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**PRINT
• ADS •**

from
1830s
- to -
1960s
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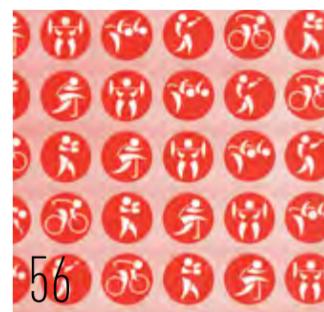
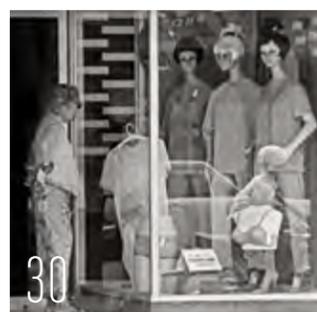
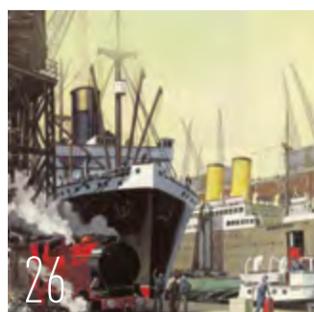
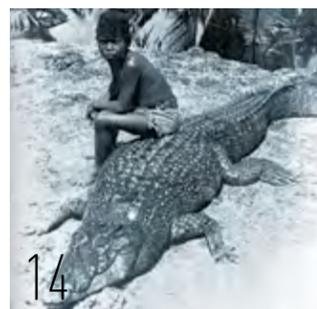
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Director's Note

"Selling Dreams: Early Advertising in Singapore". That's the title of our latest exhibition opening at the National Library Building on 20 July 2018 – showcasing print advertisements drawn from the library's collection of newspapers, periodicals, books and ephemera produced between the 1830s and 1960s. In this issue's cover story, Chung Sang Hong provides an overview of the exhibition and tells us how advertisements can provide clues to the social and economic conditions of the time.

What was the act of shopping like for Singaporeans in the 1960s? For one thing, people didn't "hang out" at shopping malls like they do today. Yu-Mei Balasingamchow takes a walk down Raffles Place, High Street and North Bridge Road – where she relives the halcyon days of department stores such as Whiteaways and John Little, standalone shops the likes of Chotirmall and Bajaj Textiles, and the slightly seedy but fascinating warren of Change Alley.

In this wide-ranging issue, we take you back to Victorian England where two women with guts and gumption – Harriette McDougall and Anna Brassey – ventured to remote parts of the world with their families in tow, and penned books about their adventures along the way. Bonny Tan compares her own experiences in adapting to life in a foreign land with these two women's.

Between the 1940s and 60s, Malay men from Southeast Asia worked as seafarers on British-owned ships. Tim Bunnell speaks to former sailors who settled in the English city of Liverpool to find out how they managed to sustain their Malay identity miles away from home.

Returning closer to home, and the subject of saltwater crocodiles, Kate Pocklington and Siddharta Perez document human encounters with these formidable reptiles in our history. At various times crocodiles have elicited fear or respect – and the occasional indifference – among people who've crossed their paths.

Before the 1970s, the Seven Sisters Festival, which commemorates the legend of the Weaver Girl and Cowherd, was widely celebrated in Chinatown. Tan Chui Hua uses oral history interviews with former Chinatown residents to paint a fascinating picture of this long forgotten celebration popular with the *amah* community.

Between 1972 and 1989, people living in HDB flats would look forward to receiving their copy of *Our Home* magazine each month. Janice Loo pores through the pages of the magazine to trace the evolution of Singapore's public housing, and documents the trials as well as joys of high-rise communal living.

Singapore's oldest and longest Pan-Island Expressway was constructed between 1966 and 1981. Since then, 10 other expressways have been built. Lim Tin Seng takes us on a whirlwind tour of the island's network of expressways, and offers a peek into the future – the North-South Corridor slated for completion in 2026.

Ang Seow Leng shares highlights from the recent donation of rare historical items by the Singapore Lam Ann Association, while Gracie Lee explains the significance of the Lim Shao Bin Collection of Japanese World War II memorabilia comprising books, maps, postcards, letters and newspapers. Finally, Sharen Chua presents highlights of commemorative sports publications from our Legal Deposit Collection.

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

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On the cover:
A Bata advertisement reproduced from *The Straits Times Annual*, 1964, p. xii. The National Library's latest exhibition "Selling Dreams: Early Advertising in Singapore" opens on 20 July 2018 at level 10 of the National Library Building on Victoria Street.

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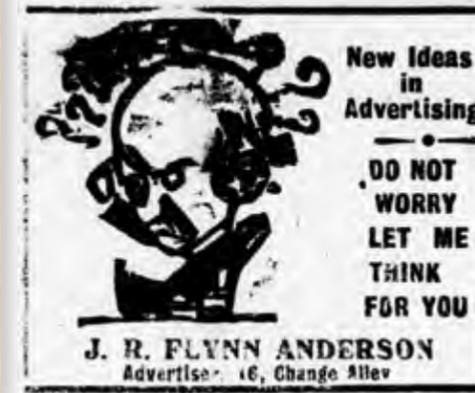
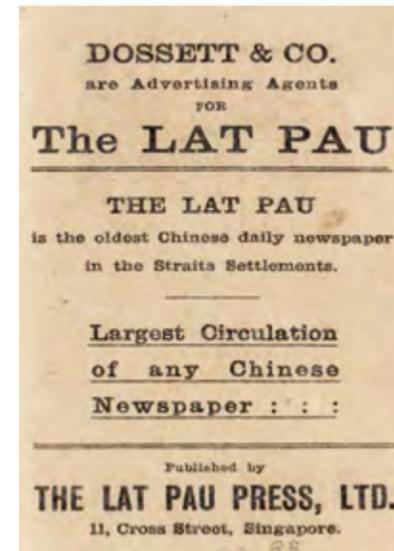
BiblioAsia is a free quarterly publication produced by the National Library Board. It features articles on the history, culture and heritage of Singapore within the larger Asian context, and has a strong focus on the collections and services of the National Library. *BiblioAsia* is distributed to local and international libraries, academic institutions, government ministries and agencies, as well as members of the public. The online edition of *BiblioAsia* is available at www.nlb.gov.sg/biblioasia/

THE STUFF OF DREAMS

Singapore's Early Print Ads

Before the advent of the internet, print advertisements reigned supreme. These primary documents provide important clues to the social history of the period as **Chung Sang Hong** tells us.

Chung Sang Hong is Assistant Director (Exhibitions & Curation) at the National Library, Singapore. He is the lead curator of "Selling Dreams: Early Advertising in Singapore" exhibition.



Advertising has existed since ancient times in various different shapes and forms. In the ruins of Pompeii for instance, advertisements hawking the services of prostitutes were carved into the buried stonework of this thriving Roman city before it was destroyed in 79 CE.¹ In medieval Europe, town criers roamed the streets making public announcements accompanied by the ringing of a hand bell. In China, one of the earliest advertising artefacts discovered was a printing block of an advertisement for a needle shop in Jinan, Shandong province, dating from the Northern Song Dynasty (960–1127 CE).²

In various towns and cities across Asia, street vendors calling out to customers have existed since time immemorial. Itinerant hawkers – who moved from place to place peddling food, drinks, vegetables, textiles and various sundries while verbally “advertising” their wares – were once a common sight on the streets of Singapore.³

In the West, Johannes Gutenberg’s invention of the printing press around 1450 gave birth to print advertising as an unintended by-product, with the first printed advertisement in the English language appearing in 1477.⁴ By the 17th century, many European towns and cities were producing publications containing news that resembled modern newspapers.⁵

The revenue earned from advertising has always been a major source of profit for newspapers. Ever since newspapers first made their appearance, and for many centuries thereafter, this format became the main medium for advertisements. Indeed, some newspapers even had the word “Advertiser” boldly proclaimed on their mastheads. In Singapore, we had *The Singapore Free*

(Facing page) An advertisement by Warin Publicity Services. Image reproduced from *The Straits Times Annual 1939, back cover*.

(Above) Early advertising agencies in Singapore helped clients to produce and place advertisements in newspapers as well as provide copywriting and design services. In the 1918 *Who's Who in Malaya*, Dossett & Co. promoted itself as the ad agent for the local Chinese paper *Lat Pau*. Similar advertisements were produced by J.R. Flynn Anderson and Siow Choon Leng. Images reproduced from (left to right) *Dossett, J.W. (1918). Who's Who in Malaya 1918 (p. 137). Singapore: Printed for Dossett & Co. by Methodist Pub. House (Accession no.: B02940225B; Microfilm no.: NL5829)*; *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser, 11 December 1918, p. 2*; and *The Straits Times, 4 March 1919, p. 3*.

Press and Mercantile Advertiser, which was first published in 1835.

From the publication of the island’s first local broadsheet, *Singapore Chronicle and Commercial Register*, in January 1824 to the outbreak of World War II in 1942, more than 150 newspapers had been published in various languages in Singapore.⁶ Judging from the large volume of advertisements in this medium, one can conclude that before the Japanese Occupation, the newspaper was the most important advertising platform in Singapore.

Of course, other print publications existed too, competing with newspapers for a slice of the advertising pie. Business directories, periodicals and magazines, souvenir publications, travel guides and related ephemera, and even cookbooks, contained advertisements, promoting various products and services that targeted specific audiences.

Apart from print media, other forms of advertising – advertisements screened before the start of movies, painted billboards, street posters, advertisements on buses and railway platforms, neon signs, etc – also existed in pre-war Singapore.

A Rich Advertising Heritage

Singapore has a rich advertising heritage that dates as far back as the early

20th century. This should come as little surprise, given the island’s history as a major entrepôt port and commercial hub of the British Empire in Asia since its founding in 1819.



William Joseph Warin founded Warin Studios in 1932, which was renamed Warin Publicity Services in 1937. The ad agency was well known for its striking print advertisements. Image reproduced from *Malaya: The Journal of the Association of British Malaya, April 1936, p. 294*.

The first advertisements placed by advertising agents in Singapore appeared around the 1910s. In the *Who's Who in Malaya* published in 1918, publisher Dossett & Co. promoted itself as the ad agent for the major local Chinese paper, *Lat Pau*.⁷ In return for a fee, ad agents helped clients create and place advertisements in newspapers – a service likely welcomed by European merchants who were eager to market their products to the large Chinese community in Singapore.

Similar advertisements were produced by J.R. Flynn Anderson, an “advertiser” who offered “new ideas in advertising”⁸ and “Advertisement Writer” Siow Choon Leng, who claimed that investing in good advertising would yield significant rewards for businesses.⁹

Singapore’s thriving advertising business before World War II was dominated by a few prominent ad agencies headed by Europeans, some of which were regional firms with headquarters in Hong Kong or Shanghai. There were at least 20 such firms specialising in advertising, publicity and marketing in Singapore and Malaya at the time.¹⁰

Most of these agencies were set up between the late 1920s and 30s. Some of them actively advertised their services in magazines and periodicals targeted at the business community. It was a common practice then for ad agencies to “sign off” advertisements they produced with the company’s name or initials: “signatures” such as “Master’s” (Masters Ltd), “Warins” (Warin Publicity Services Ltd)

and “APB” (The Advertising & Publicity Bureau Ltd) would often be inserted unobtrusively into the advertisements. These traces left by pioneering agencies serve as clues that aid historians in their study of Singapore’s early advertising scene and its key players.

The booming market and demand for advertising in major Asian cities in turn fuelled the business of some of these early agencies. The Advertising & Publicity Bureau (APB) was the first regional agency to set up shop in Singapore in 1931. It was established in Hong Kong in 1922 by Englishwoman Beatrice Thompson to serve the advertising needs of its British and American clients in Asia.¹¹ By 1940, APB was servicing many household brands and prominent firms, claiming to be the “largest advertising agency in the Far East”.¹²

Millington Ltd – one of the “Big Four” advertising agencies in Shanghai and founded by Briton F.C. Millington in 1920s – set up its Singapore branch in 1937 after having established a Hong Kong office earlier.¹³ There were also agencies started in Singapore that later became well known, one of which was Masters Ltd, founded in 1928 by Australian-born Ernst George Mozar, whose works can often be seen in early publications.

Warin Publicity Services: The First Local Agency

Among the first homegrown ad agencies in Singapore, one stood out for its vibrant and attractive print advertisements. The name “Warins” typically appears at the corner of many beautifully illustrated advertisements found in premium publications such as the 1930s issues of *The Straits Times Annual*, a periodical on Malayan and Singaporean life and culture, published by Straits Times Press between 1905 and 1982.

Warin Publicity Services was founded by Briton William Joseph Warin.¹⁴ W.J. Warin first arrived in Malaya in 1915 as a rubber planter.¹⁵ After his plantation business was hit by the Great Depression, Warin reinvented himself as a commercial artist and set up his advertising firm, Warin Studios, in a room on Orchard Road in 1932.¹⁶ His business flourished and within a span of three years, Warin Studios had moved into an office in the prestigious Union Building with a sizeable number of staff. The company also harboured ambitions of starting a branch in Hong Kong.¹⁷

Warin Studios was renamed Warin Publicity Services in 1937, and counted

among its clientele major corporations and import houses in Singapore and Malaya as well as associates in London and New York.¹⁸ The agency’s success was largely due to the consistently high-quality and creative works it produced.¹⁹ Warin recruited professional talents from overseas, among whom was the Russian-born artist Vladimir Tretchikoff, who later found international fame for his painting *Chinese Girl*.²⁰

Before relocating to Singapore, Tretchikoff had been a successful commercial artist in Shanghai working for Mercury Press, a prominent publisher of an English newspaper.²¹ Many of Warin’s eye-catching advertisements – inspired by the Art Deco movement – were designed by Tretchikoff.

The Chinese Influence

With the pre-war advertising scene dominated by Western expatriates, Chinese ad practitioners carved a name for themselves by serving the advertising needs of Chinese-speaking clients. Some were fine arts painters who practised commercial art on the side by creating artworks for advertisements. One of these was the prominent Chinese artist Zhang Ruqi (张汝器), who trained in Shanghai and France, and moved to Singapore in 1927. Renowned for his comic art and caricatures, Zhang founded a commercial art studio and created illustrations for advertisements such as Tiger Balm.²²

Local Chinese printers also produced advertisements in the distinctive “picture calendar” (*yue fen pai*; 月份牌) style which originated in Shanghai. These featured beautiful women dressed in form-fitting *cheongsam* (or *qipao*), Western attire and even swimsuits, and were highly popular in China and in overseas Chinese communities, including Singapore.

Post-war Developments

With the outbreak of World War II, the business of most ad agencies came to a grinding halt. Many advertising practitioners resumed their trade after the Japanese Occupation ended in September 1945. Newcomers entered the scene in search of opportunities as Malaya returned to British rule.

Still, the post-war advertising industry was dominated by firms with links to Britain, Australia, the United States and Hong Kong, with expatriates mostly holding the key positions. In 1948, Singapore’s first advertising association,



Advertisements by pioneer ad agencies in Singapore. Clockwise from top left: Osram lamp (General Electric Co. Ltd) by Warin Publicity Services, Shell Motor Oils (Asiatic Petroleum Co Ltd) by Masters Ltd and Silvester’s (Australian Primary Producers) by The Advertising & Publicity Bureau Ltd (with a pull-out showing a magnified view of APB’s “signature”). Images reproduced from *The Straits Times Annual*, 1936, p. 153, and *The Straits Times Annual*, 1940, pp. 28, 92.



(Top row) Art Deco-style advertisements attributed to Vladimir Tretchikoff, a Russian émigré commercial artist with Warin Publicity Services, who practised in Singapore from 1934 to 1941. Images reproduced from *The Straits Times Annual*, 1940, p. 80; and *The Straits Times Annual*, 1941, p. 16.

(Above) Whiteaways department store advertising the Daks brand of flannels that were available in “many patterns many styles”. Image reproduced from *The Straits Times Annual*, 1940, p. 88.

(Above right) A 1930s poster – designed in the style of the Shanghai “picture calendar” (*yue fen pai*; 月份牌) – advertising the services of the Medical Office (神農大藥房) at North Bridge Road that was founded in 1866. In 1916, Chinese pharmacist Foo Khee How acquired the business from its German owners and continued to run it as a Western-style pharmacy. It is still in operation today as the Singapore Medical Office.



[Above] Grundig marketed its radiogram as an essential item in the modern home in the 1960s. Image reproduced from *The Straits Times Annual, 1961*, p. xiv.

[Above right] This advertisement by The Royal Dutch Mails evoked the modernity and glamour associated with luxury cruise liners. Image reproduced from *The Straits Times Annual, 1937*, p. 140.



Association of Accredited Advertising Agents of Malaya (4As), was formed to safeguard stakeholders' interests and raise the standards of the local advertising industry. Its three founding members – Masters Ltd, Millington Ltd and Messrs C.F. Young – were key players who had been active before the war.²³

The post-war era also saw the penetration of international advertising firms into the Asian market who successfully tied up with local agencies as partners. In the 1950s, Masters Ltd partnered leading London agency, S.H. Benson, to grow its business, eventually becoming S.H. Benson (Singapore) in 1961 with offices in Kuala Lumpur and Hong Kong. The company subsequently merged with Ogilvy & Mather and became Ogilvy, Benson & Mather in 1971, making Masters the first Singapore agency to have evolved into an international agency.²⁴

C.F. Young had been a manager at the aforementioned APB before the war. In 1946, he started his own firm, C.F. Young Publicity, which was later renamed Young Advertising and Marketing Ltd to serve local and overseas clients. It was eventually acquired

Business and residential directories are another rich source of printed advertisements. *The Singapore & Malayan Ladies Directory* contains advertisements on goods and services that appealed to affluent women in colonial Singapore. Images reproduced from *The Singapore & Malayan Ladies Directory with Shopping Guide (1936–37)*, p. 285 and *1937–38*, p. 106–107.

in Hong Kong. Its Singapore office opened in 1946, and branches were subsequently set up in Kuala Lumpur and Bangkok. In 1963, Cathay was reported to be one of the three largest ad agencies in Singapore.²⁶ It later merged with leading Australian agency George Patterson Pte Ltd and was eventually acquired by Ted Bates & Co (now Bates Worldwide)²⁷, a New York-based advertising giant that expanded into Southeast Asia in the late 1960s.

The Stuff of Dreams

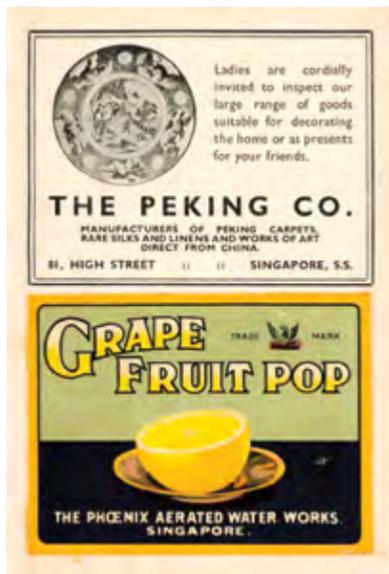
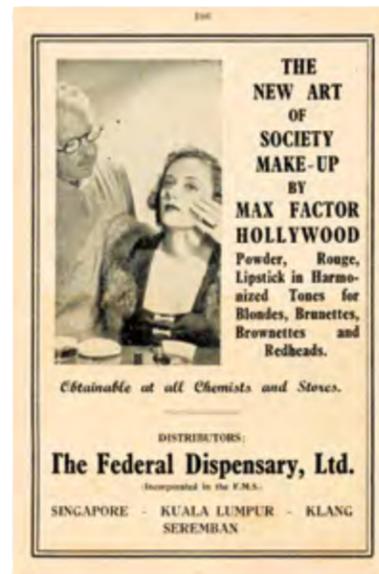
The intended audience of early print publications is quite different from the masses that similar media can reach today. Before the 1950s, as a result of low literacy rates and income levels, the ability to read and the means to purchase reading materials was the privilege of the minority.²⁸ In colonial Singapore, these would be the Europeans as well as the wealthy and better-educated members of local communities. Invariably, most of the advertisements featured in early print publications were targeted at the upper crust of society, reflecting their lifestyles, tastes, preferences, values and outlook on life.

Given Singapore's rich advertising history, it is surprising that precious little research has been done on the subject, even though a large collection of primary source materials exists. Through a new exhibition, "Selling Dreams: Early Advertising in Singapore", the National Library aims to uncover the fascinating history of this business and the untold stories behind some of the earliest iconic ads that appeared in print.

by a British company, London Press Exchange, in 1966 and was renamed LPE Singapore Ltd.²⁵

Another foreign agency, Cathay Advertising Limited, seemed to have followed a similar trajectory. Its founder, Australian businesswoman Elma Kelly, went to Shanghai in the early 1930s to work for Millington Ltd. She was posted to Hong Kong to manage the agency's branch office in 1935 but ended up in internment when the city fell to the Japanese in 1941.

After the war, Kelly and a few former Millington staff started Cathay Advertising



ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

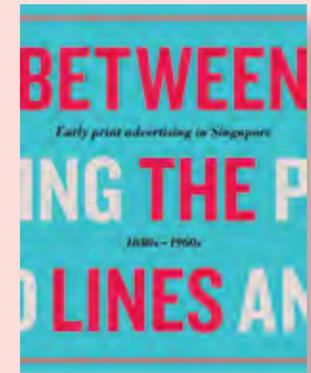
"Selling Dreams: Early Advertising in Singapore" opens on 20 July 2018 at the gallery on level 10 of the National Library Building on Victoria Street. Inspired by the concept of a department store, the exhibition contains nine "departments" showcasing various advertisements for food, medicine, household goods, automobiles, travel services, hospitality facilities, entertainment, fashion and retail.

The exhibition will present a variety of print publications from the 1830s to 1960s that are rich in advertising content and drawn from the National Library's collections, including copies of the first local newspaper, *Singapore Chronicle and Commercial Register*, from 1833. The earliest advertise-

ments in newspapers were primarily shipping and commercial notices targeted at the mercantile community, along with advertisements of imported goods, services and recreational activities.

Early business directories, periodicals, magazines, souvenir publications, travel guides, and ephemera such as posters and flyers are also rich sources of advertising material. Print advertising reigned supreme in Singapore until television made its foray here in 1963. The new media revolutionised the dissemination of information and entertainment, and as TV sets became increasingly common in local households, advertisements on television became the game changer in the industry.

A book titled *Between the Lines: Early Print Advertising in Singapore 1830s–1960s* will be launched in con-



junction with the exhibition, and sold at major bookshops in Singapore as well as online stores. A series of programmes has been organised too, including guided tours by curators and public talks.

With the passage of time, the products and services found in these vintage advertisements and also the manner in which they were touted to the general public may have become antiquated or even obsolete. However, early print advertisements still remain valuable as primary historical documents that can provide important clues to the lifestyle, culture, business and social histories of the period. Many of these old advertisements still strike a chord with people today by virtue of the sentiments they

reflected – the values, aspirations, desires and hopes – and also perhaps fears – of the readers and producers of advertisements at a particular point in our history.

Apart from marketing products and services, early advertising adopted the strategy of selling a "dream" – a desirable outcome, tangible or intangible, to its intended audience, and closely associated with purchasing the advertised product or service. Such an advertising tactic is only too familiar to modern-day consum-

ers who are often lured into parting with their money – whether on fast cars and jewellery or common everyday items like detergent and toothpaste – by slick advertisements promising them instant gratification.

The product range as well as the scale and size of the advertising industry and its platforms may have changed drastically over the years, but the one constant that has survived to this day is the aspect of selling the stuff that is of dreams. ♦

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- popularly known as *The Green Lady*, portrays a young Chinese woman with a blue-green face and dressed in traditional Chinese costume. It sold for almost £1 million at an auction in London in 2013.]
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GLOBETROTTING MUMS

Then & Now



Bonny Tan interweaves her own experiences as a modern Singaporean mother travelling and living abroad with those of two Victorian-era Englishwomen.

Bonny Tan is a former Senior Librarian at the National Library, Singapore. She currently resides in Vietnam with her family and is a regular contributor to *BiblioAsia* magazine.



The writer Bonny and her son Bryan enjoying the day at Mui Ne, a beach resort town along the South China Sea in southeast Vietnam, in 2011. Bryan was about three years old then. Courtesy of Bonny Tan.

My son, all of six months old, was on his first flight out of Singapore, ensconced in a bassinets that hung precariously in front of me. With my backpack holding both laptop and milk bottles stashed in the overhead compartment, I wondered how this journey and new living arrangement – of commuting for work between two countries with a child in tow – would pan out. Peering out of the window into the vast blue sea beneath, it struck me that for centuries, mothers and their children have made such journeys for various reasons and under more harrowing circumstances – many of whom never lived long enough to return home.

A Mother's Perspective

Many of the early 19th-century travel accounts were written by men – mostly commissioned by their government, a scientific institution or a royal benefactor. Their descriptions were invariably functional, with a bias towards trade, land acquisition or research, rather than personal in nature. While adventurous women such as Isabella Bird would later gain fame for their travel writing, many were usually single and explored the world sans husband and children.

Published accounts of mothers in the 19th century who travelled to new lands with their families are rare. Harriette McDougall and Anna "Annie" Brassey were two such Victorian-era mothers who penned their adventures abroad with their children. Their circumstances, however, could not have been more different.

While Harriette set up home with her family – living among the local people – in the disease-ridden jungles of Sarawak in 1847, Annie travelled with her family in relative comfort on board a private schooner, the *Sunbeam*, calling in at various ports around the world. Annie's well documented journey began in 1876, almost three decades after Harriette's sojourn.

Harriette was married to Francis Thomas McDougall, who would later become the first Bishop of Sarawak. They initially served as missionaries among head-hunters, pirates and rioting Chinese between 1847 and 1867. Her life of hardship in the tropics is captured through three books: *Letters from Sarawak: Addressed to a Child*¹ (1854), which contains letters to her eldest son; her autobiography, *Sketches of Our Life at Sarawak*² (1882); and her husband's biography, *Memoirs of Francis Thomas McDougall... Sometime Bishop of Labuan and Sarawak, and of Harriette, his Wife*³ (1889).

At aged 29, Harriette left the comforts of England for Sarawak in 1847 with her husband and baby son Harry, leaving behind Charles, her firstborn. She would later lay Harry to rest in Singapore when he was only three, and also lost several other children in infancy. Those who survived were raised together with orphans of various origins – Chinese, Dyaks (or Dayaks) as well as the offspring of mixed

parentage – whom she and her husband had adopted.

Harriette lived in Sarawak for almost 20 years, returning to England several times in between and, in particular, between 1860 and 1862 to settle her older children at school, before returning to Sarawak with her youngest child.

Annie Brassey was born into a privileged family. She married Thomas Brassey, the son of a railway industrialist at age 21 in 1860, and when her husband turned to politics, Annie dutifully supported him in his work. He was later knighted and, in 1886, elevated to the peerage as Baron Brassey. The couple maintained a firm friendship with then British Prime Minister William Gladstone. Such connections likely helped smoothen their journeys to places like the Middle East, North America and parts of Europe and subsequently their tour of the world.

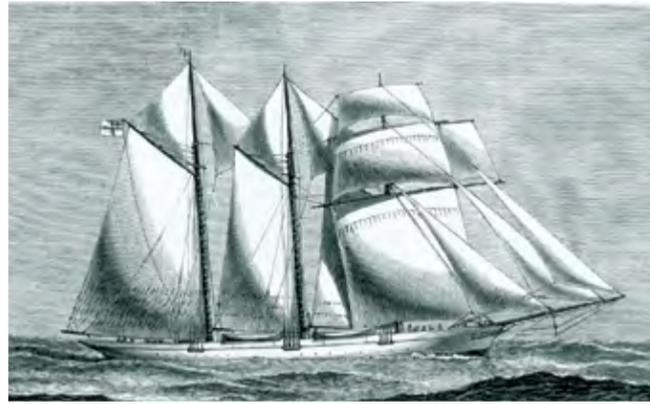
Annie's well-known account – *A Voyage in the 'Sunbeam': Our Home on the Ocean for Eleven Months*⁴ – was published in 1878, barely two years after she departed in July 1876 on a world tour with her husband, four children, pet pugs and a crew of 30 men. Illustrated with drawings based on her photographs and descriptions, the book became so enormously popular that it was republished in various languages and in 19 editions altogether.

(Facing page) Women travelling abroad with their husbands and children in 19th-century England were rare, but two Victorian-era women – Harriette McDougall and Annie Brassey – did and wrote books about their adventures overseas. Image reproduced from Crane, T.F., & Houghton, E.E. (1882). *Abroad* (p. 11). London, Belfast, New York: Marcus Ward & Co.

(Below) Portrait of Annie Brassey reproduced from Wikimedia Commons. Original image from Brassey, T. (1917). *The "Sunbeam"*. R.Y.S.: *Voyages and Experiences in Many Waters: Naval Reserves and other Matters*. London: John Murray.

(Below right) Harriette McDougall in November 1882 when she was 65. Photograph by Hughes and Mullin, Isle of Wight. Image reproduced from Bunyon, C.J. (1889). *Memoirs of Francis Thomas McDougall, D.C.L. F.R.C.S., Sometime Bishop of Labuan and Sarawak, and of Harriette, his Wife* (p. 20). London: Longmans, Greens, and Co. (Microfilm no.: NL25423).





[Above] In July 1876, Annie Brassey departed on the *Sunbeam* to travel around the world with her husband, four children and pet dogs. An account of her travels was published as *A Voyage in the 'Sunbeam': Our Home on the Ocean for Eleven Months*. This illustration of the *Sunbeam* was featured on the frontispiece of the book. Image reproduced from Brassey, A. (1878). *A Voyage in the 'Sunbeam': Our Home on the Ocean for Eleven Months* London: Longmans, Green. (Accession no.: B02897233A; Microfilm no.: NL25750).

[Above right] Some children of the school at St Thomas Church in Kuching, Sarawak. Both the church and school were established by Harriette McDougall and her husband Francis McDougall. Image reproduced from McDougall, H. (1882). *Sketches of our Life at Sarawak* (p. 194). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge. (Microfilm no.: NL26013).



Unlike the women of her generation, Annie's 1876 circumnavigation of the world was not borne out of an obligation to accompany her husband for his work but was something she herself had longed to do. The book was an outcome of "her painstaking desire not only to see everything thoroughly but to record her impressions faithfully and accurately",⁵ as her husband writes in the preface. This became one of many such family travels she would embark on and write about thereafter, ending only with her death from malaria in 1887 while on her final journey.

A Mother's Stoicism

The chance to be exposed to new sights, flavours and experiences is what attracts most people to venture abroad and settle in a new country. Life away from the comforts of home, however, calls for a certain amount of resilience and adaptability as well as a sense of fun, without which the



inevitable culture shock can often bring the adventure to an abrupt end.

Harriette describes how a family unprepared for such changes could not last the long haul. She gives an account of a certain doctor, Mr C, who had moved to Sarawak with his family. He had ignored her advice to leave the older children in England but persisted in coming as a "party of nine, having lost one child in Singapore". They did not last beyond a month because Mrs C was "so disgusted with the place", complaining there were "no shops, no amusements, always hot weather, and food so dear!"⁶

During our first week in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnamese friends were eager to introduce us to their unique cuisine. Game to try new things, we were brought to a nondescript local eatery. It looked familiar, like a noisy coffeeshop from home. So we felt safe – until a large live lizard was dangled before us and we were told that it would be our lunch! Out of courtesy, the locals often try to cater to the taste buds of visitors, but often, the most prized food item on the table could be culturally discomfiting for a foreigner.

Harriette describes such an occasion when they were treated to a Dyak feast:

"As we English folks could not eat fowls roasted in their feathers, nor

Frank and Harriette McDougall with their youngest daughter Mildred, c.1868. Image reproduced from McDougall, H. (1882). *Sketches of our Life at Sarawak* (p. xxxiv). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge. (Microfilm no.: NL26013).

cakes fried in cocoa-nut oil, they brought us fine joints of bamboo filled with pulut rice, which turns to a jelly in cooking and is fragrant with the scent of the young cane. I was going to eat this delicacy when my eyes fell upon three human heads standing on a large dish, freshly killed and slightly smoked, with food and sirih leaves in their mouths... But I dared say nothing. These Dyaks had killed our enemies, and were only following their own customs by rejoicing over their dead victims."⁷

Food supply onboard the *Sunbeam* had its fair share of problems. Annie describes how their livestock, namely six sheep, 60 chickens, 30 ducks and four dozen pigeons, were depleted by the carelessness of the sailors. Fortunately, some spare tins of food stored under the floor of the nursery helped sustain them until the next port of call.

The incident led Annie to reflect on the difficulties of travel in the days when tinned food and steam power did not exist:

"We often wonder how the earlier navigators got on, when there were no such things as tinned provisions, and when the facilities for carrying water were of the poorest description, while they were often months and months at sea, without an opportunity of replenishing their stores, and with no steam-power to fall back upon in case they were becalmed."⁸

In much the same way, I've wondered how travelling mothers in the Victorian era kept their sanity intact and their

children occupied during long stretches of boredom and monotony. Without digital toys, streaming TV and movies, and social media to keep in contact with friends and family across the oceans, how did these mothers cope?

For one, both Harriette's and Annie's families owned extensive libraries. Annie had more than 700 books, including several foreign language ones, some of which were gifted to her on her travels. These helped entertain the family through long dull moments. Annie also received various exotic pets from the hosts she called on at various ports, although not all survived the journey.

Besides the usual chores on deck, Annie devised games for the children to play on board. One such pastime was a soldier's drill where the children marched up and down the deck to the music of a fiddle and the "somewhat discordant noise of their own drums".

Harriet's orphan boys adopted English games while continuing to make their own local toys such as kites:

"The children amused themselves as English boys do. There was a season for marbles, for hop-scotch, for tops, and for kites... they cut thin



paper into the shapes of birds, fish, or butterflies, and stretch it over thin slips of the spine of the cocoa-nut leaf, then they ornament it with bits of red or blue paper, and fasten it together with a pinch of boiled rice."⁹

A Mother's Travails

Travelling on local forms of transport may seem dangerous to someone who comes from a more developed part of the world. Even so, we opted to commute as the locals do – by scooter. We experienced the harsh rays of the mid-day sun beating down on our backs, the burns from scooter exhaust pipes brushing past our calves, the desperate rush to seek shelter when the skies suddenly opened, or riding knee-deep through muddy river waters and sludge at high tide.

On the flip side, it allowed us to feel the pulse of the city – inhaling the heady aroma of meat being barbecued by the roadside, and chatting with fellow riders while astride on our scooter as if we were nonchalantly walking down a road. So when we had our son Bryan, we travelled with him perched on a rattan chair affixed at the front of our scooter seat.

In the 19th century, travel by sea was fraught with danger, not only from the mercurial weather and waves, but also from freak accidents. Several days into the start of Annie's journey, the *Sunbeam*

sailed into a violent storm and her son Allnutt and daughter Mabelle were almost thrown overboard:

"In a second the sea came pouring over the stern, above Allnutt's head. The boy was nearly washed overboard, but he managed to catch hold of the rail, and with great presence of mind, stuck his knees into the bulwarks."¹⁰

Meanwhile, the captain, who had instinctively coiled a rope around his own wrist, managed to grab Mabelle even as the waves threatened to sweep both of them overboard. Annie remembers that Mabelle "was perfectly self-possessed, and only said quietly, 'Hold on, Captain Lecky, hold on!'"¹¹ The evening did not prove restful as they were once more deluged by huge waves. With her bed drenched, Annie spent the night mopping and clearing the mess.

In February 1877, the Brasseys experienced another close call when a fire engulfed the *Sunbeam*. Flying embers from a little fire stoked in the nursery to keep the room warm sparked off a mini inferno. Annie was awakened in the middle of the night by cries of "Fire! Fire!" Her first thought was the children, but thankfully they had not been forgotten; the nurse had "seized a child under each arm, wrapped them in blankets, and carried them off to the deck-house... The

[Left] Annie Brassey devised games to keep her children entertained on board. One such pastime was a soldier's drill where the children marched up and down the deck to the music of their drums. Image reproduced from Brassey, A. (1878). *A Voyage in the 'Sunbeam': Our Home on the Ocean for Eleven Months* (p. 256). London: Longmans, Green. (Accession no.: B02897233A; Microfilm no.: NL25750). **[Below]** A few days into the start of Annie Brassey's journey, the *Sunbeam* sailed into a violent storm, and her son Allnutt and daughter Mabelle were almost thrown overboard. Fortunately, Allnutt managed to catch hold of the rail, while the captain grabbed Mabelle. Image reproduced from Brassey, A. (1878). *A Voyage in the 'Sunbeam': Our Home on the Ocean for Eleven Months* (p. 5). London: Longmans, Green. (Accession no.: B02897233A; Microfilm no.: NL25750).



children... never cried nor made the least fuss, but composed themselves".¹²

In the meantime, the quick-thinking crew put out the fire before it became uncontrollable with a new-fangled technology of the time – a fire extinguisher. A woman made of less sterner stuff would have buckled and returned home, but Annie was undaunted by these setbacks.

We witnessed the riots of May 2014 that swept through Ho Chi Minh City. The Vietnamese, who had been protesting against Chinese aggression in the Eastern Sea, began attacking businesses in the city that bore Chinese signages. Taiwanese, Singaporean and Malaysian institutions were all at risk. Later, we heard how fellow Singaporeans had escaped from burning factories or saw protestors stake out apartment blocks where they lived. Even so, we chose to stay put as we saw the potential benefits of living in Vietnam.

Well aware of the perils of living in the jungles of Borneo with a young family, Frank McDougall had initially opted for a position at the British Museum. Harriette, however, persuaded the director of the museum to release her husband from his obligation in favour of Sarawak. Frank understood Harriette's reasons for choosing a location in remote Borneo:

"... she dared not withdraw him from the service to which she thought that God had called him, even though it was to fill a post of danger, which, to many minds might have appeared like that of leading a forlorn hope."¹³

Unfortunately, in February 1857, their worst fears were realised when Chinese gold miners set fire to their settlement. In the subsequent bloody massacre, several of their English neighbours saw their children beheaded and spouses speared to death. Harriette and her family escaped the insurrection only because the Chinese needed her husband's medical expertise. Frank attended to the wounded and told Harriette to escape downriver with the children on a small life-boat to a schooner awaiting them at the river's mouth.

Later, after being reunited with her husband, they travelled to Linga. Despite the harrowing conditions on board, Harriette felt neither hunger nor anguish because her family was safe:

"The night was very dark and wet, and the deck leaked upon us, so that we and our bags and bundles were soon wet through. But we neither heeded the rain nor felt the cold. We had eaten nothing since early morning, but were not hungry; and although for several nights we could scarcely be said to have slept, we were not sleepy. A deep thankfulness took possession of my soul; all our dear ones were spared to us. My children were in my arms, my husband paced the deck over my head. I seemed to have no cares, and to be able to trust to God for the future, who had been so merciful to us hitherto."¹⁴

A Mother's Anguish

Contrary to expectations, the expatriate mother does not always lead a glamorous life, especially when she has children. Her

days are less likely spent in spas and nail bars than dodging traffic while ferrying children to school or attempting to juggle work with personal time. What is little known are the challenges of a dislocated life, which could range from homesickness and loneliness to the more mundane sense of boredom as one is plucked from a sense of routine.

Harriette recognised these symptoms in both herself and among her countrymen:

"It is, however, a common mistake to imagine that the life of a missionary is an exciting one. On the contrary, its trial lies in its monotony. The uneventful day, mapped out into hours of teaching and study, sleep, exercise and religious duties; the constant society of natives... who do not sympathize with your English ideas; the sameness of the climate, which even precludes discourse about the weather – all this, added to the distance from relations and friends at home, combined with the enervating effects of a hot climate, causes heaviness of spirits and despondency to single men and women."¹⁵

A greater discomfort is the pain of physical separation from loved ones. This could mean leaving aged parents behind, a spouse or even children. The separation may be for weeks or months, but often it is years. The convenience of air-travel and instant communication by email, texting and video chat bridge the separation but can never take the place of extended time with a loved one.

For the Victorian woman with a spouse called to travel, the woman's first place was with the husband, even at the cost of leaving a child behind. When the McDougalls first departed England for Sarawak on 30 December 1847, Harriette left behind her eldest son Charles, just two years old then, while taking her infant child Harry with them.

It is from Frank's memoirs rather than Harriette's that we see the emotional price she paid. "[N]o one can tell the pangs which that parting must have cost her" writes Frank. "Bravely as she had parted from her eldest child, he seems to have been ever in her thoughts, and her heart hungered for news of him."¹⁶

The pain of separation, however, gave birth to the book, *Letters from Sarawak; Addressed to a Child*, based on the carefully crafted letters she had written to her son, in the hope that this would help



While in Sarawak, Harriette McDougall penned letters to her eldest child Charles between 1851 and 1853. The compilation was later published as *Letters from Sarawak; Addressed to a Child*. Through the letters, Harriette hoped to "lessen the distance" between them as well as provide "familiar accounts of [her] life and habits" in a foreign land. The book also contains illustrations by Harriette. Pictured here is a drawing titled "Sarawak from the Court House". Image reproduced from McDougall, H. (1854). *Letters from Sarawak; Addressed to a Child* (p. 19). London: Grant & Griffith. (Microfilm no.: NL25436).

him understand their circumstances. She states in the preface:

"All parents whose fate separates them from their little ones, during their early years, must feel anxious to lessen the distance which parts them, by such familiar accounts of their life and habits as shall give their children a vivid interest in their parents' home."¹⁷

For the child from a well-to-do Victorian family, being sent away to boarding school at a young age was a familiar rite of passage. Early in their travels, while at Rio Grande do Sul in Brazil, Annie's oldest son, then aged 13, took leave for England to continue his studies.

"We knew the parting had to be made, but this did not lessen our grief: for although it is at all times hard to say good-bye for a long period to those nearest and dearest to you, it is especially so in a foreign land, with the prospect of a long voyage on both sides. Moreover, it is extremely uncertain when we shall hear of our boy's safe arrival."¹⁸

For Harriette, leaving her older children Mab, Edith and Herbert in England when she returned to Sarawak in 1863 after a two-year absence was a pragmatic decision because she knew that "no English

child can thrive in that unchangeable climate after it is six years old".¹⁹ Yet it was not emotionally easy, as she shared with her sister-in-law:

"Dear little ones, they are seldom out of our thoughts. It was very hard to go away this time. I still feel a tightness about my heart, and I cannot endure that people should say to us, 'Did you leave any children in England? A great trial, is it not?' I cannot bear to talk of it, but everything reminds me of my darlings."²⁰

The Victorian mother, despite medical advancements of the time, often suffered the darkest separation – death.

By August 1851, Harriette had lost five infants across a span of five years, besides having lost her second-born Harry early in her service in 1850 and her first-born Charles in a freak accident in England in 1854. The losses not only devastated her emotionally but also physically. Yet, she was able to place the losses in the context of an eternal hope – "that it was better to have had them and lost them than never to have had them". She looked on them as a sacred deposit in the hands of God, to be restored to her hereafter.²¹

Sickness would continue to plague the family in a hostile environment where cholera and various tropical diseases were rife, along with a poor diet and the stress of physical dangers from hostile tribes. In

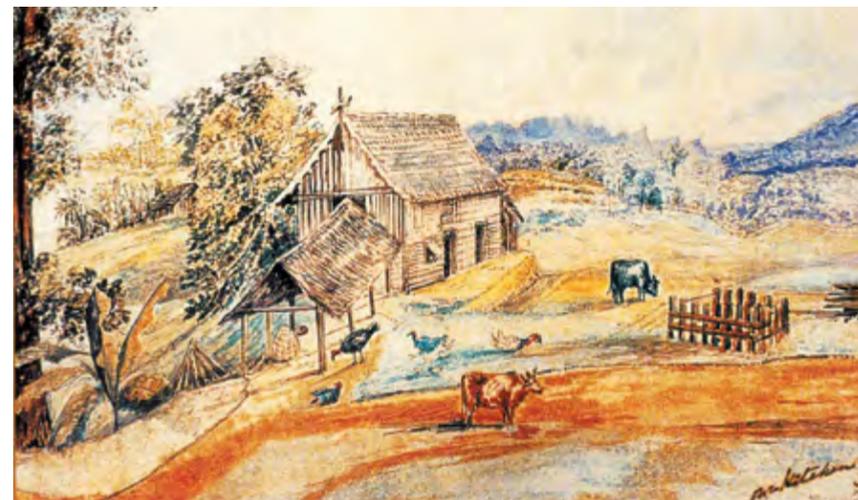
the end it would be poor health that would bring the McDougalls back to England in 1867 to recuperate and retire.

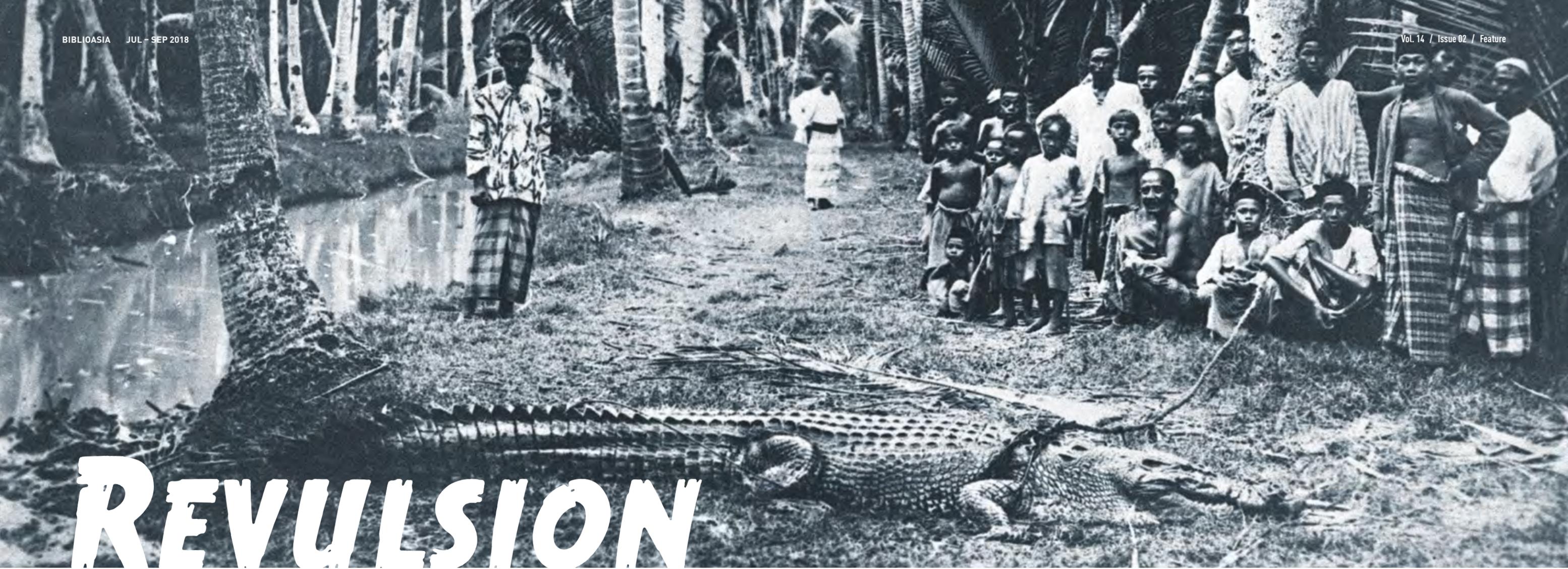
Although Annie continued her journey with her family to other far-flung outposts after her first book, her final story would end tragically. She died on 14 September 1887 from malarial fever as the family sailed from Australia to Mauritius. Her publication, *The Last Voyage to India and Australia in the 'Sunbeam'*,²² would be completed posthumously by her widowed husband and published in 1889. ♦

Notes

- 1 McDougall, H. (1854). *Letters from Sarawak; Addressed to a child*. London: Grant & Griffith. (Microfilm no.: NL25436)
- 2 McDougall, H. (1882). *Sketches of our life at Sarawak*. London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge. (Microfilm no.: NL26013)
- 3 Bunyon, C.J. (1889). *Memoirs of Francis Thomas McDougall, D.C.L.F.R.C.S., sometime bishop of Labuan and Sarawak, and of Harriette, his wife*. London: Longmans, Greens, and Co. (Microfilm no.: NL25423)
- 4 Brassey, A. (1878). *A voyage in the 'Sunbeam': Our home on the ocean for eleven months*. London: Longmans, Green. (Microfilm no.: NL25750)
- 5 Brassey, 1878, pp. vii.
- 6 McDougall, 1882, pp. 165–166.
- 7 McDougall, 1882, p. 149.
- 8 Brassey, 1878, p. 200.
- 9 McDougall, 1882, p. 115.
- 10 Brassey, 1878, pp. 5–6.
- 11 Brassey, 1878, p. 6.
- 12 Brassey, 1878, p. 361.
- 13 Bunyon, 1889, p. 20.
- 14 McDougall, 1882, pp. 142–143.
- 15 McDougall, 1882, p. 118.
- 16 Bunyon, 1889, pp. 26, 30.
- 17 McDougall, 1854, p. iii.
- 18 Brassey, 1878, p. 65.
- 19 McDougall, 1882, p. 12.
- 20 Bunyon, 1889, p. 216.
- 21 Bunyon, 1889, p. 56.
- 22 Brassey, A. (1889). *The last voyage to India and Australia in the 'Sunbeam'*. London: Longmans, Green. (Microfilm no.: NL8059)

Harriette McDougall's kitchen at her home in Kuching, Sarawak. The kitchen was in a separate hut away from the main house due to fire considerations. The family reared cows, pigs and chickens as food supplies were unreliable and expensive. Image reproduced from the website of St Thomas Cathedral Kuching.





REVULSION

— AND —

REVERENCE

Crocodiles in Singapore

Crocodiles elicit fear and respect by turns – and occasionally, even indifference. **Kate Pocklington** and **Siddharta Perez** document reptilian encounters at specific times in Singapore’s history and their impact on the human psyche.

Kate Pocklington is a Conservator at the Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum. She heads the collaborative research project, *Buaya: The Making of a Non-Myth*, at NUS Museum. **Siddharta Perez** is a Curator at NUS Museum. *Buaya* is one of the prep-room research projects she is currently managing.

On 6 November 2017, the National Sailing Centre suspended all water-based activities in the sea off East Coast Park for four days after an estuarine crocodile (*Crocodylus porosus*) – also known as the saltwater crocodile – was spotted in the waters there.¹ This was one of five reported crocodile sightings in 2017, drawing both media and public attention to this elusive reptile that inhabits the rivers, reservoirs and seas around Singapore.²

Crocodiles have always been native to Singapore, but their numbers have dropped drastically due to unbridled hunting as well as destruction of their natural habitats throughout Singapore’s modern history. In their search for new habitats, these reptiles have often strayed into urban areas.

One of the early documented crocodile encounters in a public space took place in 1906 at the Swimming Club at Tanjong Katong. The reptile was seen sunning itself on the club’s diving platform when someone took a shot at the creature, prompting it to flee in haste.³ The most recent recorded

sighting to cause a media flurry occurred in January 2018 at Sungei Buloh Wetland Reserve, where a crocodile was seen basking under the sun on a path cutting through the forest.⁴

In colonial times, crocodiles were often caught and taken to police stations as bounty.⁵ These days, however, the Public Utilities Board is more likely to receive calls from an anxious member of the public whenever crocodile sightings occur in water bodies or outside the perimeters of public spaces under the purview of the National Parks Board. The Animal Concerns Research and Education Society (ACRES) too receives its share of calls to assist in the rescue and relocation of wildlife that have strayed into public spaces.

Reptilian Encounters

Not surprisingly, sightings of crocodiles in urban Singapore are treated as freak occurrences. Mistaken identity aside,⁶ media reports of crocodile sightings raise

Crocodiles were hunted down during the colonial period in exchange for rewards from the authorities. Villagers posing with a captured crocodile, c.1910. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

alarm and strike fear in people’s hearts about the invasion of such large reptiles into public recreational spaces.

Such sensational media reporting is based on the premise that people are more comfortable appreciating crocodiles from a safe distance – confined in public spaces such as zoos and farms.⁷ Those who grew up in the 1980s and 90s would remember two such attractions that promised the thrill of being “up close and personal” with crocodiles.

The Singapore Crocodilarium at East Coast Parkway and Jurong Reptile and Crocodile Paradise, which opened in 1981 and 1988 respectively, bred crocodiles and staged performances that attracted large crowds. Stuntmen would risk life and limb as they wrestled with the reptiles as a form of entertainment.⁸



PIONEERS AT THE CROCODILARIUM



(Above) The Singapore Crocodilarium at East Coast Park opened in 1981. The crocodile farm had an open-air pool and a sand pit for the crocodiles to rest. Image reproduced from *The Straits Times*, 20 January 1980, p. 9.

(Left) A Malay boy sitting on a captured crocodile sometime in the 1920s. *Lim Kheng Chye Collection*, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

1960: The Year of the Crocodile

In the post-colonial years, with Singapore facing an uncertain future, people living in some parts of the island were faced with the presence of crocodiles. The range of emotions and reactions these crocodile sightings elicited in people is quite fascinating.

In 1960, 31-year-old clerk Chew Kok Lee, along with a group of fishermen from a nearby village, carried out an all-night vigil in Punggol to hunt down a 20- to 25-foot-long crocodile that had been terrorising fishermen in the area for some time.¹³

Fifteen-year-old Goh Koon Seng recounted that he was wading out to sea to help his father haul in the day's catch when he spotted something sinister in the water:

"A long black thing surfaced. I did not pay much attention at first. I thought it was a log. There are so many floating around here. Then its mouth opened. I screamed and turned back. As I got out of the water I heard a splash, looked back and saw the crocodile's tail submerging."¹⁴

Although Chew and his band of hunters managed to fire their shotguns at the reptile, these could have merely "just tickled it" because the same crocodile returned a week later with his mate in tow; the latter "about 25 feet long and weighing about 600 lb" but white in colour, according to one eyewitness.¹⁵

Meanwhile, that same year, in Sungei Kadut in the north of Singapore, a live 20-foot-long crocodile was viewed in a completely different light by residents of the area: here the villagers regarded the crocodile as sacred, revering it as a *kramat*.¹⁶ This particular reptile was covered in barnacles and regularly basked

provide for a healthy ecosystem where a natural equilibrium is maintained and supports a biodiversity that includes crocodiles in their natural environment.

The tussle for space in land-scarce Singapore for urban development and nature represents just the tip of the iceberg in understanding how humans co-exist with crocodiles in Singapore. Sightings of crocodiles may elicit fear, shock, surprise, amusement or even indifference whenever they are reported in the media.

Using specific time periods such as 1960 and 1977 as markers, the empirical collection and study of data for the research project *Buaya: The Making of a Non-Myth* threw up interesting findings. The project revealed different reactions to the crocodile that are intertwined and layered with the cultures and experiences of different communities throughout time and history in Singapore (see text box below).

BUAYA: THE MAKING OF A NON-MYTH

Launched in October 2016, *Buaya: The Making of a Non-Myth* is a research project held in the "prep-room" of NUS Museum. Revolving around ideas of the estuarine crocodile in Singapore, the project provides a platform for presentations of research projects and interpretations by professionals in the fields of natural history, arts and cultural studies.

The *Buaya project* is part of natural history conservator Kate

Pocklington's on-going research into the estuarine crocodile in Singapore, prompted by her conservation of a century-old specimen for permanent display at the Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum in 2013.

The *Buaya* project maps over 380 present and historic records of crocodiles in Singapore in response to the 1996 International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) report which assessed these animals to be "regionally extinct" in Singapore.

on a sand bank. Fishermen would say a silent prayer whenever they spotted the creature.

Residents were so protective of the creature that they would not disclose its location to anyone, believing that harm would befall the fishermen if the sacred crocodile moved to another site. Teo Boon Chin, who had lived in the area for over 20 years, indicated the area where the crocodile made its home with "a sweep of his arm" when he was interviewed by a newspaper in March 1960. "We know the home of the *kramat*, but are not supposed to tell it to anyone," he cautioned.

Another villager in Sungei Kadut by the name of Ah Lim, who had seen the crocodile "float on the river or laze about in the nearby mangrove swamp", added, "It is the guardian of our river and the protector of our fishermen."¹⁷

In the same year, on the southern shore of the island, villagers in Berlayer Creek in Pasir Panjang dealt with the presence of crocodiles "some of which four to five feet long" in the canal in quite the opposite manner: they held a feast in honour of their local *kramat* and invited a *pawang* (medicine man) to "scare away" the crocodiles infesting the river.¹⁸ Che Zainai Kubor, one of the villagers said, "It is not possible for human beings to stop crocodile breeding, but probably our *kramat* can."

These crocodile encounters evoked reactions in people ranging from bravado to reverence and respect, and fear. But there were also some who regarded the existence of crocodiles with complete indifference.

In August 1960, for instance, a crocodile suspected of escaping from a crocodile farm in Serangoon Garden Estate made itself at home in an unused water hyacinth pond at nearby Vaughan Road. The creature was described as having a tendency to submerge itself whenever people looked at it. When a newspaper headline in *The Singapore Free Press* pronounced that a "Shy croc in flower pond spreads fear among kampong folk", a long-time resident in the area, Lim Poon Guan, said, matter-of-factly, that finding "a crocodile in a pond here" came as no surprise to him at all.¹⁹

Early Records of the Crocodile

Crocodile records in Singapore go back to the early days of its colonial history. The earliest documented encounter of a crocodile in Singapore is found in the autobiography of Malacca-born Munshi Abdullah, who was employed by Stamford Raffles as a scribe and interpreter. *Hikayat Abdullah*, published in 1849, documents an incident about William Farquhar when he was Resident of Singapore between 1819 and 1823.

Farquhar's dog had playfully waded into the "Rochore River" when it was suddenly seized by a gigantic crocodile measuring at least "3 fathoms" (5.5 metres). In anger, Farquhar ordered for the river to be barricaded and the crocodile speared to death. Its carcass was later hung on a fig tree by the "Beras Basah River" for all to see.²⁰

Although Munshi Abdullah claimed that the attack on Farquhar's dog was the first time people knew of crocodiles in Singapore, a text predating the *Hikayat Abdullah* disputes this.

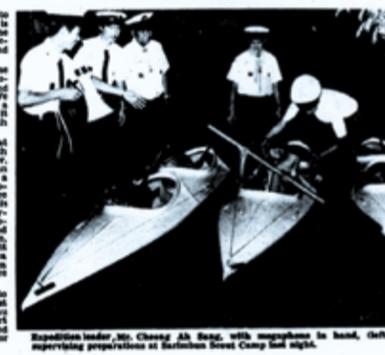
One of the accounts in *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, a Malay text written between 1641 and 1739, tells the story of the legendary white crocodile and the Raja of Malacca. One day, the raja, or king, was on board his vessel bound for Singapore when his crown fell into the sea. When he asked for the crown to be salvaged from the water, none of his men stepped forward, knowing full well that the Straits of Singapura (the Straits of Johor today) was "infested with man-eating crocodiles".

A high-ranking Laksamana (or admiral), most likely Hang Tuah himself, courageously stepped forward to carry out the raja's bidding. Valiantly, he dove into the water to retrieve the crown, but when he resurfaced, a white crocodile appeared and clamped its jaws onto his *keris*, a traditional bladed weapon that is said to be imbued with spirits and energies.

In the ensuing struggle with the crocodile, the raja's crown slipped from the Laksamana's grasp. He managed to grab the tail of the crocodile, but was pulled deeper underwater, forcing him to let go of the reptile. Although the Laksamana's



Scouts hunt for white crocodile



Expedition leader, Mr. Cheong Ah Sang, with megaphone in hand, left, supervising preparations at Sarimbun River Camp last night.

(Left) A poster from the Crocodile Paradise at Jurong advertising its performances with crocodiles.

(Above) Venture Sea Scouts getting ready for one of their expeditions in search of the white crocodile at Pulau Sarimbun in April 1977. The expedition was led by Cheong Ah Sang. Image reproduced from *The Straits Times*, 30 April 1977, p. 2.

OF DOGS AND CROCS

William Farquhar's dog was not the only casualty that fell prey to crocodiles. In August 1907, people who had mysteriously lost their pet dogs in the "past few years" were told to contact the taxidermist at Middle Road to ascertain whether four dog collars retrieved from the stomach of a crocodile shot in the Punggol River belonged to them. The carcass was being prepared to be sent to England when the discovery was made.

Reference

Discovery in a crocodile's stomach. (1907, August 13). *The Straits Times*, p. 7. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

precious *keris* was lost, the crown, fortunately, was safely retrieved. Perceiving this entire incident as an ill omen, the raja ordered his fleet of ships to turn back to Malacca at once.²¹

1977: The Year of the White Crocodile

In 1977, a group of plucky Venture Sea Scouts set out to capture a white crocodile²² that was said to inhabit Pulau Sarimbun in the northwest coast of Singapore. Newspaper reports on this expedition were published on 2 May, 30 April, 13 June and 25 June 1977.²³

These scouts were following up on an unrecorded sighting of a white crocodile

by another group of Venture Sea Scouts five years earlier.²⁴ Recalling the incident, Cheong Ah Sang said that his group of 12 scouts had “caught a glimpse of the white crocodile in 1972”. Determined to trap it, he decided to lead a team of 32 scouts on a quest to search for the reportedly 13-foot-long reptile.

On 30 April 1977, *The New Nation* reported that Cheong’s group embarked on a three-day expedition using 11 canoes and were escorted by a nine-metre whaler. He told the reporter:

“We hope to come across the white crocodile hopefully around Sarimbun Island. We may use a net with a stick

and a rope to trap it or we may bait it with chicken and fish.”²⁵

In venturing into the waters of the Straits of Johor where Pulau Sarimbun is located, these young adventurers were returning full circle to the historic Hang Tuah’s encounter with the white crocodile. Cheong’s expedition, however, failed in its bid to capture the crocodile.

According to the *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, “only the pure of heart can see the white crocodile”. Taking this advice to heart, another group of scouts led by Paul Wee prepared for the hunt by vowing to fast and refrain from consuming pork. They had earlier revealed their intention to donate the captured animal to the zoo. However, after two failed attempts, the scouts were ordered to call off the hunt by the Chief Commissioner’s Office.²⁶

The Crocodile Lives On

Leaving the sightings of the elusive white crocodile aside, it is worth examining early maps of Singapore and drawing logical connections between the names of the surrounding islands and their geography.²⁷ Place names can be a useful key in identifying local terrain, and can indicate the presence of certain species of animals.

The names Pulau Buaya (near Jurong Island) and Alligator Island (Pulau Pawai today), which appear off the southwestern coast of Singapore on maps dating back to the early 1800s, suggest the presence of crocodile populations (as well as abundant mangrove habitats) at some point in the islands’ history. These indicators, along with references in the *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, imply that from north to south, Singapore was once home to a sizeable population of crocodiles.

While the white crocodile remains an elusive mystery, there is a local lore about such a creature appearing in the Kallang River every 20 years. Although no actual encounters of white crocodiles have been recorded at the river, the reptile still looms large in the public imagination.

News reports and public records on crocodile sightings in Singapore over the last 200 years have enabled us to pinpoint the physical locations of these reptiles on the island as well as track encounters that have taken place between crocodiles and humans.

The idea of “public space” is frequently challenged in the various encounters between humans and crocodiles in this article. The natural human tendency is to react negatively, from shutting down



A baby crocodile was exported from Singapore to the London Zoo in 1936. Here, the crocodile is being fed his first morsel of meat from a pair of forceps at the zoo. Image reproduced from *The Malaya Tribune*, 29 December 1936, p. 11.

PET CROCS

Interestingly, crocodiles were also kept as pets or bred in the backyard of houses in Singapore. In 1948, it was possible to buy a live baby crocodile for as little as 25 to 40 Malayan dollars, and if the customer so desired, have the reptile killed and skinned, and made into a pair of custom-made shoes.¹

Keeping crocodiles as pets could sometimes lead to peculiar and troublesome consequences.

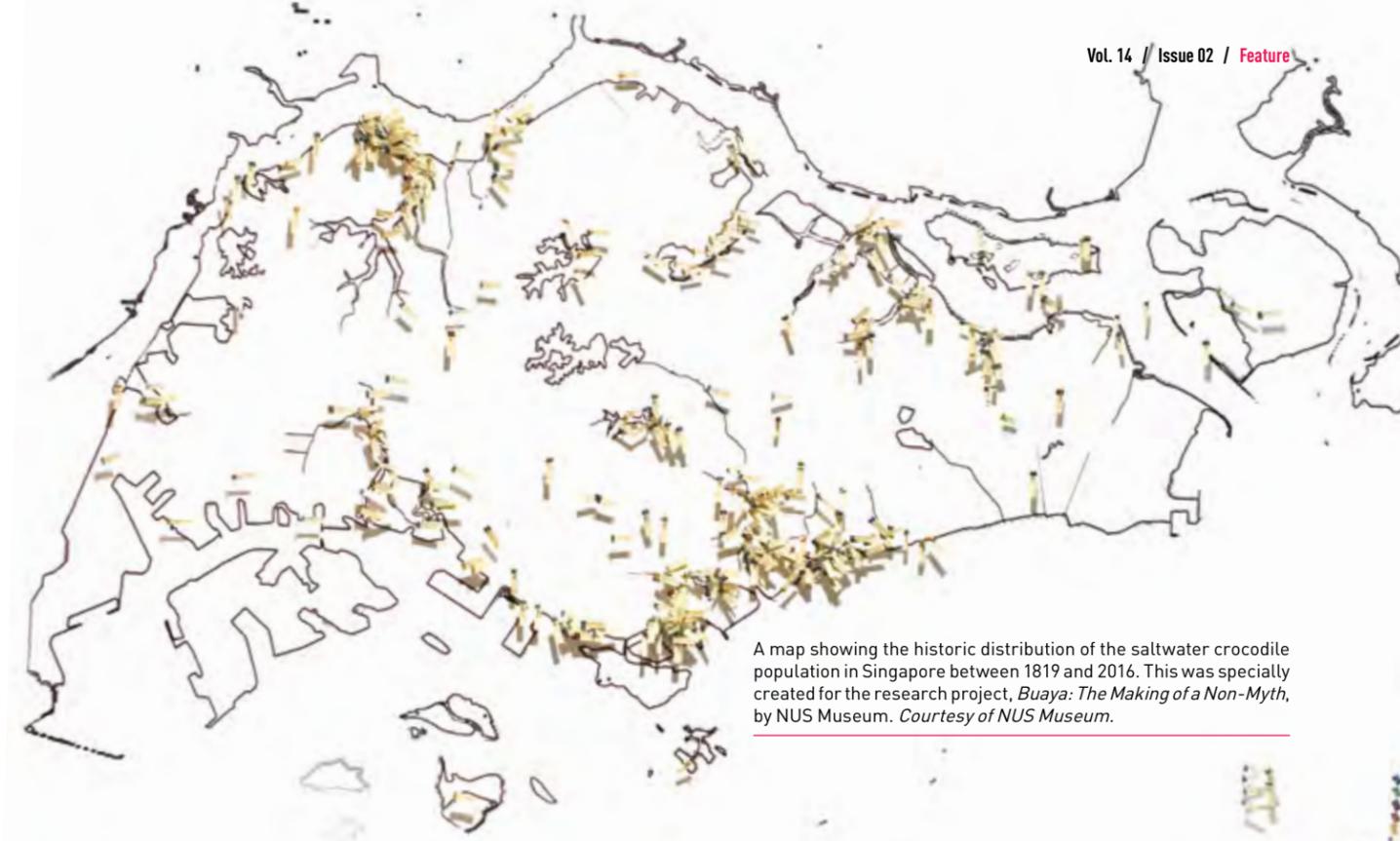
In 1899, a 70-yard “menagerie race” took place in which a “young crocodile driven by Captain Lucy” competed against a goose, a goat, a monkey and two donkeys (the crocodile did not win the race).²

In the late 1800s, the pet crocodile of a Captain Gamble that became too big as an adult was released into the Botanic Gardens Lake only to later bite one of the gardeners. In order to capture the crocodile, the lake had to be drained and

poisoned with tuba roots, unfortunately killing every living thing residing in the waters. The crocodile, however, was nowhere to be found, the creature having presumably left the confines of the freshwater lake.³

Notes

- 1 The Malayan dollar was used from 1939 to 1953 in Brunei and Malaya (under British colony and protectorate). Shoes made of lizard skin were also popular. See Choose your own crocodile. [1948, May 2]. *The Straits Times*, p. 5. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 2 Gymkhana meeting. [1889, September 4]. *Straits Times Weekly Issue*, p. 4. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 3 The Gardens crocodile. [1892, January 23]. *The Straits Times*, p. 2; The hunting of the crocodile. [1892, January 27]. *The Straits Times*, p. 3. Retrieved from NewspaperSG. [Note: Before this incident, crocodiles were kept at the Singapore Botanic Gardens. Today, the Marsh Gardens has a signboard informing visitors how it was “once the location of a rhinoceros wallow and alligator [sic, crocodile] ponds when the Singapore Botanic Gardens had a zoological collection in the 1870s.”]



A map showing the historic distribution of the saltwater crocodile population in Singapore between 1819 and 2016. This was specially created for the research project, *Buaya: The Making of a Non-Myth*, by NUS Museum. Courtesy of NUS Museum.

activities in parks and water-based clubs to draining and poisoning lakes.

The public spaces developed for encounters with crocodiles question the notion of for whom or for what they were controlled for – zoos and marine parks are

regulated spaces that allow encounters (or “non-encounters” in reality) with crocodiles within a safe setting for humans, while reserves are spaces controlled for the mobility of wildlife. Yet, the making of these spaces is constantly reconfigured

when crocodile sightings take place. In the myriad encounters with these reptiles, whether from actual documentation or from cultural memory, the crocodile’s existence still escapes being understood in public history. ♦

Notes

- 1 Lim, M.Z. (2017, November 9). Water training will resume on Friday, with no further crocodile sightings: S’pore Sailing Federation. *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from The Straits Times website.
- 2 Lee, M.K. (2017, August 24). Warning signs put up at Changi Beach Park after crocodile sighting. *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from The Straits Times website; Tan, A. (2017, August 8). Crocodiles spotted in north-eastern Singapore. *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from The Straits Times website. [Note: One of these sightings involved the death of a 1.5-metre-long crocodile which was hit by a car at Kranji. See Wild crocodile dies from injuries after accident along Kranji Way. [2017, June 6]. *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from The Straits Times website.]
- 3 A “croc” at the swimming club. [1906, May 15]. *Eastern Daily Mail and Straits Morning Advertiser*, p. 2. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 4 Lam, L. (2018, January 22). NParks to extend barricade to pathway where crocodile was spotted at Sungei Buloh. *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from The Straits Times website.
- 5 Untitled. [1856, December 16]. *The Straits Times*, p. 5; Thursday, 25th August. [1870, August 27]. *The Straits Times*, p. 4. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 6 When seen from afar, monitor lizards have been mistaken as crocodiles due to their similar shape and colouration. Unlike monitor lizards, crocodiles do not have a forked tongue. See It was just a harmless lizard... [1957, January 27]. *The Straits Times*, p. 4. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 7 Richards, A. (1960, April 6). Flirting with danger in croc farm. *The Singapore Free Press*, p. 7. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 8 Page 10 Advertisements Column 1. [1981, March 22]. *The Straits Times*, p. 10; Chia, M. (1988, September 4). Croc park to open soon in Jurong. *The Straits Times*, p. 12; Goh, K. (1988, December 15). A big bite of the business. *The New Paper*, p. 18. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 9 Lim, S. (1989, March 7). Croc bites trainer during show. *The Straits Times*, p. 18. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 10 Paradise lost. [2007, January 26]. *The Straits Times*, p. 4. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 11 Yee, A.T.K., et al. (2010, June 4). The present extent of mangrove forests in Singapore. *Nature in Singapore*, 3, 139–145. Retrieved from Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum website.
- 12 Yee, et al, 4 Jun 2010.
- 13 Clerk keeps all-night vigil at creek for a 20-ft crocodile. [1960, March 17]. *The Straits Times*, p. 14. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 14 Croc scares fishermen. [1960, March 18]. *The Straits Times*, p. 16. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 15 *The Straits Times*, 18 Mar 1960, p. 16; Ponggol croc returns with a mate. [1960, March 26]. *The Straits Times*, p. 4. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 16 *Kramat*, or *keramat*, from Arabic *karama*, translated as “miracle”. Whilst often deemed as a material shrine, *kramat* is not exclusive to a physical space nor spiritual entity, but a complex sacred “shrine” to both, visible and invisible, and applied to the mobile or immobile physicality of a spirit.
- 17 They offer a silent prayer to ‘sacred’ crocodile. [1960, April 19]. *The Singapore Free Press*, p. 7. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 18 Richards, A. (1960, June 29). Villagers to hold a feast for kramat to scare away crocs in the canal. *The Singapore Free Press*, p. 9. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 19 Shy croc in a flower pond spreads fear among kampong folk. [1960, August 17]. *The Singapore Free Press*, p. 9. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

- 20 Abdullah Abdul Kadir. [1918]. *The autobiography of Munshi Abdullah* (W.G. Shellabear, Trans). Singapore: Printed at the Methodist Pub. House. Retrieved from BookSG.
- 21 Kassim Ahmad. [2010]. *The epic of Hang Tuah*. Kuala Lumpur: Institut Terjemahan Negara Malaysia. (Call no.: RSEA 398.2209595 HIK)
- 22 This incident in 1977 gives room for speculation. Were the scouts searching for what they thought was the mythical white crocodile? Or were they looking for a crocodile that was possibly afflicted by a rare biological condition? One such condition could be albinism, a congenital disorder characterised by the absence of natural pigment, causing even the eyes to be of a different colour. Another cause could be hypomelanism – a reduced amount of melanin. In snakes that are affected by this condition, some coloured parts (mostly black) of their bodies are retained. There is also leucism, which is a partial loss of pigmentation that causes part or all of the crocodile to be white.
- 23 Scouts hope to bag white croc. [1977, May 2]. *The Straits Times*, p. 5; Scouts hunt for white crocodile. [1977, April 30]. *New Nation*, p. 2; Another hunt by scouts for white croc. [1977, June 13]. *The Straits Times*, p. 8; Tan, B. (1977, June 25). A fourth bid to catch the white croc. *The Straits Times*, p. 12. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 24 Scouts hunt for white crocodile. [1977, April 30]. *New Nation*, p. 2. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 25 *New Nation*, 30 Apr 1977, p. 2.
- 26 Another hunt by scouts for white croc. [1977, June 13]. *The Straits Times*, p. 8; Tan, B. (1977, June 25). A fourth bid to catch the white croc. *The Straits Times*, p. 12. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 27 Survey Department, Singapore. [1839]. *Map of the Island of Singapore and its Dependencies* [Topographic Map]. Retrieved from National Archives of Singapore website.



In Search of the Seven Sisters Festival

This time-honoured festival has left no tangible trace of its observance in Singapore. **Tan Chui Hua** pieces together oral history interviews to reconstruct its proper place in Chinese culture.

Researcher and writer **Tan Chui Hua** has worked on various projects documenting the heritage of Singapore, including a number of heritage trails and publications.

“In those days, what was most distinctive about Chinatown was the seventh day of the seventh month... on the night of the sixth day, they would have started... what was called the seven sisters’ festival, or qi jie jie (七姐节)... women, single young women, particularly admired the story of the love between the Weaver Girl and the Cowherd. So, on the sixth day of [the] seventh month, it would be a festival for women... they would take the crafts they had made, very exquisite, beautiful handicrafts, and display them... they would put them on very long tables, place all the crafts there, and some offerings for the seven sisters; fruit, rouge, powder, embroidered clothes – very beautiful embroidered clothes for the seven sisters – and hang them up, and the women would come on the sixth to worship the seven sisters.”¹

– Lee Oi Wah

The poignant tale of *The Cowherd and the Weaver Girl* (牛郎织女) is well loved across East Asian cultures. Its themes of separation, reunion and unwavering devotion in the face of divine wrath inspire memorialisation in the form of religious festivals and rituals, observed on the seventh day of the seventh lunar month.²

The festivals go by various names and forms: the Chinese know it as the Seven Sisters Festival (七姐节/七姐诞), Qixi (七夕节) or Qiqiao (乞巧节), while the Japanese and Koreans call it Tanabata and Chilseok respectively.

In Singapore, the annual celebration to commemorate the legend of the Weaver Girl and Cowherd was brought here by immigrant Chinese communities, notably Cantonese female servants sworn to celibacy. Known as *zishunü* (自梳女) or women who “combed their hair up by themselves”, they are more commonly called *amah* or *majie* in Cantonese) (妈姐) here, as many of them took up work as domestic help in Singapore.³

For a period in Singapore history, the observance of the Seven Sisters Festival was a much anticipated annual highlight in Chinatown, where the Cantonese community used to be concentrated.⁴ All across Chinatown, worship altars and displays of crafts and artworks would be set up on the eve of the festival by clan associations and sisterhoods, attracting throngs of visitors late into the night.

By the late 1970s, however, the scale of this observance had greatly diminished.



[Facing page] The Seven Sisters Festival is based on the Chinese legend of the Weaver Girl and the Cowherd. When Weaver Girl fell in love with the mortal Cowherd, their union incurred heavenly wrath. As punishment, the two were banished to either side of the Milky Way and could only meet once a year – on the seventh day of the seventh lunar month. This painting 天河配 (“Rendezvous in the Milky Way”, c. late 19th–c. early 20th century) depicts the reunion of the couple at the heavenly river (天河), which symbolises the Milky Way. Image source: Wikimedia Commons (painting from the collections of the State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg, Russia).

[Above] A stage performance of the *Seven Fairy Sisters* (七仙女) by the Sing Yong Wah Heng Teochew Opera Troupe, 1978. Ronni Pinsler Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Today, the Seven Sisters Festival exists only in the fading memories of former Chinatown residents.

The Task of Reconstruction

When it comes to intangible cultural heritage, documentation and preservation remain perennial challenges. In many ways, the Seven Sisters Festival is a classic illustration.

The festival has left virtually no material trace – the temples where the festivities were once held are no longer around; no archival records such as membership records or official reports are known to exist; its associated paraphernalia such as crafts, embroidery and offerings are ephemeral and not known to have been preserved; and its photographic documentation in public archives is scant. With the decline of its main group of observers, the Seven Sisters Festival has faded into memory and become a footnote in history.

To reconstruct the festival, there are two main bodies of resources: articles and columns in archived newspapers that describe the origins of the festival

THE TALE OF THE COWHERD AND THE WEAVER GIRL

Multiple variants of the tale exist, but the characters and story are largely consistent. The fairy Weaver Girl and her six sisters were known for their artistry in needle and handicrafts. When Weaver Girl fell in love with the mortal Cowherd, their union incurred the wrath of heaven. As punishment, the two were banished to either side of the Milky Way and could only meet once a year – on the 7th day of the 7th month. While the festival commemorates the unwavering devotion of the couple, the focus of its religious worship is centred primarily on the seven fairy sisters.

Reference

Stockard, J.E. (1989). *Daughters of the Canton delta: Marriage patterns and economic strategies in South China, 1860–1930*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press. (Call no.: R 306.810951 ST0)



Known as *cat cheh poon* in Cantonese (Seven Sisters Basin), this big paper basin is one of the key offerings burnt during the Seven Sisters Festival, 1954. Image source: *The Straits Times* © Singapore Press Holdings Limited. Reprinted with permission.

and its associated festivities – some of which capture the personal experiences of the writers – and a small collection of oral history interviews gathered by the National Archives of Singapore’s Oral History Centre.

However, to get a fuller sense of the festival, such as the multiplicity of experiences and actors in the festival, or to understand the significance of the festival to its actors, and to evoke the texture of memories, one needs to rely on oral history interviews.

Conducted from the 1980s onwards with former residents of Chinatown, these interviews document people’s memories of their neighbourhood, several of which include descriptions of the Seven Sisters Festival. Through these recollections, we may begin to reconstruct and re-imagine the festival at its zenith in Singapore.

Who, When and Where

Using the interviews as the basis for exploratory research, it is possible to piece together a fairly detailed profile of the

festival. Firstly, it is clear that the festival involved many groups of people – formal organisers, informal organisers and their patrons, lay worshippers as well as casual visitors.

The driving force behind the festival was the *amah* community of Chinatown, where several such clan organisations and sisterhoods were established. These *amahs* would have planned for the event months ahead, and their clan premises served as the primary festival sites in Chinatown.

Besides these formal organisers, there were also clusters of informal organisations referred to as Seven Sisters associations (七姐会) or Milky Way associations (银河会). Such organisations were usually transient, and set up by young unmarried girls and women specifically for the purpose of the festival. The members would often comprise relatives, friends and neighbours, and tithes would be collected to cover the costs of the offerings and festivities. As many of such associations were made up of teenage girls, their patrons – usually their parents – were key figures who provided the necessary funds.

The lay worshippers were generally women, both married and unmarried. These women were usually not involved in the planning and preparation for the festival, but would come together to pray and make offerings. Apart from these women, the sites would also see large crowds of visitors, who showed up just to soak in the atmosphere and enjoy the festivities.

From the oral history interviews, we know that the main group of celebrants was Cantonese. While many of the interviewees emphasised that the festival was celebrated only by the Cantonese, two interviewees took pains to mention that the Hokkien and Teochew communities observed the festival too, albeit on a much smaller scale.⁵

Ostensibly, the festival was held on the 7th day of the 7th month. All the oral history accounts, however, agree that festivities began on the eve. Foong Lai Kam, whose father was a Taoist priest and ran a business at Sago Lane, recalled that he would become exceptionally busy when the clock struck 11pm on the 6th day, as all the festival sites required a priest to conduct the necessary rites and rituals at the same auspicious time.⁶

Chay Sheng Ern Abigail, another interviewee, said that the reason was because according to the Chinese time system, 11pm is the start of the rat hour, the first hour of the day, which marks what is effectively the start of the 7th night proper.⁷

The recollections of the interviewees also give an idea of the scale of the festivities. Lee Oi Wah recalls the many associations organising these festivities:

“In Chinatown, there were numerous such associations. Where I lived [Kreta Ayer Street], there were at least two; one at the entrance of the street above the coffee shop, and another at the other end at another clan association. At the next street, Keong Saik Street, there were a couple. At Bukit Pasoh, there were more, three or four. The whole Chinatown had more than ten, and we would go to one after another...”⁸

Another interviewee, Chia Yee Kwan describes the membership composition of these associations:

“This was very popular in Chinatown in the past. At Upper Chin Chew Street, and the street next to Upper Chin Chew Street, at

Upper Hokkien Street, there were many stalls that could be organised by 10 or 20 over people. Those larger-scale ones like the Saa Kai Clan Association [an association for *amahs* from Shunde],... larger clan association[s] would have more than a hundred. Tens of people or perhaps more than a hundred people. Those that were of a smaller scale would have 30 or more people...”⁹

Unravelling Beliefs and Practices

Unlike codified religions with bodies of canonical scriptures and defined tenets, Chinese folk religion rarely displays unified beliefs. Rather, rituals and practices serve as unifying activities for believers.¹⁰ This poses another challenge to the documentation of Chinese religious festivals; without canonical texts, religious beliefs and practices reported by informants often concur only to a certain degree, and occasionally contradict one another.

This diversity in interpreting folk beliefs can be seen in the oral history interviews. To a large extent, lay worshippers and visitors to the festival sites, usually Chinatown residents, concur that unmarried female worshippers of the Seven Sisters were women who sought divine blessings in their search for a spouse as devoted as the mortal Cowherd, and – at the same time – expressed a desire to be as beautiful as the seven fairy sisters.

Some interviewees reported that unmarried women would visit the festival sites and doll themselves up in the hope of meeting their future husbands, while other interviewees disagreed – likely because they thought such behaviour was unbecoming of decent women and inappropriate for the festival.

However, granted that the main organisers were *amahs* who were sworn to a life of celibacy, these worshippers were clearly not in search of suitable spouses at the festival. To this end, oral history accounts with the *amahs* focused on descriptions of traditional practices relating to the

The driving force behind the Seven Sisters Festival in Chinatown was the *amah* or *majie* community. These women, who were sworn to celibacy, worshipped the Seven Sisters for their skills in needlework and crafts. The *amahs* would work on the craftworks to be displayed during the festival in their leisure time and after hours, 1962. Photograph by Wong Ken Foo. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



festival rather than their personal beliefs and motivations.

Judging from the actual practices – *amahs* and other young unmarried women members of Seven Sisters associations would spend a good part of the year creating beautiful handicrafts – it appears that the Seven Sisters were worshipped for their artistry and mastery of needle crafts. This certainly is corroborated by research on the Seven Sisters cult in Guangdong, China, where the adherents in Singapore originated from.¹¹

When it comes to rituals and practices relating to the Seven Sisters Festival, there is a higher degree of concurrence among those interviewed. For example, all the women mentioned that offerings would typically include a giant paper basin, cosmetics, clothing made of paper for the Seven Sisters and the Cowherd, combs, mirrors, handkerchiefs, and fruit and flowers. The priest would turn up at exactly 11pm to conduct the elaborate rituals, and the offerings would be burnt as supplication. Cantonese *tongshui* (糖水), or desserts, and *longan* tea would also be served to worshippers and visitors.

The level of descriptive detail in the interviews on ritual offerings and practices allow us to better reconstruct the festival. The following excerpt from an interview given by Abigail Chay illustrates this:

“So during this *chaat cheh* [Cantonese for Seven Sisters]... night, they actually would make flowers into lanterns... like a conical shape... and then they hang it in the air, and then they would make... a paper thing like a basin, and they would just burn it. And mainly they burn beautiful clothes... made of paper... and they actually put on powder, those white powder with like ‘Twin Girls’, ‘Twin Ladies’ [actually Two Girls brand], that kind of thing, and then the cologne *shui* [Cantonese for water], their so-called perfume at that time, at the altar... then they would just offer it for blessing... The *chaat cheh* day is on the seventh day of the seventh month of the Chinese calendar.”

She also recalls an interesting practice of placing items such as a bowl of water outside the window and applying make-up for blessings:

“On the *chor lok*, the sixth day of the seventh month, any *majie* [Cantonese for *amah*] or any lady who wanted to look very beautiful, they would put their makeup... they would also

put water right outside their window where they face the sky... 11 o'clock start the new timing of the... rat timing, 11pm to 1am, they would place there... then they would leave it until the next morning, the bowl of water. If they were *kiasu* [Hokkien for 'afraid to lose'], they would put one basin of water outside... they would open the cologne, the old-fashioned cologne, then the white powder for their face and whatever during that time they used for makeup... so they would put all these things overnight and hopefully it doesn't rain. If it doesn't rain, good weather... it seems that whatever powder you put overnight, the cologne will attract men, you will look more charming, more beautiful, and that basin of water or the bowl of water you put there, even the whole year round, will not have larva... drink already it seems... can be beautiful and can cure sicknesses."¹²

A Celebration of Artistry

One of the main attractions for the throngs of visitors, sometimes as many as two or three hundred in a single venue, were the exhibits of exquisite craftworks and needlework held in conjunction with Seven Sisters festivities.

The displays were usually held on the premises of organising clan associations

and Seven Sisters associations. Long tables would be set up to showcase the wide variety of arts and crafts; bigger-scale displays would occupy both levels of a clan's shophouse building, while smaller ones would just take up a corridor's space.

Visitors would typically go from one venue to another to admire and compare the crafts and skills of the makers. These displays would stay open, free-of-charge, until the next morning, and it was not unusual to see visitors streaming in as late as 3am.¹³

Here, the oral history interviews abound in descriptions of visits to these exhibitions, which in themselves are testament to the significance of the experiences to these women. One interviewee, Cheong Swee Kee, said she found the festival exceptionally exciting as such night events rarely took place in Chinatown at the time.¹⁴

Given the disappearance of the festival today and the absence of photographic documentation and preserved artefacts, the type of crafts and needlework presented at the Seven Sisters Festival can only be imagined via the detailed descriptions recounted by former Chinatown residents.

Chia Yee Kwan describes how "... cuttlefish bones [were used] to make figurines, that were very life-like. Those figurines were based on people from the ancient times, such as *The Story of the*

Western Wing [*The Romance of the Western Chambers*] and the *Three Kingdoms* characters..."¹⁵

A wide variety of materials were used, as former resident Lee Oi Wah explains:

"Some were figurines, or miniature tables and chairs, sewn by hand; some were made with beads, tiny beads; some were made with sequins; some were made of dough... some used matchboxes to create a beautiful display."¹⁶

Foong Lai Kam remembers:

"Most of the exhibits were made of fruit. They would stack fruit to create sculptures, such as using watermelon skin to carve out diamond or heart shapes, and stick them to create sculptures. They would display these for three days..."¹⁷

For former resident Fong Chiok Kai, what was memorable were works that used sesame and rice grains to depict mountains and rivers.¹⁸

Most of these crafts were made by *amahs* and served as a showcase for them to show off their skills. According to oral history interviews, the *amahs* would work on the crafts throughout the year during their leisure time and after hours. Lee Oi Wah recalls:

"In their leisure time, they would think about the crafts they could make, and these were their own creations, which is why the crafts had their creators' distinctive style. So when we talk about the clothing for the seven sisters and the cowherd, we would know, 'Oh, only this person is able to create such a beautiful set of clothing.'"

She further elaborates:

"On that night, there would be so many *majie*... they would take leave from their employers. They must attend this festival. To them, this festival was more important than the Chinese New Year, and they would be delighted when visitors praised the crafts, 'Oh this is so beautiful', or 'Who had embroidered this piece of clothing? It is so well-done.' They would feel that their hard work had been worthwhile, and delighted that there were so many visitors appreciating their craft."¹⁹



A stage performance of the *Seven Fairy Sisters* (七仙女) by the Sing Yong Wah Heng Teochew Opera Troupe, 1978. Ronni Pinsler Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

The Eclipse of a Tradition

For a festival that used to be one of Chinatown's most colourful and significant events, its eclipse was surprisingly rapid. By the 1970s, the festivities had been scaled down considerably. The few women who were asked about the festival's decline proffered reasons such as education and changing attitudes in society, resulting in fewer believers in the community.

Other reasons cited included lack of time to commit to the organising associations and the fact that the main organisers, the *amahs*, were advancing in age and fewer women were moving from China to Singapore to take their place.

The oral history interviews in the collections of the National Archives are a critical resource in reconstructing this ephemeral phenomenon. In the case of the Seven Sisters Festival, the existence

of a critical mass of interviews allows us to piece together detailed descriptions of the festival from the women who played different roles – as organiser, lay worshipper or visitor – and paint a textured, colourful account of times past.

More critically, it enables the comparison of multiple accounts to arrive at a more accurate, corroborated reconstruction of an intangible, cultural episode that is now relegated to the annals of history. ♦

Joss paper shops such as these in Chinatown would be the source of many of the paper offerings to the Seven Sisters and Cowherd, 1962. Photograph by Wong Ken Foo. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



Notes

- Lee Oi Wah (b.1950) is a former resident of Kreta Ayer Street in Chinatown. She remembers seeing how the Seven Sisters Festival was celebrated when she was a child (Note: Interview was in Mandarin). See Yeo, L.F. (Interviewer). (1999, October 16). *Oral history interview with Lee Oi Wah* [MP3 recording no. 002217/9/7]. Retrieved from National Archives of Singapore website.
- The traditional Chinese calendar is a lunisolar calendar comprising either a 12-month, or in the case of a leap year, a 13-month cycle. Each month has either 29 or 30 days. The calendar is determined based on both the phases of the moon and the position of the sun in the sky. It is used mainly to establish the dates of major festivals such as Lunar New Year and Mid-Autumn Festival as well as to find auspicious dates for occasions such as weddings, moving house and opening a business.
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- Interviewee Teo Sok Koon briefly mentioned that

- Teochews marked the festival as well, and Goh Beng, another interviewee, discussed how Hokkiens observed the festival. See Tan, B.L. (Interviewer). (1992, December 7). *Oral history interview with Teo Sok Koon* [MP3 recording no. 001384/14/8] [Note: Interview was in Teochew] and Lim, I.A.L. (Interviewer). (1990, September 19). *Oral history interview with Goh Beng* [MP3 recording no. 001192/2/1]. [Note: Interview was in Hokkien]. Retrieved from National Archives of Singapore website.
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- Stockard, J.E. (1989). *Daughters of the Canton delta: Marriage patterns and economic strategies in South China, 1860–1930* (pp. 41–47). Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press. [Call no.: R 306.810951 ST0]
 - Oral history interview with Chay Sheng Ern Abigail*, 25 Jan 2013.
 - Oral history interview with Lee Oi Wah*, 16 Oct 1999.
 - Yeo, L.F. (Interviewer). (2000, June 3). *Oral history interview with Cheong Swee Kee* [MP3 recording no. 002315/9/8]. Retrieved from National Archives of Singapore website. [Note: Interview was in English]
 - Oral history interview with Chia Yee Kwan*, 23 Nov 2000, p. 751.
 - Oral history interview with Lee Oi Wah*, 16 Oct 1999.
 - Yeo, L.F. (Interviewer). (1999, November 1). *Oral history interview with Foong Lai Kum* [MP3 recording no. 002226/12/3]. Retrieved from National Archives of Singapore website. [Note: Interview was in Mandarin]
 - Tan, B.L., & Pitt, K.W. (1982, October 12). *Oral history interview with Fong Chiok Kai* [Transcript of MP3 recording no. 000185/32/17, p. 222]. Retrieved from National Archives of Singapore website. [Note: Interview was in Cantonese]
 - Oral history interview with Lee Oi Wah*, 16 Oct 1999.

MALAY SEAFARERS

IN

LIVERPOOL

Tim Bunnell speaks to former Malay sailors who reside in the English city and learns how they manage to sustain their identity in a city so removed from home.

Liverpool saw extremes of both prosperity and decline in a span of just two centuries.¹ Between the 18th and early 20th centuries, the British city on the northwestern coast of England, where the River Mersey meets the Irish Sea, was a major global trade and migration port. During the Industrial Revolution that took place from around 1760 to 1840, Liverpool's role as the main gateway in the West for raw materials and finished goods, along with the ships that called there, were instrumental in developing Britain's trading links with North and South America, West Africa, the Middle and Far East, and Australia.

At the end of the 19th century, Liverpool's four major import trades – cotton, sugar, timber and grain – flourished and its dock force alone numbered 30,000.² But in the last three decades of the 20th century, the one-time "world city" fell into economic decline, and by the early 1980s, unemployment rates in Liverpool were among the highest in the United Kingdom.³

It is against this historical maritime backdrop that my research on Malay seamen in Liverpool takes place. In the mid-20th century, after World War II, men from the dispersed and ethnically diverse Malay world (or *alam Melayu*) of Southeast Asia worked as seafarers on British-owned and other merchant ships. At the time, Singapore was the hub for shipping networks in the Malay world and a key node in the global oceanic routes. Singapore was also home to the regional headquarters of the Ocean Steamship Company of Liverpool.

Between the 1940s and 60s, some of these Malay sailors settled in port cities in England and America, including London, Cardiff and New York. In Liverpool, most of the newly arrived seamen lived in the south docks area of the city, some eventually marrying British women and forming families. Several also opened their homes as lodging for visiting Malay seamen.

The Golden Age of Malay Liverpool

Hailing from Tanjung Keling on the outskirts of Malacca, Mohamed Nor Hamid (Mat Nor) first arrived in Liverpool in 1952 as a crew member on the *Cingalese Prince*. Soon after arrival, he was able to locate

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his uncle, Youp bin Baba (Ben Youp), and his family with the help of other Malay seamen residing in Liverpool.

Youp had married a local English woman and settled down at 144 Upper Huskisson Street.⁴ As it turned out, Youp was away at sea and the guest rooms in his house were occupied by other visiting Malay seamen. Fortunately, Mat Nor was able to find accommodation just next door at No. 142, in the home of fellow Malaccan, Nemit Bin Ayem from Purukalam Tigi, and his English wife Bridgit.

It is not difficult to understand why Malay seamen decided to use Liverpool as their home port in the two decades after World War II. Malays already working on the docks generally looked out for new arrivals from their homeland. Even those who slipped through this net and ended up at the Seamen's Mission in Canning Place were often directed to 144 Upper Huskisson Street and other houses like it.

There was no shortage of seafaring work during this time. Historian Jon Murden describes the period as a postwar economic "golden age" during which worldwide demand for Britain's manufactured goods soared and Liverpool's port and merchant marine served the rapidly expanding trade.⁵ This meant that there was a regular inflow and through-flow of seafarers from British Malaya.

Mat Nor reminisces about his life in Liverpool:

"We forget about all the life in Singapore, you know. That's why most of the Malays stay here because it's

a happy life in Liverpool, very happy, very easy to get a job. Any time you want a ship you can get. They send the telegram to the house you see... sometimes three or four telegram come in a day."⁶

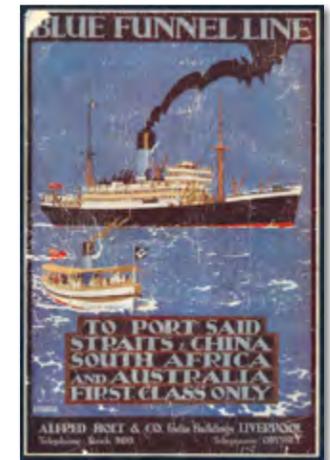
The telegrams invited men to the "pool" where they were able to apply for jobs on board ships, subject to passing a medical examination. Given the high demand for seafaring labour, even Malay men who were not British subjects experienced little difficulty in securing work.⁷

A Malay Club on St James Road

Mat Nor recounted his arrival in Liverpool in 1952: "[F]irst time when I came here, we got no place; Malay people got no place."⁸ What he meant was that there was no specifically "Malay place" at which he and his friends could comfortably socialise.

All this changed when the former seafarer Johan Awang, who had moved to Liverpool from New York City after World War II, opened a club for Malay seamen on St James Road in the mid-1950s.⁹ The Malay Club, as it came to be known, occupied the first floor of a house facing Liverpool's Anglican Cathedral. By that time, Johan Awang's own home on 37 Greenland Street – a short walk from St James Road – was already well known to visiting as well as Liverpool-based Malay seamen.

The Malay Club had bunk beds for visiting seamen, a big backyard and a games room with a dartboard. There was also a prayer room on the second floor.



An advertisement by the Blue Funnel Line promoting its sailings to Port Said, China, the Straits, South Africa and Australia. Between the 1940s and 60s, many Malay men from Southeast Asia worked as seafarers on board vessels owned by the line. Image reproduced from back cover of *The Annual of the East* (1930). London: Alabaster, Passmore & Sons. (Accession no.: B02921323K; Microfilm no.: NL25739).

Food was central to memories of the club and, more broadly, of Malay Liverpool during that period – the very mention of spicy Malay fare cooked for special occasions and gatherings would transport people whom I interviewed back to the St James Road club of the 1950s.

At weekends, seamen took their children and wives to visit what was otherwise largely an adult male space. But the club became more than just a place for the Malay diaspora to meet: it was a place where seafarers, ex-seafarers and, to a lesser extent, their family members could be comfortable within their own skins.

(Facing page) An illustration depicting the port of Liverpool during its heyday in the 1950s. Image reproduced from flickr.

(Below) Mohamed Nor Hamid (Mat Nor), who was born in Tanjung Keling, Malacca, arrived in Liverpool on the *Cingalese Prince* in 1952. He married an Englishwoman in 1959 and later took on a shore job as a crane driver on the docks. Mat Nor became the president of Liverpool's Malay Club in the early 1990s, and oversaw its registration as the Merseyside Malaysian and Singapore Community Association. Courtesy of Mohamed Nor Hamid.

(Below right) Mohamed Nor Hamid (Mat Nor) on the far left, on board the *Cingalese Prince* in 1952 with some of his shipmates. Courtesy of Mohamed Nor Hamid.



Relocation to No. 7 Jermyn Street

In the 1960s, with the streets southwest of the Anglican Cathedral marked out for post-war redevelopment, a group of Liverpool-based Malay seamen pooled their resources to buy a house at 7 Jermyn Street, just off bustling Granby Street, in what is today known as the Liverpool 8 area of the city.

Surviving records reveal that an agreement was signed on 4 June 1963 to purchase the building from a Marjorie Josephine Steele for £1,500. A supplementary trust deed signed in 1974 names Abdul Salem and Bahazin Bin-Kassim¹⁰ as the trustees of the property.

Bahazin, who was born in Perak, Malaya, in 1924, became the first president of the club at its new location, and also assumed the all-important role of cook. As had been the case at St James Road, the clubhouse on Jermyn Street included a prayer room. However, Bahazin is remembered as having been less strict than Johan Awang with regard to the activities that could take place in the club.

Food was available during the fasting month of Ramadan, for example, and Bahazin would say that it was “between you and God” whether it was eaten or not. Bahazin bought the house next to the club – No. 5 – and lived there with his English wife. With Malay lodgers staying at both numbers 5 and 7, Jermyn Street became a place in Liverpool where it was always possible to find Malay banter and spicy food.

Overall, this was a happy and optimistic time for the Malay community in Liverpool. The city had become the “capital of the Malay Atlantic”¹¹ and, in some ways, for many Liver-

poolians, it felt like the centre of the world. In addition to ambitious municipal plans announced in the 1960s for a hypermodern Liverpool of the 21st century, exciting things were happening in its music scene – this was the birthplace of the wildly popular Beatles – and in the city’s football stadiums.¹² The mid-1960s also saw an all-time record tonnage of cargo passing through the port. Jobs were still relatively easy to come by, at sea and onshore, including on the docks where Mat Nor worked.

A Place for Malays

The Malay Club – first at St James Road and then at Jermyn Street – played a significant role in making Liverpool a home away from home for seamen from the *alam Melayu* who had made the city their seafaring base. Through the Malay Club, visiting seamen were able to plug into the social networks of Liverpool’s small Malay community, which likely never exceeded more than a hundred. The club became the focal point for Malay seafaring visitors, seamen who based themselves in Liverpool, and men who had taken local “shore jobs”.

By the time the club moved to Jermyn Street in 1963, the ex-seamen who met and socialised there also included retired “elder statesmen” such as Ben Youp. Youp later moved into Bahazin’s house next door at 5 Jermyn Street and was a regular at the club in the early 1970s.

The children of Malay ex-seamen – who were born in England and never set foot in Southeast Asia – heard stories about what life was like on the other side of the world from interacting with their

fathers’ friends at the club. With these social connections came gifts, gossip and news from home. Interestingly, one of the seamen kept a pet parrot at the club that had been taught to say Malay words such as *makan* (“eat”) as well as several rude words in English and Malay.

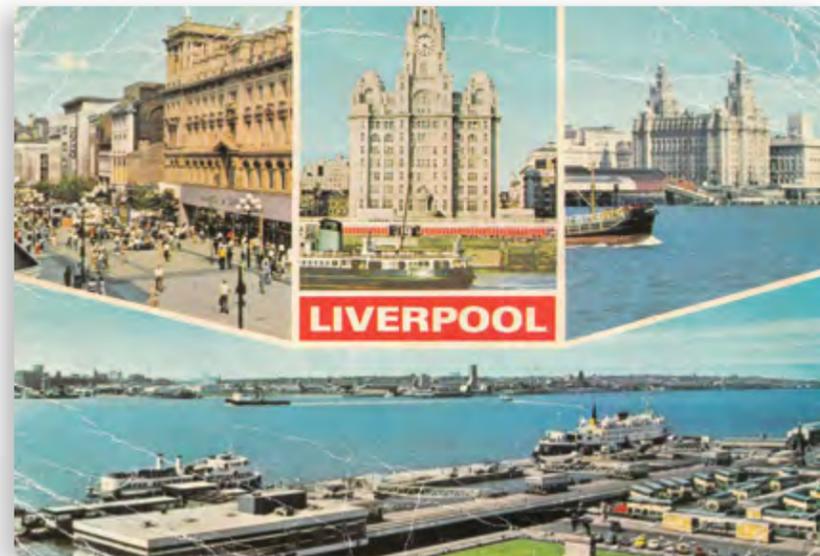
The End of an Era

By the 1960s, the Malay community had established its footing in Liverpool. However, the city’s commercial place in the world economy was undergoing profound change. Although few people realised it then, the Malay Club’s move from St James Road to Jermyn Street in 1963 was made during a time when the postwar golden age of British shipping had already passed.

It is unlikely that the club run by Bahazin on Jermyn Street received as many visiting seamen compared with the earlier location on St James Road – the 1950s, after all, had been a decade of shipping prosperity. Fewer ships arrived in Liverpool in the subsequent decades, bringing fewer new Malay seafarers to sustain the community that had come to call the city home.

In contrast, the number of Malaysian students arriving in Liverpool began to increase. In the 1970s, as part of the aggressive economic development plans pushed by the Malaysian government, hundreds of young Malays were sent to Britain to study. Liverpool was one of the cities that received undergraduate scholarship students, although it never saw the same numbers of Malay (and other Malaysian) students as it had visiting Malay seamen in the previous decades. Even so, the arrival of these students gave the Malay Club a new lease of life.

Abdul Rahim Daud was one of only two Malay students from Malaysia who began studies at Liverpool University in



(Above) Malay seafarers in Liverpool sent postcards “home” to villages, towns and cities in Southeast Asia. This is one such postcard sent by Carrim Haji Quigus Rahim on 28 January 1989. Carrim was the man from whom Abdul Rahim Daud had rented a room in the early 1970s. The latter began his studies at Liverpool University in 1970 and was a frequent visitor to the Malay Club at 7 Jermyn Street as a student. *Courtesy of Naegroho Andy Handajo.*

(Right) The section of Jermyn Street that includes the Malay Club at No. 7. Photo taken in December 2003. *Courtesy of Tim Bunnell.*

1970. He recalls that by his final year, the numbers were much greater, but also that he enjoyed visiting ex-seafarers at 7 Jermyn Street:

“Last time there’s no internet, phone also, no mobile so say like as if total bye-bye to your parents, to your *kampung* [home village]. So you feel like homesick so that’s why I used to go very often to the Malay Club so at least see them, meet them, at least I feel reduced homesick a little bit.”¹³

By this time, Liverpool was no longer the thriving city and maritime port it once had been. Granby Street, near the Malay Club’s second home in the Liverpool 8 district, had been a busy commercial thoroughfare in the 1960s. In the following decade, however, the area became synonymous with “inner-city” social and economic problems arising in part from Liverpool’s diminished position in the national and international arena. Media coverage of the infamous street disturbances in Liverpool in the 1980s marked the city on national mental maps as the “new Harlem of Liverpool”, and it came to be seen as the epitome of British post-imperial and post-industrial urban decline.

Opportunities for dock work, particularly, were badly affected, with total employment in 1979 being less than half of what it was in 1967. In 1979, it was reported that five or six out of every 10 Malay men in the city were unemployed and receiving social security payments.¹⁴ Retrenched from Gladstone Dock in 1978, Mat Nor used some of the redundancy money to

pay for a return trip to Malaysia with his Liverpool-born family.

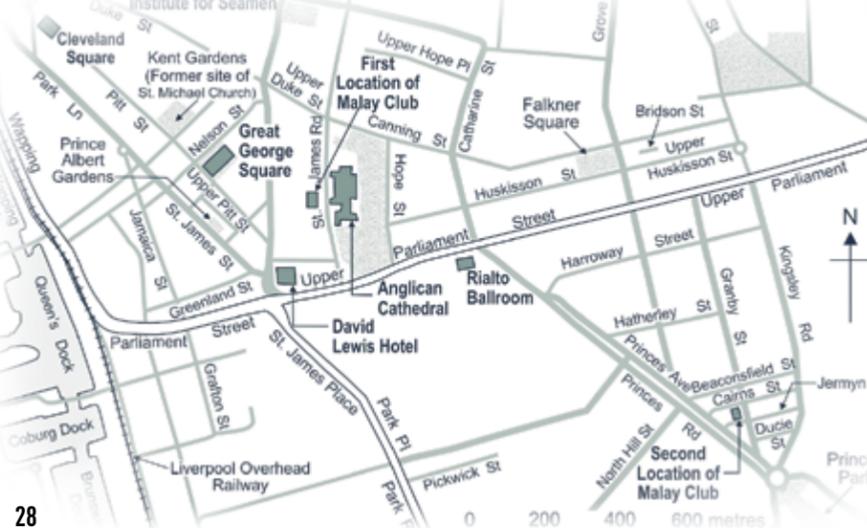
By the late 1980s, the Malay Club had become known as the Malaysia-Singapore Association. In the early 1990s, the club – with Mat Nor as its president – was officially registered as the Merseyside Malaysian and Singapore Community Association (MSA).

When I first visited in December 2003, the Malay Club was one of only two buildings in the section of Jermyn Street between Princes Road and Granby Street that had not been abandoned. By 2008, 7 Jermyn Street had ceased to function as a club, and was boarded up following a series of break-ins. The building had deteriorated to a state that fitted in with the more general dereliction affecting Jermyn and its surrounding streets. On the last occasion I visited, in August 2016, even the MSA signboard had been removed. The last piece of visible evidence of the one-time place of Malay Liverpool had been erased forever. ♦

This essay contains extracts from the book *From World City to the World in One City: Liverpool Through Malay Lives* (2016) by Tim Bunnell. Published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd, it retails at major bookshops, and is also available for reference and loan at the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library and selected public libraries (Call nos.: RSING 305.89928042753 BUN and SING 305.89928042753 BUN).

(Below) Map showing the location of the two sites – St James Road and Jermyn Street – of the Malay Club, c.1960. Produced by Lee Li Kheng. *Courtesy of Tim Bunnell.*

(Right) Bahazin Bin-Kassim was born in Kuala Kangsar, Perak, in 1924. He became the first president of the Malay Club at its No. 7 Jermyn Street location and also assumed the role of cook. He lived next door at No. 5 with his English wife. Bahazin died in the 1980s but his family home continued to provide lodging for Liverpool-based and visiting Malay men. Photo was taken in the early 1970s. *Courtesy of Abdul Rahim Daud.*



Notes

- 1 Sykes, O., et al. (2013). A city profile of Liverpool. *Cities*, 35, 299–318. Retrieved from ResearchGate.
- 2 National Museums Liverpool. (2018). *The port of Liverpool*. Information Sheet 34, Maritime Archives & Library. Retrieved from National Museums Liverpool website.
- 3 Bunnell, T. (2007). Post-maritime transnationalization: Malay seafarers in Liverpool. *Global Networks*, 7(4), 412–429. Retrieved from ScholarBank@NUS.
- 4 The area around what was once Upper Huskisson Street is today Liverpool Women’s Hospital. The electoral register for 1950 includes Ben Youp and his wife, Priscilla, living at 144 Upper Huskisson Street, as well as three other Malay men.
- 5 Murden, J. (2006). City of change and challenge: Liverpool since 1945 (pp. 393–485). In J. Belchem (Ed.), *Liverpool 800: Culture, character and history* (p. 402). Liverpool: Liverpool University Press. Not available in NLB holdings.
- 6 Interview with Mohamed Nor Hamid, Liverpool, 10 September 2004.
- 7 This rosy scenario contrasts sharply with the experiences of seamen in the pre-war period. Given inferior rates of pay for seamen signing on overseas, foreign seamen settled in Britain “in the hope of obtaining better pay and conditions”. [See May, R., & Cohen, R. (1974). The interaction between race and colonialism: A case study of the Liverpool race riots of 1919. *Race and Class*, 16(2), 111–26, p. 118.] However, a racially hierarchical labour market, both at sea and on land, left “coloured” people extremely vulnerable during economic downturns.
- 8 Interview with Mohamed Nor Hamid, Liverpool, 6 October 2004.
- 9 From its inception, the club articulated social connections with other Atlantic maritime centres – particularly New York, which had a Malay Club of its own from 1954 – and with British colonial territories, especially in the Malay world.
- 10 Bahazin first appears in the Registry of Shipping and Seamen as “Bahazim bin Said”, but changed his name by deed poll in 1963. BT 372/1578/1.
- 11 Bunnell, T. (2016). *From world city to the world in one city: Liverpool through Malay lives*. Chichester, West Sussex, UK; Malden, MA, USA: John Wiley & Sons Ltd. (Call no.: RSING 305.89928042753 BUN)
- 12 In terms of music, it was not only the Beatles but also the wider Merseybeat phenomenon that made Liverpool “a source of wonder to the world”. [See Du Noyer, P. (2007). *Liverpool: Wondrous place, from the cavern to the capital of culture* (p. 84). London: Virgin Books. Not available in NLB holdings]. In football, during the 1960s, Bill Shankly managed the Liverpool Football Club to unprecedented success.
- 13 Interview with Abdul Rahim Daud, Kuala Lumpur, 6 November 2008.
- 14 A. Ghani Nasir. (1979, October 21). Kampung Melayu di Bandar Liverpool [The Malay village in the city of Liverpool]. *Berita Harian*, p. 3. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.



Going Shopping

IN THE 60s

What was the act of shopping like for a generation that was more concerned about putting food on the table?

Yu-Mei Balasingamchow ponders over our penchant for shopping.

Ask anyone who lived in 1960s Singapore where they used to shop in town, and they will invariably give one of two answers: Raffles Place, or High Street and North Bridge Road.

The shoppers from this generation, however, were vastly different from the throngs who congregate at Orchard Road

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or hang out in shopping malls today, many without the slightest intention of buying anything. Until 40 or 50 years ago, most Singaporeans did not have the disposable incomes nor the leisure time to “go shopping” whenever they liked. The oral history collections at the National Archives of Singapore contain numerous accounts of people mentioning Raffles Place or High Street as a shopper’s paradise, only to declare in the same breath that they did not have the money to patronise any of these “high-class” shops.

Why, then, did people identify these places so readily? One reason was the yearning for a better life at a time when many were struggling to make ends meet, and the political and economic situation was uncertain. Eventually, by and large, the majority of the population *did* fare better in subsequent decades as the economy prospered; people found that after paying for necessities, they had money left over to treat themselves to some of the finer things in life. Now they could afford to shop at places they had previously only dreamt about, thus fulfilling their long-cherished desires and aspirations, and advancing a step higher on the social ladder.¹

Over the years, Singapore has become more and more of a consumerist society: the act of consumption – browsing, comparing and buying – as well as the goods and services that one buys don’t just satisfy basic needs, but also convey style, prestige and social power.² Today, going shopping for “fun” – getting a kick out of buying things, or enjoying the act of “going shopping” without the slightest urge to purchase anything – has become an acceptable pastime.

Looking back at the 1950s and 60s, it is not surprising that people think of Singapore’s shopping areas as culturally important, even though they did not “hang out” there as people do these days in Orchard Road, or they might acknowledge how small and unsophisticated these shops were compared with today’s swanky air-conditioned malls.³

This cultural shift is something to bear in mind as we take a closer look at these old shopping hubs. As focal points of cultural importance, what were they like, how are they remembered and what did they represent to people in the past (and perhaps, in the present as well)?

Raffles Place: For Western-Style Glamour

No one thinks of Raffles Place as a shopping destination these days, but it was once home to the grand dames of Singapore’s department stores: John Little & Co., established in 1845 (originally Little, Cursetjee & Co.) and Robinson & Co., established in 1858.⁴ Both originated as general stores that imported goods catering to European tastes, and chose Raffles Place for good reason – to be close to the prosperous European and Asian businesses and people with purchasing power.

By the 1950s, both department stores had become landmark shopping icons facing each other across Raffles Place, while a third establishment, Whiteaway, Laidlaw & Co., was just up the road beside Fullerton Square.⁵ Whiteaways – as it was commonly referred to – was the branch of a department store chain founded by two Scotsmen in Calcutta in 1882 and had been operating in Singapore since 1900.⁶

These three incumbents were, as one Joseph Chopard recalls:

“...the only three European companies selling all the English goods, like everything under the sun: shoes, hats, all imported from England. John Little’s, Robinson’s and Whiteaway’s – all three within that area. There were [sic] no other place selling anything of that sort in Singapore.”⁷

It is worth remembering that department stores were a relatively new genre of merchandising then, not just in Singapore but around the world. Following the advent of industrialised mass production in the West, department stores appeared in the 19th century in cities such as London, Paris, New York and Chicago, targeting middle- and upper-class female shoppers with a cornucopia of clothing and consumer goods, all attractively displayed in a comfortable and appealing setting to entice shoppers.⁸

In Singapore, these stores were “where all the rich and famous flocked” for the latest imported fashions, furniture, household items, groceries and tailoring

(Facing page) Shopping in 1960s Singapore was an entirely different experience. Most of the shops then were standalone outlets compared with the glitzy air-conditioned malls found all over the island today, 1969. *George W. Porter Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

(Right) Robinson’s touting itself as the place “for all your shopping needs” and “just what the tourist requires” with its 38 departments, a restaurant, and hairdressing salons for men and women. *Image reproduced from Miller, H. (1956). The Traveller’s Guide to Singapore (p. 10). Singapore: D. Moore. (Call no.: RCL05 915.951 MIL).*

services.⁹ The department store model was subsequently adopted by Asian entrepreneurs. Around 1935, Gian Singh & Co. was set up at Battery Road by five immigrant brothers from Punjab, India.¹⁰ The store later moved to a prominent location in Raffles Place opposite Robinson’s, next to which two of the brothers opened Bajaj Textiles.¹¹

Both stores are often mentioned by name by oral history interviewees who used to work or live in the area. Victor Chew, whose office was near Raffles Place in the late 1950s and 60s, remembers that Gian Singh started out with sports goods before including textiles, leather goods and carpets too.¹²

To Richard Tan, who grew up in the 1960s: “Robinson’s has always been *the* store of all stores. ... I still remember my first Monopoly set... it was like gold to get it, to buy it from Robinson’s.”¹³ On the other hand, Hugh Jamieson, who worked near Raffles Place in the late 1940s and 50s, recalls: “Robinson’s was regarded as the most reasonable, the cheapest of the lot. And of course they always had their annual sale.”¹⁴

Indeed, the annual Robinson’s sale is mentioned regularly by oral history interviewees because those were the only times they could afford to shop there. Kathleen Wang and her husband, for example, remember that the Robinson’s sale “is really a sale, cut the price more or less to about fifty percent”.¹⁵





John Little department store at Raffles Place, 1930. Its facade inspired the design of Raffles Place MRT station's entrances. *Lim Kheng Chye Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

On the morning of the sale, long queues of people would snake outside the store, eagerly waiting for it to open. *The Singapore Standard* and other newspapers would publish photographs of huge crowds at the annual sales events of Robinson's, John Little and Gian Singh.

Ultimately, Robinson's outlived its competitors at Raffles Place, even acquiring John Little in 1955. In 1960, the latter vacated its premises in the business district to open branches in other parts of Singapore (although the building remained until 1973 and its striking architectural façade inspired the design of the Raffles Place MRT station entrances).¹⁶

Whiteaways closed in 1962 due to "the approaching termination of lease and unsatisfactory trading results." Similarly, Gian Singh folded the following year, not because of competition, but due to a protracted workers' strike. Robinson's alone thrived as a bastion of shopping at Raffles Place until 1972, when a massive fire – one of the worst in Singapore's history – gutted the store.¹⁷ Robinson's subsequently relocated to Orchard Road, and Raffles Place has been bereft of big-name department stores ever since.

Perhaps one reason why these department stores loom large in memory is that, over many decades, they became a recognisable presence at Raffles Place in terms of their architecture and cultural impact and, eventually, as a symbol of achievement and success – if one acquired the means to purchase the goods and services offered by these stores.

As Singapore's commercial and financial sectors developed after World War II, more and more Asians worked in Raffles Place, and the area gradually lost

some of its European patina. During lunch breaks, office workers would pass their time window shopping in the department stores, which although still expensive, were less forbidding than they had been to ordinary Singaporeans of an earlier generation.¹⁸

Tan Pin Ho recalls that even though the majority of Robinson's customers in the 1960s were Europeans, its staff did not openly discriminate against Asian customers. Victor Chew, however, felt that the stores were "for the European crowd only" and did not make Asian or local customers feel welcome.¹⁹

Change Alley: An Extraordinary Place

The only shopping icon in Raffles Place that rivals its department stores in terms of cultural memory was Change Alley. It was probably the most affordable (and popular) shopping destination of its time, yet it is remembered by many in less than glowing terms.

Change Alley was a narrow lane then, about 100 metres long and connecting Raffles Place with Collyer Quay, on more or less the same site that the Change Alley shopping arcade occupies today (though the latter is now a covered air-conditioned bridge raised above street level).

The old Change Alley was an important conduit for pedestrian traffic, and hosted a community with its own identity and life. In that respect, it is more vividly remembered than the Arcade (or Alkaff Arcade, as it was also referred to), a few buildings down the road. The latter, an impressive Moorish-style landmark that similarly linked Raffles Place with

Collyer Quay, seems to have made less of an impression as a shopping location.

Change Alley was flanked by shop-houses where people lived and worked, with "tiny one-room shops" on the ground level that sold all manner of goods, as well as makeshift stalls set up under tarpaulin. All were run by Chinese or South Asian shopkeepers.²⁰ A tourist guidebook described the alley in colourful terms in 1962:

"In these narrow passageways you are increasingly hemmed in by merchandise of all sorts; you duck to avoid handbags swinging over your head, you swerve to avoid the salesman who is about to grasp your arm, you nearly trip over the small boy who is selling handkerchiefs at fantastically low prices or umbrellas[,] the price of which fluctuates with the state of the weather!"²¹

Unlike department stores, at Change Alley there were no fixed prices, inventories or currency exchange rates. Everything was up for bargaining. As Victor Chew puts it: "In Change Alley, if you don't bargain you're a fool." Some remember that prices were typically half or less than half the price of similar items being sold at Robinson's. According to Chew, depending on one's bargaining skills, "you could either get a very good bargain or you could be cheated."²²

Price was not the only differential. As Change Alley stalwart, Albert Lelah of Albert Store, points out candidly:

"You go to departmental stores, what do you get?... The price is marked down there and you pay him and you walk. But here [at Change Alley] we can talk, we can laugh, we joke. They call us by names, we call them by names and they're happy."²³

Besides office workers looking for watches, fountain pens, handbags or cheap textiles to make into office wear, there were also people who dropped by "practically every Saturday, just to walk up and down, and maybe pick up something", as Hugh Jamieson remembers. Jon Metes went to the same shop in Change Alley so often to buy shoes for his wife that he "knew exactly the little cubbyhole in the wall"²⁴ where the shop was located and soon became a familiar face to the proprietor.

Depending on who you ask, Change Alley got its name either from the barter traders who gathered there in the late

19th century, or from the itinerant South Asian moneychangers who did business in the alley from at least the 1920s onwards. According to one source, its name was derived from a trading hub in London known as Exchange Alley (also sometimes referred to as Change Alley).²⁵

Andrew Yuen, who grew up in the area in the 1950s and 60s, remembers moneychangers "wearing the *sarong*, or each one of them seemed to be wearing a coat with multiple pockets where they keep all the money. And usually they will flash around some foreign notes just to attract likely customers".²⁶

Change Alley was a prime location for the lively money exchange trade because most travellers then arrived by ship and disembarked at Clifford Pier – just a short hop across Collyer Quay. Whenever a ship was in port, tourists, sailors and military personnel would throng the place to exchange

currency or buy souvenirs, knick-knacks and exotic "Oriental" products.

Between these visitors and local customers, the little lane would often be packed to the rafters, and filled with hustle and bustle. James Koh, who used to help out at his father's shop at Change Alley, recalls: "It's always congested, it's always hot. But that added to the fun, I think, the atmosphere that tourists like."²⁷

It may have been the bargain-friendly tourist trade that made Change Alley less glamorous in the eyes of Singaporeans. Certainly, it was a different world from the air-conditioned, "spick and span and orderly" comfort of Robinson's.²⁸ As Tan Pin Ho describes it: "When you're in Robinson's you're at home, but when you're at Change Alley, you're attending a party. Life is faster, faster, business is more brisk."²⁹

It was not a place for the faint-hearted. Victor Chew remembers that

pickpockets were a perennial problem, while James Koh said that "when you walk along, of course there were all the sellers trying to get your attention, and in some cases they pulled the tourists into the shops". Andrew Yuen was sympathetic to the tourists: "Usually these shopkeepers are sharks. They will fleece them [the buyers] ... unless they also know the art of bargaining, then they get their money's worth."³⁰

The sheer diversity of customers at Change Alley and its reputation as a slightly seedy sort of place may have discomfited some locals. Although Singapore was home to a multiracial and multicultural population, it was by no means as broadly cosmopolitan as it is today. Boey Kim Cheng mulls over this in his poem "Change Alley":

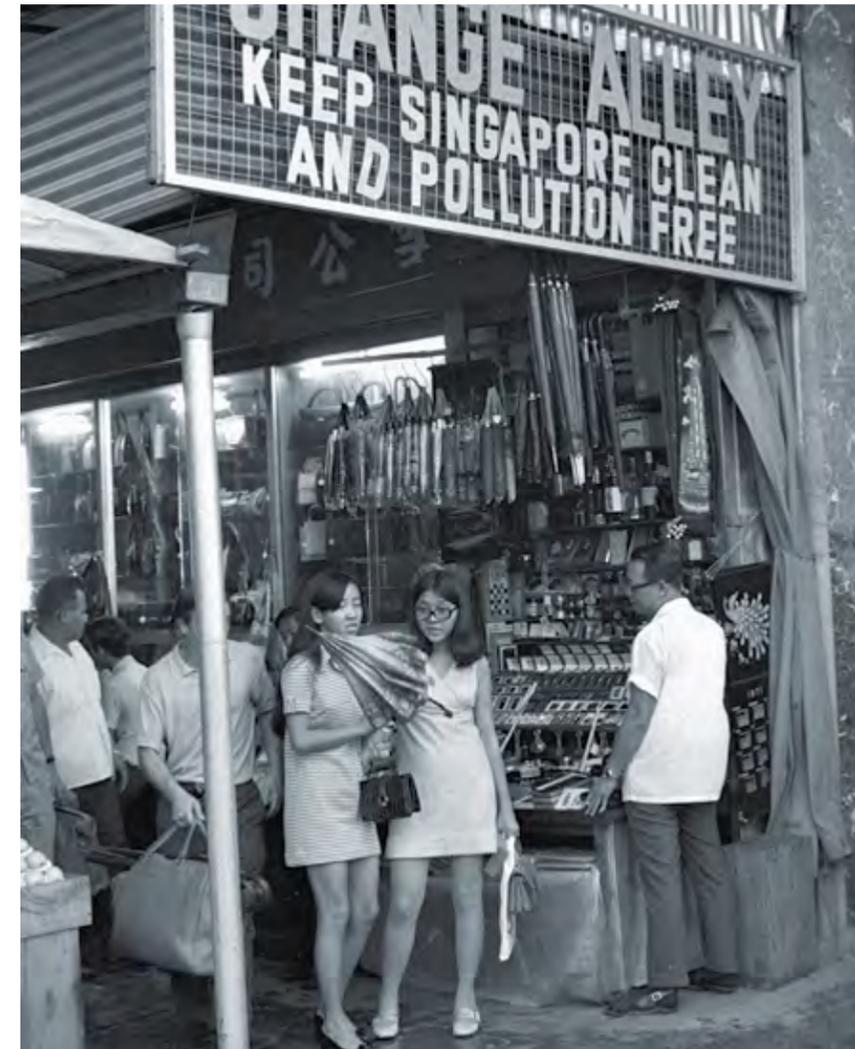
*"... the stalls
spilling over with imitation wares
for the unwary, watches, bags
gadgets and tapes;
in each recess he heard the
conspiracies
of currencies, the marriage of
foreign tongues
holding a key to worlds opening on
worlds ..."*³¹

Those "foreign tongues" would have included French and Russian, among others. Mohamed Faruk, the owner of the Dinky-Di shop, recalls: "We deal with Australians, British, Italians and also Russians. All sorts, and we speak a little bit of every language, just to convince them to buy." To offer a larger diversity of goods in his shop, Faruk would buy items from sailors who passed through Singapore regularly, such as watches, cameras and collectible items, and in turn sell them to his customers. He soon became known as a purveyor of Russian goods.³²

The rough-and-tumble flavour that Change Alley acquired was far removed from the modern and sophisticated air of the department stores at Raffles Place. The alley could be drab and utilitarian at best on a good day, or noisy, stuffy, hot and sodden with rain on a bad one. In an essay on Change Alley, Boey offers readers a specific "scent-memory" of the place: "A musty, fusty, slightly urinous odour, a shade of age and decay fused with a sense of light, sunlight and the salt sea air that permeated the Alley."³³

After Change Alley was razed for urban renewal in 1989, some lamented that there was no place like it in Singapore any more.³⁴ Yet despite its colour and what urban planners would now call a certain

In the 1950s and 60s, Change Alley was a shopping haven for locals and tourists. The narrow street flanked by shops and makeshift kiosks connected Raffles Place with Collyer Quay. Photographed in 1970. Source: *The Straits Times* © Singapore Press Holdings Limited. Reprinted with permission.



“vibrancy” – or rather, precisely because of it – Change Alley was not the sort of place that an upwardly mobile population would aspire to shop at. Instead, their hopeful gaze would turn to Robinson’s, dreaming of the day they could afford to shop there even if there wasn’t a sale.

Jalan-jalan at High Street and North Bridge Road

Across the Singapore River, a stone’s throw from the stately Supreme Court and the grimy wharves of Boat Quay, was the shopping district of High Street and North Bridge Road. Together with Hill Street, these were the first roads to be built after the British arrived, hosting an array of shops for Singapore’s European and Asian elites during the colonial period.³⁵

By the 1950s and 60s, these streets had become well known for shops and businesses owned by the South Asian community. Entrepreneurial Sindhis, Sinhalese, Gujaratis, Tamil Muslims and Sikhs established shops such as Wassiamull Assomull & Co. (established 1873; likely the first Sindhi trader in Singapore), Chotirmall, S.A. Majeed & Co., Khemchand and Sons, Pamanand Brothers, Modern Silk Store, Taj Mahal and Bajaj Textiles, which relocated here from Raffles Place.³⁶

Girishchandra Kothari recalls there being “50 to 60 shops all catering to textiles, retail plus wholesale, and about 500 other textile wholesalers at the time in High Street alone, all Indians”.³⁷ While these numbers are likely exaggerated, it nevertheless suggests that the area was already morphing into what we would today call a “shopping destination”.³⁸

This was a time before ready-to-wear, off-the-rack fashion became afford-

able for the masses. Instead, most families bought fabric by the yard to tailor-make their clothes at home, or engage the services of a professional tailor.

This was also the time when Singaporeans were becoming more exposed to Western popular culture, thanks to film and television, rock and roll music on the radio, and local fashion magazines such as *Fashion*, *Fashion Mirror* and *Her World*.³⁹ With the music of Elvis Presley, the Supremes, and Cliff Richard and the Shadows came magazines and photographs showcasing their hair and fashion styles.

By the mid-1960s, the world had been introduced to Mary Quant’s miniskirt, among other fashion trends. In Singapore, Chinese-language magazines, *Lucky Fashion Magazine* and *Shee Zee Fashion*, carried dress patterns so that budding fashionistas could sew their own miniskirts.⁴⁰

High Street became the first port of call for people looking for all kinds of textiles, from durable cloth for everyday wear to the latest, flashiest fabrics to be sewn into trendy designs. Women were typically saddled with the responsibility of sewing or at least getting clothing tailored for their families. Many Singaporeans who were children in the 1960s – including at least three who became fashion designers – remember accompanying their mothers on these shopping expeditions.⁴¹

Stella Kon describes a typical shopping trip: “If I’m looking to buy some dress material, I start from the lower end of High Street and I walk up High Street and turn along North Bridge Road, shopping all

Shopfronts of Metro and Wassiamull’s at High Street, another popular shopping hub from yesteryear, 1964. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*



Bajaj Textiles – which relocated from Raffles Place to High Street – advertising its latest textiles. Image reproduced from *The Singapore Free Press*, 28 April 1956, p. 2.

the way.” Even Puan Noor Aishah, wife of Singapore’s first president, Yusof Ishak, frequented shops at High Street for fine silks and satins to make into outfits.⁴²

High Street also boasted of department stores to rival those at Raffles Place. Two had been around since the 1930s: Aurora, established by Tan Hoan Kie as the Singapore branch of a chain from Java and a landmark at the corner of High Street and North Bridge Road; and Peking, started by Kuo Fung Ting who was born

FANCY FOOD: CAFÉS & MILK BARS

For those who could afford it, shopping trips in the 1960s were often punctuated by pit stops at one of the fashionable Western-style cafés in town. The sentimental favourites that come up time and time again in oral history interviews are Polar Café at 51 High Street and Magnolia Milk Bar at Capitol Theatre.

Of the two, Polar Café was more established, having opened in 1925. By the 1960s, it was a favourite haunt of not only the lawyers and members of parliament who worked in the area, but also young people studying at nearby schools such as Raffles Institution.¹ The café’s signature curry puffs became a much coveted treat for anyone in the area (including at least one member of Singapore’s first Cabinet), while its egg tarts, cakes and ice cream were also hugely popular.²

Magnolia Milk Bar, which opened almost immediately after World War II, was owned by local supermarket chain Cold Storage. Magnolia was Cold Storage’s house brand ice cream and manufactured locally from the 1930s. Magnolia Milk Bar served all kinds of ice cream concoctions and milkshakes as well as Western fare such as sandwiches, hot dogs and hamburgers.³

Cold Storage eventually ran several milk bars in Singapore (including one adjoining its supermarket in Orchard Road), but it was the air-conditioned outlet at Capitol that, by virtue of its location, won the hearts of many of Singapore’s baby boomers.⁴

As one Raffles Institution boy recalls, Magnolia Snack Bar occupied an iconic place in certain rituals of dating: teenagers often went out in groups for picnics or dances, after which a couple who fancied each other would move on to one-on-one dates at Capitol and Magnolia. Another former customer aptly sums it up: “If I brought a girl there, it meant that she was really special.”⁵

Magnolia was also where teachers treated their students to ice cream and friends met to celebrate over their Cambridge examination results. It became a place where an entire generation of Singaporeans picked up Western tastes and etiquette, right down to the proper use of cutlery. It wasn’t cheap though: in the 1960s, a full meal at Magnolia cost \$5, compared to a bowl of noodles from a street hawker for 50 cents.⁶

Over at Raffles Place, there was Honey Land Milk Bar, a casual snack bar

at the corner of Raffles Place and Battery Road. Run by a Mr Tan, it sold ice cream, cream puffs, curry puffs and soft drinks. Victor Chew remembers that it was the only “soda fountain shop” or “ice cream parlour” in the area that sold deliciously frothy milkshakes. Although it was a small place and only had high stools for customers, it “did a roaring business”.⁷

The really swanky eatery at Raffles Place was G.H. Café, a pre-war institution on Battery Road that was actually a bona fide restaurant with “white tablecloths and proper cutlery”. The origins of its name are speculative: some accounts say it began as the G.H. (Grand Hotel) Sweet Shop, another claimed it was named after a woman, Gertrude How, who used to run it. Whatever the case, G.H. Café was the lunchtime haunt of lawyers, shippers, traders and civil servants.⁸ Such was the café’s draw that it was even memorialised in Singaporean author and poet Goh Poh Seng’s first novel, *If We Dream Too Long* (1972):

“The restaurant was air-conditioned, had plush upholstered chairs, white tablecloths, occasionally stained, and a fat Indian woman at the piano, singing old Broadway hits. Cole Porter, Oscar Hammerstein and Richard Rodgers ghosted the large, comfortably darkened dining room, while young business executives and lawyers and doctors ate from plates with knife and fork and spoon.”⁹

Notes

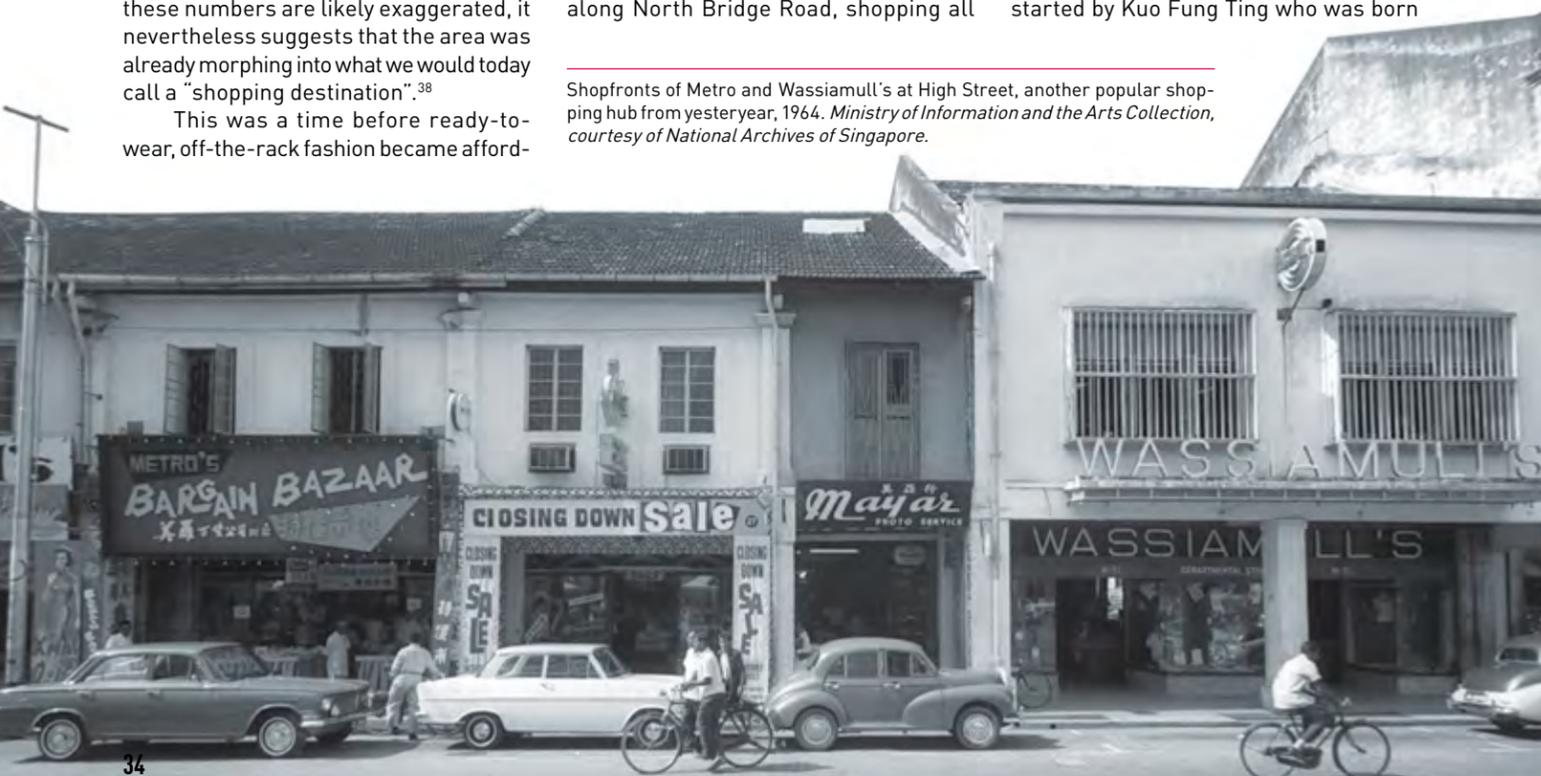
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- 6 Tan, A.B. (2006, August 9). Good ol’ sundaes. *The Straits Times*, p. 2; Lee, P. (1986, August 9). People. *The Straits Times*, p. 54. Retrieved from NewspaperSG; *Today*, 17 Aug 2002, p. 6.
- 7 *Oral history interview with Victor Chew Chin Aik*, 3 Nov 1997; See also Lee, P. (Interviewer). (1997, October 23). *Oral history interview with Yuen Andrew Kum Hong* [Cassette recording no. 001962/06/04]; Lee, P. (Interviewer). (1997, November 3). *Oral history interview with Hugh William Jamieson* [Cassette recording no. 001968/02/01]. Retrieved from National Archives of Singapore website.
- 8 *Oral history interview with Hugh William Jamieson*, 3 Nov 1997; Savage, V.R., & Yeoh, B.S.A. (2013). *Singapore street names: A study of toponymics* (p. 31). Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Editions. (Call no.: RSING 915.9570014 SAV-[TRA]); Lim, H.S. (Interviewer). (1981, July 2). *Oral history interview with Rajabali Jumabhoy* [Transcript of cassette recording no. 000074/37/05, p. 37]; Lee, P. (Interviewer). (2002, May 21). *Oral history interview with Jon Metes* [Cassette recording no. 002657/15/13]. Retrieved from National Archives of Singapore website; Lim, C.Y., & Tan, C.L. (2017). *Lim Chong Yah: An autobiography: Life journey of a Singaporean professor* (p. 68). Singapore: WS Professional. (Call no.: RSING 330.092 LIM)
- 9 Goh, P.S. (1972). *If we dream too long* (p. 33). Singapore: Island Press. (Call no.: RSING 828.99 GOH)

for the creamiest of ICE CREAM;
the most delicious MILK SHAKES
visit Singapore’s smartest

MILK BAR



An advertisement for one of several Magnolia Milk Bar outlets operated by Cold Storage back in 1938. Two of its most popular outlets were found in Orchard Road and at Capitol Theatre, at the junction of Stamford and North Bridge roads. Image reproduced from *Come to Malaya and Travel by Train, November 1938* (p. 44). (1938). Singapore: East Indies Pub. [Accession no.: B20025405G; Microfilm no.: NL29343].





in the Chinese capital, hence the name of his shop.⁴³ Kuo decided to convert Peking from a curio shop into a department store in the 1950s when he realised that “after the war, the tendency would be for people to be more fashion-conscious. They would want more of the latest fashions in clothes, and other things synonymous with prosperity”.⁴⁴

In 1957, Aurora and Peking were joined by the first Metro department store at High Street, set up by Ong Tjoe Kim, an immigrant from Xiamen, China, who had worked in department store chains in Java. A movie buff, he named his store after the Hollywood studio Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and invited Hong Kong actress Li Mei to officiate at its grand opening.⁴⁵ As one Singapore newspaper recalled in 1984, “the triangle among the three department stores – Aurora, Peking, and Metro – became a big attraction for the shoppers during the late 1950s”.⁴⁶

Unlike the air-conditioned and somewhat sterile modern shopping mall experience that has become the norm in Singapore today, shopping at High Street was quite a different experience: people wandered in and out of individual shophouses, browsing or bargaining, and perhaps eventually buying.

Reminiscing about the area, Stella Kon says: “The picture that flashes in my mind is hot sunshine and dust and shadowy cool shops.”⁴⁷ Besides the fashion boutiques, textile merchants and department stores, there was Ensign Bookstore, the legendary Polar Café, music stores such as TMA and Swee Lee, camera shops such as Ruby Photo and Amateur Photo Store, and Bata, an international shoe store chain of

(Above) Aurora department store at the junction of High Street and North Bridge Road, 1965. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

(Above right) Aurora’s “Seeing is Believing” sale offering textile goods and other “ready made-up goods”. Image reproduced from *The Singapore Free Press*, 25 August 1958, p. 1.

Czech origin at North Bridge Road. Many people remember Bata for selling affordable footwear – especially its trademark white canvas school shoes – to several generations of Singaporeans.⁴⁸

Although the vibe and buzz of High Street appear to be warmly remembered by many, these shops, like the department stores at Raffles Place, were not within the financial reach of most Singaporeans. It is perhaps their aspirational significance that resonates more deeply among people than any specific purchase, as Lee Geok Boi reflects on her family’s visits to High Street: “Most of the time we couldn’t afford anything. But we went there to look anyway.”⁴⁹

Looking and browsing, fingering and figuring out what one could buy for one’s dollar, or what one could afford (or not) were a visceral part of the Raffles Place or High Street shopping experience.

Although these shopping areas may have been a shadow of London’s Carnaby Street – which encapsulated everything that was cool about swinging 1960s fashion – they represented a desirable “Western type of shopping” before the proliferation of shopping complexes in the 1970s and the development of Orchard Road into a shopping street.⁵⁰

Today, in a city where ever more cookie-cutter shopping malls have come to dominate the landscape, with shops that parade a disconcertingly similar array of goods whether in swanky Orchard

Road or suburban Yishun, it is not surprising that many first-generation Singaporeans look back to the time when they first thought of the idea of “going shopping” – and their memories of Raffles Place or High Street gleam all the more brightly. ♦

Notes

- This reflects the “internal narrative” of “progress, about overcoming hardship and ultimate triumph”, discussed by sociologist Teo You Yenn. It is a personal narrative that maps onto the national narrative of economic growth and prosperity; it is not uncomfortable for some to talk about past experiences of poverty “because one knows that one is accepted to have climbed and arrived.” See Teo, Y.Y. (2018). *This is what inequality looks like* (pp. 20–21, 226–227). Singapore: Ethos Books. [Call no.: RSING 305.095957 TEO]
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OUR HOME

Sweet Home



One of the manifold challenges that Singapore faced at the time of self-governance in 1959 was a severe shortage of housing. Some 550,000 people, out of a population of nearly 1.6 million, had to make do with squalid living conditions, crammed into decrepit shophouses and squatter huts in the city centre and its outskirts.

To deal with the problem, the Housing & Development Board (HDB) was formed on 1 February 1960 and tasked with building as many flats as possible. Incredibly, by the end of its first decade, the board had completed over 100,000 units, providing affordable homes fitted with modern conveniences, such as a ready supply of water and electricity as well as sanitation and waste disposal facilities for nearly a third of the population.¹

A nation of flat-dwellers was steadily taking shape, and probably unbeknownst to many at the time, Singapore would become a nation of high-rise homes and its public housing programme would one day be lauded by urban planners the world over. Between 1960 and 1970, the percentage of resident population living in HDB flats increased from 9 to 35 percent,

(Above) Covers of *Our Home* featuring the iconic dragon playground at Toa Payoh Lorong 6 (April 1980) and the unique clover leaf-shaped circular block along Ang Mo Kio Avenue 2 (June 1982). Residents received their free copy of *Our Home* when paying their monthly rent or instalments at the area offices while those who paid by GIRO would get a copy in the mail.

(Left) Children enjoying themselves at a playground in Toa Payoh, 1975. When new HDB housing estates were built, children's playgrounds became essential amenities. Image source: *The Straits Times* © Singapore Press Holdings Limited. Reprinted with permission.

rising further to 67 percent by 1980. The figure has remained above 80 percent since 1985.²

To ease Singaporeans into high-rise living, the HDB started its own magazine in July 1972 as a means of building rapport and staying connected with residents – then a community of 700,000 and counting.³

Our Home not only kept residents updated on HDB policies, initiatives, new amenities and happenings in housing estates, but also functioned as a “viewpaper”⁴ where readers could express their opinions and ideas on various aspects of HDB living as well as hear from the board. Additionally, *Our Home* featured a variety of lifestyle topics such as cooking, health, fashion, interior decoration, sports and culture – in short “something for everyone in the family”.⁵

Starting with 147,000 copies, circulation grew in tandem with the number of new flats completed. By the time the last issue was published in August 1989, *Our Home* had made its way into 440,000 flats island-wide.

Keeping Up With the HDB

The magazine contents kept pace with the objectives of public housing which, over time, had evolved as societal needs changed. While the 1960s was all about quantity, the 70s saw a heavier emphasis on the quality of housing to meet the expectations of a more affluent and better educated populace.⁶

The “neighbourhood principle” continued to guide the planning of new estates and was further refined with the formulation of standards to optimise the size, type and location of ancillary facilities available to residents on their doorstep.⁷ This led to a new prototype town model based on a hierarchy of activity nodes, such as a town centre and neighbourhood centres and, later in the 1980s, precinct centres within the estate.⁸

Among the earliest examples highlighted in *Our Home* was Ang Mo Kio New Town, which comprised six neighbourhoods clustered around a town centre.⁹ Construction commenced in 1973.¹⁰ As the estate’s focal point, the town centre hosted a comprehensive range of amenities, including department stores, supermarkets, eating places, cinemas, a post office and even a public library.¹¹ It became such a shoppers’ paradise that in 1980 one resident likened Ang Mo Kio town centre to a “busy Orchard Road, [albeit] on a smaller scale and without the traffic jams and expensive price tag”.¹²

Next in the hierarchy were neighbourhood centres with more basic facilities, such as markets, hawker centres and shops, all within walking distance of homes.¹³ Apart from being one of the largest new estates of its time, Ang Mo Kio is the first to showcase HDB’s “new generation” flats.¹⁴ Compared with the ones built in the 1960s, these new flats were bigger and had improved features; the 3- and 4-room units, for example,

had a storeroom, an ensuite master bathroom with a pedestal toilet, and bigger kitchens.¹⁵

The new town model was adopted in other estates built at the time, for example, Telok Blangah, Bedok and Clementi, which subsequently facilitated the rapid development of several new towns – Yishun, Hougang, Jurong East and West, Tampines and Bukit Batok – in quick succession from the late 1970s onwards.¹⁶ As neighbourhoods inevitably took on a cookie-cutter appearance, the visual identity of new towns became an important consideration at the planning stage.¹⁷

Attempts to inject character into public housing were showcased in *Our Home*, and its covers – once dominated by images of smiley, happy residents – began to feature design and architecture more prominently from 1979 onwards. The HDB introduced new block designs to create a stronger sense of place; for instance the cover of *Our Home* June 1982 issue showcased the unique 25-storey clover leaf-shaped circular point block at Ang Mo Kio Avenue 2.¹⁸

Articles also described how colours and architectural features lent identity to public housing estates, for example, how apricot-coloured bricks and pitched metal roofs defined the aesthetics of Tampines New Town, and how the colour scheme of roofs demarcated its nine neighbourhoods.¹⁹

Similarly, in Bukit Batok New Town, the repetition of splayed corners at the water-tank level, the ground levels,



Public housing is a Singapore success story, but the early years of high-rise living were sometimes a bittersweet experience. **Janice Loo** pores through the pages of *Our Home* magazine during its 17-year run.

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(Above) In this photo taken in 1970, laundry hung out for drying on bamboo poles was a familiar sight along streets with residential units above shophouses. Before the HDB built high-rise flats, the people lived in cramped and unsanitary conditions in these shophouses. *George W. Porter Collection*, courtesy of *National Archives of Singapore*.



(Above right) An elated family viewing their new HDB flat in the 1960s. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection*, courtesy of *National Archives of Singapore*.

and along common corridors of blocks, enhanced the distinctiveness of the estate.²⁰ HDB experimented with wall murals too; for example, one block in MacPherson sported a majestic rising sun whereas another in Hougang featured the grinning face of a *wayang kulit* (shadow puppet play) puppet.²¹

In addition, older estates were enhanced or redeveloped to ensure living conditions kept up with that of new ones.²² New or upgraded amenities highlighted over the years included sports and swimming complexes, gardens and parks, commercial and shopping centres, markets and food centres, as well as community centres and facilities for social services.²³

Even playgrounds came under the HDB's scrutiny as it began to feature more dynamic elements like suspension bridges and climbing ropes to create a miniature adventureland for children.²⁴ Grown-ups were not forgotten either as new fitness corners were rolled out with structures for sit-ups, push-ups, pull-ups and other exercises.²⁵

Our Home also took pains to explain the behind-the-scenes work of its public officers, such as housing and maintenance inspectors, sales clerical officers, operators from the Essential Maintenance Service Unit and Lift Rescue Unit, cleaners and their supervisors, and even the dreaded parking warden.

From Strangers to Neighbours

However, a house does not make a home, and a pleasant living environment cannot

be achieved by design alone. As high-density public housing could potentially lead to tensions between neighbours, *Our Home* sought to forge a sense of commonality and responsibility among residents as a nation of house-proud flat-dwellers – or “heartlanders”²⁶ as we know them today.²⁷

More than a roof over their heads, the public housing programme fostered a sense of rootedness among Singaporeans by giving them a tangible stake in the country. The late founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew described it thus:

“I wanted a home-owning society. I had seen the contrast between the blocks of low-cost rental flats, badly misused and poorly maintained, and those of house-proud owners, and was convinced that if every family owned its home, the country would be more stable... I believed this sense of ownership was vital for our new society which had no deep roots in a common historical experience.”²⁸

In its inaugural message to readers in July 1972, the magazine echoed Lee's sentiments:

“*Our Home* is about you and others in HDB housing estates. You will get to know how much other people are like you, how other residents live, their problems and how they overcome them and about their achievements... We all live in the same community. It might be Redhill or Toa Payoh or

Queenstown, what matters is that we make that community something to be proud of, a healthy environment for our children.”²⁹

In line with Singapore's first Concept Plan in 1971, residential estates were developed as part of a ring of self-contained new towns around the central water catchment area.³⁰ High-rise flats began replacing *kampongs* (villages) and came to characterise the suburban landscape. *Our Home* charted this period of transition and gave voice to the hopes and frustrations of residents as they adjusted to their new environment.

A perennial complaint was noise. For those used to the relative quiet of rural *kampongs*, the cacophony of high-density estates could be hard to bear, what with screaming and crying children, blaring radio and television sets, not to mention the infernal clacking of mahjong tiles.³¹

One *Our Home* article in 1973 portrayed noise in a more positive light: as an expression of the informal communal life in estates. Writer Sylvia Leow traced the lively rhythm of everyday activities along the common corridor, from the rush of residents heading to school, work and the market, to the boisterous sounds of playing children, and the chorus of itinerant vendors plying wares and services.³²

The calls of the *galah*³³ man and the knife-sharpening vendor might evoke wistfulness for a vanished soundscape, but it was a different situation then as one disgruntled resident of Holland Close wrote:



(Left) View of HDB flats with laundry hanging out of the balconies in MacPherson housing estate in the 1970s. These are some of the first-generation flats built by the HDB in the 1960s. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

(Below) Balloting ceremony for the sale of HDB flats under the “Home Ownership for the People” scheme in Commonwealth Drive in 1965. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*



A fisherman tending to his nets on his *sampan* near the mouth of the Kallang River. In the background are new high-rise HDB flats juxtaposed against squatter huts along the riverbank, 1975–1985. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

“After reading the article... I hate to say that I view the hustle and bustle as noise nuisance. I never knew that common corridors can bring about such headaches and frustrations until I recently moved into my flat. I am extremely distressed by the ‘noisy merriment’ of the corridor. Can you study under such [a] noise-polluted environment? I earnestly pray that those pedlars, children on tricycles, etc will disappear into thin air...”³⁴

Such complaints created opportunities for the HDB to clarify its responsibilities and those of the residents. *Our Home* made it clear that it was the duty of parents to teach their children to play quietly and not cause mischief by urinating in the lifts or tampering with mailboxes.³⁵ Problems like noise, vandalism and littering could only be tackled if residents exercised consideration for the feelings and rights of their neighbours.

The more practical solution in the long term was to instil civic-consciousness. As a tool for public education, *Our Home* instructed residents on the dos and don'ts of HDB living. The topics ranged from the proper disposal of waste and bulky refuse, lift usage and the drying of laundry to playing ball games in common spaces, the keeping of plants and pets, and crime and accident prevention.³⁶

In addition, opinion pieces and letters from readers helped to define and reinforce good neighbourly behaviour. For example, in 1972, Pang Kee Pew of Alexandra estate wrote in to share how he reminded his wife to place a cloth pad under the mortar when pounding chillies – “a daily occurrence in almost every home”³⁷ – to reduce noise. For his part, Pang confessed that he was tempted to sweep the dust through the balcony gap whenever he swept the house and let it be blown into neighbouring flats. But Mrs Pang would step in and make sure that he swept the dust onto a piece of newspaper that was then folded up and disposed in the rubbish chute.

Above all, the goal was to make friends out of neighbours. As relocation disrupted existing social ties, it was not uncommon for former *kampung* dwellers to experience a loss of community.³⁸ There was a tendency towards insularity, partly due to devices that provided endless hours of entertainment and allowed people to plug into the outside world without stepping out of their flats.³⁹ Already in 1973, Leonard Lim of Commonwealth Drive observed:

“... there are others I know who have just shifted in and miss the warmth and friendliness of old neighbours and the rural way of life. These people now isolate themselves in their flats. They don't make an effort to get to know their

neighbours. Instead they rely on radios, stereograms and television to substitute for real-life contacts with neighbours.”⁴⁰

One opinion piece in 1972 defined the ideal type of neighbourly relations in HDB estates as one of warm, amicable and relaxed give-and-take. When neighbours are friends, they willingly “respect each other's right to enjoyment of peace, privacy and quiet [and] work together to build a clean, friendly and harmonious community”,⁴¹ thus reducing estate-management problems in the long-run.⁴²

To encourage residents to know their neighbours better, *Our Home* highlighted artists, sculptors, writers and other interesting personalities living in their midst.⁴³ In addition, from the June 1981 issue onwards, the magazine featured an “RC Corner” to promote the activities of the Residents' Committees (RCs) and voluntary organisations run by and for residents to promote community spirit and neighbourliness in HDB housing estates.

High-rise Paradise

Notwithstanding the complaints, many residents were generally quite happy with HDB living. One of those who expressed her appreciation was “Mei-Mei” from Toa Payoh in 1972. Having grown up in “one of those rambling bungalows

in the countryside”, she was initially apprehensive of the limited space in a flat. However, after two years she had become accustomed to her “62 sq. m. of living room, bedroom and kitchen [which] are more than ample for [her] needs”. Mei-Mei urged readers to look on the bright side:

“On the other side of the coin, be thankful that you only have a small area to furnish. House-owners in private estates inevitably have too much space... To be downright practical, who really needs acres of floors to scrub and mountains of dust to sweep when you can live comfortably in a flat which needs only a flick of the duster to emerge sparklingly clean... We might complain when shops ply a noisy trade downstairs but let’s look at it this way. Which housewife can boast of having her market, her cobbler, her carpenter, her hair-dresser and even her doctor, dentist and banker all within easy walking distance?”⁴⁴

She went on to list more advantages, such as round-the-clock essential maintenance services, the panoramic view from her home on the 11th floor, and the breeze which “makes for comfortable living all year round”. “Mei-Mei” stressed that her views were not unique but “echo the impressions of a growing community

of satisfied flat-dwellers to whom ‘home sweet home’ is a reality”.

But “home sweet home” did not come without effort. Moving into a HDB flat meant increased costs. Besides the mortgage repayments, there were utilities, furnishings, household appliances and other consumer durables to pay for.⁴⁵ Home ownership and the desire for a better quality of life in turn propelled more people into the workforce and the consumer economy, thus creating the start of an industrialised society.⁴⁶

Significantly, women began entering the workforce in greater numbers to supplement the household income, made easier by the plethora of employment opportunities at their doorstep. Another element in the planning of housing estates was the allocation of land for light industrial use, which “has enabled many a housewife and school-leaver to walk to work and to acquire new skills, bringing home additional income for the family”.⁴⁷

Multinational companies that set up production facilities in HDB neighbourhoods included Hitachi, which manufactured television sets along with washing machines at its Bedok factory, and General Electric in Toa Payoh, which produced digital and clock radios.⁴⁸ In 1972, more than half of the employment within HDB estates was generated by the industrial sector, with women making up 72 percent of its workforce.⁴⁹

A feature on young industrial workers in *Our Home* demonstrated how employment strengthened the socio-economic position of women and gave them an avenue for advancement beyond their traditional domestic roles. Readers were introduced to 25-year-old Yen Khuan Thai, who started work as a camera assembly line operator at the Rollei factory in Alexandra in 1971, and went on to do data-processing at the company’s new premises in Chai Chee.

Yen found the work “interesting and challenging”, and did not mind the distance between her home in Queenstown to the factory in the east as there was “ample scope for advancement and further training”. She earned a monthly income of \$300, not a paltry sum given that the average monthly household income of HDB residents was \$469 in those days. Working women thus went a long way in helping their families afford the trappings of the HDB lifestyle.⁵⁰

As the magazine with the largest circulation in Singapore, *Our Home* was an avenue for brands to “penetrate more homes to reach more target consumers”.⁵¹ Advertisements in *Our Home* reflected and shaped the tastes and aspirations of flat-dwellers – the ownership of consumer durables being an indicator of relative affluence and living standards.

Advertisements held out the dream of a perfect home and a new level of



(Above) The Sims welcoming the latest addition to their family – a washing machine from National. The company was well known as a reputable manufacturer of home appliances, particularly rice cookers, which continue to have a place in popular memory for their durability. Image reproduced from *Our Home*, January–February 1975, p. 2.

(Centre) An advertisement showing a family in the living room of their HDB flat with various SONY home entertainment appliances. Television viewing, including video, had become the most popular leisure activity by the 1980s. Image reproduced from *Our Home*, December 1972, back cover.

(Right) Hitachi touting its new washing machine as the “modern HDB washerwoman”. Washing machines became more common in HDB households from the mid-1970s due to their affordability and the difficulty of employing reliable washerwomen. Image reproduced from *Our Home*, October 1975, p. 2.

Notes

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- 2 Singapore. Housing and Development Board. (2017). *Key statistics: Annual report 2016/2017* (p. 9). Retrieved from Housing and Development Board website.
- 3 Singapore. Housing and Development Board. (1971). *Annual report 1971* (p. 22). Retrieved from BookSG; Out: A journal for 140,000 in HDB flats. (1972, June 29). *The Straits Times*, p. 17. Retrieved from NewspaperSG. [Note: The magazine was distributed free-of-charge to all HDB householders, but cost 50 cents a copy to purchase for non-HDB dwellers. The quarterly publication became bi-monthly from January 1973. Although the magazine’s contents were mainly in English and Chinese, certain features such as the editorial and news items would also be published in Malay and Tamil.]
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- 8 Wong & Yeh, 1985, pp. 95–96, 104–105.
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- 10 Singapore. Housing and Development Board. (1974). *Annual report 1973/1974* (p. 45). Retrieved from BookSG.
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Inside a new-generation 4-room HDB flat at Hougang in 1989. The flat had more than ample space for a family of five to live comfortably. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



well-being that could be achieved with consumer technology. Washing machines, rice cookers and vacuum cleaners would make domestic work less taxing and free up time for leisure, whereas television and radio sets enhanced the time spent at home, as these advertisements claimed:

“Make life easier with Sanyo home appliances.... Hundreds of home appliances roll off Sanyo assembly lines daily to help cut household drudgery to a bare minimum, [and] lessen the toil and increase the joy of living.”⁵²

“It’s nice to have a home of your own and fill it with lovely things... such as Sony. Sony makes your flat nice to come home to. There’s Sony television for clear reception anywhere; Sony stereo for listening pleasure and party sounds; Sony clock radio for the time and soothing background music, and a powerful world-wide Sony radio to keep you abreast with the world. All designed for superb entertainment and gracious living.”⁵³

Modern conveniences were essential in transforming the flat into an oasis of rest and relaxation, a home to which people could retire to at the end of the day to savour the fruits of their labour.

Remembering Our Home

Our Home bid farewell to its readers in 1989. That year, town councils were established to take over the management of estates from the HDB, and they started their own newsletters for residents.⁵⁴

The constant remaking of the heartland through redevelopment and upgrading has contributed to the current wave of nostalgia among Singaporeans for old playgrounds, wet markets, provision shops, cinemas and bowling alleys – many of which have either been repurposed or no longer exist.

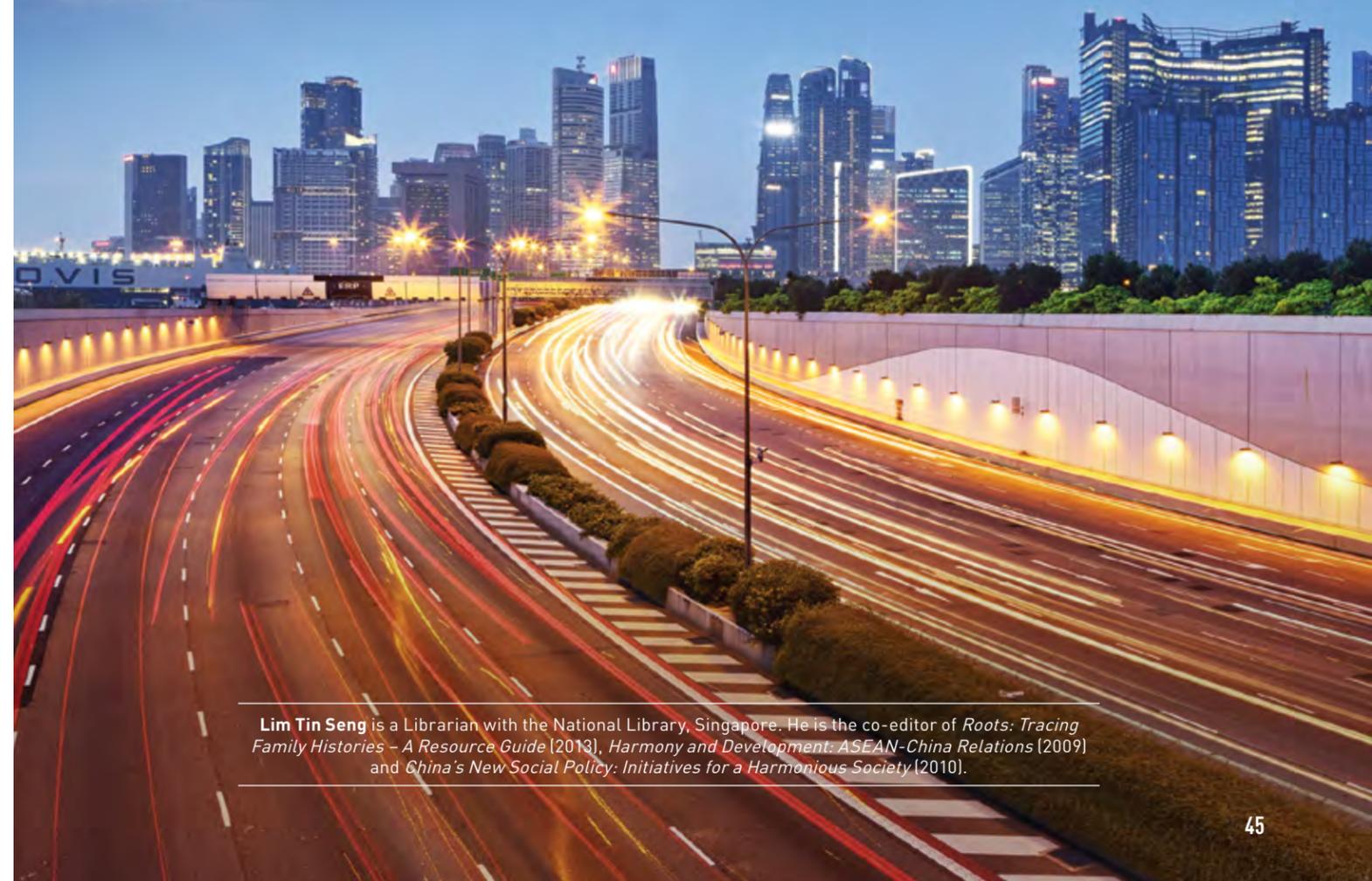
Our Home magazine not only serves as a chronicle of Singapore’s public housing history, but is also a window into the lives of those who grew up in the old estates of the 1970s and 80s – in those pivotal years when a young nation came into its own against all odds. ♦

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THE A YE, B KE AND C TE OF EXPRESSWAYS

Lim Tin Seng charts the history of Singapore’s expressways, from the oldest Pan-Island Expressway, built in the 1960s, to the newest Marina Coastal Expressway.



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(Preceding page) Completed in December 2013, the Marina Coastal Expressway connects the eastern and western parts of Singapore, and provides a high-speed link to the Marina Bay area. *Photo by Richard W.J. Koh.*

(Right) An 1890s image of Hokkien Street. As roads were made of laterite then, clouds of reddish dust would be kicked up into the air whenever bullock carts, horse-drawn carriages and jinrickshaws passed. *Courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.*



AYE, BKE, CTE and ECP... the list goes on. These are not some random letters haphazardly thrown together but acronyms of Singapore's expressways. Since making their appearance in the late 1960s, expressways have helped to ease congestion on arterial roads and ensure the smooth flow of traffic around the island.

The Early Roads

Expressways are dedicated roads that enable motorists to travel uninterrupted at high speeds from one place to another. Also referred to as highways, motorways, freeways or interstates – depending on which country you live – these are usually dual carriageways with multiple lanes in each direction. The world's first expressway, Bronx River Parkway in New York, was built in 1908. By the 1930s, expressways were found in Europe when the initial phases of the Autobahn (Germany) and Autostrade (Italy) were completed.¹

For most part of the 19th century, Singapore was served primarily by roads made of laterite, a reddish soil with a high iron oxide content.² Trams, bullock carts and horse-drawn carriages traversed the streets, kicking up clouds of red dust as they transported goods and people around town and to other parts of the island.

Some of the frequently used roads at the time included Bukit Timah Road and Orchard Road, which linked the fledgling town of Singapore to plantations in the north, Serangoon Road and Geylang Road to plantations in the east, and Tanjong Pagar Road and New Bridge Road to the port in the west. Over time, the expansion of the town followed the grid pattern of these main thoroughfares.³

As motor vehicles became prevalent in the early 20th century, laterite roads were replaced with asphalt-surfaced metalled roads. Paved with hand-packed granite, limestone and bituminous materials, these roads bore the weight of

motorised vehicles and facilitated a much faster and smoother travel experience.⁴

Although metalled roads did not reach rural areas until the 1960s, the ease of motorised travel encouraged people to move to the suburbs, which in turn spurred the expansion of the island's road network. By the end of the 1930s, major roads such as Upper Serangoon Road, Punggol Road, Changi Road, Jurong Road, Sembawang Road and Woodlands Road appeared on maps connecting the town centre to all corners of the island.⁵

Unfortunately, motor vehicles soon became a double-edged sword: in a matter of 10 years, from 1915 to 1925, the number of private registered motor vehicles on the island rose from 842 to 4,456. By 1937, the number had ballooned to 9,382, adding to traffic congestion in the town centre along with rickshaws, bicycles, trishaws and bullock carts.⁶

As traffic rules, which were first introduced in 1911, were inadequate, travelling on congested roads in the town centre became increasingly hazardous. It was common to see drivers – liberated by the lack of road signs and markings – weaving dangerously in and out of heavy traffic with nary a thought to the safety of other road users. The most vulnerable were rickshaw pullers and their passengers as well as pedestrians forced to walk on the streets because of the clutter blocking the "five-foot ways" (as pavements were called back then).⁷

The government tried to bring some order by launching the island's first public

road safety programme in 1947, and installing the first automatic traffic signals at the junction of Serangoon and Bukit Timah roads a year later. In 1950, a 30-mile-per-hour speed limit was imposed on all roads, and in 1952, the first zebra crossings were introduced in Collyer Quay.⁸

These improvements, however, were insufficient to improve traffic conditions, especially when the number of motor vehicles continued to grow, reaching nearly 58,000 in 1955.⁹ It was clear that a more concerted approach was needed. The opportunity came in 1951 when the Singapore Improvement Trust was asked to prepare a master plan to guide the physical development of the island.

Road Hierarchy

The master plan – completed in 1955 and implemented in 1958 – introduced a five-level road hierarchy to differentiate the island's roads by function. At the highest level were arterial roads, such as Bukit Timah Road and Woodlands Road, which served the entire island. Major roads or radial routes, such as Geylang Road and Changi Road, linking the city centre to the suburbs, came next. Next in the hierarchy were main thoroughfares or local roads, such as Cross Street and Market Street, which "bypassed" built-up areas. Then there were development roads that provided access to shops and buildings and, finally, minor roads.¹⁰

The master plan also introduced measures to improve traffic flow. These

included segregating non-motorised vehicles and pedestrians from motorised vehicles, and increasing the width of a traffic lane to the optimum 10 ft. To relieve traffic congestion in the city centre, the master plan recommended the creation of a network of carparks with public transport connections along the fringes of the Central Business District (CBD) to support a park and ride scheme.¹¹ Under this scheme, motorists were encouraged to switch to public transport before entering the city.

The master plan also called for the establishment of three self-sufficient satellite towns in Woodlands, Yio Chu Kang and Bulim (now part of Jurong West) in an effort to reduce overcrowding in the city centre.

Despite these measures, the 1958 master plan was fundamentally flawed: the changes it proposed were based on the assumption that urban growth would be slow and steady, premised on a projected population growth of 2 million by 1972. Moreover, the plan did not formulate a long-term strategy for road planning other than identifying a few arterial roads to be straightened or widened and a few new ones to link the new housing estates in Queenstown and Toa Payoh to the city centre. The master plan also incorrectly surmised that existing roads would be sufficient to meet future traffic demands.¹²

The pace of urbanisation picked up in the early 1960s, and by the time Singapore achieved independence in 1965, its motor vehicle population had risen to nearly 200,000 and was growing at an alarming rate of about 80 new vehicles per day.¹³ This further worsened traffic congestion on the roads. Recognising the inadequacy of the 1958 master plan, the government commissioned the State and City Planning (SCP) study in 1967 to draft a new land use and transport plan, known later as the Concept Plan.

A Network of Expressways

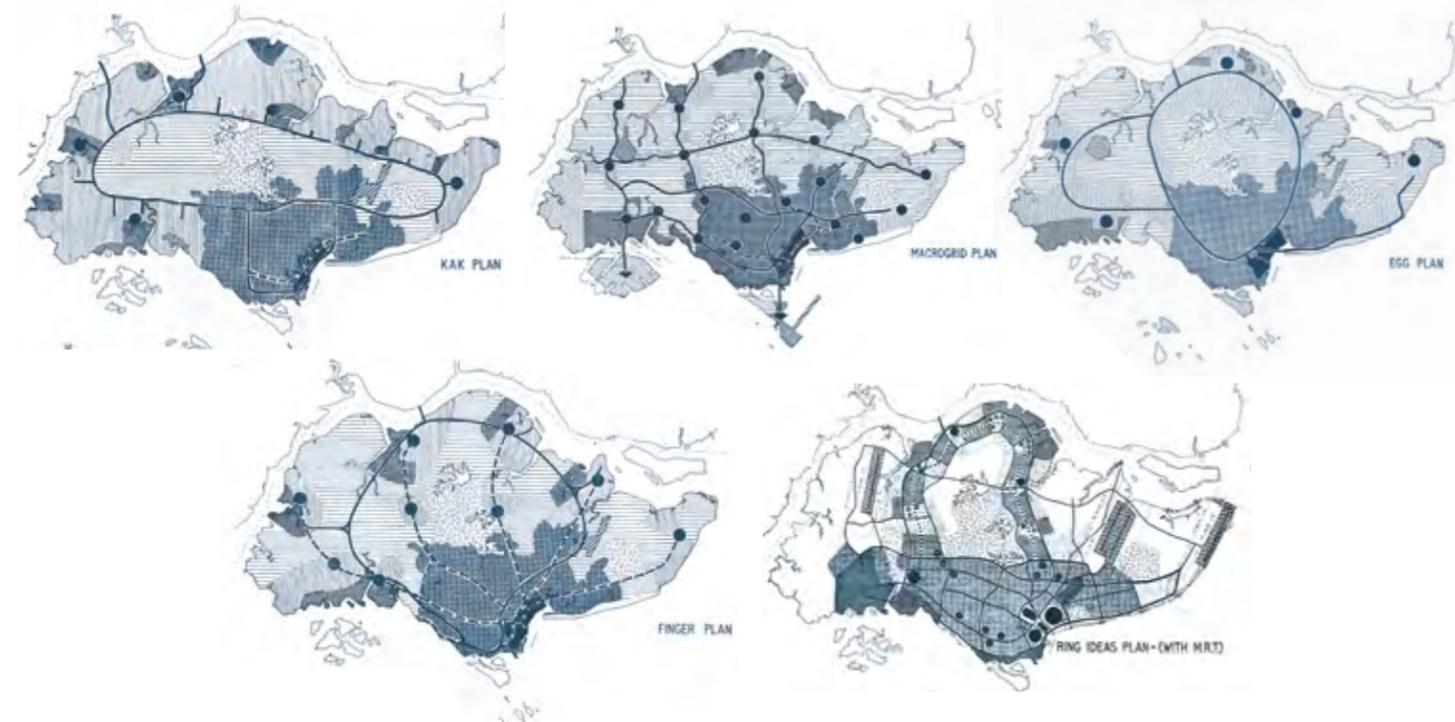
The Concept Plan was conceived by the SCP team, comprising staff from the Planning Department, Urban Renewal Department, Housing & Development Board, and the Public Works Department. Unlike the 1958 master plan, this new plan took into account the fact that Singapore's population was projected to reach 4 million by 1992.¹⁴

To develop the framework of the Concept Plan, the SCP team conducted a series of extensive surveys on land, building, population and traffic to identify how land could be optimised for growth and industrialisation.¹⁵ At the end of the intensive four-year study, the SCP team

presented 13 draft concept plans for consideration.

Each of these plans offered a different interpretation of how the island's land should be used, and how its transport network should be organised to connect people to housing, employment, services and recreation. For instance, the KAK Plan proposed connecting the different parts of Singapore by a large circular central expressway, while the Macrogrid Plan, as the name suggested, divided the island into a series of rectangular blocks using a web of expressways.¹⁶ The Finger Plan recommended that expressways radiate from the city centre like the five fingers of a hand, while the EGG Plan featured two interlinked egg-shaped expressways.

Eventually, the Ring Plan was adopted as Singapore's first Concept Plan in 1971. It proposed moving the people away from the built-up and overcrowded city centre to high-density satellite towns encircling the central catchment area. The plan also recommended the establishment of a southern development belt spanning Changi in the east to Jurong in the west. Different pockets of activities would then be linked to one another and to the city centre by a network of interconnected expressways.¹⁷



(Clockwise from top left) The KAK, Macrogrid, EGG, Ring and Finger plans are five of the 13 draft concept plans prepared in 1967 to map out Singapore's transportation network. The Ring Plan – which proposed redistributing people away from densely populated areas to satellite towns encircling the central catchment area – was eventually adopted as the island's first Concept Plan in 1971. *Images reproduced from Planning Department (1969). Annual Report for the Year 1968 & 1969 (pp. 4–18).* Singapore: Planning Department. [Call no.: RCL05 711.4095957 SP DAR].

Benjamin Sheares Bridge, as shown in this 1986 photograph, links East Coast Parkway to the city and offers panoramic views of the skyline. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

The First Expressways: PIE and ECP

The location of the first expressways in Singapore was based largely on the proposals laid out in the 1971 Concept Plan. This included the island's oldest and longest Pan-Island Expressway (PIE), a high-speed carriageway connecting industrial estates and housing estates along the southern development belt, including Jurong, Bukit Timah, Toa Payoh, Kallang, Eunos, Bedok and Tampines as well as Changi Airport.¹⁸

The 42.8-km PIE was initially conceived as a 35-km-long dual three-lane carriageway, with a central divider and hard shoulder. The first 35-km stretch was constructed between 1966 and 1981 and involved four phases: Phase I between Jalan Eunos and Thomson Road, Phase II between Thomson Road and Jalan Anak Bukit, Phase III between Jalan Eunos and Changi Airport, and Phase IV between Jalan Anak Bukit and Jalan Boon Lay.¹⁹ In 1992, a new section at the western end was added to link the PIE to Kranji Expressway (KJE).²⁰

During the construction of the PIE, roads such as Jalan Toa Payoh, Jalan Kolam Ayer and Paya Lebar Way were widened, while flyovers such as Aljunied Road Flyover and Bedok North Avenue 3 Flyover were

built to obviate the need for traffic light junctions.²¹ Grade-separated interchanges, including Thomson Road Interchange, Toa Payoh South Interchange and Bedok Road North Interchange, were also constructed to improve traffic flow into and out of the PIE.²² In 1978, a trumpet-shaped interchange was added at the eastern end of the PIE to connect it to the island's second expressway – the East Coast Parkway (ECP).²³

The 19-km ECP, built entirely on reclaimed land, links Changi Airport and major housing estates along the south-eastern coastline of Singapore to industrial sites and the CBD. Some of the estates that the ECP serves include Bedok, Siglap and Marine Parade. Construction took place over 10 years, between 1971 and 1981, in four phases. Phases 1 and 2 covered the stretch from Fort Road to Nallur Road, while Phases 3 and 4 comprised the 7-km portion from Nallur Road to Changi Road and the scenic 5.4-km section from Tanjong Rhu to Keppel Road respectively.²⁴

One prominent feature of the ECP is the 185-hectare East Coast Park that runs alongside. The park stretches over 15 km with access to a beach and amenities such as barbecue pits, cycling and jogging tracks, fishing spots, bicycle and skate rentals, food and beverage outlets, and chalets.²⁵ A second feature of the ECP



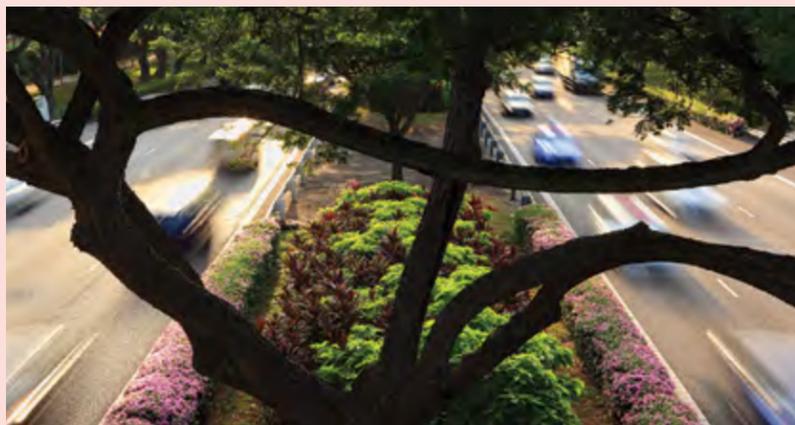
is the iconic 1.8-km Benjamin Sheares Bridge that links the expressway to the CBD and offers panoramic views of the city skyline. Named in memory of Singapore's second president, the bridge spans Kallang Basin and Marina Bay and was the longest elevated viaduct on the island at the time.²⁶

EXPRESSWAY GARDENS

Unlike the endless grey expanses of asphalt found in most countries, many of Singapore's expressways are lined with trees providing shade and central dividers blooming with flowering shrubs. This is not an act of Mother Nature: when the PIE and ECP were

constructed, specific instructions were given to beautify these expressways. On the drive from Changi Airport towards the city, tourists are usually struck by the image of Singapore as a beautiful garden city in the tropics.

A majestic raintree rising out of the central divider along the East Coast Parkway from Changi Airport. *Photo by Richard W.J. Koh.*



The Era of Expressways: BKE, AYE, CTE, KJE, TPE and SLE

Another six expressways were built between the 1980s and 90s, touted as the "Era of Expressways". During this period, the Public Works Department also carried out a series of improvements, such as the widening and re-alignment of existing expressways and roads. Underground roads, tunnels, viaducts, semi-expressways, flyovers and interchanges were also constructed to improve connectivity.²⁷

The first expressway built during this period is Bukit Timah Expressway (BKE). Completed in 1986, the BKE begins at the Bukit Timah portion of the PIE and continues north towards Woodlands Checkpoint. It is a six-lane 11-km dual carriageway that serves housing estates in Woodlands, Bukit Panjang and Bukit Timah.

Hot on the heels of the BKE was Ayer Rajah Expressway (AYE), built in 1988. The 26.5-km AYE spans the south-western coast of Singapore, stretching from the western end of the Marina Coastal

Expressway (MCE) to Tuas in the west. The expressway also passes Ayer Rajah industrial estate, which it is named after, as well as housing estates in Clementi, West Coast and Bukit Merah. The AYE is connected to Tuas Second Link, which was completed in 1995 and provides an alternative route to Johor in Malaysia.

The Central Expressway (CTE) was constructed one year later in 1989 to serve residents and industrial estates in Toa Payoh, Bishan and Ang Mo Kio. At 15.5 km long, this is currently the only expressway that connects the northern parts of the island directly to the city. Construction of the CTE was conducted in phases, and comprises segments from Seletar to Bukit Timah Road, Chin Swee Road to the AYE in Radin Mas, and two tunnels (Chin Swee Tunnel and Kampong Java Tunnel) that run along the Singapore River, Fort Canning and Orchard areas.

The 1990s saw three expressways built: Kranji Expressway (KJE) in 1994, Tampines Expressway (TPE) in 1996 and Seletar Expressway (SLE) in 1998. The KJE is located in the northwestern part of the island. At 8.4 km, the expressway passes through the Kranji industrial estate as well as housing estates in Bukit Panjang, Choa Chu Kang, Bukit Batok and Jurong. It also connects to the BKE at Gali Batu Flyover, and the PIE at Tengah Flyover.

The TPE in the northeastern part of Singapore serves the housing estates of Tampines, Pasir Ris, Lorong Halus, Punggol, Sengkang and Seletar. The 14.4-km expressway merges with the PIE near Changi Airport in the east. It also connects with the CTE and SLE in the northern part of the island. The stretch of the expressway between SLE and Lorong Halus is a particularly scenic drive with lush greenery and views of mangrove swamps and farmland.²⁸

At almost 11 km long, the SLE, also in the northeastern part of the island, connects with the BKE at Woodlands South Flyover and terminates at the CTE-TPE-SLE interchange near Yio Chu Kang, providing greater connectivity to the residents of Woodlands, Yishun and Yio Chu Kang. The stretch of the SLE near the Upper Seletar Reservoir is a particularly scenic drive with lush greenery on either side.

As these expressways were being constructed, supporting arterial roads were widened to increase their capacity. Roads in the city centre were also improved, albeit on a limited scale, due to the heavily built-up nature of the area. Some of the improvements included converting roads prone to congestion into

ECO-LINK@BKE

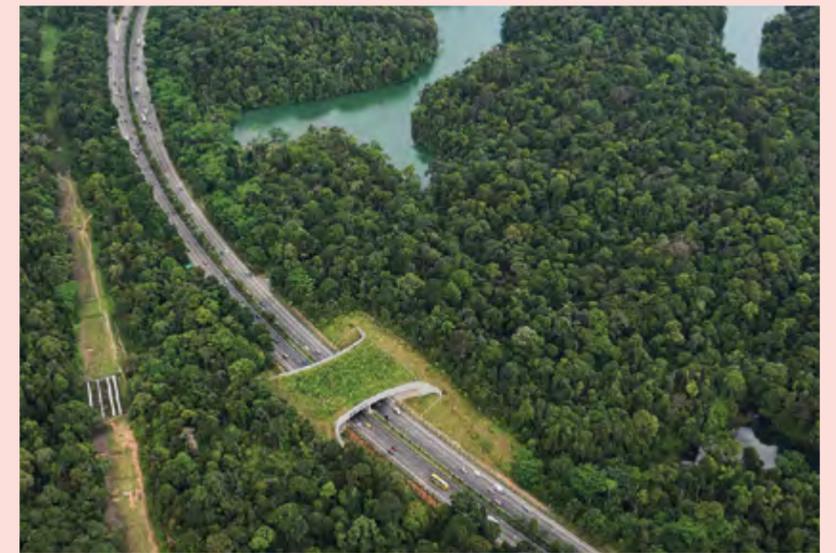
Eco-Link@BKE is a 62-metre-long wildlife crossing spanning the Bukit Timah Expressway (BKE). Located between the Pan-Island Expressway and Dairy Farm exits, the ecological bridge – the first of its kind in Southeast Asia – reconnects Bukit Timah Nature Reserve and Central Catchment Nature Reserve that were split up when the BKE cut through the forest in 1986.

The eco-link, which opened in 2013, was constructed to provide a safe passage for native animal species, such as flying squirrels, monitor lizards, palm civets, pangolins, porcupines, birds, insects and snakes, between one reserve and the other. The ability to travel between the nature reserves is important as it allows the animals to expand their habitat, increase their forage range and enlarge their genetic pool, ultimately increasing their chances of survival.

To stimulate a natural environment, native trees and shrubs such as Oil Fruit Tree, Singapore Kopsia and Seashore Mangosteen were planted along the length of the bridge. The vegetation along the edges of the link acts as a buffer against traffic noise and pollution. To keep a record of animals using the bridge, cameras with motion sensors have been installed at strategic points along the link to monitor animal movement between the nature reserves.

Public guided walks organised by the National Parks Board between late 2015 and early 2016 have been suspended so as not to disturb the animals using the link.

The Eco-Link across Bukit Timah Expressway (BKE) was built to allow safe passage of wildlife between the Central Catchment Nature Reserve and Bukit Timah Nature Reserve. The two reserves were separated when the BKE was constructed. *Photo by Richard W.J. Koh.*



one-way streets, and removing street-level parking and itinerant hawkers to improve traffic flow.

In the years to come, a variety of other measures – many of them taking advantage of technology – were introduced to reduce traffic congestion. These included computerised traffic light management and measures to reduce the number of cars on the road, such as raising import duties and taxes, the introduction of the Vehicle Quota System to control the car population through Certificates of Entitlement (COE) that could be purchased via an open bidding process, and eventually, the Electronic

Road Pricing System which charged motorists for usage of busy roads during peak hours.²⁹

To encourage commuters to switch from cars to public transportation, the network of bus services was extended and improved. The game changer in public transportation, however, was the introduction of the island-wide Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) network in 1988. From the first 6km of the North-South line that opened in November 1987, the network has been expanded to include four other lines – East-West, North-East, Circle and Downtown – with a sixth line in the making, the Thomson-East Coast Line.

EXPRESSWAY TRIVIA



Completed in 1994, the KJE is one of the first few roads in Singapore to use a special tar-like asphalt substance to minimise skidding. This anti-skid feature was later incorporated into other roads.



The BKE cuts through the Central Catchment and Bukit Timah nature reserves – home to diverse flora and fauna. To mitigate the effects on the environment, Eco-Link@BKE was built across the expressway in 2013 to allow wildlife to move freely between the two reserves.



The stretch of the TPE between the SLE and Lorong Halus is particularly picturesque with lush foliage and vistas of mangrove swamps. The SLE also hosts another scenic stretch with greenery on both sides and views of Upper Seletar Reservoir.



Three-quarters of the 12-km KPE is located underground, making this the longest subterranean road tunnel in Southeast Asia.



The 42.8-km-long PIE is Singapore's oldest and longest expressway. Constructed between 1966 and 1994, it connects Tuas in the west to Changi Airport in the east.



When completed in 2026, the NSC will score a first in featuring bus lanes and cycling trunk routes that will reduce bus travelling times between housing estates and provide cyclists with an uninterrupted ride to the city centre via park connectors.



The 5-km MCE may be the shortest expressway, but it has been the most expensive and most challenging to build as 420 metres of it are located under the seabed.



The ECP was built entirely on reclaimed land, with part of it running along East Coast Park. The drive from Changi to the city is especially scenic with rain trees rising on either side and along the central divider to form a green arch over the grey asphalt.

LEGEND

- Pan-Island Expressway (PIE)
- East Coast Parkway (ECP)
- Bukit Timah Expressway (BKE)
- Ayer Rajah Expressway (AYE)
- Tampines Expressway (TPE)
- Seletar Expressway (SLE)
- Kallang-Paya Lebar Expressway (KPE)
- Marina Coastal Expressway (MCE)
- Central Expressway (CTE)
- Kranji Expressway (KJE)
- North-South Corridor (NSC)

Next-Generation Expressways: KPE and MCE

Despite the emphasis on public transport, plans were afoot to further improve the existing network of roads and expressways.³⁰

Completed in 2008, the 12-km Kallang-Paya Lebar Expressway (KPE) was aimed at improving connectivity in the north-eastern corridor as well as cut travel time from the city centre to the newer housing estates of Sengkang and Punggol.³¹ The expressway also relieves pressure on the CTE, and is connected to the ECP, TPE and PIE.³² With three-quarters of the KPE located underground, it is the longest subterranean road tunnel in Southeast Asia.

The 5-km Marina Coastal Expressway (MCE) was completed at the end of 2013. It has a 3.6-km underground tunnel, with a 420-metre stretch of it located under the seabed, making this expressway the most expensive – and the most challenging to build – to date.³³

The MCE connects the eastern and western parts of Singapore, and provides

a high-speed link to the New Downtown area in Marina Bay. With the opening of the MCE, the section of the ECP between Central Boulevard and Benjamin Sheares Bridge was downgraded to an arterial road called Sheares Avenue, while the stretch between Central Boulevard and the AYE was demolished. This freed up prime land for the development of new projects in the Marina Bay area.³⁴

The Future: NSC

In 2008, the government announced plans for the construction of Singapore's 11th expressway, the 21.5-km North-South Corridor (NSC). When completed in 2026, the NSC will connect the city centre with towns along the north-south corridor. These include Woodlands, Sembawang, Yishun, Ang Mo Kio, Bishan and Toa Payoh. The NSC will also intersect and link up with existing expressways such as the SLE, PIE and ECP as part of the plan to improve the overall connectivity of the existing road network.³⁵

The opening of the NSC in 2026 will usher in a new era of transport in Singapore. Expressways will no longer be seen as high-speed carriageways solely for motor vehicles; instead, they will be designed to complement public transport and even cater to non-motorised users. In anticipation of population growth and demographic changes in the next two decades, the government will have to think of innovative ways to improve road connectivity and deliver a world-class transport system in line with its vision to remake Singapore.

A unique feature of the NSC will be its dedicated bus lanes and cycling trunk routes. The bus lanes will help to reduce bus travelling times between housing estates along the new expressway and the city centre, while the cycling lanes will link up with the Park Connector Networks to provide cyclists with a direct route to the city centre. Both the bus and cycling lanes will support the government's vision of transforming Singapore into a "car-lite" society where cycling and public transport would be the preferred modes of transport.³⁶ ♦

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PRESERVING NAN'AN HISTORY IN SINGAPORE



The National Library recently received several rare items connected to the history of Singapore's Nan'an community and Hong San See Temple. **Ang Seow Leng** presents highlights of the collection.

Ang Seow Leng is a Senior Librarian with the National Library, Singapore. Her responsibilities include managing the National Library's collections, developing content as well as providing reference and research services.

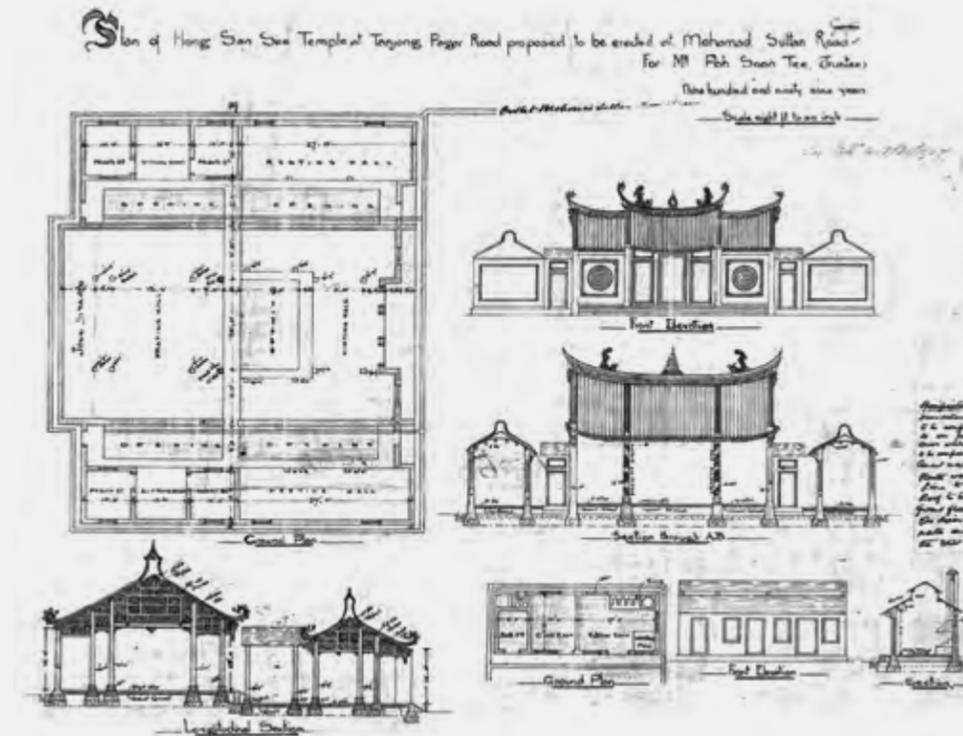
There are more than 1,000 Chinese temples in Singapore,¹ some with roots that go back to the early years of the founding of modern Singapore in 1819. These temples are not only architecturally interesting, but also provide a window into the history of the early Chinese communities in Singapore.

One such temple is the Hong San See Temple (水廊头凤山寺;² otherwise known as 凤山寺 or Temple on Phoenix Hill) on Mohamed Sultan Road – a place of worship for Hokkien immigrants from Nan'an (南安), or Lam Ann, county in southern Fujian province. Hong San See Temple – gazetted as a national monument on 10 November 1978 – is managed by Singapore Lam Ann Association (新加坡南安会馆), which was founded in 1924 by Nan'an immigrants.³

In March 2018, the clan association donated several rare historical materials to the National Library, with the intention of making these items available as primary research materials. The collection – which will be preserved for future generations of Singaporeans – mainly covers the history of the construction of the temple, and the association and its activities.

(Left) The Hong San See Temple at Mohamed Sultan Road was completed at a cost of 56,000 Straits dollars in 1913. Major restoration works were carried out between 2006 and 2009. This recent photo shows the temple juxtaposed against modern condominiums. *Image reproduced from Dean, K., & Hue, G.T. (2017). Chinese Epigraphy in Singapore 1819–1911 (Vol. 1, p. 405). Singapore: NUS Press; Guilin City: Guangxi Normal University. (Call no.: RSING 495.111 DEA).*

(Below) Plaque with the name Hong San See Temple written in Chinese calligraphy and mounted above the main entrance. *Image reproduced from 新加坡凤山寺 = Singapore Hong San See Temple (p. 6). (2007). Singapore: 新加坡古迹保存局; 新加坡凤山寺国家古迹重修委员会. (Call no.: Chinese RSING 203.5095957 SIN).*



(Left) Architectural plans of Hong San See Temple at Mohamed Sultan Road, 1907. *Building Control Division Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

(Above) The stele erected by the Singapore Lam Ann Association on its premises to commemorate the 31 anonymous Nan'an natives who were already living in Singapore when Stamford Raffles arrived in 1819. *Little Red Dot Collection. All rights reserved, National Library Board, 2009.*

Early Nan'an Settlers

It is believed that Nan'an people were already living in Singapore when Raffles set foot on the island, although it is not known exactly when the first Nan'an immigrants arrived.

One concrete evidence is the discovery of the tombs of 31 anonymous Nan'an pioneers who were buried at Qing Shan Ting burial ground⁴ (青山亭) in 1829. The graves were dug up and moved four times due to urban redevelopment until the remains were eventually cremated and laid to rest at Bukit Panjang Hokkien Public Cemetery. On 18 November 1977, the Singapore Lam Ann Association erected a stele on its premises adjacent to the Hong San See Temple to commemorate the first Nan'an settlers on the island.⁵

It is estimated that there are close to 400,000 Nan'an descendants in Singapore today,⁶ including Minister for Culture, Community and Youth Grace Fu, Member of Parliament Denise Phua and the acclaimed artist Tan Swie Hian.⁷

History of Hong San See Temple

In 1836, a group of Nan'an pioneers led by Liang Renkui (梁壬葵) established the original Hong San See Temple on Tras Street.⁸ In an article to *Xing Bao* (星报) newspaper in 1893, prominent Straits Chinese writer Chen Shengtang (陈省堂) noted that the temple was popular among devotees because the main temple deity, Guang

Ze Zun Wang (广泽尊王), or Lord of Filial Piety, answered their prayers.⁹

In 1907, the colonial government acquired the temple land for a road widening project¹⁰ and paid 50,000 Straits dollars as compensation. The Nan'an builder and architect Lim Loh (林路)¹¹ – the father of World War II hero Lim Bo Seng (林谋盛) and director of the temple's management committee – subsequently purchased a plot of land at Mohamed Sultan Road for a new temple.¹²

The construction took almost five years between 1908 and 1913, and cost 56,000 Straits dollars.¹³ In addition to its role as a place of worship, Hong San See Temple also addressed the demand for education by establishing Nan Ming School (南明学校) on the temple grounds in 1914. The school operated for 10 years until dwindling enrolment led to its closure.

One of the earliest descriptions of the temple at Mohamed Sultan Road can be found in the 1951 book, *新加坡庙宇概览 (An Overview of the Temples in Singapore)*, in which the author describes the picturesque sea view and surrounding houses. From the temple, one could see Fort Canning and Mount Faber, making it Singapore's only temple with a panoramic view at the time.¹⁴

The temple was built in the southern Fujian architectural style and features two beautiful granite columns carved with entwined dragons at the entrance, dragon ornaments on the roof made of cut porcelain (剪瓷雕) and intricate carvings on the facade depicting scenes and characters from Chinese classics such as *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*.¹⁵

(Right) A close-up of the roof of Hong San See Temple with dragon ornaments made of cut porcelain (剪瓷雕). *Little Red Dot Collection. All rights reserved, National Library Board, 2010.*

(Below) Before the Registry of Marriages was established in 1961, the Singapore Lam Ann Association solemnised weddings among members of the Nan'an community and issued marriage certificates. The certificates – adorned with butterflies, birds and flowers – would indicate the names of the bride, groom, witnesses, matchmakers and solemniser. This particular marriage was solemnised on the morning of the 24th day of the 8th lunar month in 1960 (14 October 1960). *All rights reserved, National Library Board, 2018.*



In 1936, a row erupted over the ownership of the temple, leading to a legal suit. The property eventually came under the Hong San See Temple Trustee Committee before it was relinquished to the Singapore Lam Ann Association in 1973.¹⁶ Between 2006 and 2009, the temple underwent a \$3-million restoration project spearheaded by the Lam Ann Association and funded by clan members, temple devotees and the Lee Foundation. The restoration was so well executed that in 2010, Hong San See Temple became the first building in Singapore to receive the Award of Excellence in the UNESCO Asia-Pacific Heritage Awards for Cultural Heritage Conservation.¹⁷

Highlights of the Donations

Among the items that the Lam Ann Association donated to the National Library are its rules and

regulations document from 1950, minutes of clan meetings (1924–35), documents relating to the exhumation of the remains of civilians killed during the Japanese Occupation, marriage certificates issued by the association (1935–60), and a set of seven accounts books pertaining to the construction of the Hong San See Temple, including names of the craftsmen involved and the cost as well as types of building materials.

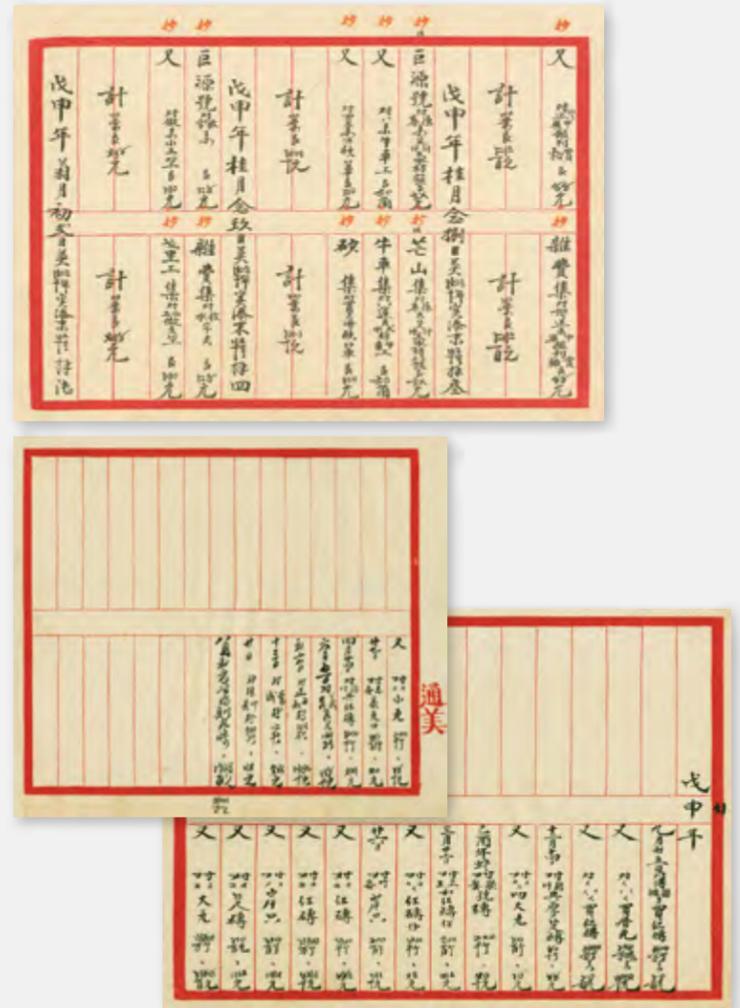
During the restoration of the temple between 2006 and 2009, these accounts books provided crucial information that helped resolve differences in opinion among various project consultants with regard to the colour of the original tiles used in the eaves. For instance, one of the entries in volume 2 revealed that green glazed eave tiles were purchased in the Wu-shen (戊申) year (1908) during the construction of the temple.¹⁸

In an article published in *Lianhe Zaobao Weekly* on 1 April 2018,¹⁹ independent Chinese history researcher Kua Bak Lim pointed out that the dates recorded in the association's accounts books – the earliest of which is from 1907 – reflect the Gregorian and Chinese Lunar calendars as well as the Chinese era name of the reigning emperor, hinting at the political changes taking place in China at the time, especially between the years 1910 and 1911 when the Qing dynasty was overthrown. Interestingly, Suzhou numerals, in which special symbols to represent digits instead of Chinese characters for accounting and bookkeeping purposes, were used in these books.

Kua also noted that names of companies and banks listed in the accounts books provide

(Right) Among the items donated by the Singapore Lam Ann Association is a set of seven accounts books pertaining to the construction of Hong San See Temple. Entries in the accounts books are written in both the Gregorian and traditional Chinese lunar calendars. In this page from volume 3, the first entry from the right is dated Wu-shen (戊申) year, month of the osmanthus (eighth lunar month) and 28th day. In the Gregorian calendar, this is 23 September (实添末) 1908. *Image reproduced from 新建凤山寺草清簿: 光绪三十四年岁次戊申瓜月英1908年乌兀吉立出入银项工料 (Vol. 3; p. 11).*

(Below right) The accounts books include names of the craftsmen and details of the cost of building the temple as well as types of building materials used. One of the entries in volume 2 indicates that green glazed eave tiles were purchased in the Wu-shen (戊申) year (1908) during the construction of the temple. Such information proved invaluable for architects involved in the restoration work. *Images reproduced from 凤山寺总簿: 大清光绪叁拾叁年岁次丁未孟冬月立 (Vol. 2; pp. 185–186).*



a snapshot of the Chinese commercial firms operating in Singapore in the early 20th century.

The donation by the Singapore Lam Ann Association is especially significant given that most of the records belonging to the association and Hong San See Temple were destroyed during World War II.²⁰ Whatever of historical value that has been salvaged is now kept in the holdings of the National Library and will be preserved for posterity. Most of the items will be digitised by the library in due course and made available for online access. ♦

Notes

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SPORTING GLORY

Sharen Chua shares highlights of commemorative sports publications from the National Library's Legal Deposit Collection.

Over the decades, commemorative booklets of sports associations, souvenir handbooks of major sporting events and records of competition results – showcasing the achievements of Singaporean sports personalities and sporting bodies – have been deposited with the National Library Board (NLB). Legal Deposit is a statutory function of the NLB that enables it to collect and preserve published works by local writers, printers and publishers as part of Singapore's written heritage.

Everyone knows that Joseph Schooling made sporting history when he won Singapore's first-ever Olympic gold in the 100-metre butterfly at the 2016 Olympics in Rio de Janeiro.¹ But how many young Singaporeans are aware that Tan Howe Liang holds the honour as our first-ever Olympic medallist? Tan overcame cramps in both legs to win the silver in the weightlifting lightweight category at the 1960 Rome Olympics. His win marked the first of several firsts in Singapore's quest for sporting gold.

Singapore on the World Stage

Tan's hard-won achievement in 1960 was Singapore's only Olympic medal for 48 years until 2008 when the women's table tennis team – comprising Li Jiawei, Feng Tianwei and Wang Yuegu – won the silver at the Beijing Olympics, losing to China in a gruelling final match. That win marked Singapore's first Olympic medal since independence in 1965.²

Singapore's para and youth athletes have similarly done the nation proud. At the 2008 Beijing Paralympics, equestrian Laurentia Tan – who suffers from cerebral palsy and profound

deafness – clinched Singapore's first Paralympic medal and Asia's first Paralympic equestrian medal with her two bronzes.³

At the same games, Yip Pin Xiu, who has muscular dystrophy, bagged Singapore's first Paralympics gold. She won the 50-metre backstroke just two days after achieving the silver in the 50-metre freestyle.⁴

When Singapore hosted the inaugural edition of the Youth Olympic Games in 2010, its young athletes won six medals, with Rainer Ng and Isabelle Li walking away with silvers in swimming and table tennis respectively.⁵ Singapore struck gold in the Youth Olympics in 2014 in Nanjing when Bernie Chin and Samantha Yom won a medal each in sailing.⁶

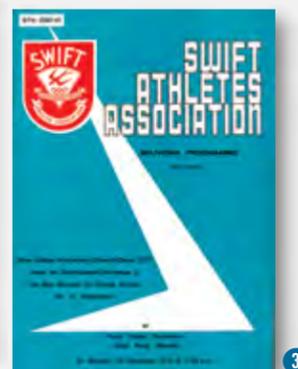
Singapore on the Regional Stage

Singapore first took part in the Commonwealth Games in 1958 when it was known as the British Empire and Commonwealth Games. The nation won its first Commonwealth gold medal – for table tennis – in Manchester in 2002, followed by three more golds at the same games: two for table tennis and one for badminton.⁷

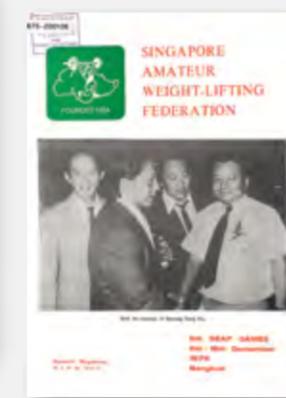
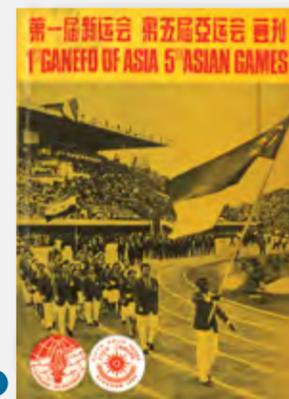
The Asian Games, which began as the Orient Olympic Games in 1913, were first held in 1951 in New Delhi.⁸ Singapore achieved four gold medals in swimming and athletics at the inaugural event.⁹

Closer to home is the biennial Southeast Asian (SEA) Games. The event was launched as the Southeast Asian Peninsular (SEAP) Games in Bangkok in 1959, and "Peninsular" was dropped in 1977. Singapore first hosted the games in 1973, and won gold in boxing, judo and shooting.¹⁰ Since then, Singapore has played host in 1983, 1993 and 2015.

Featured here is a selection of souvenir publications – highlighting events and personalities in Singapore's sporting history – found in the National Library's Legal Deposit Collection. ♦



- 12th SEA Games Singapore 1983: Opening Ceremony Souvenir** (1983)
The publication provides information on the Southeast Asian (SEA) Games hosted by Singapore in 1983. It includes details such as the official games theme song, the opening ceremony programme, locations of games venues as well as the names of torch bearers for the torch relay. Among the torch bearers was swimmer Junie Sng, who won 10 golds that year.¹¹
- Seventh Asian Games, Tehran 1974: September 1st-16th: Singapore Contingent Souvenir Handbook** (1974)
Singapore's first post-independence gold at the Asian Games was won at the 7th Asian Games in Tehran in 1974. This was achieved by Chee Swee Lee who also made her mark as the first Singaporean woman Asian Games gold medalist.¹²
- Swift Athletes Association Souvenir Programme Silver Jubilee Anniversary Dinner & Dance** (1974)
Swift Athletes Association is the oldest athletics club in Singapore, according to its website.¹³ This souvenir publication was produced to celebrate its silver Jubilee in 1974. It includes a brief history of the club as well as photos of the Singaporean sprint champion C. Kunalan.
- 第一届新运会第五届亚运会画刊 (1st GANEFO of Asia 5th Asian Games)** (1967)
GANEFO, or Games of the New Emerging Forces, was created by Indonesia in response to the country's suspension from the International Olympic Committee after the 1962 Asian Games for mixing politics and sports. There were only two editions of GANEFO: in 1963 and in 1966 when it was known as 1st Asian GANEFO.¹⁴
- 7th SEAP Games: Singapore 1st-8th September 1973** (1973)
This is a record of the results from the 1973 Southeast Asian Peninsular (SEAP) Games hosted by Singapore for the first time. With a final medal tally of 140, Singapore scored the most number of medals at the games.¹⁵
- 第廿届奥林匹克运动会 (Olympic Games 1972)** (1972)
Features articles on various events, the triumphs as well as the disappointments at the 1972 Olympic Games held in Munich, West Germany. The games were overshadowed by the Munich Massacre in which 11 Israeli athletes and officials, along with a West German police officer, were killed by members of a Palestinian terrorist organisation group.
- Singapore Amateur Weight-lifting Federation Souvenir Programme** (1975)
This souvenir programme by the Singapore Amateur Weight-lifting Federation carries a message by Tan Howe Liang, Singapore's first Olympic medallist and then Singapore's national weightlifting coach.



WHAT IS THE LEGAL DEPOSIT?

One of the statutory functions of the National Library Board Act is Legal Deposit. Under the act, all publishers, commercial or otherwise, are required by law to deposit two copies of every work published in Singapore with the National Library within four weeks of its publication. The Legal Deposit function ensures that Singapore's published heritage is preserved for future generations. Legal Deposit also acts as a repository for published materials, providing exposure via the online catalogue, PublicationSG: catalogue.nlb.gov.sg/publicationsg. For more information, please visit www.nlb.gov.sg/Deposit.

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JAPAN IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

The Lim Shao Bin Collection

More than 800 items documenting early Japanese interactions in Singapore and the region have been donated to the National Library. **Gracie Lee** explains the significance of this repository.



As a young man in the 1980s, Lim Shao Bin studied and worked in Japan, where he developed a lifelong passion for collecting Japanese historical materials on Singapore and Southeast Asia. As a student on a scholarship sponsored by a Japanese precision engineering company, Lim would make monthly trips to the office in the Kanda district in Tokyo to report on the progress of his studies.

Just a stone's throw away from the office was Jinbōchō, a district clustered with numerous bookshops, publishing houses and literary

societies. At every corner and at every turn, trolleys and shelves of books would spill onto the pavements. After Lim was done at the office, he would explore these book-lined streets and, over time, began to discover rare materials on the subject of pre-war Singapore. As money was tight, Lim would occasionally skip a meal so that he could buy an old picture postcard of Singapore, which cost about ¥1,000 then.

On a more personal level, Lim's purpose for collecting stems from a sense of deep loss over the death of his grandfather at the hands

Gracie Lee is a Senior Librarian with the National Library, Singapore. She works with the rare materials collections, and her research areas are in colonial administration and Singapore's publishing history.

(Above) Printed in 1944 as a magazine supplement, this board game titled 双六大東亞共榮圏めぐり: 新年號附録 (*Shūgoroku Dai Tōa Kyōeiken meguri: Shinnengō furoku*) was designed to look like a map of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere (see Note 2). The game brings players on a tour of the various territories controlled by the Japanese during World War II. The illustrations depict landmarks in Asia, as well as Asian leaders (Wang Jingwei of China, Ba Maw of Burma, Subhas Chandra Bose of India and José P. Laurel of the Philippines), who had either collaborated with the Japanese to overthrow Western colonial rule or were installed as puppet heads of states in their own countries. Singapore is represented by a view of the city from the sea and the Syonan Jinja shrine in the MacRitchie Reservoir area, which commemorates Japanese soldiers who perished in the battles of Malaya and Sumatra. (Accession no.: B29245106G).

(Right) Lim Shao Bin at an antiquarian bookshop in Jinbōchō, Tokyo.



of Japanese soldiers in Malacca in 1945. In his quest to better understand the war, Lim began acquiring materials on Japan's military history in Singapore and Southeast Asia. These items later went on to form the nucleus of his collection.

Over the course of the next 30 years and countless work and leisure trips to Japan, Lim painstakingly assembled a collection of over 1,500 items, some of which have been featured in books such as *Images of Singapore: From the Japanese Perspective (1868–1941)* published in 2004, and exhibitions like *Vignettes in Time: Singapore Maps and History through the Centuries*, organised by the National Library Board and the Singapore Heritage Society in 2009.

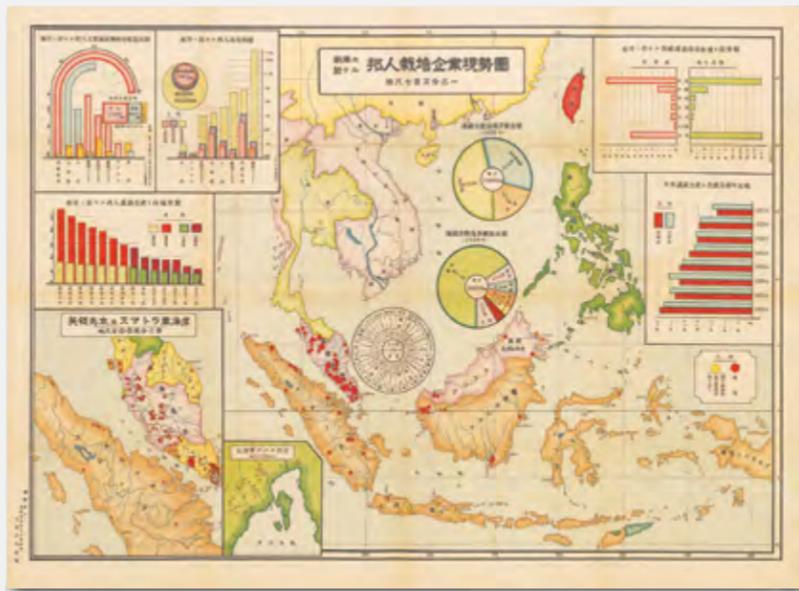
Between 2016 and 2017, Lim donated a selection of his precious Japanese memorabilia to the National Library Board in three tranches. His intention was to make these items accessible for research and, in the process, educate younger generations of Singaporeans on our war history.



1



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Lim retired from a senior management position at Sony in 2018 and now devotes his time to the study and research of Singapore and Southeast Asia and their interactions with Japan during the World War II period.

Overview of the Collection

In total, the donation comprises more than 800 items: Japanese wartime maps on Southeast Asia; commemorative books, atlases and photographs; newspapers covering Japan's military campaign in Singapore and Malaya; picture postcards depicting scenes of early Singapore; and postal covers and letters written by the Japanese diaspora in pre-war Singapore.

Most of the materials are in Japanese and date from the mid-Meiji (1868–1912) to early Showa (1926–89) eras. The earliest item in the collection is a postal cover of a registered mail sent from the Medical Hall in Singapore to Japan in 1885. Two main themes can be discerned on closer inspection of the items: the pre-war Japanese community in Singapore, and Japan's military expansion and subsequent occupation of Southeast Asia.

Although Japanese immigrants have been coming to Singapore since 1862,¹ records of this little-known, pre-war community are few and far between. The Lim Shao Bin Collection of Japanese historical materials on Southeast Asia has significantly strengthened the library's holdings of this subject as well as the war period which, until now, has been largely confined to printed works on the Japanese military campaign and the occupation of Singapore and Malaya between 1942 and 1945.

1. As part of reconnaissance efforts, the Japanese military prepared detailed maps of key cities in Southeast Asia in the 1930s, including this one of Singapore titled 新嘉坡市街地圖 (*Shingapōru shigai chizu*), which marks out 83 landmarks and locations of interest such as government and commercial buildings. An accompanying booklet (an inside page shown here) contains photographs of the places and landmarks found on the map. The map was most likely used by the Japanese military to requisition important buildings in Singapore after the British surrender. [Accession nos.: B29245121D [map]; B29255626D [booklet]].
2. This 1929 map, 南洋ニ於ケル邦人栽培企業現勢圖 (*Nan'yo ni okeru hojin saibai kigyō gen-seizu*), includes seven charts that compare the cultivation, investment and consumption of rubber by Japan with the rest of the world. Also included is a diagram that shows the distance between Singapore and other major ports in Southeast Asia, highlighting the importance of Singapore as an export centre for half of the world's rubber supply that was produced in Malaya at the time. Southeast Asia's rich natural resources was one of the primary reasons cited for Japan's military advance into Southeast Asia during World War II. [Accession no.: B29245119K].



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With this donation, the library now has a more comprehensive record of the Japanese presence in Singapore, beginning from the Meiji era. The addition of significant Japanese wartime sources to existing British and Australian accounts has also made it possible to study the Pacific War from both sides of the conflict, thereby bringing new perspectives and insights to the topic.

Collection Highlights

Maps and Atlases

The cartographic collection contains more than 130 maps and atlases on Southeast Asia dating from the 1860s to 2000s. While most are Japanese maps produced during the Taisho (1912–26) to the early Showa (1926–89) periods, there are also some non-Japanese maps in the collection; the oldest, in fact, is an 1862 map of British India.

There are different types of maps in the collection: world, regional (e.g. East Asia, Southeast Asia), country/area (e.g. Burma, Sumatra) and city/town (e.g. Malacca, Taiping, Palembang, Cebu, Manila).

The maps record valuable information such as geopolitical boundaries, location of economic resources, transportation routes, climate data, population figures, city layouts, military infrastructure as well as battle plans and conquests in Southeast Asia. Collectively, the maps demonstrate the extent of data-gathering and research before World War II that Japan carried out on Southeast Asia and the interest that it had shown in its southern neighbours.

3. Printed on 2 March 1942, about two weeks after the fall of Singapore, this map titled 馬來半島及昭南島(新嘉坡島)精圖; 昭南港(新嘉坡)市街地圖 (*Marai hantō oyobi Shōnankō [Shingapōru] shigai chizu*) marks the location of 78 Japanese businesses in Syonan City with street names given in English. On the reverse are maps of the Malay Peninsula and Syonan Island (Singapore), with the locations and names of the 11 mines and 25 rubber plantations owned by Japanese citizens. The map of Syonan City is based on an earlier city map published by the Singapore Japanese Club in 1938. [Accession no.: B29245124G].
4. Prepared by the Japanese 25th Army in February 1942, this map titled 新嘉坡島に於ける敵軍戰闘指導要領要圖 (*Shingapōru ni okeru tekigun sentō shidōryō yōzu*) details one course of attack on Singapore. It involved the capture of Seletar and an invasion from the north-east of the island. The intended plan of action is outlined in blue text on the top right-hand corner of the map. [Accession no.: B29245125H].



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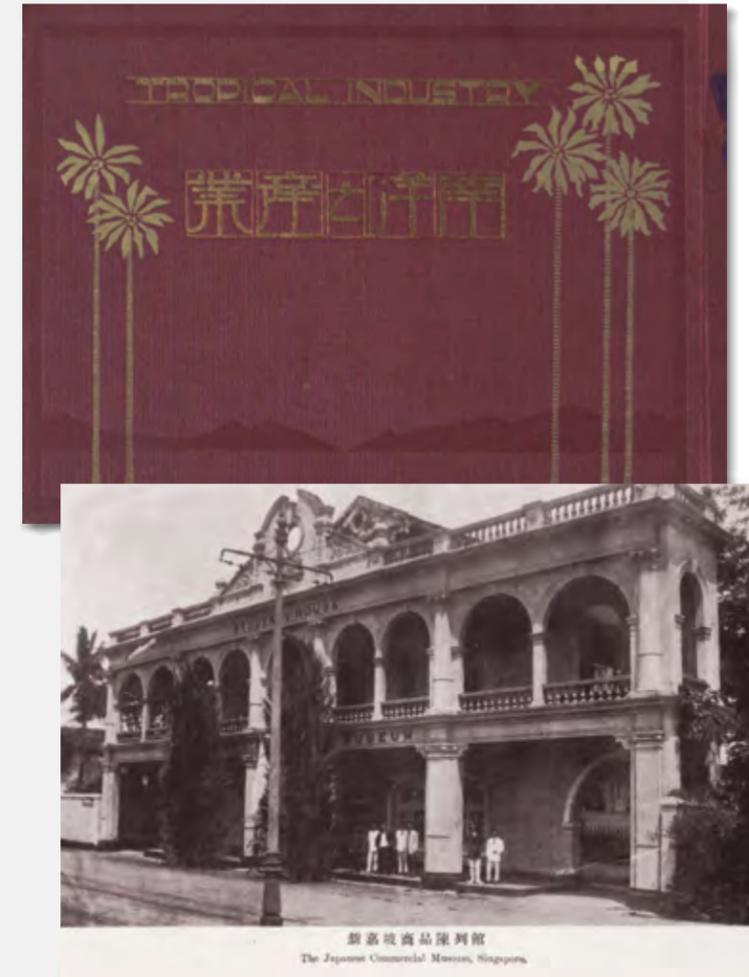
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Postcards and Letters

Dating from the Meiji (1868–1912) to the early Showa (1926–89) eras, the philatelic collection comprises some 500 picture postcards – in colour as well as black-and-white – mostly depicting streets, buildings and the Asian inhabitants of colonial Singapore.

The postcards showcase familiar thoroughfares such as Battery Road, High Street, North Bridge Road, Orchard Road and Serangoon Road, and places like Boat Quay, Tanjong Katong and Tanjong Rhu. A handful feature less frequently seen views of the island, such as the granite mine at Bukit Timah and the old police station on Pasir Panjang Road. The collection also contains some letters and postal covers.

About a third of the postcards were printed in Japan, with several containing handwritten messages by Japanese and European residents living in Singapore. These were primarily addressed to family, friends and business associates back in Japan, and are potentially useful for studying the social networks and lives of Japanese residents in Singapore.

One of the unique highlights of the philatelic collection is an album of Japanese postcards assembled by Lim on the theme “Singapore on a map”. The postcards feature illustrations of maps with Singapore as a port of call along the transnational routes of Japanese ocean liners, and as one of several Japanese-occupied territories in the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere² during the Pacific War. A number of these postcards contain stamps and postmarks commemorating the fall of Singapore as well as the first and second anniversaries of the

5. Postcards issued by Japanese shipping companies, such as Nippon Yusen Kaisha and Osaka Shosen Kaisha, identified Singapore as one of the strategic ports of call along their liner and cargo routes. This undated postcard by the Osaka Shosen Kaisha features well-known landmarks and scenes of the various ports of call – including Singapore, Colombo, Los Angeles and Rio de Janeiro – of the MS *La Plata Maru*. [Accession no.: B32413808G].
6. A postcard commemorating the historic visit by Crown Prince Hirohito (later Emperor Showa) to Europe in 1921. The royal entourage stayed in Singapore from 18 to 22 March 1921 whilst en route to Europe. [Accession no.: B32413808G].
7. The first page of a letter from Koighiro Ejiri of Ryuoyakubo, a Japanese drug store at 414 North Bridge Road, addressed to a Watanabe of Messrs S. Tachika in Seremban, Malaya, describing the Japanese and Chinese medical supplies sold in the store. The letter illustrates the personal connections between Japanese residents in Singapore and Malaya as well as the business networks that existed between Singapore, Xiamen (China) and Japan. The envelope is postmarked 17 May 1918 from the post office that used to operate at Raffles Hotel. In the early 20th century, many Japanese-owned shops were located on Middle Road (which was known as Little Japan back then) and North Bridge Road. [Accession no.: B32413805D].
8. A Japanese postcard featuring the waterfront and skyline of Syonan City (Singapore) dated 6 August 1945. Visible from the photo is the General Post Office (today’s Fullerton Hotel), the Victoria Theatre and Concert Hall, the old Supreme Court and Municipal Building (today’s National Art Gallery) and St Andrew’s Cathedral. The writer, Wako Kobayashi, describes her life as an apprentice in a factory and her future plans when the war ends. She encourages Mie Kakuda, the addressee of this postcard, to press on during this time of adversity. [Accession no.: B32413808G].

9. Picture postcards of colonial Singapore. Some of these carry messages written by Japanese residents or tourists visiting Singapore. They were sent to family, friends and business associates back in Japan, although a small number are addressed to other Japanese residents living in Malaya. About a third of the 500 postcards were printed in Japan. The names of studios and photographers are usually not stated on the cards but a few include the names of Japanese studios in Singapore and Malaya, such as Togo & Co. (Singapore), Hakone Studio (Melaka), Nikko Studio (Penang) and M. Nakajima (Kuala Lumpur). There are also cards produced by non-Japanese studios and stationers in Singapore like G.R. Lambert, Max H. Hilckes, Wilson & Co., Continental Stamp Co. and Koh & Co. [Accession no.: B32413805D].
10. Singapore was one of the ports of call for the Imperial Japanese Navy’s training missions in the 1920s and 30s. This postcard commemorates a training cruise to Marseille, France, led by Vice-Admiral Seizō Sakonji. The two battleships, *Idzumo* and *Yakumo*, docked in Singapore between 27 and 31 March 1931. During his time on the island, Vice-Admiral Sakonji met with leading members of the Japanese community. [Accession no.: B32413808G].
11. A pictorial book published in 1920 by the Japanese Commercial Museum in Singapore. Titled 南洋之産業 壹之巻 = Tropical Industry (*Nan’yō no sangyō. Ichi no ken = Tropical Industry*), the book describes the cultivation and processing of rubber, oil palm, tobacco, tea, rice, tapioca, tin, hemp, timber, coffee and fruits in Southeast Asia. [Accession no.: B29262851B].

Greater East Asia War (the Japanese name for the Pacific War).

Among the postcard collection is also a series of 13 postcards depicting the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905) with postmarks from Singapore. These souvenir postcards were among the earliest commercial postcards produced in Japan, and their popularity led to a subsequent boom in the production and use of postcards in Japan.

Books

Among the items are eight books, mostly works documenting the Japanese military campaign in Southeast Asia, photographs and war art published by press agencies in Japan such as Domei News Agency and Asahi Shinbun as well as the Japanese military.

There are also two books produced in Singapore documenting the pre-war Japanese community in Southeast Asia. The first, 馬來に於ける邦人活動の現況 (*Marai ni okeru hōjin katsudō no genkyō*), published by Nanyō Oyobi Nihonjin Sha (South Seas and the Japanese Press) in 1917, provides an overview of Japanese activities in Malaya. The second book, 南洋之産業 壹之巻 = Tropical industry (*Nan’yō no sangyō*).



12



Ichi no ken = Tropical industry), published in 1920 by the Japanese Commercial Museum in Singapore describes the tropical industries of Southeast Asia.

Newspapers

The collection includes 27 newspaper issues published between 1941 and 1942 in the early stages of the Pacific War, and in 1945 during the Japanese surrender. The newspapers provide an interesting study of how the same events are covered and interpreted differently by Japanese and Western media. The newspaper selection includes the *Asahi Shinbun*, *Tokyo Nichi Nichi Shinbun*, *Yomiuri Shinbun*, *Hochi Shinbun*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *Daily Mail*, *The New York Times*, *The Daily Express*, *Los Angeles Examiner* and *the Rochester Times-Union*.

Posters

There are six large-format American World War I posters in the collection. These were used to recruit members for the US armed forces as well as encourage the American public to buy government war bonds in aid of military operations and expenses. ♦

The author wishes to thank Lim Shao Bin and librarians Goh Yu Mei and Ng Hui Ling for their input. Digital versions of some of the items featured in this article are available on BookSG at <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/printheritage>.

Notes

- 1 The first Japanese settler, Yamamoto Otokichi, came to Singapore in 1862. See Tan, B. (2016, Jul-Sep). Singapore's first Japanese resident: Yamamoto Otokichi. *BiblioAsia*, 12 (2), 32-35. Retrieved from BiblioAsia website.
- 2 The Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere refers to Japan's wartime empire in Asia, promoted under the guise of mutual benefit and Asian unity.



13



12. Published in 1917, this pictorial book, *馬來に於ける邦人活動の現況 (Marai ni okeru hōjin katsudō no genkyō)*, which comprises two parts, provides an overview of Japanese activities in Malaya during the Taisho era (1912-26). Part 1 consists of more than 100 black-and-white as well as coloured plates – along with short captions – depicting landscapes, social life and the customs of the Malay Peninsula, with a section devoted to the cultivation of rubber. Part 2 consists mainly listings and descriptions of rubber and coconut plantations and tin mines owned by the Japanese in the region, as well as a directory of Japanese nationals living here and their occupations. (Accession no.: B29262852C).

13. This 1943 book, *大東亜写真年報 = Japan Photo Almanac. 2603年版 (Daitō shashin nenpō = Japan Photo Almanac. 2603 nenban)*, contains photographs of all Japanese-invaded territories under the Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere (see Note 2). Featured on this page are images of victorious Japanese soldiers in Singapore shouting "Banzai" (meaning "10,000 years of long life") at the Empire Dock in Keppel Harbour, and taking part in a victory parade in Raffles Square. (Accession no.: B29244788K).

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SELLING DREAMS

Early Advertising in Singapore

20 July 2018 – 24 February 2019

Level 10 Gallery, National Library Building

Free Admission

Advertisements are a reflection of society's desires, aspirations, ideals, hopes and insecurities. Featuring a myriad of print advertisements from the 1830s to 1960s in the National Library's collection, this exhibition explores the dreams behind these advertisements and examines how people's aspirations have changed over time.

Visit us to learn more about Singapore's past through advertising.

