

# Storm in Shuang Lin

*By Chan Chow Wah, Lee Kong Chian Research Fellow*

**THE WELL-KNOWN LANDMARK** of Shuang Lin Monastery at Toa Payoh was once used as a training ground for volunteers going to the Burma Road, which was instrumental in sustaining logistics in the Sino-Japanese War in the 1930s. It also had great impact on the lives of two men, Mr Wu Hui Min, a volunteer for the war effort, and Venerable Pu Liang, the Abbot of the monastery.

This is an extract from a paper, *Storm in Shuang Lin: Ethnography of Social Actors in the Political Climate of 1939-1942*, by Mr Chan Chow Wah, a Fellow of the Royal Anthropological Institute and Member of the American Anthropological Association. He presented this paper in December 2006 as part of the inaugural Lee Kong Chian Research Fellowship Series.

The Sino-Japanese War began on 7 July 1937. As the war developed, the Chinese seaports were either captured or blocked by the Japanese who attempted to terminate external supplies entering China. In response, the Chinese government developed alternative land supply routes.

The Burma Road, built as an alternative supply road, became China's most important supply route. The Singapore Free Press described it as "China's new munitions and supplies route"<sup>1</sup>.

Construction of the Burma Road between Yunnan in China and Lashio in Burma began in 1937 and was completed in 1938. Supplies were sent by sea to the Rangoon port

(Yangon), transported by rail to Lashio and through the Burma Road (滇緬公路) to Kunming (昆明) in China. The journey from Kunming to Lashio took about a week, and there were six stations along the route to support the drivers.

Due to the lack of experienced drivers and mechanics in China, the Chinese government requested Mr Tan Kah Kee, the Chairman of the China Relief Fund, to recruit drivers and mechanics from Nanyang (South East Asia).

The Nanyang Federation of China Relief Fund (南洋華僑救護祖國難民總會) was founded in 1938 to support China in the Sino-Japanese War. Mr Tan Kah Kee had been elected as its chairman, and its regional office was located



Ee Hoe Hean was the headquarters of China Relief Fund, and where Mr Tan Kah Kee's office was located.

Chan Chow Weh, 2006.

at the Ee Hoe Hean Club (怡和軒) in Singapore. Representatives of the Fund set up their local China Relief Fund offices to implement programmes, forming a large network around the region.

The China Relief Fund raised money to purchase medication, medical equipment, clothing, food and military hardware such as planes, tanks, trucks,

explosives and weapons,<sup>2</sup> transforming the Overseas Chinese population into a regional force in support of China.

## DRIVERS AND MECHANICS FROM NANYANG (南洋華僑機工)

In response to the Chinese government's request for volunteers from Nanyang, the China Relief Fund published the first recruitment notice (number 6) on 7 February 1939<sup>3</sup>.

Among the candidates who responded were applicants who had borrowed licences or had very limited driving skills. At the same time, information from China indicated that the roads required extremely good driving skills. So the China Relief Fund decided to test drivers and to establish a Driving Institute.



A China-bound supply convoy travels up the Burma Road. OMI Online, U.S. Army Center of Military History.

After background checks were conducted, candidates whose driving licences had a photo were accepted while others were tested near Outram Road. Initially, the test involved basic driving skills with an empty truck. When further information on road conditions came in, the testers for the third or fourth and subsequent batches attempted to simulate road conditions in China by testing candidates on more difficult terrain on Neo Tiew Road (鐵窗路), and the trucks were loaded to increase driving difficulty.

Those who could not drive were sent to the Driving Institute located in Shuang Lin Monastery. The coordinators included Mr Ng Aik Huan (黃奕歡), Mr Lau Boh Tan and a training committee formed by a group of skilled drivers.



An old postcard of Shuang Lin Monastery, printed in England and dated 7 Sept 1932, depicts the monastery in the 1930s.

Chan Chow Weh

The Shuang Lin Monastery was founded in 1898 by Mr Low Kim Pong (劉金榜) when he invited Venerable Xian Hui (賢德禪師) to be the first Abbot. It was the first Buddhist monastery in Singapore and one of the largest in the region.

Mr Ng recalled training and testing the candidates at the Shuang Lin Monastery, and described the training location as a "very big place" that was acquired by the government amid the post-war housing development projects. Dr Low Cheng Jin, grandson of Mr Low Kim Pong, mentioned that the training was conducted "behind the temple" where "entry could be made by the other side, not necessary through the temple's gate". At the back of the temple was a piece of open land with access roads.

On 7 July 1939, Mr Tan Kah Kee issued a notice<sup>4</sup> for more volunteers and cited recruitment efforts in Singapore, mentioning the recruitment of 200 semi-skilled drivers who were trained at a "distant location with rough terrain" for about three weeks. He then recommended other China Relief Fund local offices to adopt similar strategies to produce more qualified volunteers. The "distant location with rough terrain" was probably the land behind the monastery.

## ON TO THE BURMA ROAD

Qualified volunteers from Nanyang converged in Singapore to form a batch. Between February and August 1939, about 3,200<sup>5</sup> volunteers left in nine batches. The majority were Chinese men, but there were also Indians, Malays and four Chinese women<sup>6</sup> (陳新珍, 白雷姝, 朱雷珍, 李淑英). These volunteers were known as Drivers and Mechanics from Nanyang (南洋機工). About 1,000 of them died in service, 1,000 settled in China and others returned to Nanyang after the war.

China's wartime leader Chiang Kai Shek (蔣介石) said that the volunteers' "spontaneous offer of service to the country



Convoys ascending a famous 21-curve stretch along the Burma Road.  
CMH Online, U.S. Army Center of Military History.

in the hour of crisis has not only brought material aid to China in the war of independence, but has also demonstrated to the world that the Chinese people everywhere are united by common loyalty<sup>7</sup>.

One of the volunteers who were trained in the Driving Institute was Mr Wu Hui Min.

### MR WU HUI MIN<sup>8</sup>

Mr Wu Hui Min (吳高民) was born in Hainan, China, and came to Singapore in 1934 when he was 15 years

old. In Singapore, he worked for the Wu association and had the opportunity to read the Chinese newspapers every day. They updated him with developments of the Sino-Japanese war, and he participated in fund-raising activities like selling flowers, attended rallies and boycotted Japanese goods.

In 1939, Hainan Island fell to the Japanese and Mr Wu felt a deep sense of loss. He wanted to contribute towards the war efforts, as he felt that he did not have a home to return to, and believed that everyone should do whatever he could in a time of crisis.

For volunteers like Mr Wu, the Japanese Occupation of their homes had initiated a process in which they transformed the despair of personal loss into efforts towards the protection of their larger cultural homeland.

During this time, Mr Wu came across the notice for volunteers for the Burma Road, and went to register at the Shuang Lin Monastery<sup>9</sup>. All the volunteers lived in the Driving Institute and were trained by instructors. They started the day with morning exercises and military training, after which they had driving lessons. A few trainees shared a truck and took turns to drive.

After three weeks of training, Mr Wu joined 506 others to



Mr Wu Hui Min, a volunteer who went to the Burma Road, had trained in the Shuang Lin Monastery. He settled in China after the war. This photo was taken in Hainan Island in 2005.  
Chan Chow Wah, 2005.



Volunteers stayed at the Great Southern Hotel after graduating from the Driving Institute at the Shuang Lin Monastery.  
Chan Chow Wah



Mr Wu Hui Min and his batch of volunteers gathered at the Tong Ji Hospital before they left Singapore. Earlier batches of volunteers had stayed in the hospital.

from the ninth batch. They stayed at the Great Southern Hotel and left Singapore on 14 August 1939. At 6 am, they gathered at Tongji Hospital and left for Tanjong Pagar harbour at 10 am. The harbour was by then already crowded with people who had come to send them off. As the vessel Feng Qing (丰庆号) left the harbour at 3 pm, the crowds sang to encourage the volunteers and to bid them farewell<sup>10</sup>.

### THE SOOK CHING MASSACRE

On 7 February 1942, Japan began the invasion of Singapore. By 15 February, the British had surrendered and Singapore became Syonan (昭南島). On 21 February, the Japanese launched "Sook Ching" (肅清大檢証) to "clean up all anti-Japanese elements"<sup>11</sup>.

All male Chinese between the ages of 18 and 50 had to assemble at five assembly points at noon. One of them was Jalan Besar, where anti-Japanese suspects were transported to Changi Beach "just outside the wire of the Changi Prisoner of War camp"<sup>12</sup> for execution.

One of the victims of Sook Ching was Venerable Pu Liang, Abbot of Shuang Lin Monastery, who had allowed the China Relief Fund to establish the Driving Institution inside the monastery.

### VENERABLE PU LIANG<sup>13</sup>

Venerable Pu Liang (普濟法師) came to Singapore in 1912. In 1917, he became the 10th Abbot of Shuang Lin Monastery. From 1937 till his execution, the Venerable served as the chairman of the Chinese Buddhist Association (星洲中華佛學會), a Buddhist charity and social association.

Venerable Pu Liang had two disciples to assist him in temple management, serving as an accountant and a clerk. Both

assistants were "very devoted"<sup>14</sup> to the Venerable.

The Venerable was a highly regarded and well-respected person who enjoyed wide support across different sectors of the Chinese community. During the Sino-Japanese war, he was involved in various activities to support the China Relief Fund and help war victims. A Chinese newspaper described him as "very active in relief work"<sup>15</sup>.



Venerable Pu Liang  
(普濟法師)  
Used with permission from The  
Singapore Chinese Buddhist  
Association.

On Vesak Day in 1939, he worked with the China Relief Fund to launch the "Shuang Lin Monastery Vesak Day Vegetarian Meal Fund Raising Event" (双林寺素食佛祖誕辰齋助賑會). Held on 28 May<sup>16</sup> in the monastery, it attracted "a few thousand" participants and raised about \$10,000 (Straits Dollars). It was covered by major newspapers<sup>17</sup>.

In early 1942, during Sook Ching, a group of Japanese soldiers arrived at the Shuang Lin Monastery to arrest Venerable Pu Liang. They had to force their way in, and upon entering, arrested the Venerable and his two disciples immediately. The rest of the people were ordered to squat along the corridors. The soldiers proceeded to search the Venerable's rooms, and opened trucks and lockers. Dr Low Cheng Jin, who was present, believed that the Japanese were looking for evidence of Venerable Pu Liang's "anti-Japanese" activities. Mr Ng Aik Huan, the China Relief Fund leader, believed that the Japanese found some belongings and marketing materials belonging to the Driving Institute's volunteers<sup>18</sup>.

Venerable Pu Liang, his two disciples and others in the monastery were taken to the Jalan Besar Inspection point. Most of the people who reported to Jalan Besar were released about a week later, but the three Venerables did not return. The monastery sent people to search for them, but they could not find them. They and Mr Ng concluded that the Japanese had executed the Venerables.

## A TARGETED ARREST

Although Venerable Pu Liang had participated actively in support of relief work for the war, many other Buddhist and Taoist organisations had held similar events. For example, in July 1939, a seven-day Chinese opera was put up at Tian Fu Gong (天福宮) to raise funds for the China Relief Fund<sup>19</sup>.

The Chinese Chamber of Commerce - whose chairman was Mr Tan Kah Kee, Japan's most wanted man - managed Tian Fu Gong. Yet, during the Japanese occupation, temples<sup>20</sup> managed by the Chinese Chamber of Commerce were not disturbed<sup>21</sup>. Venerables from major Buddhist institutions<sup>22</sup> that participated in memorial services and China Relief Fund activities were also left unharmed.

For example, Venerable Rui Yu (瑞于舞) Abbot of Seng Hong Temple (靜鏡庵), had donated money<sup>23</sup> and participated in China Relief Fund programmes. After Venerable Pu Liang's execution, he became the Chairman of the Chinese Buddhist Association and sought permission from the Japanese authorities to resume the association's activities<sup>24</sup>.

In general, Japanese troops were advised not to disturb religious institutions<sup>25</sup>. Therefore, the Japanese soldiers who went to Shuang Lin Monastery probably knew whom they wanted and what "crimes" they had committed.

The Burma Road was seen as China's major lifeline, and the Japanese had attempted to terminate it through diplomatic and military means. The fall of Singapore was perceived as a means for the Burma Road "to be completely cut off in the near future"<sup>26</sup>.

Even though Venerable Pu Liang had offered only the physical place, the Driving Institute was seen as part of the larger network to supply volunteers to the Burma Road. Shuang Lin Monastery was reported in the press as a recruitment and training ground for volunteers to the Burma Road, and training was conducted in the open, visible to people around the monastery, so it was not difficult for the Japanese to know about its activities. From the Japanese perspective, "volunteers" meant "guerillas"<sup>27</sup>.

This may have explained why the Venerable's rooms and the monastery were searched. Usually, Japanese soldiers would arrive to inform residents about inspections, but would not search the place.

Like most of the victims from Jalan Besar Inspection Point, Venerable Pu Liang and his two disciples were likely executed at Changi beach. The Venerable was probably the only Chinese Buddhist religious leader executed<sup>28</sup>, and he and his two disciples probably the only Chinese Venerables executed during Sook Ching.

## A POW WITNESS

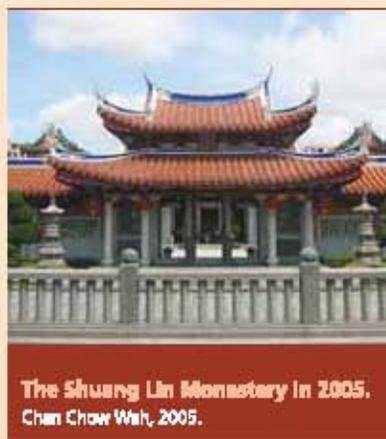
A British prisoner-of-war may have witnessed the execution of Venerable Pu Liang. Mr John Hamilton Wadge<sup>29</sup>, a Corporal (Service number S/93369), was part of the Royal Army Service

Corps attached to the 53rd Infantry Brigade of the 18th Division. Following the fall of Malaya, the 18th Division retreated to Singapore and was assigned to protect the northern shores of Singapore. On the day of surrender on 15 February 1942, the 53rd Brigade was stationed along Braddell Road.

Mr Wadge's group had moved southwards along Thomson road and taken shelter in an abandoned house, the former residence of a Michelin employee who had been evacuated from Singapore. They had been taken as prisoners of war in this house and transferred to the Changi area.

Mr Wadge witnessed three Chinese monks in robes being executed at the beach.

## HISTORY REMEMBERED



The Shuang Lin Monastery in 2005. Chan Chow Wah, 2005.

The volunteers to the Burma Road and their supporters were people from all walks of lives. Their decisions and actions were propelled by a culturally-conditioned world view, and through their actions, these individuals became the embodiments of

global-local forces. Their stories enable us to understand how an event influenced and impacted individuals, and how their actions shaped the course of the Sino-Japanese War.

As the place where volunteers were trained and whose Abbot paid a heavy price during Sook Ching, Shuang Lin Monastery is one of the few institutions<sup>30</sup> related to Burma Road volunteers that still exist, making it a "living" institution and a depository for the nation's collective social memories. The monastery was gazetted as a National Monument on 17 October 1980, and has embarked on a restoration project that continues to this day.

1 The Singapore Free Press, 1 June 1938, Pg 3  
 2 俞汝坤, 郑永福. (1989). 南洋华工同乡抗日史. 昆明: 云南人民出版社, pg 51  
 3 南洋商报, 8 February 1939, Pg 9  
 4 南洋商报, 8 July 1939, Pg 7  
 5 陈嘉庚. (1946). 南洋同化录. 新加坡: 陈嘉庚基金会, 陈嘉庚国际学会, Pg 108  
 6 俞汝坤, 郑永福. (1989). 南洋华工同乡抗日史. 昆明: 云南人民出版社, Pg 68-7  
 7 The Singapore Free Press, 31 May 1939, Pg 2  
 8 Wu Hui Min (personal communication, 16 July 2005)  
 9 联合早报星洲刊, 22 Aug 1999, Pg 11

10 林少川. (1994). 陈嘉庚与南洋华工. 北京: 中国青年出版社, Pg 122  
 11 Shinzoid Memoir. (1975). Syonan - My Story. The Japanese Occupation of Singapore. Singapore: Asia Pacific Press Pte Ltd. Pg 21  
 12 Thompson, Peter (Peter A.). (2005). The battle for Singapore: the true story of the greatest catastrophe of World War Two. London: Portrait. Pg 375  
 13 Information on Venerable Pu Liang is constructed through Shuang Lin monastery publications, oral history records, Chinese newspapers of the period and accounts of British POW and The Singapore Chinese Buddhist Association archives (新加坡中华佛教会).  
 14 Low, Chang Jin (Dr). National Archives of Singapore, Oral History Centre. Accession Number 287.  
 15 南洋商报, 6 July 1939, Pg 9  
 16 南洋商报, 29 May 1939, Pg 7  
 17 星洲日报, 29 May 1939, Pg 9. 星洲日报, 29 May 1939, Pg 9. 南洋商报, 29 May 1939, Pg 9  
 18 Ng Aik Huan. National Archives of Singapore, Oral History Centre. Accession Number 35  
 19 南洋商报, 6 July 1939, Pg 7  
 20 The temples included Tian Fu Gong (天福宫), Heng Shan Ting 恒山亭, Jin Lan Miao (金山庙)  
 21 坡城南报: 天福宫与恒山亭. (2005). 新加坡新闻会刊. Pg 70  
 22 The Buddhist monasteries that were active in China Relief Fund activities and frequently mentioned in the press include: 双林寺, 慈惠庙, 天福宫, 恒山亭, 佛光寺, 凤山寺, 五善堂, 留神神位, 观音堂, 观音堂, 龙山寺  
 23 南洋商报, 17 July 1939, pg 10  
 24 Singapore Chinese Buddhist Association (新加坡中华佛教会) archives  
 25 Tsuji, Masanobu. (1988). Singapore 1941-1942: the Japanese version of the Malayan campaign of World War II. H.V. Howe (ed.). (Margaret E. Lake, Trans.). Oxford University Press. Pg 306  
 26 The Shonan Times, 20 February 1942, FrontPage.  
 27 Tsuji, Masanobu. (1988). Singapore 1941-1942: the Japanese version of the Malayan campaign of World War II. H.V. Howe (ed.). (Margaret E. Lake, Trans.). Oxford University Press. Pg xi  
 28 A list of monasteries and their Abbots were constructed from newspaper reports of China Relief Fund programs that mentions Venerables. The list is checked against respective monasteries, publications, and archives to verify if they were executed during the Sook Ching period.  
 29 Information supplied by Ms Janet Hamilton Jacobs, youngest child of Mr. John Hamilton Wadge (Personal Communication, Feb 2006)  
 30 Other locations include Tong Ji Hospital (同济医院), Ee Hoe Club (怡和轩), Great Southern Hotel (禧天大酒店)

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新报日报

星中日报

明南日报

## LEE KONG CHIAN RESEARCH FELLOWSHIP SERIES: FIFTH RESEARCH FELLOW SIGNED UP

The Lee Kong Chian Research Fellowship welcomed its fifth Research Fellow on 22 January 2007. Mr Peng Welbu signed the Fellowship with Ms Nglian Lak Choh, Director of the National Library.

Mr Peng, a doctoral candidate with the College of Journalism & Communication from Jnan University, China, will be researching on the Chinese press and its influence on Chinese culture and ethnicity, and will explore the history of Southeast Asian Chinese newspapers.

To date, two Research Fellows, Mr Chan Chow Wah and Ms Adeline Koh, have presented their findings.

The NLB's Research Fellowship awards researchers who make use of the Library's archived and preserved collections.



Mr Peng Welbu (top) and Ms Chiam Ching Leen (bottom right) were the two most recent researchers to be awarded the Lee Kong Chian Research Fellowship.