 1970s, it was packed bumper to bumper with vehicles. **Sharon Teng** tracks its rise and subsequent decline.

A drive-in cinema conjures up breezy fun, adventure and romance under the stars. Singapore's one and only drive-in cinema, the former Jurong Drive-in, opened 50 years ago. It only lasted 15 years but during its short lifespan, it left indelible memories.

The Jurong Drive-in Cinema opened on 14 July 1971 and it was touted as the next "in-thing" that would revolutionise the movie-watching experience. Constructed at an estimated cost of \$3 million, this was the first drive-in cinema in Singapore and Malaysia and also the largest in Asia at the time.

A full-page announcement was published in the *Straits Times* on the day of the cinema's opening. In it, the Deputy Chairman of Cathay Organisation, Heah

Hock Meng, wrote that the new drive-in promised that patrons would be treated to first-class movie entertainment and there would be "no parking problems, no parking fees; no need to worry about acoustics because every car will have its own speaker which can be adjusted to suit the patron's needs". In addition, patrons would not have to "worry about what you wear... [and if] the baby cries or your wife inadvertently drops her handbag with a clatter at a crucial moment in the film, you will get no hard looks because, of course, you have complete privacy in your own car".¹

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Location and Amenities

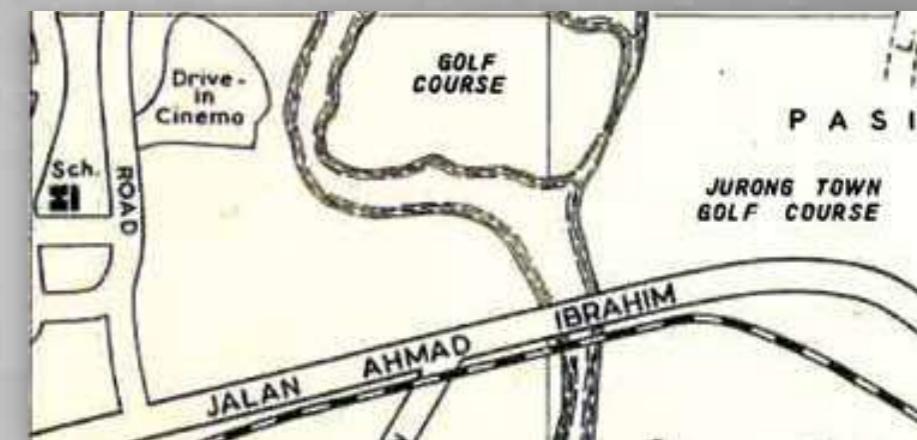
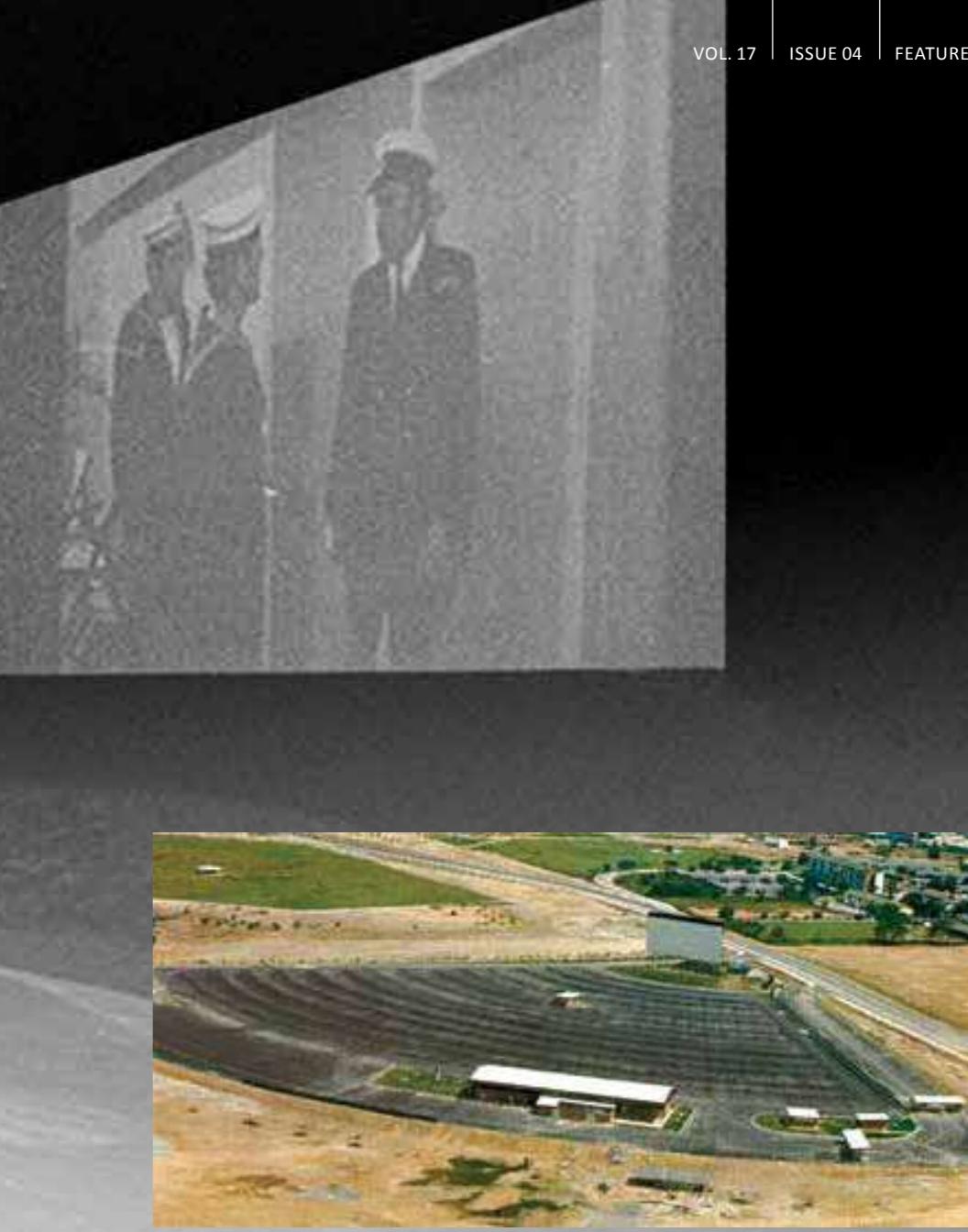
The construction of Jurong Drive-in was no easy task. It occupied 14 acres (5.6 hectares) of land along Yuan Ching Road, adjacent to Jurong Park, at a site now occupied by ActiveSG Park @ Jurong Lake Gardens. The site required 340,000 cubic yards (259,939 cubic metres) of earth to fill in the landscaping just for the installation of the giant screen. Measuring a whopping 47 ft by 110 ft (14.3 m by 33.5 m) and suspended 25 feet (7.6 m) from the ground, the screen was also tilted at an angle of six-and-a-half degrees for optimal viewing from the inside of a car.

The sound system was supported by a projector that had a range of 275 ft (83.8 m) compared with 140 ft (42.6 m) for a typical indoor projector. Speakers were hooked onto either side of posts, one for each car. A car would park alongside a post, with the windscreens facing the cinema screen, and the speaker would be draped over the car window or door. Due to the terraced gradient, all cars enjoyed a clear and unobstructed view of the screen. Walk-

(Facing page) Vehicles at the Jurong Drive-in Cinema on the opening night, 14 July 1971. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

(Top) Aerial view of the Jurong Drive-in Cinema undergoing construction, 1970. Image reproduced from Jurong Town Corporation, Annual Report (Singapore: Jurong Town Corporation, 1970), 27. (From National Library, Singapore, Call no. RCLOS 352.0072 JTCAR).

(Above) Site of the Jurong Drive-in Cinema, 1972. Image reproduced from Singapore Survey Department, Singapore Guide and Street Directory: With Sectional Maps (Singapore: Singapore Survey Department, 1972), Map 131. (From National Library, Singapore, Call no. RCLOS 959.57 SIN).





(Top) A cinema official assisting Minister for Culture Jek Yeun Thong in setting up the car speaker. He was the guest-of-honour at the official opening, 14 July 1971. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

(Middle) Vehicles at the Jurong Drive-in Cinema on opening night, 14 July 1971. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

(Above) Guests and patrons buying ice-cream from a vendor at the Jurong Drive-in Cinema on opening night, 14 July 1971. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

in patrons could avail themselves to the 308-seat sheltered viewing gallery, which was installed with loudspeakers and fans.²

Ensuring the smooth entry and exit of vehicles from the cinema required careful planning. Cars coming from Jalan Ahmad Ibrahim would turn into Yuan Ching Road to reach the entrance of the drive-in. Car marshals were on hand to guide drivers to empty parking bays, particularly latecomers, to avoid dislodging those who had arrived earlier and were already in their chosen lots. There were two screenings each night – 7 pm and 9.30 pm – and cars arriving for the later show would wait in a large holding area that could accommodate 300 vehicles. As soon as the first screening ended and cars had vacated the lots, then the next lot of cars would be allowed to enter.³

Vendors went around selling ice-cream and cold drinks which were snapped up, while an air-conditioned cafeteria offered quick bites like hamburgers, hot dogs, sandwiches, fried *poh piah*, chicken salad, porridge, *mee siam*, French fries and drumsticks.⁴ There was even a playground containing a jungle gym, swings, slides, a merry-go-round and a rocker to occupy and entertain restless children.⁵

Eugene Ker Ban Hing, who used to sell newspapers at the entrance of the drive-in on weekends, recalled that “*a pasar malam* was held along the road leading to the drive-in [Yuen Ching Road] on Wednesday and Saturday nights, creating a carnival-like festive atmosphere”.⁶

The Cinema Opens

On the opening night, 880 cars filled the 900-car capacity site. The film screened for the charity premiere was *Doctor in Trouble*, a British comedy set on a luxury cruise liner bound for the Mediterranean, with proceeds going to the Jurong Town Creche. Admission tickets were priced at \$30 and \$50 (for a reserved lot) per car for a maximum of five passengers, including the driver. An estimated \$20,000 was collected that night.⁷

The cinema screened mainly first-run English language movies from the United States and Britain as well as Mandarin kungfu and action-packed films from Hong Kong, with two screenings each night and an additional midnight screening on Saturdays. Tickets cost \$2 for adults and \$1 for children below 12 (admission prices were later raised in 1978 to \$2.50 for adults and \$1.50 for children).⁸

Jurong Drive-in appealed to those who preferred the open air to the cramped interior of indoor cinemas as they could sit

on stools outdoors, on their car roofs, on the back of their pick-up trucks or even lay newspapers on the ground. Children could run about in the open without disturbing their parents. Moreover, cinemagoers could be casually dressed in T-shirts, shorts and slippers.⁹

It was also popular with courting couples, who were perhaps less interested in the action taking place on the screen. Sales executive Felix Goh recalled going on a double date and there was some disagreement over seating arrangements. Even though sitting in front would provide a better view of the movie, it was the back seat that was in demand. “We tossed a coin over which couple should occupy the back seat. My friend won,” he quipped.¹⁰

For others, the journey to the far-flung cinema located in the western part of the island was itself a part of the experience. Hotel executive Lilian Gan reminisced, “My husband and I used to go there once or twice a week. We’d go on long drives on weekends and end up there.”¹¹

Movies starring martial arts legend Bruce Lee were especially popular, packing in the crowds every night when these were screened. *The Big Boss*, which launched Lee’s movie career, was a spectacular box-office hit, raking in \$12,000 in ticket sales for just an evening’s screening in 1971.¹²

Ronald Goh Wee Huat, who helped to install the sound system for the drive-in, recalled that on the opening night of *The Big Boss*, “the crowd was so overwhelming that the whole carpark slots, all the cinema, [were] all taken up and you have another few hundred cars along the road lining up. And you’re in the car and you’re stuck in that kind of jam, they just left the car there and actually broke through the fencing and there was chaos”. He also remembered that at the end of movie screenings, “a lot of times people drive off without removing the speakers and damaging their windscreens... some people brought a chain cutter and... took away the speaker”.¹³

Antoine Low, Head of Cathay’s Property and Technical Section, said that during a midnight screening of *The Big Boss*, there had been so many people and cars that they could not handle the flow. “We kept selling tickets and putting the steady flow of money into wastepaper baskets,” he recalled. As a result, the show, which had been scheduled for midnight, didn’t start till one in the morning.¹⁴

Mandarin film *Evil Karate* was screened at Jurong Drive-in Cinema. Image reproduced from *The Straits Times*, 11 October 1971, 6. (From NewspaperSG).

Some people even came up with ingenious ideas to avoid buying tickets. While working at a factory in Jurong, housing agent Teo Soon Kin said that he and his friends watched *The Big Boss* on five consecutive nights for free: “We sat outside the perimeter fence and watched. Sometimes, we would ask motorists nearest the fence to turn up the volume of their individual speakers so we could listen as well”.¹⁵

Cinema Shenanigans and Disgruntled Patrons

The Jurong Drive-in was, unfortunately, also a magnet for antisocial behaviour. In 1972, a reader wrote to the *Straits Times* complaining that “[b]efore the ending of each show at the Jurong Drive-in cinema, [especially during the weekends] ‘speed-aces’ with beam headlights on, exhaust booming and tyres screeching will be zooming at 40 to 50 m.p.h. along the lanes to see who reaches the exit first. It is not only an annoyance to others who wish to see the end of a film but also dangerous, to everyone in the drive-in”.¹⁶

These drivers also continued racing after leaving the drive-in and the writer suggested that the traffic police “arrest these speed-aces as they race each other along Upper Ayer Rajah Road”.¹⁷ A month later, the police replied that they had “taken enforcement action against 28 vehicles for speeding along Upper Ayer Rajah Road”.¹⁸

A decade on and things were no better. On 24 August 1982, a reader complained in the *Straits Times* that residents living near the Jurong Drive-in had been having sleepless nights on weekends and the eve of holidays. “Motorcyclists going

for the midnight show make a din both before and after the show. The situation is worse when some of them turn the drive-in into a racing circuit before the show. The race lasts about twenty minutes and the noise is unbearable.”¹⁹ Once again, the police responded by mounting operations to monitor the situation, resulting in 84 motorcycles being impounded and 20 motorcyclists issued tickets for speeding, inconsiderate or dangerous driving.²⁰

Just six months later, on 6 March 1983, the *Singapore Monitor* reported that “Jurong police are keeping a close watch on the Jurong Drive-In, because a group of hell-riders have been causing trouble there”. On the previous Saturday, more than 100 of them had ridden around the open-air cinema and were causing annoyance to other patrons. One cinemagoer said: “They dashed round the place in full throttle. Not only were the noise and fumes annoying, it was dangerous. Some of them also let off fireworks to add fun to their games, they looked so wild.”²¹

The huge amount of trash left behind by cinemagoers each night was also a concern as sweepers had to clear away the garbage before the following day’s screenings. Besides food wrappers, less common items found included footwear, condoms and even lingerie.²²

There were also instances of break-ins and thefts at Jurong Drive-in, though not always competently done. On 3 May 1977, “eight masked youths armed with parangs and iron pipes broke into the restaurant and office of Jurong drive-in cinema. They earlier held up two security guards on rounds in the compound at 3 am and tied them with wire. After ransacking

CATHAY'S
JURONG DRIVE-IN CINEMA
TEL: 653894

Advance Cash Bookings At The Cathay Cinema from 10 am to 6 pm daily. After 6 p.m. phone bookings can be accepted at the Jurong Drive-in Cinema's Box-Office.

ADM.—ADULTS: \$2.00; CHILDREN (UNDER 12) \$1.00
NOW SHOWING! 2 Shows Nightly At 7.00 & 9.30 PM.

SEE! The Spectacular Duel between Bare-Hand Skill and Flashing Swords!

EVIL KARATE

Mandarin Film with English and Chinese Subtitles

COLOR SCOPE

the premises for some time, they managed to get away with only a torchlight worth \$5.25".²³

Waning Fortunes

Attendance at the Jurong Drive-in dropped drastically towards the end of the 1970s and early 80s. The manager of the drive-in, Peter Teo, lamented that "the novelty of the drive-in has worn off and we'd be extremely lucky if we got half the place full".²⁴

Said the *New Nation*: "Jurong is a bit out of the way, even for motorists. More comfortable and better cinemas are

sprouting everywhere today, especially in HDB [Housing & Development Board] new towns and estates, showing much the same stuff as Jurong drive-in. Coming home from distant Jurong to a HDB carpark late at night and having to search every nook and corner for a lot can be a deterring experience."²⁵

In his oral history interview, former Jurong Drive-in employee Ronald Goh said: "I guess once the novelty wears off... the sound system is not so good, you have a small speaker... for serious cinemagoers, I don't think they will enjoy the experience of going to the cinema. If you want to watch a proper movie, then with a proper sound system, of course, the theatre... It's more for novelty, for dating teenagers that want to go to the cinema in a car and that's it."²⁶

From the late 1970s, Cathay tried several methods to draw audiences in, such as distributing free gifts to children attending Walt Disney films at the drive-in, screening first-run English films and offering cheaper tickets than those sold at other cinemas. Unfortunately, Cathay was unsuccessful in reversing the trend.²⁷

As early as 1980, Cathay was already considering shutting the drive-in but decided to let it continue operating until the lease of the land (from the Jurong Town

Corporation) on which it stood expired in 1985. On 10 December 1981, the *Straits Times* reported that "[at] the peak of [Jurong Drive-in's] popularity in the early 1970s, it was fully packed every night, especially when it screened films of the late kung-fu star Bruce Lee. But once the novelty of Singapore's only drive-in cinema wore off, nothing has been able to bring back the crowds. Today, only 100 cars are seen there on an average night, though weekends fare better". A spokesman for Cathay Organisation said: "We have tried almost everything and have almost given up hope. The novelty of the drive-in seems to have faded."²⁸

Cathay also blamed video pirates for poor attendance figures and the slump in the film industry. "Video pirates have been taking advantage of Singapore's loose copyright laws. They have even been advertising their videotape rental services," said Cathay spokesperson Geraldine Lee in 1985. According to Lee, about 200 people were going to the drive-in cinema for its two daily screenings and the situation was no better on weekends.²⁹

On 29 September 1985, Cathay officially announced that Jurong Drive-in would close for good the following day, after its last show. The last movie screened was the Taiwanese film, *The Woman of Wrath*. The *Straits Times* described the dismal turn-up on 28 September: "The scene at the Jurong Drive-in Cinema last night. And it was a Saturday. On the screen was a Mandarin movie, *The Woman of Wrath*. But there were pathetically few patrons watching it. The gallery was almost deserted while only a few cars were found in its sprawling grounds."³⁰

Jurong Drive-in finally closed on 30 September 1985 after almost 15 years.³¹ The land formerly occupied by the drive-in was developed into Fairway Country Club and later the ActiveSG Park in 2019 as part of Jurong Lake Gardens.³²

Revival of the Drive-in Cinema

There have been various attempts to revive the concept of the drive-in cinema in Singapore since.

At the 1996 Festival of the Arts, one of the programmes under the Arts Festival Fringe was a drive-in movie screening held at the People's Association carpark in Paya Lebar, which had a capacity of 100 cars and 300 walk-in patrons. A projection screen, measuring 7 m by 3 m, was raised 2 m off the ground. Three family-friendly movies, including *Grease* and the animation film *Asterix Conquers America*, were screened

LAST 2 NIGHTS OF DRIVE-IN ENTERTAINMENT
THE JURONG DRIVE-IN CINEMA WILL CEASE OPERATIONS FROM OCTOBER 1, 1985.
OUR SPECIAL THANKS TO ALL OUR PATRONS FOR YOUR LONG-STANDING SUPPORT THROUGH THESE FOURTEEN ENTERTAINING YEARS

MAJESTIC: NOW SHOWING!
(5339032) 4 SHOWS: 1.00, 3.30, 7.00 & 9.15pm

LAST 2 DAYS AT

BEDOK (5412677) 4 SHOWS: 1.30, 4.00, 7.30 & 9.30pm
BROADWAY (4542504) 4 SHOWS: 1.30, 3.30, 7.00 & 9.00pm
JURONG DRIVE-IN (CHASSING) 2 SHOWS: 7.30 & 9.30pm
ODEON KATONG (4473988) 4 SHOWS: 1.00, 3.30, 7.00 & 9.00pm
REGAL (2717588) 4 SHOWS: 1.30, 3.30, 7.00 & 9.15pm

LAST DAY AT

GALA (4880278) 4 SHOWS: 1.30, 3.30, 6.45, 8.45pm
KONG CHAN (253881) 4 SHOWS: 1.00, 3.00, 7.30 & 9.30pm

THE WOMAN OF WRATH

Jurong drive-in's lot is an unhappy one

It's curtains for Jurong Drive-in tomorrow Video pirates blamed for poor attendance

(Top) Taiwanese film *The Woman of Wrath* was the last movie screened at the Jurong Drive-in. Image reproduced from *The Straits Times*, 29 September 1985, 4. (From NewspaperSG).

(Middle) By the early 1980s, the novelty of the Jurong Drive-in Cinema had worn off, and nothing the operator did – such as free gifts, first-run shows and cheap tickets – could bring back the crowds. Image reproduced from *The Straits Times*, 10 December 1981, 11. (From NewspaperSG).

(Above) Jurong Drive-in Cinema announcing that it will close for good after its last show on 30 September 1985. Image reproduced from *The Straits Times*, 29 September 1985, 10. (From NewspaperSG).



back-to-back starting at 7.30 pm on 31 May and 1 June.³³

In 2003, a drive-in movie screening was held at a carpark in Kallang as part of the month-long event, "Romancing Singapore", which was organised to celebrate love and romance. The admission fee of \$10 per car enabled patrons to watch two movies.³⁴

Also in 2003, a company named MovieMob organised free drive-in and outdoor open-air movie screenings, including local films and Hollywood blockbusters, at selected locations across Singapore. Since its inception, the company has held over 300 movie screenings for events such as Singapore's first French drive-in movie event over the Valentine's Day weekend in 2016, "P.S. I Love You", which attracted close to 100 vehicles and some 600 people. The company also helped to usher in the new year with open-air screenings of *Night at the Museum I* and *II* for the Marina Bay Singapore Countdown 2019.³⁵

More recently, on 25 July 2020, Downtown East announced that it would hold a monthly series of drive-in movie screenings starting from 8 August with the hit musical, *The Greatest Showman*. Tickets were priced at \$18 per car for up to a maximum of five persons in a vehicle. Unfortunately, just 10 days later, it was announced that the screening had been cancelled due to "unforeseen circumstances" and refunds would be made.³⁶ We can only surmise that the cancellation was related to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic.

As these examples demonstrate, there is still a market for the occasional drive-in movie experience. When mass events are allowed to take place again, hopefully some entrepreneurial company will resurrect the spirit of the Jurong Drive-in. ♦

The site of the former Jurong Drive-in Cinema was first occupied by Fairway Country Club before it was demolished to build the ActiveSG Park as part of Jurong Lake Gardens. Courtesy of NParks.

- 18 "Untitled," *Straits Times*, 24 November 1972, 21. (From NewspaperSG)
- 19 Mid-Nightmare, "Too Noisy to Sleep," *Straits Times*, 24 August 1982, 15. (From NewspaperSG)
- 20 Yeow Shang Ying, "Action Taken at Drive-in," *Straits Times*, 27 September 1982, 15. (From NewspaperSG)
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- 23 "Loot for 8 Armed Robbers: A Torchlight," *New Nation*, 4 May 1977, 1. (From NewspaperSG)
- 24 "Some Close Encounters at the Drive-in."
- 25 "End of Road for Drive-in?" *New Nation*, 10 December 1982, 2. (From NewspaperSG); "Some Close Encounters at the Drive-in."
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- 28 "Jurong Drive-in's Lot is an Unhappy One."
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French Impressions

19th-century Natural History Drawings of Singapore and Southeast Asia

A little-known collection from 1818 to 1820 commissioned under the watch of two French naturalists sheds light on the early study of the region's flora and fauna.

Until recently, most people would not have heard of the two Frenchmen, Pierre-Médard Diard and Alfred Duvauzel, who accompanied Stamford Raffles on his maiden trip to Singapore on 28 January 1819.¹ Fewer still would know that these two young naturalists collected specimens and worked with artists to create drawings of animals and plants at the various locations they ventured to, including Singapore and the surrounding region as far away as India.

Today, these 117 lifelike colour illustrations – mostly of birds and artfully drawn by unnamed local artists – join the more widely known natural history drawings commissioned by William Farquhar when he was British Resident and Commandant of Melaka between 1803 and 1818. Together, these collections provide an important insight into the development of science and the study of natural history of this region in the early 19th century.

What makes the Diard and Duvauzel collection especially significant is that it contains what is possibly the first illustra-

tion of an animal that is native to Singapore and Southeast Asia – the Spiny Turtle. The handwritten annotation on the drawing clearly proclaims “isle de Singapour” or “island of Singapore”, stamping our claim on the origins of this now-endangered species.

Although the relationship between Raffles and the two naturalists ended abruptly, with the Frenchmen dismissed and their precious specimens and research confiscated, the drawings found their way safely back to France where they reside today in the collections of the Muséum National d’Histoire Naturelle in Paris. Thanks to the generosity of the museum, the National Library, Singapore, was given permission to put up the digitised images of the collection on its BookSG portal for the public to access in 2020.²

More recently, all 117 illustrations have been published in a hardcover book titled *Diard & Duvauzel: French Natural History Drawings of Singapore and Southeast Asia, 1818–1820*. Co-published by Epigram, the Embassy of France in Singapore and the National Library together with several

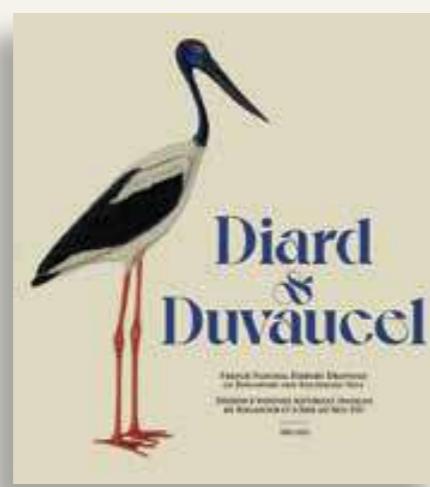
key partners, the introductory essays and detailed captions accompanying the stunning illustrations have been written by a team of scientists and curators based in Singapore, Paris and Spain.

We can’t be certain if Diard and Duvauzel were the first Frenchmen to have stepped on Singapore soil, but certainly they are now the first to be part of our documented history. These brave men who left the comforts of their homeland blazed a trail for other French citizens – explorers, planters, merchants and missionaries – who followed in their wake. That French presence continues in Singapore today, represented by a 20,000-strong community who are part of the city’s commercial and cultural scene. ♦

NOTES

1 Danièle Weiller, “Stamford Raffles and the Two French Naturalists,” *BiblioAsia* 16, no. 2 (Jul–Sep 2020).

2 *Figures peintes d’oiseaux [et de reptiles], envoyées de l’Inde par Duvauzel et Diard (Painted depictions of birds [and reptiles], sent from India by Duvauzel and Diard)* can be accessed from here: <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/printheritage/detail/c908d4fd-4e4b-441d-bdab-48c9eb69d0c1.aspx>.



Diard & Duvauzel: French Natural History Drawings of Singapore and Southeast Asia 1818–1820 is available for reference at the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library and for loan at selected public libraries (Call nos.: RSING 508.0222 DIA and SING 508.0222 DIA) and for sale at all major bookstores, including Epigram’s online store at epigrambookshop.sg.



Nº 11: Banded Woodpecker
Chrysophlegma miniaceum

This woodpecker with a yellow-tipped crest can still be spotted in Singapore today. The specimen portrayed in this drawing, however, is more likely from the Malay Peninsula or Sumatra, where Diard and Duvauzel might have collected it. The bird had already been described scientifically about 50 years before Diard and Duvauzel travelled to the region.



Nº 67: Javanese Lapwing
Vanellus macropterus

The lapwing depicted in this drawing used to occur in a few places in Java. Today, it is thought to be extinct and reports of sightings in Sumatra have not been substantiated thus far. Stamford Raffles or Diard and Duvauzel might have bought a specimen in a market, which would not have been an unusual practice then. Although the species had already been described from a bird in the collections of the Muséum National d’Histoire Naturelle in Paris, that specimen has no connection with either Diard or Duvauzel.



Nº 34: Green Broadbill
Calyptomena viridis

On 1 June 1820, Stamford Raffles wrote about the Green Broadbill in his *Descriptive Catalogue of a Zoological Collection* thus: “Found in the retired parts of the forests of Singapore and of the interior of Sumatra.” There are two depictions of this broadbill in the collection. They are nearly identical, differing only in the composition of the tuft of feathers on the forehead. In both drawings, the birds are male, as indicated by the small yellow spots above their eyes. From Raffles’ catalogue entry, it can be inferred that he must have procured at least two specimens, one from Singapore and another from the environs of Bencoolen (Bengkulu) in Sumatra. Diard, Duvauzel and William Jack (a botanist working with Raffles) could have collected the Singapore specimen during their visit in 1819. This species has the distinction of being the first bird from Singapore to be given a scientific name.



N° - 20.
tête du Hanuman d'après nature
et gravé sur cuivre
J. = 1822

Nº 7b: Hanuman Langur
Semnopithecus entellus

When Duvauzel was staying in Chandernagor (Chandannagar) in West Bengal, India, langurs were quite a common sight, especially at the start of winter. Local Bengalis consider the monkey species depicted in this drawing as sacred because its black face and hands resemble those of the Hindu monkey god Hanuman. According to accounts, every time Duvauzel had a chance to point a gun at one of these langurs, the people around him would start making loud noises, causing the animals to scatter. One day, Duvauzel went to the holy town of Gouptipara (Guptipara) in the Hooghly district, not far from his home, where dozens of langurs were resting in the trees. Before Duvauzel could get hold of a specimen, however, he was surrounded by a dozen devotees intent on stopping him. On his way home, he noticed a beautiful female Hanuman Langur; unable to resist the temptation, he shot her. She died, just after trying to save her baby by hiding it among the leaves of a tree. Perhaps Duvauzel felt sorry for what he had done. The female monkey is immortalised in this drawing, which was reproduced in *Histoire Naturelle des Mammifères*, a grand illustrated work on recently discovered mammals by his uncle (by marriage) Frédéric Cuvier in 1825.

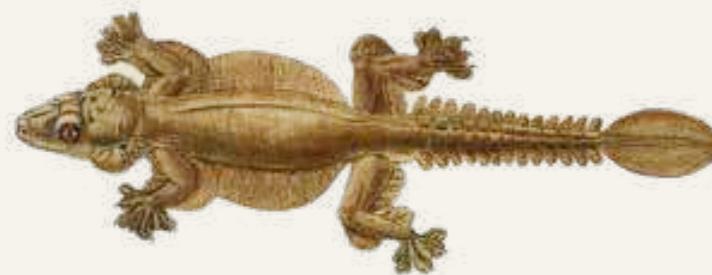
Nº 2: Spiny Turtle
Heosemys spinosa

"The island of Singapore" or "isle de Singapour" states the annotation on the drawing. This is quite a remarkable statement to make at a time when Singapore had only just entered the public consciousness in Europe because of Raffles and the East India Company. Diard and Duvauzel were in Singapore between January and February as well as May and June 1819, during which time they could have observed the young turtle represented in this drawing. Although no date was written on the paper, this may well have been the first illustration of an animal found in Singapore. The Spiny Turtle is found widely across Southeast Asia, usually in lowland rainforests near rivers or streams. The half-completed aspect of some of the drawings, like this example, suggests that the artist (or artists) working in the field with Diard and Duvauzel were under pressure to record time-critical aspects of the animals. This is particularly obvious with the drawing of the Spiny Turtle—the identical left legs could have been added later.



Nº 3: Kuhl's Gliding Gecko
Gekko kuhli

The specimen portrayed in this drawing was obtained in Sumatra. This conspicuous gecko was first described from Java, where Diard again found it after he left the employ of Stamford Raffles. Kuhl's Gliding Gecko can also be found in Singapore, where an early specimen was collected and donated to the Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle in Paris in December 1868 by the French trader Andrew Spooner.



Nº 2: Flask-shaped Pitcher Plant
Nepenthes ampullaria

Stamford Raffles collected pitcher plants when he first visited Singapore in early 1819, and these became the first botanical specimens from mainland Singapore. The Scottish botanist William Jack was working for Raffles at the time, but he did not accompany Raffles on this first visit to Singapore and instead remained at Prince of Wales Island (Penang). When Raffles returned to Penang from Singapore, these botanical specimens were passed to Jack for study. Jack named one of the species after Raffles – *Nepenthes rafflesiana* Jack (better known as the Raffles' Pitcher Plant) – to honour the collector. What is depicted in this drawing though is the *Nepenthes ampullaria*. These names were only published in 1835, years after Jack's death in 1822 and based on research and drawings that were sent back to England. Diard and Duvauzel would have known about Jack's work, although this painting was probably drawn from a separate specimen at a later date.



Mother Island

Finding Singapore's Past in Pulau Lingga

Singapore's history is closely intertwined with that of Lingga's. The kings that once reigned from its shores played a pivotal role in the fate of the Malay world, including the birth of modern Singapore, as **Faris Joraimi** reveals.

In a half-forgotten corner of Telok Belanga (officially rendered as Telok Blangah), sandwiched between Bukit Purmei and Kampong Bahru Road, lies the tomb of the last king of the Riau-Lingga Sultanate, Sultan Abdul Rahman Mu'zzam Shah II (r. 1883–1911). Deposed by the Dutch in 1911 after refusing to sign a treaty that would effectively strip him of all power, he fled to Singapore where he lived in exile until his death in 1930.

Today, many Singaporeans associate the Riau islands, now part of Indonesia, with Batam's massage parlours and Bintan's more sanitised resorts. Fewer, though, have any inkling of just how much Singapore is bound to this archipelago by ties of history, economics and culture. Who remembers, for instance, that both Singapore and the Riau-Lingga archipelago were once part of the same maritime empire: the old Sultanate of Johor that

emerged after the fall of Melaka to the Portuguese in 1511? Modern Singapore came into being ultimately with the dismemberment of this realm in 1824, when the Anglo-Dutch Treaty divided the Malay World between the British and the Dutch.¹

A Trading Power

The name "Riau-Lingga" is a collective geographic expression for an archipelago of islands located south of Singapore and

east of Sumatra. The archipelago includes familiar places such as Bintan and Batam, but also other isles, such as Pulau Lingga and Pulau Penyengat, that once loomed large over the region. Riau-Lingga referred to the kingdom's (uneasy) system of dual government: Riau being the domain of the Bugis chiefs centred around Bintan and Pulau Penyengat, while Pulau Lingga served as the sultan's headquarters.

This joint Malayo-Bugis rule dates back to the time of the old Johor Sultanate. It was a system that sustained the polity following the turbulent wars that erupted after Sultan Mahmud Shah II's (r. 1685–99) violent assassination.² Having died without a male heir, Sultan Mahmud II was the last in the line of a dynasty of rulers that had held kingship over Melaka (founded c. 1400), before the Portuguese invasion in 1511 forced the court to flee south and re-establish its rule on various sites along the Johor river.

Later, racked by rival claims to the throne following Mahmud II's gruesome death, the kingdom was restored to order under the new Bendahara Dynasty with the backing of Bugis warrior-chiefs. Bearing the title "Yang Dipertuan Muda" (viceroy), the Bugis chiefs built up old Johor into a formidable regional power, drawing upon their military and economic dominance across the Malay seas.

Association with the Malay court gave the Bugis newcomers prestige and also a strategic base to conduct their economic activities.³ In the words of historian Carl Trocki, the Bugis exploited the Johor Sultanate but also preserved it.⁴ The Malay rulers, though sovereigns *de jure*, became increasingly less involved in the running of their kingdom. That said, they remained crucial to its legitimacy through the force of *daulat* – a mystical aura of royal authority that preserved the realm – believed to inhabit their bodies.

Old Johor reached its height in the 18th century when it was ruled from the port city of Riau, on the Carang River in Bintan. Stable, prosperous and competitive, it posed a threat to Dutch trading interests in the region.⁵ This rivalry led to an all-out war in 1784 that witnessed the heroic stand of the Bugis chief Raja Haji Fisabilillah against the European invaders. The Dutch, however, eventually triumphed. They destroyed Riau and extended their influence over the polity.

The echoes of such splendours and struggles can be glimpsed from a seven-hour voyage that begins at the Tanah Merah Ferry Terminal in Singapore and

(Facing Page) Pantai Pasir Panjang Karang Bersulam ("Long Coast of Interwoven Reefs") at high tide. During low tide, the corals and reef flats would probably be more exposed. It is a popular spot for Mandi Safar festivities. Courtesy of Marcus Ng.

(Below) Map titled *Carte de l'Archipel et des Détroits compris entre Singapour et Banca*, 1855, showing Lingga in relation to Singapore. © British Library Board H.F.SEC.18.1530.).

(Bottom) Sultan Abdul Rahman Mu'zzam Shah II, the last ruler of Riau-Lingga. Retrieved from Southeast Asian & Caribbean Images, Leiden University Libraries. Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0).



ends at Pulau Lingga, the former kingdom's royal seat since 1788. Lingga is a land of palaces, forts and tombs, and nearly every royal landmark here bears the imprint of a broader reach.

The Isle of Kings

In 2019, a friend of mine, the researcher and photographer Marcus Ng, invited me on a trip to Lingga. There is no direct route

there from Singapore as the ferry from Tanah Merah stops in Tanjung Pinang, the capital of Indonesia's Riau Islands Province (Provinsi Kepulauan Riau, or "Kepri" for short). Visible across the water is Pulau Penyengat, the tiny island fortress of the former Bugis chiefs. On Pulau Penyengat are the tombs of renowned figures from the history of the sultanate – from Engku Puteri Raja Hamidah, consort of Sultan

A sago extraction and processing plant in Daik. The finished product – finely ground sago flour – is shipped off to Sumatran towns like Jambi. Courtesy of Marcus Ng.



Mahmud Shah III (r. 1770–1811), to the scholar and chronicler Raja Ali Haji.

As the inter-island transit ferry departs Tanjung Pinang, we enter azure waters girded by white sands with endless coconut palms, *pandan* plants (screwpine) and casuarina trees. The ferry makes stops at neat coastal kampongs – ordered lines of littoral houses built along the perimeter of tiny isles such as Pulau Benan and Pulau Rejai. It skirts hidden shoals, marked by the half-submerged stilt-roots of *bakau* (*Rhizophora* spp.) trees, mangrove islands that rise and sink with the tide.

Near these intertidal forests, people have built traditional fish traps – like the *kelong* and *belat* – which recall scenes of old Bedok, Siglap or Pasir Panjang before reclamation and resettlement: the Singapore our parents remember. But the equally prominent broadcast towers and satellite dishes remind us that this is how modern and connected rural life can look like too.

After about five hours at sea, the ferry berths at Sungai Tenam pier, on the northern tip of Lingga. It is another hour's drive south to Daik, the island's principal town on its opposite coast. The well-maintained road runs past peaty swamps, pepper gardens and near-century-old gutta percha estates, now nearly indistinguishable from primary rainforest. Before long, Mount Daik and her three peaks emerge into view amid the flat lowlands: a lone cone with sheer faces clawing heavenward.

I had long wanted to visit Daik. Its famed mountain, which rises more than a kilometre above the sea and is oft-

built their residences at a point of axis between a mountain or a hill, and an estuary or coast.⁷ The palace of old Singapura, for instance, was built on the slopes of Bukit Larangan (later Government Hill and then Fort Canning Hill) overlooking the Singapore River.

Lost Istanas and Royal Mosques

The palace that Sultan Mahmud Ri'ayat Shah III built on the Daik River – when he shifted his court from Bintan to Lingga – no longer stands. Neither does the one built by his great-grandson Mahmud Shah IV (r. 1842–57).⁸ Istana Damnah, completed in 1860 by Sulaiman Badrul Alam Shah II (r. 1857–83), survives only in ruins. What remains are pedestals, pillars and stone staircases suggesting where the demolished halls used to be.

Istana Damnah's cosmologically strategic site becomes apparent as one approaches it: positioned at the foot of Mount Daik, any potential visitor to the court would have felt a sense of awe at its imposing backdrop. Today, tourists to the area are greeted by a replica of the palace next to the ruins, complete with gardens and a little park with strolling paths and benches.

Daik town still looks and feels like a village in comparison to busy Tanjung Pinang. Its centrepiece is the royal mosque, Masjid Sultan Lingga, whose existing structure dates back to 1909, the third to be built after the previous two were damaged by fires. The first iteration of the mosque was raised in 1800.⁹ Constructed by Chinese workers brought in from Singapore, the present-day royal mosque has an unassuming Malay vernacular style, complete with signature Malay eaves. Unsurprisingly, it is painted in the regal yellow similar to the royal mosque on Pulau Penyengat.

An elaborate wooden screen greets the visitor upon entry, finely executed by carvers from Jepara in Central Java. Within the mosque is a more grandiose woodwork structure, also of Jepara make: the *minbar*, or pulpit. Dating back to the 1790s – before the first royal mosque was built – its design bears recognisable Chinese and European elements. The use of pink peonies, tessellated swastikas and baroque foliage departs from what we typically expect to find in a Malay mosque. The swastika, for example, or *banji* (from the Chinese *wansui*, 万岁, and the Japanese *banzai*; both mean "ten-thousand years") have long been used in Malay and Javanese textiles, woodcarving

(Below) The elaborate *minbar* (pulpit) inside Masjid Sultan Lingga. It is more than 200 years old, and bears Chinese and European elements. Courtesy of Marcus Ng.

(Bottom) Masjid Sultan Lingga (royal mosque), painted in the regal yellow, which still has a *bedok*, a ceremonial drum once used to call the faithful to prayer. Courtesy of Marcus Ng.



and metalwork, demonstrating a robust absorption of "Chinese" elements in this region's visual language.

The pulpit's local elements are unmistakable: the overhanging eaves on its hexagonal roof are common in Malay construction, and the finial (a crowning ornament or detail) calls to mind the Javanese-style *mustaka* or *kepala som*, a carved embellishment found on the roof summits of mosques throughout the Malay world.¹⁰ The swirling tendrils and upturned crockets are design motifs found across Malay art, known as *awan larat* ("meandering clouds") and *sulur bayung* ("creeping vine") respectively.¹¹ The structure's coat of dark blue, crimson, green and yellow had been freshly painted. During our visit, more repainting works were being done, most notably at the tomb of Sultan Mahmud III. He rests in the burial grounds of the mosque that he had ordered built.

One of his sons, Abdul Rahman I (r. 1811–32), lies buried in a nearby royal cemetery. Enclosed within a low wall painted in that same sacred yellow, the cemetery also contains the graves of two other rulers of Riau-Lingga besides Abdul Rahman I: his successor Muhammad II (r. 1832–42) and Sulaiman Badrul Alam Shah II.

Mahmud III was the last king of a united Johor Sultanate. His death in 1811 threw up two contenders for the throne: his sons Abdul Rahman and Hussein (by different mothers). The two brothers commanded the support of competing factions of the Riau-Lingga elite. This feud was what eventually led Temenggong Abdul Rahman to leave the court and establish a fiefdom on the banks of the Singapore River. It was this succession dispute that opened a path for Stamford Raffles to further the interests of the British East India Company (EIC) in the region. Since the sultanate was at the time under Dutch influence, Raffles needed a local prince to legitimise his claim over Singapore.

In return for granting the EIC a lease to establish a trading post on Singapore, the British would recognise Hussein as sultan. With this arrangement sealed in the Singapore Treaty of 1819, Singapore came under the tripartite rule of the EIC, the temenggong and "Sultan" Hussein Shah of Johor, while Abdul Rahman ascended the throne in Lingga.¹² As the Bugis chronicler Raja Ali Haji lamented, "there were now two kings in one kingdom, with the boundaries determined by two governments, the Dutch and English".¹³

After this “one kingdom” ceased to exist with its formal partition by the Dutch and British in the treaty of 1824, Riau-Lingga limped on as a separate kingdom under Abdul Rahman I and his successors.

Spinning Tops and Other Pastimes

Traditional pastimes are still alive and well on Lingga, with programmes to sustain interest actively promoted and undertaken by local authorities. More importantly, the local residents still enjoy them. Take *gasing* (plural *gegasing*), for example: Malay spinning tops once popularly played in the villages of Singapore and Malaya. Daik holds *gasing* tournaments twice a year, and I had the good fortune of witnessing one.

Gasing-spinning requires decent upper body strength, proper form and technical dexterity. Players are split into two teams and the game takes place over several rounds in which teams alternate between spinners and throwers. After spinners cast their *gasing*, the players from the other team try to knock these *gegasing* off-balance with their own. The *gegasing* still standing are then left to spin (*adu uri*) with the team whose *gasing* is the last one still spinning winning the round. The roles are then reversed and the rounds repeated. Although the game sounds simple, the precise rules and point-system are incredibly complex.

Gasing-spinning is a very old Malay game and was once considered a sport of princes. Watching the *gasing* players perform their athletic manoeuvres is electrifying, some having their own signature style and flourish. The *gegasing* themselves are a marvel, carved out of hardwood with exquisite grain. At their highest speeds, they almost resemble levitating saucers. Still, the most amusing aspect of the experience is hearing the commentator’s enthusiastic live observations. In a different world, one can imagine him commenting at a big-league *gasing* cup match.

Besides the water sports such as racing *kolek* and *jong* (two varieties of sailing canoes), Lingga also holds boat-rowing regattas as well as kite-making and -flying competitions. The sailboats and kites of the present have incorporated more sophisticated and durable materials, though. The people of Lingga appear to have adapted traditional, recreational pursuits according to the needs and conditions of the present, whereas Singaporeans may tend to look down on ours as vestiges of an irrelevant past.

Lingga’s one and only radio station, Radio Bunda Tanah Melayu FM (RBTM;



(Above) *Gegasing* (spinning tops) in action at a tournament. Courtesy of Marcus Ng.

(Right) *Lempeng sagu* (right) served with *asam pedas ikan pari* (left) in Tanjung Buton, Daik. Courtesy of Marcus Ng.

“Malay Motherland Radio”), fills the airwaves with the sound of Malay musical genres. Masters in *dondang sayang* exchange witty quatrains as a fiddler plays in the background, while on Monday mornings, recitations of *pantun* and *sya’ir* (a form of traditional Malay poetry comprising four-line stanzas) keep oral literature alive.

Other leisurely activities are closely intertwined with the realm of the sacred. Every year on the 15th day of the Islamic month of Safar, hundreds still descend on Lingga’s beaches to partake in the ritual of Mandi Safar. This practice has been all but extinguished in Singapore due to changing religious attitudes surrounding some old Malay customs. Mandi Safar (literally “the Bath of Safar”) involves taking a bath in the sea en masse to cleanse oneself of the previous year’s negative energies and to ward off potential misfortune in the coming year.

In Lingga, as was the case in Singapore, this is also an excuse for the young to picnic, socialise and have fun with their friends by the sea. Food stalls are set up

as well as makeshift tents and platforms for performances, music and dancing.

At sunset each day, Marcus and I retired to our favourite corner of the island, Tanjung Buton: a long pier lined with food-carts for dining alfresco. Overlooking a charming bay, Tanjung Buton is the perfect setting to savour local delicacies while soaking in the evening sea breeze.

The cuisine of Lingga features rustic Malay dishes, some of which can hardly be found in Singapore today. For example, accompanying the classic *asam pedas ikan pari*, a spicy stingray stew, is a fried griddle cake of sago flour known as *lempeng sagu*. Replacing rice as the meal’s staple, *lempeng sagu* harks back to earlier times in the Malay world when rice was a luxury available only to elites, and the main source of carbohydrates was the humble sago. Indeed, to partake in sago is to taste the natural ecology of Lingga itself – an island of swamps and marshy floodplains – where sago palms proliferate in abundance and sago factories, using age-old extraction methods, still operate on the banks of these palm-lined wetlands.

Mother Island

Riau-Lingga is home to great cultural diversity, even if it is presented as an heir to the courtly Malay traditions of the old Johor Sultanate. Besides the Malays and Bugis, there are the Orang Suku Laut (sea people) who maintain their semi-nomadic lifestyle subsisting on marine products. These communities now maintain a quiet existence on the margins of modernity, but their ancestors once performed an invaluable role in the security and defence of the old sultanate as naval pilots, navigators and combatants.¹⁴

Then there are the Chinese, mostly descendants of Teochew settlers. They have been involved in Riau-Lingga society since the 18th century when Daeng Chelak, the Yamtuan Muda of Riau (deputy ruler or viceroy), invited Chinese coolies to establish gambier plantations on Bintan.¹⁵ Today, many Teochew residents run sundry shops in towns and villages across the archipelago and support their neighbourhoods by building mosques and other public structures. Some also manage fleets that trawl the surrounding waters, delivering regular supplies of trevally (a species of large marine fish) that end up as fishballs in

our soup. On Lingga, there are also coastal towns like Pancur in the northeast with a predominantly Chinese population, while Daik has a prominent Teochew “quarter” with schools, temples and shops built by its longstanding Teochew community.

Carl Trocki has written extensively on how the Bugis-Teochew plantation economy that took shape in Riau was instrumental to the wealth (and labour surplus) achieved by early colonial Singapore.¹⁶ Indeed, the success of Riau as a regional port was due in no small part to the symbiotic relationship between the Teochew gambier and pepper planters, and the Malayo-Bugis traders whose networks enabled their distribution and sale. After Riau’s decline in the late 18th century, Bugis traders and Teochew planters moved their base to Singapore. Without the ability to tap into these local networks of economic cooperation and migration, Trocki writes, it was unlikely for Singapore to have had enough port turnover to sustain its operations, at least in its fledgling years. Taking over the functions of old Riau, Singapore became its successor.¹⁷

To visit Riau-Lingga, therefore, is to visit an important part of Singapore’s own

some published compilations. For example, see Arthur Wedderburn Hamilton, *Malay Pantuns = Pantun Melayu* (Singapore: Editions Didier-Millet, 2009), 77. (From National Library, Singapore, Call no. RSING 899.281 MAL-[JSB]). Translation by author.

7 John N. Miksic, “Three Mountains in Malay History,” in Zai Kunming, *Dapunta Hyang: Transmission of Knowledge*, accessed 20 August 2021, <https://dapuntahyang2018.wordpress.com/three-mountains-in-malay-history>.

8 Aswandi Syahri, “Negeri dan Istana Baru Sultan Mahmud Muzaafaryah Daik Lingga (1849),” *Jantung Melayu*.com, accessed 20 August 2021, <https://jantungmelayu.com/2019/10/negeri-dan-istana-baru-sultan-mahmud-muzafaryah-daik-lingga-1849/>.

9 Sri Sugiharta, *Masjid-Masjid Kuno di Sumatra Barat, Riau dan Kepulauan Riau* (Batusangkar: Balai Pelestarian Peninggalan Purbakala Batusangkar, 2006), 57. (Not available in NLB’s holdings)

10 Imran Bin Tajudeen, “Adaptation and Accentuation: Type Transformation in Vernacular Nusantarian Mosque Design and Their Contemporary Signification in Melaka, Minangkabau and Singapore,” *ISVS IV: Pace or Speed?* 4th International Seminar on Vernacular Settlement, Ahmedabad, India, February 14–17, 2008: Proceedings (Ahmedabad: Print Vision for CEPT University, 2008), 136. Academia, https://www.academia.edu/300404/Imran_bin_Tajudeen_2008_Adaptation_and_Accentuation_Type_transformation_in_vernacular_Nusantarian_mosque_design_and_their_contemporary_signification_in_Melaka_Minangkabau_and_Singapore.

11 See Farish Noor and Eddin Koo, *Spirit of Wood: The Art of Malay Woodcarving* (Hong Kong: Periplus, 2003). (From National Library, Singapore, Call no. RART q736.409595 NOO)

12 C.H. Wake, “Raffles and the Rajas: The Founding of Singapore in Malayan and British Colonial History,” *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 48, no. 1 (227) (1975): 60. (From JSTOR via NLB’s eResources website)

13 Raja Ali Haji ibn Ahmad, *The Precious Gift (Tuhfat al-Nafis)*, trans. Virginia Matheson and Barbara Andaya (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1982), 244–45. (From National Library, Singapore, Call no. RSING 959.5142 ALI)

14 Timothy P. Barnard, “Celates, Rayat-Laut, Pirates: The Orang Laut and Their Decline in History,” *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 80, no. 2 (293) (December 2007): 35. (From JSTOR via NLB’s eResources website)

15 Gambier was a valuable crop used in tanning leather and its trade contributed to the wealth of Riau-Lingga. The Teochew planters who arrived in Singapore from Riau introduced the *kangchu* cultivation system

that dominated the interior for much of the early 19th century. See Carl Trocki, *Prince of Pirates: The Temenggong and the Development of Johor and Singapore 1784–1885* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2007), 33–35. (From National Library, Singapore, Call no. RSING 959.5103 TRO). For information about gambier plantations in early Singapore, see Timothy Pwee, “From Gambier to Pepper: Plantation Agriculture in Singapore,” *BiblioAsia* 17, no. 1 (Apr–Jun 2021).

16 Trocki, *Prince of Pirates*, 34.

17 Carl Trocki, *Singapore: Wealth, Power and the Culture of Control* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 8. (From National Library, Singapore, Call no. RSING 959.5705 TRO-[HIS]). On Singapore’s early Teochew community, see Jason Heng, “An Old Teochew Oral Account Sheds New Light on the 1819 Founding of Singapore,” in Singapore National Library Board, *Chapters on Asia: Selected Papers from the Lee Kong Chian Research Fellowship (2014–2016)* (Singapore: National Library Board, 2018), 291–331. (From BookSG, Call no. RSING 959.57 CHA-[HIS])

18 Barbara Andaya, “From Rum to Tokyo: The Search for Anti-Colonial Allies by the Rulers of Riau, 1899–1914,” *Indonesia*, no. 24 (October 1977): 128. (From JSTOR via NLB’s eResources website)

evolution as a port and society rooted in the Malay world’s patterns of culture and commerce. Even after Singapore and Riau-Lingga were separated, the two islands preserved firm links: well into the 1920s, the princes of Riau-Lingga maintained residences and trading houses in Singapore town.¹⁸ Ordinary folk born in Singapore moved to Lingga, and vice-versa, as a matter of routine. Until the 1980s, Singaporean Malays living on the Southern Islands still crossed regularly into Riau to visit their cousins and relatives.

We often lament how “small” Singapore is. Unlike other countries, we do not have a vast countryside that maintains a sense of our “authentic” past or traces of our culture against the continuous flux that characterises life in a global city. In reality, nearby places like Lingga display familiar landscapes and recognisable traditions. Modes of life there remind us of our profound historical ties to this region, and that if we cease to regard Singapore’s identity as being confined to its present-day borders, it can hardly be considered “small” at all. Lingga is a keeper of our pasts, a fount of stories that we in Singapore have long forgotten. ♦

In Their Own Words: THE EARLY YEARS OF THE SUBSTATION

The development of the arts in Singapore is unimaginable without this arts centre dedicated to alternative voices. Key individuals from its early history tell **Clarissa Oon** how it got started.



Clarissa Oon is an arts writer and former journalist who heads Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay's digital content and archives. She is working on a year-long series, PopLore, which celebrates and documents Singapore popular music and includes an exhibition on live music venues.

A rundown former power station was transformed by artists and the government into an arts centre. And so began the almost inconceivable journey of Singapore's first independent, multidisciplinary arts space – The Substation.

In 1985, the late influential drama doyen Kuo Pao Kun had a vision of an arts centre that would be accessible to all art forms, artists and cultures. The then Ministry of Community Development (MCD; now Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth) accepted his proposal and leased the building at 45 Armenian Street to Kuo's Practice Performing Arts Centre Ltd (PPACL). The government also provided a \$1.07-million grant towards the reconstruction and renovation of the building, which was completed in June 1990.

Opening in September 1990, The Substation predicated the National Arts Council (NAC) and much of today's state-planned arts infrastructure. In its heyday in the 1990s, particularly during Kuo's tenure as artistic director from 1990 to 1995, it was the place to be in the arts. It was a space in which to experiment and make art and also engage in robust debate about one's work, the arts and society. Singapore's Ambassador-at-Large Tommy Koh was The Substation's patron, and its board members during that period included former cabinet minister Ong Pang Boon.



(Above) The Substation's founder, Kuo Pao Kun, 1990. All Rights Reserved. Eric Foo Chee Meng 1979–2001. Courtesy of National Arts Council, Singapore.

(Left) The Substation on Armenian Street, 2006. It officially opened on 16 September 1990. Photo by Sengkang. Retrieved from Wikimedia Commons.

"The Substation cannot begin to survive unless we start creating a new space within our inner selves – a space which is responsive to creative, pluralistic, artistic ventures," wrote Kuo. Such ventures would, by nature, be "untried, raw, personal, unglamorous, slow in developing and often 'not successful', 'not excellent'. There is no other way to nurture the young, innovative and experimental in art."¹

The art centre's operating model was unique for a Singapore arts organisation at the time: ad hoc government grants coupled with the subleasing of some of its spaces to commercial enterprises such as a café. While financial sustainability was a challenge, it was home to hundreds of performances and exhibitions for more than 30 years.

The Substation moved out from Armenian Street on 30 July 2021 and has entered a new phase of its journey as an arts company.

In the three decades that it existed on Armenian Street, it had been an incubator of young artistic talent. Professor Tommy Koh noted in an op-ed in the *Straits Times* that the arts centre "has nurtured many recipients of the Cultural Medallion and Young Artist Award." He said: "Eminent theatre practitioners, such as Wild Rice founding artistic director Ivan Heng, TNS [The Necessary Stage] artistic director Alvin Tan and TheatreWorks artistic director Ong Keng Sen were mentored by Pao Kun at The Substation." The Substation also nurtured other lesser known artists as well, he added.²

Most critical of all were its values and culture. As Koh noted, "The Substation is about the freedom to innovate, to experiment, to challenge the establishment and conventional wisdom. It is about the process of art-making and less about its outcome."³

At this point in the Substation's history, it is now apt to revisit its beginnings. Key players of the time share their perspectives on the centre's founding years.

The Arts Administrators

Securing the Building and Garden

In 1986, the power station on Armenian Street became the first property under NAC's then new Arts Housing Scheme to receive a capital grant of \$1.07 million for renovations;⁴ the scheme was administered by the MCD's cultural affairs division, precursor of today's NAC.

MCD allowed the former power station, earmarked for conservation, to be managed by a private, not-for-profit company on a 10-year lease. This was unheard of at the time: other buildings – shells of former schools converted into workspaces for arts groups – were leased out for only up to three years.

At the time, veteran arts administrators Juliana Lim and Tisa Ho were, respectively, deputy director and assistant director in MCD's cultural affairs division. They share the decisions they undertook to let the arts centre fly, including allocating a garden behind the building to The Substation with permission from the Land Office.⁵ The garden became a key performance space before being sublet to a commercial tenant in the mid-2000s.⁶

Tisa Ho: Juliana had the idea that old buildings that were lying fallow could be better used, as the artists and arts groups that we knew were struggling for working space. The Telok Ayer Performing Arts Centre [TAPAC, now defunct] was, I think, the first experiment.

Juliana Lim: I went to take a look at The Substation. I remember climbing into the building, through this vertical ladder on the side of the building. I slid open this big, heavy door, entered this room, and found a

floor with holes in it, and then the Land Office chaps came and said it was the generator room. This building was unlike the others, unlike TAPAC and all which used to be schools with many classrooms. The power station was not a building for co-sharing. In my subconscious mind, I thought, this is a building that has to go to one player because it's quite a compact building, it was not big.

Ho: Structurally, it was obviously very sound, it was a very solid building. "Disused" doesn't begin to describe the state that it was in; it was encrusted with bat and mouse droppings. But I thought the potential was exciting. There was one big space which could be used for a slightly different kind of performance space than the proscenium theatres and Drama Centre



(Top left) Juliana Lim, former deputy director in the then Ministry of Community Development's cultural affairs division. Courtesy of Juliana Lim.

(Top right) Tisa Ho, former assistant director in the then Ministry of Community Development's cultural affairs division. Courtesy of Tisa Ho.

(Right) Colourful murals at The Substation Garden. These were painted by local artists in the 1990s. The Substation Collection, PictureSG, National Library, Singapore.

that we had then, and some potential workspaces upstairs.

Lim: We invited concepts from the bigger arts groups at the time. The reason why Pao Kun got the building was his proposal went way beyond an individual group's need, unlike the rest who were looking for rehearsal space. It was multicultural, multidisciplinary – those were the words we liked.

This was a fresh concept, entirely his, and we were not going to co-own it, because we got no means to do this.

We saw ourselves more as an enabler with PPACL as a tenant, than a co-owner.

For the capital grant [to cover the building's renovations], we went to the Ministry of Finance, and I remember they were very lukewarm. And to be frank, I was very disheartened, and I think Tisa was the one who pushed it further.

Ho: I think we also made a case for preservation of our buildings, because there was a lot of talk about conserving the former Tao Nan School beside it [now The Peranakan Museum]. The climate was right,

there was an awareness of urgency, of keeping your architectural heritage.

Lim: On the garden, I think what Pao Kun said was, "I want the link to nature." There was a huge banyan tree. Basically, once we agreed with his vision of the building, we were very much swayed in his direction. The garden was Tao Nan School's playing field, and I think the neighbour was also asking for it. The Land Office had to arbitrate, and they gave it to Pao Kun.

The General Manager

"Every day, I had to think, where to get money."

In 1989, Tan Beng Luan left her civil service job to join PPACL. She knew Kuo from attending his directing course a few years before. Overseeing the founding of The Substation, she recounts the fundraising challenges of the early years – a *Straits Times* article in 1990 reported that the arts centre had to raise \$700,000 for its first year's operations.⁷

The Substation operated in this way: it rented out its spaces for artists to use at very affordable rates, and also initiated its own programmes. *Dance Space, Word Space, Music Space and Raw Theatre* were all programmes created by Pao Kun to spearhead or explore new possibilities in artmaking. We had a 120-seat black-box theatre, a garden, art gallery, dance studio, two classrooms, as well as a meeting room and office. There was also an art

bookshop and café. MCD allowed us to sublet our spaces to commercial tenants. The ministry gave Pao Kun the freedom to set the artistic direction for the centre and we never had to seek approval for any of our programmes.

While the government's capital grant paid for the building, the money for equipment and fittings had to be raised by PPACL. And it was really very hard. Every day, I remember one of my administrators would receive a call from the contractor to ask for payment. Once, we couldn't even find \$800 to pay for the air-con instalment.

But we did have supporters. Our first fundraising event was supported by many visual artists who donated paintings to The Substation that we sold. Our salaries were supported by the Practice Perform-

(Below left) Tan Beng Luan left her civil service job to join Practice Performing Arts Centre Ltd. Courtesy of Tan Beng Luan.

(Below) Kuo Pao Kun (in black) and Professor Tommy Koh (in sports attire) at The Substation's First Anniversary Walk-a-Jog event in September 1991. The Substation Collection, PictureSG, National Library, Singapore.



Before Guinness, there was another company which wanted to support The Substation. But the condition was to have naming rights over the entire Substation. Of course, Pao Kun's reaction was, no, The Substation [had] to maintain its name; we can name individual spaces within The Substation after a sponsor but not the entire building. When Guinness came in, they wanted to support The Substation with \$1 million over five years, provided the theatre was named the Guinness Theatre. That was okay.

Up to that point, everything went quite well. But when we were about to close the deal, there was a request from Guinness' UK office to say that in the agreement, The Substation had to guarantee that no performances or activities take place there that will damage the image of Guinness. Pao Kun said there's no way The Substation can make this guarantee; we would have to work out a system to scrutinise all events in detail before we even let artists use the space, and it just wasn't possible.

There was a lot of "ding-donging" [back-and-forth]. I often heard Pao Kun over the phone, trying to persuade the Guinness representative in Singapore so he could in turn persuade the UK office. Eventually Guinness counter-proposed to change the wording to something like: "The Substation has no intention of creating any damages to the image of the sponsor." That finally was okay.

I remember asking Pao Kun – what if Guinness drops this whole sponsorship idea because you disagree with their original condition. You guess what his response was? He said, "Well, then we start all over again and look for another sponsor."

The front door of The Substation, with its slogan "A Home for the Arts", 1991. It officially opened on 16 September 1990. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore*.



This ability to endure hardship and willingness to take a difficult journey is the character of Pao Kun.

I remember another incident. In early 1990, one of our board members, Mdm Li Lienfung [the late writer and vice-chairman of the Wah Chang group of manufacturing companies], called me. She had a friend who could be willing to occupy the gallery space for the entire year, which meant we could collect rental revenue. But I said the gallery cannot be rented out for a year because we won't have the space for our [own] visual art activities.

So of course Mdm Li was very upset because she was really concerned about

the financial situation of The Substation. But then, what to do? This issue about the strong artistic mission of The Substation – versus commercial usage and revenue collection – was a constant tension. You have to make a decision. For that same reason, it would never occur to Pao Kun to rent out the garden [as] it was the second biggest space after the theatre. I often say he led his team of board members through a difficult path full of ups and downs and hurdles. Fortunately, they were willing to come along [on the journey].

said, "We'd like to have a local band play at your space, and they'll be playing original music," their reaction would be like "Hmm? Local music?"

When Pao Kun opened The Substation, me and [music producer] Nazir Husain went to meet him. We knew someone who facilitated the meeting. We said, "Hey look, can we also have music at The Substation Garden? The music will be what I'll call left-wing music. There will be punk rock, there will be thrash metal, anything that is really non-mainstream, no Abba, no Richard Clayderman." And Pao Kun was very cool about it and he said, "Oh sure." Then I looked at him and I said, "Hey, it won't be pretty music," and then he said something like this: "The Substation is a place for people to experiment, a place for people to do anything they want."

And true to his words, many years down the line, it wasn't just non-mainstream music, you also had mainstream artists performing at The Substation. The genre, the categorisation of it for him, does not matter. What matters for him is that you have something to say, we have a space here, say it the way you want to say it.

The first gig that we organised, for the life of me I cannot remember who played, I cannot remember any-

thing about it. But [Pao Kun] was there at the gig, and I think [he and] Professor Tommy Koh were sitting in the crowd in the garden, watching some thrash metal or heavy metal band.

I dare say that from 1990 to 1991, we must at least have had four or five gigs, and that was more than all the gigs featuring local music in the 1980s.

The impact The Substation made was incalculable. Teenagers would come for the gigs and say "Hey, why can't we have this in my school?" At Ngee Ann Polytechnic, for example, they started their own series of concerts.

Every year, the number of gigs around town increased. In the late '90s and early noughties, I remember looking at

a newspaper or magazine listing and thinking, "Wah, so many gigs ah." It was a domino effect where pundits started organising gigs themselves, and venues looking at this said, "Well, there's a trend. There's a market for Singapore indie music." And [clubs like] Hard Rock Café, Sparks and Fire started to have indie music nights too.



(Top) Musician Joe Ng of The Padres. Courtesy of Zen Yeo.

(Middle) Audiences and musicians at the Rock the Garden Endowment Fundraising Concert, organised by The Substation in its garden in 1996. *The Substation Collection, PictureSG, National Library, Singapore*.

(Right) Music duo Nuradee performing at The Substation Garden in 1991. *The Substation Collection, PictureSG, National Library, Singapore*.

The Indie Musician

Building the Music Ecosystem, One Gig a Time

With the government's ban on long hair and tightening of rules for live entertainment in the 1970s, the decade after that saw the entire local music scene in the doldrums. Original music in English by Singapore bands

had largely disappeared from radio and TV, and the live music venues in those days were mainly hotel lounges.

Musician Joe Ng – frontman of 1990s indie band The Padres – talks about how things changed when indie music gigs began to be held at The Substation Garden.

In 1990, I was involved in writing for [pioneering indie music magazine] *BigO*. I was also starting to work in a record company and trying to organise gigs. It was quite challenging because the concept of original music was new for a lot of people. When I knocked on the doors of pubs and schools and

The Theatre Maker

Learning and Receiving Criticism

The co-artistic director of established socially engaged theatre company Drama Box, Kok Heng Leun got his "baptism of fire" in the arts working as a programme executive at The Substation from 1992 to 1993. He credits

the centre as a place of beginnings for many artists like himself.⁸

On one October evening in 1990, a group of young people – myself included – who had just graduated from the National University of Singapore, gathered at the

garden of The Substation and decided to form Drama Box. We formed [the theatre company] because we wanted to do our own Chinese-language theatre, telling our stories. Drama Box's first production, a double bill, was held at the Guinness Theatre in 1991.

Young practitioners like myself found The Substation a good place to start something new. Drama Box started without much connection with the bigger community; coming to The Substation made us feel like you were part of something bigger, part of a community.

For a new group, a beginning would require a supportive environment. The Guinness Theatre black box is small, with a manageable audience capacity. The flexible space in the theatre also allows directors to try things, to reconfigure, to start from "zero". The floor plan of the black box indicated that the seats could be moved, and during the 1990s, it was such an exciting possibility.

Yet at the same time, we knew that once we started on something,



we would subject our work to being critically examined by others. There were so many different practitioners of different backgrounds visiting and working at The Substation. Your work would be seen by these artists. You would even get to talk to them after the show at the café in The Substation. The Substation was the place where we knew we could be free, without being judged, but where we must learn how to receive critical opinions.

I remembered asking Pao Kun about the diversity of programming in The Substation. After a year, there were people who were quite confused about what the place was about. In fact, there were people who asked that The Substation should have a clearer identity for easy marketing purposes.

Pao Kun's response was (and I paraphrase his words here): "The Substation

is a home for the arts. So it should accommodate any kind of arts – traditional, contemporary, experimental and pop. So when people come to The Substation, they get to meet different artists, they get to meet different kinds of arts. Isn't that good?"

Having a vision does not make a place tick. The values that the place embodies must be upheld by strong and firm leadership. All the artistic directors of The Substation are strong artists, visionary and also resilient. I have witnessed Pao Kun defending why certain artworks or performances were allowed to be showcased at The Substation gallery when queried by the public or even by the board of directors. By doing so, Pao Kun gave artists a sense of security that the place is one of freedom and openness.



(Left) Kok Heng Leun, co-artistic director of Drama Box. Courtesy of Alecia Neo.

(Below) Members of Drama Box at a discussion at The Substation Garden in the early 1990s. Courtesy of Drama Box.

(Below right) A dance performance in The Substation Garden by Singapore group Dance Dimension Project as part of SeptFest 1996. The Substation Collection, PictureSG, National Library, Singapore.



produced in modern times, but he was not a terrific manager. At the board level, I was one of those who brought that kind of experience. I think Pao Kun liked me because I could speak to him openly and frankly, which is saying more about him than me, in that he was able to accommodate such a diversity of perspectives, people who bring different talents to the table.

Funding was a challenge, but because it was Pao Kun, he could always bail us out; he just had to go and ask certain Chinese patrons, and they would give [him] money.

More challenging was he was the father of the fringe theatre, the people who would not be recognised by established procedures. He was willing to give them space, both in a physical as well as creative sense. Every time a controversial issue like performance art emerged – it was a big controversy – he did give space for that. And he argued for it.⁹

Pao Kun's contribution is in pushing the boundaries for what is allowed, which I think today, very few artists can do as well as he did. On the other hand, space is not as critical today because there are a number of other groups and platforms that have given space. When you talk about the 1990s, this wasn't the case in Singapore. The Substation actually had a series called Raw Theatre. To think of it as a worthy cause, and to provide support for it in a systematic way, this is what Pao Kun basically institutionalised.

I think that the essence of The Substation is that we must always be at the fringe. Now, many board members and even some artistic directors disagree with this, but you see, what Pao Kun created was the fringe. It was not the centre, and I felt in whatever

(Below) Malaysian playwright and theatre director Krishen Jit (left) chats with Substation founder Kuo Pao Kun (right) at the launch of Kuo's book, *Images in the Margin*, in 2000. Artistic director T. Sasitharan is in the background between them. The Substation Collection, PictureSG, National Library, Singapore.

(Middle) Craft stalls at The Substation's Sunday Market, c. 1990s. Singapore Tourist Promotion Board Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

(Bottom) Arun Mahizhnan, former board member of The Substation. Courtesy of Institute of Policy Studies.



The Substation does in the arts, we must be very mindful of pushing the boundaries, extending and nurturing the fringe.

And what is fringe today will become the centre of tomorrow, you know, and then my point is we have to move on to the fringe. This was actually one of the big problems at The Substation's board level. Whenever we were reaching the boundaries, some board members were very uncomfortable. At some point, Pao Kun felt very frustrated that the board was not unanimously supporting him. But I felt that the risk is worth tak-

ing. And Singapore is the better for it, The Substation is the better for it. I still feel that should be the role of The Substation. ♦

The Board Member

"What is fringe today will become the centre of tomorrow"

Arun Mahizhnan, special research advisor at the Institute of Policy Studies, has had a long association with the arts. As Mobil Oil Singapore's public affairs manager in the 1980s, he helped pave the way for the inter-

nationalisation and professionalisation of the Singapore Arts Festival through Mobil's sponsorship of the festival, and was on the PPACL and then The Substation board for many years.

I was one of the pioneers in the arts domain in Singapore with management expe-

rience, but [who had] a very soft spot in our heart for the artist. I was not going to impose management on the artist, but I was going to impose management on the institution so the artists perform at their best.

Pao Kun was perhaps the greatest artist and arts leader Singapore has

NOTES

- 1 Audrey Wong, ed., *25 Years of The Substation: Reflections on Singapore's First Independent Art Centre* (Singapore: The Substation and Ethos Books, 2015), 12. (From National Library Singapore, Call no. RSING 792.095957 OON). See also Julian Lim, "Arts Housing Scheme – \$10 a Classroom a Month," *Singapore Arts Manager 1980s/90s: Memories and Musings*, 24 May 2009, <https://julianlim.wordpress.com/2009/05/24/arts-housing-scheme-10-a-classroom-a-month/>.
- 2 Tommy Koh, "Fare Thee Well: The Substation's Legacy Will Endure," *Straits Times*, 6 March 2021, <https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/fare-thee-well-the-substations-legacy-will-endure>.
- 3 Koh, "Fare Thee Well: The Substation's Legacy Will Endure."
- 4 Clarissa Oon, *Theatre Life! A History of Singapore English-language Theatre in Singapore Through The Straits Times (1958–2000)* (Singapore: Singapore Press Holdings, 2001), 147. (From National Library Singapore, Call no. RSING 792.095957 OON).
- 5 Julian Lim, "Substation Stories," *Singapore Arts Manager 1980s/90s: Memories and Musings*, 15 December 2009, <https://julianlim.wordpress.com/2009/12/15/substation-stories/>.
- 6 Lee Weng Choy, "The Substation: Artistic Practice and Cultural Policy," in *The State and the Arts in Singapore: Policies and Institutions*, ed. Terence Chong (New Jersey: World Scientific, 2019), 204, 210. (From National Library Singapore, Call no. RSING 700.959570904 STA)
- 7 "The Substation Plans Host of Activities to Raise Funds," *Straits Times*, 16 May 1990, 26. (From NewspaperSG).
- 8 Kok Heng Leun, "The Place of The Substation: A Space and a Place for a Beginning," in *25 Years of The Substation: Reflections on Singapore's First Independent Art Centre*, ed. Audrey Wong (Singapore: The Substation and Ethos Books, 2015), 38–45. (From National Library Singapore, Call no. RSING 700.95957 TWE)
- 9 Performance art was not funded by the government for 10 years starting from 1994.

Wong Din Haan

A Pioneer Educator



Wong Din Haan, who founded a girls' school in Singapore, was also a champion for women's rights.

Patricia Lim tells us more.

Family photo of Wong Ah Fook's family home on Keng Lee Road, Singapore. First row, from left: older daughter Winnie Kwan Ming Chit; granddaughter; Wong Din Haan; grandson; Wong Peng Sook, wife of Kwan Ying Hung holding her baby son Kwan Teet Ming. Second row, from left: younger daughter Elsie Kwan Ming Tak; wife of Kwan Ying Siong holding her second son; wife of N.I. Low. Third row, from left: second son Dr Kwan Ying Hung; eldest son Kwan Ying Siong; and friend N.I. Low. Courtesy of Paddy Chee.

"When[ever] the [Wah Kiew Nui Hok] school holds a general meeting, people will see a middle-aged lady sitting at a corner, listening to the speaker patiently. No matter how long the meeting goes on [for], she maintains herself in an upright posture. However, as she had never spoken a word during meetings, someone might think she is a less enthusiastic person, or the one with inadequate words. But actually, this quiet woman is exactly the most passionate person of all."¹

This "quiet woman" is none other than my grandfather's sister, whom I addressed as Saam Koo Por, which means third paternal grandaunt in Cantonese. She founded a school for girls in the early 20th century.

My family is Cantonese. Saam Koo Por's name was Wong Mei Ho (黃美好), but as a Hokkien clerk had transcribed it in the Hokkien fashion so her name became Wong Bee Ho in official documents. At some point after her marriage, she returned with her four children to live in Singapore with her father Wong Ah Fook (黃亞福),² who was my great-grandfather.

It was much later that I discovered she was known by another name. I had attended a lecture by Professor Zheng Liang Shu (郑良树; Tay Liang Soo) of Southern University College, Johor, where he spoke about the pioneer educator Wong Din Haan (黃典嫻; Huang Dian Xian). The second daughter of Wong Ah Fook, my grandaunt had founded a school for girls in Singapore.³

I was confused because no one in the family seemed to know about the existence of this girls' school until I asked one of my uncles, Pang Heng Hung. He confirmed that she was indeed the founder of a school known as Wah Kiew Nui Hok (华侨女校), which was located on New Bridge Road. His mother was Wong Bee Soo, Wong Din Haan's younger sister, who had been a teacher in the school.

After retiring as founding Librarian and Research Fellow at the ISEAS-Yusof Institute, **Patricia Lim Pui Huen** finds pleasure in exploring Singapore's history and discovering the roots of her family's past. Her publications include a biography of her great grandfather, *Wong Ah Fook: Immigrant, Builder and Entrepreneur* (Times Editions, 2003). In 2020, she published a volume of short stories, *One-Legged Football and Other Stories* (Areca Books), which highlights the challenges faced by people with disabilities.

Pioneer in Female Education

Founded in 1905, the school can be linked to the events in China following the aftermath of the Boxer Rebellion that lasted from 1899 to 1901.⁴ The Boxer Protocol signed on 7 September 1901 ended hostilities and those involved were executed. Following this, Empress Dowager Cixi reluctantly gave way to pressure for reforms and an extensive reform programme simply referred to as New Policies – a series of cultural, economic, educational, military, social and political reforms – was launched in late 1901.

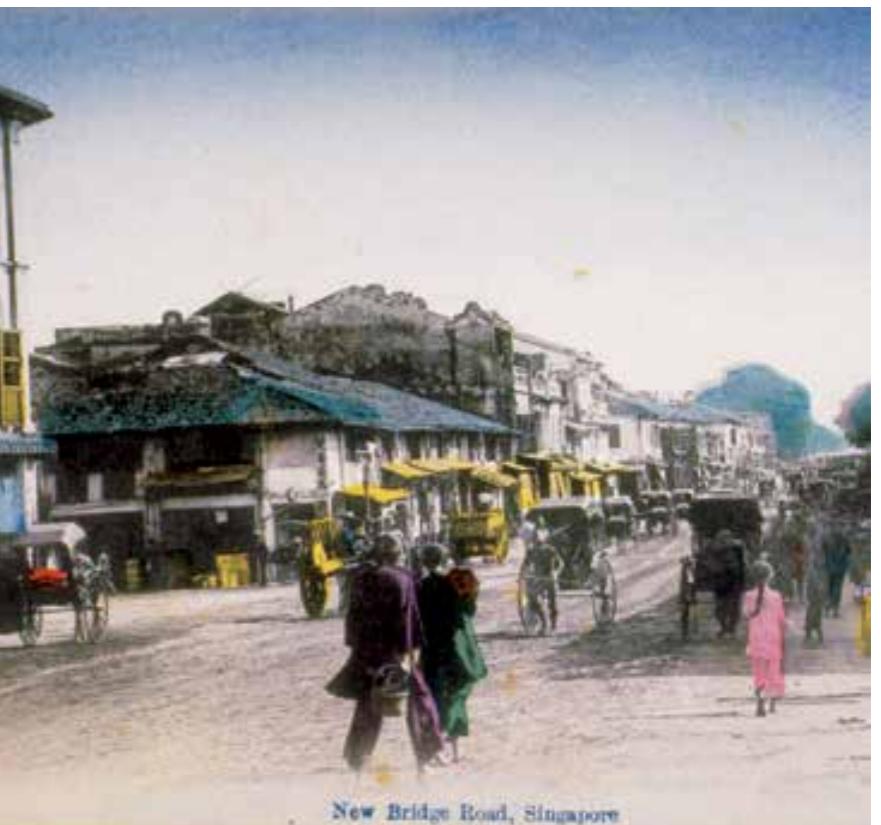
Reforms to the education system in China also had an impact on Chinese education in Singapore. The Chinese imperial examinations (科举) to select candidates for the state bureaucracy, which had been the pinnacle of the education system in China for centuries, was abolished in 1905. The entire education system was overhauled and an Education Bureau was established to take charge of the modernisation and administration of national education leading to a university degree. In his book, *The Rise of Modern China*, Immanuel Hsü noted that provincial academies were transformed into colleges, prefectural schools into middle schools, and district schools

into elementary schools.⁵ These reforms marked the beginning of the modern Chinese education system.

Although born in Singapore, my grandfather Wong Siew Nam (黃兆楠), who was better known in literary circles by his alternate name Wong Ging Tong (黃景棠), was then living in Guangzhou. Like other intellectuals of his time, he would have been caught up in the fervour for reform although we have no evidence of his role, if any, in the reform movement. However, he was a friend of the leading thinkers and political activists of the time, Kang Youwei (康有为) and Liang Qichao (梁启超), both of whom were also Cantonese. As a person who had sat for and obtained a degree in the last imperial examinations held between 1909 and 1912, my grandfather greeted the reforms in education with enthusiasm and could not resist the challenge of establishing a new category of school with a new syllabus and new teaching methods.

Together with my grandmother, Mah Lai Wan (马励芸), grandfather founded a girls' school named Kuan Wai Nui Hok (坤维女学) in Guangzhou in 1905 with grandmother as headmistress. She held the post for some 20 years and after the war, the school was managed by my aunt

New Bridge Road, looking towards the Sepoy Lines, c. 1906. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



New Bridge Road, Singapore

Wong Din Haan was the second daughter of Wong Ah Fook (below), who came to Singapore in 1854 as a carpenter. He was responsible for the construction of a number of Johor's heritage buildings, including the Istana Besar, the royal palace of the Sultan of Johor. Jalan Wong Ah Fook in downtown Johor Bahru is named after him. *Image reproduced from Song Ong Siang, One Hundred Years' History of the Chinese in Singapore (London: John Murray, 1923), 354. Collection of the National Library, Singapore. (Accession no.: B20048226B).*



Tang Yung Hing (邓蓉馨) until 1949. It still continues today as the 29 Middle School.

Grandfather must have communicated his enthusiasm to his father because Wong Ah Fook was among the group of Cantonese businessmen in Singapore who founded Yeung Ching School (养正学校) for boys in 1905. It is best remembered by the impressive building on Club Street that it occupied from 1918 to 1956. The school is known today as Yangzheng Primary School and is located along Serangoon Avenue 3.

Grandfather's sister Wong Bee Ho, who had adopted the alternate name of Wong Din Haan, was affected by the same zeal: she founded Wah Kiew Nui Hok in Singapore in the same year and became its headmistress.⁶

She was much admired as headmistress. Every morning at 8 am, she would arrive punctually at the school and leave at 4 pm in the afternoon. Although she never uttered a word during board meetings but just listened intently from the corner, she cared deeply for the school. Newspaper reports of the day praised her courage and determination.

Both Yeung Ching and Wah Kiew schools used Cantonese as the language of instruction since the founders were

Cantonese. The early schools in Singapore were mainly founded by Chinese dialect groups or by clan associations and these naturally taught in their respective dialect. By 1904, the Hokkien community had set up Chong Cheng School (崇正学校), and by 1906, Tao Nan School (道南学校); both used Hokkien. Also in 1906, the Teochew community established Tuan Mong School (端蒙学堂), which taught in Teochew. But the rise of the Republic of China in 1911 brought a new sense of pride and national consciousness to Chinese communities overseas, leading to a common spoken language: Mandarin. Schools in Singapore also began transitioning from teaching in dialect to using Mandarin.

After 13 years, Wah Kiew Nui Hok ceased operations in 1918 – the same year that Wong Ah Fook passed away.⁷ This suggests that he might have been the main financial benefactor of the school. However, the school probably also faced resistance from the conservative Chinese society, which was not yet ready for the education of females. The traditional view held by many then was that girls need not be educated as their primary roles in life were to be a good daughter, wife and mother.

Yeung Ching School (养正学校) on Club Street, Singapore, 1948. The school was founded by Wong Ah Fook and a group of Cantonese businessmen on Park Road in 1905. It moved to Club Street in 1918. The school is known today as Yangzheng Primary School and is located along Serangoon Avenue 3. *Yeung Ching Primary School Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*



However, Wong Din Haan's school was a pioneer in female education in that it inspired the establishment of five more Chinese girls' schools in Singapore during its lifespan.⁸ Of these five schools, Nam Wah Nui Hok (南华女学) founded in 1917 has continued to the present day as Nan Hua High School (南华中学), a premier school for boys and girls.⁹

This was probably her most important legacy to Singapore as she recognised the importance of educating women for their own personal development and advancement in society. She was the first woman who had the courage and the nerve to leave the comfortable seclusion of home to push for the education of women in the face of conservative opinion.

Advocate for Women's Rights

My grandaunt must have been bitterly disappointed when the school had to close but she continued to be socially active in community affairs. When the Chinese Ladies Association (now known as Chinese Women's Association Singapore) was established in 1915, she was a founding member along with her younger sister Wong Bee Soo and the wives of her two younger brothers, Mrs Wong Siew

Qui (née Ng Yung Chee) and Mrs Wong Siew Yuen (née Mark Shou Young).¹⁰

Ng Yung Chee was the daughter of Ng Chit Mui, the collector of tax revenue in Macau and a supporter of Dr Sun Yat-sen. Ng was a man of liberal views who allowed his daughters' feet to remain unbound and took the trouble to educate them in both English and Chinese. Mark Shou Young was the daughter of a prominent industrialist and grew up in Japan, so she was proficient in three languages, Cantonese, English and Japanese.

The first president of the association was Mrs Lee Choon Guan (née Tan Teck Neo), daughter-in-law of prominent Peranakan businessman Lee Cheng Yan, while the other founding members included Mrs Lim Boon Keng (née Grace Yin Pek Ha) and Dr Lee Choo Neo, Singapore's first woman doctor. At a time when women were confined to the home, the association contributed significantly to women's development. Its activities enabled them to meet socially outside, make friends across communities, widen their horizons beyond that of their own community, and learn new skills such as making Western pastry and learning Western music.

Such activities might seem very trivial today, but they represented the first foray outside the home for Chinese women and their first exposure to the outside world. The early members of the association can be said to represent the emerging Singapore women who used their energies and good influence to improve the position of women as well as work for the public good.

When the Singapore chapter of the international martial arts organisation, Chin Woo Athletic Association, was formed in 1924, my grandaunt's younger brother Wong Siew Qui became the vice-chairman. She and other members of her family were appointed as committee members, including younger brother Wong Siew Yuen and her two sisters-in-law.¹¹ This is something of a surprise as none of them were particularly athletic or had displayed interest in martial arts. However, the activities of Chin Woo opened up more opportunities for women to be socially active and to participate in martial arts and other cultural activities.

Fundraising Efforts

My grandaunt was also a member of the first committee of the Women's Wing of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce; her sister-in-law Mrs Wong Siew Qui being the chairman. The Chinese Chamber of Commerce (now Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry), formed in 1906, was involved in various fundraising and relief efforts, both in Singapore and

started out with rubber planting and then turned to tin mining. She owned and managed Mei Yuan Company, a tin mining company in which she was said to have invested a substantial amount of money. She was no armchair investor and made a trip to Ipoh, accompanied by her assistant He Wen Lan, to personally inspect mining pools, tin dredges and *palong* (a wooden structure for sorting tin ore) and to view mining operations – all this while immaculately dressed in her *cheongsam* and her *chignon* still in place.

Author Zhao Guan Hai (招观海) described her thus:

"Mr. He is her assistant in mining business. She has been called 'The strong woman in the Nanyang' (南洋之女丈夫). She was previously doing business in rubber planting but was not very successful. And then she switched to tin mining with great effort and dignity, proving herself as a leading woman of her kind. I heard that in Perak, there are only two women engaged in tin mining business, one is Madam Wong, and the other is a Hakka woman."¹²

By that time, my grandaunt had become deeply religious. When the Venerable Taixu (太虚法师) first came to Singapore in 1926 to promote the Buddhist faith, he was able to garner the support of local devotees, who founded the Singapore Chinese Buddhist Association (新加坡中华佛教会) in 1927. One of the founders was my grandaunt, who devoted much energy to the affairs of the association.¹³ She helped to set up its medical section in 1937, possibly because her son Dr Kwan Ying Hung had by then graduated from his medical studies. In 1940, she was appointed president of the association, which is around the time that she appeared to have adopted the name Wong Fook Mei (黄福美) for her religious activities.¹⁴

Fundraising took various forms. In September 1937, the Singapore Chinese Women's Relief Fund was established at the initiative of Mrs Kao Ling-pai, wife of the Chinese Consul-General to Singapore, who became chairman of the fund. Apart from raising funds, it also provided supplies of bandages, medicine, clothing and other necessities to the war-torn areas of China¹⁵ as well as started a Refugee Children Shop (难民商店) in Singapore.

Fundraising took on new meaning when my grandaunt became president of the Chinese Ladies Association in 1939.¹⁶ Her name appeared in the headlines whenever Chinese newspapers reported on local fundraising activities. One of its activities was to run a food stall at the Great World amusement park every Saturday night. Members took turns to

in China. In 1931, when the Yangtze River overflowed its bank and devastated some 180,000 sq km (an area that is over half the size of Malaysia), resulting in millions of people made homeless and lives lost, the Women's Wing set up 12 committees to help raise funds.¹⁵

When the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–45) broke out in China, Japanese aggression aroused much anger from the overseas Chinese communities. The Chinese Chamber of Commerce took the lead in raising funds and set up the China Relief Fund Committee in 1937 (with prominent businessman and philanthropist Tan Kah Kee as president). My father Wong Peng Shing (黃秉盛), who was a member of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce, was very much involved in fundraising and I still vividly remember the anger and anxiety he felt and how hard he worked to raise funds to alleviate the suffering of refugees.

The *Nanyang Siang Pau* newspaper (南洋商报) reported that the refugee relief effort was led by two elderly women, 69-year-old Mrs Leong Yuen Ho and 63-year-old Wong Din Haan. The journalist described the latter as a progressive thinker who promoted education for girls. Despite the fact that she came from a wealthy family and could have led a life of ease and leisure, she had founded a school for girls and was now active in raising funds for refugee relief. Although she seemed frail and did not speak much, she worked with strength and determination. The journalist added that all over Nanyang, everyone knew of the name "Wong Din Haan" and she was known as "The number one good person in Nanyang".¹⁶

Fundraising took various forms. In September 1937, the Singapore Chinese Women's Relief Fund was established at the initiative of Mrs Kao Ling-pai, wife of the Chinese Consul-General to Singapore, who became chairman of the fund. Apart from raising funds, it also provided supplies of bandages, medicine, clothing and other necessities to the war-torn areas of China¹⁵ as well as started a Refugee Children Shop (难民商店) in Singapore.

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cook, and their names and the menus were published in the Chinese newspapers. Delicious offerings at the stall included porridge, noodles, soup, pies and even *laksa*.

When Women's Day was celebrated in March 1940, nearly 1,000 women and schoolgirls gathered at Great World, where their performances, together with the sale of refreshments, raised \$10,000 for the China Relief Fund.¹⁹ My grandaunt made a rousing speech as chairman of the event. War relief work was regarded as a patriotic duty in which the participation of women was welcomed. Fundraising created opportunities for women to exercise their organisational talents and abilities, and assert their qualities of leadership.

After Singapore surrendered on 15 February 1942, the Japanese military launched Operation Sook Ching "to cleanse" or purge anti-Japanese elements from the Chinese community. In particular, the Japanese looked for people involved in the China Relief Fund, members of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce, and Chinese school teachers and pupils. Between 21 February and 4 March 1942, thousands of Chinese men were summoned to report at mass screening centres and those suspected of being anti-Japanese were never seen again.

My grandaunt was one of those arrested by the Japanese. I wonder what the Japanese officers thought when this tiny old lady appeared before them.

NOTES

- 1 郑良树 [Zheng Liang Shu] "新马华社早期的女子教育" ["Early Education for Girls in the New Malayan Society"], 马来西亚华人研究学刊 [Journal of Malaysian Chinese Studies], no. 1 (1997), 49. (From National Library, Singapore, Call no. RU 959.5004951 J MCS)
- 2 Hailing from Guangdong province, China, Wong Ah Fook came to Singapore in 1854 as a carpenter. He first established himself in the building business before venturing into agriculture, revenue farming and banking. He was responsible for the construction of a number of Johor's heritage buildings, including the Istana Besar, the royal palace of the Sultan of Johor. Jalan Wong Ah Fook in downtown Johor Bahru is named after him.
- 3 Zheng, "新马华社早期的女子教育" ["Early Education for Girls in the New Malayan Society"], 48.
- 4 The Boxers (so named because they practised Chinese martial arts, then known as Chinese boxing) were members of a secret society called the Yiqiquan (Society of Righteous and Harmonious Fists) that aimed to purge China of foreign influences and evict foreigners from China. In June 1900, Empress Dowager Cixi declared war on all foreign nations with diplomatic ties in China. An international force, the Eight-Nation Alliance, was formed comprising America, Austria-Hungary, Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Japan and Russia to quell the rebellion. Hostilities ended with the signing of the Boxer Protocol on 7 September 1901.
- 5 Immanuel C.Y. Hsü, *The Rise of Modern China*, 3rd ed (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1989), 410–11.

She was then 67 years old. We do not know how long she was detained for or what she was subjected to during incarceration. It must have been a traumatic experience because she died in 1942, after she was released.

Leaving a Legacy

I remember my grandfather's sister Saam Koo Por as a small woman who spoke very little at family gatherings. It has been an amazing journey finding out that she had accomplished so much in her life. Growing up in the 19th century when girls were generally seen and not heard, she was one of the few women who had the guts and gumption to challenge convention by venturing out and making a place for herself in the world. By founding a school for girls, she not only paved the way for female education but was also a trailblazer in showing how educated women could play a progressive role in society.

Grandaunt Wong Din Haan was a remarkable woman. Although she is remembered as a pioneer educator, she was much more than that. She came into prominence when the Chinese in Singapore needed direction in a time of stress arising from dire situations in China. While my grandaunt's fundraising efforts were laudable, what is far more important is that the causes she dedicated herself to revealed her vision and leadership and gained her recognition as a respected leader of the Chinese community in Singapore.

Wong Din Haan, family name Wong Bee Ho. Courtesy of Paddy Chee.



However, my grandaunt had been so modest and retiring that even her grandchildren do not know of her achievements. This essay honours her memory by bringing her out of the shadows of the past. I hope that her legacy of dedication, courage and determination will live on and serve as an inspiration for future generations to come. ♦

I am grateful to Lim Guan Hock, former deputy director of the National Archives of Singapore, Bak Jia How and the late Professor Zheng Liang Shu for their assistance in writing this essay.

14 "佛教訪問..." ["A Buddhist Interview..."], 南洋商報 [*Nanyang Siang Pau*], 22 April 1940, 7. (From NewspaperSG)

15 "總商會籌賑會婦女部召開第一次會議議決全部分為十二組並選出各組正副主任" ["Women's Wing of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce, at its First Meeting, Splits into 12 Committees and Appoints their Chairmen and Vice-Chairmen"], 南洋商報 [*Nanyang Siang Pau*], 22 February 1932, 6. (From NewspaperSG)

16 "捐款千元助賑之黃典嫻及梁鄧氏訪問記" ["Contributing a Thousand Dollars for Disaster Relief, An Interview with Wong Din Haan and Madam Leong Tang"], 南洋商報 [*Nanyang Siang Pau*], 31 August 1937, 7. (From NewspaperSG)

17 "Help for Victims in War Torn China," *Straits Times*, 12 September 1937, 4. (From NewspaperSG)

18 "星華婦女會昨選出各部職員黃典嫻被舉為正會長" ["Singapore Chinese Ladies Association Elected its Office-bearers Yesterday, Wong Din Haan Elected President"], 南洋商報 [*Nanyang Siang Pau*], 11 April 1939, 8. (From NewspaperSG)

19 "徐悲鴻籌畫展在商會繼續舉行今日起至二十六日止婦女會派員擔任招待" ["Xu Beihong's Charity Painting Exhibition for China Relief Fund Held at the Chinese Chamber of Commerce, Will Begin Today until March 26"], 南洋商報 [*Nanyang Siang Pau*], 18 March 1939, 7; "Chinese Women's Day Celebration," *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 9 March 1940, 5. (From NewspaperSG)

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TOWKAYS at HOME

Mandalay Villa. House of Jade. House of Teo Hoo Lye. **Yap Jo Lin** gives us a tour of three opulent homes from the early 20th century.

The role of an archivist at the National Archives of Singapore (NAS) mainly involves taking care of the archives' valuable records. However, an equally important part of an archivist's job is to highlight and showcase to the public the interesting and varied records in the collections of the NAS. One of these collections is the Building Control Division (BCD) Collection, which consists of around 246,000 plans prepared between 1884 and 1969.

These plans were part of an effort by the government to ensure that buildings

erected in Singapore were structurally sound. Based on that collection, as well as other resources at the National Library and NAS, this photo essay showcases three homes and their owners: Mandalay Villa, which belonged to Lee Cheng Yan and his son Lee Choon Guan; House of Jade owned by Aw Boon Haw; and the House of Teo Hoo Lye at Dhoby Ghaut. All three homes were constructed in the first three decades of the 20th century.

These men were successful towkays (business owners) who had also made significant contributions to society. Some took up leadership roles, such as by serving on the Legislative Council (Lee Choon

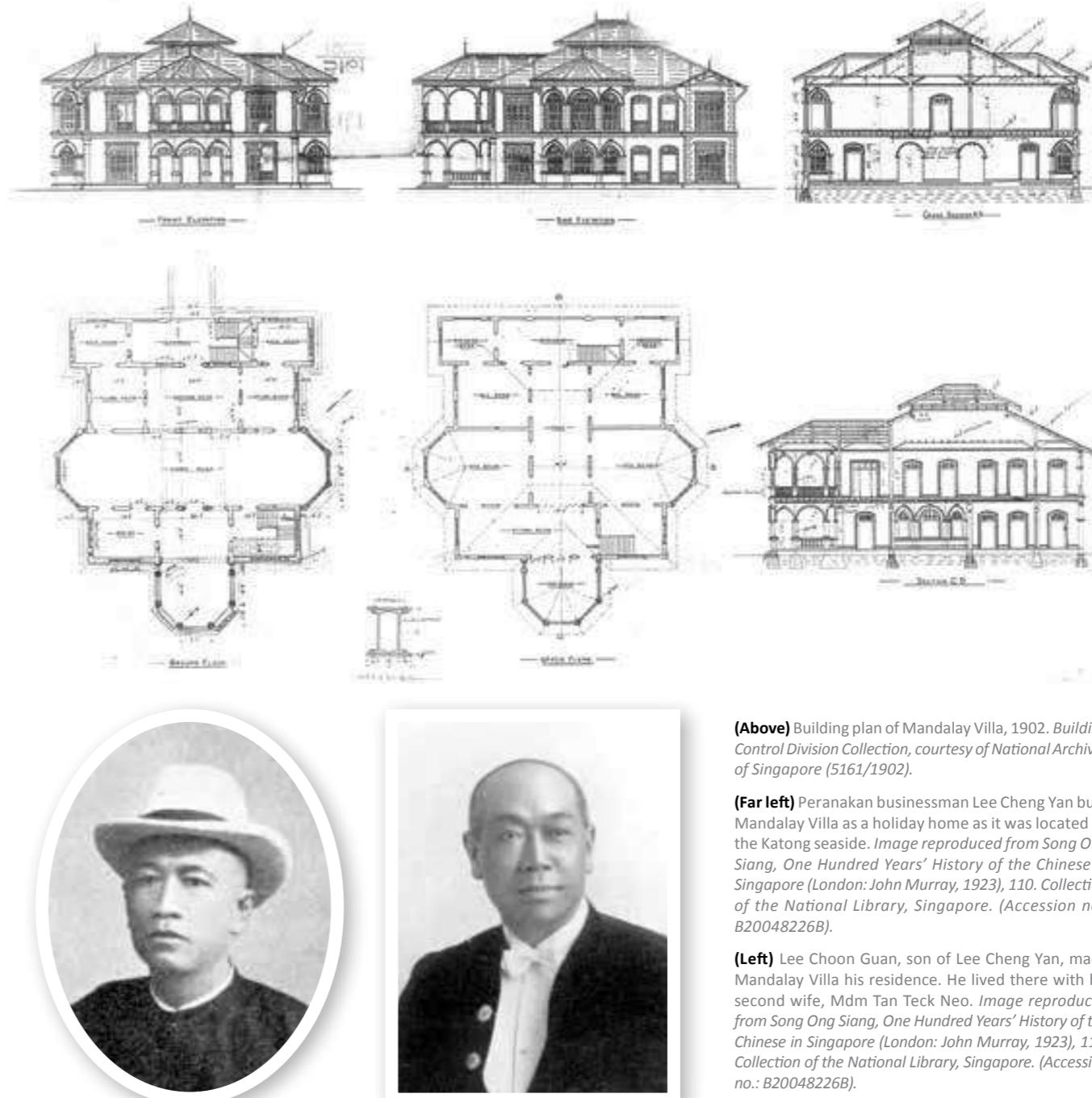
Guan), as a Justice of the Peace (Lee Cheng Yan), or on the committee of the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce (Teo Hoo Lye). They also supported various philanthropic causes: Aw Boon Haw, for example, was reported to have given away some \$10 million in his lifetime.¹

It wasn't just the men who were generous though. In 1918, Mrs Lee Choon Guan (née Tan Teck Neo) was awarded the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (also known as the MBE) for her contributions during World War I, which included helping the Red Cross look after wounded soldiers and civilians.² She is believed to be the first Chinese woman to have been conferred the award.

Mandalay Villa was built in 1902 as a holiday resort by prominent Peranakan businessman Lee Cheng Yan, 1968. *Lee Kip Lin Collection, PictureSG, National Library, Singapore*.



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



MANDALAY VILLA

In the days before land reclamation along Singapore's eastern coastline, Mandalay Villa at 29 Amber Road would have stood by the Katong seaside, roughly where the Amber Road roundabout junction with Marine Parade Road is today.³

Mandalay Villa (efforts to uncover the origins of the name were unsuccessful) was built by prominent Peranakan businessman Lee Cheng Yan as a holiday home. Lee was one of the Chinese businessmen who partnered Dutchman Theodore Cornelius Bogaardt in 1890

to form the Straits Steamship Company, which eventually became part of Keppel Corporation. Other tycoons who were part of Straits Steamship include Tan Jiak Kim and Tan Keong Saik.⁴

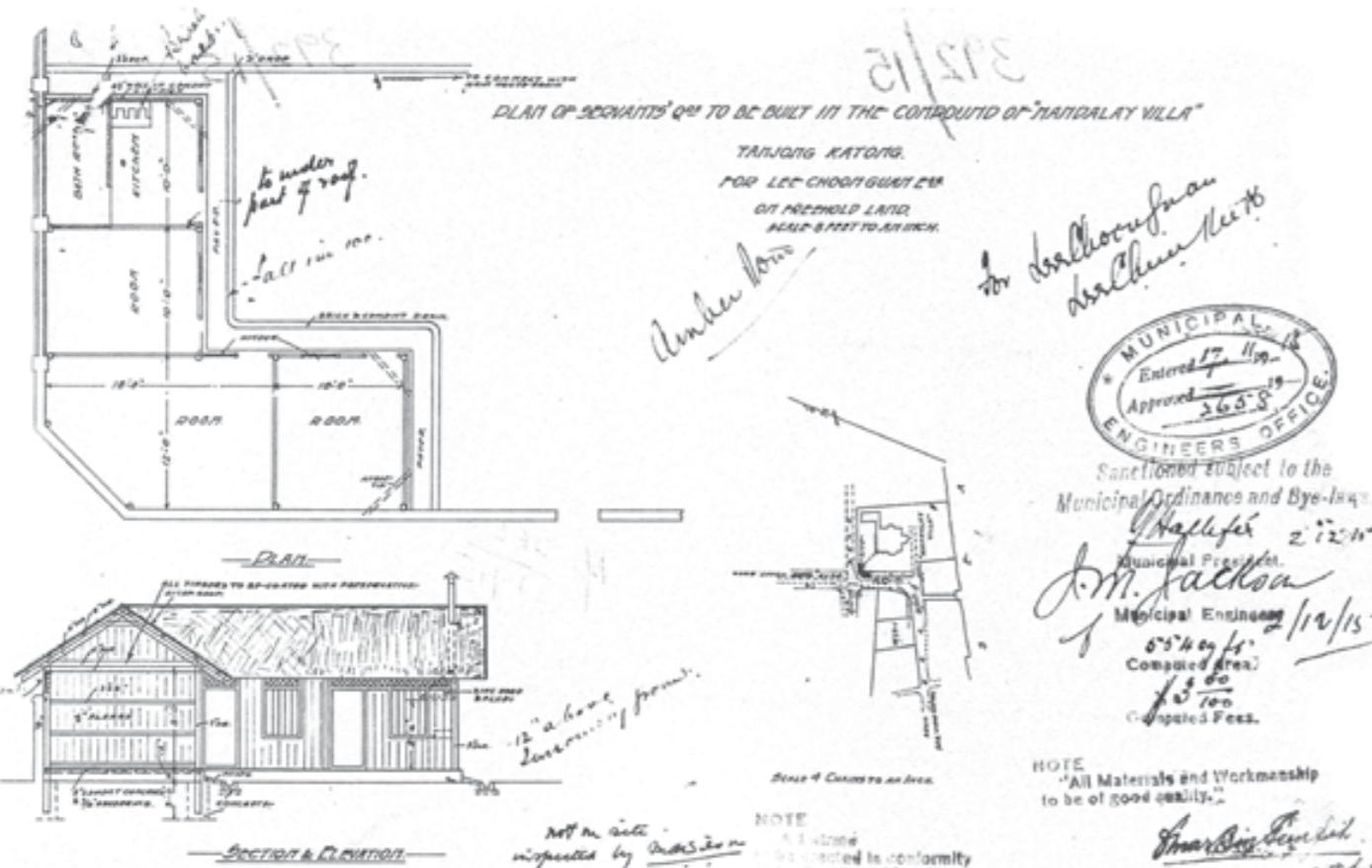
Lee's son and successor Lee Choon Guan made Mandalay Villa his residence. The latter lived there with his second wife, Tan Teck Neo, who was better known as Mrs Lee Choon Guan. She was the third daughter of Tan Keong Saik, after whom Keong Saik Road is named.

The two-storey Mandalay Villa was designed in 1902 by the architectural

firm Lermit & Westerhout. The entrance hall opened into a huge living-cum-dining room which stretched over the entire width of the house, or more than 21 m. The ground floor also had an office, which was bolted shut with horizontal iron bars every night, as it had three iron safes in it.⁵

The building plan from 1915 (see overleaf) depicts additional servants' quarters that were to be added to the Mandalay Villa compound and gives us a sense of the more modest buildings behind the "big house".

This plan includes a site plan of the property, which shows the front, semi-



(Above) Plan of the servants' quarters to be built in the compound of Mandalay Villa, 1915. Building Control Division Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (2658/1915).

(Right) Mdm Tan Teck Neo (Mrs Lee Choon Guan; back row, second from left) with family members during her birthday celebration at Mandalay Villa, 1950s. Photo by Wong Ken Foo (K.F. Wong). Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

circular section of the house – where the verandah was – overlooking the sea. The verandah was an ideal place to enjoy the sea view, cool breeze and lapping waves.

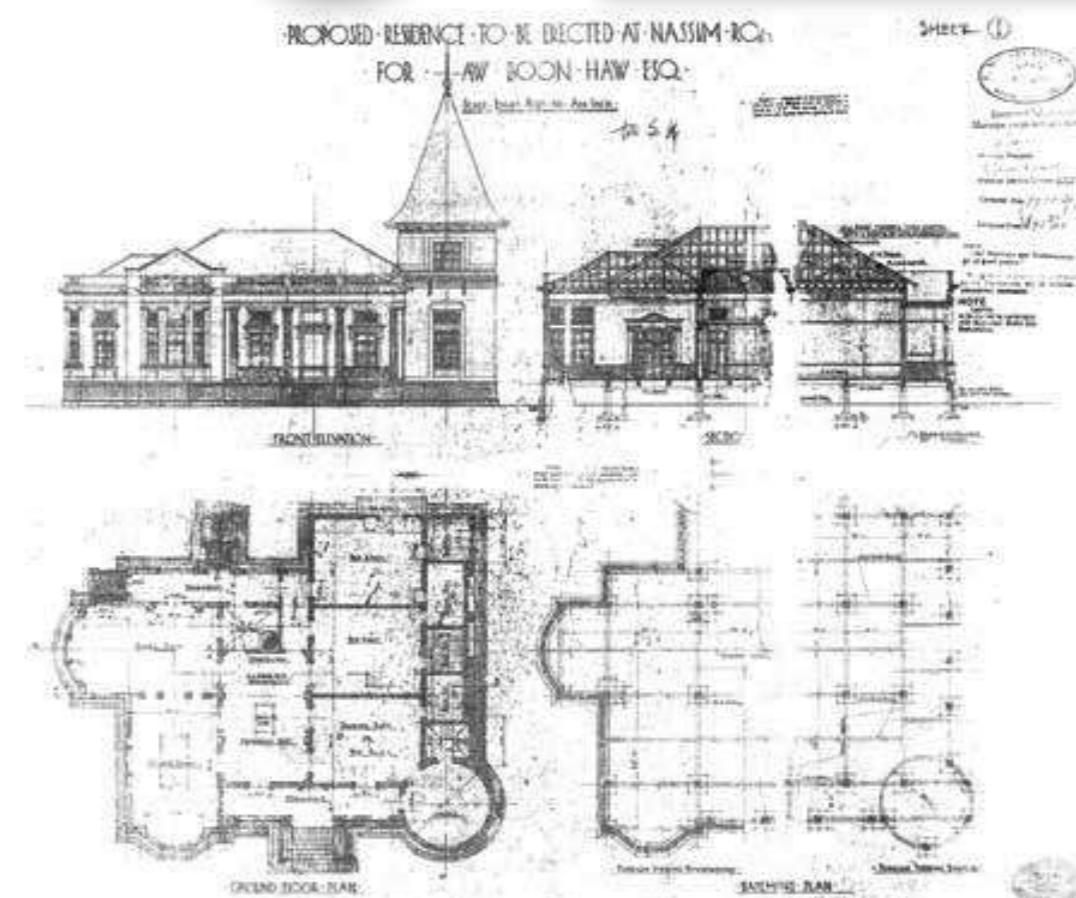
Not surprisingly, it became a prime spot for the family to relax and unwind. Mrs Lee would have her daily afternoon tea there at 4 pm and “sun downer” cocktails at 6 pm. Furnished with rattan armchairs and long garden benches to comfortably accommodate 14 people, the verandah was also used for entertaining the many guests and visitors calling on the Lee family.⁶

Mrs Lee was known for hosting many glamorous social events at Mandalay Villa, the most important of which were held on her birthday on 18 December. The who's who of Singapore society would be invited to a lavish party, both Europeans

and Asians, and the fishermen of Kampong Amber would hold a parade in Mrs Lee's honour. This was their way of thanking the family for letting them live in the kampong almost rent-free.⁷

Giving us a sense of the guest list and the scale of such parties, a *Straits Times* article in 1931 reported that at Mrs Lee's birthday dinner that year, the Sultan of Johor proposed a toast to Mrs Lee's health and the Chief Justice replied on her behalf.⁸ There were more than 400 guests, who were entertained by *ronggeng* (Malay folk dance), *wayang* (Chinese opera) and fireworks.⁹ Mrs Lee's grandson Herbie Lim recalled that during such parties at the house, talcum powder was often spread on the tiled floor to make it more slippery and suitable for after-meal dancing.¹⁰

Mr Lee Choon Guan died in 1924, at the age of 56. Mrs Lee, however, outlived her husband by 50 years, and died in 1974 at the ripe old age of 101. She resided in Mandalay Villa until her death. We are unable to ascertain when Mandalay Villa was demolished though.



HOUSE OF JADE

The House of Jade at 2 Nassim Road was built by “Tiger Balm King” Aw Boon Haw, founder of the Tiger Balm brand of medicinal ointments. This was one of those rare houses with its full name prominently displayed on the facade: “Tiger Oil House of Jade”. A tiger's head adorned the facade beside the letterings and tiger statues guarded the front entrance to the house, on either side of the front steps.

In planning the house, Aw was adamant that it “must be modern yet traditional”, dignified in appearance and be painted white. It was referred to as the

“White House” by employees, while family members called it the “Big House”.¹¹ The four Ionic columns at the entrance bear some resemblance to the north entrance of the White House in Washington, D.C.

According to Aw Swan, a son of Aw Boon Haw, the family had initially lived in another house next to the plot of land on which the House of Jade was later constructed. There was a nearby dhoby (laundry) shop that the family sent their washing to, and this dhoby used the vacant plot to dry clothes. One day, however, Aw Boon Haw found out that the dhoby was charging him a higher price than his other

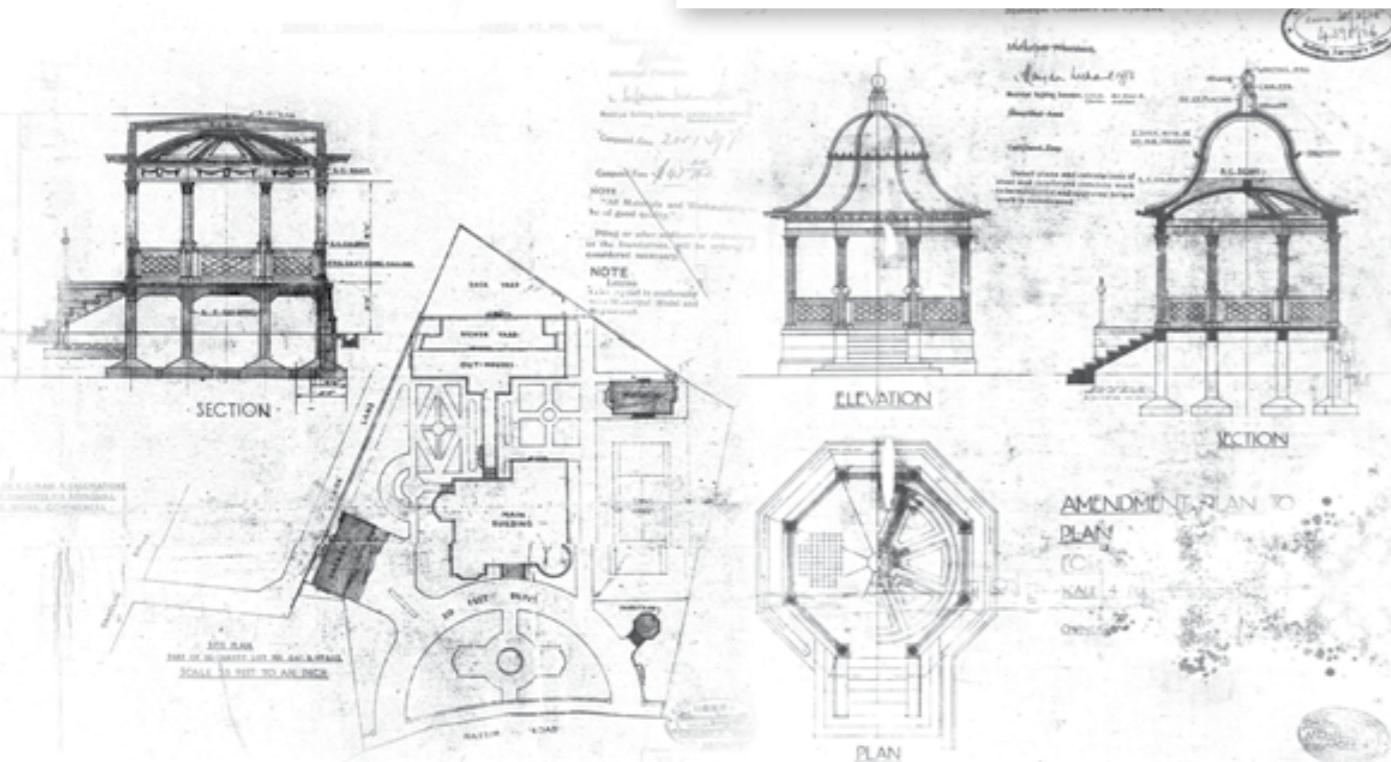
customers. Although the sum of money was small, just a few more cents, Aw was angered by the principle of the matter.¹²

According to Aw Swan, his father “dismissed the man without another word and then muttered something about teaching a crook a lesson he would never forget”. Aw Boon Haw bought the plot of land, fenced it off and decided to build his new residence on the land, thereby depriving the dhoby of space to dry his laundry.¹³

The House of Jade was designed in 1926 by the architectural firm Chung & Wong, whose stamp is seen on the bottom right of the building plan. All the

(Right) Mrs Hiroko Sato, wife of then Japanese Prime Minister Eisaku Sato, viewing the jade display at the House of Jade, 1967. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

(Below) Site plan of House of Jade, 1927 (left) and amended plan of a pavilion, 1928 (right). Building Control Division Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (439B-1/1926; 439F/1926).



main rooms of the house were located on the ground floor, although the house also had an attic, a basement as well as an impressive tower.

The building was situated within extensive and well-planned-out grounds. There was even an outdoor pavilion erected on the compound. It would have been useful for musical performances.

One of the occasions for such musical performances was at the housewarming that Aw held in September 1928 upon the completion of his new residence. Aw held three housewarming parties to accommodate all his friends. The *Malaya Tribune* reported that the Merrilads, a Peranakan performing arts group, performed at one of the parties, and their performance was

enjoyed by both the party guests and hundreds of spectators gathered outside the house.¹⁴

As its name suggests, the House of Jade was especially famous for its collection of jade and other carved minerals. Aw was an ardent collector of jade and jadeite carvings, and had a nose for sniffing out good deals and investments.

By 1936, his jade exhibits had grown to become the biggest private collection in the world. Foreign dignitaries and visitors from around the world viewed the collection while visiting Singapore. They included Queen Ratna of Nepal; Princess Anne of the United Kingdom; President Varahagiri Venkata Giri of India and his wife; the Governor-General of Trinidad

and Tobago, Sir Solomon Hochoy, and his wife; and Mrs Hiroko Sato, wife of Japanese Prime Minister Eisaku Sato.

The collection was not just open to visiting dignitaries but to the public as well. After Aw's death in 1954, the collection remained open for public viewing until the family donated most of the items to the National Museum of Singapore in 1979. An exhibition of the Haw Par Jade Collection was opened at the museum's art gallery in January 1980, and items from the collection were again on display at the museum's 2010 exhibition, "Singapore 1960".¹⁵

House of Jade was demolished in 1990 and replaced by the Nassim Jade condominium.¹⁶



(Above) The House of Teo Hoo Lye at 13 Dobby Ghaut, c. 1917–21. The ground floor was occupied at one time by the Louis Molteni Confectionery. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

(Right) Businessman Teo Hoo Lye built his residence in Dobby Ghaut. Image reproduced from *Song Ong Siang, One Hundred Years' History of the Chinese in Singapore* (London: John Murray, 1923), 350. Collection of the National Library, Singapore. (Accession no.: B20048226B).



HOUSE OF TEO HOO LY

Designed by Swan & Maclarens, the house of Chinese businessman Teo Hoo Lye was located at the junction of Dobby Ghaut, Kirk Terrace and Bras Basah Road, where Cathay Building now stands.

Teo's life story is the quintessential tale of the immigrant from China who comes to Singapore with nothing, and makes a name for himself through sheer hard work and a shrewd business acumen. Teo was born in 1853 and arrived in Singa-

pore when he was 18. He first found work as a manual labourer, earning just \$2 a month, but later decided to venture into business.

Starting out with a modest grocery store on Rochor Road, Teo expanded his business until it eventually included trading in copra (dried coconut kernels), sago factories in Cebu and Sarawak, and a fleet of steamers for transporting commodities. At the time of his death on 16 November 1933, he was said to have more than 14 steamships in his fleet.

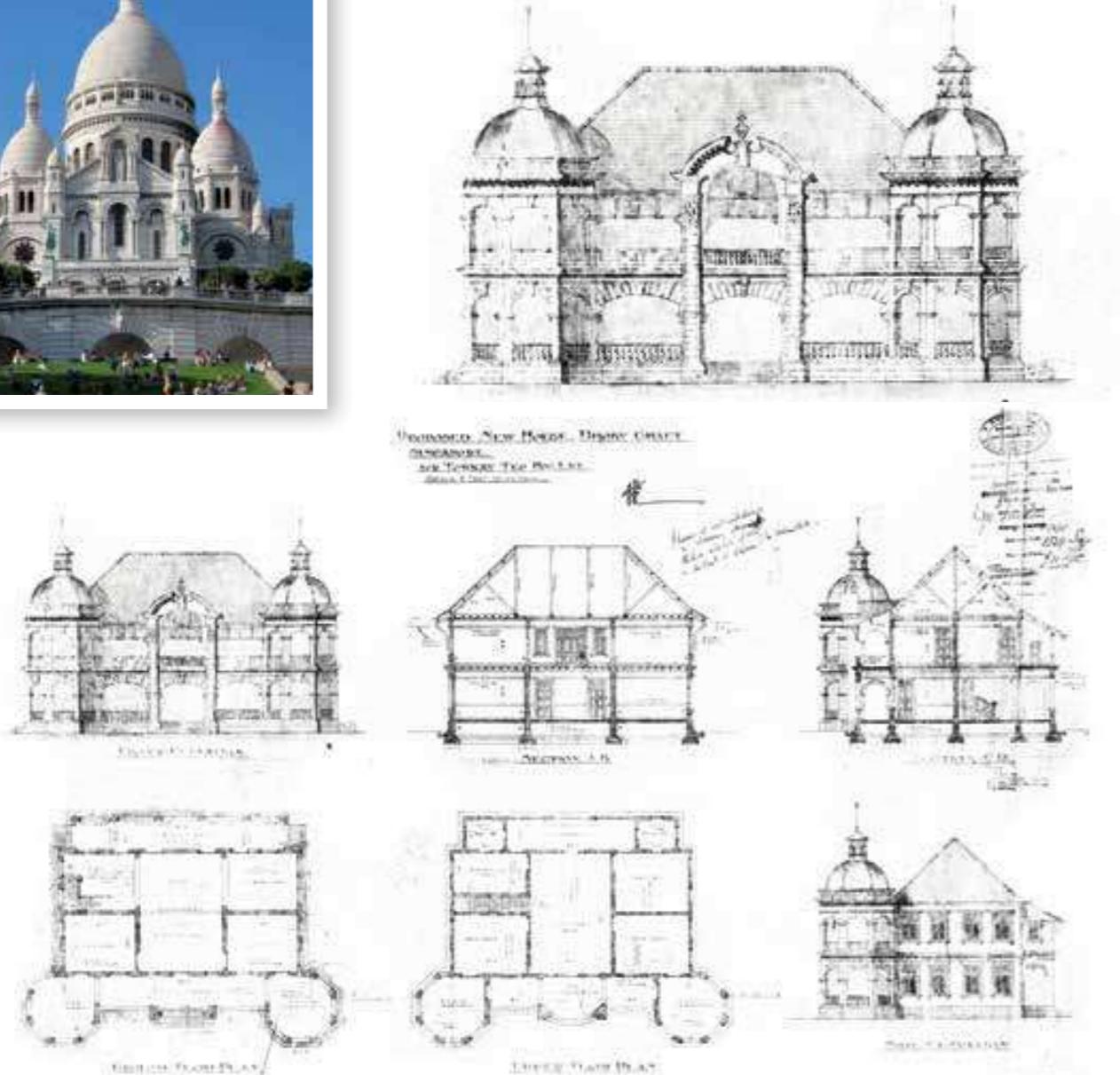
Teo was also one of the founders of the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Sze Hai Tong Bank. Despite his massive wealth, Teo was described in a *Malaya Tribune* obituary as a reserved man who led a "simple life and refrained wholeheartedly from entering into the realm of politics".¹⁷

The architectural historian Julian Davison has described Teo's house as being French-inspired, resembling the Basilique du Sacré-Coeur de Montmartre



(Left) South facade of the Basilique du Sacré-Cœur de Montmartre in Paris. Photo by Tonchino, 23 October 2011. Image retrieved from Wikimedia Commons (Attribution-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported [CC BY-SA 3.0]).

(Below) Building plan for the House of Teo Hoo Lye, 1913. Building Control Division Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (1253-4/1913).



(Sacred Heart Basilica of Montmartre) in Paris.¹⁸

Teo made many additions to his property over the years, which can be seen when comparing the original 1913 site plan with a later one in 1926.

Teo appears to have lived in the main house for the rest of his life, but the adjoining buildings had various occupants at different times, including the Louis Molteni Confectionery and Far Eastern Film Service Ltd.

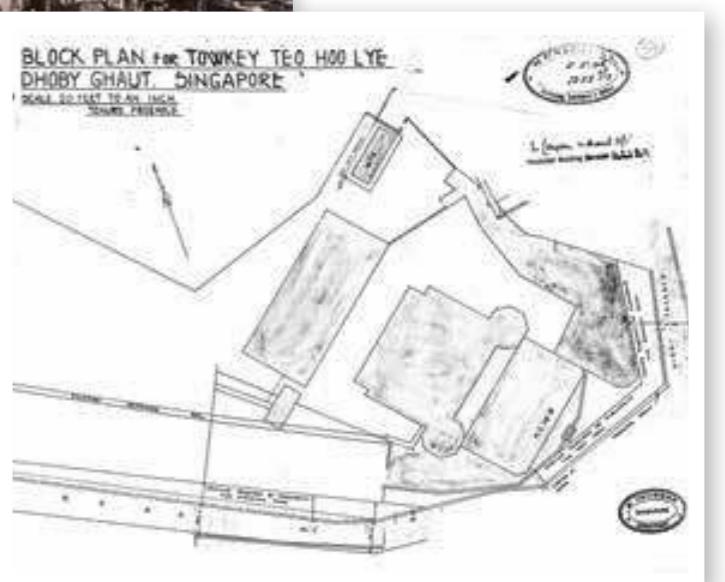
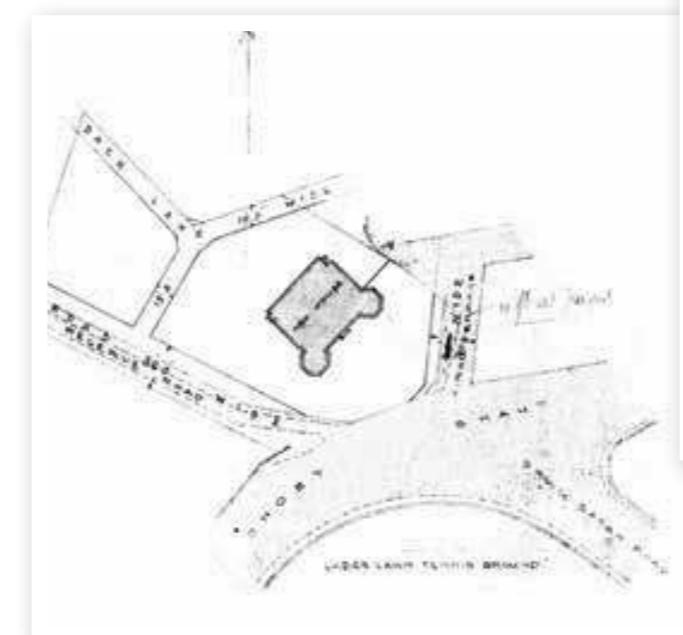
At various points, two schools were also located on the premises: Royal Eng-

lish School and Teo Hoo Lye Institution.¹⁹ Founded in 1928 with the motto "Disce aut Discede" (Latin for "Learn or Depart"), the latter grew from an initial enrolment of about 60 boys to nearly 600 a year later.²⁰ It was renamed Standard Institute after Teo's death in 1933.²¹

The House of Teo Hoo Lye was acquired by Mrs Loke Yew (née Lim Cheng Kim) in 1936. Demolition works started in 1937 for the construction of Cathay Building, which was completed in 1941. Mrs Loke Yew's son, Loke War Tho, had established Associated Theatres in 1935, the predecessor of Cathay Organisation. ♦



The House of Teo Hoo Lye at 13 Dobby Ghaut, c. 1920s. Far Eastern Film Service Ltd leased the front portion of the building during this time. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



Teo Hoo Lye expanded his property over the years as can be seen by comparing the site plan in 1913 (left) with the one in 1926 (right). Building Control Division Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (1253-3/1913; 1253V/1913).

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SITI RADHIAH'S COOKBOOKS

for the Modern Malay Woman

A number of cookbooks written in the 1940s and 1950s helped expand the traditional Malay culinary repertoire, as **Toffa Abdul Wahed** tells us.

The name Siti Radhiah Mohamed Saleh may not ring a bell to many, but she was one of the few female Malay cookbook authors whose works were produced and published in Singapore in the period between the end of World War II and independence in 1965.¹ All in all, she wrote four cookbooks:

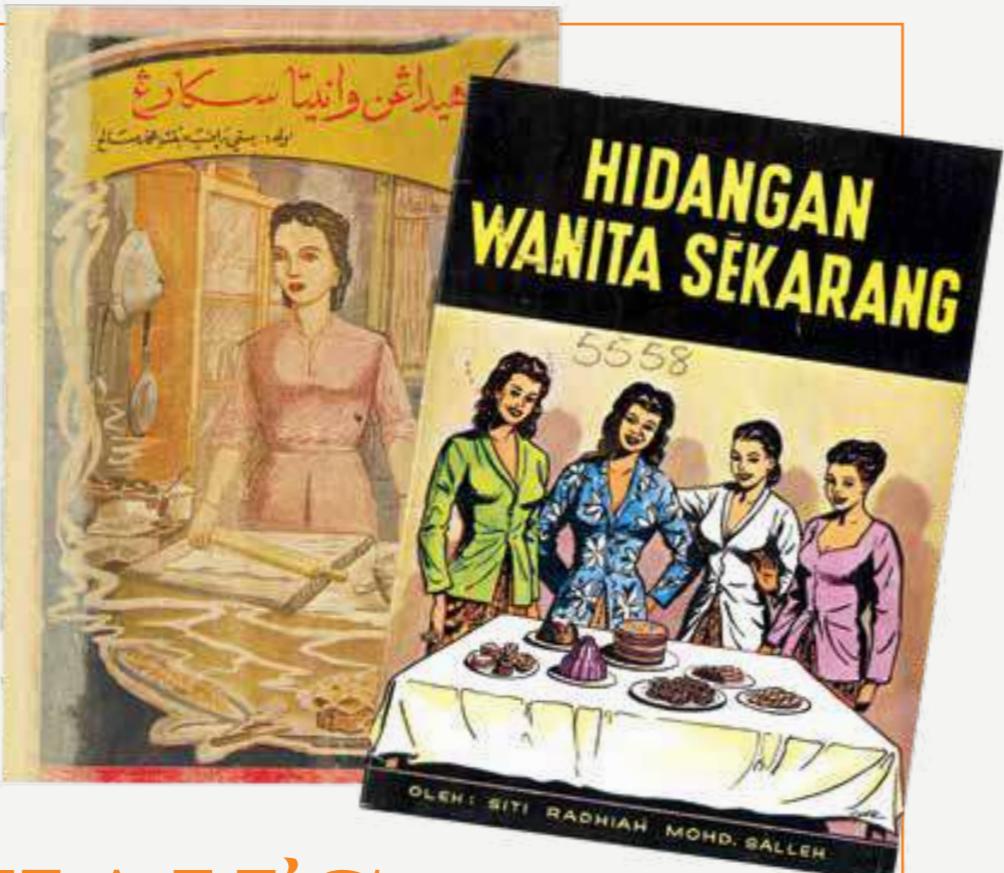
Hidangan Melayu (*Malay Dishes*; 1948), *Hidangan Wanita Sekarang* (*Dishes for Today's Women*; first printed in Jawi script in 1949 and reprinted three more times in Jawi before it was published in romanised Malay in 1961), *Memilih Selera* (*Choosing Tastes*; 1953) and *Hidangan Kuih Moden* (*Modern Kuih Dishes*; 1957).²

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These publications not only reflect Siti Radhiah's modern attitude towards food and her advocacy of women's education and progress, they were also a medium through which she could voice the importance of enlarging the scope of Malay literature so that it would serve the needs of women who were interested in domestic science.

Early Life

Siti Radhiah's cookbooks do not provide much biographical information about her, and we do not know the



year she was born. We can only surmise that she was likely born in Selangor. It is only in her second book, *Hidangan Wanita Sekarang*, that she was described as a graduate of Selangor Malay School, a former teacher of Kuang Malay School in Selangor and the wife of Harun Aminurashid who was also a writer.

Much of the information about Siti Radhiah in this essay has been gleaned from the biographies about her husband Harun Aminurashid – who gained a reputation over time as a renowned educator, writer, editor, publisher and political activist from Singapore – whom she married in the 1930s.³ Together, they had 15 children. Siti Radhiah was once a teacher. She likely chose this career because there were not many options available to Malay women at the time. Her father, Mohamed Saleh, was the principal of Serendah Malay School in Selangor.

In 1939, Siti Radhiah and her family moved to Brunei when Harun was transferred there as Superintendent of Education. He had in fact been banished there by the British colonial authorities for his nationalist teachings as a teacher at the Sultan Idris Training College in Tanjung Malim, Perak.⁴ While in Brunei, Siti Radhiah lost her fifth child, and gave birth to her sixth and seventh children.⁵

When the British returned upon Japan's surrender in 1945, Siti Radhiah's husband was imprisoned without trial by the British Military Administration, the interim administrator of British Malaya, for 86 days as he was accused of colluding with the Japanese.

During this time, Siti Radhiah and her children found refuge with the Kedayan, one of the indigenous peoples of Borneo. When her husband was later found not guilty, he was first offered a position as a member of the state executive council for Ulu Yam in Selangor, and then a teaching position in Singapore. He turned down both appointments as he had lost faith in the British colonial authorities and wanted nothing to do with them. In 1946, Siti Radhiah and her family moved to Singapore, where she

and her husband became involved in the writing and publishing industry.⁶

A Mission to Spread Knowledge

Encouraged by the success of her first cookbook, *Hidangan Melayu*, published in 1948, Siti Radhiah went on to write a second one in 1949.⁷ In the preface she wrote:

"Since my first book titled '*Hidangan Melayu*' was well received by my

female readers, here I attempt to arrange and write a cookbook of *kuih* to develop our library. For the contents of this book, I have compiled [recipes for] new styles of *kuih* that I have tried, which were taught to me by my friends who are experts at making *kuih*, and found to be nice. Since I feel that it would be good to share this knowledge, I have compiled [the recipes of]



(Above) Siti Radhiah and her family lived in Brunei between 1939 and 1946. Her husband, Harun Aminurashid, was transferred there by the British colonial authorities to take up the position of Superintendent of Education. Image reproduced from Abdullah Hussain, *Harun Aminurashid: Pembangkit Semangat Kebangsaan* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 2006), 272. (From National Library, Singapore, Call no. Malay R 899.283 ABD).

(Facing page left) Siti Radhiah's second cookbook, *Hidangan Wanita Sekarang* (*Dishes for Today's Women*), was first published in Jawi script in 1949. Image reproduced from Siti Radhiah Mohamed Saleh, *Hidangan Wanita Sekarang: Kuih-kuih Zaman Sekarang Untuk Hidangan Pada Ketika Minum Teh Petang Atau Pada Ketika Hari-hari Keramaian Atau Hari Besar* (Singapore: Royal Press, 1949). (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RCLOS 641.5 RAD).

(Facing page right) In 1961, Siti Radhiah's second cookbook, *Hidangan Wanita Sekarang*, was published in romanised Malay. Image reproduced from Siti Radhiah Mohamed Saleh, *Hidangan Wanita Sekarang* (Singapore: Royal Press, 1961). (From National Library, Singapore, via PublicationSG).

as many as 50 kinds of *kuih* for my sisters who would love to try them too... Hopefully, [this cookbook] will become a bit of a service to my *bangsa* [nation], particularly to the women."⁸

Siti Radhiah regarded cookery as an important body of knowledge that needed to be documented and disseminated. Attuned to the culinary trends of the period, she compiled recipes that were in vogue in the Malay world at the time. In the process of writing her cookbooks, she employed the same method of gathering information: by learning from women who were good cooks and knowledgeable about cookery, and trying out and testing their recipes.

For her third cookbook, *Memilih Selera*, published in 1953, Siti Radhiah obtained several of its 53 recipes from various Indonesian women. These women were most probably her friends.⁹

In 1957, Siti Radhiah's fourth cookbook, *Hidangan Kuih Moden*, was published by Geliga Limited.¹⁰ It was the first instalment in the publishing company's Women's Series. By then, Siti Radhiah had graduated from a cookery course taught by a "Miss Asmah". It is likely that she incorporated what she had learnt from Miss Asmah into this cookbook, which features modern recipes accompanied by photographs of cakes and tarts taken by her instructor.¹¹

Being able to compile recipes from various culinary traditions suggests that Siti Radhiah belonged to a cosmopolitan community of like-minded women who were eager to share their culinary knowledge and uplift each other. Between September 1955 and September 1958, only 20 percent of the market for Malay books came from Singapore, compared to 75 percent from the Federation of Malaya, and the remaining 5 percent from Sarawak, Brunei and British North Borneo.¹² Hence, Siti Radhiah's cookbooks contributed to the corpus of works on domestic science and enabled knowledge about cookery to be shared publicly and to a wider audience, including those residing beyond the shores of Singapore.

Siti Radhiah saw her work of compiling recipes and writing cookbooks as a community service to the Malays, especially women, and the development of Malay literature and libraries as well as the preservation of Malay heritage. In the preface of her second cookbook,

she used the term *bangsa* which refers to the Malay nation. Her contributions to the nationalist struggle against colonialism were aimed at elevating the position of Malay women by imparting valuable life skills, particularly modern methods of preparing food, through her writing.

Siti Radhiah further articulated this point in *Memilih Selera*, her third cookbook: "By having all kinds of information for mothers or for women published, it is one way to guide our women towards progress."¹³ She also expressed concern over the dearth of books catered to Malay women, especially those written by Malay women, and exhorted other Malay women to share their knowledge by writing *buku panduan* (guidebooks or manuals) on various topics such as managing the household, taking care of the family, health, sewing, fashion and applying makeup.

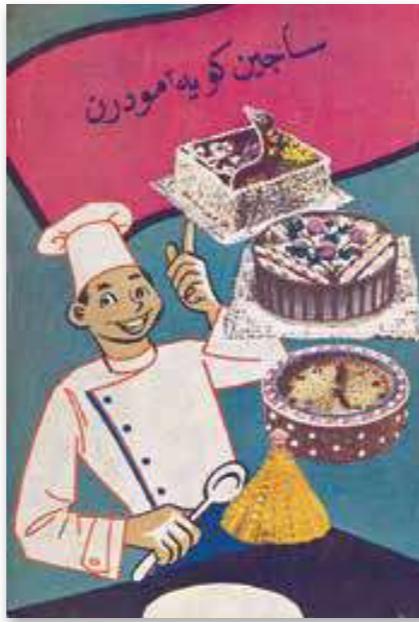
In the early to mid-20th century, writing books was considered the domain of men, and there were very few female writers (regardless of race or ethnicity) in Singapore and Malaya. Between 1921 and 1949, female authors made up only 3.4 percent of the total number of Malay-language book authors in Singapore and Malaya.¹⁴ Cookery books, for instance, constituted a mere 4.8 percent of Malay non-fiction literature, which includes social science, history and politics, science and technology, and arts and culture within the same period.¹⁵ The first novel by a woman, *Cinta Budiman* (*Sensible Love*), by Rafiah Yusof, was published in Johor Bahru in 1941.¹⁶

In the publisher's note in *Memilih Selera*, the publisher HARMY echoed Siti Radhiah's sentiments about the need for more books targeted at Malay women: "A genre that is lacking in our literature is books on *pengetahuan rumah tangga* [domestic science] especially those related to the cookery or cuisine of our *bangsa*... Hopefully more books about cookery or domestic science will be published after [this cookbook] by Miss Siti Radhiah binti Mohamed Saleh."¹⁷

It is possible that her husband Harun Aminurrashid, who founded HARMY with Raja Mohamed Yusof, the owner of Al-Ahmadiah Press, could have written the note.

In 1953, the same year that *Memilih Selera* was published, HARMY began producing *Fesyen* (*Fashion*), the first Malay weekly fashion magazine in Malaya, which became another avenue

Siti Radhiah's fourth cookbook, *Hidangan Kuih Moden* (*Modern Kuih Dishes*), was published in 1957. The cover of the cookbook reads *Sajian Kuih2 Moden* whereas its title page says *Hidangan Kuih Moden*. The different titles on the cover and title page might have been a printing error. Image reproduced from Siti Radhiah Mohamed Saleh, *Hidangan Kuih Moden* (Singapore: Geliga, 1957). (From National Library, Singapore, via PublicationSG).



for Malay women to share and learn recipes through its recipe column, *Dapur Fesyen* (*Fashion's Kitchen*).

It is highly likely that Siti Radhiah was encouraged by her husband Harun Aminurrashid to write because not only was he a prolific writer himself, he was also a keen supporter of women's writings. He had earlier founded two magazines in 1946, *Hiboran* (*Entertainment*) and *Mutiara* (*Pearl*), which published most women's writings in Malaya in the late 1940s and 1950s.¹⁸ Moreover, like Siti Radhiah's cookbooks, Harun's works also touch on women's issues. For instance, his first novel, *Melur Kuala Lumpur* (*Jasmine of Kuala Lumpur*), published in 1930 broached the topic of female emancipation.¹⁹

While acknowledging that women should be educated, an article by Rahmah Daud in 1956 published in a special issue celebrating 10 years of *Hiboran*, edited by Harun, mentions that women's struggle (*perjuangan*) for the nation began at home, and that they must fulfill their domestic responsibilities as wives, mothers and daughters first before venturing out to work in education, politics and other fields.²⁰ According to a *Fesyen* article in 1954, women's role had expanded after World War II

from being the *ratu dapur* ("queen of the kitchen") to the *ratu rumah tangga* ("queen of the household"), signifying that they were expected to be knowledgeable about and responsible for various household matters.²¹

A Taste for Modern Kuih

Siti Radhiah's second book, *Hidangan Wanita Sekarang*, and fourth book, *Hidangan Kuih Moden*, feature the recipes for a smorgasbord of delicacies which she referred to as *kuih cara baru* ("new-fashioned kuih"), *kuih zaman sekarang* ("kuih of this time and age") and *kuih moden* ("modern kuih"). She explained that many of the 50 recipes in *Hidangan Wanita Sekarang* closely followed the recipes and cooking techniques of Western cuisine.

Siti Radhiah saw how modern Western recipes – of assorted cakes, tarts, biscuits and puddings – could be adapted to fit into the traditional Malay culinary repertoire. She therefore encouraged her readers to increase the variety of *kuih* served in Malay homes especially during Hari Raya and other festive occasions. To Siti Radhiah, the modern Malay woman was not one who rejected *kuih cara lama* ("old-fashioned kuih"), but one who was not afraid to embrace new cooking styles so as to further develop her culinary know-how and expand her recipe collection.

In *Hidangan Kuih Moden*, the publisher Geliga remarked that Malay women were beginning to develop an appetite for new cooking methods. This cookbook, with its 65 recipes for "modern kuih", appears to have been published in response to that growing interest amidst increasing acceptance of female education among Malay parents and exposure to domestic science as a subject.

Malay girls in vernacular schools began learning domestic science in Standard IV when they were around 10 years old. Inspector of Schools R.A. Goodchild commented in 1949 that enrolment at Malay girls' schools in Singapore had risen steeply after the war, and since many Malay girls got married at 16 or 17 years old, infant hygiene, cooking and sewing formed an important part of their education. In 1949, the *Straits Times* reported: "Rochore Girls' School, with only 40 students before the war, now has 140. The Kampong Glam Malay Girls School, with 400 pupils, has two school sessions each day to cope with the demand. Nine hundred Malay girls attended

school in 1941. There are 3,000 today."²² Lessons in domestic science would equip Malay girls with the skills for their future roles as wives, mothers and educators to their children.²³

The postwar period also witnessed the birth of several women's organisations, such as the Kaum Ibu (Women's Section) of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and the Women's Institute, which sought to improve the lives of Malay women – especially those living in rural areas who were uneducated – through literacy, sewing and cooking classes.²⁴

At the same time, there was an increase in the number of schools and courses offering diplomas in domestic science and related subjects.²⁵ Getting these qualifications enabled Malay women to become domestic science instructors in government schools, entrepreneurs who founded their own cookery schools as well as cookbook authors.²⁶

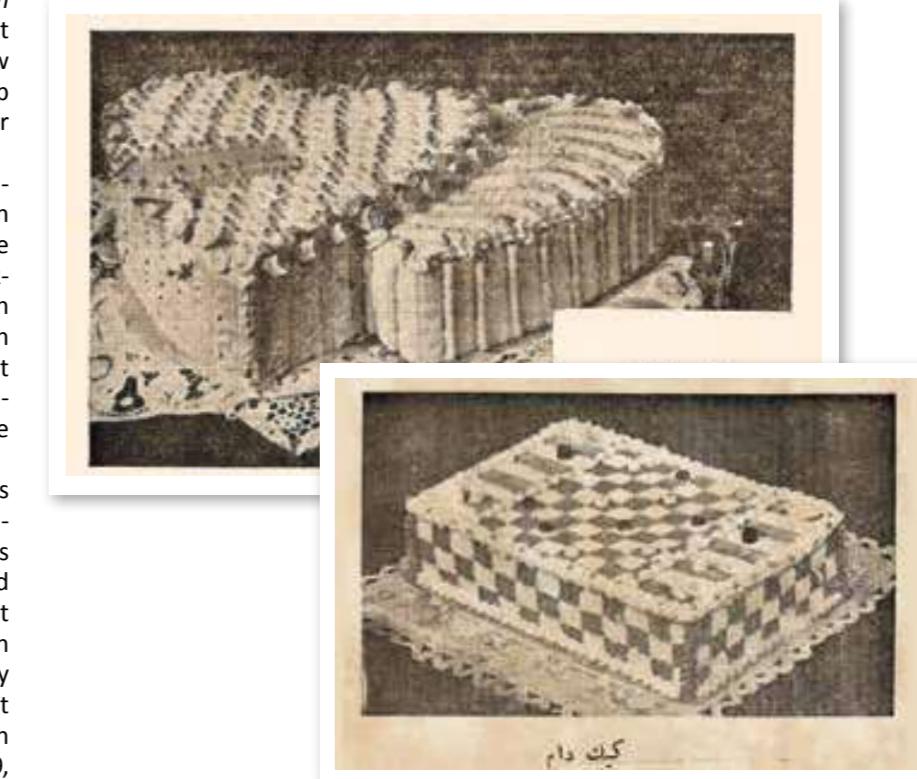
Despite having already written three cookbooks, Siti Radhiah enrolled in a cookery course to further deepen her culinary knowledge, incorporating what she had learnt from the course in her

fourth cookbook, *Hidangan Kuih Moden*.

As for *Hidangan Wanita Sekarang*, it included perennial favourites of modern Malay women at the time: marble cake, "roll cake" or Swiss roll with jam, oatmeal biscuit, *kuih lapis* (layer cake)²⁷ and *kuih semperit* (a butter cookie usually in the shape of a dahlia flower and is also known today as *biskut* or *kuih dahlia*). In addition, there are a handful of variations of *kuih lapis* in these books, including *lapis Betawi* and *lapis bumbu*.

Unlike *Hidangan Wanita Sekarang*, which features a number of traditional Malay *kuih* such as *dodol* (a sticky confection made from glutinous rice flour, coconut milk and palm sugar) and *wajik* (a diamond-shaped snack made with steamed glutinous rice and cooked in palm sugar and coconut milk), *Hidangan Kuih Moden* has no recipes for these. Instead, it consists entirely of Western-style recipes.²⁸ The book cover depicts a man in a chef's uniform and illustrations of Western cakes.

This cookbook contains, for instance, several recipes that are of Dutch origin or have Dutch influences. In addition to *kuih*



These are two of the cakes featured in *Hidangan Kuih Moden* (*Modern Kuih Dishes*). They are the Double Heart (top) and Kek Dam (Checkers Cake) (bottom). Images reproduced from Siti Radhiah Mohamed Saleh, *Hidangan Kuih Moden* (Singapore: Geliga, 1957), 30, 44. (From National Library, Singapore, via PublicationSG).

lapis, there are *kaasstengel*, a savoury cookie made with cheese, butter, wheat flour, egg yolks and baking powder, which is usually eaten during festive occasions in Indonesia today; and *speculaas*, a Dutch spiced cookie traditionally consumed just before or on Saint Nicholas Day.

Hidangan Kuih Moden also has many recipes for cakes with names such as "doll cake", "butterfly cake", "zig zag", "double heart" and "magic cake". An interesting recipe is for *Kek Hari Raya* (Hari Raya Cake), which is basically a butter cake with fondant poured and spread over it and then decorated with royal icing. But this has failed to become a Hari Raya staple.

Modern *kuih* was, however, not without its critics. In 1946, a *Comrade* correspondent using the pseudonym Orang Pelayaran (Sailor) lamented: "It is inevitable that in a cosmopolitan city like Singapore the Malays here have lost the art of making good old-fashioned Malay cakes and have taken to [W]estern cakes." Comparing the situation in Singapore with that in Malaya, he wrote: "But in the Union, the art is not lost, though taste[s] may have changed."²⁹

An Appetite for Culinary Diversity

Moving away from *kuih*, Siti Radhiah's third cookbook, *Memilih Selera*, contains 53 recipes for *lauk-pauk* (*lauk* refers to a dish that is eaten with rice; *lauk-pauk* means

an assortment of *lauk*). In the preface she wrote: "With the encouragement from my previous books, namely *Hidangan Melayu* and *Hidangan Wanita Sekarang* which have been celebrated by my Malay sisters, I have compiled a cookbook of *lauk-pauk* and I named it *Memilih Selera*. Hopefully, this book can be a companion to the sisters who would like to own it."³⁰

As mentioned earlier, several of these recipes were obtained from Indonesian women. Hailing from different parts of Indonesia such as Sumatra, Kalimantan and Java, these recipes make up a wide variety that include *sate* (*satay*, or grilled skewered meat), *otak-otak* (fish paste mixed with spices, wrapped in banana or coconut leaves and then grilled), *soto* (a soup comprising meat and vegetables), *gulai* and *opor* (both dishes are cooked in spices and coconut milk). Indonesian dishes with European influences such as *bistik* (beef steak), *kroket* (croquette) and *pastel* (a type of filled pastry like *empanada* and curry puff) are also featured.

Some of the dishes found in the cookbook, like *sate* and *tahu goreng* (fried tofu served with sweet and spicy sauce and ground peanuts), were already being sold by Javanese hawkers in Singapore before the 1950s.³¹ There were, however, a handful of dishes that might have been unfamiliar to some women living here and in Malaya such as *basngek* (*besngek*; grilled

Siti Radhiah's third cookbook, *Memilih Selera* (*Choosing Tastes*), was published in 1953. Image reproduced from Siti Radhiah Mohamed Saleh, *Memilih Selera* (Singapore: HARMY, 1953). (From National Library, Singapore, via PublicationSG).



chicken cooked in spices and coconut milk) and *gado-gado* (a salad of boiled and raw vegetables, hard-boiled eggs, *kerupuk* or deep-fried crackers, and fried tofu dressed in peanut sauce) for which she included the romanised spellings. A dish called *kari daging Brunei* (Brunei meat curry) is also featured in this cookbook.

NOTES

- 1 Her name has also been spelled "Radiah" and "Radziah", and her father's name has also been spelled "Saleh". For this essay, I have used the spelling "Radhiah" and "Saleh" from Siti Haida Harun's cookbook.
- 2 According to Christopher Tan, food writer and author of *The Way of Kueh* (2019), the word *kueh* or *kuih* refers to a diverse variety of sweet and savoury foods and snacks. *Kuih* is the formal spelling used in Malay today. I have used this spelling to replace all instances of *kueh* mentioned in the materials consulted for this essay, including Siti Radhiah's cookbooks. See Christopher Tan, *The Way of Kueh: Savouring & Saving Singapore's Heritage Desserts* (Singapore: National Heritage Board, 2019), 2. (From National Library, Singapore, Call no. RSING 641.595957 TAN)
- 3 Harun Aminurrashid, whose real name was Harun bin Muhamad Amin, was born in 1907 in Telok Kurau, Singapore. His other pen names include Har, Gustam Negara, Atma Jiwa and Si Ketut. Besides writing textbooks and novels, Harun was also the author of several publications, including *Warta Jenaka*, *Warta Ahad*, *Hiburan* and *Warta Malaya*. For a list of his works, see Abdul Ghani Hamid, *Sebuah Catatan Ringkas Harun, Seorang Penulis* (Singapore: Jawatankuasa Bulan Bahasa, 1994). (From National Library, Singapore, Call no. Malay RSING 899.2305 ABD)
- 4 Sundusia Rosdi, "Harun Aminurrashid," *BiblioAsia* 3, no. 2 (2007): 5. For more information about his time as a student and later a teacher at Sultan Idris Training College, see Abdullah Hussain, *Harun Aminurrashid: Pembangkit Semangat Kebangsaan* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 2006),

20–39. (From National Library, Singapore, Call no. Malay R 899.283 ABD)

5 Abdullah Hussain, *Harun Aminurrashid: Pembangkit Semangat Kebangsaan*, 32.

6 Sundusia Rosdi, "Harun Aminurrashid," 5–6.

7 NLB does not have a copy of *Hidangan Melayu*. It is available at Arkib Negara (National Archives of Malaysia). See Siti Radhiah Mohamed Saleh, *Hidangan Melayu*, Arkib Negara, <https://ofa.arkib.gov.my/ofa/group/asset/810802>. [Note: The cookbook is not listed in a catalogue compiled by Md. Sidin Ahmad Ishak for his dissertation. See Md. Sidin Ahmad Ishak, "Malay Book Publishing and Printing in Malaya and Singapore 1807–1949," vol. 2, PhD Diss. (University of Stirling, 1992), <http://hdl.handle.net/1893/31182>.]

8 Siti Radhiah Mohamed Saleh, *Hidangan Wanita Sekarang: Kuih-kuih Zaman Sekarang Untuk Hidangan Pada Ketika Minum Teh Petang Atau Pada Ketika Hari-hari Keramaian Atau Hari Besar* (Singapore: The Royal Press, 1949), 4–5. (From National Library, Singapore, Call no. Malay RCLOS 641.5 RAD). [Note: English translation by author.]

14 Before 1920, there were at least two female writers whose works were in the form of *syair* (traditional Malay poetry made up of four-line stanzas or quatrains). Three more female writers appeared on the scene in the 1920s, including Sophia Blackmore, a female missionary who wrote *Pelajaran Melayu* (*Malay Lesson*) in 1923. See Md. Sidin Ahmad Ishak, "Malay Book Publishing and Printing in Malaya and Singapore 1807–1949" vol. 1, PhD Diss. (University of Stirling, 1992), 132–33, 175–78.

10 Siti Radhiah Mohamed Saleh, *Hidangan Kuih Moden* (Singapore: Geliga, 1957). (From National Library, Singapore, via PublicationSG). [Note: The cover of this cookbook reads *Sajian Kuih2 Moden* whereas its title page says *Hidangan Kuih Moden*. The different titles on the cover and title page might have been a printing error. For this essay, I have taken the title that appears on the title page.]

11 Siti Radhiah Mohamed Saleh, *Hidangan Kuih Moden*, [n.p.]. Geliga Limited also published *Sajian Pilihan*

(*Selected Dishes*) as the second instalment of the Women's Series in the same year due to public demand. The publisher noted that the authors, Hamimah Mohamed and Rashimah Mohamed, had passed their cookery course at one of the cookery schools in Singapore. See Hamimah Mohamed and Rashimah Mohamed, *Sajian Pilihan* (Singapore: Geliga, 1957). (From National Library, Singapore, Call no. Malay RCLOS 640.2 HAM)

12 Kartini Saparudin, "Colonisation of Everyday Life" in the 1950s and 1960s: Towards the Malayan Dream," (Master's thesis, National University of Singapore, 2005), 16, <https://scholarbank.nus.edu.sg/handle/10635/15580>.

13 Siti Radhiah, *Memilih Selera*, [n.p.]. [Note: English translation by author.]

18 Alicia Izharuddin, "The New Malay Woman," 57.

19 NLB has the 1962 edition. See Harun Aminurrashid, *Melur Kuala Lumpur* (Singapore: Royal Press, 1962). (From National Library, Singapore, Call no. Malay RCLOS 899.2305 HAR).

20 Rahmah Daud, "Wanita Dengan Rumah Tangga," in *Hiboran 10 Tahun 1946–1956*, ed. Harun Aminurrashid (Singapore: Abdullah Ali, 1956), 81. (From National Library, Singapore, Call no. Malay RCLOS 059.9928 H)

21 "Soal Kuih-muih Melayu," *Fesyen* (4 July 1954): 4. (From National Library, Singapore, Call no. Malay RCLOS 391.005 F)

22 "Hygiene Among Malay Mothers," *Straits Times*, 11 January 1949, 5. (From NewspaperSG)

23 It was reported in 1949 that four English and two Malay schools in Singapore were training more than 1,000 girls between the ages of 11 and 16 in domestic science. See "Making School Girls Better Wives," *Singapore Free Press*, 28 March 1949, 5. (From NewspaperSG)

24 Lenore Manderson, "The Shaping of the Kaum Ibu (Women's Section) of the United Malays National Organisation," *Signs* 3, no. 1 (Autumn 1977): 210–28. (From JSTOR via NLB's eResources website)

25 Opened in 1947, Tenaga Murni on Onan Road was the first tailoring school for Malay women in Singapore. Recipes by its students were frequent features in

Back: *Gender, Identity and Nation in the Literatures of Brunei Darussalam, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia and the Philippines*, ed. Grace V.S. Chin and Kathrina Mohd Daud (Singapore: Springer, 2019), 57. (From National Library, Singapore, Call no. RSING 809.8959 SOU)

17 Siti Radhiah Mohamed Saleh, *Memilih Selera*, [n.p.]. [Note: English translation by author.]

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12 Kartini Saparudin, "Colonisation of Everyday Life" in the 1950s and 1960s: Towards the Malayan Dream," (Master's thesis, National University of Singapore, 2005), 16, <https://scholarbank.nus.edu.sg/handle/10635/15580>.

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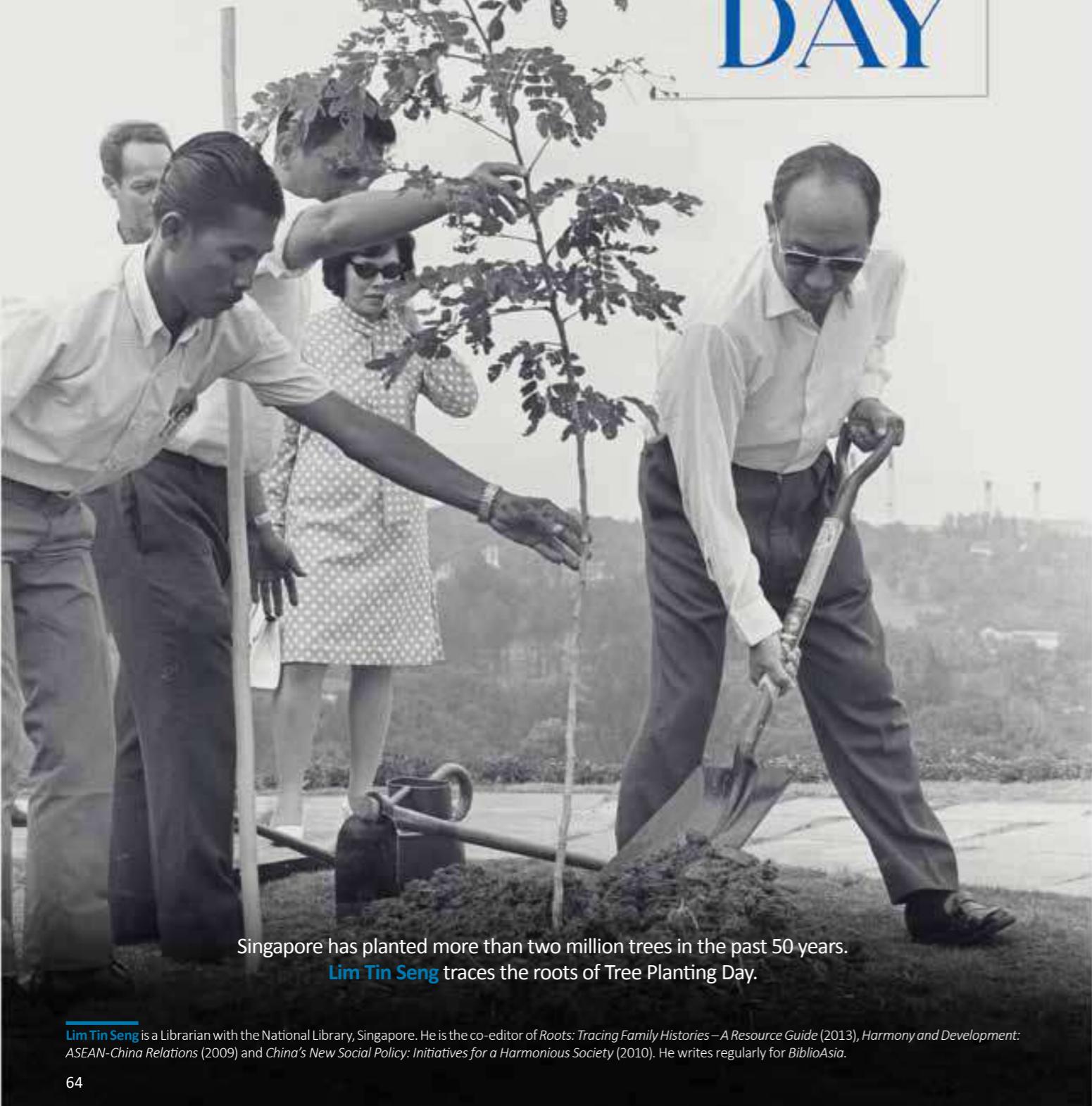
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The Blossoming of

TREE PLANTING DAY



When acting Prime Minister Goh Keng Swee planted a rain tree sapling on the summit of Mount Faber on a Sunday morning in 1971, there was little to suggest that it was a momentous occasion. The only people present were E.W. Barker, the Minister for Law and National Development, senior officials from the Ministry of National Development and Goh's wife.

As the *Straits Times* reported: "There was no fanfare, speeches, no long retinue of assemblymen and PAP [People's Action Party] party cadres as Dr Goh, in a long-sleeved blue shirt and gold-rimmed sunglasses, potted the sapling into its newly prepared bed." The event itself was very short. "Within five minutes of Dr Goh's arrival, the sapling, which is under a year old, was promptly embedded, watered, and was given its name tag on a black plaque." The report added that groups of tourists, schoolchildren and local sightseers walked past Goh, "totally unaware that history had been planted".¹

What was so special about that Sunday morning some 50 years ago? That day, 8 November 1971, marked the start of what has become an annual ritual in Singapore: Tree Planting Day.

Early Tree Planting Activities

Tree planting in Singapore did not, of course, start in 1971. The practice began in the 19th century and in the early days, it was carried out mainly by the Singapore Municipality and Singapore Botanic Gardens.

The municipality planted trees to either beautify parks and public spaces under its purview or to provide shade along roads such as Battery Road, Orchard Road, Connaught Drive and Jalan Besar. Commonly planted trees include the cotton tree (*Ceiba pentandra*), aangsana (*Pterocarpus indicus*), flame of the forest (*Delonix regia*) and rain tree (*Samanea saman*).

Trees were also planted in the Botanic Gardens for beautification or in its nurseries to support the municipality's tree planting efforts as well as to experiment with new commercial crops like the pará rubber tree. Between the 1880s and 90s, the Botanic Gardens also carried out a large-scale tree planting programme in an attempt to reforest tracts of land that had once been primary forest but had been cleared to make way for plantations.²

After World War II, the colonial government continued to hold many different tree planting activities. For instance, a tree planting campaign was launched in 1948 by the municipality to replant roadside

trees that had been cut down during the Japanese Occupation. In 1955, the Singapore Improvement Trust (SIT) introduced a programme for residents to develop "a greater interest in the well-being of the estate" through tree planting. In the same year, the municipality, now renamed the City Council, also began to plant more flowering trees, such as the red bead tree (*Adenanthera pavonina*), green ebony (*Jacaranda filicifolia*) and Madras thorn (*Pithecellobium dulce*), as roadside trees in an attempt to turn Singapore into a "Garden City of the future".³

The 1963 Tree Planting Campaign

When the People's Action Party government came into power in 1959, it continued the practice of tree planting. Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew believed that it was important for cities to have greenery. "I have always believed that a blighted urban jungle of

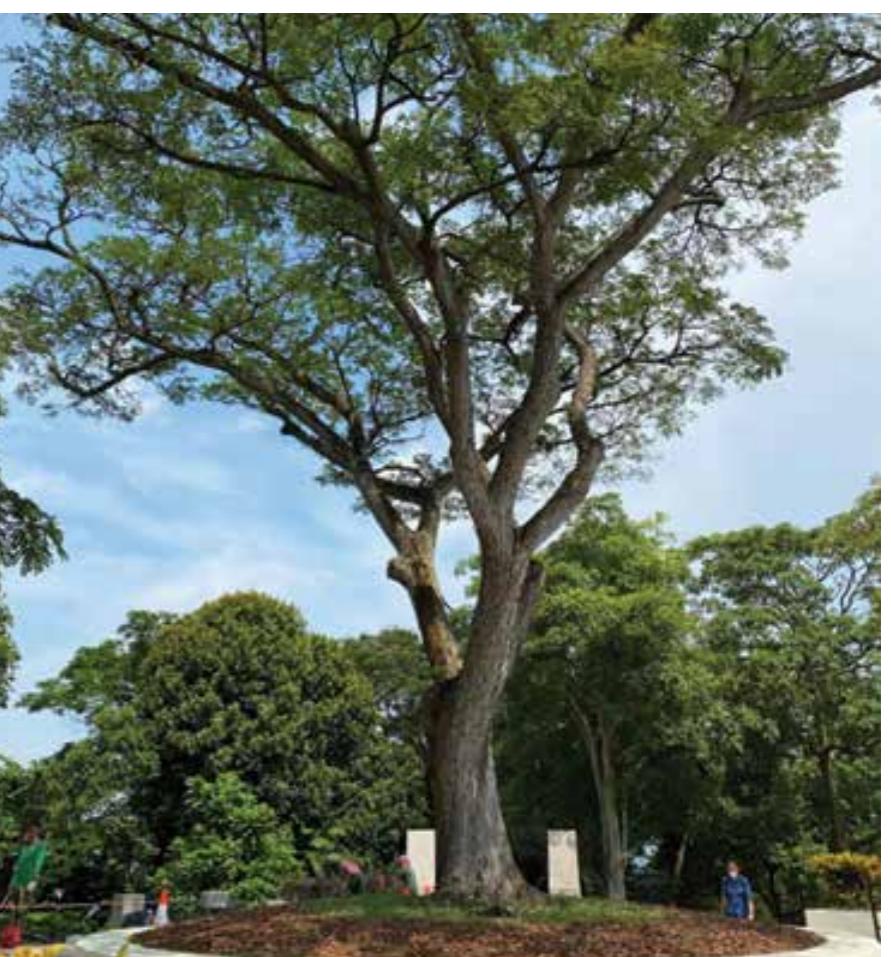
concrete destroys the human spirit. We need the greenery of nature to lift up our spirits," he said. "Even in the 1960s, when the Government had to grapple with grave problems of unemployment, lack of housing, health and education, I pushed for the planting of trees and shrubs."⁴

In 1963, Lee launched an island-wide tree planting campaign. He noted that such a campaign was needed because Singapore was "becoming barren of trees" and estimated that only one tree had been planted for every 10 that had been felled for building projects. According to a contemporary news report, Lee said that planting more trees "would not only increase the island's water supply – trees encourage cloud formation and retain moisture that would otherwise be lost – but would make Singapore a pleasanter [sic] place to live in".⁵

Lee set a target of planting 10,000 trees annually. Of these, half were to be

(Facing page) Acting Prime Minister Goh Keng Swee planting a rain tree on Mount Faber on 8 November 1971, Singapore's first annual Tree Planting Day. Source: *The Straits Times* © SPH Media Limited. Reprinted with permission.

(Below) This towering rain tree is said to have grown from the sapling planted by Acting Prime Minister Goh Keng Swee in 1971 at the start of Tree Planting Day. It stands in Faber Point, the highest point of Mount Faber. Courtesy of Jimmy Yap.





Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew planting a *mempat* tree sapling at Farrer Circus in 1963. The ceremony also signified the beginning of an island-wide tree planting campaign. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

planted by the government along roads, in housing estates and parks, and the rest by the public. To prevent vandalism in housing estates, Lee suggested that "young trees be guarded by barbed wire".⁶

However by April 1967, the government felt that more needed to be done as there was still "a lack of feeling of care for trees among the people" and "a lack of experts" within the government to provide advice on "how best to give scenic beauty to the city". On 11 May 1967, the Garden City campaign was announced.⁷

In its early phase, the Garden City campaign was implemented as an intensive tree planting programme. Marked by the planting of fast-growing shrubs and "instant trees", such as the *angsana*, *rain tree*, *sea apple* (*Eugenia grandis*) and curtain creeper (*Vernonia elliptica*), the aim was to produce results in the shortest possible time.

"Once we had greenery over the main parts of the island, we added dashes of colour with free-flowering trees such as the Yellow Flame, and the deep pink *Francoipani*," recalled Lee. "We planted colourful Bougainvillea on our overhead pedestrian bridges creating hanging gardens across our

roads." To get variety, he encouraged the Parks and Recreation Department to look for new species of trees and shrubs. "The results of this active search became visible in the 1980s, when swaths of colour began to appear along many of our major roads and in our HDB [Housing & Development Board] new towns," he said.⁸

The First Tree Planting Day

Four years after the Garden City vision was unveiled, Tree Planting Day was introduced. While the tree planting event on Mount Faber on 8 November 1971 may have been sparsely attended, it was one of many similar events held around Singapore. These involved students in schools, Singapore Armed Forces units in military camps, as well as cabinet ministers and members of Parliament in the parks and community centres of their constituencies. It was reported that about 8,400 trees and 21,677 shrubs and creepers were planted that day.⁹

As Minister for Social Affairs Othman Wok put it, the event was to "enhance the aesthetic sense of our younger generation and educate them to be more appreciative of natural beauty and understand the part

they have to play in looking after our city and caring for our trees and plants".¹⁰ After planting two purple millettia (*Callerya atropurpurea*) in Kampong Glam Community Centre, Foreign Minister S. Rajaratnam remarked that tree planting would not only "bring back the rural scene", but also improve the urban living conditions of the people. He remarked that "Singapore [would] be congenial for living, and [would] avoid the neurotic consequences of people living in concrete jungles".¹¹

As Lee had been travelling when Tree Planting Day was launched on 8 November, he was not able to take part on the day itself. Instead, he planted a yellow flame tree at Tanjong Pagar Community Centre on 12 December 1971 to mark the occasion.

At the event, he remarked that Tree Planting Day was "Singapore's most important day". "Every year, there will be a Tree Planting Day, just before the northeast monsoon begins," he said. "It would take years before we get the full results. Meanwhile, we must educate all our people – adults, youngsters and motorists parking cars – to nurture and care for trees and not to damage them. Then we shall have a green, cool and luxuriant Singapore."¹²

Tree Planting Day in the 1970s and 1980s

Tree Planting Day has been held every year since. It usually involves the entire community from cabinet members, members of Parliament and grassroot leaders to residents, students and the general public.¹³ In the 1970s, Lee led mass tree planting activities on newly reclaimed land such as East Coast Park and Marina South to kick off Tree Planting Day.¹⁴ Some of the trees planted during this period include tembusu (*Cyrtophyllum fragrans*), eugenia (*Syzygium myrtifolium*), tamarind (*Tamarindus indica*) and sea putat (*Barringtonia asiatica*).¹⁵

Fruit trees became the focus of Tree Planting Day in the 1980s. According to Lee, the plan was to start by planting sturdy fruit trees in all HDB estates before moving on to more delicate ones. "We can saturate our housing estates with enough of the hardy fruit trees that can withstand the initial vandalism and pilfering by children," he said. "Then, in the next stage, we can go for the better fruit trees, after higher social standards of behavior have been the norm."¹⁶ The hope was that gradually, Singapore would be able to nurture a generation with the social discipline to respect and share the fruits of communal property.

Some of the fruit trees planted at the time include popular ones like rambutan

(*Nephelium lappaceum*), coconut (*Cocos nucifera*), mangosteen (*Garcinia mangostana*), jambu ayer (*Syzygium aqueum*), mango (*Mangifera indica*) and jackfruit (*Artocarpus heterophyllus*), as well as lesser-known ones like jujube (*Ziziphus mauritiana*), langsat (*Lansium domesticum*), kedondong (*Canarium pilosum*), binjai (*Mangifera caesia*) and kundang (*Bouea macrophylla*). As Chua Sian Eng, Commissioner of Parks and Recreation Department (1983–95), noted: "The younger generation has probably never seen any of these fruits. It's a pity to let these trees, which thrived here for centuries, die out of our environment."¹⁷

Becoming Part of the Clean and Green Campaign

The Tree Planting Day held on 4 November 1990 was a milestone event. Not only did it mark the fulfilment of Lee's target of planting 100,000 trees, but it was also his last as prime minister.¹⁸ He planted two trees that day – a dwarf coconut tree at Spottiswoode Park in Tanjong Pagar and a *kuras* tree (*Dryobalanops oblongifolia*) at the Esplanade Park.

Tree Planting Day that year was also significant as it was incorporated into Clean and Green Week, known today as Clean and Green Singapore after it became a year-long event in 2007.

Clean and Green Week was launched by First Deputy Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong with the aim of turning Singapore into a cultivated and gracious society that not only had a clean and green lifestyle, but was also conscious about other environmental issues. Goh said that "[a] total approach to shape and change our attitude towards our environment is needed... Through diligent tree planting and keeping the country clean, the right habit can be conscientiously cultivated. When it becomes our second nature to keep our environment clean and green, it would also be in our nature to be considerate to others by maintaining the environment noise-free, stench-free and irritation-free".¹⁹

Goh used Tree Planting Day to convey messages about environmental protection and sustainability, as well as issues such as reducing pollution, recycling more and minimising waste. During his first decade as prime minister, Goh planted many different species of trees, including the *nyatoh puteh* (*Palaquium obovatum*), *pulai* (*Alstonia angustiloba*) and the Manila palm (*Adonidia merrillii*).

One of the most unique trees that Goh "planted" was the "commitment tree" at Marina City Park in 1992.²⁰ Made entirely of recycled materials like aluminum cans

and discarded cardboard and bottles, it had "leaves" that allowed people to pen their good intentions towards the environment. After unveiling the tree, Goh "pledge[d] to protect and improve the environment for the health and enjoyment of present and future generations of Singaporeans and guests".²¹ Incumbent Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong continues to observe the tradition of holding Tree Planting Day in November. Over the years, he has planted a variety of trees like the *sepetir* (*Sindora wallichii*), *api-api putih* (*Avicennia alba*), *jelutong* (*Dyera costulata*), *cemantung merah* (*Elaeocarpus mastersii*) and *Borneo kauri* (*Agathis borneensis*). These were planted all over the island, including the Central Catchment Nature Reserve, Punggol Reservoir, Punggol Waterway Park, Ang Mo Kio and Sengkang.²² Recent years have seen programmes such as live music performances and workshops on creating terrariums as part of the occasion.²³

Prime Minister Lee also uses the annual event to highlight important environmental issues such as climate change, energy conservation, waste reduction and recycling. Like Goh, Lee felt that for Singapore to progress into the next stage of greening, it would not only need to be green and clean, but also sustainable.²⁴

Such is the importance of Tree Planting Day that not even a global pandemic could stop it. In 2020, as Covid-19 was sweeping across the world, Lee planted a Buddhist pine (*Podocarpus macrophyllus*) bonsai tree on a rooftop garden in Hougang to observe that year's Tree Planting Day. Although the event was held without participation from the community due to social distancing measures, Lee wrote on his Facebook page that he would like all residents to "continue in our efforts to make Singapore a City in Nature".²⁵

For Tree Planting Day in 2021, Lee planted the same type of tree that his father and founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew did back in 1963, the *mempat* tree (*Cratoxylum formosum*), at Ang Mo Kio Avenue 3. Again, due to the pandemic, residents were unable to participate and the event was attended in person by only about 40 people. Said Lee on his Facebook, "It is our responsibility to nurture a more beautiful and sustainable Singapore for future generations. One of the many reasons why we hold Tree Planting Day every year!"²⁶

From Garden City to City in Nature

Over the years, the Garden City vision has morphed into something bigger, and has moved from just greening Singapore into a plan for sustainability.



Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew planting a *damar minyak* sapling at the Singapore Botanic Gardens in 1987. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

In 1992, the government released Singapore's first environmental protection and sustainability blueprint. Known as the Singapore Green Plan, it set out directions to turn Singapore into a model green and sustainable city that was conducive to gracious living, with controls to prevent the generation of pollution and waste. The plan sketched out nature conservation measures to protect the island's biodiversity and natural environment, and envisioned citizens who would care for the environment and an economy that supported the development of environmental technology.²⁷

This has been supplanted by the 2009 Sustainable Singapore Blueprint that aims to guide Singapore's sustainable development efforts until 2030. It presented several new initiatives such as turning Singapore into a "City in a Garden", introducing minimum energy and water efficiency standards for more household appliances, improving the standard and efficiency of public transpor-

tation, and creating a Centre for Liveable Cities for knowledge sharing.

Today, the latest sustainability blueprint is the Singapore Green Plan 2030 (Green Plan). Released in 2021, the 10-year plan charts the island's green targets with the aim of "strengthen[ing] Singapore's economic, climate and resource resilience, [and] improv[ing] the living environment of Singaporeans" by advancing the national agenda on sustainable development. Some of the targets set by the Green Plan include reducing the country's carbon emissions, increasing the use of renewable energy, creating new green jobs and building up the country's climate resistance. The vision was to turn Singapore into a "City in Nature".²⁸

One of the key initiatives is to plant one million trees across the island by 2030. Called the OneMillionTrees Movement, the heart of this ambitious effort is "the engagement and involvement of community".²⁹

Since the unveiling of the OneMillion-Trees Movement, about 100 individuals and more than 100 groups have pledged their support to plant more than 120,000 trees. Organisations and institutions have also shown similar support – for instance, Keppel Corporation pledged to plant 10,000 trees in parks and nature reserves over the next five years, while the National University of Singapore and Jurong Town Corporation pledged to plant over 80,000 trees on its campus and 30,000 trees on Jurong Island respectively.³⁰

Beyond planting more trees, the One-MillionTrees Movement is about, as Minister for National Development Desmond Lee said, nurturing "a whole new generation of Singaporeans to carry on [the] responsibility to keep planting and nurturing trees for the benefit of future Singaporeans".³¹ Some five decades after the initial Tree Planting Day event, it appears that the idea has well and truly taken root. ♦

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