

# bibliasia

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## A Labour OF Love

THE ORIGINS OF KUEH LAPIS

— p. 4 —

# PRESERVING THE SOUNDS OF SINGAPORE

The clacking of a typewriter, the beeping of a pager and the shrill ringing of an analogue telephone – have you heard these sounds before? Sounds can paint images in the mind and evoke shared memories.

**SoundscapeSG** is a crowdsourcing platform by the National Archives of Singapore that enables the community to contribute sounds from their daily lives and surroundings for historical preservation. It documents the sounds of today and integrates them into a sound map for archiving purposes, preserving this intangible form of sound heritage for future generations.



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## ISOUNDSCAPESG

PRESERVING THE SOUNDS OF SINGAPORE



## Director's Note

I think we can all agree that 2020 was a challenging year. Like many people, I'm looking forward to a much better year ahead.

And for those of us with a sweet tooth, what better way to start 2021 than to tuck into buttery rich *kueh lapis*? Christopher Tan's essay on the origins of this mouth-watering layered cake from Indonesia – made of eggs, butter, flour and spices – is a feast for the senses, and very timely too, given the upcoming Lunar New Year.

Still on the subject of eggs, you should read Yeo Kang Shua's examination of Madras *chunam*, the plaster made from, among other things, egg white and sugar. It is widely believed to have been used on the interior walls of St Andrew's Cathedral. Kang Shua sets the record straight.

Given the current predilection for toppling statues of contentious historical figures, poet and playwright Ng Yi-Sheng argues that Raffles has already been knocked off his pedestal – figuratively speaking that is.

From a familiar historical figure, we turn to a relatively unknown personality – Kunnuck Mistree, a former Indian convict who remade himself into a successful and respectable member of society. Vandana Aggarwal ferrets out the facts to uncover a fascinating story of redemption in 19th-century Singapore.

For a break from these heavy topics, check out our delightful photo essay on the children of the 1960s from the collection of the National Archives. And sadly, as Robinsons too fades into history, we shine a spotlight on some not-so-well-known aspects of its storied past.

Speaking of spotlights, one of my favourite essays in this issue is the one on the history of street lighting in Singapore. Timothy Pwee takes what might have been a dull subject and turns it into an illuminating (pun intended) read.

I'd also like to draw your attention to the essay that highlights the National Library's rich collection of rare paper-based artefacts. We have more than 19,000 items and our recent book, *Stories from the Stacks*, showcases a small selection of them, including a manual of football rules in Jawi, a colonial-era list of Tamil names, and a copy of a 15th-century Chinese map that mentions Temasek.

These are just a few of the interesting articles that await you in this issue. Make yourself a nice cuppa (perhaps with a slice of *kueh lapis*), sit back, and slowly savour these essays. We enjoyed putting this issue together and we hope you will equally enjoy reading it.

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Director  
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**On the cover**

*Kueh lapis legit* and its ingredients.

Illustration by Oxygen Studio Designs

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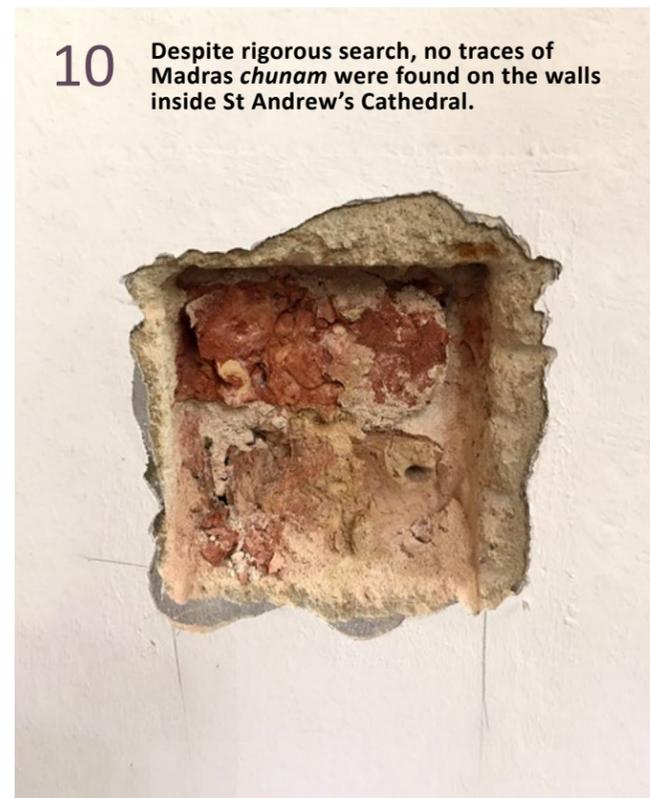
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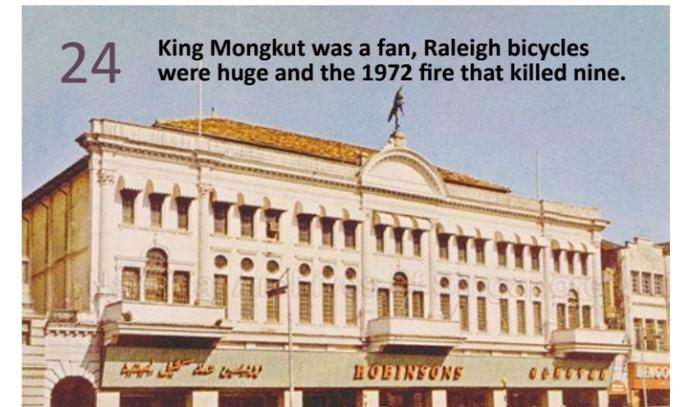
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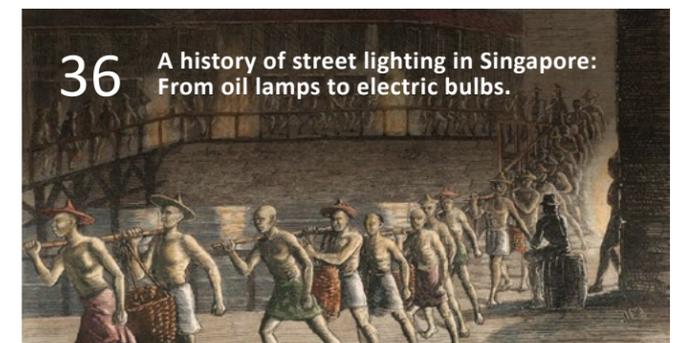
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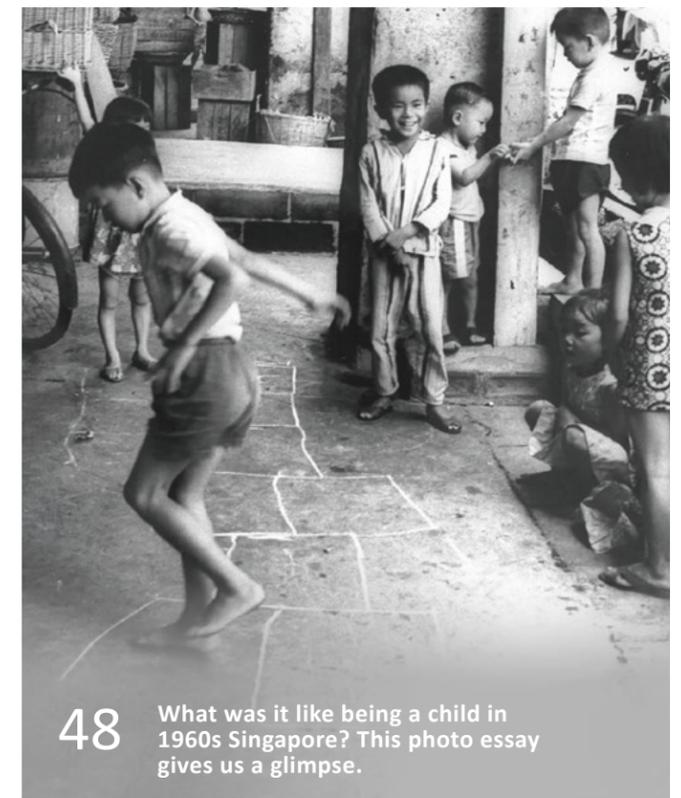
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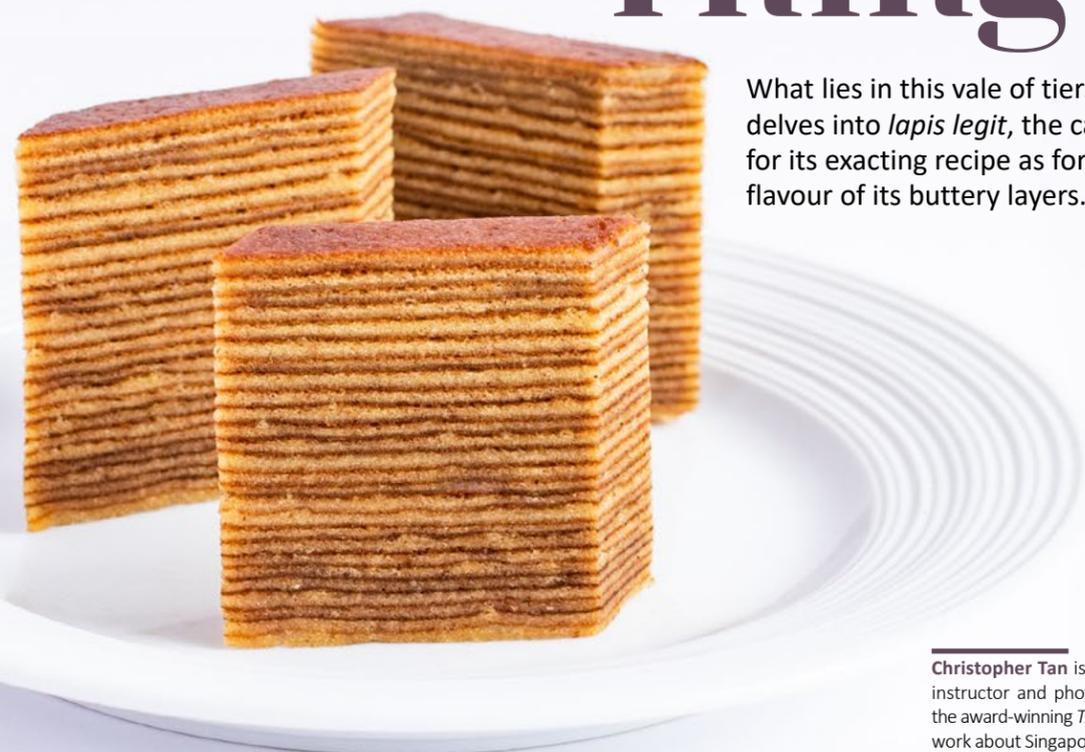
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# Love Is A MANY-LAYERED Thing

What lies in this vale of tiers? **Christopher Tan** delves into *lapis legit*, the cake that is as famous for its exacting recipe as for the unparalleled flavour of its buttery layers.



When I was young, *kue lapis legit*<sup>1</sup> would announce its presence in my family kitchen long before anyone got to taste it. The first portent was the careful shepherding of precious bottles of spice powders and brandy. The next sign was the buying of many eggs and much butter. On baking day, the kitchen thrummed with signals: the loud rhythm of batter vigorously beaten; the steady cadence of spread batter thinly, grill it until brown, press out bubbles, brush with butter, then repeat; and the rippling scent-waves of sizzling butter and caramelising crust. Anticipation ran at a fever pitch, or perhaps that was just the heat nimbus of our Baby Belling oven.

*Kue lapis legit* and its sister confection *spekkoek* (more of that sisterhood later) are iconic cakes for Indonesians, Malays – especially those with some Javanese heritage – and Peranakan Chinese. Major festivals such as Hari Raya and the Lunar New Year would not be complete without tables graced by these tiered touchstones. These communities have roots and branches in the milieus of maritime Southeast Asia's Dutch colonial era, which saw the flowering of many hybrid foodways. "Most of us who live in cities known for rich colonial history, like Jakarta, Palembang, Bangka, Semarang, Surabaya and Bandung, are familiar with

**Christopher Tan** is a food writer, author, cooking instructor and photographer whose latest book is the award-winning *The Way of Kueh*, a comprehensive work about Singapore's *kueh* culture.

*lapis legit* and *spekkoek* as [legacies of] Dutch influence," says Indonesian food writer, author and restaurant pundit Kevindra Soemantri.<sup>2</sup>

Modern makeovers have spawned a multiplicity of *lapis* varieties – patterned in bright colours; flavoured with fresh or dried fruit, cheese or coffee or chocolate; rolled up into logs; or carved and rearranged like intricate marquetry. A comprehensive 1986 Indonesian recipe book, *Hidangan Ringan: Party Snacks*, includes 11 different variations on the theme, to the tune of *cempedak*, durian, mocha and more.<sup>3</sup> However, the classic version remains the most revered

incarnation: a soft, rich European-style butter cake infused with spices native to the Indonesian Archipelago, cooked one layer at a time under a hot grill.

## Peeling Back the Years

Trawling through vintage recipes, I found that this basic template has persisted with little alteration for well over a century. The only major differences between old and modern recipes are the heat source – formerly charcoal, these days usually an electric oven element – and the now-frequent addition of condensed milk and/or milk powder to the batter, perhaps to mimic the stronger flavours and higher protein content of yesteryear's imported butter.

The Spekkoek (Kwee Lapiés) recipe in the 1895 book, *Recepten Van De Haagsche Kookschool* (*Recipes from The Hague Cooking School*), is fully consonant with modern recipes, albeit its "65 cloves" might be a bit much for most of us today. It directs the cook to cream butter, sugar, eggs and flour into a batter "in the usual way", flavour it with very finely ground spices, bake it in layers, smearing butter over each layer when it is done, and finally to store the cake in a tightly sealed tin, where it will keep for "a long time".<sup>4</sup>

The 1925 *Groot Nieuw Volledig Oost-Indisch Kookboek* (*Great New Complete East Indies Cookbook*)<sup>5</sup> collates three

*spekkoek* recipes in its *inlandsche bakken* (native baking) chapter. One of them has only three thick sponge cake layers, baked individually and then sandwiched with "some sort of jelly" – we know this style today as *kue lapis surabaya*, *koningskroon* ("king's crown cake" in Dutch) or *bahulu lapis*.

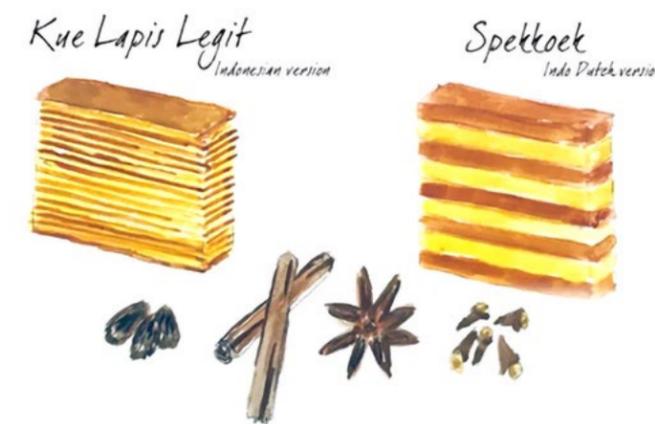
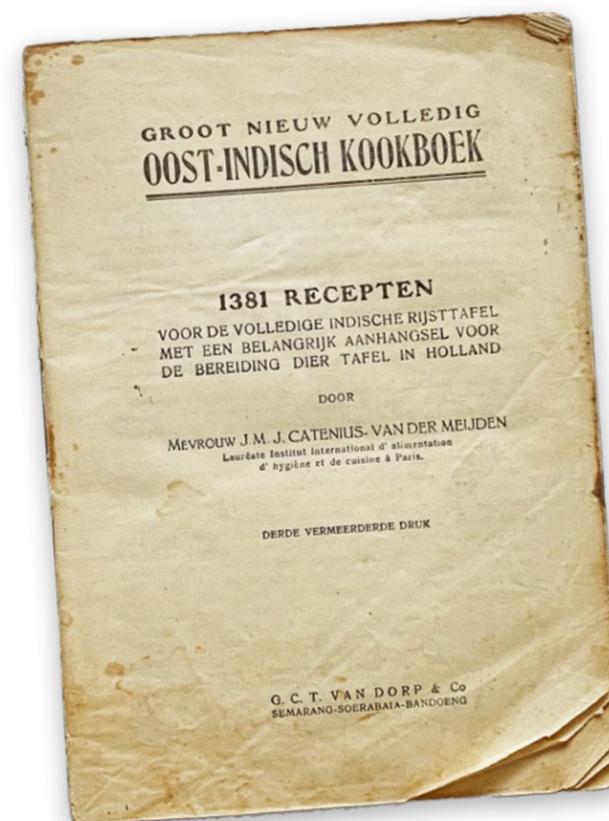
The other two *inlandsche* recipes are classic *spekkoek*, and both require "two persons... two skillets... two deep bowls... two wicker brooms or egg beaters" (see text box on page 7) to wrangle one plain white batter and one spiced brown batter, baked in alternating layers. Their formulas otherwise differ: one rests on copious butter and flour, plus cloves, cardamom, cinnamon, nutmeg and mace; the other is more egg-rich, and omits nutmeg and mace but includes crushed *ang-khak*,<sup>6</sup> or Chinese red yeast rice. This last item is especially intriguing given Soemantri's observation that *lapis legit* spice blends are "similar to Chinese five-spice... there is a *lapis legit* recipe that uses fennel also".<sup>7</sup>

Vintage recipes using a single spiced batter are also common. Besides the *Haagsche Kookschool* book, *Kokki Bitja* (*Beloved Cook*; 1859),<sup>8</sup> *Oost-Indisch Kookboek* (*East Indies Cookbook*; 1870)<sup>9</sup> and *Het Nieuwe Kookboek* (*The New Cookbook*; 1925)<sup>10</sup> all take this tack for their *spekkoek*. The *Groot Nieuw Volledig*

*Oost-Indische Kookboek* also lists a single plain-batter variation, "for convenience", with the spices merely sprinkled over each layer after the cake is baked. In a *Straits Times* interview in 1983, famed Kampong Glam culinarian Hajjah Asfiah binte Haji Abdullah called this version *kueh baulu lapis*, which she would make to sell at her Ramadan bazaar stall near Bussorah Street.<sup>11</sup>

Dutch-Indonesian chef Jeff Keasberry identifies the two-batter cake with fewer total layers as Indo-Dutch *spekkoek* that originates from the Dutch East Indies era, a species older than and distinct from what he calls Indonesian *kue lapis legit*, which uses a single batter and has thinner and more layers – at least 18, according to him.<sup>12</sup> Indonesian culinary teacher and author Sitti Nur Zainuddin-Moro also makes the same distinction in her influential cookbook *Kue-Kue Manasuka* (*Kue You Will Like*; 1980), naming the two-batter version *Sepekuk Biasa* (ordinary *spekkoek*), and the other *lapis legit*.<sup>13</sup>

Many examples of both variants have appeared in Singaporean recipe books over the years, although their names are sometimes conflated. Mrs Susie Hing's landmark 1956 cookbook, *In A Malayan Kitchen*, includes a *spekkoek* recipe (and a *koningskroon* recipe) that Dutch readers from earlier generations would have recognised straightaway.<sup>14</sup>



(Above) Dutch-Indonesian chef Jeff Keasberry identifies the two-batter cake with fewer total layers as Indo-Dutch *spekkoek* (right) originating from the Dutch East Indies era, a species older than and distinct from what he calls Indonesian *kue lapis legit* (left), which uses a single batter and has more and thinner layers. Courtesy of Jeff Keasberry.

(Left) Title page of *Groot Nieuw Volledig Oost-Indische Kookboek*, published in 1925. It contains nearly 1,400 recipes, including three *spekkoek* recipes in its *inlandsche bakken* (native baking) chapter. Image reproduced from van der Meijden, J.M.J.C. (1925). *Groot nieuw volledig Oost-Indisch kookboek* [Great New Complete East Indies Cookbook]. Malang: G.C.T. Van Dorp & Co. (Not available in NLB holdings).

(Facing page) The author's home-made *kue lapis legit*. This is an iconic cake for Indonesians, Malays and the Peranakan Chinese. Courtesy of Christopher Tan.

A 1957 *Straits Times* article records a *spekkoek* recipe by a Mrs Rosaleen Yang, who baked alternating plain and cocoa-spiked batters in “a copper or brass pan”.<sup>15</sup> A similar recipe for *Lapis Betawi* (Batavia, as Jakarta was called under the Dutch) appeared in *Berita Harian* in 1968, which called for a generous amount of spice to augment the cocoa.<sup>16</sup>

In 1981, the *New Nation* published Nonya doyen and cookbook author Mrs Leong Yee Soo’s single-batter *Spekkoek Kueh Lapis* Batavia recipe, which details the importance of pricking each cooked layer with a skewer to deflate bubbles and create microscopic holes for the next layer’s batter to flow in, for better adhesion.<sup>17</sup> In 1977, the *Straits Times* featured a recipe by one Cik Khatijah Ashblie for *Lapis Mascovish*, whose vanilla batter was layered with almonds and raisins.<sup>18</sup>

Outside of home kitchens, only a few stores in Singapore made or imported *spekkoek* and *kue lapis* in the early 20th century. One such establishment was the Java Restaurant (originally Mooi Thien Res-

taurant) on North Bridge Road – described in a 1950 *Straits Times* article as being “not unlike a Paris bistro”<sup>19</sup> – where founder Lim Djin Hai and his family served both Javanese and European food in the late 1940s. Prior to emigrating to Singapore in 1946, Lim was a caterer in his hometown of Bencoolen (now Bengkulu), where one of his clients was the then Governor-General of the Dutch East Indies. (Java Restaurant later moved to Killiney Road, morphing into the Java Provision Store, where for over 25 years it purveyed home-baked and imported Indo-Dutch goods.)

### Building a Mystery

The early origin stories of *spekkoek* and *lapis legit* remain largely unknown, despite their widespread popularity. *Spekkoek* derives from the Dutch words *spek koek*, meaning “bacon cake”, no doubt an allusion to the cake’s pale and red-brown stripes. However, there seem to be no records in the Netherlands of any layered cake by that name which pre-dates *lapis legit*, and neither is there such an extant cake there.

Some have suggested *spekkoek* has its origins in the German *baumkuchen*, the “tree-ring” cake considered the ultimate test and accomplishment of a *konditor-meister* (master pastry chef). However, *baumkuchen* has a drier texture than *spekkoek* and is made using a different method: its cylindrical layers are built up around a rotating spit. Also, German records clearly trace its evolution from a dough-based cake in the 1500s into the batter-based form known from the 1700s until today.<sup>20</sup> “There is no significant record of Prussian people in Indonesia,” says Soemantri, but “perhaps *baumkuchen* influenced the original Dutch *spekkoek*”.<sup>21</sup>

Here is a curious similarity though: *baumkuchen* is traditionally flavoured with spices (cinnamon, cardamom, nutmeg, ginger or vanilla), citrus, nuts (most often almonds) and liquor. The oldest *spekkoek* recipe I have come across, from *Kokki Bitja*, calls for clove, cardamom, white pepper, *jeruk cina* (mandarin orange) zest, kenari nuts and brandy. Mere coincidence or distant cousinhood?



(Left and bottom left) Pressing a freshly baked *lapis legit* layer to flatten and smoothen it, and spreading batter for the next layer. Courtesy of Christopher Tan.



(Below) *Spekkoek* recipe from *In a Malayan Kitchen*. *Spek koek* means “bacon cake” in Dutch. Both bacon and cake bear stripes – as can ribbons, as this recipe’s subtitle references. Reproduced from Hing, S. (1956). *In a Malayan Kitchen* (p. 65). Singapore: Mun Seong Press. (Call no.: RCL05 641.59595 HIN).

No: 81.

**SPEKKOEK**  
(RIBBON CAKE)

12 ozs. Butter.  
7 ozs. Sugar.  
15 Egg Yolks.  
5 Egg Whites.  
2 ozs. Flour sieved.  
1 Teaspoon Cinnamon Powder.  
1 Teaspoon Nutmeg grated.  
1 Teaspoon Clove Powder.  
6 Cardamon (Kapu laga) pounded

} Mixed and sieved.

There is a special oven required to successfully cook this cake, and it can be made to order in Singapore. Alternatively if one has an electric oven with the elements place at top and bottom—example Baby Belling Cooker, then it can be cooked by electricity. As the cake requires the heat at the top once the oven is well heated an ordinary oven has not proved successful.

Prepare a hot fire and heat oven, line bottom of deep cake pan with a well buttered piece of grease proof paper cut to the exact fit of pan: and allow to get hot in the oven Just before commencing to cook cake.

Separate eggs retaining five whites in a separate bowl. Beat egg whites and add  $\frac{1}{2}$  of sugar continue beating till holding a point. Beat egg yolks with  $\frac{1}{2}$  of sugar till creamy. Beat butter till creamy with balance of sugar. To egg yolks add butter mixture, egg whites and flour. Divide mixture into two equal parts. To one part only add the previously mixed and sieved spices. Into prepared and heated cake tin spread one small ladle of mixture and spread evenly. Replace lid of oven which now has the fire in the lid at the top. Cook until golden brown and dry when tested. Cook alternate layers of mixture one top of the other until completed about 3 minutes for each layer. The top layers may be a little thicker than those at the bottom.

### BEAT 16 EGG YOLKS... FOR ONE HOUR

The following is a 1925 recipe for *spekkoek* from *Groot nieuw volledig Oost-Indisch kookboek* (*Great New Complete East Indies Cookbook*), translated from the original Dutch by Christopher Tan.<sup>1</sup> The cake, in its springform pan, may have been baked within a metal vessel with hot coals underneath and/or on top of its lid. Dutch technical prowess at casting such pots led to such vessels being dubbed “Dutch ovens” by other nations in the 18th century.

### Kwée lapis (Spekkoek) I.

Thirty eggs, the whites beaten separately, 30 tablespoons fine dry white sugar, 15 tablespoons sifted flour, one pound washed butter,<sup>2</sup> two dessertspoons finely pounded Chinese red rice or red yeast rice (*ang-khak*<sup>3</sup>), one teaspoon clove powder, one teaspoon finely pounded cardamom, two teaspoons finely pounded cinnamon, melted butter.

### Preparation:

To make the batters for this cake, two persons are needed, as well as two pots, two deep bowls<sup>4</sup> and two wicker brooms<sup>5</sup> or egg beaters.

One batter may not stand longer than the other: this is why the above-mentioned ingredients are divided into two lots.

In one of the pots, beat 16 egg yolks with 16 tablespoons of fine dry white sugar for one hour,<sup>6</sup> until the mixture is as smooth as butter.<sup>7</sup> Then



Javanese *kue lapis* and *spekkoek* recipes in the *Groot Nieuwe Volledig Oost-Indische Kookboek*, published in 1925. Reproduced from van der Meijden, J.M.J.C. (1925). *Groot nieuw volledig Oost-Indisch kookboek* [*Great New Complete East Indies Cookbook*] (p. 305). Malang: G.C.T. Van Dorp & Co. (Not available in NLB holdings).

add eight tablespoons of flour one by one, then add half a pound of washed butter in small increments while beating constantly.

In the second pot, beat the remaining 14 egg yolks with seven tablespoons of the white sugar and seven tablespoons of flour, along with the spices mentioned above, and half a pound of butter.

When the batters in the two pots have been well mixed, add the whipped egg whites a spoonful at a time, 16 egg whites for the 16-yolk batter lot.<sup>8</sup>

The cake is baked in layers in a springform pan,<sup>9</sup> which must first be brushed well with butter.

The first layer must be thoroughly dry and well cooked: before you add a second layer of the spiced batter, press it down with a muslin-wrapped hand,<sup>10</sup> then brush some melted butter over it.<sup>11</sup> Then continue to bake the batters alternately in layers.



A more plausible progenitor for *kue lapis legit* may be the layer cakes traditionally made in southern China to celebrate the annual Double Ninth festival – recipes which travelled to maritime Southeast Asia with the Chinese diaspora. Chiefly rice-based, these cakes are steamed layer by layer, frequently with alternating batters of different colours, often tinted with – yes – red yeast rice. Chinese communities in Southeast Asia still make these today; in Indonesia they are simply called *kue lapis*, but old Dutch and Indonesian cookbooks identify them as *kue lapis cina*<sup>22</sup> or *kue*

A vintage brass pan of the type used for baking *kueh lapis legit*. Note the “scars” on the lid left by hot coals. Courtesy of Christopher Tan.

When you have baked four layers, prick the cake with a knitting needle: if nothing adheres to the needle then the layers are done, and you can continue layering; otherwise let them bake for a while longer.<sup>12</sup>

Use a soup ladle that is not too large to scoop the batter.

For convenience’s sake, you can also make this cake using only the first batter, and after every layer is baked, sprinkle it well with the mixed spices, and then top with the batter again.

### NOTES

- 1 Van der Meijden, J.M.J.C. (1925). *Groot nieuw volledig Oost-Indisch kookboek* [*Great new complete East Indies cookbook*] (p. 305). Malang: G.C.T. Van Dorp & Co. (Not available in NLB’s holdings)
- 2 Freshly churned butter is always washed with plain water to remove all traces of buttermilk – the liquid separated from the butterfat by the churning – and casein dairy proteins. If not washed away, these make the butter develop rancid off-flavours and turn bad.
- 3 See note 6 on page 9.
- 4 The batters are mixed in the pots so presumably the bowls are used for beating the egg whites.
- 5 Small brooms – bundled plant stalks or twigs – were historically used to beat liquid ingredients. Metal whisks only started to become more common around the early 20th century.
- 6 Brooms are not very efficient whisks.
- 7 Presumably this means a thick and creamy foam.
- 8 And presumably do the same for the remaining 14 whites for the 14-yolk batter lot, although the recipe does not spell this out.
- 9 Springform pans with latched sides and removable bases were largely the same then as they still are now. Pan size is unmentioned, so this was either standard knowledge, or the reader is expected to know how to make do.
- 10 The muslin prevents the cake layer from sticking to your hand as you flatten it.
- 11 The layering alternates the two batters; every layer is pressed and butter-brushed.
- 12 The needle test checks for uncooked batter under the surface: heat sources were not always even. The baking set-up is not detailed, but it would have featured top-down heat.

*lapis jawa*. In *Kue-Kue Manasuka*, Sitti Nur Zainuddin-Moro records a Batavian recipe for a red and white version called “Lapis Merah Putih (Betawi)”.<sup>23</sup>

The auspicious Chinese saying and wish for success 步步高升 (*bu bu gao sheng*, which means “rising step by step”) is embodied by both steamed and baked *lapis*. For the Indonesian Chinese, *lapis legit* “is always related to celebration, and for them, its many layers equal prosperity,” says Soemantri.<sup>24</sup>

### A Nonlinear Lineage

Indeed, *kueh lapis legit* is nothing if not rich. In my family, we let it sit untouched for at least a couple of days post-baking, so that all the butter and spice can fully



(Aboveleft) Steamed rice-based *kue lapis* for sale at a *kue pasar* (market) in Jakarta. Courtesy of Christopher Tan.

(Above) Home-made *kue enggak ketan*, composed of glutinous rice flour, eggs, butter, sugar, condensed milk, and *blondo*—boiled, oily coconut milk. Courtesy of Christopher Tan.

permeate its crumb. When at last it falls under the knife, the sight of even, lovely lamina evokes great relief in the baker, who discovers only at this moment if the deck was stacked for success.

So what might have bridged the gap between steamed rice-flour layers and baked wheat-flour layers, and how? Permit me to suggest a trip to Palembang. Now South Sumatra's capital, Palembang was formerly the capital of the Srivijayan empire, a Buddhist kingdom which endured from around the 7th century to the 13th century. Its trade links with China, South Asia and the Middle East ensured a constant flow of goods, pilgrims, cultures and languages between those regions and the Malay Archipelago. This made Palembang a fertile place for culinary ferment.

The city lays claim to several *lapis* varieties. Some are modern glosses on the form—made with pineapple jam between strata (*lapis nenas*), a multi-layered version of the regional pandan-scented specialty

*bolu kojo* (*lapis kojo*), and so on.<sup>25</sup> Two older signature Palembang *lapis* types are much closer in spirit to *spekkoek*, baked the same way but with fewer, slightly thicker layers.

One of them, *kue maksuba*, is made using chicken and/or duck eggs, butter or margarine, sugar, condensed milk and vanilla, with flour in miniscule quantity or, most often, entirely absent. Essentially a hyper-rich custard, *kue maksuba* has a smooth solidity not unlike the Malay *kuih bakar*, with less of a cake-like vibe than orthodox *spekkoek*.

The other *lapis* variety, *kue enggak ketan*, has the same ingredients as *kue maksuba*, plus two key elements: glutinous rice flour, and *blondo* or *glondo*—thick coconut milk which has been boiled until some of its oil has separated out. The oily sheen from the *blondo* and a faint springiness from the glutinous rice flour strongly recall steamed *kue lapis cina*, while the heavy doses of butter and condensed milk bestow a European richness. However, the airlessly dense wheat-free crumb and the lack of spice means the resemblance to *spekkoek* is only partial.

*Kue enggak ketan* reminds me strongly of another sweet, one from Goa, India. *Bebinca*, also called *bibinca* or *bibik*, is a colonial legacy said to be a Portuguese recipe but tweaked with local ingredients. It has many *spekkoek*-like traits, first and foremost a very rich batter made of egg yolk and coconut milk, with comparatively little wheat flour, and spiced with cardamom and nutmeg. *Bebinca* is traditionally “baked” layer by layer—some recipes specify seven layers, others multiples of seven—under a pot lid holding burning wood or coconut husks, with clarified butter brushed over each layer. It must rest for several hours before being sliced. In terms of flavour and texture, *bebinca* sits squarely between *spekkoek* and *kue enggak ketan*.

*Bebinca*'s creation is often attributed to a (possibly apocryphal) nun named Bibiana or Bebiana at the Convent of Santa Monica in Goa, whose devout sisters were famed for their culinary skills and repertoire of festive sweetmeats.<sup>26</sup> Alternative origin stories suggest links with other similarly named Asian baked goods such as the Filipino *bibinka* and the Macanese *bebinca*; however, these purported family resemblances are scattered and hard to qualify. For instance, in Macau, *bebinca de leite* is a baked milk custard and *bebinca de inham* is yam cake (*wu tau koh* in Cantonese), and neither is layered.

That said, there is a Goan *bebinca* variation made with mashed potatoes and baked in a single layer, which is all but identical to Malay *kuih bingka kentang*. In fact, many Goan sweetmeats appear to be cognates of Southeast Asian ones. These include *kulkuls* (crisp shell-shaped pastries), cousins of *kuih siput*; *alle belle* (crepes rolled around grated coconut cooked with palm sugar), which are much like *kuih dadar*; *pinaca* (roasted rice and coconut pounded with palm sugar and warm spices), the twin of Peranakan *kueh dadu*; and Goan *dodol* (rice, palm sugar and coconut milk toffee), which differs from Indonesian *dodol* only in that Goan cooks use regular rice instead of glutinous rice.

Food historian Janet Boileau quotes Macanese-culture expert Rui Rocha in speculating that Southeast Asian desserts likely travelled westward to Goa, perhaps via Melaka, and were assimilated into local and Catholic culinary and confectionery traditions there.<sup>27</sup>

*Bebinca* is also traditional to East Timor, a Portuguese colony up until the 1970s. Though they seem similar, it is unclear whether Timorese *bebinca* prefigured or instead descended from the Goan version. Such intricately connected and mingled gastronomy is the legacy of centuries of Dutch and Portuguese colonisers contending over the same turf in Asia and around the world. While not as emblematic to Singapore's Eurasians as *sugee* cake, *spekkoek* is also made by that community, whose origins, history and traditions incorporate both Portuguese and Dutch heritage.<sup>28</sup>

### Much More Than Its Seams

Perhaps this is how the story could have gone: a colonial-era cook makes a Dutch *taart* (butter cake) batter. Some extra eggs are on hand, so in they go—has she not seen Portuguese cooks do likewise to make their cakes richer, softer, more velvety? Familiar with European cakes baked in separate layers and then assembled, she wonders if the layers could be baked *in situ* instead, just as her Chinese neighbours steam their cakes, and what if that uprising steam was replaced by coal heat radiating from above? And then, surrounded by—or maybe only dreaming of—the East Indies, she seizes on spices from that corner of the empire, those seeds and bark and buds whose aromas lift the spirits. Should these infuse all the

batter? Or only half of it, for layers that alternate colours and scents? She thinks and experiments, and so it goes.

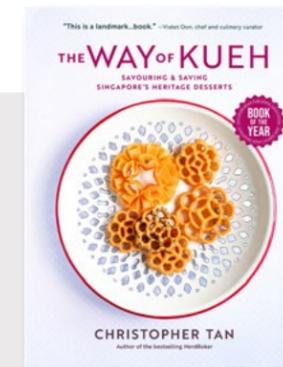
Imagine such a narrative, writ not by a single person over an afternoon, but by numberless cooks and bakers, exchanging ideas and handing down legacies through the generations as they spread and grill and press and brush. Is this line of thought and practice not destined to birth something marvellous, something enduringly delicious? As *The Straits Times* opined in a 1957 article about making *spiku* (another nickname for *spekkoek*) for Hari Raya: “The results are more than equal to those achieved by even the most accomplished pastrycook of Vienna.”<sup>29</sup>

I could not agree more. If mindfully made, each spice-flecked strata should be a beautiful paradox: coherent enough to peel off without tearing, yet thin and

fragile enough to melt on the tongue; dairy-lush and spice-opulent, but debonair and delicate, and never ponderous.

Having taken over *lapis*-making duties from my elders, I understand more keenly why this *kueh* and its kin have enjoyed such longevity and such exalted status. Refining and notating my family's *lapis legit* recipe for my book, *The Way of Kueh*,<sup>30</sup> took me months of research and testing, over 1,300 words and finally three pages of text and photos to do it full justice. Yes, *lapis legit* and *spekkoek* require significant mental and physical investment, but when they are imbued with care and commitment, their glory—and the accompanying feeling of achievement—transcends every ounce of expended effort. Master this cake, and you can truly say you have earned your stripes. ♦

Christopher Tan's book, *The Way of Kueh: Savouring & Saving Singapore's Heritage Desserts* (2019), won Book of the Year at the 2020 Singapore Book Awards and was also the winner in the Best Illustrated Non-Fiction Title category. The book is available for reference at the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library and for loan at selected public libraries (Call nos.: RSING 641.595957 TAN and SING 641.595957 TAN). It also retails at major bookshops in Singapore.



### NOTES

- Throughout this article, I have used different spellings for the word *kuih*, as appropriate to that community to whose desserts I am referring: hence *kuih* for Malay items, *kueh* for Peranakan items, and *kue* for Indonesian items, plus idiosyncratic spelling within direct quotes. *Legit*, pronounced with a hard “g”, means “sweet” or “sticky” in Bahasa Indonesia.
- Personal communication with Kevindra Soemantri (www.feastin.id), 23–30 March, 2019.
- Pamudji, D. (1986). *Hidangan ringan: Party snacks*. Kuala Lumpur: Arenabuku Sdn Bhd. (Not available in NLB holdings). Among the author's *lapis* recipes are a few with “tikar” designs, constructed by rotating and reassembling cut sections of *lapis*, to yield complex patterns when sliced across. These pre-date by over a decade the more colourful *lapis* designs popular in Sarawak.
- Manden, A.C. (1895). *Recepten van de Haagsche kookschool [Recipes from the Hague Cooking School]* (p. 244). The Hague: De Gebroeders van Cleef. (Not available in NLB holdings). Founded in the late 1800s, the school provided its female students with formal culinary training.
- Van der Meijden, J.M.J.C. (1925). *Groot nieuw volledig Oost-Indisch kookboek [Great new complete East Indies cookbook]* (pp. 305–306). Malang: G.C.T. Van Dorp & Co. (Not available in NLB holdings). A mammoth book chronicling nearly 1,400 recipes from the Dutch East Indies, written to help familiarise Dutch cooks with the cuisine.
- Also known as red rice, this is rice inoculated with a yeast strain that produces a vivid red pigment as it grows. The dried grains are a traditional Chinese ingredient used to make rice wine and to add colour to dishes.
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- Sitti Nur Zainuddin-Moro. (1980). *Kue-kue manasuka [Kue you will like]* (pp. 130, 132). Jakarta: Dian Rakyat. (Call no.: RSEA 641.5 ZAI). The author, a cooking academy veteran, formidably marshals 272 recipes for Indonesian *kue*, colonial delicacies, Western-style cakes, savoury snacks and pantry essentials.
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- Prelude to New Year. (1957, January 24). *The Straits Times*, p. 12. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- Kueh bangket kelapa dan lapis betawi, waduh, lazar sa-kali! (1968, June 2). *Berita Harian*, p. 8. Retrieved from NewspaperSG. This recipe has a truly decadent butter-to-flour ratio of around 6:1.
- Feast with the experts. (1981, January 29). *New Nation*, p. 10. Retrieved from NewspaperSG. The name *Spekkoek Kueh Lapis Batavia* comes from Mrs Leong Yee Soo's classic local cookbook, *Singaporean Cooking*. See Leong, Y.S. (1976). *Singaporean cooking*. Singapore: Eastern Universities Press Sdn Bhd. (Call no.: RSING 641.595957 LEO)
- Hari Raya delight for you to try. (1977, September 13). *The Straits Times*, p. 34. Retrieved from NewspaperSG. “Moscovish” is likely a rendering of “moscovis”, a Dutch colonial-era name attached to cakes made with dried fruit or candied peel. “Moscovis” refers to Russia, although the connection to the country is unclear.
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A modern rolled variation of *kue lapis legit* with a flower-shaped cross-section. Courtesy of Christopher Tan.



# St Andrew's Cathedral

## and the Mystery of Madras Chunam

Was Madras *chunam* used inside St Andrew's Cathedral? Maybe not, says **Yeo Kang Shua**, who has carefully examined the layers of plaster on its interior walls.



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Completed in 1865, St Andrew's Cathedral<sup>1</sup> is a national monument that is regularly featured in guidebooks about Singapore. Built in the English Gothic style, descriptions of this handsome building invariably mention that the interior walls of this Anglican church used a unique form of plaster known as Madras *chunam*. The rather unusual ingredients that make up Madras *chunam* – among other things, egg white and coarse sugar – are undoubtedly a key reason why it has become lodged in the popular imagination.

The use of Madras *chunam* is mentioned in the 1899 book, *Prisoners Their Own Warders*,<sup>2</sup> by John Frederick Adolphus (J.F.A.) McNair of the Madras Artillery who had supervised the construction of the church. (It was consecrated as a church in 1862, before it was fully completed, and re-consecrated as a cathedral in 1870.) In his book, McNair wrote:

"In dealing with the interior walls and columns, we used... 'Madras *chunam*', made from shell lime without sand; but with this lime we had whites of eggs and coarse sugar, or 'jaggery', beaten together to form a sort of paste, and mixed with water in which the husks of coconuts [*sic*] had been steeped. The walls and columns were plastered with this composition, and, after a certain period for drying, were rubbed with rock crystal or rounded stone until they took a beautiful polish, being occasionally dusted with fine soapstone powder, and so leaving a remarkably smooth and glossy surface..."<sup>3</sup>

This claim has been repeated many times since, and not merely in guidebooks but also in press reports as well as serious works.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, some writers have gone on to suggest that the same plaster was not just found in St Andrew's, but widely used in Singapore. In a 1981 *Straits Times* article, author Peter Keys wrote that "Madras (*chunam*) plasterwork became universally used, with its odd (but since proven to be practical) mixture of shell lime, egg white, sugar and coconut husk..." in Singapore.<sup>5</sup>



(Above) Plaster sampling at one of the columns in St Andrew's Cathedral. A sample of the plaster was taken from the surface to the brick substrate for laboratory analysis. In this photograph, a thin layer (2–3 mm) of grey Portland cement screed can be seen under the white paint layer. Courtesy of Yeo Kang Shua.

(Facing page) Completed in 1865 and consecrated as an Anglican cathedral in 1870, St Andrew's is a national monument that regularly features in guidebooks of Singapore. Almost every description mentions that the interior walls of the building were plastered with Madras *chunam*, which is partly made of egg white. Courtesy of Preservation of Sites and Monuments, National Heritage Board.

In his 1988 book, *Singapore: A Guide to Buildings, Streets, Places*, co-written with Norman Edwards, the authors said that some of the buildings in the Serangoon area also featured Madras *chunam*.<sup>6</sup> A 2017 article in *The Straits Times* even claimed that Madras *chunam* was used in the Istana (formerly known as Government House),<sup>7</sup> despite McNair's own account that they had used a mixture of Portland cement, sand and powdered granite.<sup>8</sup>

Over the last 100 years, it has become axiomatic that Madras *chunam* was used in St Andrew's. There is, however, just one problem: there is no physical evidence of Madras *chunam* on the walls of St Andrew's. For close to a decade, I have been involved in conservation issues pertaining to the interior of St Andrew's and, as part of this job, I have closely examined and analysed the plaster work at various locations within the building. Despite having taken and analysed numerous samples of the plaster, we have not found any trace of egg white, the tell-tale sign of Madras *chunam*.

### Peeling Back the Mystery

I first became involved with the conservation of the walls of St Andrew's in 2011. Around that time, the paint on some parts of its interior walls had begun peeling, while in other parts, the plaster had delaminated (the technical term for "popped out"). Because of my background in architectural conservation, I was asked to study and advise the cathedral.

While I began my investigation, the cathedral carried out ad-hoc repairs to the

affected areas, mainly behind the lectern as well as around the Epiphany Chapel and pulpit. Two years later, more localised repairs were carried out, this time on the south facade of the west porch, to address the same problem.

In 2016, to prepare for a large-scale and comprehensive plaster repair, the cathedral undertook lime plaster trials at selected interior walls and columns along the south aisle of the building.<sup>9</sup> In 2018, further trials using proprietary lime were carried out behind the lectern and pulpit, on the west porch and on the north facade of the west porch.

In addition to these trials, in 2019, the internal walls of the tower (the belfry) were repaired during conservation work on the church bells.

Thus between 2011 and 2019, we had numerous opportunities to sample and study the plaster around many spots within St Andrew's because of the repair work and the lime plaster trials. However, none of our investigations found any trace of protein (egg white) or fibre (coconut husk). The lime plaster trials in 2016 and 2018, in particular, allowed us to remove the existing plaster ahead of the trial. While doing so, we did find a thin finish coat of Portland cement screed and, in some cases, layers of Portland cement plaster, but no Madras *chunam*. (The existence of Portland cement attest to subsequent repair and/or replastering at these localised areas.)

Our failure to find Madras *chunam* on the walls of St Andrew's was puzzling. Why couldn't we find any trace of this unique plas-

ter inside the church even though we had done extensive sampling? One possibility is that Madras *chunam* had been originally used, but was completely stripped away later, which is why no trace can be found today. The more controversial possibility, of course, is that despite McNair's account, Madras *chunam* was never actually used inside St Andrew's.

To unravel this mystery, we must delve into the intricacies of the making and application of Madras *chunam*, and we need to learn more about how St Andrew's was built.

### Making Madras Chunam

The word *chunam* is a transliteration of *cunṇāmpu* or *choona*, which means "lime" in Tamil and Hindi respectively. Madras (now known as Chennai) is a city in Tamil Nadu, India. Madras *chunam* thus refers to a particular type of lime plaster commonly used in Madras.

One of the earliest descriptions of Madras *chunam* in English is found in *A Practical and Scientific Treatise on Calcareous Mortars and Cements, Artificial and Natural*, authored by Louis-Joseph Vicat. His 1837 book describes how shell-lime, sand, sugar, egg white, clarified butter, sour milk and powdered soapstone were used as ingredients to make the coats of this plaster.<sup>10</sup>

Published in 1840, James Holman's *Travels in Madras, Ceylon, Mauritius, Cormoro Islands, Zanzibar, Calcutta, etc. etc.* contains a very detailed description of Madras *chunam* that bears repeating to get an idea of the work necessary to make the plaster, and how to apply it.

"The lime is of the finest quality, and is produced from sea-shells well washed and properly cleansed, after which they are calcined with charcoal, during which process the greatest care is taken to exclude every thing likely to injure the purity and whiteness of the lime. ....

"The plaster is composed of one part of *chunam*, or burnt lime, and one and a half of river sand thoroughly mixed, and well beaten up with water. ... Before the plaster is applied, the wall must be trimmed... and swept perfectly clean, it should then be slightly sprinkled with water; after the wall is ready the plaster is... mix... with jaggery-water, to a proper consistency, it is then laid on about an inch thick... and levelled..., being

afterwards smoothed with a rubber, until it acquires an even surface. During the process of rubbing, the plaster is occasionally sprinkled with a little pure lime mixed with water, to give it a hard and even surface.

"For two coats.

... The plaster used for the second coat consists of three parts of lime, and one of white sand, which is mixed up as before... till it is reduced to a fine paste. The plaster thus prepared is... applied... over the first coat, about one-eighth of an inch thick, after which it is rubbed down.... It is then polished with a crystal, or smooth stone rubber, and as soon as it has acquired a sufficient polish, a little very fine Bellapum powder is sprinkled upon it, to increase its whiteness and lustre, while the rubbing is still continued. The second coat ought to begun [*sic*] and finished in one day, unless in damp weather....

"For three coats.

... A day or two afterwards, before it has had time to dry, the third coat is applied. This consists of four parts of lime, and one of fine white sand; these, after being well mixed, are reduced by grinding to a very fine paste.... This is... mixed with the whites of eggs, tyre (curds), and ghee (butter), in the following proportions:-

12 eggs, 1½ measures of tyre and ½ lb. of ghee to every parah of plaster.

"These must all be thoroughly mixed... to a paste of a uniform consistence, a little thicker than cream, and perfectly free from grittiness..., and is put on about one-tenth of an inch thick, ... when it is gently rubbed, till it becomes perfectly smooth. Immediately after this another coat of still finer plaster is applied, consisting of pure lime ground to a very fine paste, and afterwards mixed with water... until it is of consistency of cream. This is put on one-sixteenth of an inch thick, with a brush, and rubbed gently with a small trowel, till it becomes slightly hard it is then rubbed with the crystal or stone rubber, until a beautiful polish is produced, during which process the wall is occasionally sprinkled with fine Bellapum powder....

"If the plaster be not entirely dry on the second morning, the operation of polishing ought to be continued until it is quite dry. The moisture as before mentioned must be carefully wiped off, and the wall kept quite dry till all appearance of moisture ceases."<sup>11</sup>

Holman's and Vicat's descriptions of how to mix the plaster, combined with our knowledge of the size of the church building, allow us to calculate approximately how much Madras *chunam* would have been needed to plaster the interior walls. According to McNair:

"[The] building is 250 feet long internally, by 65 feet in width, with nave and side aisles; or, with the north and south transepts, 95 feet, the transepts being used as porticoes."<sup>12</sup>

Based on these dimensions, the interior walls have a linear run of 690 feet (250 by 95 feet) or approximately 210 m. With the height of the walls being approximately 50 feet (15.24 m), the approximate surface area of the interior walls would then be 34,500 sq ft (3,205 sq m). Vicat and Holman differed on the thickness of the final coat of Madras *chunam* used. The thickness ranges from

A studio portrait of Major John Frederick Aldophus McNair in his uniform, c. 1900. McNair, who supervised the construction of St Andrew's Church, recounted in his book, *Prisoners Their Own Warders*, that Madras *chunam* was used as a plaster for the interior walls and columns of the church. Courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.



one-tenth plus one-sixteenth of an inch, or approximately 4 mm, to one-quarter of an inch, or approximately 6 mm. The total volume of the final plaster would range approximately from 466 cu ft (13.2 cu m) to 718 cu ft (20.3 cu m).

Vicat and Holman also held different views on the number of eggs required to make the plaster. According to Vicat,

### THE CURIOUS INGREDIENTS THAT MAKE UP MADRAS CHUNAM

When constructing a building, plaster is applied to the walls to protect the underlying stone or brick, and for decorative reasons. In the 19th-century, walls were typically plastered using lime plaster, which is primarily made of lime, sand and water.

Madras *chunam*, in contrast, uses additional ingredients. According to Louis-Joseph Vicat and James Holman, making Madras *chunam* also involved using ghee (butter) or oil, tyre (sour curd), albumen (egg white) and soapstone powder (*lapis ollaris*, commonly known as talc) in the final coat.

For lime, Vicat and Holman wrote that sea shells were used, while John Frederick Aldophus McNair's account cites corals instead. "[Our] lime... [was] made from coral, of which there were extensive reefs round the Island of Singapore.... Coral is almost a pure carbonate of lime, and therefore very well suited for the purpose. It was broken up and heated in kilns constructed for the purpose".<sup>1</sup>

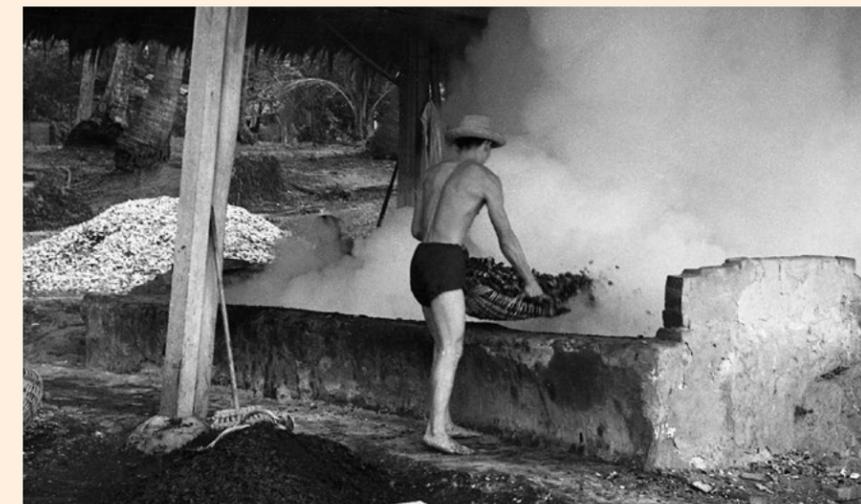
It is not unusual to use raw sugar (jaggery) in plaster. In fact, sugar is widely used as an additive to increase the plasticity of lime plaster as it decreases the viscosity of plaster and improves its workability and strength. This quality is especially important in decorative plastering, such as mouldings and capitals.

Oil is also a common ingredient used in the final coat of plaster. In the

around 10 to 12 eggs are needed per 1.28 cu ft, while Holman said that the whites of a dozen eggs were needed for every 2.17 cu ft.<sup>13</sup> Based on these accounts, between 2,580 and 6,730 eggs would have been used to plaster the interior walls of St Andrew's, which is a considerable number of eggs. This quantity does not account for the plaster on the columns.

### Constructing St Andrew's

The foundation stone of the present church building was laid by the Right Reverend Daniel Wilson, Lord Bishop of Calcutta and Metropolitan of India, on 4 March 1856.<sup>14</sup> It was designed by Ronald MacPherson of the Madras Artillery, who was appointed Executive Engineer and Superintendent of Convicts in Singapore.



West, linseed oil<sup>2</sup> is typically used, while Tung oil<sup>3</sup> is used in China. The addition of oil increases the plaster's water resistance and is typically used in the final layer.

Soapstone powder consists of a large agglomerate of hydrated magnesium silicate that is used for polishing soft materials.

Sour curd is largely made up of milk proteins (casein), which are useful as a binder in lime plaster to improve its adhesive properties.<sup>4</sup> Conceivably, as albumen comprises primarily of protein, it might also have been used as a binder. In recent years, studies have found that albumen does increase the compressive and flexural strength of plaster.<sup>5</sup>

Coconut fibre in some form is cited as an ingredient by McNair though not by Vicat

A lime kiln at Kampong Mata Ikan, 1967. Seashells (white pile on the left), which are made of calcium carbonate, are heated to approximately 900 degrees Celsius to produce calcium oxide, also known as quicklime. The man is using a woven rattan *pungki* or *pengki* (畚箕) (a shallow basket) to deposit what looks to be charcoal – fuel for the kiln – into an open pit. Photo by Hor Kwok Kin. Retrieved from Photonic.

and Holman. It is unclear from McNair's account if the lime plaster was mixed with water, together with the coconut fibre (husk) that was steeped in it, or just the water, with the husk removed. Coconut fibre is composed mainly of cellulose, hemicellulose and lignin, which are insoluble in water.<sup>6</sup> Coconut fibre, however, is known to have been added to plaster to improve its tensile strength<sup>7</sup> and it is not inconceivable that it was used in the mixture.

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He is said to have drawn inspiration for the design from a ruined Cistercian monastery in the village of Netley in Hampshire, a county in southeast England.<sup>15</sup>

When MacPherson left for Melaka in 1857 to take up a new posting as Resident Councillor, McNair took over the responsibility as Engineer and Superintendent of Convicts, and with the assistance of John Bennett, a civil and mechanical engineer, supervised the construction of the church carried out by Indian convict labourers.<sup>16</sup>

After five years of construction, an opening service was held on 11 October 1861.<sup>17</sup> At the time, the interiors were almost completed but the exterior and the spire were still unfinished.<sup>18</sup> The church was consecrated by the Bishop of Calcutta, George Edward Lynch Cotton, on 25 January the following year<sup>19</sup> although the spire would only be completed in December 1864. Construction work on the entire building finally ended in April 1865, nine years after the foundation stone was laid.<sup>20</sup>

The construction of St Andrew's faced funding constraints from the very beginning, which affected the building schedule. In an 1855 letter, Edmund Augustus Blundell, then Governor of the Straits Settlements, wrote to the Secretary to the Government of India, outlining the budget and the reliance on convict labour to keep costs down:

“Original estimate sanctioned in 1853 amounting to Rs. 14,985 is now, of course, wholly inadequate to effect the construction of the entire New Building suited to accommodate the large and increasing Protestant Congregation of the place... Captain Macpherson's estimate, amounts to 120,932 Rs, but with the assistance of Convict labor, and chiefly of materials prepared by Convict labor, he reduces the actual outlay to 47,916 Rs. and I have no doubt, that by venturing on Convict labour to a

This elevation drawing of the proposed spire design for St Andrew's Church (now St Andrew's Cathedral) is attributed to Ronald MacPherson. However, his design was not realised and a simplified design (see inset photo) by Jasper Otway Mayne, an engineer with the Public Works Department, was constructed instead. Among the many differences, the *ocil-de-boeuf* (bull's eye) windows at the belfry level were replaced by lancet windows, and the flying buttresses connecting the pinnacles to the spire, as well as *lucarne* (spire light), which is a type of dormer window, were removed. *Courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.*

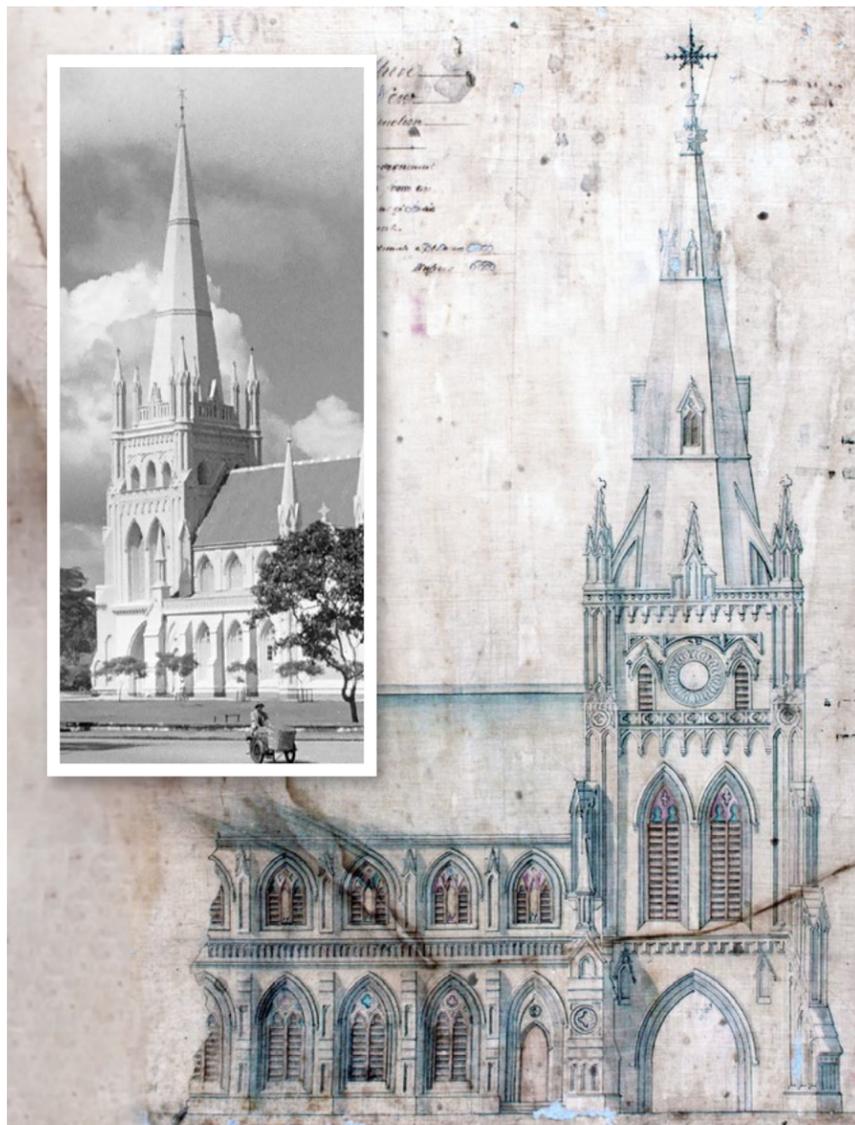
still greater extent, as mentioned by him in his letter accompanying the Plan and Estimate; the Estimate of the actual outlay of money may be reduced to 40,000 Rs...”<sup>21</sup>

Funding remained tight throughout the entire building process. In 1859, three years into its construction, the government tried to raise funds to complete the spire through loans from public subscribers.<sup>22</sup> Three years later, *The Singapore Free Press* reported that “Rs. 21,784 was spent on St Andrew's Church; the body of this fine building was completed” while “the spire is in abeyance”.<sup>23</sup> This suggests that the project may not have been allocated the Rs. 40,000 estimated by Blundell.

Work progressed slowly over the next few years.<sup>24</sup> In 1863, the tower with eight pinnacles, on which the base of the spire would be constructed, was built.<sup>25</sup>

It would take another two years before the spire was finally erected, signifying the completion of the handsome English gothic edifice.<sup>26</sup> (The original design of the spire could not be realised and the spire was redesigned by Jasper Otway Mayne, an engineer in the Public Works Department.) In total, the construction of the church took nine years: five years to complete the main building and interiors, and another four for the tower and spire.

One of the casualties of the tight funding was the plastering work. In 1859, *The Singapore Free Press* wrote that because the “proposal of a Government Loan for the completion of the Church has not produced any favourable effect... not a single man is now allowed to work there – that the small number of Convicts allowed for plasterers of the interior have been withdrawn”.<sup>27</sup>



### Putting It All Together

We know from Holman's account that the production process for the plaster – from preparation and application to completion, especially for the final finishing coat – is both laborious and labour-intensive. Given the challenges of limited funds and a labour shortage, it is certainly possible that Madras *chunam* was not used at all, or if it was, only in a very limited fashion.

Some other clues emerged from newspaper archives. In 1949, the cathedral had to undergo major repair work as the structure had suffered damage during the Japanese Occupation (1942–45) when it was used as a hospital.<sup>28</sup> A 1949 article in *The Malayan Tribune* reported that the “original walls of ‘Madras *chunam*’... are being replaced by plaster...” and that the colour scheme would be changed from grey to white on the interiors and grey on the exterior.<sup>29</sup>

Based on this account, the interior of the church in 1949 was grey before the repair work. The key point to note is this: if the church's interior was indeed

executed in Madras *chunam* as McNair had asserted, the colour is unlikely to be grey. This is because only the purest and whitest of shells are used in the production of Madras *chunam*, and great care is taken to ensure its pristine whiteness. As such, the mention of the grey interior walls suggests that the walls were not plastered with Madras *chunam* when the building was first built, or possibly, that the material was replaced at some point thereafter.

In the absence of any physical confirmation or other published documentation to confirm the presence of Madras *chunam* in St Andrew's, the only evidence for it then is McNair's account. Could McNair be mistaken? His book, *Prisoners Their Own Warders*, was published in 1899, some 34 years after the completion of the church, so a faulty memory cannot be ruled out.

An alternative explanation is that Madras *chunam* was indeed used as described by McNair, but only in a very limited fashion because of budgetary constraints.

Without a comprehensive examination, we cannot know with any certainty if Madras *chunam* was actually used in St Andrew's. And even if we were able to conduct comprehensive experiments that returned negative results, there is still a possibility that Madras *chunam* was used initially, but subsequently removed.

Having weighed the historical evidence – the budgetary constraints that affected the progress of construction and the grey walls in 1949 – and given the results of the trials and repairs conducted in the last decade, there is sufficient evidence to say that Madras *chunam* was never actually used in St Andrew's. Regrettably, however, we will never know for sure. ♦

The author would like to acknowledge Wee Sheau Theng for her invaluable assistance in the course of this research.

### NOTES

- 1 St Andrew's Cathedral is the second church building on the site of the original St Andrew's Church, named after the patron saint of Scotland. The original building was designed by Government Superintendent of Public Works George D. Coleman and completed in 1836. After the spire of the church had been struck by lightning in 1845 and 1849, the building was considered unsafe and later demolished. The second St Andrew's Church was completed in 1865. It was consecrated as a cathedral in 1870 and became known as St Andrew's Cathedral. See Cornelius-Takahama, V. (2017). *St Andrew's Cathedral*. Retrieved from Singapore Infopedia, National Library, Singapore.
- 2 McNair, J.F.A., & Bayliss, W.D. (1899). *Prisoners their own warders: A record of the convict prison at Singapore established 1825, discontinued 1873, together with a cursory history of the convict establishments at Bencoolen, Penang and Malacca from the Year 1797*. Westminster: A. Constable. (Call no.: RRARE 365.95957 MAC; Microfilm no.: NL12115)
- 3 McNair & Bayliss, 1899, pp. 98–100.
- 4 Town and country. (1928, July 7). *The Straits Times*, p. 10; Cathedral bells silent for first time in fifty years. (1936, March 29). *The Straits Times*, p. 28; Cathedral's walls were coated with egg. (1949, September 13). *The Malaya Tribune*, p. 2; Davies, D. (1954, October 24). Convicts and the whites of eggs. *The Straits Times*, p. 14; The hazards of photography 100 years ago. (1957, July 7). *The Straits Times*, p. 12; St. Andrew's Cathedral. (1971, September 17). *New Nation*, p. 9; Chandy, G. (1979, December 3). Christmas was special event even then. *New Nation*, p. 9; Chia, A. (1981, July 19). Peace and quiet pervades its grounds. *The Straits Times*, p. 4; Teh, J.L. (2003, June 5). Fewer cars might help this building last longer. *The New Paper*, p. 4; Ng, J.X. (2013, April 2). White church, colourful past. *The Straits Times*, p. 8. Retrieved from NewspaperSG; Liu, G. (1996). *In granite and chunam: The national monuments of Singapore* (p. 174). Singapore: Landmark Books and Preservation of Monuments Board. (Call no.: RSING 725.94095957 LIU); Tan, B. (2015, October–December). Convict labour in colonial Singapore. *BiblioAsia*, 11 (3), pp. 36–41. Retrieved from BiblioAsia website.
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- 14 Untitled. (1856, March 4). *The Straits Times*, p. 4; St. Andrews. (1870, April 30). *The Straits Times*, p. 1; Untitled. (1870, December 24). *The Straits Times*, p. 1. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 15 Straits Times Saturday, Oct. 12, 1861. (1861, October 12). *The Straits Times*, p. 19. Retrieved from NewspaperSG; McNair & Bayliss, 1899, pp. 71–74, 97.
- 16 McNair & Bayliss, 1899, pp. 71–74, 97; *The Straits calendar and directory for 1861* (pp. 26–27). (1861). Singapore: Printed at the Commercial Press. Retrieved from BookSG. In the *Straits Times* article, John Bennett was named the Executive Engineer while J.F.A. McNair was not mentioned. However, in McNair's *Prisoners Their Own Warders*, it is mentioned that a Captain Purvis of the Madras Artillery had succeeded MacPherson in the role of Engineer and Superintendent of Convicts in 1857 but relinquished his position a year later. McNair then succeeded him, while Bennett was Assistant Superintendent of Convicts. Upon verification with *The Straits Calendar and Directory for 1861*, McNair was on leave in Europe and Bennett, who held the positions of Special Assistant Engineer and Deputy Superintendent of Convicts, was thus officiating as both the Executive Engineer and the Superintendent of Convicts in McNair's absence.

- 17 *The Straits Times*, 12 Oct 1861, p. 19. It is interesting to note, however, that the church was recorded as opened for service on 6 October 1861 in *The Straits Calendar and Directory for 1861*. See *The Straits calendar and directory for 1861*. (1861, 1861, p. 42.
- 18 During construction, the original design of the spire by Ronald MacPherson was deemed unsuitable due to supposed settlement issues and thus said to have been redesigned by Jasper Otway Mayne, an engineer with the Public Works Department. See *The Straits Times*, 24 Dec 1870, p. 1.
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- 25 St. Andrew's Church. (1863, October 17). *The Straits Times*, p. 2. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 26 *The Singapore Free Press*, 31 Aug 1865, p. 2.
- 27 Correspondence. (1859, September 8). *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, p. 3. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 28 Singapore on February 15, 1942. (1946, February 15). *The Straits Times*, p. 2. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 29 *The Malaya Tribune*, 13 Sep 1949, p. 2; Lim, S.J. (1996, November 30). Places of worship steeped in history. *The Straits Times*, p. 10. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

# RAFFLES DISPLACED

**Ng Yi-Sheng** is a poet, fictionist, playwright and researcher. His books include his debut poetry collection *last boy*, which won the Singapore Literature Prize in 2008; the short story collection *Lion City*, which won the Singapore Literature Prize in 2020, and the performance lecture compilation *Black Waters, Pink Sands*.

in the ARTS, CULTURE  
AND HISTORY  
OF SINGAPORE

Raffles, once widely admired and revered as the founder of Singapore, has been portrayed in a more complicated light in recent years, as **Ng Yi-Sheng** tells us.



**(Left)** An engraving of Stamford Raffles by James Thomson, 1824. National Portrait Gallery, London. Image reproduced from Boulger, D.C. (1897). *The Life of Sir Stamford Raffles*. London: Horace Marshall & Son. Collection of the National Library, Singapore. (Accession no.: B03013459C).

**(Facing page)** Raffles' "Disappearance" by Teng Kai Wei in partnership with the Singapore Bicentennial Office. On 31 December 2018, the polymarble Raffles statue along the Singapore River was painted over to give the optical illusion that it had been removed. Courtesy of the Singapore Bicentennial Office.

On 7 June 2020, as the Black Lives Matter protests raged around the world, a group of anti-racism activists in Bristol toppled a statue of the 17th-century slave trader Edward Colston, rolled it all the way to the harbour, and then triumphantly dumped it into the Avon River.

This act galvanised activists across the globe. In Brussels, people began defacing sculptures of the murderous King Leopold II. In Boston and St Paul, statues of Christopher Columbus were attacked while in Penang, a Francis Light statue was vandalised with red paint.

Meanwhile, in Singapore, satirical Twitter account @Raffles\_Statue reposted a video of the Colston statue being dropped into the harbour, with this comment:

"I'd like to declare that I can't swim.  
#StatueLivesMatter"<sup>1</sup>

This was just one of many voices in mid-2020 urging Singaporeans to consider the removal of the statue of Stamford Raffles. Dhevarajan Devadas, a research assistant at the Institute of Policy Studies, posted on Facebook that we should "finally acknowledge the impact of colonialism on the indigenous people of this region by vacating his place of honour".<sup>2</sup> Veteran journalist Jeevan Vasagar agreed, writing in a column for the *Nikkei Times* that "Raffles should disappear for good".<sup>3</sup>

How did this revolt against Raffles arise? One major stimulus was the publication of Tim Hannigan's *Raffles and the British Invasion of Java* (2012).<sup>4</sup> This non-fiction work details how Raffles instigated the British East India Company's bloody invasion and subsequent occupation of Java between 1811 and 1815, ritually humiliating the royals and pillaging their treasure houses, and mismanaging funds and alienating his colleagues. He even allowed the local Java-

nese to be kidnapped for slavery, including sexual bondage, for his friend Alexander Hare's colony in Banjarmasin, on the island of Borneo.<sup>5</sup>

Criticisms mounted with Nadia Wright's *William Farquhar and Singapore: Stepping out from Raffles' Shadow* (2017),<sup>6</sup> which claims that the credit for establishing the port of Singapore should in fact go to the first Resident, William Farquhar, rather than Raffles, who spent a mere eight months on the island. Then in 2019, the Asian Civilisations Museum's exhibition titled "Raffles in Southeast Asia – Revisiting the Scholar and Statesman" highlighted how his writings on Southeast Asia were rife with plagiarism and misinterpretation of evidence.

Artists and playwrights have been inspired by these polemics. Jimmy Ong, for instance, has created numerous artworks that depict Raffles being punished for his sins. In his charcoal drawing *Roro Rafflesia* (2015), Raffles is stripped naked and scolded by a Javanese goddess. In his performance installation *Open Love Letters* (2018), Raffles' headless and legless body is sawn in half and used as a charcoal grill to make biscuits known colloquially as "love letters".

Haresh Sharma's play *Civilised* (2019) imagines Raffles and Farquhar still alive in the present day, collaborating as oppressors. Alfian Sa'at and Neo Hai Bin's documentary theatre production *Merdeka / 獨立 / சுதந்திரம்* (2019) features re-enactments of key events in Singapore's history, including Raffles' callous treatment of Sultan Husain Shah in Singapore and the royal family in Yogyakarta.<sup>7</sup>

The 2019 theatre production of *Merdeka / 獨立 / சுதந்திரம்* by Alfian Sa'at and Neo Hai Bin re-enacts key events in Singapore's history, including Stamford Raffles' callous treatment of Sultan Husain Shah in Singapore and the royal family in Yogyakarta. Courtesy of *Wild Rice*.



These revisionist depictions of Raffles represent only the latest in a series of cultural movements, all grappling with a figure who has loomed large over popular history in Singapore. Over the past two centuries, dozens of artists and intellectuals have invoked his name to further their own agendas. Taken as a whole, their works reveal the complex and continually shifting relationship between Singapore society and the legacy of colonialism.

#### Raffles Instituted (1817–1942)

The earliest artworks associated with Raffles arose not out of victory, but abject failure. In 1815, he was dismissed from Java, having failed to make the colony profitable for the East India Company. Back in London, he took pains to restore his reputation. In 1817, he wrote and published *The History of Java*<sup>8</sup> and commissioned portraits of himself by George Francis Joseph and James Lonsdale, a marble bust by sculptor Francis Leggatt Chantrey, a miniature by Alfred Edward Chalon as well as a coat of arms to commemorate his knighthood.

Raffles died in 1826, bankrupt. It was his widow, Lady Sophia Raffles,

who took on the task of rehabilitating her husband's image, with considerably more success. In 1830, she published his papers under the title, *Memoir of the Life and Public Services of Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles*,<sup>9</sup> and even convinced Chantrey to erect a life-size marble statue of him at Westminster Abbey in 1832, which still stands today. She also commissioned multiple copies of Chantrey's bust of Raffles, including one that she sent to Singapore.<sup>10</sup>

Raffles soon won further acclaim in Singapore, thanks to the writer Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir, better known as Munsyi Abdullah. In 1849, he published *Hikayat Abdullah (Stories of Abdullah)*, a memoir containing anecdotes of early Melaka and Singapore, including the time he worked as Raffles' scribe.<sup>11</sup> Here, the latter is praised in the most glowing of terms. Two poems celebrate Raffles and his wife, and the author writes, "Even should I die and return to this world in another life I should never again meet such a man."<sup>12</sup>

However, the cult of Raffles only really gained momentum in the latter half of the 19th century as his name began to be attached to numerous landmarks in Singapore: Raffles Lighthouse in 1855, Raffles Place (formerly Commercial Square) in 1858, Raffles Institution (formerly Singapore Institution) in 1868, Raffles Library and Museum (formerly the Singapore Library) in 1874 and Raffles Hotel in 1887.

These efforts culminated in the bronze statue by the famed British sculptor-cum-poet Thomas Woolner portraying Raffles as a pillar of imperial might, eight feet tall on his pedestal, arms confidently folded, one foot trampling on a map of Singapore. This was unveiled at the Esplanade (now Padang) on 27 June 1887 to serve as "a permanent memorial of the Jubilee",<sup>13</sup> i.e. the 50th anniversary of Queen Victoria's coronation.

Before the grand opening, Inspector of Schools A.M. Skinner held a competition for the best inscription to accompany the statue. One finalist was Raffles Institution schoolboy D.C. Perreau, who penned the following lines:

An Epitaph

Immortal founder of this isle,  
Thy work is done and yet no smile

Plaster cast of Francis Leggatt Chantrey's bust of Stamford Raffles. *Bastin Collection, National Library, Singapore. (Accession no.: B29029424).*

Comes from thy cold but pensive face  
To greet the glory of the place  
Which eight and sixty years ago  
Thy weary wand'rings well did know;  
Ope but a while thy closed eyes  
And see the perfect paradise  
Thy restless once, now folded, arms  
Have placed amidst Earth's fairest charms

In vain we ask; Life's spark no more  
Doth shine as it had done before;  
Thou'rt gone, great soul, thou'rt gone,  
but thou,  
Though dead, art not forgotten now!

*Labor Omnia Vincit*<sup>14</sup>

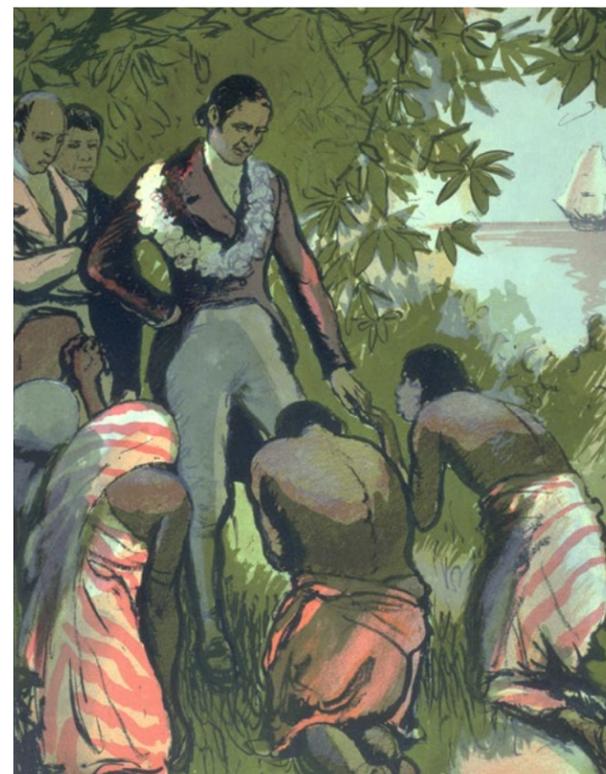
In the end, however, the final inscription was somewhat more prosaic:

"On this historic site, Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles first landed in Singapore on 28th January 1819, and with genius and perception changed the destiny of Singapore from an obscure fishing village to a great seaport and modern metropolis."

Why was Perreau's more poetic text not chosen? One possible reason is that it speaks of the death of the colonist. The British had no desire to mourn Raffles the man – instead, they wanted to glorify his lasting accomplishments.

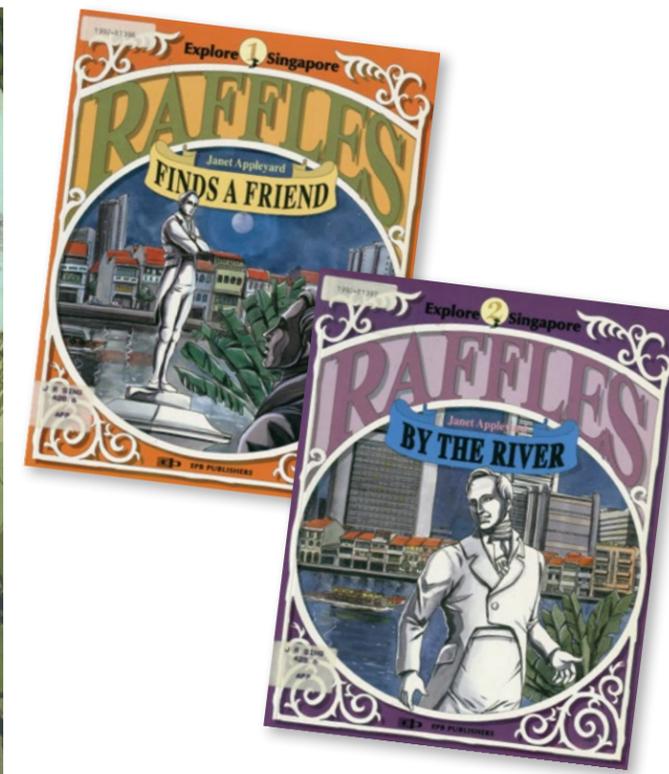
In the years that followed, the statue suffered a number of indignities. During sports events at the Esplanade, it was hit by stray footballs and clambered upon by spectators, seeking better views.<sup>15</sup> For this reason, the statue was moved to its current location in front of the Victoria Memorial Hall at Empress Place, as part of the centenary celebrations in 1919, accompanied by Doric columns, a marble-lined pool, fountain jets and vases of flowers.

Meanwhile, Raffles' image proliferated in other media. In a 1927 poster produced for the Empire Marketing Board,<sup>16</sup> Raffles stands alongside other colonists such as James Cook<sup>17</sup> and Cecil John Rhodes<sup>18</sup> in a group portrait. He also appears in *The Pageant of Empire: An Historical Epic*, held at the Empire Stadium (now Wembley Stadium) in London in 1924.<sup>19</sup> The souvenir volume features an illustration titled *Singapore: Stamford Raffles' Farewell* by Gerald Spencer Pryse, which shows a garlanded Raffles with local men and women kneeling before him as if in worship.



(Above) Artwork of *Singapore: Stamford Raffles' Farewell* by Gerald Spencer Pryse, 1924. It shows a garlanded Stamford Raffles with local men and women kneeling before him as if in worship. The illustration appears in the souvenir volume for *The Pageant of Empire: An Historical Epic* held in London in 1924. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

(Above right) *Raffles Finds a Friend* is a standard biography of the man, while *Raffles by the River* narrates the adventures of the two Raffles statues as they come to life at night and frolic around modern Singapore. These two books are part of Janet Appleyard's six-volume picture book series, *Explore Singapore*. Collection of the National Library, Singapore. (Accession nos.: B04216016; B04216015H).



#### Raffles Reconstituted (1942 onwards)

World War II put an end to the myth of British invincibility. During the Japanese Occupation of Singapore (1942–45), amid rumours that the bronze statue of Raffles would be melted down for the metal, it was quickly removed and stored in the former Raffles Library and Museum (renamed Syonan Library and Museum during the Occupation). When the statue was reinstalled at Empress Place after the war, it was stripped of its colonnade, which had been damaged by bombing, and its flower vases were lost for good.

In the post-war years, there were some signs that the cult of Raffles might be on the wane. In 1949, Raffles College merged with King Edward VII College of Medicine, rebranding itself as the University of Malaya. In 1960, the Raffles Library was renamed the National Library.

In 1960, the Dutch economist Albert Winsemius arrived in Singapore as a consultant to the Singapore government. He told then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew that there were "two pre-conditions for Singapore's success: first, to eliminate the Communists who made any economic

progress impossible; and second, not to remove the statue of Sir Stamford Raffles".<sup>20</sup> Both these acts, he argued, would show Western capitalist nations that Singapore still welcomed their investments.

Lee embraced this advice. In 1969, at the opening of an exhibition to mark the 15th anniversary of the People's Action Party (PAP), then Minister for Foreign Affairs S. Rajaratnam said that "[t]o pretend that [Raffles] did not found Singapore would be the first sign of a dishonest society". He added that the statue had narrowly escaped demolition by the early PAP. "We started off as an anti-colonial party. We have passed that stage – only Raffles remains."<sup>21</sup>

That same year, Donald and Joanna Moore's popular history book *The First 150 Years of Singapore* was published, marking a century-and-a-half since British arrival on the island. In the book, Prime Minister Lee is described as a latter-day Raffles. "The first one hundred and fifty years of Singapore open and close under the aegis of a great man: Raffles, a beacon of almost blinding light at the beginning, pointing the way; Lee Kuan Yew, succes-

sor... Raffles and Lee Kuan Yew have, as we shall see, much in common, not only in themselves, but in their stars."<sup>22</sup>

Thus, during the initial decades of Singapore's independence, Raffles was lionised. Between 1962 and 1966, E.W. Jesudason, Principal of Raffles Institution, wrote a school anthem, "Auspicious Melioris Aevi", picturing Raffles as a classical hero, holding "the torch/That cast Promethean Flame".<sup>23</sup> In 1972, the Singapore Tourist Promotion Board (now Singapore Tourism Board) erected a second Raffles statue, in white polymarble, at his landing site on the north bank of the Singapore River, near Boat Quay.

Later, companies began co-opting his name, resulting in commercial enterprises such as Raffles City Shopping Centre (1986), Raffles Country Club (1988; now defunct), Singapore Airlines' Raffles Class (1990; renamed Business Class in 2006), the Raffles Cup horse races (1991), Raffles Town Club (2000) and Raffles Hospital (2002).

Writers, too, paid tribute. They retold Raffles' story in works such as Hereward Brown and Ian Senior's musical *The Lion*





Fyerool Darma's installation, *The Most Mild-Mannered Men*, for the fifth edition of the Singapore Biennale, 2016. The work consists of two chalk-white pedestals: one bears a grotesquely bloated bust of Raffles, while the other stands empty, bearing only a plaque inscribed with the name of the Sultan who negotiated with him: "Hussein Mu'azzam Shah, 1776–1835". Courtesy of Fyerool Darma.

of Singapore (1979), Nigel Barley's travelogue *The Duke of Puddle Dock: Travels in the Footsteps of Stamford Raffles* (1991),<sup>24</sup> Asiapac Books' children's graphic novel *Stamford Raffles: Founder of Modern Singapore* (2002),<sup>25</sup> and Victoria Glendinning's biography *Raffles and the Golden Opportunity 1781–1826* (2012).<sup>26</sup>

Perhaps the strangest of these texts is Janet Appleyard's picture book series, *Explore Singapore* (1992–94). The first volume, *Raffles Finds a Friend*, is a standard biography of the man. But there is little exploration of history in the five subsequent titles: *Raffles by the River*, *Raffles Meets the Merlions*, *Raffles and the Elephant*, *Raffles at Raffles* and *Raffles Happy Birthday*.<sup>27</sup> Instead, these books narrate the adventures of the two Raffles statues as they come to life at night and frolic around modern Singapore.

The work is, in a sense, the natural result of the endless reduplication of Raffles' name and image. To many, he is no longer a historical figure but a mere icon, utterly disassociated from colonial violence and subjection, gently tinged with the nostalgic grandeur of a bygone age.

#### Raffles Reviled (1971 onwards)

There were, of course, counter-narratives to this onslaught of praise. In 1971, sociologist Syed Hussein Alatas published *Thomas Stamford Raffles, 1781–1826: Schemer or Reformer?* This text considers not only Raffles' role in recruiting slaves for Alexander Hare's settlement in Banjarmasin, but also his involvement in the massacre of

the Dutch and Javanese in Palembang; his racist writings about Chinese, Malays and Arabs; and his failure to speak out regarding social injustice in the United Kingdom. "Raffles was just one of the hundreds of enthusiastic pioneers of empire building moved by the lust for gain," Alatas concludes. "[C]ompared to the wider circle of thinkers and reformers, he was philosophically and ethically a dwarf."<sup>28</sup>

In 1977, Ronald Alcantra won the Ministry of Culture Playwriting Competition with a script titled *An Eclipse Leaves No Shadows*.<sup>29</sup> This was first performed as a radio play in 1979 and then adapted for TV in 1988. Set in 1823, the play dramatises the power struggle between Raffles and Singapore's first Resident, William Farquhar. Into the picture enters Syed Yassin,<sup>30</sup> a merchant who escapes from prison and runs amok before being killed. Here, Raffles is portrayed as a sickly, tyrannical racist who is stricken by frequent mind-splitting headaches, who snubs Farquhar for marrying a Eurasian wife, and who cruelly parades Syed Yassin's corpse through the streets as a warning to all who dared to defy British authority.

However, it is in the field of Malay literature that we see a truly sustained critique of Raffles. In 1980, the prolific poet and writer Suratman Markasan published "Balada Seorang Lelaki di Depan Patung Raffles" ("The Ballad of a Man Before the Statue of Raffles") in the journal *Sasterawan*. The five-part poem imagines a madman in contemporary Singapore, screaming curses at Raffles' statue, blaming him for the impoverishment of the Malay race:

"Serentak lelaki hilang kepala bingkas  
 'Dosamu tujuh turunan kusumpah terus  
 kau membawa Farquhar dan Lord Minto  
 siasatmu halus. Membuka pintu kotaku  
 pedagang buru pemimpin menambah kantung  
 membangun Temasek menjadi Singapura  
 masuk sama penipu perompak pembunuh  
 aku sekarang tinggal tulang dan gigi cuma  
 kusumpah tujuh turunanmu tanpa tanggung!..."

(Translation)

"Suddenly, the man who has lost his mind springs to his feet  
 'Your sins for seven generations I put a curse on  
 you brought with you Farquhar and Lord Minto  
 your intelligence was subtle. By opening my city doors  
 traders, labourers, leaders filled up their pockets  
 they developed Temasek into Singapore  
 swindlers, robbers, murders all entered too  
 I'm now left with only bones and teeth  
 I curse you seven generations now!..."<sup>31</sup>

In later Malay works that touch on Raffles, the tendency is to focus more on the Malays who interacted with him. In Mohamed Latiff Mohamed's 2007 poem "Raffles", he is portrayed as exploitative, viewing Singapore as "a utopia/to be owned/to be possessed", but the poet's real scorn is reserved for the Malays who embrace him: They are "fools nary of dignity".<sup>32</sup>

In Isa Kamari's novel *Duka Tuan Bertakhta*<sup>33</sup> (*His Majesty's Sorrow*) (2011), published in English as *1819*,<sup>34</sup> Raffles is depicted as a conniving, manipulative man intent on stripping the Sultan and Temenggong of their power and participating in sinister Freemasonic rites. However, the heart of the story is about the Malay men who were left defenceless without a credible leader to protect them from the British.

Fyerool Darma's installation, *The Most Mild-Mannered Men*, created for the fifth edition of the Singapore Biennale in 2016, captures the Malay perspective on Raffles.

The work consists of two chalk-white pedestals: one bears a grotesquely bloated bust of Raffles, while the other stands empty, bearing only a plaque inscribed with the name of the Sultan who signed the treaty with him in 1819: "Hussein Mu'azzam Shah, 1776–1835". Expressing fury towards the colonist is not the only part of an anti-colonial struggle; artists also seek to remember those who were colonised – not just the winners of history, but also the losers.

#### Riff-Raff (1989 onwards)

In the early 1980s, the professor and poet Robert Yeo was struck by a whimsical idea: what if Raffles and Lee Kuan Yew were to meet face to face? This was the inspiration for his play *The Eye of History*, first presented in excerpted form at the National University of Singapore's *Voices of Singapore* reading in 1989, followed by a full staging in 1992.

To the contemporary eye, the script appears rather lacking in conflict. When Raffles makes his appearance at the Istana on his 200th birthday, Lee is surprised, but unflustered. They drink wine and make cordial conversation. Raffles compliments Lee as "a leader who takes a long and enlightened view of history",<sup>35</sup> while Lee agrees to consider Raffles' recommendations to preserve more of Raffles' heritage – for instance, by making his birthday (5 July) a public holiday.

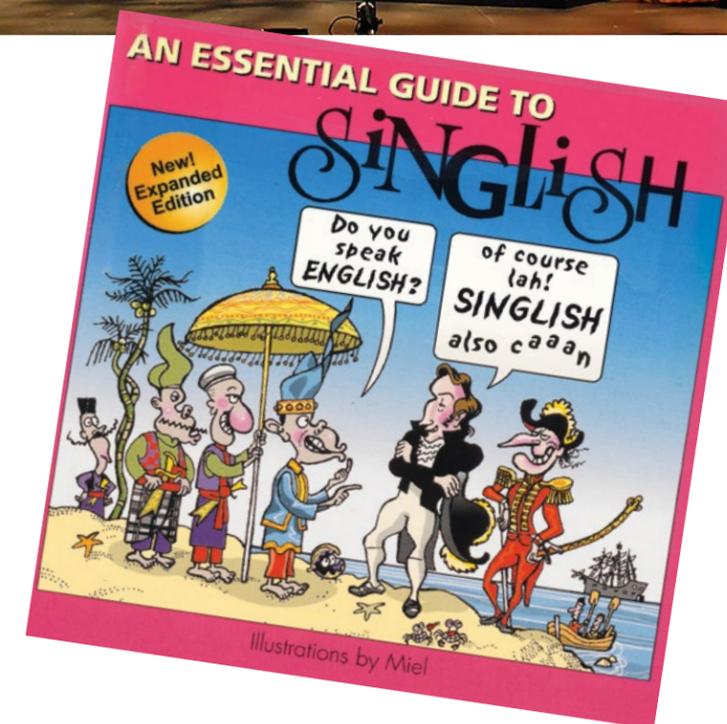
What is revolutionary, however, is the fact that Raffles and Lee are portrayed as ordinary humans, not untouchable leaders. Raffles is written as someone who likes the musical *Cats*, shops at local department store Metro and wears batik shirts. This is iconoclasm of another sort: the status of the colonist is diminished to that of an ordinary citizen.

We see similar gestures elsewhere: illustrator Shirley Eu imagines Raffles stripping down to his singlet and picking his nose on the cover of Catherine Lim's

(Top right) A behind-the-scenes photo from Colin Goh and Woo Yen Yen's *Talking Cock: The Movie*, 2002. In the comedy, Stamford Raffles is portrayed as an object of utter ridicule. Courtesy of Colin Goh.

(Middle right) Ng Yi-Sheng's play, *The Last Temptation of Stamford Raffles*, reconstructs the last 12 hours of Raffles' life. It was staged by W!ld Rice in 2008. Courtesy of W!ld Rice.

(Right) The cover illustration for *An Essential Guide to Singlish* drawn by Prudencio Miel shows Stamford Raffles speaking in Singlish, 2003. Image reproduced from Ma, M.P., & Hanna, S. (2003). *An Essential Guide to Singlish*. Singapore: Gartbooks. (Call no.: RSING 427.95957 ESS).

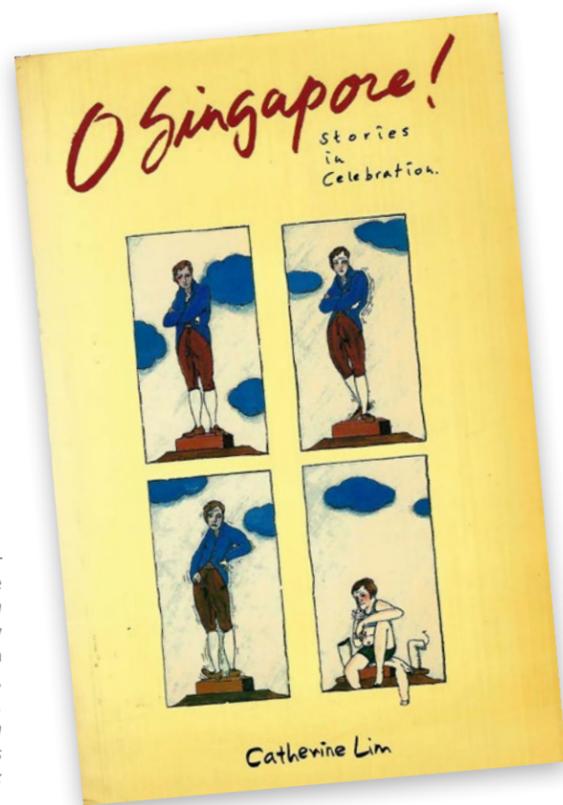


*O Singapore! Stories in Celebration* (1989),<sup>36</sup> cartoonist Prudencio Miel has him speaking Singlish on the cover of *An Essential Guide to Singlish* (2003);<sup>37</sup> and the Singapore Tourism Board's advertising campaign *Let the Stars Guide You* (2017) shows him chowing down at food courts and buying clothes in Orchard Road.

An especially memorable example is Colin Goh and Woo Yen Yen's *Talking Cock: The Movie* (2002). In the comedy, he is portrayed as an object of utter ridicule. In one scene, Raffles bestows

Singapore its name after a Malay woman screams "Singh kapuk!" ("The Sikh man has stolen something!") and fantasises about a future mental institution full of young boys in tight shorts, which he will call Raffles Institution.

There are, of course, works that attempt to seriously and sympathetically engage with Raffles. But increasingly, these stories have a more nuanced take, underscoring the fact that that he died in the prime of his life, in debt and dishonour, bereft of almost all his children.



The cover illustration for Catherine Lim's *O Singapore! Stories in Celebration* by illustrator Shirley Eu shows Raffles stripping down to his singlet and picking his nose, 1989. Image reproduced from Lim, C. (1989). *O Singapore! Stories in Celebration*. Singapore: Times Books International. (Call no.: R 5828 LIM).

We see this in Charles Mandel's horror thriller *Days of Sir Raffles* (1998),<sup>38</sup> which imagines him unleashing and then suffering under an ancient curse. I conveyed the same message in my play *The Last Temptation of Stamford Raffles* (2008), which reconstructs the last 12 hours of Raffles' life. In Kent Chan's 2014 video work *To the Eastward (The Lines Divide)* and Brian Gothong Tan's 2016 multimedia performance *Tropical Traumas: A Series of Cinematic Choreographies*, we not only hear of Raffles' misfortunes, but see how he, and all other historical actors, are eclipsed by the majesty of the indigenous rainforest.

Meanwhile, some artists have chosen to elevate the "common man" to stand as Raffles' equal. Lee Wen's installation *Untitled (Raffles)* (2000) consisted of a scaffold that visitors could climb to look the polymarble Raffles statue in the eye. Vertical Submarine's *Foreign Talent* (2007) featured a statue of a foreign construction worker placed directly opposite Raffles' statue.

More often, however, there has been an interest in memorialising other historical figures. Haresh Sharma's play *Singapore* (2011) entirely omits Raffles from the narrative of early Singapore, focusing instead on William Farquhar and his Eurasian wife Nonio Clement. Rosie Milne's novel *Olivia and Sophia* (2015)<sup>39</sup> transfers the focus to his wives, describing the process of colonisation through their eyes.

These various approaches were echoed with the opening event of the Singapore Bicentennial. On 31 December 2018, the polymarble Raffles statue along the Singapore River was painted over to give the optical illusion that it had been removed. On 5 January 2019,



*Foreign Talent* by Vertical Submarine, 2007, featured a statue of a foreign construction worker placed directly opposite the statue of Stamford Raffles. Courtesy of Vertical Submarine (Justin Loke and Joshua Yang).

four additional statues were temporarily installed next to the Raffles statue: that of Sang Nila Utama, Munsyi Abdullah, Tan Tock Seng and Naraina Pillai.

These two works – Teng Kai Wei's *Raffles' "Disappearance"* and Hong Hai Environmental Art's *The Arrivals* – signal the new relationship Singaporeans have with Raffles in the 21st century: he has been displaced from the centre of our attention. He is no longer the leading man in the pageant of history, but simply another member of the huge and varied cast.

### Raffles-lessness? (Forthcoming)

All this raises the question: should the statue of Raffles be removed? Suggestions to remove it have provoked angry

responses from those who want the monument to remain intact.<sup>40</sup> Evidently, a significant proportion of Singaporeans still view Raffles as worthy of reverence.

Nonetheless, Raffles has, in a sense, already fallen. More and more contemporary writers and artists have vilified, minimised or sidelined his legacy. Works of history such as *Studying Singapore Before 1800*<sup>41</sup> (2018) and *Seven Hundred Years: A History of Singapore*<sup>42</sup> (2019) have extended the timeline of Singapore's past, demoting Raffles to a mere a bit player in the grander scheme of the Singapore story.

On 27 June 2020, an online discussion, *Still "Essential"? Roundtable on the Icon of Stamford Raffles*, was organised by The Substation. The panellists emphasised

that symbolic gestures such as removing statues are nowhere as important as acts of reparation. Museums and other cultural institutions would do well to shift their attention away from British colonists, and focus instead on reactivating the heritage of disenfranchised indigenous communities such as the Orang Laut ("sea people").

Panellist Faris Joraimi noted that much of the commentary assumed that those who wanted to tear down the statues were vandals who wanted to remove historical markers in a violent manner. However, it does not necessarily have to be that way, he said:

"We don't have to pull him down to the sound of drumbeats and toss him into the river. It could be a solemn ceremony. Would we be reading Suratman Markasan's poem? Would we be reading Hussein Alatas? It could actually be a sober moment for us to take stock of our symbolic departure from colonial narratives and our beholdenness to colonial past as a source of legitimacy. It could be a powerful moment of national reflection that marks the beginning of a renewed self-confidence." ♦

This article has its foundation in the author's earlier essay, "Raffles Restitution: Artistic Responses to Singapore's 1819 Colonisation", first published in the *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* (Volume 50, Issue 4, December 2019, pp. 599–631).

### NOTES

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- 16 The Empire Marketing Board was formed in May 1926 to promote intra-Empire trade without the use of tariffs and to persuade consumers to "Buy Empire".
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- 18 Cecil John Rhodes was Prime Minister of Cape Colony (now South Africa) from 1890 to 1896. Rhodes and his British South Africa Company founded the southern African territory of Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe and Zambia), which the company named after him in 1895.
- 19 The Pageant of Empire was the name given to various historical pageants celebrating the British Empire, which were held in the early 20th century. The most elaborate pageant was the one in London – from April to October 1924 – featuring a cast of 15,000 people, 300 horses, 500 donkeys, 730 camels, 72 monkeys, 1,000 doves, seven elephants, three bears and one macaw. It apparently took three days to watch the entire performance.

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# REMEMBERING ROBINSONS

Many generations of Singaporeans have shopped in Robinsons since its founding in 1858.

Gracie Lee and Kevin Khoo highlight some milestones in its illustrious history.



After surviving 162 years, the Great Depression, being bombed by the Japanese during World War II, several economic downturns and a devastating fire in 1972, the curtains have finally come down on home-grown department store Robinsons – once hailed as “one of the handsomest shops in the Far East”.<sup>1</sup>

In August 2020, Robinsons closed its store in Jem shopping mall. Barely four months later, its flagship luxury store in The Heeren followed suit. Its last outlet at Raffles City Shopping Centre shuttered in January 2021.

High-quality merchandise and impeccable service set Robinsons apart when it opened in 1858, and the store quickly became popular with the European community and Malay royalty. Even King Mongkut

of Siam was a loyal customer and was known to have signed off his letters to Robinsons as “your good friend”. Famous people who graced its portals back in its heyday included Britain’s Prince Philip, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and singer Cliff Richard.<sup>2</sup>

Over the years, Robinsons served countless Singaporeans, many of whom became friendly with staff who had worked in the store for decades. The annual Robinsons’ sale, touted as “the sale truly worth waiting for”, was one of the highlights of Singapore’s shopping calendar.

What felled the retail giant? Declining sales due to changing consumer tastes and the rising popularity of online shopping were contributing factors. The reduced

footfall to its outlets was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic that ravaged the world for much of 2020.

As Singaporeans bid farewell to a much-loved icon, we look back at some of the defining moments in Robinsons’ storied past gleaned from newspaper reports in NewspaperSG, annual reports and inhouse newsletters kept by the National Library, and oral history interviews and images from the National Archives.

#### NOTES

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## HOW ROBINSONS GOT ITS NAME

The grand dame’s history can be traced back to 1 February 1858 when Philip Robinson, who came from Australia, and James Gaborian Spicer, a former keeper at the Singapore Jail, opened Spicer & Robinson at Nos. 9 & 10 Commercial Square (now Raffles Place).

An 1858 advertisement for the “New Family Warehouse”, as it was called, went: “Spicer & Robinson respectfully invite the attention of Private Families, Hotel Proprietors, and the Public generally to their establishment, now replete with a well selected stock, which they are determined to offer at the lowest remunerative rates, in order to ensure a large amount of public support.”<sup>1</sup> The store sold items such as tea, rice, sugar, oatmeal, biscuits, crackers, cheese, preserved meats and women’s hats.

A year later, the store was renamed Robinson and Company when

Robinson’s partnership with Spicer was dissolved and George Rappa, Jr. came on board. After Robinson’s death in 1886, his son, with the splendid name of Stamford Raffles Robinson, succeeded him. One A.W. Bean was also brought in as a partner. The business flourished and was incorporated as a limited company in 1920. The firm then came under the management of a hired general manager and a board of directors comprising members such as prominent businessman Eu Tong Sen.<sup>2</sup>

◆ Gracie Lee

#### NOTES

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## FROM HIGH-END TO HIGH STREET

Robinsons began life as a high-end store when it opened, setting out to woo customers with its wide array of quality merchandise, excellent service and eye-catching displays. By the turn of the 20th century, the store had become a household name among British “mems”, European expatriates and the well-heeled of Singapore society.

Robinsons made a name for itself as a one-stop shopping paradise, with departments dedicated to drapery, haberdashery, millinery, home furnishings, bicycles, photographic apparatus, sporting equipment, musical instruments, and even arms and ammunitions used for game hunting.

It was said that wealthy Straits Chinese women would travel from Kuching in Sarawak to Singapore just to buy Swiss voile, which could only be found in Robinsons. To appeal to female shoppers, the store later offered dressmaking services that included bespoke clothing sent all the way from London.

Robinsons was also a trailblazer in introducing new shopping experiences and brands exclusive to the store, such as Hennessy brandy and Heineken beer. In 1907, Robinsons became among the

(Facing page) The Robinsons building in Raffles Place, 1950s. The store’s name is also displayed in Chinese and Malay on the signboard. The statue of Mercury is perched on the top of the arch. *Chiang Ker Chiu Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

(Left) Robinsons advertising its annual sale in 1907. *The Straits Times, 5 September 1907, p. 1. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.*

(Above) Spicer & Robinson’s first newspaper advertisement. The company started out as a family warehouse in Commercial Square (now Raffles Place). *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser, 25 February 1858, p. 3. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.*

(Above right) Robinsons advertising the services of its experienced European cutters who offered bespoke clothing for “every well-dressed man”. *The Straits Times, 17 November 1928, p. 1. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.*



(Left) In 1907, Robinsons became among the world's first agents for Raleigh bicycles, a British brand. For the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II, Raleigh launched its "New Elizabethan" model of bicycles, which were sold in Robinsons. Image reproduced from *The Straits Times Annual*, 1954, p. 131.

(Above) The Robinsons "Big Sale" in 1959 took place from 23 March to 11 April, with substantial discounts storewide. Shoppers could write in to order their items and collect them later. Image reproduced from *Robinson & Co. Ltd.* (1959, March 2). This is Robinson's reporting from Singapore. Singapore: Robinson & Co. Ltd. Collection of the National Library, Singapore. (Accession no.: B28906607E).

# RALEIGH

## THE ALL-STEEL BICYCLE



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### RALEIGH "NEW ELIZABETHAN" MODEL

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Sole Agents: **ROBINSON & CO., LTD.** SINGAPORE & KUALA LUMPUR

world's first agents for Raleigh bicycles and, by the 1950s, had sold more than half a million of such bicycles.

Unfortunately, Robinsons' reputation as a high-end shopping destination put off some people. Polytechnic lecturer Ng Joo Kee, who was born in 1959 and lived in nearby Chulia Street, recalled that Robinsons was particular about who could enter its premises. It was "a very up-market kind of a department store and we were very poor. We usually [wore] singlets, and shorts and slippers and we weren't allowed in". It was only when the underground carpark in Raffles Place opened in 1965, giving people access to the supermarket at Robinsons, that he managed to sneak into the store.<sup>1</sup>

By the 1970s and 80s, as Singapore's economy took off and disposable incomes rose, Robinsons began carrying a wider range of products to cater to the emerg-

ing middle class. Over time, Robinsons grew in popularity among shoppers from all walks of life.

In 2013, its new owners decided to revive the store's luxury roots: its premises at The Centrepoint were closed and a new, decidedly more upscale, flagship store opened at The Heeren. However, the attempt to target more affluent customers failed. According to retail experts, Robinsons ended up being too expensive for the general public, but at the same time, it was not attractive enough for the well-heeled.<sup>2</sup> ♦ Gracie Lee

#### NOTES

- 1 Yap, W.C. (Interviewer). (1997, November 3). *Oral history interview with Ng Joo Kee* [Transcript of MP3 recording no. 001970/4/1, p. 4]. Retrieved from National Archives of Singapore website.
- 2 Low, Y. (2020, November 2). Upmarket or mass market? Retail experts say Robinsons' confused identity contributed to its closure. *Today*. Retrieved from Today website.

## ALWAYS ON THE MOVE

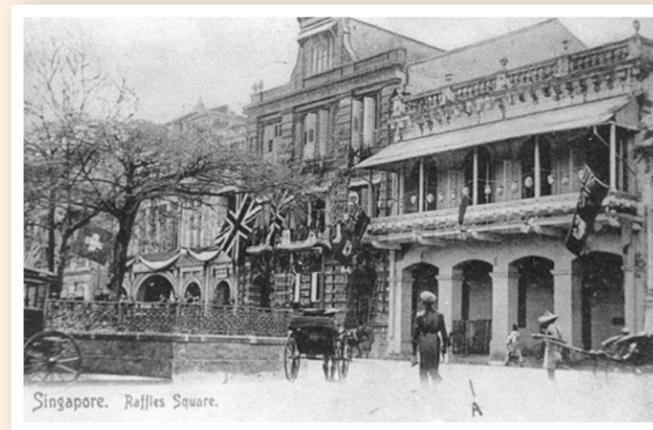
In Singapore, Robinsons relocated several times in the course of its long history. The store's first move took place in 1859 when it shifted from its original site in Commercial Square to the corner of Coleman Street and North Bridge Road. The new site was a stone's throw away from the Esplanade (Padang), the heart of social life in 19th-century Singapore.

In 1881, Robinsons opened a new shop with a tailoring department on Battery Road. Ten years later, it returned to Commercial Square – by then renamed Raffles Place – and occupied much larger premises. In November 1941, the store moved to Raffles Chambers, located on the opposite side of Raffles Place.

This new store was met with approval by the press. Noted a news report: "Those who have visited it already have remarked on its spaciousness, the modern way of displaying the merchandise so that you can walk all round it, the wide entrance where you can wait for your car in comfort." The ground floor housed the "men's clothing and tailoring departments, leather goods, confectionary, cosmetics, perfumes, gramophones and sports goods, silverware. On the first floor you have women's departments, dresses for children, furnishing and dress materials, household linens, haberdashery, shoes and the like". The second floor featured an air-conditioned cafe as well as hair salons for men and women.<sup>1</sup>

Business came to a halt during the Japanese Occupation (1942–45), and resumed only in April 1946. Operating from the same iconic location at Raffles Place, Robinsons became the first department store in Southeast Asia to be fully air-conditioned in 1955. After a facelift in 1957, the name "Robinsons" on its facade was also displayed in Malay and Chinese, envisioning its future in a self-governing Singapore.<sup>2</sup>

Tragedy struck in 1972 when a huge fire razed the store to the ground (see overleaf). The store reopened in less than a month at Specialists' Shopping Centre on Orchard Road – Singapore's prime shopping district.<sup>3</sup> To keep its links with the original site in Raffles Place, Robinsons opened a branch at Clifford Centre in 1977 but this closed in 1983.<sup>4</sup> That same year, the store decamped across the road to Centrepoint Shopping Centre (now known as The Centrepoint).



The Centrepoint store was where the management pinned its hopes on regaining the lustre lost after the disastrous fire. In the company's in-house newsletter in 1983, Chief Executive Loh Man Chee wrote that "your management has [sic] determined to regain the lost leadership of Robinson's being 'the shopping place' for families in South East Asia". He noted that the company had invested more than \$10 million in fixing up the new store. "Great effort has been made to give the new store a new look and to reinforce our merchandising objectives – superior quality and value."<sup>5</sup>

The store was a major tenant in Centrepoint until 2013 when it moved to The Heeren.<sup>6</sup>

Robinsons also opened other outlets in Singapore. A branch in Raffles City was unveiled in 2001 to reach out to younger customers. In 2013, Robinsons expanded into the suburbs with an outlet in Jem, a shopping mall in Jurong East.<sup>7</sup>

Robinsons also expanded overseas, launching its first overseas outlet in 1928 in Kuala Lumpur, though this closed in 1975. The company re-entered the Malaysian market with stores at The Gardens Mall in 2007 and The Shoppes at Four Seasons Place in 2018 (both ceased operations in December 2020<sup>8</sup>).

Although all of Robinsons' stores in Singapore and Malaysia have closed, the time-honoured trade name lives on through its sole store at the Dubai Festival

Raffles Place in 1965. The Overseas Union Bank building is on the extreme left and Robinsons department store just next to it. In the middle is the Chartered Bank building with the dome, while the tall building on the right is Bank of China. Arshak C. Galstau Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



City Mall in the United Arab Emirates, a development opened in 2017 by the Al-Futtaim Group, which acquired Robinsons in 2008.<sup>9</sup> ♦ Gracie Lee

#### NOTES

- 1 Heathcott, M. (1941, September 30). In The "New Family Warehouse". *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, p. 7. Retrieved from NewspaperSG
- 2 Robinson & Co. (1958). *The story of Robinson's, 1858–1958* [n.p.]. Singapore: [publisher not identified]. (Call no.: RCL0S 338.065 ROB); 'Open as usual' after bombing. (1958, October 4). *The Straits Times*, p. 5. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
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- 4 Pereira, A. (1983, November–December). History of Clifford Centre Branch. *Robinson's Group Berita* [n.p.]. (Accession no. B28739090E)
- 5 A step forward in difficult time. (1983, July–August). *Robinson's Group Berita* [n.p.]. (Accession no. B28739088A)
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- 7 Robinsons takes the city. (2001, June). *Family news: The staff newsletter of the Robinsons Group*, 3. (Accession no.: B12020063C); Gems at JEM. (2013, June 26). *Today*, p. 60. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 8 Robinson & Co, 1958, [n.p.]; David, A. (2020, December 21). End of an era as Robinsons closes in Malaysia. *New Straits Times*. Retrieved from New Straits Times website.
- 9 Fung, E. (2008, April 4). Sold – Robinson's now owned by Dubai's Al-Futtaim. *Today*, p. 4. Retrieved from NewspaperSG; Dubai Festival City Mall. (2021). *Robinsons*. Retrieved from Dubai Festival City Mall website. [Note: Robinsons' main shareholder OCB Bank sold its stake to Indonesia's Lippo Group in 2006. Robinsons was acquired by the Al-Futtaim Group in 2008.]

## ROBINSONS DURING WORLD WAR II

In July 1941, Robinsons held its annual shareholder meeting in Singapore. This took place amidst the backdrop of World War II which had broken out in Europe in 1939.<sup>1</sup> When the company's Chairman W.H. MacGregor addressed shareholders on 28 July, Britain was still reeling from aerial bombings by the Luftwaffe, the German air force, which had taken place between September 1940 and May 1941.

Fortunately, as the war had not yet reached the shores of Britain's colonies in Southeast Asia, Robinsons managed to turn a profit. In 1941, the company reported profits amounting to more than \$270,000, almost double its pre-war 1939 earnings. Robinsons shareholders received dividends ranging from 5 percent to 8 percent, depending on the class of stock each person owned. Even after the payouts, there were substantial funds left over to fill the company's coffers. Despite the ongoing war in Europe, the store had plenty of fine goods on display as the company was able to procure supplies from Australia.<sup>2</sup>

At the shareholder meeting in 1941, MacGregor ruefully noted that "there may be some who will suggest

that the increased profit is due to advantage having been taken of war conditions... [t]o a limited extent that perhaps is true, but it is a truism which applies to every business... and is difficult to avoid... [the] policy of the Board, however, has been to maintain prices at a reasonable level, and I should like to emphasise that the improved results this year have resulted from greatly increased turnover rather than from large profit margins". MacGregor also announced that the company had earlier contributed \$5,000 towards the War Fund and would be making a further donation of \$5,000.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, MacGregor sounded a note of caution. "Conditions at the present time make it difficult to foresee what the future may bring." He assured shareholders that "however much the spending power of the public is contracted, or import bans extended, there will always be goods to sell and there will also be buyers of these goods, and we can rest assured that we shall have a full share of any business passing".<sup>4</sup>

Just five months later, on 8 December 1941, the Imperial Japanese Army dropped the first bombs on Singapore. Some of these landed on Robinsons, which damaged its beautiful frontage. Although Robinsons declared the store "Open as usual" the following day, rubble piled up at the entrance of its premises. In the last days before the

fall of Singapore, the cafe in Robinsons became a rallying point for the European community, packed with civilians and servicemen as many deserted the business district and eateries bolted their doors.<sup>5</sup> The store was struck again by bombs on 13 February 1942 and was later looted.

Robinsons was closed throughout the three-and-a-half years of the Japanese Occupation (1942–45). It only reopened for business in April 1946 and in the first year of operations, managed to reap a profit of over a million dollars.

MacGregor did not live to see Robinson's post-war restoration as he had died in March 1942 during his internment by the Japanese.<sup>6</sup> ♦ **Kevin Khoo**

### NOTES

- 1 Robinsons to buy goods from Australia. (1941, July 28). *The Straits Times*, p. 4. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 2 Robinson's & Co. (1958). *The story of Robinson's, 1858–1958* [n.p.]. Singapore: [publisher not identified]. (Call no.: RCL0S 338.065 ROB); *The Straits Times*, 28 Jul 1941, p. 4.
- 3 *The Straits Times*, 28 Jul 1941, p. 4.
- 4 *The Straits Times*, 28 Jul 1941, p. 4.
- 5 *Robinsons and Company (Singapore)*. (2002, December). Robinsons 1858: A century of progress (p. 11). *Family News: The Staff Newsletter of the Robinsons Group*. Singapore: The Robinsons Group. (Call no.: RSING 338.47658871 FN)
- 6 Robinson's & Company, 1958, [n.p.].

## THE GREAT ROBINSONS FIRE

On Tuesday, 21 November 1972, an overloaded electrical system short-circuited on the ground floor of the building and started a fire at about 9.50 am.<sup>1</sup> According to *The Straits Times*, "a Robinson's salesman in the Men's Department said he saw a flash across some electrical wire running along the ground floor ceiling near the jewellery counter. The drapes on the wall were set ablaze, he said, and within minutes the fire had spread across the room". The flames that engulfed the building soared as high as 200 ft (61 m) at one point, with the conflagration reportedly visible as far away as Toa Payoh and Jurong.<sup>2</sup>

Nine people died in the fire, eight of whom were trapped in the store's lifts. Out of the nine fatalities, eight were employees. The fire gutted the entire building, leaving only a shell, and incinerated millions of dollars worth of goods stockpiled for Christmas. It also damaged neighbouring

buildings, including the roof of the adjoining Overseas Union Bank. Businesses across Raffles Place and the commercial district were forced to stop for the day, and thousands of workers were evacuated from their offices.<sup>3</sup>

George Yuille Cadwell was a medical doctor whose practice was located at the Bank of China building across from the store. "I was busy working and didn't notice anything and... [one of my patients] came in [and said] 'Robinsons is on fire!'," he recalled. "And I looked out of the window and I saw lots of smoke coming out of the building and flames coming out of the windows... a very, very big fire. And I noticed that as the flames got higher and higher, this little tiny figure of winged Mercury [on the roof of the Robinsons building] just slowly melting in the heat and folding over and dropping down. And I could feel the heat through the glass of my window [although] we must have been 200 yards away? It was quite warm... The buildings [at Raffles Place] are all joined together... as



The Straits Times put the news of the Robinsons fire on the front page. *The Straits Times*, 22 November 1972, p. 1. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

Robinsons was built just of wooden floors and wooden rafters. And so it went up [in flames] very quickly, very dry."<sup>4</sup>

Tan Wee Him, a journalist with *The Straits Times* who covered the fire, was another eyewitness. "I received a call from my office... 'We need every available journalist to cover the fire that broke out at Robinson's... When I [reached] Robinsons, I couldn't believe [it]. The whole place was a towering inferno. The flame was shooting up and even this bronze statue right at the top of the roof of Robinsons melted. You can just imagine the heat generated... I had to hide behind pillars... to protect myself from the heat."<sup>5</sup>

The fire brigade arrived at 10.13 am and attempted to put out the blaze but the nearby fire hydrants were not functioning as they should as the water pressure was too low. Although efforts were made to divert and supply water from other mains, the water pressure fell again at noon and the firemen resorted to pumping water directly from the Singapore River. By late afternoon, a fleet of 18 fire engines had

been deployed to the scene. The police later cordoned off most of Raffles Place for public safety and to prevent looting. The total value of the Robinsons building, the goods destroyed and loss of profits was estimated to be about \$14 million.<sup>6</sup>

On 21 December 1972, then President Benjamin Sheares officially appointed a Commission of Inquiry to investigate the cause of the fire. The commission found that Robinsons had overloaded its ageing and deteriorating electrical circuitry by installing numerous spotlights and decorative fittings for the festive Christmas period, ignoring warnings of overloading by its own electricians.

The commission also noted that Robinsons had inadequate fire safety measures and had, in fact, stored large quantities of combustible goods in unauthorised loft storage areas. In its report released to the public in December 1973, the commission made several recommendations on fire safety and building safety measures to prevent a similar tragedy. Many of the commission's recommendations were

subsequently incorporated into the Building Control Act of 1974, which vested the government with the power to take action against unauthorised building works as well as the owners of dangerous or dilapidated buildings.<sup>7</sup>

Robinsons would bounce back quickly from this disaster. On 11 December 1972, a new Robinsons store opened at Specialists' Shopping Centre on Orchard Road. The company also made plans to rebuild the store in Raffles Place, but the government had acquired the prime site for urban redevelopment before this could happen.<sup>8</sup> The site is presently occupied by One Raffles Place, the former OUB Centre.

♦ **Kevin Khoo**

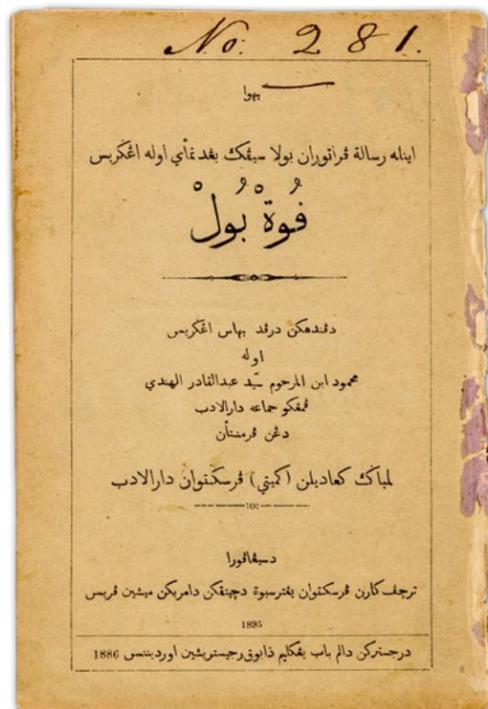
**Gracie Lee** is a Senior Librarian with the National Library, Singapore, and works with its Rare Materials Collection. **Kevin Khoo** is a Senior Manager with the Oral History Centre at the National Archives of Singapore.

### NOTES

- 1 Singapore. Commission of Inquiry into the Robinson's Fire. (1973). *Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Robinson's Fire, 1973* (pp. 5–8). [Singapore: Printed for the Govt. of Singapore by the Singapore National Printers]. (Call no.: RSING 614.84 SIN)
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- 3 *The Straits Times*, 22 Nov 1972, p. 1.
- 4 Ng, B. (Interviewer). (2012, November 1). *Oral history interview with George Yuille Caldwell* [MP3 recording no. 003776/38/14]. Retrieved from National Archives of Singapore website.
- 5 Chew, H.M. (Interviewer). (2006, June 9). *Oral history interview with Tan Wee Him* [Transcript of MP3 recording no. 003058/07/03, pp. 65–67]. Retrieved from National Archives of Singapore website.
- 6 *The Straits Times*, 22 Nov 1972, p. 1.
- 7 Singapore. Commission of Inquiry into the Robinson's Fire, 1973, pp. 5–20.
- 8 Kwee, M. (1972, December 12). Robinson's plans to rebuild at fire site. *The Straits Times*, p. 15; Govt takes over Robinson fire site. (1973, January 18). *The Straits Times*, p. 1. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

# STORIES FROM THE STACKS

A book of football rules in Jawi, a colonial-era compilation of Tamil names and the 19th-century version of a 600-year-old Chinese map showing Temasek are among the items showcased in *Stories from the Stacks*, the latest book published by the National Library, Singapore.



At the bottom of the cover page of *Risalat Peraturan Bola Sepak* is a line indicating that the booklet is registered under Chapter Five of the Book Register Ordinance 1886. Collection of the National Library, Singapore.

**Title:** *Inilah Risalat Peraturan Bola Sepak yang Dinamai oleh Ingeris Football* (A Book of Football Rules)  
**Author:** Mahmud ibn Almarhum Sayyid Abdul Kadir al-Hindi (translator)  
**Year published:** 1895  
**Publisher:** Lembaga Keadilan (Committee) Persekutuan Dar al-Adab  
**Language:** Malay (Jawi script)  
**Type:** Booklet, 16 pages with a fold-out plan of a football field  
**Call no.:** RRARE 796.334 FOO  
**Accession no.:** B21189180H

### A Football Rulebook in Jawi

Although it is not clear exactly when the football-loving British introduced the game to Malaya, it became so popular among Malay youths here that a guide to the sport was published by the Ethical Committee of the Dar al-Adab Association<sup>1</sup> in 1895. Printed by the American Mission Press in Singapore, *Inilah Risalat Peraturan Bola Sepak yang Dinamai oleh Ingeris Football* (henceforth referred to as *Risalat Peraturan Bola Sepak*) covers the rules of the game over 17 topics (*bab*) in Jawi

– the Arabic script adapted for writing the Malay language.

The title, author, publisher and printer of the booklet are stated on the front cover. Inside the 16-page booklet is a fold-out plan of a football field with the positions of the players indicated in Jawi. Below the diagram are Jawi references to player positions, accompanied by their English equivalents.

With the exception of the fold-out plan and a glossary of terms where the corresponding English explanations such as “off-side” and “free kick” appear next to the Jawi phrases, everything else in *Risalat Peraturan Bola Sepak* is written in Jawi.

It is not known which English source (or sources) the writer, Mahmud ibn Almarhum Sayyid Abdul Kadir al-Hindi, used as a reference to produce this book of football rules. In the foreword, Mahmud writes that arguments and disputes on the playing field became commonplace as more Malays took to the game. Seeing the need to explain the basic rules of football to new enthusiasts, the Dar al-Adab Association commissioned him to write the book.

Although Mahmud was well versed in Malay linguistics – between 1881 and 1918, he was involved as either the author or translator of 16 Malay works, including a Malay dictionary (*Kamus Mahmudiyah*) – he admitted in the foreword that the task of translating football rules from English to Malay was challenging.

To make the text clearer, he used basic English terms that Malay players were already familiar with, such as “goal”, “corner” and “free kick”. Even so, Mahmud was dissatisfied with his attempt and, in his foreword, expressed hopes of producing a more detailed book on football rules in future. However, to date, no other football-related book authored by Mahmud has ever been found.

Another key person involved in the publication was Haji Muhammad Siraj bin Haji Salih. He was an accomplished copyist-editor, a prolific printer and the biggest bookseller of Muslim publications in Singapore in the late 19th century. As the Honorary Secretary of Dar al-Adab, Haji Muhammad Siraj was instrumental in engaging the services of the American Mission Press to print Mahmud’s work.<sup>2</sup> Copies of the booklet were sold at Haji Muhammad

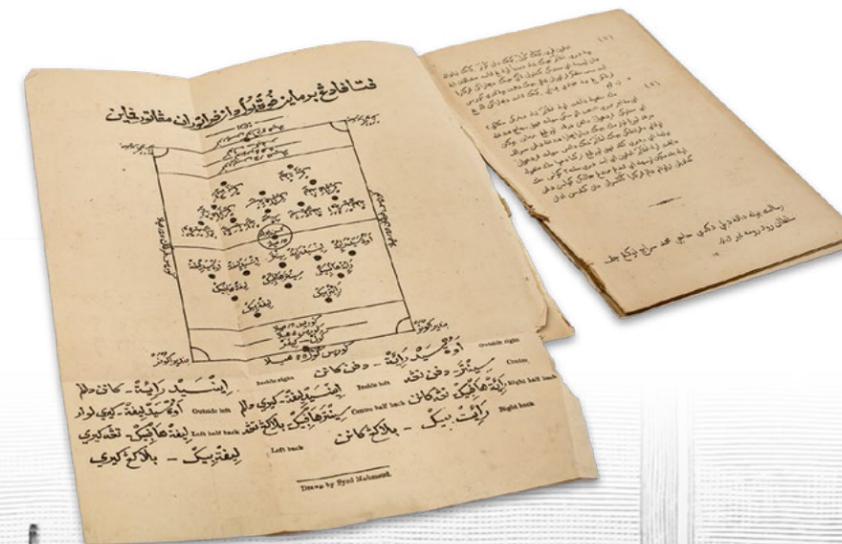
Siraj’s shop at 43 Sultan Road.<sup>3</sup> When he passed away in 1909, *The Straits Times* described him as “one of the best known of the Malays of Singapore”.<sup>4</sup>

Dar al-Adab, the publisher of *Risalat Peraturan Bola Sepak*, was one of the earliest Malay/Muslim recreation clubs in Singapore. The club was established in 1893 and had its own grounds in Jalan Besar, where it held sports events that were well attended by locals and Europeans.<sup>5</sup> Dar al-Adab likely had a vested interest in commissioning the book of football rules as it was the organiser of the annual football competition called the Darul Adab Cup. Several recreation clubs and local football teams competed for this trophy.<sup>6</sup>

Interestingly, the British regarded football as a tool to “civilise” the “ignorant” “natives” living in its colonies.<sup>7</sup> An 1894 report in *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser* noted in rather grandiose terms:

“All these native races have readily taken to various forms of athletic sport, and the sight of men of every race, colour and creed assembled together on the cricket or football field, afford striking evidence of the good results attending British protection, whilst the mere assembly for a common purpose by teaching men of different races to know and respect one another exercises a by no means unimportant influence on their general civilisation”.<sup>8</sup>

It is debatable whether football had any civilising effect on the “men of different races” in Singapore. What is more certain is that *Risalat Peraturan Bola Sepak* was helpful in teaching Malay youths the basic rules of the game.<sup>9</sup> More than a century after its publication, the sport remains hugely popular, not just among Malays in Singapore, but for all communities. ♦ **Mazelan Anuar**

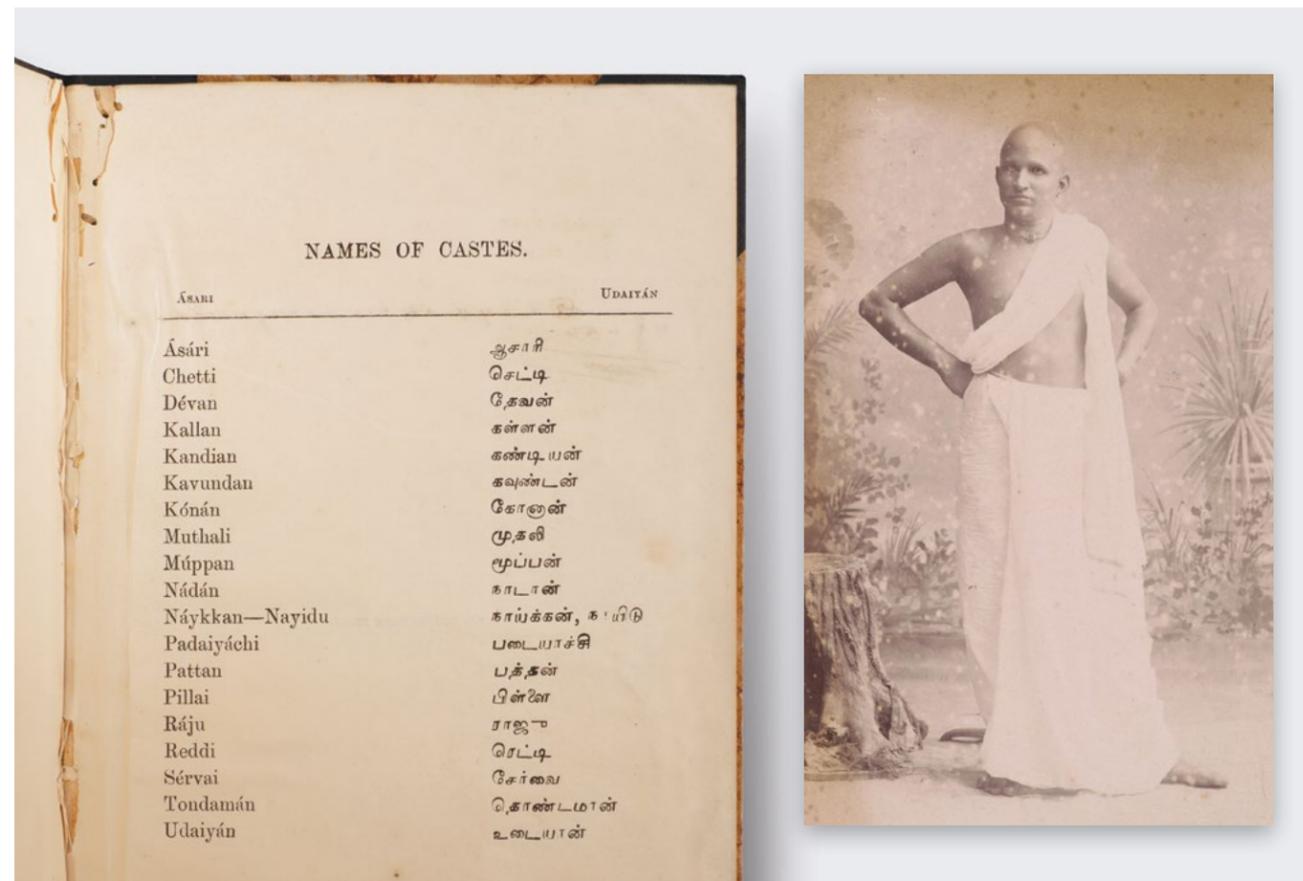


(Right) The booklet includes a fold-out plan with positions of players labelled in Jawi on the diagram of a football field. Collection of the National Library, Singapore.

(Below) Football (or soccer) in the form played today can be traced to mid-19th-century England, although the actual history of the game goes back more than 2,000 years. Image reproduced from Shearman, M. (1887). *Athletics and Football* (p. 345). London: Longmans, Green, and Co. Retrieved from Wikimedia Commons.



**Mazelan Anuar** is a Senior Librarian with the National Library, Singapore, whose research interests are in early Malay publishing and digital librarianship. **Liviniyah P.** is a former Associate Librarian working with the Singapore and Southeast Asia collections. **Mok Ly Yng** is a map research consultant with more than 20 years of experience. He has provided mapping consultancy to several map exhibitions, books and heritage projects.



**(Above left)** A glimpse of the personal and caste names used by the Tamil community in British Malaya. The list was collated by colonial officer Alfred Vanhouse Brown and A. Swaminatha Pillai, an interpreter of Tamil and Hindi languages from Perak. Interestingly, some caste names in the booklet, such as “Nayidu” and “Reddi”, are typically associated with the Telugu community, rather than Tamils. *Collection of the National Library, Singapore.*

**(Above right)** A Chettiar moneylender, c. 1890. Originally from South India, the Chettiars started coming to Singapore during the 19th century. *Courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.*

**Title:** *List of Tamil Proper Names*  
**Author:** Alfred Vanhouse Brown  
**Year published:** 1904  
**Publisher:** Government Printing Office (Kuala Lumpur)  
**Language:** Tamil, English  
**Type:** Book, 48 pages  
**Call no.:** RRARE 929.4 BRO  
**Accession no.:** B16331012F

**A Book of Tamil Names**

In governing a diverse population that spoke and wrote a variety of languages, the British colonial administrators in Singapore and Malaya faced many challenges. The languages used in Malaya, China and India have their own writing systems, none of which were remotely similar to the Latin script familiar to the British. This would have made the identification of individuals, with their names rendered in different scripts, a problem. To overcome this, the colonial government commissioned the compilation of lists containing the romanised versions of common Asian names.

One such document used by colonial officials to transcribe Tamil names<sup>10</sup> is the

48-page *List of Tamil Proper Names*, published in Kuala Lumpur in 1904. Although this was neither the first nor the longest list produced by the Government Printing Office of the Federated Malay States, the personal and caste names in the book shed light on the patterns of Indian migration into British Malaya during the 19th and early 20th centuries.

The Indian subcontinent is home to numerous ethno-linguistic groups. Of these, South Indians formed the largest segment of the Indian immigrant population in British Malaya, particularly from the late 19th century onwards. The Tamils, most of whom were employed as labourers in plantations, the harbour, and transportation and municipal sectors, constituted the majority of these migrants,<sup>11</sup> with smaller groups of Malayalees and Telugus.<sup>12</sup> This explains why the British saw the need to commission a book of specifically Tamil names.

Alfred Vanhouse Brown, an officer with the Federated Malay States Civil Service who was based in Kuala Lumpur, compiled the list with the assistance of A. Swaminatha Pillai, an interpreter of Indian languages from Batu Gajah, Perak.<sup>13</sup>

Brown was educated at the Merchant Taylor’s School in London and Queen’s College in Oxford, graduating with a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1896. That year, he was appointed to serve in the Eastern Cadetships, specifically the civil service in the Federated Malay States. He undertook several positions there until 1906, when he was appointed Superintendent of Posts and Telegraphs in Selangor, Negri Sembilan and Pahang. In the same year, Brown also served as the Acting District Officer and Indian Immigration Agent in Perak.<sup>14</sup>

There is not much more information about Brown and Pillai, or how they collated the names. According to the note at the front of the book, Brown

adhered closely to the transliteration system laid down by the Board of Revenue in Madras, Tamil Nadu.<sup>15</sup> He also provided a useful guide to help readers pronounce vowels in the romanised Tamil names by using corresponding vowel sounds found in English words.

Page 1 (unnumbered) to page 45 of the book contain the romanised spellings of common Tamil personal names. This list is organised in alphabetical order, alongside a column that indicates if the names belong to men (labelled “M”) or women (“F”). The third column contains the corresponding names written in Tamil script.

On the last page of the book is a list of 19 caste names, most of which belong to those from the upper castes, including widely recognised names such as “Chetti” and “Pillai”.<sup>16</sup> The former, for instance, refers to the Chettiar community, a Tamil trading caste of businessmen and moneylenders. The Chettiars who migrated to British Malaya consisted mainly of the Nattukottai Chettiars, a subgroup involved principally in moneylending,<sup>17</sup> and who later became a key fixture of the business landscape in British Malaya.

Interestingly, some of the caste names in the list, such as “Nayidu” and “Reddi”, are typically associated with the Telugu community rather than the Tamils. Both names may have been used by Telugu migrants who moved from the coastal districts of Andhra Pradesh to Tamil Nadu, before migrating to British Malaya. Over time, these immigrants from various castes and linguistic groups who settled in Tamil Nadu may have adopted the language and cultural practices of the Tamils.<sup>18</sup>

Names provide a window into an individual’s identity – whether it be gender, ethnicity, religious affiliation, nationality or social position. For instance, Tamil names traditionally do not carry a family name. Instead, both males and females use their father’s name before their personal name. Upon marriage, a Tamil woman would traditionally adopt her husband’s personal name in place of her father’s name.

The *List of Tamil Proper Names* is a useful historical source for researching the migration and settlement history of Singapore’s Tamil community. It also complements similar publications in the National Library that list the common names of members of the Malay and Chinese communities in the Straits Settlements. ♦ *Liviniyah P.*

**Title:** Mao Kun Map (茅坤图), from *Wu Bei Zhi* (武备志), Chapter 240  
**Compiler:** Mao Yuanyi (茅元仪)  
**Year published:** Late 19th century  
**Language:** Chinese  
**Type:** Map  
**Call no.:** RRARE 355.00951 WBZ  
**Accession no.:** B26078782G  
**Donated by:** Singapore Federation of Chinese Clan Associations

**Admiral Zheng He’s Navigation Map**

The Mao Kun Map (茅坤图) is the collective name for a set of navigational maps that are based on the 15th-century expeditions of the Indian Ocean by renowned Ming dynasty explorer Admiral Zheng He (郑和; 1371–1433/35).

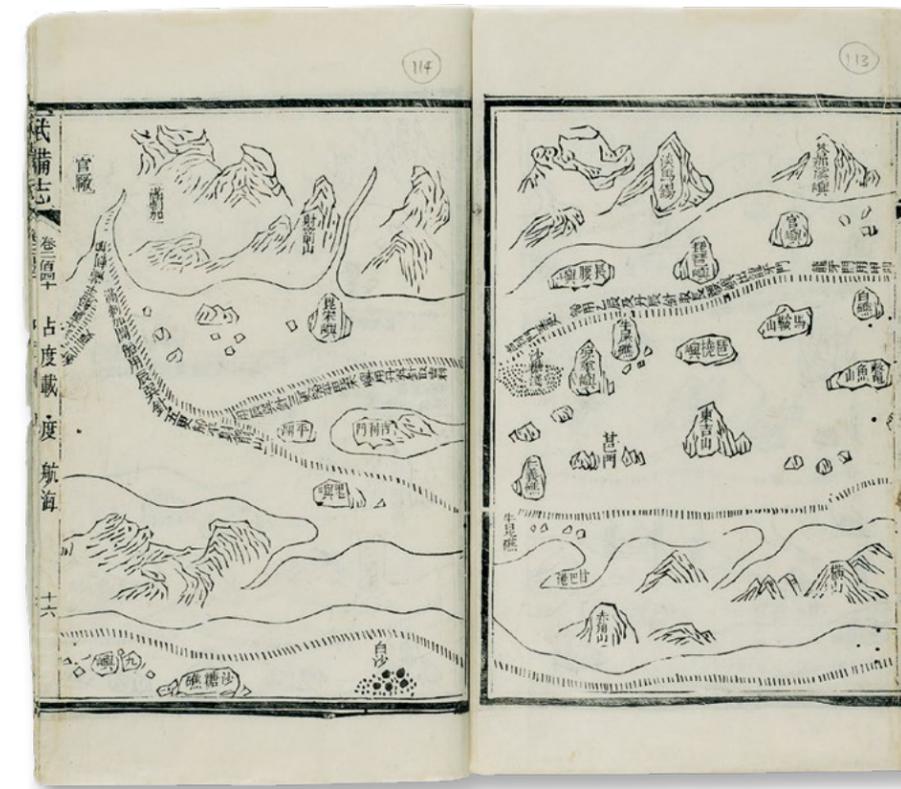
Also known as Zheng He’s Navigation Map (郑和航海图) or the Wu Bei Zhi Chart, the map is believed to have been drawn between 1425 and 1430, although scholars have offered differing views of its exact date of origin.<sup>19</sup> The term Mao Kun Map, as coined by the Dutch sinologist Jan

Julius Lodewijk Duyvendak (1889–1954), is the most commonly used name today for this set of Chinese navigational maps.

The Mao Kun Map was first published in the late-Ming publication *Wu Bei Zhi* (武备志).<sup>20</sup> It was compiled in 1621 by Mao Yuanyi (茅元仪; 1594–1640), who served as a strategist in the Ming court, and published in 1628. Mao’s grandfather, Mao Kun (茅坤; 1512–1601), owned a large and distinguished personal library, and it is believed that this map was part of his collection. Given that three generations of the Mao family had served in the Ming dynasty’s imperial service – either in a military or naval capacity – it is not surprising that the map ended up in their possession.

Originally drawn as a scroll measuring 20.5 cm by 560 cm (in the manner of traditional Chinese paintings), which no longer exists today, the Mao Kun Map was recast into 40 pages – essentially an atlas format – for publication in the 240-chapter *Wu Bei Zhi*. The map is featured in the final chapter of *the Wu Bei Zhi*, in the “Geographical Surveys” section, which covers astronomical observations and geographi-

The Mao Kun Map is believed to be based on the naval expeditions of the early 15th-century Ming admiral, Zheng He, who made several voyages from China to Southeast Asia and across the Indian Ocean. The pages shown here depict the return route between Melaka and China through the Strait of Singapore. The name Temasek (淡马锡), is marked on a hill on the right page. Pedra Branca (白礁) appears on the same page, whereas Melaka (满刺加) is labelled at the top left of the left page. *Collection of the National Library, Singapore.*



cal surveys for military operations. After more than 250 years of obscurity, the Mao Kun Map was made known to the rest of the world around 1885–86 in a journal article by George Phillips (1836–96).<sup>21</sup>

The National Library's copy of the Mao Kun Map is from a late 19th-century edition of the *Wu Bei Zhi*. It is among one of six known editions of the *Wu Bei Zhi* published over the centuries. All six editions are still extant and held in various private and public collections around the world, but it is not known how many copies there are of each.

The navigational map is read from right to left in the tradition of classical Chinese writing and painting. The voyage begins at the Treasure Ship factory near the Ming capital city of Nanjing and follows a southerly course along the coast of China for 19 pages until it reaches Chiêm Thành in Vietnam. It then continues to various places in Southeast Asia over the next 12 pages, before reaching Martaban in Myanmar. The last nine pages depict the routes to Ceylon (Sri Lanka), India, Arabia and the east coast of Africa. The furthest point reached on the map is Malindi in Kenya.

The Mao Kun Map was conceived and drawn as a strip map, with the sailing route taking centre stage and the geographical features rendered in a linear fashion along the sailing route. As such, both the orientation and scale vary from one segment to the next on the map, leading to a “distortion” of space as we generally understand it.

To further compound the difficulty of interpreting the map, upon reaching the Southeast Asian archipelago, the journeys no longer progress in a linear route. From this point onwards, the map has to be read as two distinct parts: the upper half of each page depicting one journey, and the lower half presenting a separate and unrelated journey. Both narratives continue onto the subsequent pages – but at different travel speeds. In order to understand the map better, the two halves have to be interpreted separately.

While land masses and islands are depicted in plan view (i.e. bird's-eye view), the major cities and mountains are portrayed in elevation view (i.e. like cardboard stand-ups). The sailing routes are shown as dashed lines, while important places like settlements and

landmarks are labelled. Altogether, some 500 place names appear on the map, with the most prominent place names – such as countries, provinces and prefectures, and official installations like forts or depots – boxed up.

The Mao Kun Map uses two navigational techniques. The first is the Chinese 24-point compass, with 15 degrees for each compass point or “needle” (or compass needle) employed throughout the map. The second is the “star altitude” technique (过洋牵星术), which navigators once used to cross the Indian Ocean. This technique made use of the known altitude of selected stars and compared them with markings on a reference board. If the altitude of a selected star matched a certain pre-marked altitude line on the reference board, the exact position and location of the ship could be determined.

In order to achieve this feat, the people living along the coasts of the Indian Ocean would have been called upon to assist with this type of navigation. Four pages of “star altitudes” are appended at the end of the Mao Kun Map.

Of interest is the fact that the name Temasek (淡马锡) appears at the top

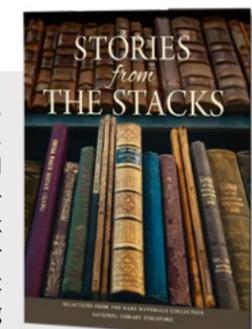
A depiction of Longyamen (Dragon's Teeth Gate) by an unknown artist, c. 1848.

centre of page 27, while Melaka (满刺加) appears at the top left of page 28. Other familiar places on page 27 as identified by scholar J.V.G. Mills include Pulau Sakijang Pelepah<sup>22</sup> (琵琶岛), Pulau Tembaku<sup>23</sup> (官岛/龟岛), Pulau Satumu<sup>24</sup> (长腰岛) and Pedra Branca<sup>25</sup> (白礁).

The sailing directions radiating from Melaka depict the homeward journey from Melaka to China across the South China Sea. The route passes through Karimun (吉利门) and to the South China Sea via Longyamen (龙牙门), or Dragon's Teeth Gate, which was a significant navigational landmark in those days. Longyamen as indicated on the map refers to the main Strait of Singapore.

The Mao Kun Map is of great significance to Singapore as it is the only known cartographic work that mentions “Temasek” – the name that was used in ancient documents to indicate the site of modern Singapore. Other place names on the map have helped to narrow the location of Temasek to an area consistent with where Singapore is found today. There is, however, uncertainty over what exactly Temasek means on the map – does it refer to the island itself or to a larger region encompassing the island?

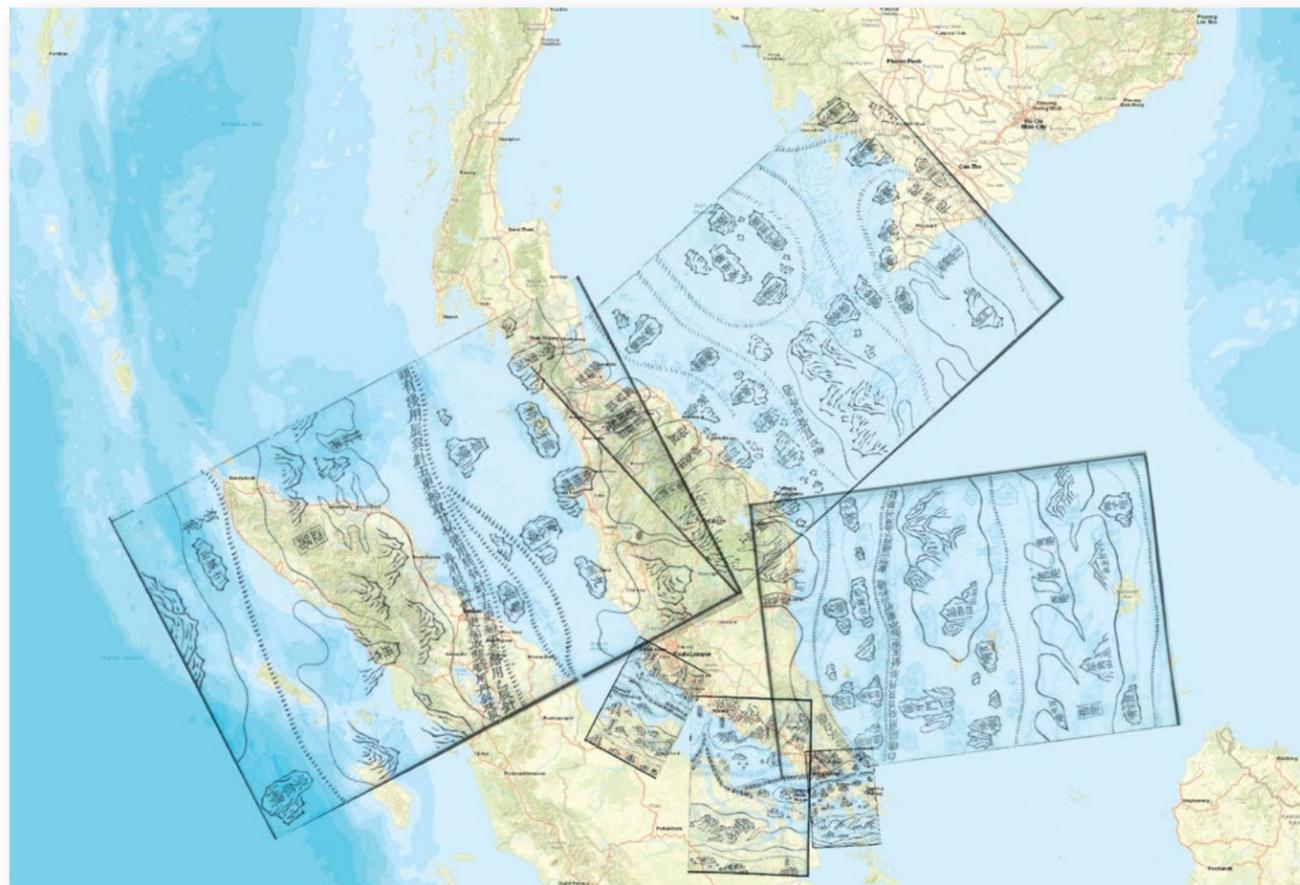
What is certain from the Mao Kun Map is that the Singapore Strait was used as a sailing route between the Indian Ocean and China in the 15th century, testifying to the importance of Singapore's location in the regional trade network during this period. ♦Mok Ly Yng



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Library Board, Singapore, and Marshall Cavendish Editions, the book is available for reference at the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library and for loan at selected public libraries (Call nos.: RSING 016.95957 SIN-[LIB] and SING 016.95957 SIN) as well as for digital loan at nlb.overdrive.com. It is also available for sale at major bookshops in Singapore.

Overlay of six pages from the Mao Kun Map over a contemporary map of the Malay Peninsula. Image overlay provided by Mok Ly Yng.



#### NOTES

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- 20 Translated by J.V.G. Mills as Records of Military Preparations.
- 21 Phillips, G. (1885–1886). The seaports of India and Ceylon described by Chinese voyages of the fifteenth century. *Journal of the North China Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 20, 209–226; and 21, 30–42.
- 22 Pulau Sakijang Pelepah is also known as Lazarus Island.
- 23 Pulau Tembaku is also known as Kusu Island.
- 24 Pulau Satumu is where Raffles Lighthouse is located.
- 25 Pedra Branca is where Horsburgh Lighthouse is located.

# LET THERE BE Light

Timothy Pwee enlightens us about the history of street lighting in Singapore, starting with the first flickering oil lamps that were lit in 1824.



There is something special about Singapore at night. The glittering skyline of the Central Business District and Marina Bay is now an iconic image, while the annual festive light-ups of Orchard Road, Chinatown, Geylang Serai and Serangoon Road never fail to draw a crowd intent on taking selfies and wefies.

Singapore did not always sparkle after dark though. The first streetlights relied on feeble, flickering oil lamps, which were joined by gas-lit lamps in the second half of the 19th century. Even then, street lighting was limited to major areas in town. Streetlamps running on electricity were introduced in the early 20th century but there were not very many of these back then. It was only after World War II that the authorities came up with plans to ensure that all of Singapore's streets would be lit at night.

## The First Streetlamps

According to Charles Burton Buckley's 1902 work, *An Anecdotal History of Singapore*, the first streetlamps in the settlement

were lit on 1 April 1824, some five years after the British East India Company set up a trading post on the island. Oil lamps using coconut oil were installed on some bridges and major streets, at police *tannah* (police outpost or station) and on the facade of important buildings. While these lamps were an improvement over moonlight, there were problems. According to Buckley, "there were very few lamps and they had only a single glass in front, so the light was little use. As if to show this, Mr Purvis's godown was broken into that same night and robbed of goods worth \$500".<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, the lamps themselves could become the targets of theft, as reported by the *Singapore Chronicle* in 1836:

"Last night the dwelling houses of both Messrs. Fraser and Guthrie, immediately adjoining each other, were entered by thieves. From the former all the hanging lamps in the upper verandah were taken away, and from the latter, only one lamp

[left] hanging at the bottom of the stair-case, which they could not ascend from the door having been fortunately locked."<sup>2</sup>

The lack of adequate street lighting meant that the "natives", as locals were referred to by European residents, used torches with naked flames whenever they held night processions. This, of course, posed a fire hazard to buildings made of combustible materials such as wood and *attap*. In an 1833 letter to the editor of the *Singapore Chronicle*, the writer expressed concern after seeing a number of such processions during a walk around town:

"Last night I took a walk through the Town and in the course of my perambulations met no less than three or four processions of a similar kind... all of them carrying a greater or less number of torches, from which sparks were continually flying up into the air..."<sup>3</sup>

The poor lighting, combined with the absence of a proper police force in the early decades of colonial Singapore, contributed to the spate of violent crimes committed under the cover of darkness, as this account from the *Singapore Chronicle* in February 1832 demonstrates:

"[The] witness was awake by a noise and perceived Chinese and witness's companions fighting—also observed by the torches the Chinese brought, that the latter took away 7 boxes. Witness and his companions pursued, but he received a wound in the right arm. On returning observed that *Bander* and *Bandarre*, two of the crew had been killed and that

the *Nacodah* of the prow likewise had received a wound..."<sup>4</sup>

It was only in 1843 that Singapore got its first fulltime police commissioner, Thomas Dunman. That same year, Maria Revere Balestier, wife of the first American consul in Singapore Joseph Balestier, donated a bell from her family's Revere Foundry in Boston to St Andrew's Church (subsequently demolished and replaced by St Andrew's Cathedral in 1861).

As was typical in the largely unlit world of that era, Singapore was unsafe at night and had an after-dark curfew. One condition of Balestier's gift was that the bell would be rung for five minutes every night, immediately after the firing of the 8 pm gun, to announce the start of curfew hours. This practice continued until 1874.<sup>5</sup> (The bell currently resides in the National Museum of Singapore).

Aside from facilitating crime, the lack of street lighting also increased the chances of accidents, as a letter in *The Singapore Free Press* in July 1844 noted:

"I beg to suggest a remedy against broken legs of a dark night by the erection of two lamp Posts at the top of the Stairs. A bright idea that and no mistake! It would also be judicious to place lamps at each of the landing places, which would probably prevent the numerous accidents we hear of to parties leaving the steps on a dark night.

It is not long since an unfortunate Commander of a vessel was drowned near the entrance of the river; now, Mr Editor, had there been a light the chances are his life might have been saved."<sup>6</sup>

The landing places in question would have been located along the north bank of the Singapore River, in front of what is today the Asian Civilisations Museum. It seems that lamps were indeed installed after that letter was published, because in 1847, there was another letter complaining that the lamps had been removed when repairs were carried out at the Landing Place, causing people to miss their step and fall into the water:

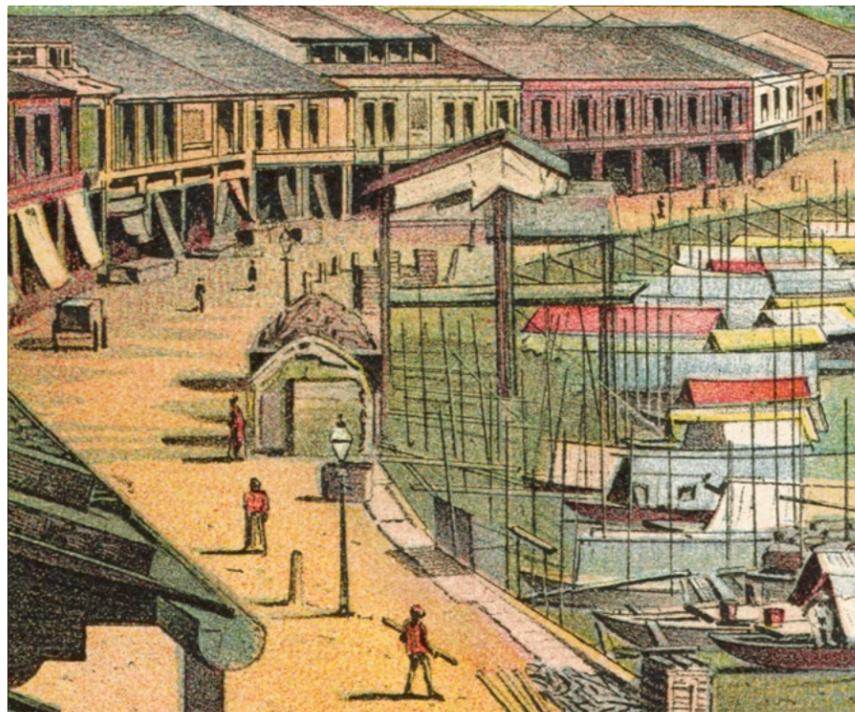
"A few evenings since a Lady accompanied by her Husband, child and ayah nearly met with a very serious accident. They had alighted from a Palanquin and were proceeding to the landing place to embark in a Boat when the gentleman, who was in advance, not being aware of any steps, fancied he was still far from the water, and was in consequence precipitated to the bottom. The Lady unconscious of the danger was following, when a gentleman present caught her by the arm. The Ayah went a little to the left and fell amongst the loose stones but fortunately without injury to the child."<sup>7</sup>

(Facing page) Lighted torches illuminating the evening sky as coolies transport coal to refuel a ship, c. 1876. Given the amount of fuel such torches consumed, it is not surprising that two years after this image was published, the first electric light began replacing torches. However, it would take several decades before electricity would light up many of the streets in Singapore. This illustration first appeared in *The Graphic* on 4 November 1876. Courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

(Right) Detail from Charles Dyce's *The River from Monkey Bridge* (ink and watercolour, 1842–3) showing a bridge lamp on the right. It would have been fuelled by coconut oil as this was before the introduction of gas lighting in Singapore in 1864. Image reproduced from Liu, G. (1999). *Singapore: A Pictorial History, 1819–2000* (p. 31). Singapore: Archipelago Press in association with the National Heritage Board. (Call no.: RSING 959.57 LIU-[HIS]).



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(Left) Detail from an illustration from the 1880s showing gas lamps along Boat Quay. The design of public lamps did not change much throughout the 19th century until the advent of electric lighting in the 20th century. Image reproduced from Moerlein, G. (1886). *A Trip Around the World* (p. 57). Cincinnati, Ohio: M. & R. Burghelm. Retrieved from BookSG. Collection of the National Library, Singapore. (Accession no.: B03351770D)

(Bottom left) Singapore's first gasworks, Kallang Gasworks, c. 1911. The gasworks was constructed in 1862 to supply the first piped gas for street lighting. It was decommissioned in March 1998 and its function taken over by Senoko Gasworks. Arshak C. Galstaun Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

big European cities of the 19th century were moving away from oil lamps to gas-lit lamps for street lighting. Cities in Europe had already embarked on gas lighting before Stamford Raffles arrived in Singapore in 1819. The Gas Light and Coke Company<sup>11</sup> had been established in London in 1812 to supply gas for public use.

Installing gas-lit streetlamps around a city was no small matter though. Methane, the gas used for these lamps, had to be manufactured from coal and then distributed by an underground network of pipes to each lamp post. This meant that heavy investment was needed to build a gas production plant and to lay out a network of pipes connected to fixed lamp posts. The gas plant would also require a constant supply of coal. In addition, legislation would be needed to allow for the laying of underground pipes around the city.

In 1856, several acts were passed by the Legislative Council of India (known as the Indian Acts), which allowed for the appointment of municipal commissioners, granted powers of taxation and created a common legal structure for the municipal governments in Indian cities, including those in the Straits Settlements. These acts replaced a hodgepodge of older laws. In particular, the provisions of "Act XIV for the Conservancy and Improvement of the Towns of Calcutta, Madras, and Bombay, and the Several Stations of the Settlement of Prince of Wales' Island, Singapore and Malacca" vested municipal commissioners with powers to contract and maintain street lighting. In the decade following this legislation, the cities under Indian administration, including Singapore, introduced gas streetlamps, something previously found only in the municipalities of Britain.

Robert Rigg, the first Secretary of the Municipal Commission, is credited as the driving force behind the introduction of gas lighting to Singapore.<sup>12</sup> However, not much is known of his exact contribution, nor is it clear how or when the Singapore Gas Company – the firm behind the setting

up of gas lamps here – was started. What is known is that there were negotiations from at least 1860 onwards about floating a company in London to build gasworks and piping in Singapore for street lighting. The company was officially registered in London in 1861, and a deal was subsequently struck for the company to supply a minimum of 400 gas lamps to the town of Singapore. The company also oversaw the construction of Singapore's first gasworks, Kallang Gasworks,<sup>13</sup> in 1862 to supply piped gas for street lighting.

The gas lamps were first lit on the occasion of Queen Victoria's birthday on 24 May 1864. People were supposedly so fascinated with the lamps that they were "seen going up to the lamp-posts and touching them gingerly with their finger-tips; they could not understand how a fire came out at the top without the post getting hot".<sup>14</sup> *The Singapore Free Press* reported that crowds "follow[ed] the lamplighter from lamp to lamp and gasp[ed] with astonishment and admiration as he produced light from nothing".<sup>15</sup>

Why was a London-based company providing the infrastructure of streetlamps instead of a local one in Singapore? Aside from the engineering expertise being in London, there was also the large capital investment needed. At the time, Singapore did not have a capital market to raise the funds required.

The availability of gas lighting did not mean the end of oil lamps however. While the main thoroughfares were lit with gas, less important areas continued to rely on

oil lamps. Interestingly, the new gas lamps were not lit during the full moon and the Municipal Council decided that oil lamps should be left unlit as well.<sup>16</sup>

The prevalence of street lighting gave life to the city, as a poem composed by 许南英 (Xu Nan Ying) in 1896, demonstrates:

“海山雄镇水之涯，商贾云屯十万家；  
三岛干洲人萃处，此坡合好号新嘉。  
傍晚齐辉万点灯，牛车水里闹奔腾。”<sup>17</sup>

[Translation]

“Sea and mountain meeting at the shore,  
A multitude of businesses gather;  
Where people of a thousand lands meet,  
'Singapore' is the name of this town.  
Ten thousand lamps light up the evening,  
Kreta Ayer bustles with life;”

### The Advent of Electric Lighting

Electric lamps only started appearing on Singapore's streets from the early 20th century, although electricity had been used for indoor lighting from as early as the 1880s.

Cities in the United States first began using electric arc lighting in the 1870s, despite its light being too glaring. Electric arc lighting involved placing two carbon electrodes slightly apart but close enough for an electric spark to form between the two electrodes, emitting a brilliant arc. So brilliant was the light that one of the earliest records of its use was by the British Navy as searchlights mounted on ships. Not everyone appreciated being spotlighted though, as this irate-sounding letter in *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile*

*Advertiser Weekly Mail Edition* in 1890 illustrates:

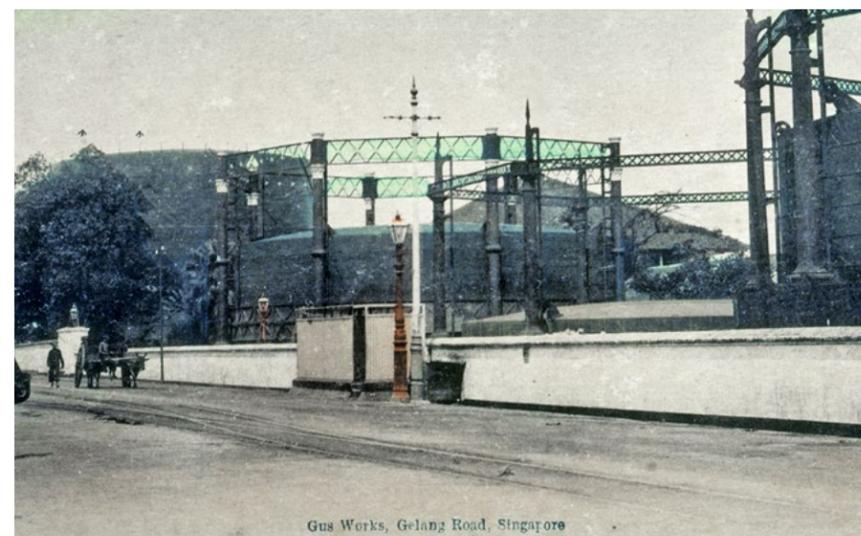
“A great inconvenience could be very easily abolished if the Royal Engineers on Pulau Brani would, in their electric searchlight practice, avoid choosing the exact time and neighbourhood of the departure of mail steamers. It is a physical impossibility to pilot a vessel safely in the face of the blinding glare of the electric light.”<sup>18</sup>

Another downside was that the open arc was a potential fire hazard, which precluded it from being used indoors.

The Tanjong Pagar Dock Company installed an electric arc light in July 1878; the Siemen's arc lamp emitted light equivalent to about 2,000 candles “to facilitate work which had to be carried on all night”.<sup>19</sup>

In February 1885, the Telegraph Office in Singapore installed 59 Edison-Swan incandescent bulbs. These bulbs worked by heating a filament in a vacuum to produce light. The following year, the Union Hotel on Hill Street replaced its gas burners with electric lamps, using incandescent bulbs of either 16 or 32 candlepower each (around 20 to 40 watts).<sup>20</sup> In 1890, Government House (now known as the Istana) was also fitted with incandescent lamps.<sup>21</sup>

Using such bulbs for street lighting, however, took longer. While the owners of individual buildings could install a small generator to power their own lights, a system of electric street lighting – which was more complex – necessitated an electrical



Gas Works, Geylang Road, Singapore

By 1849, it seems that lighting the town had become a priority, as the Municipal Committee decided to add “nearly 50 lamps, at a cost of lighting, of 300 dollars a year, exclusive of the first cost of lamps &c”.<sup>8</sup>

Merely adding a lamp did not necessarily mean there would be sufficient illumination as this complaint in *The Singapore Free Press* of 19 April 1850 attests:

“Most of the Public lamps are of no use whatever, through the dirt which covers them, and which prevents the rays of the light from passing through it. The lamplighters have no clean rags, employ very dirty ones, and have been seen using the water of the drains, that is to say muddy and dirty

water, to clean these lamps. There is also a scarcity of lamplighters, it being sometimes pretty near Gun-fire before the lamps in some localities are reached.”<sup>9</sup>

Another problem was the tendency of some of these lamps to go out at night as this 1861 complaint in *The Straits Times* illustrates: “We call the attention of the Public Lamplighter to the fact, that the lamp at the corner of High Street and North Bridge Road, generally ceases to burn at One A.M.”<sup>10</sup>

### From Oil to Gas

While the fledgling town of Singapore was trying to get by with oil lamps, the



A gas lamp along Geylang Road, c. 1900s. Lim Shao Bin Collection, PictureSG, National Library, Singapore.

power station, in the same way that gas lighting required a central gasworks.

The impetus was the introduction of the electric tram system in Singapore, which led to the setting up of the city's first electrical power station. In 1901, the Singapore Tramways Ltd was founded in London, and work on the power station and headquarters at MacKenzie Road in Singapore began the following year. The power station began generating electricity in 1905 and the first regular tramway route started running on 25 July the same year. The power station also supplied the electricity required for electric street lamps, which were first used in 1906 to light up Raffles Place and the Esplanade (now Padang).

Electricity quickly penetrated society, used in government offices, commercial buildings and homes. The Tanjong Pagar Dock even started its own power plant to electrify operations in 1909. Singapore's increasing electricity demand led to the opening of a second power station, St James Power Station,<sup>22</sup> in 1927.

A major power failure on the evening of 16 April 1936 showed how dependent Singapore had become on electricity, with cookers and refrigeration shutting down and cinemas cancelling screenings. Even Government House was not spared, and Governor Shenton Thomas "had to 'feel' his way round the passages until peons arrived with electric torches". *The Singapore Free Press* reported that a "feature of the 'black-out' was the revelation that about seven-eighths of the streets of Singapore, claimed to be one of the most modern cities of the East, are still gas-lit".<sup>23</sup>

In November 1936, a *Straits Times* editorial claimed that Singapore had "some of the worst lighted streets in the world", and the obsolete and old-fashioned gas street lamps provided poor lighting for motorists and pedestrians.<sup>24</sup> T.H. Stone, President of the Singapore Rotary Club, echoed this view. In a Rotary luncheon in September 1937, he said "[t]he complete overhaul of Singapore's lighting is necessary and urgent because there is not a single street in this island that is properly lit".<sup>25</sup>

The rise of the automobile was the reason for the sudden disaffection with gas streetlamps. Poorly lit streets made the darkness between gas lamps dangerous blind spots for drivers.

In the early 1930s, there was a further development of the electric arc lamp. By sealing the lamps in tubes of sodium or

(Below) Singapore's first electrical power station on Mackenzie Road, 1905. It generated electrical power for the trams and also supplied the electricity for electric street lamps, which were first installed in 1906. *F.W. York Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

(Bottom) Overhead electric tram lines and an electric lamp along High Street, early 20th century. *Lim Shao Bin Collection, PictureSG, National Library, Singapore.*



mercury vapour to create a bright glow, it made "perpetual daylight" possible as one enthusiastic 1933 report in *The Straits Times* put it.<sup>26</sup> By 1937, both Kuala Lumpur and Ipoh had installed test stretches of mercury vapour lamps with positive results.<sup>27</sup> Singapore did its own test along East Coast Road between Katong and Siglap with 300-yard stretches lit up by mercury vapour, sodium vapour and standard electric filament lamps.<sup>28</sup>

In December 1937, a committee was set up to look into traffic problems in Singapore and to recommend solutions.<sup>29</sup> The report, produced the following year, noted that poor street lighting was one of the causes of traffic accidents and proposed lighting standards for the various classes of

streets. The most important routes were classified as Group A, and only mercury or sodium vapour lamps were deemed suitable for these roads. The dozen highway routes included the main thoroughfares in town such as Beach Road, Orchard Road and Connaught Drive as well as major routes outside of town, like Clemenceau Avenue, Kallang Road, Bukit Timah Road, Thomson Road and Serangoon Road.<sup>30</sup>

The lighting recommendations, however, were not accepted by the Municipal Commission who proceeded with its own lighting plans and street classification system. In 1940, it successfully lit a stretch of Clemenceau Avenue using mercury vapour lamps but further plans were derailed due to the war.<sup>31</sup>

At the start of the Japanese Occupation (1942–45), the Japanese Military Administration took the opportunity to repair the damage caused by the war by replacing street lighting at 43 major junctions in Singapore with electric street lighting.<sup>32</sup>

The immediate post-war years saw Singapore's population swelling to over 900,000 due to people being displaced from Malaya and the surrounding region. The resulting demand, which saw a sharp increase in the use of gas plus the difficulty of getting replacement gas lamps, hindered repair and servicing work.

In December 1946, the Municipal Commission approved a \$30,000 budget to install 72 electric lamps at various strategic locations in the city, such as Victoria Street, Bras Basah Road, River Valley Road and Outram Road as an initial measure.<sup>33</sup> In 1947, a proper five-year scheme costing \$1 million was implemented to install more than 3,000 electric street lamps in Singapore. This was followed in July 1951 by a second five-year plan amounting to \$1.5 million to improve street lighting.<sup>34</sup>

In 1954, the City Council (successor of the Municipal Commission) announced that the approximately 530 gas street lamps still in use in Singapore would be scrapped by the end of the following year and replaced with electric lamps.<sup>35</sup>

Whether in 1955 or a little later, the complete crossover to electric bulbs would have put Singapore's 25 lamp attendants out of work. By the late 1940s, time switch-

The bulb of this street lamp along Phillip Street photographed in 1968 resembles the ones from early 20th-century Singapore. *Lim Shao Bin Collection, PictureSG, National Library, Singapore.*



ers had replaced the lamplighters, who previously did their rounds in the evening to light the gas lamps and then returning in the morning to extinguish them.<sup>36</sup> However, while lamp lighting was no longer needed, the lamps still needed cleaning and maintenance. This was a job handled by the lamp attendants employed by the Gas Department.

While electric lamps were brighter and cheaper, there was, however, one important task that gas lamps excelled at that electric lamps could not accomplish – concealing bad smells. In 1955, about a dozen gas lamps around Singapore were kept burning day and night, supposedly to "offset the smell which might otherwise escape from the sewage mains near which they were installed", according to City Councillor Chan Kum Chee.<sup>37</sup> These gas lamps were located in places such as the Telok Ayer police station, Fort Canning and the Immigration Office.

By the 1960s, thanks to widespread electrification, Singapore glowed at night.

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Songs were even written about how beautiful Singapore was after dusk. The 1962 P. Ramlee movie *Labu dan Labi*, a comedy about two bumbling servants, features the song "Singapura Waktu Malam", a paean to Singapore at night. The opening stanza goes:

"Singapura waktu malam  
Lampu neon indah berkilauan  
Gedung tinggi gemerlapan  
Sungguh megah tiada bandingan"

[Translation]

"Singapore at night  
Neon lights beautifully sparkling  
Glittering tall buildings  
Really magnificent without  
compare" ♦

Assistance for the English translations of the Chinese poem by 许南英 and the Malay song by P. Ramlee were provided by colleagues Goh Yu Mei and Juffri Supaat respectively.

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# The Extraordinary Life of Kunnuck Mistree

Indian convicts contributed much to the early infrastructural development of Singapore but their voices have rarely been heard. **Vandana Aggarwal** uncovers the story of one convict who made good.

It is no exaggeration to say that Singapore was built on the backs of Indian convicts. These men – and they were mainly but not exclusively men – laid roads, cleared forests and were involved in the construction of buildings like Sri Mariamman Temple, St An-

drew's Church (now Cathedral), Horsburgh Lighthouse and Government House (today's Istana). In addition to manual labour, some also worked as hospital attendants, gardeners and domestic servants.

The first batch of 80 Indian convicts arrived in Singapore from Bencoolen (now Bengkulu) in Sumatra on 18 April 1825 on the brig *Horatio*. Over the decades that followed, more convicts were shipped to Singapore until 1867 when the practice was abolished.<sup>1</sup> In history books, these

men (and a handful of women) are simply referred to as Indian convicts – faceless and nameless. However, thanks to dogged detective work in the archives, we have been able to piece together the life story of one remarkable individual.

Kunnuck Mistree was 38 years old when he arrived in Singapore in 1825. Once here, he was able to turn his life around: he eventually set up a business, got married and had children. His death, some four decades after stepping on

these shores, even merited a mention in the local newspaper. (Different documents use different spellings of his name, including Kunnuckram Mitre and Kanak Mittery.<sup>2</sup> Kunnuck Mistree, the version chosen for this essay, was how his name was spelt in an official appeal filed by his legal counsel in 1857.<sup>3</sup>)

## From Calcutta to Bencoolen

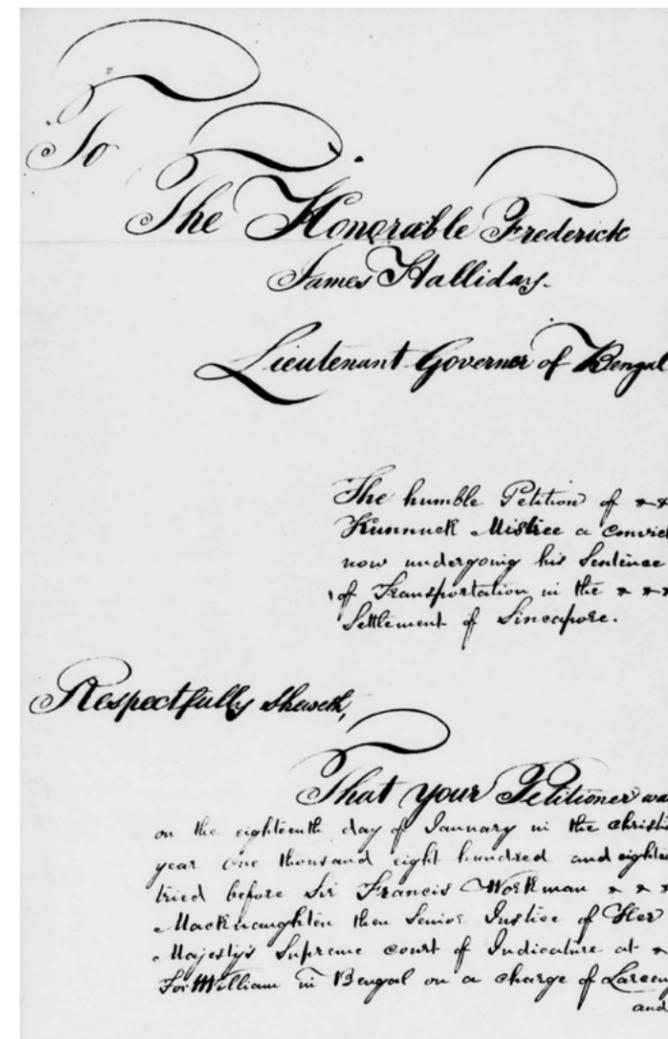
Nothing is known of Mistree's early life and neither do we have an image of him. What we know of him dates back to 1818 when he was convicted of larceny – a category which includes housebreaking, burglary and dacoity (gang robbery) – in Calcutta (now Kolkata) and was shipped to Bencoolen in Sumatra:

"... in the Christian year one thousand eight hundred and eighteen tried before Sir Francis Workman Macnaghten then Senior Justice of Her Majesty's Supreme Court of Judicature at Fort William in Bengal on a charge of Larceny and being duly convicted was sentenced to transportation for life to Fort Marlborough Bencoolen in the Island of Sumatra."<sup>4</sup>

Mistree was around 31 years old when he arrived in Bencoolen, a convicted criminal sentenced to permanent exile. Despite being relatively young, his future prospects looked bleak.<sup>5</sup> Fortunately, Stamford Raffles, who was then Lieutenant-Governor of Bencoolen, believed that convicts should be given the chance to redeem themselves and, for some, even the chance of emancipation. In a letter to the Court of Directors of the British East India Company (EIC) in 1818, Raffles wrote:

"The object of the punishment as far as it affects the parties must be the reclaiming them from their bad habits, but I must question whether the practice hitherto pursued has been productive of that effect... There are at present about five hundred of these unfortunate people... I would suggest the propriety of the chief authority being vested with a discretionary power of freeing such men as conduct themselves well, from the obligations of service, and permitting them to settle in the place, and resume the privileges of citizenship."<sup>6</sup>

Raffles organised the convicts in Bencoolen into three classes: (i) "first class



A petition in 1857 from Kunnuck Mistree's solicitor to the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, laying down his case for a free pardon. The document is the most detailed source of the key highlights of Mistree's life since being sent to Bencoolen. Attached to the petition were copies of certificates vouching for his conduct, character references as well as his employment history. Mistree was granted a full pardon in January 1858. Collection of the National Archives of Singapore. (Media no.: SSR/S026\_00750).

to be allowed to give evidence in court, and permitted to settle on land secured to them and their children; but no one to be admitted to this class until he has been resident in Bencoolen three years"; (ii) "the second class to be employed in ordinary labour"; and (iii) "the third class, or men of abandoned and profligate character, to be kept to the harder kinds of labour, and confined at night".<sup>7</sup>

Well-behaved convicts could move up to a higher class and be freed from servitude, while those who failed to toe the line would be demoted to a lower class, and lose their freedom and privileges. For convicts, the promise of a better life made them work towards improving their lot. A similar system was later implemented in Singapore, though with six rather than three classes of convicts.<sup>8</sup>

Initially, Mistree could have been assigned jobs like clearing forests or building roads like any other convict in Bencoolen, but he eventually managed to get employment as a dresser at the

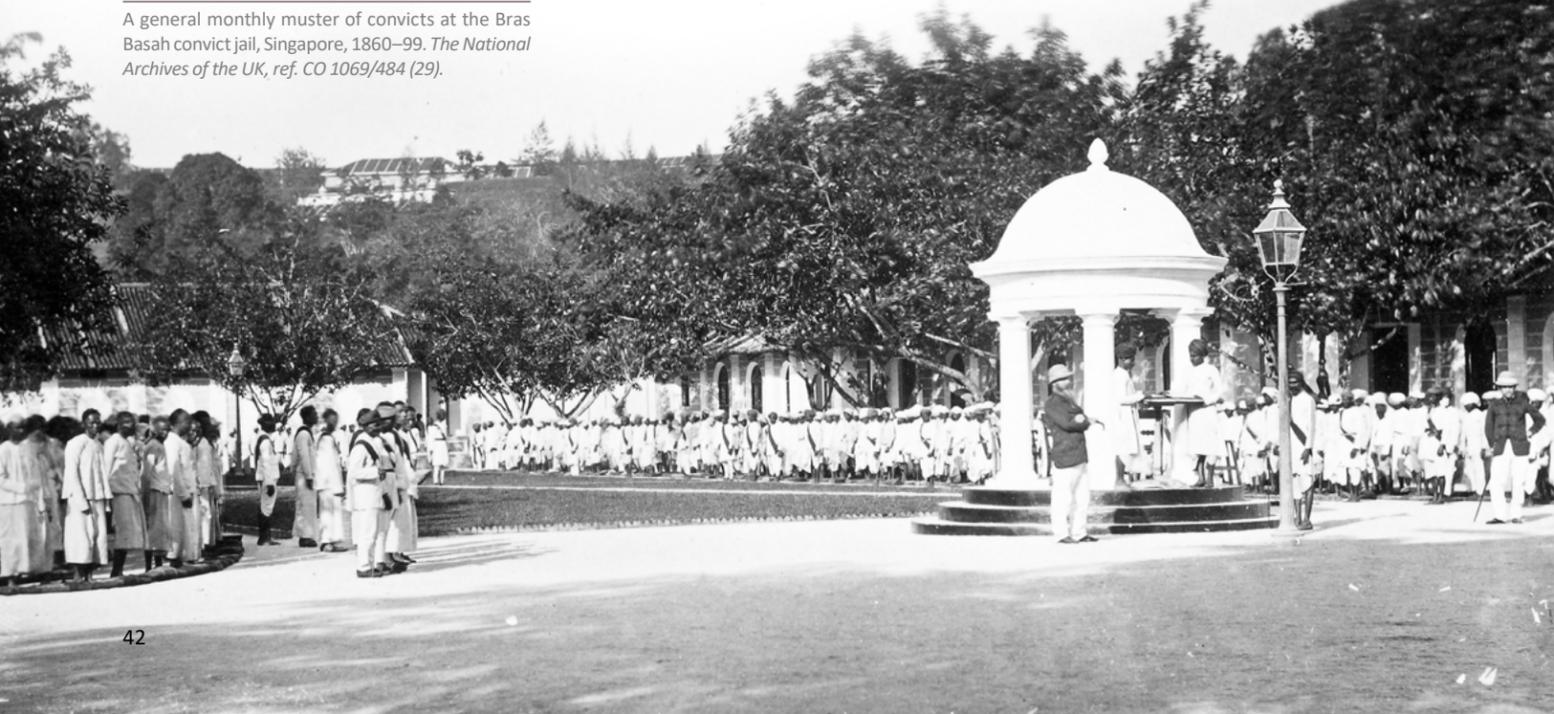
local hospital as a convict of the first class. According to the rules, the earliest this could have happened would have been 1821, three years after his internment.<sup>9</sup>

The practice of sending Indian convicts to Bencoolen began at the end of the 18th century. In 1787, the EIC sent the first batch of convicts to its settlement in Fort Marlborough. Subsequently, the territories of Penang, Melaka and Singapore also received convict labour.<sup>10</sup>

Transportation served both penal and economic objectives. Shipping convicts to the colonies gave those territories a source of cheap labour. It also served as a deterrent as transportation was deemed a severe punishment. "To be sent across the 'kala pani', or 'black water', in a convict ship or 'jeta junaza', or 'living tomb' as they called it, meant, especially to a man of high caste... the total loss to him of all that was worth living for."<sup>11</sup>

In 1797, the EIC passed the first of a number of laws regarding transportation: Regulation IV directed that all sentences

A general monthly muster of convicts at the Bras Basah convict jail, Singapore, 1860–99. *The National Archives of the UK, ref. CO 1069/484 (29).*



of imprisonment for seven years or more would be commuted to transportation in a foreign land. By the end of the 19th century, over 3,000 Indian convicts had been transported to the penal sites of Bencoolen, Amboina (now Ambon Island), the Andaman Islands and Penang.<sup>12</sup>

### Moving to Singapore

Within seven years of his arrival in Bencoolen, Mistree's life would be up-ended again. This time, though, it would be through no fault of his. The 1824 Anglo-Dutch treaty that demarcated British and Dutch possessions in Southeast Asia resulted in an exchange of territories, with Britain ceding Bencoolen to the Dutch in exchange for Melaka. The Supreme Government in Calcutta decided to relocate all convicts to the Straits Settlements, although convicts of the first class and a few others were given the option of staying back in Bencoolen as free men and women, albeit without the option of returning to India until their term was served.<sup>13</sup>

Rather than remaining in Bencoolen, Mistree chose to be transported to Singapore. "[C]omfortable and happy in his then position neglected to avail himself of the conditional Pardon accepted by other convicts and was consequently removed to Singapore [sic]."<sup>14</sup>

Just before leaving for Singapore, Mistree was given a character certificate that gives us a peek into his life in Bencoolen. Dated 23 March 1825, the name and signature on it are illegible but it confirms that "Connick Mittre" had been employed at the general hospital for seven years and his behaviour during this period was that of "sobriety, honesty, and attention to duties".<sup>15</sup> One month later, on 25 April, Mistree arrived in Singapore on the schooner *Anne*. For the 38-year-old, the island was to be his third and final home.<sup>16</sup>

On arrival, Mistree and the other convicts were housed in temporary *attap* huts in the Temenggong's village (later called Kampong Bencoolen), located at the mouth of the Singapore River. Not all convicts were automatically given jobs similar to what they did in Bencoolen or enjoyed the same freedom. They were also not placed in the same convict class as before.<sup>17</sup>

Mistree was assigned the job of a dresser at the Pauper Hospital, possibly due to his prior experience and the connections he had built up in Bencoolen.<sup>18</sup> He was likely categorised as a second-class convict, one level down from his convict status in Bencoolen. This may account for the many letters of recommendation he received between 1827 and 1828, when

he was nearing the completion of three years of service in Singapore.

This was the mandatory period before a convict could move up to the category of first class, provided all other requirements were met. Various people who knew Mistree in Bencoolen and Singapore wrote letters of commendation. One of these, dated August 1827, was from Dr R. Tytler, Head Surgeon of the Straits Settlements, who certified that "convict Konnuck Ram Mittre served as a Native Doctor in the General Hospital of Fort Marlboro while I was Head Surgeon Straits Settlement. I always found him very diligent and attentive".<sup>19</sup>

In a letter dated 16 June 1827, Dr William Montgomerie, former Acting Surgeon in charge of Singapore, wrote that "Konat Mistery" had always behaved well during his time as a dresser at the Pauper Hospital,<sup>20</sup> while Assistant Surgeon Alex Warrant certified on 1 July 1828 that "Kunnick Maistry" had served "in a sober and steady manner" under his charge for a year.<sup>21</sup> These letters proved effective and Mistree was upgraded to a convict of the first class.

Convicts were rarely addressed by name in official letters. However, a letter dated 21 February 1828 by Kenneth Murchison, Resident Councillor of Singapore, specifically mentions that "Kunnuck Mit-tree, dresser Pauper Hospital", along with two other convicts, had not been given a monthly ration and in lieu, a sum of Rs 2 was added to his salary bringing it up to a princely sum of Rs 12 per month.<sup>22</sup>

Mistree's name next appears in 1842 in Lease Deed No. 711, made in favour of "Kunnick Meetre" for a piece of land on Carpenter Street measuring about 324 square feet.<sup>23</sup> One might ask how a convict was allowed to own land, but surprisingly this was not unusual as well-behaved convicts were accorded a relative amount of freedom.<sup>24</sup> Thanks to the liberal ideas first espoused by Raffles in Bencoolen, convicts could buy land, get married and even own small businesses.

In Singapore, these measures continued and the convicts could move about unshackled.<sup>25</sup> Mistree was clearly one of the many convicts who benefitted from this freedom and put it to good use. "The convicts were at this time treated with great indulgence..." and some of the older convicts managed to amass "considerable sums of money, and, indeed, to become possessed of landed property in the town".<sup>26</sup>

Mistree did not live a life of penury. He became a financially savvy man who began investing his money in real estate.



Prisoners in the Bras Bash convict jail, c. 1900. The jail was built by convict labour and was completed in 1860. Photo by G.R. Lambert & Co. *Illustrated London News Collection*, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Carpenter Street lies in the heart of Chinatown and it is unlikely that Mistree resided there. He could have used this property to earn rental income and in all probability still lived in Kampong Bencoolen, where many immigrants from Bencoolen had settled down.<sup>27</sup>

### A Ticket of Leave

In 1845, under the newly formulated guidelines for the management of convicts, Mistree applied for a ticket of leave – a privilege accorded to trustworthy first-class convicts after 16 years of service. Once approved, Mistree would be allowed to live outside convict lines as a respectable member of society and take up a profession of his choice.<sup>28</sup>

Convict lines were residential quarters specially constructed for convicts. Ironically, convict labour was more often than not used to build them. The convicts in Singapore lived in open prisons in dedicated areas although they could also live in temporary buildings near their place of work. Mistree might have been allotted quarters near the hospital where he worked or, allowed to live as he pleased. All that was expected of him was to stay on the right side of the law and attend muster when required.

A letter by Senior Surgeon Thomas Oxley on 14 September 1846 certified that "Connak Mistery having a Ticket of leave to provide for himself & being desirous of quitting his situation of Dresser in the Paupers Hospital... leave it now at his own

request".<sup>29</sup> A formal certificate bearing the official seal of Resident Councillor Thomas Church validates this information.<sup>30</sup>

According to John Frederick Adolphus McNair, Executive Engineer and Superintendent of Convicts, convicts who were released from imprisonment with a ticket of leave were "absorbed innocuously into the native community, and again contributed to the advantage of the place in the various occupations they had recourse to, in order to obtain an honest livelihood". He added that the convicts "very rarely a second time came under the cognisance of the police, but peaceably merged into the population, and earned their livelihood by honest means".<sup>31</sup>

Mistree used his newfound freedom to earn a living as a "native holistic doctor". By virtue of his long stints at various hospitals in Bencoolen and Singapore, Mistree had gained enough knowledge and skills to practise medicine and, according to his official petition for a pardon, he had "gain[ed] esteem of his countrymen and others... in Singapore [sic] with whom he [had] come in contact".<sup>32</sup>

In 1846, an assistant doctor by the name of J.I. Woodford resigned from government service and opened a dispensary on Church Street in Kampong Bencoolen. Woodford's name appears both in reference to the property that Mistree bought on Carpenter Street in 1842 and also as the executor of Mistree's will.<sup>33</sup> Woodford was obviously someone whom Mistree had a great deal of trust in and it is possible

that Mistree may have been working for Woodford at his dispensary.

### Quest for Freedom

In 1855, three decades after Mistree first set foot on Singapore, he began the process of asking to be pardoned and to be allowed to return to India. Apparently, Mistree had written to Whitehall in London, which responded in a reply dated 7 August 1855, advising "Konuck Ram Mittre" to refer the matter to the Governor-General of India as the latter had the authority to grant a remission of sentence if he so desired.<sup>34</sup>

It wasn't until two years later that a petition was submitted by Mistree's solicitor, which was forwarded by the Governor of Singapore to the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal on 23 December 1857.<sup>35</sup> In his petition, Mistree presented himself, not without reason, as someone of impeccable character ever since his days in Bencoolen. The petition described in detail Mistree's journey from Fort William in Calcutta to Fort Marlborough in Bencoolen and then to Singapore:

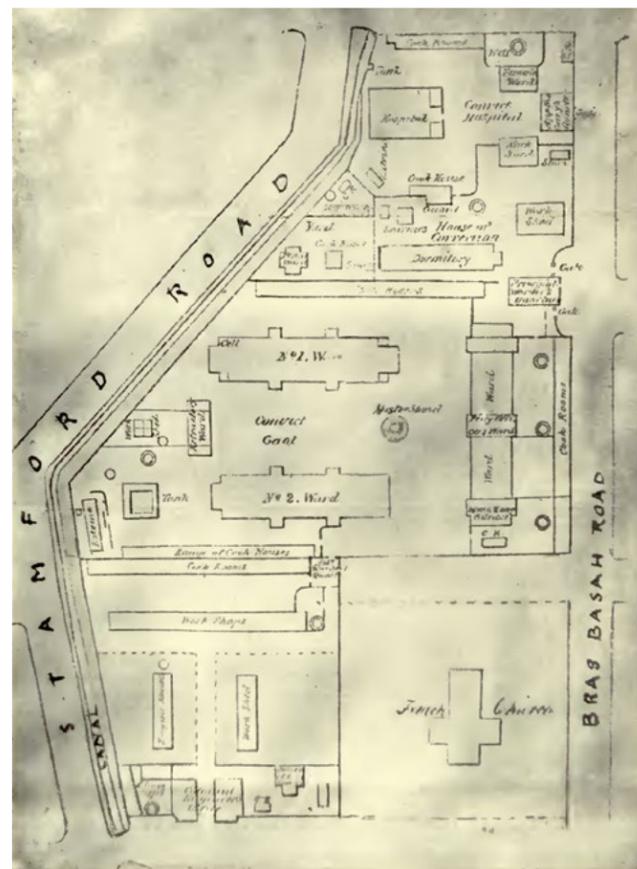
"That your Petitioner having by reason of good behaviour won the good opinion of the parties in charge of the convict establishment at Fort Marlborough was employed in the convict hospital as dresser, in the act of which he has attained considerable experience... and in consequence of good behaviour enjoyed many comforts derived to the greatest body of convicts... consequently removed to Singapore [sic] where he continued to serve in the convict hospital in the capacity of a dresser..."<sup>36</sup>

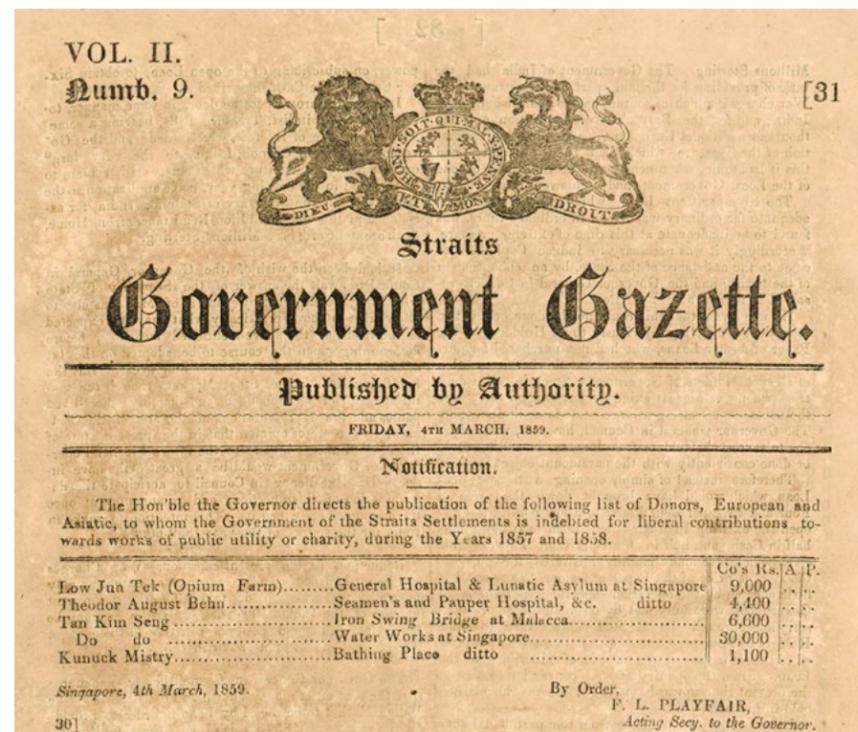
The petition is the most detailed source of the key highlights of Mistree's life since being sent to Bencoolen. It laid down several reasons why Mistree should be pardoned, mentioning his age (70 years) and the fact that he had already served banishment for 38 years.<sup>37</sup>

Another reason cited was Mistree's desire to die in his homeland. "To a Hindoo the punishment of transportation is more terrible than death itself and the only consolation left to a Hindoo under such circumstances is the hope of returning if it be but to die on the banks of his beloved Ganges."<sup>38</sup>

Attached to the petition were copies of certificates vouching for Mistree's conduct, character references as well as his employment history. Senior officers,

A plan of the Bras Bash convict jail. The jail was built entirely by convict labour and was completed in 1860. The convicts soon realised that "an open campong, or village, had become a closed cage". Image reproduced from McNair, J.F.A., & Bayliss, W.D. (1899). *Prisoners Their Own Warders: A Record of the Convict Prison at Singapore Established 1825, Discontinued 1873, Together with a Cursory History of the Convict Establishments at Bencoolen, Penang and Malacca from the Year 1797*. Westminster: A. Constable. (Call no.: RRARE 365.95957 MAC; Microfilm no.: NL12115).





Kunuck Mistree's donation of Rs 1,100 towards a bathing area was announced in the *Straits Government Gazette* of 4 March 1859. It mentions "Kunuck Mistry" alongside other donors such as Tan Kim Seng. *Image reproduced from Straits Settlements. (1859, March 4). Straits Settlements Government Gazette, 2 (9). Singapore: Mission Press. Collection of the National Library, Singapore. (Accession no.: B02969339H).*

including doctors and jail staff, strongly supported Mistree's quest for freedom. Resident Councillor Thomas Church issued a conduct certificate dated 20 September 1856 noting that the "conduct of Kunuck Mistry has been very good.

I know him at Bencoolen and also here for the last 19 years".<sup>39</sup>

Mistree's petition was successful and in January 1858, he was granted a full pardon on account of his age and stellar service record, allowing him to return to India.<sup>40</sup>

Although he was now able to return to his homeland, it appears that Mistree did not do so, or at least, not permanently. Instead, we see that from 1857 onwards, Mistree became more of a "settler" than a "sojourner". Through donations of land and money, he began to give back to the country that had granted him a new lease of life.

Around 1858, Mistree is known to have donated a piece of land for "religious purposes".<sup>41</sup> It cannot be ascertained exactly where this land was but the Sri Sivan Temple,<sup>42</sup> formerly located in Dhoby Ghaut, was within walking distance from Kampong Bencoolen. This might have been the Hindu temple that benefitted from Mistree's generosity.

Subsequently, Mistree made a donation of 1,100 rupees towards a bathing area, earning for himself a mention in the *Straits Government Gazette* of 4 March 1859. It lists "Kunuck Mistry" alongside other generous donors such as Tan Kim Seng<sup>43</sup> "to whom the Government of the Straits Settlements is indebted for liberal contributions towards works for public utility or charity, during the Years 1857 and 1858".<sup>44</sup> The fact that Mistree appears on the same list as the likes of prominent businessman and philanthropist Tan Kim Seng speaks volumes.

There are other signs that Mistree's social standing had risen within Singapore society. In 1857, notices were published in the newspapers containing the names of people eligible to stand for election as municipal commissioners as well as vote

for them. In order to qualify, they should pay taxes amounting to at least 25 rupees annually. The name "Kanaka Maistry" appears on the list.<sup>45</sup>

Why did Mistree not return to India to spend his remaining days as he had petitioned? Having left India under shameful circumstances and after being away for so long, Mistree, who was Hindu, would have lost his caste and like most convicts, would have nothing to look forward to in India.<sup>46</sup> After a little over three decades in Singapore, Mistree had a new life, a successful business and a family. Age was also not on his side as Mistree was already in his 70s. In



addition, his quest for a pardon appeared to have earned him respectability and the status of a free man.

On 27 July 1865, a death notice published in *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser* announced the passing of Mistree on 24 July 1865:

"Kanakay Maistry, a liberated Bengallee convict of considerable wealth, died on the 24th inst. at Campong Bencoolen; his estate which is worth about 50,000 dollars has been divided amongst his sons. We believe he has appointed Mr. Woodford, one of his executors.

The amount of his estate was considered substantial at the time, and is even more remarkable given that the majority of convicts died penniless and in ignominy.

As part of their punishment, all life convicts had their name, crime and date of sentence tattooed on their foreheads in the vernacular before being transported from India. To hide this, former convicts would wear a headgear that was pulled down to cover their foreheads.<sup>48</sup> Although

Indian convicts were tattooed on the forehead with the crime they had committed. Shown here is a convict branded on the forehead with "Doomga", which means "murder" in Hindustani. *Image reproduced from Marryat, F. (1848). Borneo and the Indian Archipelago: With drawings of Costume and Scenery (p. 215). London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans. Collection of the National Library, Singapore. (Accession no.: B03013523F).*

Kunuck Mistree's death on 24 July 1865 was published in the press. *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 27 July 1865, p. 2. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

Mistree would have borne this permanent mark, he did not let his convict past define him. Instead, he rose above his challenging circumstances and became a man of substance. It is possible that Mistree's descendants still live in Singapore today, unaware of his remarkable and inspiring story. ♦

I first came across Kunuck Mistree's name in 2015 while transcribing the Straits Settlements Records at the National Archives of Singapore. Intrigued, I began to search for more information about him in books, newspapers and old documents. I have uncovered a lot of information about Mistree's life as a convict. To my knowledge, there is no other convict in Singapore who has had his journey reconstructed in such detail. There are still gaps to be filled and my research continues.

## NOTES

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# The Young Ones

Photographs of children in the 1960s show how much things have changed in Singapore in the last six decades.

A good number of the silver-haired men and women of the Merdeka generation have retired today. They now while away their time chatting with friends over coffee and playing with their grandchildren. But back in the 1960s, these men and women were young boys and girls, bursting with life, energy and potential, much like Singapore itself as the new nation found its feet.

The following photographs of children are from the pictorial book, *There Was a Time*, which was produced in collaboration with the National Archives of Singapore. The book portrays the rhythms of daily life between 1959 and 1965. This was a pivotal period in Singapore's history

as it negotiated the shaky transition from British crown colony to self-rule, then being part of the short-lived but tumultuous Federation of Malaysia before becoming an independent and sovereign nation.

This was a time when Singapore had just begun its process of modernisation. Kampong folk moved into high-rise flats, new careers were forged in factories built in Jurong, the trading of stocks and shares began in Raffles Place, television was introduced to Singapore, and the new red-brick National Library opened on Stamford Road.

Yet, some things carried on as they had before. Bumboats still jostled on the fetid waters of the Singapore River, children

Children at play, 1962. *Captek, kuti-kuti*, five stones, hopscotch, *gasing* and even *tikam-tikam* – games played by children of every race. © Urban Redevelopment Authority. All rights reserved.

played on five-footways, families enjoyed the sea breeze along Queen Elizabeth Walk, and eating out at roadside hawker stalls was a way of life.

This small selection of photographs is a reminder that every senior citizen today was once a playful, lively child and that it is important to remember, as Cliff Richard so famously sang in his 1962 record-breaking pop single, "The Young Ones", to "live, love, while the flame is strong, 'cause we may not be the young ones, very long". ♦

Running tap water, Seletar, 1960. The Rural and Urban Services Advisory Council had a water supply scheme in the 1960s, but some villages would not get piped water until much later. *The Ralph Charles Saunders Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*



Friends posing for a photo in a back lane, 1963. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*



Free milk for children during recess, 1950s. After the war, there was a policy of giving out free milk to needy children. Supplied by UNICEF, the milk was distributed by the Social Welfare Department to welfare institutions and schools. *Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

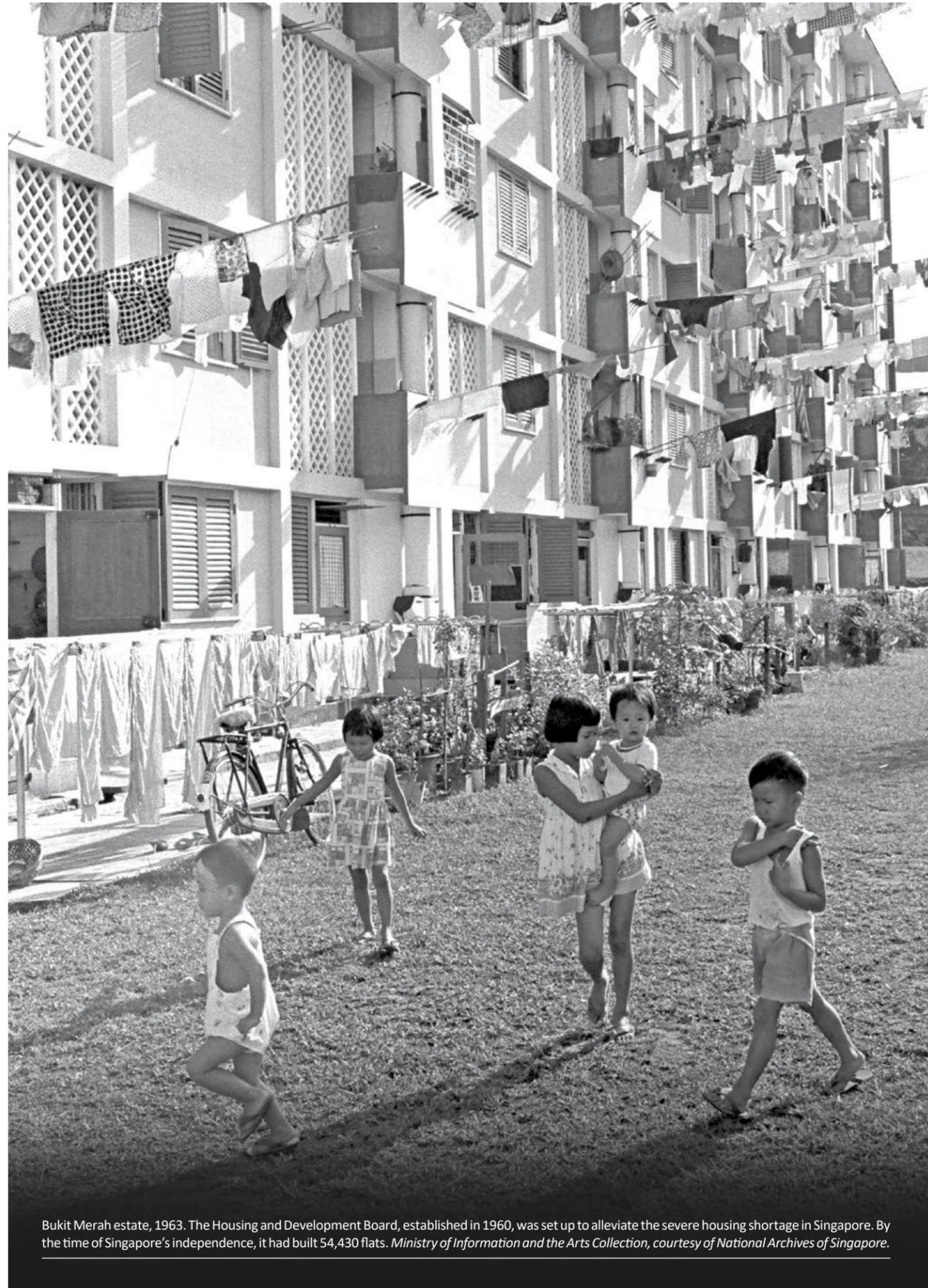


A public crèche, 1963. In the mid-1960s, the Department of Social Welfare ran 10 crèches catering to low-income families. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*



An Indian family in Serangoon Road, 1962. This was the time when the iconic businesses of Little India were being founded: Lian Seng for household goods, Haniffa Textiles, Jothi flower shop and Mustafa, which started out as a food stall. *Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*





Bukit Merah estate, 1963. The Housing and Development Board, established in 1960, was set up to alleviate the severe housing shortage in Singapore. By the time of Singapore's independence, it had built 54,430 flats. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*



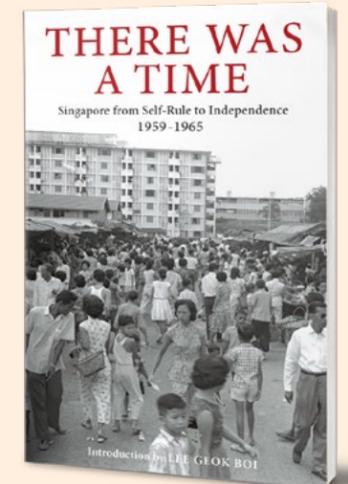
Qur'an lesson, Katong, 1962. In 1959, there were 12 *madrasah* (Islamic religious schools) in Singapore, increasing to 28 by 1962. *Photo by Wong Ken Foo (K.F. Wong). Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*



Sharing a bowl of noodles by the roadside, 1962. *Photo by Wong Ken Foo (K.F. Wong). Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*



Girl posing with an Indian milkman's calf, with the Winstedt Road flats in the background, 1961. *Lau Nyeng Siang, from "Family and Friends: A Singapore Album" organised by Nexus, National Museum of Singapore and Landmark Books.*



*There Was a Time: Singapore from Self-Rule to Independence, 1959–1965* – produced by Landmark Books in collaboration with the National Archives of Singapore (NAS) – is available for reference at the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library and for loan at selected public libraries (Call nos.: RSING 959.5705 THE-[HIS] and SING 959.5705 THE). Comprising some 238 images, largely taken from the collections of the NAS, the 288-page pictorial book also retails at major bookshops in Singapore.



CHONG STE  
 JOONUM TEE  
 CHENG TEO  
 SERONN LEE  
 CHEE KANG  
 CHAN YEW  
 MENG MIMI  
 TEO SIM BEE  
 ENG LOH KH  
 EYEW CHU  
 KWOK CHOR  
 TEOTESIANG

we are producing  
 new fields of studies  
 new ideas in design  
 new designs in crafts  
 new forms of visuals  
 new skills in trades  
 new techniques in printing  
 new types of souvenirs  
 and a new breed of  
 creative people  
 the in-word is NEW  
 the mood is high-keyed  
 the pace is moving  
 the theme is HAPPENING  
 if you have the means  
 we have the talents  
 if you have the job  
 we have the people

In the 1960s, most school crests in Singapore probably involved some combination of a torch with an open flame, an open book and a lion – all emblazoned on a shield with a motto below it.

But Wee Chwee Beng, a pioneer teacher of Baharuddin Vocational Institute (BVI), ditched these hallmarks of Western heraldry when he designed a crest for the new institute in 1968. Instead of an illustrative approach, Wee abstracted the initials “BVI” into two right-angled arrows. Each was assembled by combining the letters “V” and “I”, while one was enclosed to form a triangle-like “B”. The arrows were constructed into a larger right-angled triangle that was inversely mirrored to form a square crest, which looked identical regardless of which side it was viewed from.

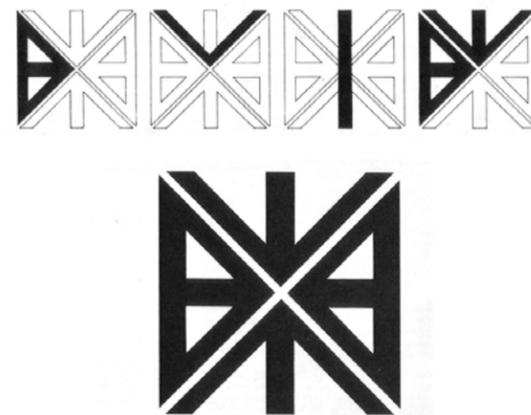
This design was too radical, even for his colleagues at Baharuddin. They found the abstract logo too modern for their liking. “I felt strongly at that point in time that we should break away from the norm or what is expected because I am designing for the future, not for the present, not for the past,” Wee explained. “At a time when others were drawing tigers and lions [on school crests], people were a bit shocked. I kept on trying to tell them it will be acceptable even 30 to 40 years on. I was saying this [design] would

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# BECOMING MODERN DESIGN

by

The now-defunct Baharuddin Vocational Institute was Singapore’s first formal school for design. **Justin Zhuang** looks at how the institute laid the foundation for the design industry here.



**(Facing page)** According to a manifesto by the editorial team of Baharuddin Vocational Institute’s 1971 commemorative magazine, the institute aimed to produce a “new breed of creative people”. Image reproduced from Baharuddin Vocational Institute. (1971). Singapore: Baharuddin Vocational Institute. (Call no.: RCL05 372.95957 BVI).

**(Far left)** The design of the crest of Baharuddin Vocational Institute. The crest was an abstract combination of the letters “BVI”. Image reproduced from Baharuddin Vocational Institute. (1971). Singapore: Baharuddin Vocational Institute. (Call no.: RCL05 372.95957 BVI).

**(Left)** The cover of the commemorative magazine to mark the official launch of Baharuddin Vocational Institute in 1971. Image reproduced from Baharuddin Vocational Institute. (1971). Singapore: Baharuddin Vocational Institute. (Call no.: RCL05 372.95957 BVI).

be modern and contemporary whereas if you start to have lions and tigers you are going back [in time].”<sup>1</sup>

The eventual adoption of Wee’s progressive design was a fitting start for an institute set up to support Singapore’s rapid industrialisation programme. BVI was part of a network of vocational training institutes established by the government after Independence as part of a national industrialisation drive spearheaded by then Minister for Finance Goh Keng Swee.

At the time, the newly minted nation faced a raft of economic woes: the unemployment rate was high and many people were living in slums and squatter settlements. These vocational institutes<sup>2</sup> were started with the objective of training a skilled workforce who could work in the new multinational companies and factories that the government was trying to attract to invest in Singapore.

The diverse curriculum from vocational institutes ranged from courses in mechanical engineering to building construction. BVI, however, specialised in the manual and applied arts, which included advertising art, handicrafts, fashion, furniture design and printing. Its graduates were expected to play a vital role in creating made-in-Singapore products, said then Minister of State for Education Lee Chiaw Meng at BVI’s first graduation ceremony on 7 November 1970:

“This institute was established with the realisation that the development of industries in Singapore requires a greater focus on design, product presentation, packaging, advertising and display and a growing printing industry. Furthermore, the expanding tourist trade planned for Singapore

will inevitably generate a demand for handicrafts and souvenirs with a local flavour.”<sup>3</sup>

## A National Design Institute

Prior to the establishment of the BVI, one typically entered such creative trades via an internship with companies or apprenticeship with artisans and practitioners. Studying art and design in prestigious overseas institutions was a privilege that only a select few enjoyed, who either paid the hefty school fees out of their own pockets or were awarded full scholarships. Although various private organisations in Singapore offered formal training in such fields, none seemed to be particularly successful.

The Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts – Singapore’s only art school then – had an Applied Arts Department since its founding in 1938, offering courses in

calligraphy, graphic design, fabric design and illustration.<sup>4</sup> However, it was primarily regarded as a school for artists rather than one that trained skilled workers for the manufacturing and industrial sector.

The Singapore Commercial Art Society (now defunct), which represented artists working in the advertising industry, pioneered a two-year commercial art course taught by members in 1970. Unfortunately, the take-up rate was low and there was a hiatus of six years before the next run of the course began in 1976.<sup>5</sup>

The government’s foray into applied arts training started in the 1960s with short-term courses offered by the Adult Education Board. Sometime around 1964, the Ministry of Education began planning for a dedicated institute.<sup>6</sup> In 1965, Laurence Koh Boon Piang, a Specialist Inspector (Arts and Crafts), was appointed to plan, lead and run the proposed “Queenstown



The campus of Baharuddin Vocational Institute on Stirling Road, which opened in 1971. Image reproduced from Baharuddin Vocational Institute. (1971). Singapore: Baharuddin Vocational Institute. (Call no.: RCL05 372.95957 BVI).

Vocational Institute" (BVI's original name), overseen by the ministry's Technical Education Department. He was supported by a team of art teachers, many of whom were sent overseas for applied arts training sponsored by various countries and organisations, including the Colombo Plan.

Wee was one of those sent abroad. He went to Montreal, where he studied under a Canadian team that was constructing displays for the 1967 International and Universal Exposition, or Expo 67, the historic world fair where nations come together to showcase their achievements.

Another Baharuddin teacher, Iskandar Jalil (who later became an eminent ceramist and winner of the Cultural Medallion for Visual Arts in 1988),<sup>7</sup> was sent to Maharashtra, India, in 1966 under a Colombo Plan Scholarship to learn textile design. In 1972, he headed to Tajimi,



Japan, where he received an education in ceramics engineering, also under the same scholarship. By the time BVI officially opened in 1971, nearly 40 percent of its teaching staff had been trained abroad.<sup>8</sup>

Besides sponsoring the training of staff, several countries also funded the physical set-up of the institute. The British government allocated some \$2.25 million from its Special Aid Scheme to construct a new building for the BVI on Stirling Road and furnish it with \$850,000 worth of equipment and furniture.<sup>9</sup> The Federal Republic of Germany donated some \$3.5 million worth of machinery and equipment, provided training fellowships and even sent a team of eight experts here to set up and run a department at BVI to teach students how to work in a commercial press.<sup>10</sup>

At BVI's official opening on 8 October 1971, then Minister for Home Affairs Wong Lin Ken acknowledged the international efforts in realising what was ultimately a nationalistic endeavour. "The Baharuddin Vocational Institute is also unique in that it is a multi-national effort," he said. "In this way, our Republic will some day be able to depend entirely on our own designers and craftsmen in the field of advertising, handicraft souvenir, fashion, woodworking and printing trades."<sup>11</sup>

**(Left)** Master potter Iskandar Jalil using his single-hand technique to create an artwork, 2007. The Cultural Medallion winner taught at the Baharuddin Vocational Institute and later at Temasek Polytechnic's School of Design until his retirement in 1999. *Courtesy of Iskandar Jalil.*

**(Below)** The 1975 cohort of the advertising art class. Seated second from the right is pioneer teacher Wee Chwee Beng, who designed the crest for the institute in 1968. The principal, Rashid Durai, is seated fourth from the right. *Courtesy of Collin Choo.*



### Advertising for BVI

BVI began taking in its first batch of students in 1968, even before the completion of its campus on Stirling Road. Over the next two years, the institute ran courses out of borrowed classrooms at Kim Keat Vocational School, Singapore Vocational Institute, Tanglin Vocational School and even at the printing demonstration room of the East Asiatic Co.<sup>12</sup>

It cannot be ascertained why the institute was renamed from Queenstown to Baharuddin, but it is most likely in memory of former People's Action Party assemblyman Baharuddin bin Mohamed Ariff, who passed away in 1961. In 1965, the government had named the new Baharuddin Vocational School in Queensway after him.<sup>13</sup> But after the school's merger with New Town Secondary School in 1969, the name "Baharuddin" was dropped.<sup>14</sup> Subsequently, Queenstown Vocational Institute was renamed Baharuddin Vocational Institute.

By the time BVI settled into its new campus on Stirling Road in 1971, some 300 people had already graduated from the institute. In addition, around 800 students were enrolled in 23 fulltime courses, each typically lasting two years.<sup>15</sup> The largest intake of over 200 students was in the Handicrafts Department, which offered training in courses ranging from ceramic arts to fabric design and even classes on shellcraft and dollmaking.

However, BVI became best known for its Applied Arts Department, specifically its course in advertising art, now known as graphic design. The two-year programme provided training in the design of advertisements and other forms of visual communication. In 1977, it was reported that the course drew about 200 applicants annually for its 40 vacancies, with interior design coming in a close second.<sup>16</sup> Its popularity reflected pent-up demand for the institute's heavily subsidised courses, with citizens paying a nominal monthly fee of just \$6. To apply for the course, candidates had to complete at least Secondary 4, be over 15 years old, pass entrance tests in English, mathematics and science, and sit for an interview to demonstrate their interest in art and design.<sup>17</sup>

"I knew the [advertising art] course was very competitive by looking at the crowd [that turned up]," recalled former student Patrick Cheah.<sup>18</sup> He successfully convinced the assessors with the artwork and posters he had designed in St Joseph's Institution, and enrolled in 1972.



Logos designed by staff and students of Baharuddin Vocational Institute. The abstract designs that distilled letters into shapes were part of a popular international trend known as the modernist graphic design style. Clockwise from top left: Logos for Keppel Shipyard (1968), Singapore Metrication Board (1971), the Vocational Industrial and Training Board (1979) and the Singapore Sports Council (1974).

Not everyone was successful on their first attempt at applying to join at BVI. Nancy Wee, who spent 36 years teaching design – first at BVI and then at Temasek Polytechnic's School of Design – had applied for the Industrial Technician Certificate in Commercial Art in 1974. "It was really tough. We all had to go for interviews and I didn't get in on my first try. There were many applicants who were much better than me," she said. However, she was determined to join BVI. She waited for a year and then re-applied, using the extra time to attend art classes in the hope of boosting her chances. She nailed it on her second attempt. She recalled: "When I went for the interview, I met the same lecturer who had assessed me the first time, so I said, 'I'm here again!' He must have felt that this girl was really interested."<sup>19</sup>

Having given up a place in pre-university for BVI, Cheah was surprised by the diversity of his fellow classmates. "Sitting next to me was a Hokkien-speaking fellow. I spoke English, and he only spoke Hokkien. But his art was good." According to Wee Chwee Beng, the early batches of advertising art students ranged from working professionals to those eligible for pre-university as well as academically weaker students. It reflected the flexibility of BVI's enrolment criteria, which not only considered academic

results but also a student's aptitude for creative work.

Despite the popularity of some of BVI's courses, the general public often saw the institute's students as "dropouts" because of its vocational roots. As most Singaporeans aspired for white-collar jobs, opting for vocational institutes was popularly thought of as a last resort for those who struggled academically. "[BVI] wasn't considered prestigious. Back then, the thinking was that if you went to a vocational school, it was because you were not good at studying. There was this perception that vocational institutes were for dropouts," said Nancy Wee.<sup>20</sup>

Such sentiments were reinforced by then Minister for Education Tay Eng Soon in 1984 when he expressed concern that bright students who struggled with English were opting for vocational training and the polytechnics. However, he did single out BVI as an exception because it catered to a specialised interest.<sup>21</sup> Nonetheless, parents often contacted Wee Chwee Beng to express concerns for their children's future. "I even had mothers who [came] to me and [said], 'I don't understand why my son wants to study in this vocational institute when he can go to junior college,'" he said.<sup>22</sup>

Fortunately, he could point to the early success of BVI's students, who were frequent winners of logo and poster design

competitions – even beating professionals in the field. Companies and organisations used such competitions to select and commission the winning designs as their logo. Some examples include the logos for Keppel Shipyard (1968) by Sim Bee Ong and the Singapore Metrication Board (1971) by Lee Chee Kang. The institute also took on work for the government, including the 1974 branding for the Singapore Sports Council as well as designing displays for the temporary maritime museum on Sentosa that same year.

### Preparing for the Industry

Ensuring that BVI's students were well equipped to serve the industry was the focus of its curriculum. In the advertising course, students were taught a variety of techniques to manually construct visuals at a time when computers had yet to become part of graphic design production. Besides classes in fundamental skills such as drawing in various media, students were also given hands-on training in modern techniques like photography using a 4X5" large-format camera, typography, layout and packaging design. Such training was supplemented by classes in English, science and mathematics, which were tailored to teach students the theory behind design work.

As a result of their specialised and comprehensive training, BVI students were able to find employment quickly upon graduation, often as in-house designers in advertising agencies and publishing companies. By 1979, BVI's advertising art course had trained some 371 graduates and these made up a quarter of the advertising art personnel in the industry.<sup>23</sup> Many BVI graduates performed well in their jobs and quickly rose through the ranks. Typically, one started out in an advertising agency as a finished artist whose job was to realise the concepts of visualisers and art directors. BVI graduates, however, often leapfrogged this career progression to become art directors.

"The people that advertising agencies could employ before were not trained in design," said Ronnie Tan who graduated in 1973 and started his own graphic design practice soon after.<sup>24</sup> "If you come in knowing how to do typography, drawing images that look good in flat tones... you become an American Idol, one in a million," he quipped.

Tan believed that the success of BVI graduates was due to a shortage of designers rather than its curriculum. Comparing what he had been taught with his brother's experience in an advertising agency, he felt that BVI's teachers, the majority of whom had never worked in the industry,

were not attuned to what employers were looking for. Neither did they keep abreast of the latest design trends.

Theresa Yong, the top trainee of the 1977 cohort, felt that the curriculum was too technical-focused. The training at BVI was good enough that Yong could skip a year when she went to study at the Art Center College of Design in California in the United States. However, her overseas experience taught her to push the limits of creative design compared to the more technically driven training she received in Singapore. “The design course [in the US] was challenging in a way that it forced me to open up my mind. It was a different way of training from Singapore,” she said. “The courses themselves were not very different from what we had [at BVI]... it’s how the teachers taught them.”<sup>25</sup>

Lim Chong Jin of the 1978 cohort, agreed. “The ‘V’ of BVI stood for ‘vocational’. The training was completely skewed towards skill-based competencies. We had to use a 0.2 nib technical pen to draw perfect lines with faultlessly precise spacing,” recalled Lim, who went on to study in the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in Canada (NSCAD).<sup>26</sup>

In Canada, Lim found he had to write essays, participate in critical discussions and read art history. “To me, it was more difficult to pursue the course than to get in[to] the school,” he said. “I probably had a strong visual portfolio that supported my acceptance to NSCAD, but the contextual studies and other theoretical aspects were evidently lacking.”

### Ahead of Its Time

BVI was aware of its shortcomings and continually reviewed its offerings to ensure it remained relevant and could produce employable graduates. In its early years, BVI even worked with companies to sponsor training which was not included in its curriculum, such as jewellery and rosewood furniture design.<sup>27</sup>

To better meet the needs of the industry, BVI and other vocational institutes became part of a newly established Industrial Training Board (ITB) in 1973. It led to courses being organised into three levels of certification – Industrial Technician, Trade, and Artisan – to cater for a variety of educational qualifications.

In 1974, BVI’s courses were streamlined and those with poor employment prospects – such as shellcraft and doll and flower making – were phased out. Popular courses were also offered at the Industrial Technician Certificate level and graduates with this certificate were deemed as being on par with the technician-certified students of the polytechnics.<sup>28</sup> These courses included advertising art, fashion arts, furniture design and production, interior design and three-dimensional design.

“[The students] will be learning more than studio skills. We want them to know something about costing, production planning, quality control and communications,” explained BVI principal Rashid Durai, who took over from Laurence Koh Boon Piang in 1974. “The idea is to supply the missing link – designers and crafts-

men who can fill supervisory and junior management grades,” he added

In 1977, ITB formalised the ad hoc practice of seeking advice from industry professionals and appointed a Trade Advisory Committee for each institute. BVI’s Applied Arts Trade Advisory Committee was made up of 17 external members from a variety of fields, including advertising, photography, interior design, architecture, handicrafts and sculpture. Reflecting the institute’s most popular offering, the committee was headed by Chan Yen Park, who was then the accounts director of a leading advertising firm as well as President of the Association of Accredited Advertising Agencies.<sup>29</sup>

The committee conducted a survey of manpower and training needs in the applied arts industry and found an urgent need for more professional designers. In 1980, BVI upgraded its advertising art and interior design courses as three-year diplomas, becoming the first institute in Singapore to offer such a level of training in these fields.<sup>30</sup> It helped raise BVI’s profile among the growing number of institutes offering formal design training. In 1988, a new milestone was reached when BVI launched the Diploma in Applied Arts (Product Design) course to support the government’s push for local manufacturers to produce higher-value exports.

Besides responding directly to industry needs, BVI’s Trade Advisory Committee also tried to address other issues that were impacting the quality of design in Singapore. One of the ways suggested by the committee was to raise the level of creativity by getting the institute to look beyond technical education and include art in its curriculum, which was what overseas institutes were doing.

Committee members Khor Ean Ghee and Brother Joseph McNally proposed the establishment of a Singapore Institute of Art and Design. “Good design should be art training, art is a foundation,” said Khor. “If art [is] not good, other design cannot be very good.”<sup>31</sup> Unfortunately, the idea was not taken up by the government as it regarded design education to be a domain of industrial training.

In 1990, when Singapore’s education system was restructured, technical education was streamlined and the Normal (Technical) stream was introduced for technically inclined students. BVI’s diploma courses were then transferred to the design school of a new polytechnic – Temasek Polytechnic.

# DRESSMAKING



Dressmaking students of Baharuddin Vocational Institute showcasing their designs in the institute’s 1971 commemorative magazine. Image reproduced from Baharuddin Vocational Institute. (1971). Singapore: Baharuddin Vocational Institute. (Call no.: RCL05 372.95957 BVI).

set up their own practices – DPC Design, Design Objectives and Immortal Design respectively – and were part of the first wave of homegrown graphic design firms in Singapore. Lim Chong Jin rose to become a creative director at local advertising agency TNC Worldwide, before returning to his alma mater in 1992. Today, he is the Director of Temasek Polytechnic’s School of Design.

BVI’s graduates have also made their mark outside Singapore. Fashion stalwart Esther Tay started the fashion label Esta, which grew into a household name in the 1980s and even retailed in Japan. Today, she is better known for designing uniforms for corporations such as DBS, Singtel and NTUC Income. Product design graduates like Low Cheah Hwei currently heads the design team for Philips in Asia, while Nathan Yong has made a name designing furniture for international labels such as Design Within Reach and Ligne Roset.

By making design education accessible to the man in the street, BVI was instrumental in laying the foundation for Singapore’s design industry. The establishment of a state-sponsored institute to groom and supply a design workforce showed the commitment of the government in developing such services that ultimately spurred the growth of the industry. ♦

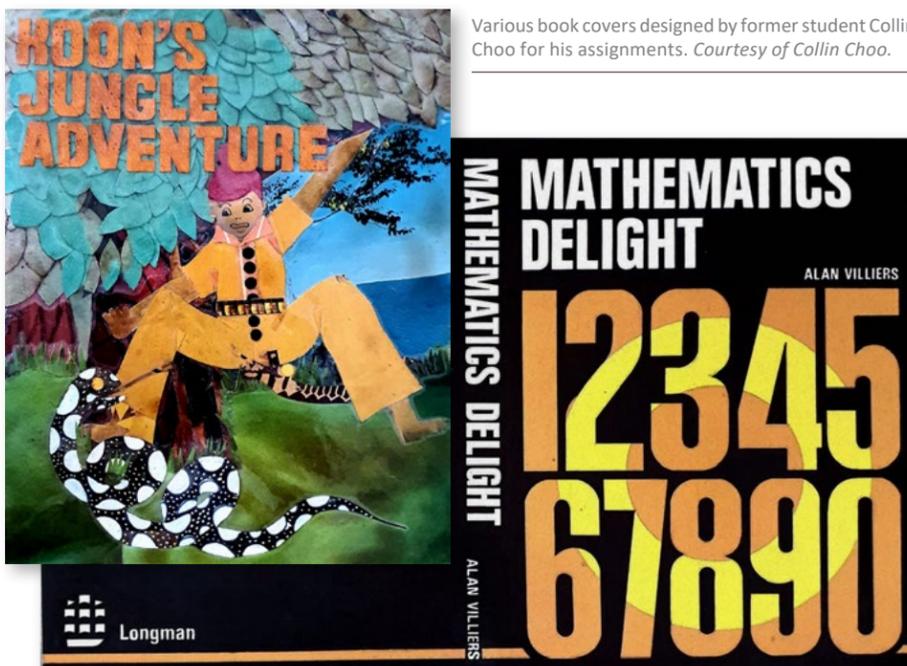
The design school continued operating out of BVI’s premises on Stirling Road until its campus officially opened in Tampines in 1995. At the same time, BVI’s other applied art offerings were absorbed into a new Institute of Technical Education, thereby marking the end of an era for an institute that had, for more than two decades, nurtured and produced some of Singapore’s best design pioneers.

### The Cradle of Design

Today, the only physical trace of BVI is a heritage marker outside its former campus on Stirling Road, which was repurposed in 2004 to house the Management Development Institute of Singapore.<sup>32</sup>

Its more enduring legacy is the generation of practitioners who helped pioneer Singapore’s design industry. Advertising art graduates such as Patrick Cheah, Ronnie Tan and Theresa Yong eventually

Various book covers designed by former student Collin Choo for his assignments. Courtesy of Collin Choo.



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The call to create a “rugged society” in Singapore has resonated through the decades. **Shaun Seah** looks at how the policy shaped young people in the 1960s.

In the immediate post-independence years, Singapore faced a number of challenges: it was a small city-state with few natural resources, its access to the larger market of Malaysia was circumscribed because of political wrangling, and it had a limited ability to defend itself.

Singapore’s future would lie in the hands of its young people and the political leadership of the time felt that this group needed to be better prepared for the challenges ahead. At a Queenstown Community Centre National Day celebration held on 10 August 1966, then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew noted:

“It is the young that will determine what happens to this society... It depends on the education we give them; the training they receive; the values that they are taught... whether you should have a soft society, fun-loving, pleasure-loving, weak, effete or whether you should have a rugged, robust, disciplined, effective society, a hard society, a tough, rugged society...”<sup>1</sup>

Recalling his years in Raffles Institution, Lee decried his privileged colonial education as having reared a “whole generation of softies... weak from want of enough exercise, enough sunshine, and with not enough guts in them”. He believed that the education system overemphasised examinations and paper qualifications. His government instead sought to produce “a whole generation...

prepared to stand up and fight and die” for Singapore.<sup>2</sup>

Lee felt that a “soft” society would not be up to the task of taking on the manifold challenges that newly independent Singapore would face. What was needed instead was a “tough, rugged society”.

The need for a generation prepared to “fight and die” was literal, not just metaphorical. In March 1967, Parliament passed the landmark National Service (Amendment) Bill, which made it mandatory for all able male Singaporeans to serve in the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) for two years.

With universal conscription, it was also necessary to ensure that those called up to do their National Service would be relatively prepared. A generation of recruits who were “weak from want of enough exercise,” would not do well in

uniform. It was certainly unlikely that such youths would be prepared to “stand up and fight and die” for Singapore.

### The Rugged Society in School

One way of creating this rugged society would be to have outdoor activities emphasised in schools through what were then called extra-curricular activities (ECAs) such as uniformed groups like the scouts and the National Cadet Corps (NCC). ECAs were cited by one *Straits Times* journalist as “the word that put new life in schools in Singapore”.<sup>3</sup>

To stress the importance of ECAs among students and their (presumably exam-conscious) parents, from 1967 onwards, ECA participation became integrated into national assessment metrics with the award of marks or grades. These would be taken into account for admission to pre-university classes, and applications for bursaries and Public Service Commission scholarships.<sup>4</sup>

The rugged society did not stop at ECAs though. In 1967, a predecessor of today’s National Physical Fitness Award (NAPFA) was introduced, requiring all students aged 10 and above to undergo a five-station physical test twice a year.<sup>5</sup>

That same year, Singapore’s branch of the global Outward Bound School (OBS) was opened on Pulau Ubin by then Minister

for Defence Goh Keng Swee, specifically to build a rugged society. These initiatives all sought to forge ruggedness and solidarity among students through formative experiences beyond the classroom.

### A Rugged Society Ready to Defend Itself

The urgency of a building a “rugged society” would only mount with time. On 17 July 1967, Britain announced the imminent withdrawal of British troops from Singapore by 1971. This would be a major economic blow to Singapore as the British military presence generated 20 percent of Singapore’s Gross National Product. It was also estimated that around 25,000 base workers would lose their jobs by 1970.<sup>6</sup> The rapid withdrawal of British forces threatened to bring Singapore into a recession.

The same day the withdrawal was announced, then Prime Minister Lee addressed the first batch of Officer Cadets commissioned from the SAF Training Institute (SAFTI) at the Istana. In his speech, Lee identified the qualities of “discipline, grit and stamina” in its citizen army as crucial to Singapore’s national survival. Against the backdrop of mass conscription, Lee exhorted the freshly commissioned officers to train incoming young Singaporean men well so that “what we lack in numbers we will make up for in quality”.<sup>7</sup>

### Drilling from Young

Lee was of the view that a rugged society would be reflected in a credible defence force – and this effort would need to begin in the schools, well before youths enlisted for military service.

Since a rugged society ultimately served the purpose of national defence, much of its rhetoric and initiatives were militaristic in tone. Drill and parades were very much part of the movement. In July 1967, four months after the National Service (Amendment) Bill was passed, the inaugural Singapore Youth Festival (SYF) was held. The festival saw 4,390 students participating in ceremonial military drills, athletic displays and cultural performances over two weeks. By 1970, this figure had risen to 9,000.<sup>8</sup> At SYF 1968, Lee refused an umbrella and joined cadets and schoolchildren who were getting soaked in a tropical downpour.<sup>9</sup>

However, there was no guarantee that marching under the sun (and rain) could attract the enthusiasm and participation of Singapore’s youths. Indeed, as some recalled, all the “drill, left right left, the marching and everything else” simply seemed quite pointless.<sup>10</sup>

Despite the foot drills, uniformed groups became popular in schools. One reason for the enthusiasm may have been the opportunities these groups accorded

**(Facing page)** Youths crossing a rope structure over a river during an obstacle course at the Outward Bound School on Pulau Ubin, 1967. The school was opened in 1967 to forge ruggedness and solidarity among students through experiences outside the classroom. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

**(Below)** The National Service (Amendment) Bill passed in Parliament on 14 March 1967 made National Service compulsory for all 18-year-old male Singapore citizens and permanent residents. The registration exercise for the first batch of recruits was held from 28 March to 18 April that year. In this photo taken on the first day of registration, a recruit is given a health check to ensure that he is medically fit for rigorous military training. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

**(Below right)** Then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew inspecting the guard of honour at the 1968 Singapore Youth Festival held at Jalan Besar Stadium. Lee later refused an umbrella offered to him during a heavy downpour midway through the march-past. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*



young Singaporeans who had less-than-ideal living conditions at home. In 1970, over 38.5 percent of families lived in squatter colonies with limited access to sanitation, water and healthcare, while 13.3 percent resided in often overcrowded shophouses.<sup>11</sup> A total of 25 percent of Singaporeans lived in poverty.<sup>12</sup>

Former scout Jackie Yap used to live in Bukit Ho Swee, “a very notorious area” rife with gangsters, and studied in Bukit Ho Swee Secondary School in the late 1960s. Despite participating in his school’s National Police Cadet Corps (NPCC) activities on Saturday mornings, Yap’s appetite for adventure beckoned and he also joined the local Sea Scout group on Sunday afternoons.

Scouting gave Yap the opportunity to leave behind claustrophobic afternoons at home – crammed into a one-room flat shared with nine other family members. With the scouts, Yap was able to venture outdoors and indulge in his “passion for the sea”, once even rowing around Singapore in a wooden *sampan*. Yap said that many of his fellow underprivileged peers enjoyed their time with the Sea Scouts because “they could [finally] enjoy space and some form of novel recreation for free”.<sup>13</sup>

Taylor Eng lived in an overcrowded shophouse along Havelock Road and attended Raffles Institution in the late 1960s. He enjoyed scouting as it provided him an escape from familiar, urban settings. Memorable escapades for him included an overnight hike followed by

camping on Singapore’s Mount Faber, and an expedition to the 2,817-metre-high Gunung Tahan, the highest point in the Malay Peninsula, a trip which he remembered fondly as a simply “crazy” idea.<sup>14</sup>

On 9 August 1968, *The Straits Times* wrote about a rafting expedition by eight cadets from Sang Nila Utama Secondary School and New Town Integrated School to West Malaysia that spanned more than 110 km over four days.<sup>15</sup>

From 1975, the NCC (Sea) began its annual Round Island Canoeing Expedition. The expedition typically saw 80 cadets in 40 double-seater canoes doing a full circumnavigation of the Singapore coast, starting from the west bank of the Causeway. Over four days, cadets completed a journey of some 200 km with only overnight stops at SAFTI Boat Station in the west, and the NCC sea training centres in Pasir Panjang and Changi.<sup>16</sup>

The rugged society was not restricted to boys. Young girls, too, were enthusiastic participants. Chung Cheng High School alumna Rina Sim, an NCC cadet, relished the air of authority her cadet uniform carried during her daily commute to school from Kampong Chai Chee, happily correcting villagers who mistook her for a *za bor mata* (Hokkien for “policewoman”). Her experience in the NCC sparked a lifelong passion for the military, and against parental objections, she joined the Republic of Singapore Navy in 1978 even before receiving her bookkeeping examination results.<sup>17</sup> She

served the navy with distinction and was eventually appointed Chief Clerk in the Naval Diving Unit.

Dunearn Secondary NCC cadet Shamsia Muslim was proud that she completed a day-long navigation test in the countryside – the “toughest of all training tests in the NCC”. Shamsia resolutely refused offers of help from passing lorries when she got lost in rural Lim Chu Kang and expressed wonderment at the world beyond her neighbourhood to discover plantations and “hospitable rural dwellers”.<sup>18</sup>

All these activities left a mark on young, impressionable minds. Former 1960s Rafflesian scout Zainul Abidin bin Mohamed Rasheed (later Senior Minister of State in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) “the sense of service to others” and learned “the true meaning of life-long friends”.<sup>19</sup> Another fellow scout, Kwek Siew Jin (who later became Rear-Admiral and Chief of Navy) believed that scouting “was the best thing that happened” to him in his formative years, resulting in character-building and moral growth.<sup>20</sup>

Jackie Yap of Bukit Ho Swee Secondary School felt that his time in the Sea Scouts and NPCC taught “a lot of very good survival skills, life skills which [are] today, so important”. Yap later went on to join the Singapore Army as a regular in the Commandos, where he completed the SAF Ranger Course before leaving service in the late 1980s. Today, he works with corporate clients as a team-building consultant, helping participants to enjoy



The National Cadet Corps (NCC) girls’ contingent marching through the streets during the 1972 National Day Parade at the Padang. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

the great outdoors and to understand themselves and nature better.<sup>21</sup>

### Whither the Rugged Society?

While the rugged society rhetoric eventually petered out, such was the appeal of the concept that the call would be resurrected every now and then over the ensuing decades. In 1974, a year of high inflation and economic uncertainty, Haji Sha’ari Tadin, then Member of Parliament for Kampong Chai Chee, recalled the “old rallying call” of the rugged society as he called on Singaporeans to “roll up their sleeves and work even harder” after several years of stellar economic growth.<sup>22</sup>

In 1980, a *New Nation* editorial bemoaned the pampered lives of younger generations, believing Singaporeans to have come “a long way and perhaps wrong way away from the rugged society” of the 1960s. The editorial lamented that people no longer woke up at 6.30 am for national fitness exercises but were instead “snoring away on their expensive deluxe beauty rest bed” in an air-conditioned room, before travelling in an air-conditioned vehicle to an air-conditioned office and, after work, relaxing in air-conditioned squash courts, bowling alleys and shopping malls.<sup>23</sup>

In a 1990 speech at the opening of the College for Physical Education, then First Deputy Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong noted a “disconcerting and unhealthy” trend of rising obesity among youths, and called for a renewed emphasis on physical fitness to eliminate obesity. Singapore has succeeded, he said,

because “we dare to strive for excellence. We have to be fit and rugged to meet competition to achieve excellence. I therefore throw you this challenge – get Singaporeans to return to the rugged society”.<sup>24</sup> Government anxiety over mounting obesity among youths would see the introduction of fitness initiatives like the Trim and Fit programme in 1992 and the All Children Exercise Simultaneously Day in 1993.

In 2015, the term “rugged society” made another brief reappearance. During Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong’s National Day Rally, he noted that the rugged society was one of three factors crucial to Singapore’s success. Prime Minister Lee said that although the term “rugged society” is not used so often anymore, “our people must still be robust and tough and able to take hard knocks, always striving to be better.... If we are soft and flabby, we are going to be eaten up. We have to be rugged, we have to have that steel in us”.<sup>25</sup>

Public discourse reflects the centrality of this rugged ideal – take for instance the labelling of “millennials” born between 1980 and 2000 as the “strawberry generation”, incapable of enduring hardship or adverse conditions. Since 2017, a *Straits Times* feature series has sought to counter this stereotype through stories of perseverance among youths in fighting debilitating diseases, mental health struggles and personal failures in life. The “Generation Grit” series suggests a reframing of the concept of ruggedness to qualities beyond just fitness and physical prowess.<sup>26</sup> ♦

(Below) Youths clambering over the A-frame during an obstacle course at the Outward Bound School on Pulau Ubin, 1967. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

(Below right) Sea Scouts undergoing training, 1956. Scouting was officially inaugurated in Singapore in 1910, with sea scouting introduced in 1938. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



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# Asthma, Amahs and Amazing Food

Irene Lim recalls herbal remedies, home-cooked meals and domestic servants in this extract from her memoir, *90 Years in Singapore*.



Irene Lim, who turns 94 years old this June, began documenting her life stories in 1989. Her daughter, University of Michigan professor Linda Lim, collected these and compiled them into a recently published book, *90 Years in Singapore*.

Born in Kuala Lumpur in 1927, Irene Lim, née Ooi, has lived in Singapore all of her life except for the three years she spent in Penang during the Japanese Occupation. She attended Raffles Girls' School in the 1930s and early 1940s. In 1948, she married Lim Hee Seng, an accountant, raised three daughters between the 1950s and early 1970s, and led an active, social life.

Irene's memoir, *90 Years in Singapore*,<sup>1</sup> presents fascinating accounts of her childhood, growing-up years, marriage, and family life. The family's routines and responses to daily and community happenings provide an intimate window into life as experienced by middle-class women at the time.

In this extract from her book, Irene recalls her family's domestic helpers preparing herbal remedies for ailments such as asthma and eczema, and cooking delicious Cantonese and Peranakan dishes for the family. She also describes in vivid detail household habits and cultural practices, the various foods the family ate, and their relationship with the women who worked as servants in the household in the 1950s and 1960s.

What I disliked about our neighbourhood was the sawmill at the corner of our road not far from our home,<sup>2</sup> at the other end from the Chinese school. When the sawmill burned wood scraps, I feared that was a health hazard, and wondered if it worsened Cheryl's<sup>3</sup> asthma. To treat it, Ah Sam went to Chinatown to buy flying foxes to cook with herbs, which were supposed to "warm" a patient's lungs; she told Cheryl it was mutton soup.

Cheryl also suffered very badly from eczema, for which mother-in-law<sup>4</sup> took her to a *sinseh* at Upper Cross Street. He used herbs resembling dried twigs and leaves, which were boiled and then cooled until comfortably warm, for Cheryl to steep her affected hands in. Then she was bandaged with a thick white ointment which the locals insisted was made of frogs. They called it frog ointment. It took a long time but it did get rid of the eczema, which Western medicine could not.

Once in a while, a man would come around the neighbourhood with a very distinctive loud call that I could never make out, something that sounded like "way jerapan". Ah Sam would dash out to buy bullfrogs from him to skin and then boil with herbs. The meat was white, like chicken, and of course Cheryl never found out what it really was. That was to cool her skin to get rid of the eczema. Ah Sam also bought small river turtles to steam for soup, saying it was good for the skin. She wanted to buy crocodile meat which was reported to be the best cure. I refused but now find that it is sold in NTUC FairPrice supermarkets!

I remember being told by another cook that asthma (or was it tuberculosis?) patients were cured by swallowing live, newborn mice whose eyes were not yet opened. It makes me sick to think of these tiny creatures wriggling inside the unfortunate patient's throat down to the stomach.

Ah Sam (meaning "aunt" in Cantonese), whose given name was Lee Yuet Kiew (her friends called her Ah Kiew), came to work for us in 1954. Much later, she told us that she had left her home village in Guangdong province to come to Singapore because a fortune-teller warned her that if she had a husband, she would not have a son and vice versa, i.e., one of them would die.

So Ah Sam decided not to marry and like other members of her "black and white

amah"<sup>5</sup> sisterhood, she did not cut her hair. She always wore it in a single thick, long plait hanging down her back. On festive days, she would go to a hairdresser to have it combed into a "bun", with a hairnet and some pins. Ah Sam and her "sisters" wore the same light-coloured Chinese cotton blouse (hip-length with a mandarin collar, diagonal front "frog" button closure, three-quarter sleeves and side slits at the hem) paired with loose black silk trousers daily. They wore the same outfit during festive occasions, only in a more elaborate and expensive material. They also wore gold and jade jewellery (earrings, bangles, chains and lockets) they had purchased with their wages.

Ah Sam belonged to the generation of Chinese women whose breasts were bound from puberty so that they would be flat-chested. This required the donning of a white chest undergarment with strings tied to flatten the breasts. I wonder if this contributed to her developing breast cancer later in life.

On her days off, Ah Sam visited her sisterhood's premises in Chinatown, where some retired elderly *amahs* lived. There were also young girls they had "adopted" to care for them in their old age, in exchange for training in their service profession. Like her sisters, Ah Sam also belonged to a funeral association. In exchange for monthly or annual dues, the association

(Facing page) From the top: An *amah* with a close-up of her bun secured with a hairnet and pin. *Amahs* took vows of celibacy, pledging to remain unmarried for life. *Kouo Shang-Wei Collection, PictureSG, National Library, Singapore*; Irene Lim with a flying fox that her father caught on a hunting trip to Johor, 1934. *Courtesy of Irene Lim*; One of the Peranakan dishes that Ah Sam cooked for the family was *nonya chap chye* cooked with preserved brown soya bean paste. *Photo from Shutterstock*.

(Below) Irene with her husband Hee Seng, elder daughter Laurette and younger daughter Linda, 1950. *Courtesy of Irene Lim*.





(Above) Cheryl's fourth birthday party at Sommerville Road, 1959. Standing behind Cheryl (seated in front of the cake) is Irene. Laurette is standing third from the left and Linda is standing at the extreme right looking down. Courtesy of Irene Lim.



(Left) Irene looking resplendent in the 1950s. Courtesy of Irene Lim.

would prepare and provide for the funerals of its members. Being single and far from home, these women would not have descendants to conduct funerary rites. Professional mourners were very common then and could be hired for any funeral. They wore sack cloth, chanted and banged cymbals and gongs while accompanying elaborately decorated hearses carried on the back of lorries. Family mourners walked or sat in cars behind the procession. I think some of the professional mourners belonged to martial arts associations.

When Ah Sam arrived as a *sinkeh*<sup>6</sup> from China at the age of 18 (by Chinese reckoning), she found employment as a personal maid to one of Eu Tong Sen's teenage sons at Eu Villa on Mount Sophia,<sup>7</sup> next to the Methodist Girls' School. She was very ambitious and, in her free moments, would steal off to the kitchen to watch the cooks prepare food. This was how she learned the art of fine Cantonese cooking even though she was from a peasant family.

minced pork and scallions. Another Cantonese dish Ah Sam cooked was steamed rice flavoured with Chinese sausages, liver sausages and a liver roll, which was liver encasing a thick piece of lard that had been preserved in sugar. Cheryl's favourite was a dish of mixed vegetables and meat, chopped small and well seasoned, folded in a lettuce leaf and popped into the mouth, like the Vietnamese do.

Ah Sam had learnt to cook duck and salted vegetable soup, and *chap chye* the Peranakan way (with preserved brown soya bean paste, instead of preserved soya bean cubes as the Cantonese do). I also taught her another duck recipe: duck stuffed with chopped mushrooms, onions, minced pork and rice, seasoned and deep fried before being steamed. She also served preserved duck, either steamed or fried. Other specialities she made were steamed *dim sum*, steamed pigs' brains to make the girls "brainy", and steamboat served at home.

On special occasions, one or more of Ah Sam's "sisters" would come over to help prepare special dishes like meat dumplings, or minced pork and crab meat balls cooked with bean threads in clear soup (*bakwan kepiting*). There were also baked crabs, whose shells were stuffed with minced pork, crab meat, diced mushrooms, large onions and water chestnuts, all well seasoned – with egg white added – before being placed in the oven. The crabs were bought live, trussed and hung up in strings in the kitchen until it was time to cook them; occasionally one would fall off and scurry about the kitchen floor.

Ah Sam also made traditional foods to be eaten on special days, such as the pink-and-white rice flour dumplings in a syrupy clear sweet sauce for the winter solstice. She also boiled *dong guai*,<sup>8</sup> a bitter but expensive Chinese herb, in a pork-bone soup that the girls hated having to drink once a month after they began menstruating.

During the Chinese New Year, Ah Sam would gather the children in the front verandah, where she fired off Roman candles stuck at the end of one of the long bamboo poles we used for drying clothes. Since our house was on a hill slope, the candles had a nice, safe trajectory. Before fireworks were banned, the kampong across the narrow road would be noisy with them.

During the Eighth Moon (Mid-Autumn) Festival, we bought the children lanterns from Chinatown, made of coloured cellophane paper and wire bent in the shapes of various birds and animals, with a small candle inside. They would parade around

the garden waving the lighted lanterns. The mooncakes we ate then were filled with black, red or brown bean paste (*tau sah*), sometimes with a salted egg yolk embedded. The children preferred these to the more elaborate mooncakes filled with different seeds and nuts that were sticky and hard to chew, but I liked the type with nuts better.

When it was the Fifth Moon (Dragon Boat) Festival, I would order special *nonya choong* (dumplings). These were different from the Cantonese dumplings which used fatty pork and a large piece of mushroom in each, covered in soaked but uncooked glutinous rice and then immersed in boiling water for four to four-and-a-half hours. We preferred the *nonya* dumplings that had minced streaky pork, pieces of minced, sugared wintermelon spiced with ground coriander, white peppercorns and *chekur* (aromatic ginger), plus shallots, garlic, sugar, salt, light and dark soya sauce, cooked together in lard. The meat filling was wrapped in a cone or pyramid of steamed glutinous rice, then placed inside bamboo leaves tied with hemp string and steamed for 35 minutes, never boiled. Both types of dumplings were very filling.

Two or three times when Ah Sam was working for us, which was about once in four or five years, she returned to China via Hong Kong to visit her family, often accompanied by one or more of her "sisters". She would ask for our old things – clothes, shoes, toys – to take back with her for the children in the village. Between

visits, she would mail them parcels as well as send letters dictated to a letter-writer in Chinatown.

It was from these visits in the 1950s and 1960s that we heard about how poor people were in China, how little food they had to eat during the Great Leap Forward,<sup>9</sup> and how oppressive the Communist government was. Ah Sam and her "sisters" were all relieved that they had emigrated, and they regularly sent money home to their families.

During the Cultural Revolution,<sup>10</sup> when I told Ah Sam the government had forbidden people from drinking tea, she replied that in her village they had been too poor to drink tea, which they grew only for export. Her family were farmers, and in Singapore, a male relative of hers used to collect "slops" from our kitchen to feed the pigs on his pig farm.

Ah Sam was our most loyal servant. She just knew "her" children – Laurette,<sup>11</sup> Linda<sup>12</sup> and Cheryl – were the cleverest ones around! But she was also difficult, insisting that she had to have full control of everything, including the other general household servants and the gardener, and that caused quite a bit of trouble. She left me once and came back again because I could not get any other servant to stay. She would ring these new hires to tell them she was such a good cook and that they would be no match for her. The last one to leave simply told me she wished to come back, but that no one else would work for me with Ah Sam around. In total, Ah Sam worked for me for 14 years.

During this time, we also had a string of other servants to take care of various household chores besides cooking. The two who stayed the longest were Ah Moy and Gek Lan (Ah Lan). Ah Moy came when she was 13 to help look after Cheryl and do odd jobs around the house. Ah Moy became Ah Sam's servant, but Ah Sam did buy things for the girls who worked for us because they helped her to comb her hair or massage her.

Ah Moy was a farmer's daughter and was filthy when I first saw her. Her feet were so caked with mud that we told her to use a brush to clean them. We taught her how to bathe properly. She had only used well water before so she was fascinated with the taps and played with them, especially the hot taps. Her mother took all her money and never bothered to leave food for her even when she knew Ah Moy would be returning home for a visit with her pay. I saved some money for Ah Moy and it did come in handy when she got married.

Ah Moy told us she could never settle back into her old home after living with us for some years, and had proper food and a clean bed with a mattress and sheets. When she was 16, her parents arranged for her to meet prospective bridegrooms and we were horrified that it became quite frequent. Each time Ah Moy was put "on show", she was given a red packet of \$12 if she was not deemed suitable by the bridegroom, and her parents happily pocketed the money. She was most upset and ashamed.

(Below) Glutinous rice and pork being scooped into bamboo leaves before being steamed. *Nonya*-style dumplings in the Lim household were stuffed with a mixture of minced pork cooked with candied wintermelon, ground coriander, white peppercorns and shallots, among other ingredients. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

(Below right) Ah Sam with Cheryl at Sommerville Road, 1957. Courtesy of Irene Lim.





Irene at home in a photograph taken in early 2020 when she was 92 years old. Courtesy of Irene Lim.

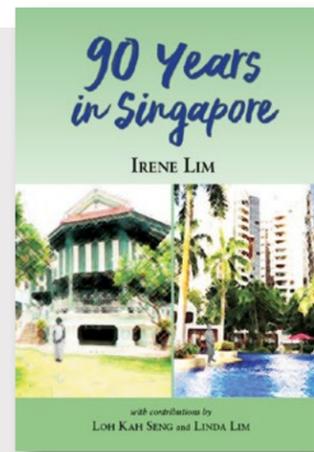
When Ah Moy got married, Ah Sam presented her with a bedspread and pillowcases, and we bought blankets from the money I had helped her save. I gave her a gold bracelet and bought a gold chain and pendant from the rest of the money, and even had some left over to buy makeup, the cheapest I could get. Her mother did nothing. On Ah Moy's wedding day, I had to trudge to the farm to put her makeup on. We hoped she would find happiness, but a year or so later, Ah Moy turned up saying she was most miserable and that she did not have a good husband. But she later had a son, so perhaps things improved.

Ah Lan came next. Unlike Ah Moy who was illiterate, Ah Lan had left school at around 13 or 14 when she came to work for us. Her mother was a poor farmer's wife who wished for a son but had a daughter every year until she had a round dozen, none of whom she loved. She would go to the market and let her children stand around while she had a bowl of noodles or some other titbit and not let them have a bite.

Ah Lan's entire pay was also given to her mother so I had to save money for her to buy clothes. She was small and thin. Once, after her monthly visit home, Ah Lan

cried and said that her elder sister objected to her working for us. The sister belonged to some group which at weekends met with "boys and girls in the same room". They could have been left-wing Chinese school students, who were politically active at the time. Later, we realised that Ah Lan was stealing Laurette's and Linda's socks and panties, as well as Ah Sam's cash, and even packets of Tide soap powder, perhaps instigated by her mother or sister, so we let her go.

Ah Peng was one servant with whom Ah Sam got on well. She was a big, fat jolly girl whom mother had found working as a hairdresser's assistant. She had been paid \$10 a month for three years and had not been given the training she had been promised. Instead, she swept the floors, and washed the towels and dishes. Ah Peng was under the charge of the Social Welfare Department as her mother worked in a gambling den at night and her father was in the mental hospital suffering from syphilis. Ah Peng did not know how to manage money and we tried to teach her not to blow all her pay at one go and also not to pick up taxi drivers as she liked to. One day, she told us she was getting married so we gave her presents and she left. ♦



Irene Lim's memoir, *90 Years in Singapore*, is available for reference at the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library and for loan at selected public libraries (Call nos.: RSING 307.7609595 LIM and SING 307.7609595 LIM). It also retails at major bookshops in Singapore and online at [www.shop.hoprinting.com.sg](http://www.shop.hoprinting.com.sg).

#### NOTES

- 1 Lim, I. (2020). *90 years in Singapore*. Singapore: Pagesetters Services Pte Ltd. (Call no.: RSING 307.7609595 LIM)
- 2 Irene's home was on Sommerville Road, off Upper Serangoon Road.
- 3 Cheryl is Irene's youngest daughter, born in 1955. She attended Methodist Girls' School, has a PhD in Sociology of Technology and lives in the United Kingdom.
- 4 Irene's mother-in-law, Lee Yew Teck, was born in Singapore in 1891 to China-born Christian parents. She attended Methodist Girls' School and raised four children.
- 5 These black-and-white *amahs*, or *majie*, hailed from the Pearl River Delta region of Guangdong province in China. In Singapore, they formed a tight-knit group and established clan associations in Chinatown. These hardworking and independent women took vows of celibacy and remained unmarried for life.
- 6 *Sinkeh* means "new arrival" in Hokkien.
- 7 Eu Tong Sen was a prominent businessman and community leader. He is best remembered as the man behind traditional Chinese medicine company Eu Yan Sang, which still exists today. Eu Villa, his lavish mansion on Mount Sophia, was designed by architectural firm Swan & Maclaren.
- 8 *Dong guai* (Chinese angelica), also known as "female ginseng", is a herb used in traditional Chinese medicine to treat menstrual cramps and other menopausal symptoms.
- 9 The Great Leap Forward (1958–60) was a campaign mounted by the Chinese Communist Party to transform the country through forced agricultural collectivisation and rural industrialisation.
- 10 The Cultural Revolution (1966–76) was launched by Mao Zedong in 1966 to reassert his control over the country. The masses were mobilised to purge all traces of capitalist and traditional elements in Chinese Communist society.
- 11 Laurette is Irene's eldest daughter, born in 1949. She attended Methodist Girls' School. She graduated from the University of Singapore and lives in Singapore.
- 12 Linda is Irene's second daughter, born in 1950. She attended Methodist Girls' School, has a PhD in Economics and lives in the United States. She is Professor Emerita of Corporate Strategy and International Business at the Stephen M. Ross School of Business, University of Michigan.

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