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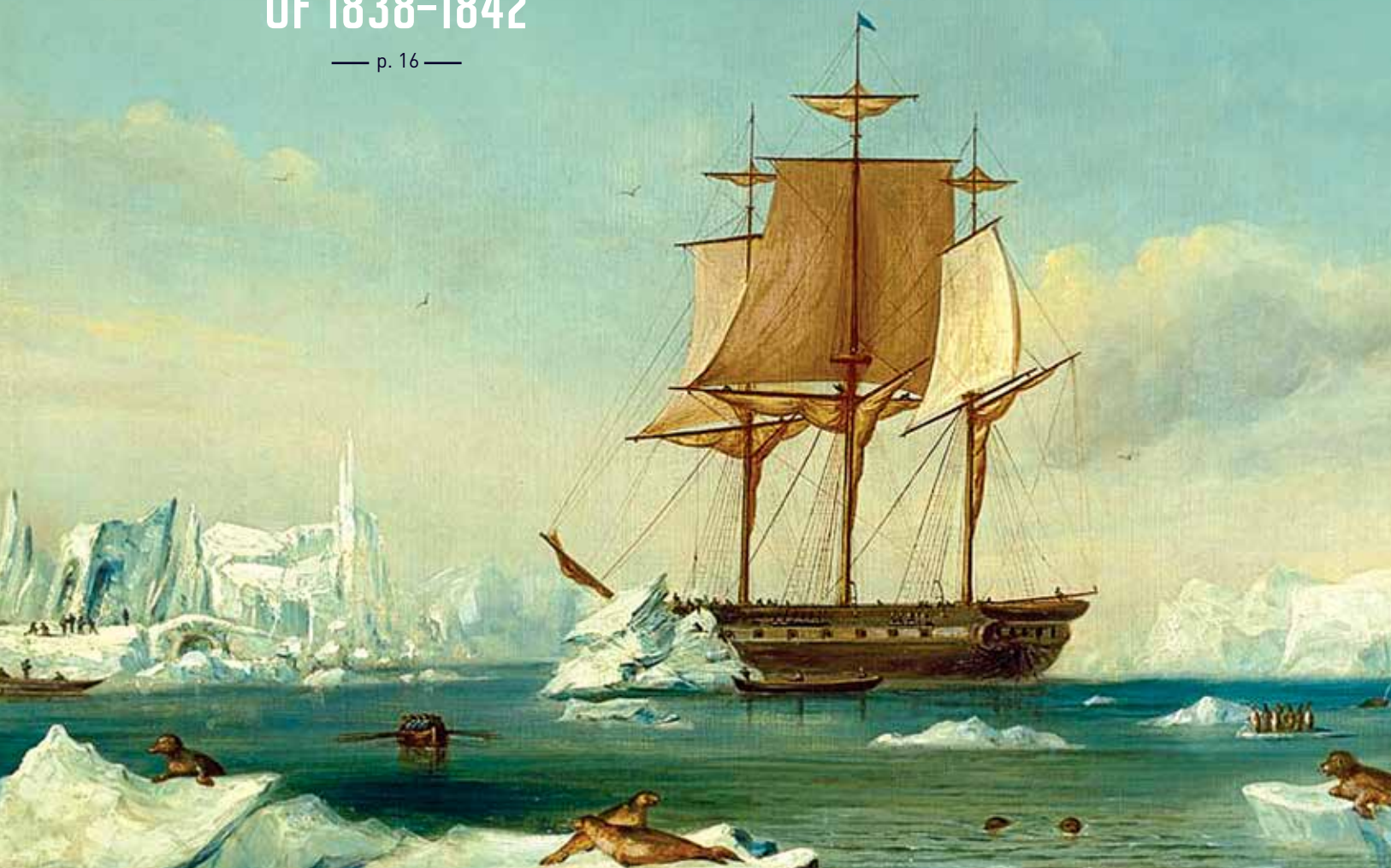
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## THE WILKES EXPEDITION OF 1838-1842

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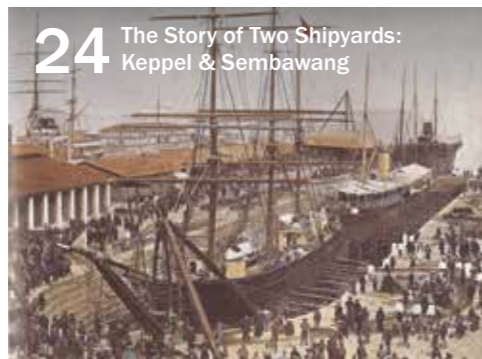
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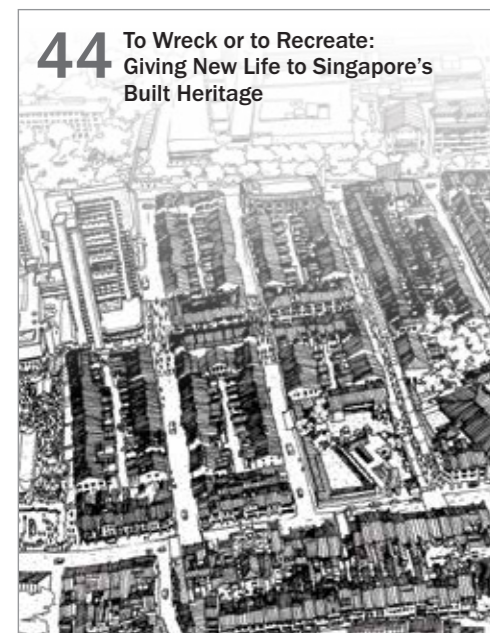
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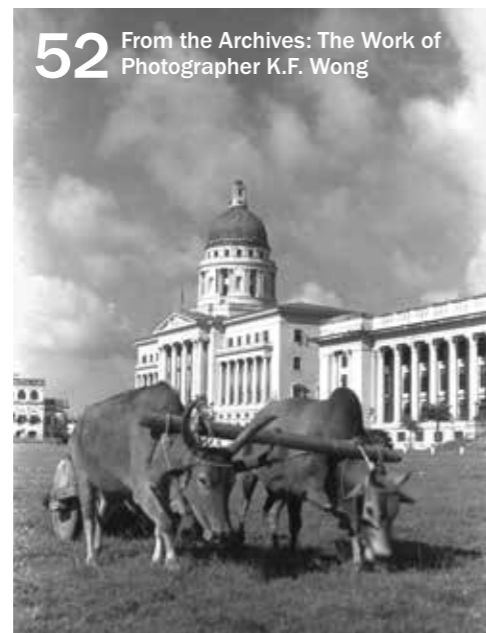
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## Director's Note

This issue of *BiblioAsia* presents yet another selection of diverse and, hopefully, riveting essays for your reading pleasure.

Writing is an art form that is increasingly sidelined in this digital world of truncated emails and text messages. Novelist Meira Chand looks back at her collection of written manuscripts – filled with random notes and scribbles on the margins – and ponders over their value in a time where writers have gone paperless. In not dissimilar vein, K.U. Menon pores over letters written by government officials in postwar Singapore as part of a declassification project by the National Archives, and rues the death of elegant writing.

Still on the subject of authorship, Farish Noor's essay on the violence inflicted by the British on the people and lands they colonised in Southeast Asia and its glaring omission in 19th-century writings – including those by Stamford Raffles – provide much food for thought.

From the mid-18th to the 19th century, several scientific expeditions were launched by European nations to map out newly "discovered" lands around the world. An American naval expedition in 1842 is noteworthy for the breadth of scientific and educational knowledge it acquired during the course of its journey. Led by Lt. Charles Wilkes, the fleet made a stop in Singapore in 1842, as Vidya Schalk reveals.

Profit was clearly the main motive when Singapore's first dockyard was established in 1859 to take advantage of the island's position at the crossroads of East-West trade. Wee Beng Geok traces the colonial roots of Keppel and Sembawang shipyards – both major drivers in the economy today.

Moving on to more recent times, Lim Tin Seng charts Singapore's efforts in preserving and conserving historic buildings and sites since 1950, while Cheong Suk-Wai uses oral history interviews to weave a fascinating narrative of some of our significant breakthroughs and achievements in the field of medicine. People who grew up in Singapore in the 1970s will likely remember shopping at an Oriental Emporium. Kam Kit Geok takes a look at the history of this home-grown chain of department stores.

Jeffrey Say asserts that Singapore's contemporary art scene can be traced to 1986, at least two years before the start point generally agreed by art critics while Sara Siew examines the life of pioneer artist Georgette Chen, and reveals the little-known fact that Chen was an equally prolific writer.

Finally, we look at the career of the late photographer K.F. Wong. While his images provide an important perspective of Singapore in the postwar years, it is his photos of the indigenous peoples of Borneo that brought him critical acclaim, as Zhuang Wubin tells us.

We hope you enjoy reading this issue.

**Ms Tan Huism**  
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### On the cover

A painting of the USS *Vincennes* in Disappointment Bay, Antarctica, c. 1840, based on a sketch by Lt. Charles Wilkes. Part of the United States Exploring Expedition fleet, this 127-foot (39-m) Boston-class sloop-of-war under the command of Lt. Wilkes arrived in Singapore on 19 February 1842. *Image from Wikimedia Commons.*

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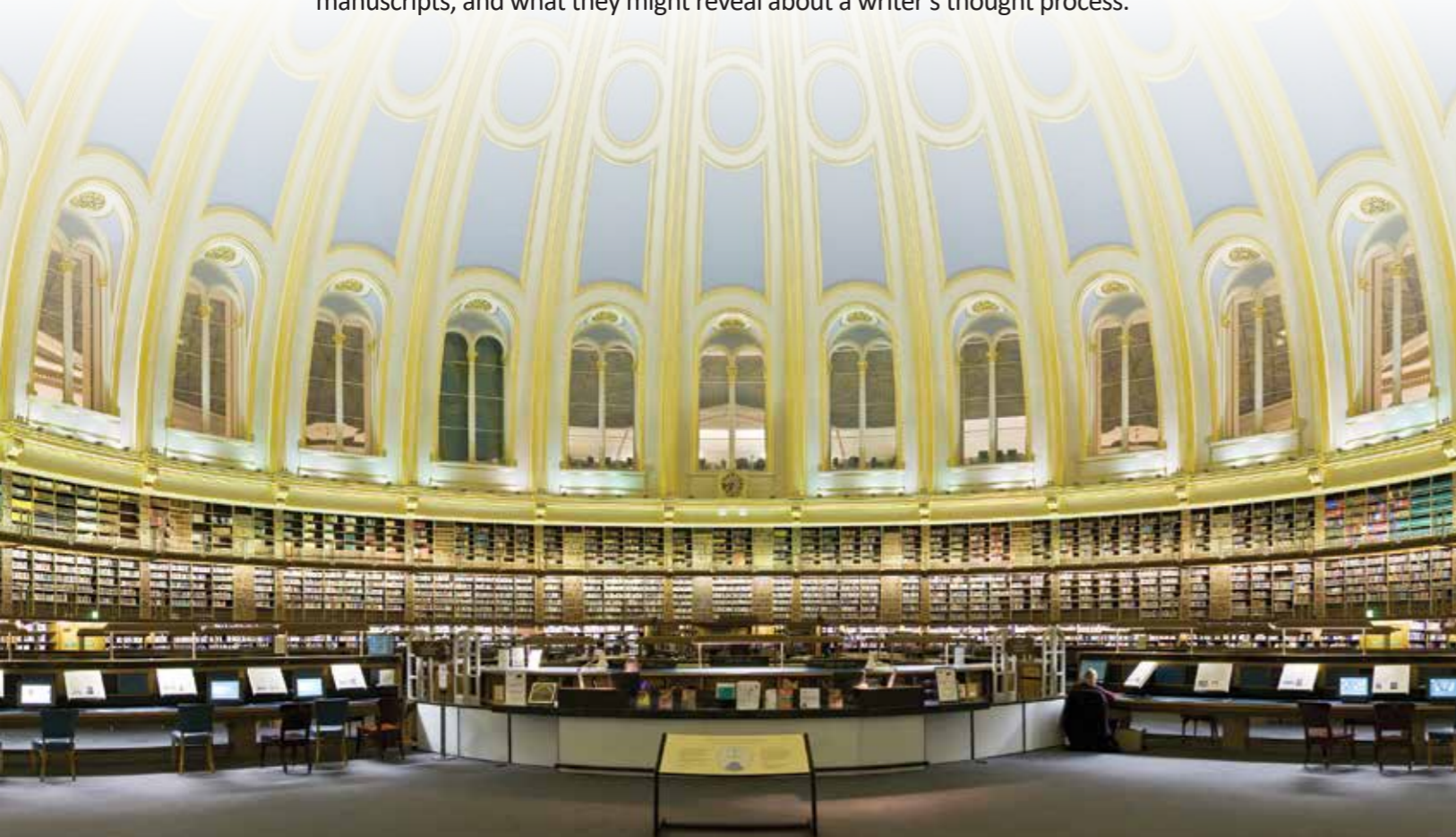
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# On Writers and Their Manuscripts

No great work of literature is completed in just one draft. In an age where writers have gone paperless, novelist **Meira Chand** ponders over the value of manuscripts, and what they might reveal about a writer's thought process.



**Dr Meira Chand's** nine novels reflect her multicultural experiences, having lived in Japan and India before moving to Singapore in 1997. A National Library Distinguished Reader, she has a PhD in creative writing from the University of Western Australia and is actively engaged in nurturing young Singaporean writers.

As a young writer many years ago, it thrilled me to go to the Reading Room of the British Museum in London. This massive circular room with a soaring glass-domed ceiling opened in 1857, and it quickly became a mecca for writers from all over the world, who came here to research and write, and breathe in its rarefied literary atmosphere.

Until its closure in 1997 and its transformation into an exhibition space in the British Museum, many famous writers and luminaries used the Reading Room, including the likes of Oscar Wilde, Karl Marx, Sun Yat Sen, George Bernard Shaw, H.G. Wells, Virginia Woolf and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, to name but a few.

There were glass cases in the Reading Room, in which were displayed the handwritten manuscripts of famous authors: Charles Dickens, Jane Austen and many more. I used to stare at these sheets of paper in awe. Thin and yellowed with age, they were crammed with inky words that, in a long ago moment, had fallen fresh from the minds of these great writers.

A flow and urgency were apparent in the writing, the dark hatching of corrections thick upon the pages, as were the occasional ink blobs, smears and fingerprints. So much of the writer's emotion seemed evident in the handwriting, in the choice of paper, and even the strength of the pen marks. It was humbling to realise that before me was the rawness of the creative process in the seminal moments of a classic work.

This moment is beautifully described by Agatha Christie:

You start into it, inflamed by an idea, full of hope, full indeed of confidence... know just how you are going to write it, rush for a pencil, and start in an exercise book buoyed up with exaltation. You then get into difficulties, don't see your way out, and finally manage to accomplish more or less what you first meant to accomplish, though losing confidence all the time. Having finished it, you



**(Facing page)** A panoramic view of the interior of the British Museum Reading Room in 2006. Situated in the centre of the Great Court of the British Museum, this used to be the main reading room of the British Library. In 1997, this function moved to the new British Library building at St Pancras in London. *Image from Wikimedia Commons.*

**(Above)** Meira Chand is an award-winning novelist of Swiss-Indian parentage, who is now a Singaporean citizen.

know it is absolutely rotten. A couple of months later you wonder if it may not be all right after all.

Whenever I pick up, in a library or bookshop, the published volumes of those very manuscripts I had gazed at in awe in the British Museum – still being printed and read by modern readers – I can only marvel at the unchanging quality of the writer's imagination through time. These memories came back to me recently in Singapore when I donated my own manuscripts and associated research materials to the National Library.

In the digital age, most, if not all, work is produced on a computer, the document saved to a file in the hard drive and finally emailed to a publisher, who will likely read it on a computer screen. Increasingly, writers accumulate paperless manuscripts and, because of this, original handwritten manuscripts, such as those of the classics I saw in the British Museum, hold ever more fascination for us.

Old habits die hard, and although I now work in a largely paperless way, I still like to correct and edit on a printed hard copy. When I began my career as a young writer in the days before computers, manuscripts were bulky things comprising many physical drafts. As a result, the writer invariably ended up with stacks of paper, boxed or bound with string, all heavily worked with corrections and edits.

Not yet published and unsure of my own worth as a writer in those early days, it was easy to question the value of storing so much paper and, in exasperation, sometimes even throwing it all away. Indeed, I did dispose of early typed drafts of my first novel, thinking them to be of no consequence until my first publisher in London alerted me to the fact that I might regret such impulsive action at a future stage in my writing career. I understood this sentiment when I made my donation to the National Library.

I have written nine novels over several decades, but have lived an itinerant life for the most part, residing for long periods of time in different parts of the world. After several decades of living in Japan I finally made my way to Singapore in 1997; among the things I brought with me were drafts of some of my novels. As a professional novelist, I have continued to write through my long residence in Singapore. As the number of my published books accumulated, so have the paper drafts of those works that I still need to work on. Over the years, the boxes of stored manuscripts have taken over my study, stacked shoulder high, the span of my writing life grown up like a forest around me.

When the librarians from the National Library came to view the materials, it amused me to see how delighted they were at the emergence of the most heavily worked manuscripts. Not only were these manuscripts thickly pencilled upon with corrections, but many pages were, quite literally, cut and pasted together. In



Some of the manuscripts and ephemera for *The Painted Cage* that Meira Chand donated to the National Library. Work on *The Painted Cage* started several years prior to its publication in 1986. She also visited museums and heritage sites in Japan to gather information on foreigners who had lived there in the 19th century as part of her research.

the days before computers, this is what all writers did – a pair of scissors and a tube of glue were part of any writer’s kit. When I now click the “cut” button on my Mac, and then slide the cursor down and select “paste”, I never fail to draw a breath of deep gratitude for the wonders of modern technology.

While assessing and sorting through the many boxes in my study, the National Library people noticed that most of the manuscripts were of my later books. “Where are your earliest handwritten manuscripts?” they asked me. Although I had indeed handwritten my first four novels, and laboriously typed them up on an old typewriter, in the intervening years of relocating from one place to another, I had forgotten where I had stored them. But I was certain they were not lost.

Manuscripts do get lost for many different reasons, and there have been some famous losses in history. In 1597, the playwright Ben Jonson, a contemporary of William Shakespeare, wrote a play, *The Isle of Dogs*. The subject matter so offended the government that Jonson was arrested and orders given to burn his script. Unfortunately, there is no record of the contents of the play; we only know that it was written by Jonson and subsequently fell victim to the censorship of the day.

In more modern times, the Polish Jewish writer Bruno Schultz, aware of the threat to his life (he was murdered by the Nazis in 1942), entrusted the manuscript of his last novel, *The Messiah*, to the care of friends. After his death, his biographer searched in vain among his friends for this missing work. The manuscript has never been found.

Following her suicide in 1963, Sylvia Plath’s estranged husband, Ted Hughes, destroyed her last writings because he did not wish their children to read the contents. Similarly, William Blake’s literary executor deliberately destroyed some of his works, believing that they were inspired by the Devil no less.

Many writers, such as James Joyce, destroy their own work for reasons known



only to them. Joyce destroyed an early play, *A Brilliant Career*, leaving just the title page with the words “To my own soul I dedicate the first true work of my life”. The poet Philip Larkin kept very personal diaries throughout his life, but wished them destroyed upon his death as he did not want controversial elements of his life to be revealed. His request was honoured by his long-time secretary, who burned the lot.

My own early manuscripts were not lost for any such dramatic reason; I had just forgotten where I had stored them.

Last summer, with my family, I visited a home I still own in the mountains of Nagano, northwest of Tokyo, the residue of my many years in Japan. The house has a dusty attic that, to my grandchildren, was magically intriguing. Exploring the attic in excitement, they found, under a pile of old carpets, a leather suitcase and four large boxes of manuscripts. I had forgotten I had stored them there when relocating to Singapore, and hadn’t noticed them beneath the carpets while previously cleaning out the attic. I was filled with enormous relief and emotion at the sight of all this yellowing paper, as if a lost child had been returned to me.

In the boxes and suitcase that I unpacked upon my return to Singapore, the many notebooks and binders in which I had handwritten my first four novels finally emerged. I also found the early typed drafts of these novels, all heavily

cushioned by the literal cutting and pasting together of text that I did in those days.

It was a strange feeling to open up those old dog-eared exercise books, to look down at the flow of my own firm writing, and to see the pressure of emotion, the urgency to capture the torrent of thoughts, the cross-hatching of corrections, the smears and finger-marks, the stain of a coffee cup. And remembering how I had stood before the writings of Dickens and so many other literary immortals in the Reading Room of the British Museum so long ago, I felt humbled to have shared with every writer across time, in my own very small way, the miracle of our human imagination. Walt Whitman described it most evocatively:

“The secret of it all, is to write in the gush, the throb, the flood of the moment – to put things down without deliberation – without worrying about their style – without waiting for a fit time and place... By writing at the instant, the very heartbeat of life is caught.”

Philosophers have examined the miracle of the imagination across the ages, from Sophocles to Paracelsus to those of our modern times. Breaking with earlier ideas about the source of the imagination, the philosopher Immanuel Kant saw it as the hidden condition of all knowledge. He speaks of it as being transcendental, of

grounding the objectivity of the object in the subjectivity of the subject. To Kant, the imagination preconditions our very experience of the world, rather than coming from a transcendent place beyond man, as some earlier philosophers suggested.

To the writer, however, when caught in the heat of inspiration, the seemingly unstoppable flow of words can come only from a Divine Mind. The poet William Wordsworth provides a wonderful metaphor for the way all writers feel when writing. He speaks of withdrawing from the world to the “watchtower” of his solitary spirit. Perhaps it is this heightened state of awareness and its connection to our common humanity that the writer seems able to command that imbues literary manuscripts with such romantic power for the public.

In our modern world, the interest in literary manuscripts has grown enormously. Many institutions, particularly in the United States and the United Kingdom,

spend large sums of money to acquire the manuscripts of famous writers. Two hundred years ago, nobody would have bothered to archive contemporary literary work. Today, in the digital age, manuscripts have acquired both a meaningful and a magical value.

For the student of literature, the meaningful is found in what a writer has cut out or changed in the manuscript, the variations of each draft presenting a mental map of the writer’s intention, struggle and literary journey. The magic, however, is found in the mystery of artistic genius. While viewing a manuscript, we can, as it were, stand at the author’s side at the very moment their imagination is pushed beyond the boundaries of human ability.

Literature’s invaluable gift to society is found in the human sharing of spirit and experience. The reader enters the writer’s mind, and the writer enters the reader’s mind. Together, they journey through the imagination to unknown worlds and to

those deepest parts within us. It is this wish to share in the direct experience of the writer that fuels the push within libraries and archival institutions around the world to build archives of primary materials.

This is why the librarians from the National Library welcomed my own humble, handwritten exercise books, the sheets of manuscript padded with pieces of cut and pasted text, and even an unrelated shopping list hastily scribbled into a margin. The extraordinary journey of literary creation holds us in awe as we view a manuscript. From the intimacy of the written page, the writer appears to reach out across time and space, linking us in direct and authentic experience to the work being produced. ♦

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#### THE MAGIC OF MANUSCRIPTS

By Michelle Heng, Literary Arts Librarian, National Library, Singapore

Dr Meira Chand’s first donation to the National Library, Singapore, in 2014 included manuscripts, typescripts and research materials relating to drafts for *A Different Sky* (Random House: London, 2010), an Oprah Winfrey-recommended novel that follows the arc of modern Singapore history.

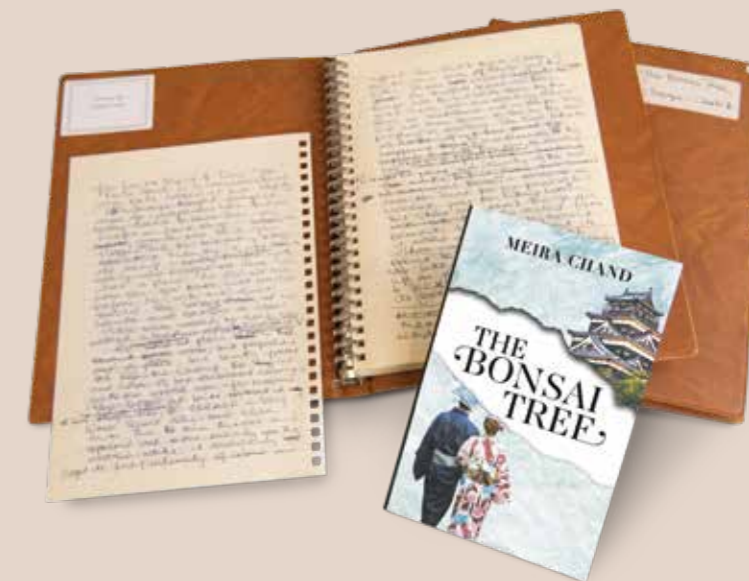
Her most recent donation in 2018 includes typescripts of *The Bonsai Tree* (John Murray: London, 1983), a novel about a young English woman who marries the Japanese heir to a textile empire and her many travails at a time when foreigners were reviled by conservative Japanese society. The author’s reworked editions and handwritten markings on these typescripts offer a glimpse into the painstaking process that goes into the birth of a literary work. The *British Book News* stated in October 1983 that, “*The Bonsai Tree* is a considerable

achievement both as a novel and as a social document...”

While living in Japan, the author visited various museums and heritage sites to gather information for her early novels. These Japanese- and English-language ephemera – including brochures and booklets – on old European-style mansions inhabited by expatriates in Japan from the mid-19th to early 20th-century were donated to the National Library, along with a reproduction of a 1865 plan of the Yokohama Foreign Settlement. The author used these materials as research for *The Painted Cage* (Century Hutchinson: London, 1986), a murder mystery set in 1890s Yokohama

that was longlisted for the Booker Prize in 1986 and reissued by Marshall Cavendish (Singapore) in 2018.

Meira Chand’s authorial drafts and research materials capture the magic of a writer’s creative process and provide a fascinating behind-the-scenes peek into her works. One of the key functions of the National Library is the collection and preservation of documentary materials relating to Singapore’s history and heritage. Dr Chand’s donation to the library’s Donor Collection augments the growing collection of research materials gifted by authors associated with Singapore’s literary development.



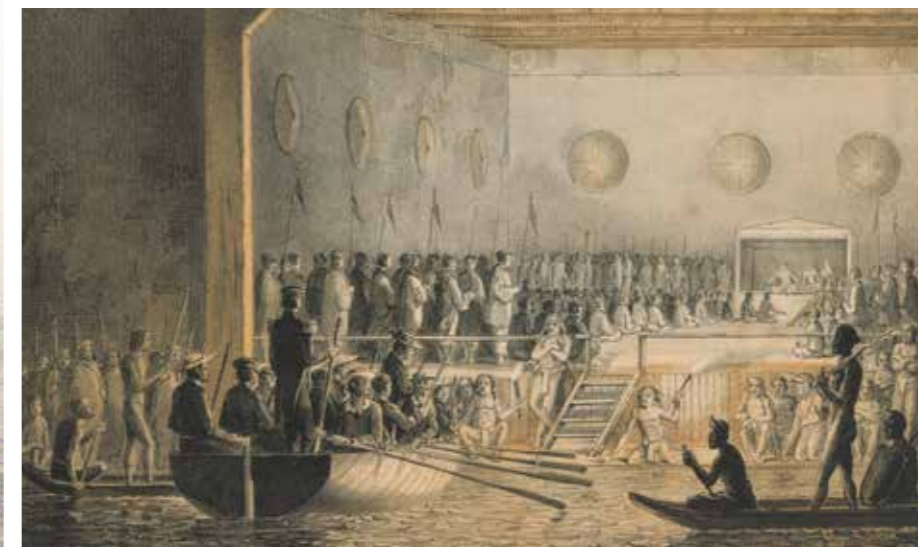
The author’s copious markings in her own handwriting on the time-ripened pages of her manuscripts for her novel, *The Bonsai Tree*, offer a glimpse into the painstaking creative process. Previously published by John Murray (London) in 1983, *The Bonsai Tree* was reissued by Marshall Cavendish (Singapore) in 2018. The novel was longlisted for the Booker Prize in 1983.



# Don't Mention the Corpses

## The Erasure of Violence in Colonial Writings on Southeast Asia

History may be written by the victors, but what they conveniently leave out can be more telling. **Farish Noor** reminds us of the violent side of colonial conquest.



(Left) Native Dayaks (or Dyaks) in Sarawak using *sumpita*, or blowpipes, to defend themselves from a coastal attack led by James Brooke, the White Rajah of Sarawak. Image reproduced from Brooke, J., & Mundy, G.R. (1848). *Narrative of Events in Borneo and Celebes, Down to the Occupation of Labuan [...]* (Vol. II; 2nd ed.) (facing p. 227). London: John Murray. (Microfilm no.:NL7435).

(Above) The court of the Sultan of Borneo, with the audience chamber filled with natives, all well-dressed and armed. The sultan sits cross-legged on the throne at the upper end of the chamber. Frank Marryat describes him as being bald and dressed in a "loose jacket and trousers or purple satin, richly embroidered with gold, a close-fitting vest of gold cloth, and a light cloth turban on his head". Image reproduced from Marryat, F.S. (1848). *Borneo and the Indian Archipelago: With Drawings of Costume and Scenery* (p. 109). London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans. Retrieved from BookSG.

"All conquest literature seeks to explain to the conquerors 'why we are here'."<sup>1</sup>

– Robert Bartlett,  
*The Making of Europe* (1993)

Among the many outcomes of the colonial era in Southeast Asia – from the 18th to the 19th century – is a body of writing that can be best described as colonial literature. By this I am referring not only to the accounts that were written by intrepid European travellers who ventured to this region, but also the writings of colonial bureaucrats, colony-builders and administrators, and the men who took part in the conquest of the region by force of arms.

### The Justification for Violence

It is interesting to see how these authors dealt with the issue of violence that often came with colonisation, and how such violence was sometimes justified or even celebrated. In the long-drawn process of

colonisation in Burma, Anglo-Burmese relations were largely hostile throughout most of the 19th century, and culminated in a series of costly wars: the First Anglo-Burmese War (1824–26), the Second Anglo-Burmese War (1852–53) and the Third Anglo-Burmese War (7–29 November 1885).

Among those who wrote about these wars was Major John J. Snodgrass, whose account of the First Anglo-Burmese War was from the viewpoint of a British officer serving in the colonial army. Snodgrass' *Narrative of the Burmese War* (1827) was a work that was bellicose and ultimately triumphalist in tone and tenor, and as he had conceded earlier in his work, the war was in fact "an unequal contest".<sup>2</sup> Although Snodgrass had little sympathy

for the Burmese as a people – his work is full of snide and disparaging remarks about the Burmans and their ruler – he did not hide the fact that the battles of the First Anglo-Burmese War were ferocious, and remarked that "our first encounters with the troops of Ava were sanguinary and revolting".<sup>3</sup>

A similar kind of frankness can be found in the works of men like Admiral Henry Keppel, George Rodney Mundy and Frank Marryat. All three were navy men, and all of them had taken part in the naval campaign off the coast of Sarawak that led to the eventual attack on the Kingdom of Brunei. The works of these three men – Keppel's *Expedition to Borneo of HMS Dido for the Suppression of Piracy* (1846);<sup>4</sup>

Mundy's account in *Narrative of Events in Borneo and Celebes, Down to the Occupation of Labuan* (1848);<sup>5</sup> and Marryat's *Borneo and the Indian Archipelago* (1848)<sup>6</sup> – would become the most widely read accounts of the so-called "war on piracy" in maritime Southeast Asia, ultimately adding the seal of legitimacy for what was really a sustained campaign to weaken Brunei's standing as an independent Southeast Asian polity.

Although Keppel, Mundy and Marryat were directly involved in the naval campaign in Borneo, and supportive of the efforts to expand British colonial power across the region while weakening the power of local kingdoms such as Brunei, they were also brutally frank in their accounts of the conflict and the realities of colonial warfare.

Keppel and Mundy did not hide the fact that attacks on native settlements did indeed take place, and Keppel was honest enough to admit that, in the course of the subjugation of the natives of Sarawak, the colonial forces – led by the adventurer James Brooke – had also committed acts of plunder and looting.<sup>7</sup> Keppel went as far as stating that such excessive use of violence – which included the razing of native villages to the ground – was necessary, for "without a continued and determined series of operations of this sort, it is my conviction that even the most sanguinary and fatal

onslaughts will achieve nothing beyond a present and temporary good".<sup>8</sup>

Violence was thus a constant leitmotif in many of the works written by colonial authors who arrived in Southeast Asia in the 19th century. Colonies were rarely built by peaceful negotiations, and often through the unequal contest of arms between unequal powers. In the writings of men like Snodgrass, Keppel, Mundy and Marryat, we see the power differentials between East and West laid bare as we witness the bloody genesis of new colonies across the region.

The fact that these authors did not feel the need to hide the truth that colonialism was built through violence is also a reflection of the mores and sensibilities during the age of Empire. In the 19th century, the technological gap between East and West widened. In tandem with this development arose a body of pseudo-scientific theories of racial difference and racial hierarchies in which Asians and Africans were cast as "inferior" races who were backward, degenerate and unable to govern themselves.

Such notions – though largely discredited today – were all the rage then, and were often used to justify the use of force in the process of empire-building. The idea was that "savage" and "primitive" Asians and Africans stood to benefit from



exposure to Western civilisation, and would only submit to their colonial subjugators if they were forced to do so at gunpoint.

### The Erasure of Violence

And yet there is also *another* parallel tradition of colonial writing that emerged in the 19th century. This took the form of works that seemed to deliberately sideline the topic of violence altogether, attempting to erase all memory of the violent encounters between the colonising powers and the societies they came to dominate.

Among the books written about colonial Southeast Asia where we see a near-total erasure of the memory of conflict, three works come to mind: Stamford Raffles' *The History of Java* (1817),<sup>9</sup> Hugh Low's *Sarawak: Its Inhabitants and Productions* (1848)<sup>10</sup> and Spenser St John's *Life in the Forests of the Far East* (1862).<sup>11</sup>

*The History of Java* was a monumental two-volume work that courted controversy almost as soon as it came off the press. Raffles' peers, such as John Crawfurd, took exception to the work and accused the author of misinterpreting elements of Javanese history by present-

ing a one-sided view of the Javanese as a "degenerate" race that was lost in the past and unable to progress without Western intervention. To make things worse, contemporary scholars such as Peter Carey (1992) have noted several instances of plagiarism and fabrication in Raffles' work.<sup>12</sup>

Notwithstanding the academic shortcomings of *The History of Java*, there is also a glaring omission in the text – the elephant in the room as it were – which is the absence of any mention of the invasion of Java itself. In Carey's account of the British occupation of Java from 1811 to 1816, we find a detailed recounting of the violence of the British attack as well as instances of violence, humiliation and plunder that took place during the British occupation thereafter.

The same cannot be said of Raffles' work. Although Raffles had claimed that he had amassed more information about Java than any other European in his time, *The History of Java* does not elaborate on how all that data was collected and how the treasure horde of Javanese antiquities – including statuary, manuscripts,

royal regalia and jewellery, among other items – was put together by Raffles for his own research and his private collection.

### The Violence Wrought Upon Java

Contemporary historians have pointed out that the arrival of the British in Java, which began with the attack on Batavia (present-day Jakarta), was anything but peaceful: so violent was the assault on the fortified port-city that bodies were said to have been piled up one on top of the other. Equally shocking are local accounts of the British attack on the royal city of Jogjakarta, which led to the killing of hundreds, including the Javanese defenders who had taken cover in the royal mosque.

Carey, Tim Hannigan (2012)<sup>13</sup> and others have noted that, in the wake of the successful attack, the Javanese royal family and nobles were forced to submit to the conquerors in the most humiliating manner, and that the royal palace was looted and sacked. Hannigan described the manner in which the Sultan of Jogjakarta was stripped of his courtly regalia by the victorious British troops, and then thrown into a backroom, "while the sepoys and English soldiers embarked on a victorious rampage" within the compound of the royal palace they had overrun.<sup>14</sup> There are also accounts of how members of the royal family had their jewels literally ripped off their bodies by the troops of the East India Company.

And yet nowhere in *The History of Java* do we read of what truly happened during these assaults, and the image of Java that we are left with is that of a tranquil land rendered static and domesticated by colonial intervention. Even in the images that accompany the text – the now-famous images of Javanese monuments and the hand-coloured figure studies of the Javanese themselves – all we get to see are idyllic portraits of a land and a people rendered passive, inert and thus exposed to the outsider's gaze.

### The White Rajah who "Saved" Sarawak

Southeast Asia would experience a succession of such violent incursions where brutalities would either be subsequently erased or forgotten. More than two decades after the British occupation of Java, another military-naval campaign visited maritime Southeast Asia – the aforementioned "war on piracy" – leading to the capture of Sarawak by the former East India Company-man-turned-rogue-adventurer, James Brooke.



A painting of James Brooke, the "White Rajah" of Sarawak, by Francis Grant, 1847. Brooke took Sarawak by force in 1841. The land was not gifted to him, as some colonial writers have claimed. Image from Wikimedia Commons.

As noted earlier, there exist several accounts of the Sarawak campaign that were explicit in their treatment of colonial warfare. But parallel to these works was another kind of historical recounting written by the likes of Hugh Low. His book *Sarawak: Its Inhabitants and Productions* is startling in how it weaves a narrative that *re-presents* the conquest of Sarawak and the attack on Brunei in an almost fairytale-like manner.

Low's work purported to be a study of the land and people of Sarawak as well as a history of that part of Southeast Asia. But in the course of recounting this history, Low was also attempting to present a sanitised account of how an Englishman like James Brooke could have assumed the role and title of the "White Rajah" of Sarawak. Low's retelling of the Brooke tale borders on the fantastical when he glibly states that Rajah Muda Hassim of Sarawak found himself "tired of Sarawak"<sup>15</sup> for no explicable reason, after which he promptly handed over the territory of Sarawak to Brooke on 24 September 1841.

What is totally absent from Low's rose-tinted account of Brooke's rise to prominence is the fact that Brooke, as the leader of his private army of 200 men, had attacked Rajah Muda Hassim's compound and forced the latter to surrender to him – a fact that was highlighted in the work by Gareth Knapman (2017).<sup>16</sup> As far as fairytale heroes go, Low's depiction of Brooke fits the bill in many ways: for Low, nothing of significance could be achieved in Brooke's absence or without Brooke's guidance; Asiatic monarchs would incredulously surrender their ancestral lands to him in return for nothing; and the man

was motivated by only the best motives "to do good, to excite interest and to make friends".<sup>17</sup>

Such sanitised colonial propaganda would become the norm in the decades to come. In 1862, yet another hagiographic account of the Brooke legend appeared in the form of Spenser St John's two-volume work, *Life in the Forests of the Far East*. In this work, St John repeated the familiar trope of Brooke as the white saviour whose presence alone would restore order – which was in turn framed in bold relief against a backdrop of "savage" Bornean natives and "treacherous" Bruneians and Chinese. That Sarawak's story could only have a fairytale ending seems obvious when we consider that the story was told in conjunction with other tales of the Empire.

In order for the story of benevolent imperial intervention to make sense, it was necessary to have as its counterpart the story of native malevolence and decline; and more perceptive readers of the works of Low and St John will be able to see that both writers have woven a number of complex narratives that developed in tandem with one another.

At the forefront is, of course, the tale of the Brooke dynasty, whose messy and bloody genesis was cleaned up and sanitised. Parallel to this are three other narratives that framed Brooke's idealised image in bold relief: the story of the decline of Malay power, embodied by the tale of Brunei's fall from grace; the story of Chinese treachery, encapsulated in St. John's account of the Sarawak uprising; and the story of native backwardness and vulnerability that is found in the studies of native life and customs carried out by Low and St John.

### Coming to Terms with Reality

Reading works such as these today we are reminded of the fact that colonialism was a complex process that in turn gave birth to complex accounts of it. At face value, the works of Raffles, Low and St John strike the contemporary reader as being straightforward examples of colonial propaganda, which they undoubtedly were – and this was a type of writing that continued well into the 20th century, as exemplified by the works of later colonial functionaries such as Frank Swettenham (1907).<sup>18</sup>

But what is equally important to note is how and why some of these colonial writers chose to sideline or even silence the violence that invariably accompanied colonisation, and what they hoped

to achieve by doing so in their writings. Scholars of colonial history are no doubt appreciative of the fact that some of these colonial-era writers – such as Snodgrass, Keppel, Mundy and Marryat – were honest in their accounts of the violence they perpetrated. At the very least, this opens the way for a critical discussion of colonialism and its enduring legacy.

The works of Raffles, Low and St John, however, pose a far greater challenge. In rereading the works of this other group of writers with a critical eye today, we see the stark and enormous gaps and long instances of silence where the brutal realities of colonial conquest were deliberately erased and eventually forgotten. In doing so, we can critique these authors for their moral complicity in what was, in the final analysis, one of the most violent eras in recent Southeast Asian history. ♦

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(Below left) A Javanese man of the lower classes. Image reproduced from Raffles, S.T. (1817). *The History of Java* (Vol. I) (p. 84). London: J. Murray. Retrieved from Internet Archive.

(Below right) A Loondoo Dayak of Borneo, whom Frank Marryat described as being "copper-coloured, and extremely ugly: their hair jet black, very long, and falling down to the back; eyes were also black, and deeply sunk in the head, giving a vindictive appearance to the countenance; nose flattened; mouth very large; the lips of a bright vermilion, from the chewing of betel-nut; and, to add to their ugliness, their teeth black, and filed to sharp points". Image reproduced from Marryat, F.S. (1848). *Borneo and the Indian Archipelago: With Drawings of Costume and Scenery* (facing p. 5). London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans. Retrieved from BookSG.





# Georgette Chen: *Artist Extraordinaire*

Sara Siew examines the link between visual art and the written word through the fascinating story of Singaporean artist Georgette Chen.

Artists express themselves in a variety of ways. Although art is the most obvious of these, some artists also rely on the medium of words as a means of self-expression. From private musings and working notes to published essays and interviews, many artists have chronicled

their experiences, thoughts and feelings through the written and spoken word.

Some writings, like manifestos and declarations, tell us about the ideas behind a certain style or about the context in which artists worked, while others strike a deeper, more emotive chord. The

Dutch post-impressionist painter Vincent van Gogh, for example, wrote 800 or so letters to his younger brother Theo, laying bare his private anguish and joys, and in the process painted a portrait of himself that is arguably as compelling as his artworks.

The celebrated Singaporean artist Georgette Chen (1906–93) also wrote extensively. Chen's achievements as an artist are widely recognised: her lively oil paintings of the places and people of Singapore at a formative time in its history have cemented her status as one of the nation's most important first-generation artists; she was also a respected art educator for 27 years and a Cultural Medallion recipient. Less well known, however, is her personal story, one that spans wars and revolutions, triumph and tragedy, and loves lost and found.

## A Life Less Ordinary

"I often sit quietly in the silence of the night and wonder at the mysterious drama that is life..."<sup>1</sup>

Georgette Chen, who was named Zhang Liying when she was born in October 1906, was the fourth daughter of Zhang Jingjiang, a wealthy Chinese merchant.

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Georgette Chen said that France was in a way her home. She knew Brittany, in the northwest of France, best besides Paris, having spent many years of her childhood in St Enogat, a village near the beachside suburb of Dinard. Georgette Chen. *Coast of Brittany*. c. 1930. Oil on canvas, 54 x 65 cm. Gift of Lee Foundation. Collection of National Gallery Singapore. Courtesy of National Heritage Board.



(Above) Georgette Chen (seated rightmost in the first row) at the Horace Mann School, New York, 1923. Chen studied in private schools around the world. She received her primary education at the Lycée Jules-Ferry in Paris, followed by Horace Mann School in New York, the exclusive McTyeire School for Girls in Shanghai, and the Art Students League in New York, before studying art in Paris. Image reproduced from Chia, J. (1997). *Georgette Chen*. Singapore: Singapore Art Museum. (Call no.: RSING q759.95957 CHI).

(Above right) Georgette Chen and her first husband, Eugene Chen, whom she married in 1930. Date of photo unknown. Courtesy of National Gallery Singapore.



(1927–33). Her time in the French capital was perhaps the most significant. The City of Light was not unfamiliar to Chen; having spent part of her childhood there, she spoke fluent French and was well acquainted with the sights and sounds of Paris. Chen counted the Tuileries Garden and Parc Monceau among her favourite childhood haunts and, decades later, would still delightfully recall riding on the merry-go-round at the park and feeding her favourite swans at the Tuileries.

Revisiting Paris in her early 20s, now as a budding artist, further strengthened Chen's relationship with the city. While enrolled at the less structured art schools of the Académie Biloul and Académie Colarossi, Chen also carved for herself an education that extended far beyond the classroom. She travelled around Paris frequently, seeking subjects to paint and relishing "the freedom of painting whatever you like".<sup>4</sup>

Chen gradually found acclaim, beginning with the acceptance of one of her paintings by the Salon d'Automne in 1930, an annual exhibition that had by then transcended its beginnings as an alternative to the official conservative salon to become an influential, progressive platform in the Parisian art world. She also started to exhibit regularly in other salons and participated in two major exhibitions in 1937: Palace of Painting and Sculpture as part of the Paris World Fair, and *Les Femmes Artistes d'Europe Exposit* (Women Artists in Europe) at the Jeu de Paume museum.

## Beginnings and Endings

"A good love story is always close to one's heart."<sup>5</sup>

Paris augured exciting beginnings for Chen not just in art, but also in her personal life: it was here where she found a love that was to become her most enduring. In 1927, at the age of 21, she met Eugene Chen in Paris. The two were introduced by their mutual friend Soong Ching Ling, more famously known as Madam Sun Yat Sen (Chen's father was a key funder of Sun Yat Sen's political activities in China).

Eugene, a political journalist and respected diplomat, had been Sun's foreign policy adviser from 1922 to 1924 and, following that, the minister for foreign affairs of the nationalist government in Wuhan, China. With the collapse of the nationalist government in 1927, Eugene found himself exiled in Europe, his political career in limbo. His encounter with Georgette Chen was, however, to bloom.

Despite their vastly different professions, the two were aligned in their mutual love for the arts. Chen recalled: "Well, in the first place he always loved art, music, literature, French. He was a very good French scholar as well. And he was always ready to pose for me. That always helps an artist. He always told me not to sew because there were many tailors who could do the work. And if I wanted to sew, then it was better to take up my easel and paint instead."<sup>6</sup>





Georgette Chen, c. 1950s. Courtesy of National Gallery Singapore.

Despite their 30-year age difference, and the initial disapproval of Chen's father at their pairing, the couple found in each other "the closest of companions",<sup>7</sup> and were married in Paris in 1930. Chen would take on Eugene's surname and retain it even when she remarried after his death.

The revelatory nature of the written word—even of life at its most mundane—is exemplified in Chen's writings. The simple, sequestered joys that she shared with Eugene in Paris were rarely mentioned publicly; rather, they were expressed in diaries where she recorded the minutiae of everyday life with her husband—from giving him a haircut to talking a walk together to search for pineapples and avocados for a still-life painting. In one candid entry, she wrote: "Begin small canvas of E portrait. Poses so badly & talks all the time."<sup>8</sup>

Chen recorded not just details of her daily life but also, significantly, information on her art and the subjects she was studying or portraying, with descriptions such as "roses still-life 10F" and "nature morte 6F", terms that likely refer to standard French canvas sizes. On occasion, she would also briefly mention if her

painting or study was successful, or if it had to be executed again. These details, which Chen recorded dispassionately and faithfully, offer precious insights into the often hidden and banal aspects of artistic practice, as well as the hard work and dedication behind an artist's craft.

Over time, Chen's writings also bear silent witness to the progression of her career: while early diary entries speak of these attempts and studies, later accounts (which appeared in letters to family and friends instead) describe the pieces she was commissioned to create, her attempts at juggling painting and teaching, and the tedium of preparing for exhibitions or judging on committees.

Chen's blissful life in Paris as a happy newlywed and an emerging artist was soon compromised by the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937. In 1941, while she and Eugene were living in Hong Kong, they were detained by the Japanese and placed under house arrest before being moved to Shanghai, where they were interned until 1944.

During their time in the Chinese city, Eugene was often called up for "interviews" with the Japanese; fearing for Chen's safety, he always insisted on taking her everywhere he went.<sup>9</sup> Chen would later recount an exchange between Eugene and a Japanese officer at one of these sessions, following yet another failure on the part of the Japanese to secure her husband's cooperation:

"Another arrogant Japanese left our sitting room humble and human again. These were his parting words: 'Other Chinese leaders have several faces and several tongues, but you, Mr Chen, have only one face and one tongue...' And in his characteristic humour, Eugene replied: 'That is precisely why I must not be made to lose that one and only face and tongue, having no spares'.<sup>10</sup>

Eugene Chen passed away in 1944 at the age of 66 due to ill health. He was still under house arrest in Shanghai at the time.

### Peace in a New Land

"We have all found peace of mind in a land which is not our own..."<sup>11</sup>

When Chen wrote these words in a letter to Dorothy Lee, Eugene's cousin, in 1961,

she was 55 years old and living alone in Singapore. Much had transpired in the 17 years since her husband's death, bringing her serendipitously to a Southeast Asian island that was worlds away from the cities she had known: Paris, Shanghai and New York.

Following the end of World War II, Chen stayed in China until 1947, when she left for New York. That same year, she married Dr Ho Yung Chi, Eugene Chen's colleague and an old mutual friend of theirs. Together, Chen and Ho lived in New York then Paris, all the while bearing hopes of eventually returning to China. However, in the absence of better prospects in China, the couple eventually decided to take up an offer to teach at Han Chiang High School in Penang, Malaya, arriving in 1951 to what Chen described as "a beautiful tropical island which I call my Tahiti".<sup>12</sup>

While Chen was immediately enthralled by this new land and enjoyed her life in Penang immensely, the experience was marred by growing strife in her marriage. Her relationship with Ho was increasingly plagued by bitter arguments over issues like money (she suspected Ho to have an ulterior motive) and her continued use of Eugene's surname. Chen's eventual decision to part with Ho was further complicated by intransigence on his part, and it was only after a lengthy, draining process that the couple were eventually divorced in 1953, after six years of marriage. In the same year, Chen moved to Singapore.

Chen arrived in Singapore with renewed hope for a peaceful life. In a letter to friends in early 1954, she said: "With my regained liberty, I now look forward to a simple, useful, and creative existence for the remaining short years that are left."<sup>13</sup> She rented a house in Sennett Estate and took up part-time teaching at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, a move that would allow her to pursue her art independently while supporting herself financially.

She frequently described this arrangement in her letters as allowing her to have "bread without butter", and with characteristic good humour, often added, "I don't like butter much anyway, too fattening!"<sup>14</sup> Despite the toll of age and debilitating rheumatoid arthritis (a condition that began in her 40s), Chen adopted a simpler lifestyle—one far removed from the material comforts of yesteryear—with bravado, relishing even "the ordinary chores of life".<sup>15</sup>

### Paradise on Earth

"So you can see why I am fast becoming a tropical plant and desire nothing more than to spend the rest of life painting the vivid motifs of this multi-racial paradise of perpetual sunshine."<sup>16</sup>

The simple, satisfied existence in Malaya that Chen often spoke of was due to her art, which flourished in this land she now called home. From the 1950s to the 70s, she firmly established herself artistically, creating many of the paintings she is known for today. This would, arguably, not have been possible if she had not settled down in Malaya: so closely intertwined was her art with its people and places.

Chen, in turn, would increasingly identify herself as being a part of this land, a new citizen who set out to learn the mother tongue Malay, print her own batik and adopt the Malay *nom de plume* of Chendana (which refers to fragrant sandalwood), becoming, in a sense, the metaphorical tropical plant she often wrote about in her letters. Her art and life were an indivisible whole that was inextricably linked to the land she had settled into.

Chen's enchantment with Malaya was, in fact, already apparent when she first arrived in Penang in 1951 with Ho. In a letter written a few months after her arrival, she had gushed about her new home:

"I have always had a sort of weakness for this little island while passing through it on my many journeys westward and hoped that some day, I may have more than just a glance at it. It is called the 'pearl of the East' or 'Paradise on Earth' not without reason. If Malaya does not prove to be a fruitful period for me artistically, it shall not be for the lack of beauty which seems to be everywhere... The waterfront with the rows of Malayan straw huts bathing right in the water whose color is green and violet, make me shout with excitement each time I pass them by... As to the great variety of fruits, with their strange, new, and unexpected forms, they are not only wonderful to look at but delicious to eat! I have been introduced to the Durian fruit and consider that my life has been enriched by it!"<sup>17</sup>



(Top) Georgette Chen painting Tunku Abdul Rahman in Kuala Lumpur, June 1956. Also pictured is the Tunku's wife, Sharifah Rodziah. The Tunku first met Georgette and Eugene Chen in 1931 on a ship from Marseilles, Paris, to Singapore. He noted that Chen had a "beautiful and charming" presence, and attributed his political awakening to her husband. Courtesy of National Gallery Singapore.

(Above) Georgette Chen. *Singapore Waterfront*. c. 1963. Oil on canvas, 50 x 61 cm. Gift of Lee Foundation. Collection of National Gallery Singapore. Courtesy of National Heritage Board.

The inspirations and attractions that Malaya afforded clearly invigorated Chen. She made no secret of the "inexhaustible motifs"<sup>18</sup> that she found in this "seasonless newfoundland",<sup>19</sup> which she embraced wholeheartedly. Tropical fruits in their bright colours and variegated forms take centre stage in her still life paintings.

These are accompanied by depictions of daily scenes: from a bustling outdoor market to a *satay* seller working by the beach, to the Singapore River. Chen's portraits, which she was frequently commissioned to make, form another compelling body of work; whether they portray her family and friends (including



the first prime minister of Malaysia, Tunku Abdul Rahman) or strangers, these depictions are warm and intimate, sometimes capturing their subjects in the middle of private, interior moments.

Chen often professed, in letters to friends, of her desire to spend the rest of her life depicting Malaya and its motifs. This desire was, however, stymied by age and debilitating illness. She battled rheumatoid arthritis from her 40s until death. The condition, which had also afflicted her father, caused much pain and lack of mobility (in one account, a severe attack in her knees left her “hobbling on a stick for months and months”<sup>20</sup>), which, although controlled by medication, worsened over the years. This was in part and, quite ironically, due to the medicine that Chen was taking religiously, a side effect of which was osteoporosis.

Despite having to deal with the painful condition alone, Chen remained strong and gentle in spirit; it is in this regard, perhaps, that her writing is most instructive, for it reveals her character in a way that her paintings arguably could not. In letters to friends, Chen often spoke about how “life is anguish and blessings all intermingled which we must accept and carry on as best we can.”<sup>21</sup> True to this proclamation, she seemed to accept her adversities stoically, however big or small, and forge ahead. The measure of Chen’s inner strength further comes through in the self-deprecating humour evident in her writing. In a letter to Patricia Kennison, one of her students who later became a close friend, she compared herself to an old, worn machine:

“My ‘full form’ can partly be explained by the fact that friends always revive me, for there are times when I do feel quite PATRAQUE, to use an apt French word. (patraque: both a’s are short. Said of a machine that functions badly because it is badly made or old.) But on the whole the slow coach has gone fairly well after its last major repair though the rounds have not been reduced.”<sup>22</sup>

As Chen alluded to in her letter, it was the simple joy of friendship – in addition to art and a home she loved – that helped sustain her through adversity.

### The Last Chapter

In an introspective moment while writing to Eugene’s cousin Dorothy Lee

in 1967, Chen, then 61, offered what could be described as a summary of her remarkable life:

“I shall be glad to leave my pictures to Singapore and Malaysia as my little contribution to this tropical land in which I have found rehabilitation. This last chapter of mine on this ‘treasure island’ which I call my ‘Tahiti’ (Tahiti, as you know, is another tropical island where the French painter Gauguin adopted as his new home) has been creative and

peaceful. Here, I have stood on my own two feet, albeit arthritic, and I have cut a happy coat with his colorful tropical cloth at my



(Right) Georgette Chen. *Self-Portrait*. c. 1946. Oil on canvas, 22.5 x 17.5 cm. Gift of Lee Foundation. Collection of National Gallery Singapore. Courtesy of National Heritage Board.

(Below) Georgette Chen. *East Coast Vendor*. 1961. Oil on canvas, 92 x 73 cm. Collection of National Gallery Singapore. Courtesy of National Heritage Board.



disposal. I have tried to pursue my work to the best of my ability, I have continued to be myself seeking neither fame nor riches. Art like love and friendship or religion is a pursuit of love and devotion. I have respected and cherished my friends and have tried hard not to take advantage of them and their love has kept me alive. Sometimes when I think that I am the product of four world events, all wars – two Chinese revolutions, the one of Dr Sun and Mao Tse-tung and the 1st and second World Wars in all of which I have been inexorably involved,

the wonder is that my profession should have been one of good-will and peace! Only God can answer for these paradoxes...”<sup>23</sup>

In 1981, Chen suffered a serious fall. She was hospitalised and required hospice care for the next 12 years until her passing in March 1993 at age 87. Following Chen’s death, 53 of her paintings as well as a voluminous archive of her personal papers and belongings were bequeathed to Singapore. Georgette Chen’s love for and gratitude to this land – “this tropical land in which I have found rehabilitation” – had finally come full circle.<sup>24</sup> ♦

### NOTES

- Chen, G. (1974, April 12). *Georgette Chen to Dorothy and Lucille Lee* [Letter]. Retrieved from National Gallery Singapore. Dorothy Lee was the cousin of Eugene Chen, Georgette’s first husband, and Lucille was Dorothy’s daughter. Georgette often addressed Dorothy as her cousin, keeping in touch with her for many years after Eugene Chen’s passing; she once told her stepmother that Dorothy was “just like a sister” to her.
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- Chen, G. (1959, October 27). *Georgette Chen to Hsu Mingmeo* [Letter]. Retrieved from National Gallery Singapore. Hsu was a friend of Eugene Chen’s and a medical doctor who modernised medicine in China. He was also the author of *Dr Wu Lien Teh: The Plague Fighter*. In the letter, Georgette was wishing Hsu success with a book he was writing, possibly a novel titled *Five Years in Love*.
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- Chen, G. (1960, December 24). *Georgette Chen to Pauline Chen and her family* [Letter]. Retrieved from National Gallery Singapore. Pauline Chen was one of Chen’s close friends. They first met shortly after Chen arrived in Penang in 1951. Pauline stood by Chen throughout her divorce and subsequent relocation to Singapore, maintaining a decades-long correspondence with her.
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- Chen, G. (1963, February 11). *Georgette Chen to Patricia Kennison* [Letter]. Retrieved from National Gallery Singapore. Kennison was one of Chen’s students at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts.
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### SPEAKING OF...

Georgette Chen is the first artist featured in *The Artist Speaks*, a series of books published by the National Gallery Singapore featuring visual artists who write.

*The Artist Speaks: Georgette Chen* draws upon the National Gallery’s extensive archive of materials on the artist dating from the 1930s to the 1970s. The collection consists of Chen’s journals, photographs, official records, newspaper clippings, personal belongings – including her beloved Hermes Baby typewriter and Malay books, among others – as well as carbon copies of some 1,000 letters that Chen had written to friends and family between 1949 and 1972.

The book also draws from materials held in the collections of the National Library and National Archives, including the oral history interview that art historian Constance Sheares conducted with Chen in 1988.<sup>25</sup> Other resources in the National Library include a video on Chen produced by the Singapore Art Museum for the National Library Board in 2008,<sup>26</sup> a biographical account of Chen’s life authored by Jane Chia in 1997,<sup>27</sup> and the catalogue accompanying the 1985 retrospective exhibition of more than 170 of Chen’s works at the National Museum Art Gallery.<sup>28</sup>



*The Artist Speaks: Georgette Chen* is the first title in the eponymous series published by National Gallery Singapore. The book is available for reference at the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library and for loan at selected public libraries (Call nos.: RSING 741.595957 ART and SING 741.595957 ART). Other artists in the series include Chua Ek Kay, one of Singapore’s most esteemed Chinese ink practitioners, and the late performance artist Lee Wen.



# U.S. EX. EX.

## AN EXPEDITION FOR THE AGES

The Wilkes Expedition – as it is popularly known – vastly expanded the borders of scientific learning. **Vidya Schalk** explains how this historic American naval mission between 1838 and 1842 is linked to Singapore.

A painting of the USS *Vincennes* in Disappointment Bay, Antarctica, c. 1840, based on a sketch by Lt. Charles Wilkes. The ship was a 127-foot (39 m) Boston-class sloop-of-war carrying a crew of 190. This was the flagship under the command of Lt. Wilkes. *Image from Wikimedia Commons.*



**Dr Vidya Schalk** is a research scientist and currently a lecturer in the School of Materials Science and Engineering at the Nanyang Technological University, where she develops online curriculum and teaches a module on the History of Materials. Her interest in scientific explorations has led her to research 19th-century naval expeditions.

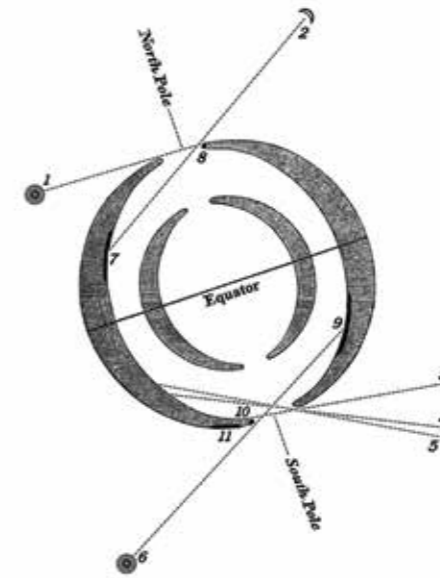
In early 1842, almost 500 naval officers, sailors and scientists from the United States visited Singapore on their way home after an epic four-year voyage of discovery. They were members of the United States Exploring Expedition, part of the last All Sail Naval Squadron to circumnavigate the globe and the first-ever scientific mission mounted by the fairly young nation (the country had achieved independence in 1776).

Few people have heard of the Wilkes Expedition, its more commonly used name, and fewer still about the United States Exploring Expedition – or simply the U.S. Ex. Ex. Although the expedition became mired in controversy, it nonetheless left behind an important legacy in its meticulous documentation of the earth's biodiversity. Among its contributions are the first-ever systematic mapping of the coastline of the US Pacific Northwest, the charting of some 1,500 miles (2,414 km) of the frozen Antarctic coast, and the first concrete proof that Antarctica is a continent.

### The Mission

The Wilkes Expedition was primarily a mission of exploration. It aimed to extend the borders of learning, and came at a time when Britain, France and other European nations were busy expanding their territories through colonisation. The mission parameters were two-fold – navigational and scientific – as directed by the US Congress:

“To explore and survey the Southern Ocean, having in view the important interest of our commerce embarked in the whale fisheries, as well as to determine the existence of all



doubtful islands and shoals; and to discover and accurately fix the position of those which lie in or near the track pursued by our merchant vessels in that quarter... Although the primary object of the expedition is the promotion of... commerce and navigation, yet all occasions will be taken, not incompatible with the great purpose of the undertaking, to extend the bounds of science, and to promote the acquisition of knowledge...<sup>1</sup>

### Genesis of the Expedition

In 1818, an American eccentric named John C. Symmes put forward the “Holes in the Poles” theory. He declared the earth as hollow, with a habitable interior only accessible through openings at the North and South poles that were large enough to accommodate sailing ships. This was picked up by an enterprising newspaper editor from Ohio, Jeremiah Reynolds, who called for further research to establish the veracity of the so-called “polar holes”, eventually advocating a national maritime expedition to explore the mysteries of the South Pole. By 1828, Reynolds had managed to pique the interest of US Naval Secretary Samuel Southard and President John Quincy Adams.

Support also came from whalers and sealers who needed accurate charts of islands and navigational hazards in the Pacific Ocean. Whaling had become a booming business – whale oil was as significant then as crude oil is today – and the US was then the global industry leader. With whales hunted to near extinction in the Atlantic Ocean, the Pacific Ocean was

A sectional view of the earth showing the openings at the North and South poles. In 1818, American John C. Symmes put forward the “Holes in the Poles” theory. *Illustration reproduced from Seaborn, A. (1820). Symzonia: A Voyage of Discovery. New York: J. Seymour. Image from Wikimedia Commons.*

the next fertile ground and the ability to navigate safely in these waters would be crucial to its success.

The process of getting the expedition off the ground, however, dragged on for almost a decade as the government's priorities shifted due to political changes and financial pressures. Also, the public was suspicious of any scientific research, considering it the idle pastime of bored aristocrats. The expedition soon earned the unfortunate moniker the “Deplorable Expedition”.

In the midst of this, the financial crisis known as the Panic of 1837 struck the nation and thrust the American economy into chaos. Nonetheless, in 1838, against all odds, as directed by Secretary of War Joel Poinsett (who was also an amateur botanist), the U.S. Ex. Ex. was put back on the agenda and Lt. Charles Wilkes was asked to take full command of the mission.

A full-blown controversy erupted when this was announced. Wilkes (see text box overleaf) was one of 40 lieutenants on the navy list, along with 38 others who had chalked up more sea service than him. Such a command conferred upon a junior officer was unprecedented in the naval service and caused an uproar. Letters of protest poured in and heated debates ensued in Congress, but in the end the appointment went through.

### The A-Team

Wilkes personally selected the vessels, crew and scientists for the expedition. He also decided that all duties pertaining to astronomy, surveying, hydrography, geography, geodesy, magnetism, meteorology and physics would be the preserve of the naval officers. Any work relating to zoology, geology and mineralogy, botany and conchology was to be filled by the naval medical corps, failing which civilians could be appointed.

All personnel and crew members of the expedition came under the control and direction of Wilkes. Disappointed that there was no “respectable naturalist”<sup>2</sup> in the medical corps, he fell back on the best civilian talents the country could offer. The “Scientifics”,<sup>3</sup> as they were called, were a





Portrait of Charles Wilkes painted by Thomas Sully and engraved by R.W. Dodson. The image appears in vol. I of Charles Wilkes' *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition During the Years 1838, 1839, 1840, 1841, 1842*, published by Lea and Blanchard in 1845. Retrieved from Internet Archive.

### A MILITARY MAN AND A SCIENTIST

Lt. Charles Wilkes was 40 years old when he was given command of the U.S. Ex. Ex. in 1838. Wilkes was a military man and a scientist – a very exacting combination. He was also a proud man who firmly believed that no important accomplishment could be achieved without discipline. He demanded much of himself and those around him.

In addition to being self-opinionated and stubborn, Wilkes possessed a fiery temper and, as a result, became embroiled in frequent altercations with his superiors throughout his naval career. Incidentally, Wilkes is believed to be the inspiration for the character Captain Ahab in Herman Melville's 1851 classic, *Moby Dick*.<sup>1</sup>

But the truth was, in spite of his relatively junior rank, no officer in the navy was more suitable than Wilkes to lead the scientific mission. He had trained under two of the leading scientists in their fields – James Renwick and Ferdinand Hassler – under whose tutelage he became proficient in astronomy, magnetism, geodesy and nautical surveying.

True to his character, Wilkes accepted the appointment to lead the squadron as no more than his due and was granted a great deal of autonomy by Secretary of War Joel Poinsett to make plans and lead the expedition. The Ex. Ex. had many daunting objectives to fulfill – and Lt. Charles Wilkes was deemed the best person for the job.

#### NOTE

<sup>1</sup> Herman Melville's nephew, Hunn Gansevoort, was on the Wilkes expedition, but he detached with a sick ticket within 11 months. Melville incorporated aspects from the Ex. Ex. into his masterpiece, *Moby Dick*.

group of brilliant scientists and naturalists, almost all of whom went on to redefine the scientific fields of botany, zoology and geology as well as then emerging fields like volcanology and anthropology. Two artists were also part of the crew: they sketched and used the camera lucida – an optical device used to aid drawing – to capture portraits of people and to maintain a visual record of the voyage.

Also assembled onboard were taxidermists, equipment makers, carpenters, sailmakers and surgeons, in addition to naval officers (many of whom later became high-ranking servicemen), marines and other sailors. It was not glory or wealth but the thirst for knowledge that inspired many of these men to leave their homes and embark on a journey into the unknown.

### Sailing to the Ends of the Earth

The U.S. Ex. Ex. set sail at 3 pm on 18 August 1838 from New York. From the east coast of the United States, the fleet sailed to Madeira in Portugal, stopping at Porto Praya before heading to Rio de Janeiro in South America and then southwards to Cape Horn at the Tierra de Fuego, where they made their first attempt to reach the Antarctic.

The gales and terrible weather, however, forced the ships to turn back but not without the tragic loss of the USS *Sea Gull*: its 15 men on board were never seen again. The rest of the fleet sailed to Peru and headed westwards to survey and explore the Tuamotu and Society islands in the South Pacific, before moving on to Tahiti and Samoa, and finally arriving in Sydney, Australia, in November 1839.

The fleet sailed into Sydney harbour in the middle of the night. Delighted to be at a port where English was spoken, the Americans took every opportunity

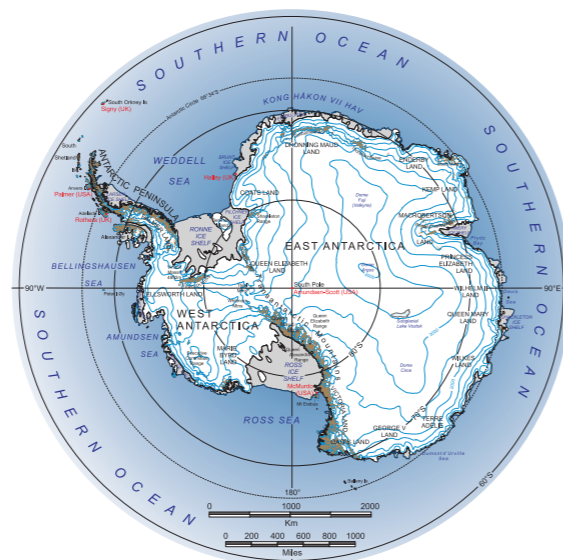
to enjoy the sights. They also noted that rum was used as a medium of exchange; with a population of 24,000 in the city, it seemed there was a tavern for every 100 inhabitants.

From Sydney, the U.S. Ex. Ex. launched a second encounter to the Antarctic on 26 December 1839. Well stocked with 10 months of provisions in case they became trapped in ice, the expedition proceeded south. On 19 January 1840, land was identified at roughly 160 degrees east and 67 degrees south. Wilkes surveyed and mapped nearly 1,500 miles (2,414 km) of the Antarctic coastline – considered a remarkable achievement to this day – providing substantial proof that Antarctica is a continent. In honour of Lt. Charles Wilkes, a million square miles (almost 2,600,000 sq km) of land on East Antarctica is named Wilkes Land.

From the icy waters of the Antarctic, the U.S. Ex. Ex. sailed towards New Zealand and then to the Fiji Islands, where four months were spent on detailed surveying. Altogether, 50 reefs and 154 islands were carefully mapped, but a bloody encounter between the crew members of the expedition and the Fijians mar this accomplishment. The Fijians had a reputation as cannibals. At first the crew thought these were mere myths but soon realised that the reports were true. As the fleet was preparing to leave Fiji in July 1840, two of its officers, one of them Wilkes' nephew, were killed by the islanders while bartering for food on Malolo Island. In the subsequent disproportionate reprisal by the Americans, some 60 islanders lost their lives.

Leaving Fiji behind, the expedition headed to Hawaii and from there to survey and chart the American Pacific

A map showing the major geographical features of the Antarctic continent. Wilkes Land, as indicated along the southwestern coast of East Antarctica, occupies an area of almost 2.6 million sq km. Image from Wikimedia Commons.



Northwest in April 1841. From California, the fleet briefly returned to Honolulu and proceeded to Manila in the Philippines. By then, time was running out for the expedition. Wilkes had promised the crew that they would return to the US by the end of May 1842, and the men were eager to get home.

The U.S. Ex. Ex. left Manila in January 1842, making their way home via the Sulu Sea. When Sultan Jamal ul-Kiram I of Sulu sent word that he was interested in establishing closer trading ties with the US, Wilkes signed a peace and trade treaty with the king, which gave protection to US vessels and a shorter passage to Manila and on to Canton (now Guangzhou) in China.

Heading south, on their return journey, the fleet made one last stop in Singapore before returning to the US. The expedition's documentation of Singapore constitutes one of the first primary accounts of Singapore by Americans.

### Singapore Stopover

On 19 February 1842, the USS *Vincennes* with Wilkes on board arrived in Singapore,<sup>4</sup> then part of the Straits Settlements together with Malacca and Penang. Wilkes was warmly received by the US consul Joseph Balestier, his wife Maria Revere – the daughter of the famous American patriot Paul Revere – and son Joseph. The two men had become acquainted some years earlier in Washington prior to Balestier's arrival in Singapore. In fact, Wilkes had provided Balestier with information on the region, including a copy of the best map he had at the time. Balestier reciprocated Wilkes' kindness by hosting him in Singapore. Years later, when Wilkes wrote his autobiography, he would make special mention of a huge cabinet presented to him by Mrs Balestier, fashioned out of "woods of this country [Singapore]".<sup>5</sup>

Wilkes and his crew were so fascinated with Singapore that he dedicated an entire chapter to the island in his "Narrative" of the expedition.<sup>6</sup> Several astute observations were made by Wilkes and the crew during their brief stay here. It is remarkable that several of these observations hold true almost 200 years later.

### A Colourful Melting Pot

The crew was amazed by the confluence of races, languages and cultures in Singapore and the peaceful coexistence among the people, the "rarity of quarrels between different races and religions owing to the consideration of the place being neutral

### A SIZEABLE FLEET

Most European exploring expeditions in the 19th century used modestly sized ships. But the US Navy went one up by assembling a squadron of six sailing vessels with officers, crew and scientists numbering almost 500 strong, making it one of the largest voyages of discovery in the history of Western exploration. The original fleet comprised the following:

- The USS *Vincennes*, a fast 127-foot Boston-class sloop-of-war with a crew of 190. This was the flagship under the command of Lt. Charles Wilkes.

- The 118-foot USS *Peacock*, a slightly smaller, full-rigged sloop-of-war rebuilt for the expedition, and manned by a crew of 130. (When the *Peacock* ran aground on 18 July 1841, the USS *Oregon*, an 85-foot brigantine, accommodated the officers and crew of the lost ship.)
- The two-masted 88-foot brigantine USS *Porpoise* with a crew of 65.
- The USS *Relief*, a slow 109-foot supply ship with a crew of 75.
- Two small 70-foot schooners, USS *Sea Gull* and USS *Flying Fish*, each manned by a crew of 15. (*Sea Gull* went missing on 8 May 1839 when it was caught in a storm.)

ground". They were also "struck with the order and good behaviour existing among such an incongruous mass of human being[s]... speaking a vast variety of tongues, and some of who would infallibly have been at war with each other elsewhere".<sup>7</sup> Wilkes called Singapore the "Babel of the East".<sup>8</sup>

### A Thriving Entrepôt

Wilkes estimated there were at least 1,500–2,000 vessels in the port at any one time, with numerous *prahu* (wooden sailing boats) from neighbouring Riau and Lingga, Celebes, Flores, Timor, Ambon, Sumba and Lubok, and also from resource-rich Borneo. Popular goods imported from Riau and Lingga included

Some of the items obtained by the Wilkes Expedition from Southeast Asia include the *kris* (dagger) and a model of a *prahu* (wooden sailing boat). These are currently kept at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History. Courtesy of Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of Natural History, Department of Anthropology (E3911-0 & E3893-0).

pepper, rice, camphor, sago, coffee, nutmeg, oil, tobacco, *biche-de-mer* (sea cucumber), birds' nests, tortoise shells, pearls, rattan, ivory, animal hides and *sarongs*, among other items.<sup>9</sup> Boats from Papua and Aru brought birds of paradise flowers, which were found in abundance in the markets of Singapore.





The expedition noted that “every avenue, arcade, or veranda approaching it [the bazaar] is filled with money-changers, and small-ware dealers, eager for selling European goods, Chinese toys, and many other attractive curiosities.”<sup>10</sup>

Singapore was described as a thriving entrepôt, with arriving goods redistributed to other places, with hardly anything produced here. Vessels that called at the port were not charged duties on imports or exports, and the only questions asked were the contents of the cargo, the value of the goods and the size of the vessel. Such information was then published weekly in the newspaper, “so anyone may inform themselves of the charges he is liable to incur and of the advantages it has over the other ports in the Eastern seas.”<sup>11</sup>

The era of steam-powered vessels was just starting to take off and Wilkes mentions that “during... [his] stay in Singapore, the subject of steam navigation was much talked of, and many projects appeared to be forming by which the settlement might reap the advantages of that communication, when established between India and China.”<sup>12</sup>

#### A Place of Transience

In 1842, the population in Singapore was recorded as 60,000, comprising 45,000 Chinese, 8,000 Malays and 7,000 Indians, with only one-tenth of the whole as female. The people were diverse, with Malays, Chinese, Hindus and Muslims, Jews, Armenians and Europeans, and Parsees, Bugis and Arabs. Wilkes wrote about the transient nature of the population, remarking that “no European looks upon the East as a home, and all those of every

nation I met with invariably considered his sojourn temporary.”<sup>13</sup> The Chinese, for instance, were likely to return home to China as soon they acquired a skill, even at the risk of being punished for having left their homeland illegally.

#### Lush Flora and Fauna

Wilkes and his men found the jungle undergrowth in the interior so impenetrable that no Europeans or natives had ever climbed Bukit Timah Hill, the highest point of the island even though it was only 500 ft (152 m) high. Tigers were not indigenous to Singapore, but the big cats had begun to swim across the narrow Johor Strait from the Malay Peninsula in search of food. Even criminals and thieves avoided their usual escape routes in the jungles for fear of tigers.

Records of the crops grown here included nutmeg, coffee, black pepper, cocoa, gambier, gamboge (a kind of resin) and a variety of fruits. Timber was also an important cash crop, and highly prized for shipbuilding. The Americans noted an abundance of fruit in Singapore; they were told “that there are 120 kinds that can be served as a dessert”<sup>14</sup> and they especially enjoyed pineapples. They collected many zoological, conchological and botanical specimens, including two species of the *Nepenthe* (pitcher plants) that were preserved and brought back to the US.

#### A Vibrant Cultural Scene

The arrival of the U.S. Ex. Ex. in Singapore coincided with the Chinese New Year celebrations. The eve fell on 21 February 1842, and the expedition members were awed by the processions of lanterns, noisy gongs

and cymbals. Wilkes described the sight of “an immense illuminated sea-serpent” made of lanterns.<sup>15</sup> The Americans were astonished at “the extent and earnestness with which gaming was carried [out] by the Chinese at every shop, bazaar and corner of almost every street with cards or dice... their whole soul seemed to be staked with their money.”<sup>16</sup>

They also watched a Chinese opera and an Indian theatrical show that was performed by plantation workers on Balestier’s estate. In addition to Chinese New Year, the Americans also encountered Muharram processions.<sup>17</sup> Wilkes observed men and boys playing football which he called “hobscob”, although it was most likely *sepak takraw*, a sport played with a rattan ball and native to the Malay Archipelago. The expedition also witnessed wedding and funeral processions, and even visited Chinese and Hindu cemeteries.

#### The Scourge of Opium

According to Wilkes’ account, opium smoking in Singapore was one of the most repugnant sights witnessed by expedition members during their time on the island. Opium was easily available and shops were licensed to sell it, which was a huge source of revenue for the government but a great cause of human degeneracy. Many of the vessels that trafficked opium were either owned or operated by merchants. Wilkes noted “how some of those who knew its effects and condemned its use engaged in and defended its trade...”<sup>18</sup>

One of the crew wrote that opium vendors would set up their “little table in the public street, with his box and scales upon it, and tempting samples of the “dreamy drug... A single glance of these opium dealers will convince you that they are their own best customers... [with] their soiled and disorderly dress, the palsied hand and pale cheek, the sunken eye and vacant stare...”<sup>19</sup>

#### The Library of Congress and the Singapore Link

Wilkes and his team obtained a number of rare Malay and Bugis manuscripts and books with the help of the Singapore-based American missionary Alfred North.<sup>20</sup> Some of these beautifully written manuscripts were described “as forming a collection which is said to be the largest now in being, that of Sir Stamford Raffles having been lost”.<sup>21</sup> (Raffles’ precious collection of drawings, manuscripts, books and wildlife specimens were destroyed when the ship *Fame*, taking him and his family back to



(Above) Opium smoking was one of the social ills that plagued Singaporean society in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Courtesy of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.



(Left) In Singapore, Charles Wilkes and his team obtained a number of rare documents with the help of American missionary Alfred North. One of these is a letter (shown here) from Sultan Ahmad of Terengganu to William Farquhar dated 29 Rejab 1234 (24 May 1819). Farquhar Collection, Asian Division, courtesy of Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

Indonesia, and are an important source of information about the early British colonial period in the region.

Among the documents are seven letters from the Raja Bendahara of Johor-Pahang (1819–22), three letters from the Pangeran Dipati of Palembang (1819–22), and a letter from Sultana Siti Fatimah binti Jamaluddin Abdul Rahman of Pamanah dated 1822. There are also numerous letters from Riau dating from 1818, as well as those from Siak, Lingga, Terengganu and other places.

Other treasures of note are two copies of the rare 1840 lithographed Mission Press edition of the *Sejarah Melayu (Malay Annals)* written in Jawi,<sup>23</sup> a copy of the *Hikayat Abdullah* (1843) by Munshi Abdullah,<sup>24</sup> as well as codices such as *Hikayat Amir Hamzah* (1838),<sup>25</sup> *Hikayat Johor* (1838),<sup>26</sup> *Hikayat Panca Tanderan* (1835), *Hikayat Patani* (1839), and a handcopied (by Munshi Abdullah) version of *Kitab Tib* from 1837.

#### Home at Last – But No Hero’s Welcome

The U.S. Ex. Ex. set off from Singapore on 26 February 1842 without the smallest ship in the fleet, the *USS Flying Fish*. She had been sold because her frame had weakened considerably and was

unlikely to survive the perilous journey home around the Cape of Good Hope in the hurricane season.

When the *USS Vincennes* finally pulled into New York harbour on 10 June 1842, there was no welcome ceremony or celebration after its nearly four-year sojourn. Much had changed politically in the country in the time Wilkes and his crew were away. Instead, Wilkes and several other officers were court-martialled for various charges—including abuse of power—that distracted from the achievements of the expedition. In the end, Wilkes was found not guilty on all counts, except for using excessive punishment on his men, for which he was reprimanded.

In the days that followed, Wilkes marshalled the support of influential politicians to safeguard the discoveries of the expedition. It is to Wilkes’ credit that the first-ever national institutions in the US became home to the important collections that the U.S. Ex. Ex. had brought home, where their proper safekeeping and study could be ensured.

Despite the dent to his reputation, Wilkes was placed in charge of the expedition’s collections on 1 August 1843.<sup>27</sup> Once again, he was deemed the best person for the job and set about preserving and preparing the collection for display in addition to preparing reports and directing the production of the expedition charts. The “Collection of the Exploring Expedition” was displayed at the Patent Office Building in Washington D.C. until 1858 when it was transferred to the Smithsonian Institution which, together with artefacts from American history, influenced the early development of the institution.

In 1844, the original and official (by the authority of Congress) publication of the expedition, titled *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition, During the Years 1838, 1839, 1840, 1841, 1842*, was assembled by Wilkes using the journals and records of his officers and others. The work was issued in five volumes with illustrations, maps and an atlas.<sup>28</sup>

#### The Legacy of the U.S. Ex. Ex.

The expedition was not an easy one by any measure—the gruelling four-year sea voyage saw the loss of close to 40 men and two ships, the *USS Sea Gull* and *USS Peacock*. Despite the immense challenges of the mission and the difficulties that beset Wilkes on his return, the accomplishments of the U.S. Ex. Ex. would go down in the annals of American history for its success in not only promoting American commerce and

The Thian Hock Keng temple in Singapore sketched by Alfred T. Agate and engraved by J.A. Rolph in 1842. The image appears in vol. v of Charles Wilkes’ *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition During the Years 1838, 1839, 1840, 1841, 1842*, published by Lea and Blanchard in 1845. Retrieved from Internet Archive.





industry, but also for expanding the borders of scientific knowledge. Altogether, some 40 tons of material were brought back by the expedition, along with an astounding amount of data.

The team surveyed 280 Pacific islands, created 180 charts and logged 87,000 miles (140,013 km) without the use of modern navigation aids. The expedition also mapped 800 miles (1,287 km) of the Pacific Northwest coastline and 1,500 miles (2,414 km) of icebound and frozen Antarctica coast. A century later, during the Pacific campaign in World War II, the maps and charts created by the U.S. Ex. of the Pacific Islands (Tarawa, Gilbert and Marshall islands) would be used for the American island-hopping strategy during the war.<sup>29</sup>

The Wilkes Expedition played an important role in the development of science not only in the US but the world over. By making its research publicly available, the expedition was also instrumental in the democratisation of science. The specimens and items amassed from the expedition formed the core collection of many departments at the Smithsonian Institution, and the work of the “Scientists” would profoundly affect the subsequent development of American science and, by extension, all scientific discovery on the global stage. ♦

The items collected from the Wilkes Expedition were initially kept by the National Institute for the Promotion of Science. In 1858, the collection was transferred to the Smithsonian Institution and housed in the museum (seen here) in the Smithsonian Institution Building, nicknamed The Castle. *Image reproduced from Rhees, W.J. (1859). An account of the Smithsonian Institution, its founder, building, operations, etc. : prepared from the reports of Prof. Henry to the regents, and other authentic sources (p. 20). Washington: Thomas McGill. Retrieved from Internet Archive.*



**ON PAPER: SINGAPORE BEFORE 1867**

Among the rare manuscripts and documents that the U.S. Ex. Ex. obtained from Singapore and kept at the Library of Congress in Washington D.C. are official correspondence and letters addressed to British Resident William Farquhar. Seven of these letters will be on display at the National Library’s upcoming exhibition, “On Paper: Singapore Before 1867”, which opens in the last quarter of 2019 at level 10 of the National Library Building.

The exhibition will showcase over 100 items from the National Library,

National Archives of Singapore and National Museum of Singapore, as well as from overseas institutions such as The British Library, National Library of the Republic of Indonesia and National Archives of the Netherlands. Comprising manuscripts, maps, letters, treaties, paintings, photographs and other forms of documentation, these paper artefacts trace the history of Singapore until its establishment as a Crown Colony on 1 April 1867.

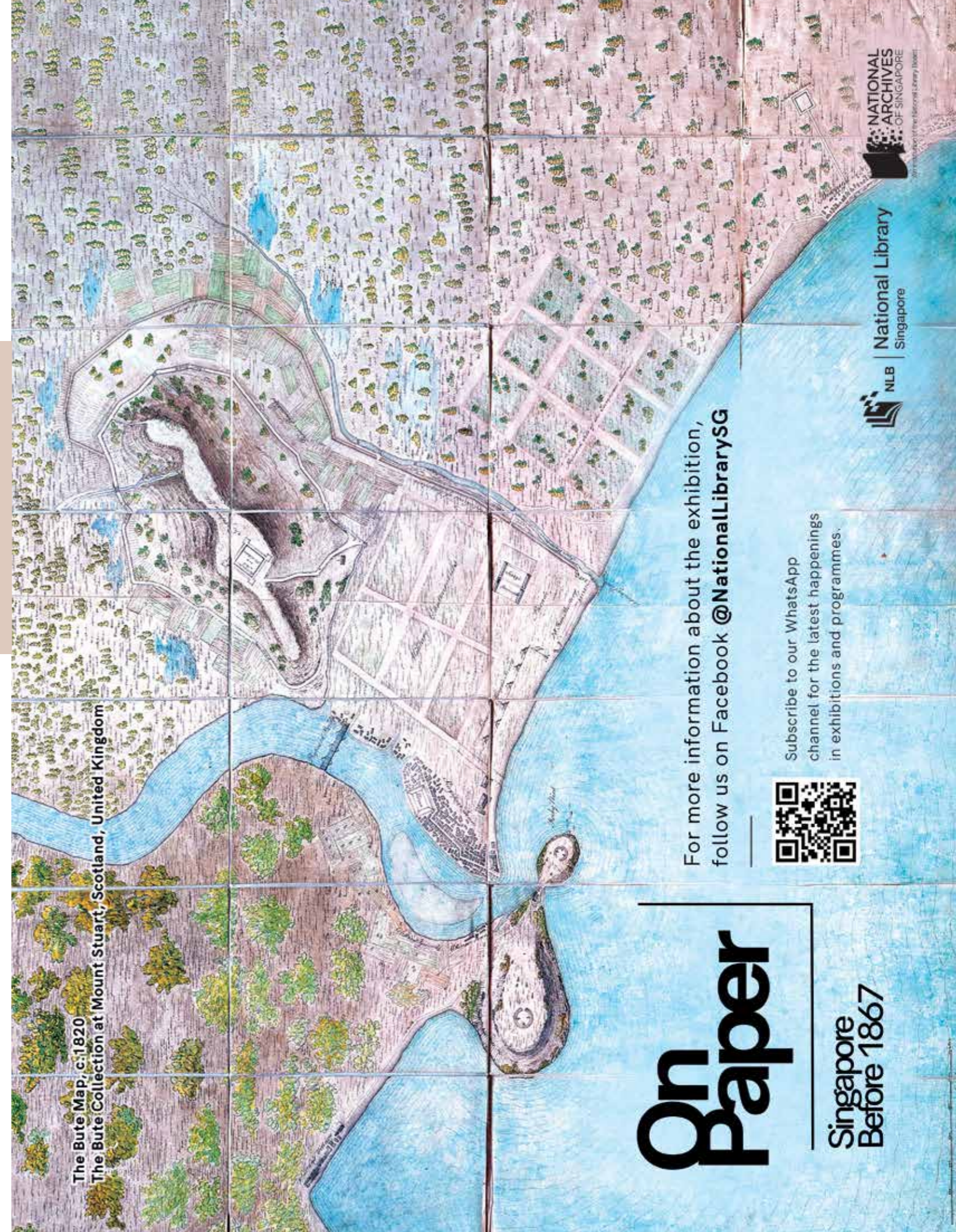
A companion book of the same title will be launched in conjunction with the exhibition. For more details on the exhibition opening date, follow us on Facebook @NationalLibrarySG.

**NOTES**

- 1 Wilkes, C. (1842). *Synopsis of the cruise of the U.S. Exploring Expedition during the years 1838, '39, '40, '41 & '42 delivered before the National Institute by its Commander Charles Wilkes on the twentieth of June 1842 to which is added a list of officers and scientific corps attached to the expedition* (p. 6). Washington, DC: Peter Force. Retrieved from Internet Archive.
- 2 Stanton, W. (1975). *The Great United States Exploring Expedition of 1838–1842* (p. 63). Berkeley, Los Angeles; London: University of California Press. (Not available in NLB holdings)
- 3 The roster of the civilian corps, as it appeared on the date of sailing and as it remained for the most part throughout the voyage was as follows: Charles Pickering and Titian Peale (naturalists), Joseph Couthouy (conchologist), James Dana (mineralogist and geologist), William Brackenridge (horticulturist), William Rich (botanist), Horatio Hale (philologist), Joseph Drayton and Alfred Agate (artists/draughtsmen). See Feipel, L.N. (1914). *The Wilkes Exploring Expedition. Its Progress through Half a Century: 1826–1876. United States Naval Institute Proceedings*, XL, pp. 1323–50. (Not available in NLB holdings)
- 4 *USS Porpoise* and *USS Oregon* had arrived in Singapore almost a month earlier on 22 January 1842 and *USS Flying Fish* on 16 February 1842.
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- 16 Wilkes, 1845, vol. V, p. 404; Colvocoresses, G.M. (1855). *Four years in the Government Exploring Expedition; commanded by Captain Charles Wilkes, to the island of Madeira, Cape Verd Island, Brazil...* (5th edition; p. 348). New York: J.M. Fairchild. Retrieved from Hathi Trust Digital Library.
- 17 Wilkes, 1845, vol. V, p. 410. [Note: Muharram is the first month of the Islamic calendar. On the first day of Muharram, the Islamic new year is celebrated. The 10th day of Muharram is known as the day of Ashura, which commemorates the death of Husayn ibn Ali, a grandson of Prophet Muhammad.]
- 18 Wilkes, 1845, vol. V, p. 428.
- 19 Colvocoresses, 1855, p. 346.
- 20 Of interest to note is that when the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions Singapore mission station shut down in 1843, Houghton Library of Harvard University became the repository of the remaining archives and contains many valuable manuscripts.
- 21 Wilkes, 1845, vol. V, p. 420.
- 22 Teeuw, A. (1967). *Korte Mededelingen: Malay Manuscripts in the Library of Congress. Bijdragen tot de taal-, land-, en volkenkunde*, 123 (4), pp.

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- 23 NLB also has the 1840 edition which has been digitised. See Munshi Abdullah. (1840). *Sejarah Melayu*. Singapore: Mission Press. Retrieved from BookSG.
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- 25 NLB does not have the 1838 edition. NLB’s 1865 edition has not been digitised, but a microfilm copy is available. See *Hikayat Amir Hamzah*. (1865). [S.l.: s.n.]. (Microfilm no.: NL1886)
- 26 NLB does not have the 1838 edition. Instead see this edition: Muhammad Said. (199-). *Hikayat Johor dan tawarikh al Marhum Sulan Abu Bakar*. London: Oriental and India Office Collections, Reference Service Division, British Library. (Call no.: RCLOS Malay 959.511903 MUH)
- 27 Viola, H.J., & Margolis, C. (Eds.). (1985). *Magnificent voyagers: The U.S. Exploring Expedition, 1838–1842* (p. 197). Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press. (Not available in NLB holdings)
- 28 Only 100 copies were produced in 1844, and thus were much sought after. Beyond the five initial volumes, there were 24 additional volumes planned covering topics such as ethnography, mammalogy, ornithology, geology and botany, but not all were eventually published.
- 29 Also known as leapfrogging, this was a military strategy employed by the Allies in the Pacific War against the Axis powers (most notably Japan) during World War II. The goal was to control strategic islands, island-by-island, using each as a base along a path towards Japan with the eventual aim of bringing US bombers within range of an invasion.



The Bute Map, c.1820  
The Bute Collection at Mount Stuart, Scotland, United Kingdom

**On Paper**

Singapore Before 1867

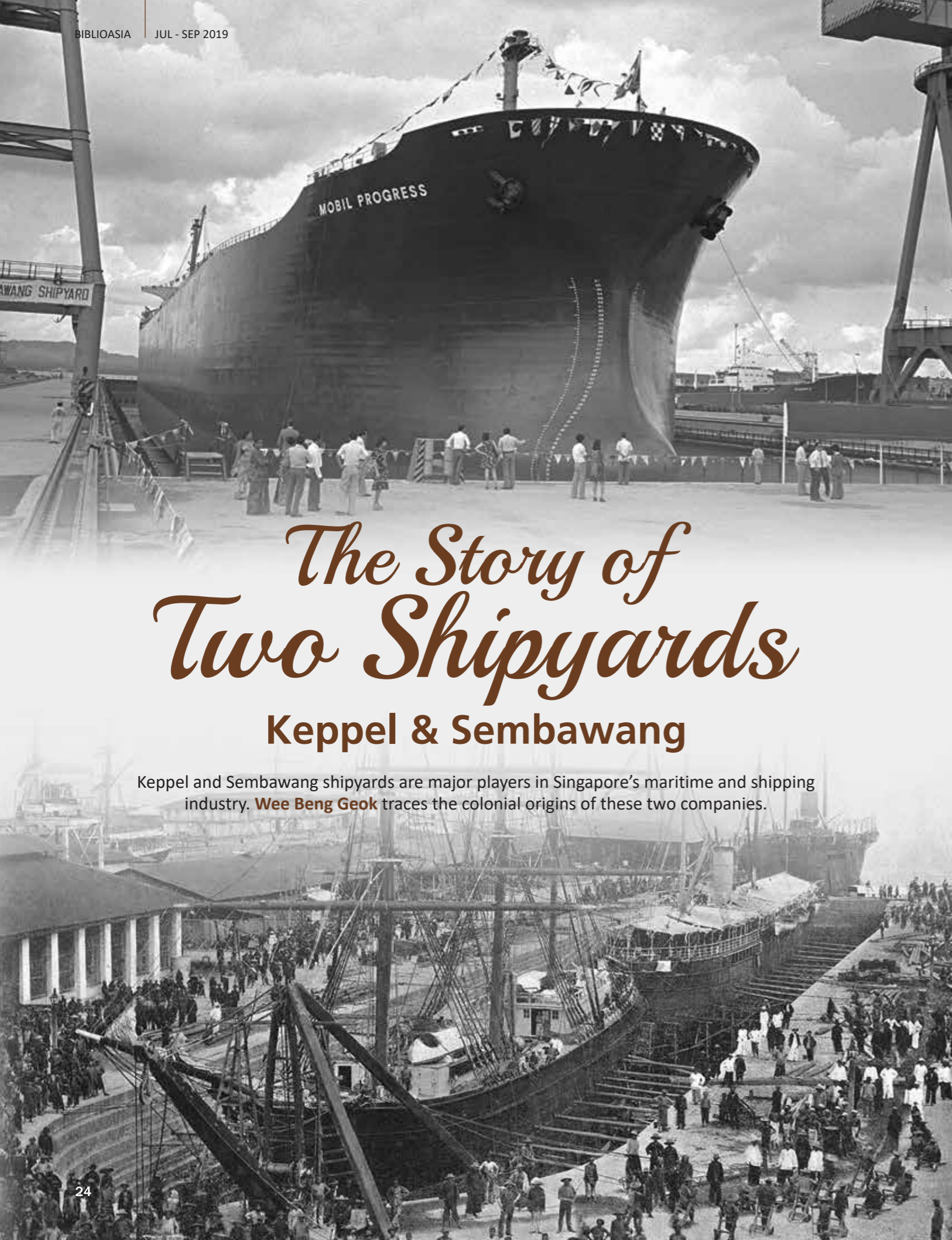
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# The Story of Two Shipyards

## Keppel & Sembawang

Keppel and Sembawang shipyards are major players in Singapore's maritime and shipping industry. **Wee Beng Geok** traces the colonial origins of these two companies.

**Dr Wee Beng Geok** is a former Associate Professor of Strategy and Management at Nanyang Technological University. In 2000, she set up the Asian Business Case Centre, Nanyang Business School, and was its director for 15 years. She has also worked in the corporate sector, including more than a decade in Singapore's marine industry.

Singapore has always been highly prized for its location. Fortuitously positioned at the southern tip of the Malay Peninsula, at a key crossroad along the East-West trade route, its importance as a port settlement can be traced to the 14th century when the island was known as Temasek.

In 1819, the British arrived on the scene, and were quick to grasp Singapore's potential as an entrepôt and a base to spread its version of merchant capitalism in Southeast Asia. Land was leased from the indigenous rulers to set up a British trading post on the island, and in a treaty signed in 1824, Singapore was ceded in full to Britain. For the next 140 years, the British built institutions that would lay the foundations for the rise of a modern global city, including a market infrastructure that took advantage of Singapore's strategic position as a prime node in the global shipping routes.

Two dockyard entities from the colonial period became precursors of well-known post-independence companies: Keppel Shipyard and Sembawang Shipyard. Although the origins and legacies of these two shipyards could not be more different, their trajectories were shaped by the imperatives of the British Empire as well as an industrialising Britain that was at the forefront of major technological and business innovations. One shipyard had purely commercial roots, while the other was a military naval base established to protect British imperial interests in Asia.

### Early Dockyard Entrepreneurs

The advent of steamships for sea transportation in the 19th century drew entrepreneurs to invest in the ship repair business in Singapore. Although steamships were faster and more reliable compared with wind-powered vessels, repairs to the steamship hull – unlike sailing vessels – could not be done by beaching the vessel<sup>1</sup> but had to be carried out in a drydock.<sup>2</sup>

The use of steamships also required new logistical arrangements. Coal, the energy source of steamships, had to be first transferred from coal-carrying ships anchored at the mouth of the Singapore River onto small lighters, which in



(Facing page top) A large crude carrier at Sembawang Shipyard's new Premier Dock, a \$50-million, 400,000-dwt drydock, at its official opening by then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew in May 1975. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

(Facing page bottom) Albert Dock was built by the Tanjong Pagar Dock Company in Tanjong Pagar in 1879. It was located to the east of Victoria Dock, the company's first drydock which began operations in 1868. Lim Kheng Chye Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

(Above) Rows of lighter boats at Boat Quay, 1890. These lighters transported coal from the coal-carrying ships anchored at the mouth of the Singapore River to be stored in godowns along the river banks. When the steamships arrived for refuelling, lighters would transport the coal out to the steamships. Courtesy of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

turn transported the coal to warehouses situated along the river bank for storage. Lighters then transported the coal out to the arriving steamships. It was a laborious process, made all the worse during stormy weather and choppy seas when the lighters would sometimes capsize, resulting in tons of lost coal. Furthermore, stored damp coal combusted easily and became a constant fire hazard.

In 1845, the Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company (P&O) in London began monthly sailings to the Far East, including a stop in Singapore. In 1852, P&O became the first shipping company to move its coaling stations from the Singapore River to New Harbour (now Keppel Harbour<sup>3</sup>) where it built its own wharf. The new location had a sheltered anchorage, a pier for bunkering, as well as space for coal storage and godowns (warehouses). Other shipping firms followed suit and New Harbour, with its deep waters, soon became the preferred berthing location for ships calling at Singapore.

With increased steamship traffic, several Singapore-based British and European companies as well as residents became keen to invest in the construction of drydocks for ship repair. Although considerable start-up capital was needed, the returns were projected to be good

and several companies were willing to take the risk.

### Competition, Monopoly and a Government Takeover

New Harbour was deemed a suitable location for drydocking facilities. In 1859, British mariner Captain William Cloughton built Singapore's first drydock, aptly named Dock No. 1, at New Harbour. The Patent Slip and Dock Company was subsequently formed in 1861 to assume control of this ship repair facility.

In 1864, a group of investors decided to build another drydock at New Harbour. To raise funds for the project, they set up a joint-stock limited liability company – Tanjong Pagar Dock Company Limited (TPDC) – which became the first local joint-stock company to offer shares to the public in Singapore.

The TPDC initially hoped to raise \$200,000 in Singapore, with 2,000 shares of \$100 each available for purchase. However, as not all shares were taken up by local residents, the balance was sold to investors in London. With a reasonably attractive dividend policy, TPDC shares were considered a good investment by the 1870s. In subsequent fundraising exercises, new shares were offered for sale at a premium, with some bought by shareholders in London.



Victoria Dock, TPDC's first drydock located on the western side of Tanjong Pagar, started operations in 1868. With the opening of this new dock, the Patent Slip and Dock Company faced intense competition. It mounted a price war, and TPDC was forced to cut its prices. Although TPDC's drydock business faced losses as a result of this move, its wharf services still managed to turn in a profit and became the company's main income source.

With the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, more steamships called at Singapore and, by the following year, dock operations had become profitable. In 1870, Patent built its second dock, Dock No. 2, at New Harbour. Nine years later, in 1879, TPDC built another drydock, Albert Dock, located to the east of Victoria Dock, to meet the growing demand. The TPDC began to acquire smaller rivals that owned docks and wharves at New Harbour, but who were less able to withstand the competitive business environment.

Finally, in 1899, TPDC merged with its main rival, the New Harbour Dock Company (in 1875, Patent Slip and Dock Company had incorporated itself into a public company bearing this name). With this acquisition, TPDC came to control the entire shipping, dockyard and wharf business at New Harbour, except for the P&O wharf. Singapore's port and its future prosperity rested heavily on TPDC's shoulders.

Singapore's port was the seventh largest in the world in 1904 but faced strong overseas competition, especially from the port in Hong Kong. TPDC's port

facilities became increasingly inadequate to compete internationally and the company's wharf system was under severe strain as no major improvements to its facilities had been carried out since 1885.

This situation was exacerbated by differences with regard to capital spending between the TPDC Board in Singapore and the London Consulting Committee in Britain representing the company's group of European and British shareholders.<sup>4</sup>

In March 1904, TPDC submitted a \$12-million modernisation plan to upgrade and expand its facilities, including a proposed financing scheme. This was rejected by the company's Europe-based shareholders, who were concerned that the costs of financing the project would "endanger a dividend of 12 per cent".<sup>5</sup> TPDC sought financial support from the Straits Settlements government, but instead the government decided to expropriate the company's assets and take over the management of its operations.

With the passing of the Tanjong Pagar Dock Ordinance in April 1905, TPDC became a government organisation known as the Tanjong Pagar Dock Board. TPDC shareholders received from the government \$761 for each \$100 share – substantially higher than the \$600 peak reached by the share in the stock market. The board was reconstituted in 1913 as a statutory board known as Singapore Harbour Board (SHB). In the same year, the SHB launched King's Dock, the largest dock east of the Suez. In 1917, another drydock, Empire Dock, was completed. Port facilities at Keppel Harbour were also enhanced.

The SHB retained TPDC's monopolistic ship repair business, and for the next five decades, it controlled the entire chain of repair business at Keppel Harbour. With its sizeable facilities, the SHB soon edged out the smaller shipyards and engineering workshops in Tanjong Rhu and Kallang. This commanding position lulled the SHB to such complacency that by the end of the 1950s, capital investment had slowed down considerably and SHB's costs and productivity began lagging behind overseas dockyards like Hong Kong's.

**A New Naval Base in Asia**

After World War I, as the locus of naval power moved to the Pacific, the Board of Admiralty in London, as part of its appraisal of British naval policy, proposed building a new naval base facility in Asia. In the light of the growing threat posed by the Japanese military and rising international tensions, Britain grew anxious to protect its empire in Asia, and Singapore was considered the most ideal location for its new naval base.

Although British naval ships had previously docked at SHB's drydocks, the new British battleships were too large to berth at these facilities as their anti-torpedo bulges extended out on either side of the ship's hull. Thus, Sungei Sembawang, facing the Johor Strait, was chosen as the new site to construct the naval dockyard. Its strategic location as well as the deep waters of the Johor Strait would provide good anchorage for the naval fleet, bolstered by facilities such as onshore wharves and workshops.

The Singapore Naval Base Scheme was announced to the British Parliament in 1923. The plan was immediately met with hostile reactions from the British public, who were weary of war and expected the government to improve their lives through more social spending. Although the original plan was for the naval dockyard in Singapore to be completed in 1930, the construction timeline was extended by another three years to avoid the immediate need for heavy expenditure. The completion date of the naval dockyard was thus pushed back to 1933.

To appease its citizens back home, Britain sought monetary contributions from its Asian colonies to ease the funding burden. In May 1923, Singapore made a gift of 2,845 acres of land for the naval base valued at about £150,000, or 1.25 million Straits dollars. This was followed by a donation of £250,000 from the Hong Kong government. Domestic issues in Britain in 1924, however, impeded progress

**The Biggest Naval Dock In The World**

**Story Of The Naval Base**

*THIS supplement contains a full length historical account of the development of the Singapore naval base, written especially for the Free Press by David S. Waite. This is the first time such a survey of Defence activity here has been published. The story is told in five chapters:*

**CHAPTER I** deals with the early history of Singapore as a defended port up to 1900;

**CHAPTER II** discusses the genesis of the present naval base project, and the early discussions on its advisability;

**CHAPTER III** continues the story from the Labour Government's abandonment of the work, its revival under the Conservative, up to the £2,000,000 gift of the F.M.S. Sultans towards the cost;

**CHAPTER IV** describes the base site just ten years ago, the signing of a £4,000,000 contract, the towing to Singapore of the floating dock and the progress of the work;

**CHAPTER V** discusses estimates of the total cost of the Defence Bill at Singapore, the share paid by Empire gifts and recalls the Defence Contribution Controversy in Singapore.

*Other articles on various aspects of the naval base are also published. On page 24 are four remarkable pictures showing how the graving dock was built.*



H. K. Sir Stratton Thomas, the Governor of the Straits Settlements, who will open the dock.

tion of the dock, and wherever possible Malayan goods have been bought.

Thus the granite for the concrete and dressed masonry came from the quarry at East London, the property of the Sultan of Johore, although a small proportion of it came from quarries in Cornwall. The granite had to be chiselled to a point of mathematical accuracy where the crown was fitted to the dock.

During most of the work a thick earth dam separated the dock from the sea.

The site of the float ramp from 5½ ft. long by 3½ inches wide and five inches thick (the smallest is 2½ feet long by 1½ inches wide and a thickness tapering from 17½ inches to 15½ inches). These have spacing beams from the base of the docks and are arranged as to facilitate ear of change of the upper stocks to fit the bottoms of various warships using the dock.

Looking across the dock, as spectators at the opening ceremony today will do, one sees a wide ex-

(Left) When completed in 1938, King George VI Dock at the Singapore Naval Base in Sembawang was touted as one of the largest naval docks ever built and capable of accommodating the biggest ship in the world. *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 14 February 1938, p. 1.

(Below left) King George VI Dock under construction at the Singapore Naval Base, 1933. *The National Archives of the UK (ADM195/106)*.

prospect of a war with Japan, the completion of Sembawang Naval Base became a priority for Britain. King George VI Dock was finally completed in early 1938 and was touted as one of the largest naval docks ever built, capable of accommodating the biggest ship in the world.

**The War Comes to Singapore**

In December 1941, as Japanese imperial forces advanced into Singapore from Malaya, Sembawang Naval Base came under heavy Japanese shell and mortar attack. Just before the British surrendered to the Japanese on 15 February 1942, the retreating British naval personnel blew up the drydock's caisson and pumps as well as its electrical generating plant. The intention was to prevent the Japanese from using the naval base. The Japanese navy, however, managed to repair the damaged facilities at Sembawang Naval Base and used it to service its naval fleet during the Japanese Occupation.

As the tide of war turned in late 1944, the naval base became the target of air raids by Allied Forces, and the dockyard facilities suffered severe damage. When the British returned to Singapore following the Japanese surrender in September 1945, they began repairing and upgrading the naval base facilities. By the end of 1951, Sembawang Naval Base was back on its feet again.

The postwar years leading up to the 1960s were the most productive for the naval base. With British involvement in the Korean War in 1949 and other regional conflicts, the dockyard serviced a wide range of naval vessels in the region, including aircraft carriers, commando helicopter carriers, cruisers, destroyers, frigates, submarines and minesweepers.

**Developing a Ship Repair Industry**

Singapore inched closer to independence from British rule when the first Legislative Assembly general election was held in 1959. The victorious People's Action Party which formed the government, was faced with bleak economic prospects and severe unemployment, and its key priority

This wood-engraved print shows the opening of Victoria Dock at New Harbour by then Governor Harry St. George Ord on 17 October 1868. *Courtesy of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.*



when the incoming Labour government blocked the funds that had been earmarked for the construction of the dock. When the Conservative government returned to power in late 1924, the Singapore Naval Base Scheme was revived, but the construction of the drydock was delayed yet again.

In mid-1926, the largest single contribution of £2 million was received from the Federated Malay States. Then in April 1927, New Zealand came forward with a commitment of £1 million to be disbursed over eight years.

In 1928, the tender for the drydock and wharf construction in Sembawang was awarded to a South African company, Sir John Jackson's Ltd, for £3.7 million, and

construction began with some 5,000 workmen and 100 British staff. Millions of feet of soil were dug, and 1.6 million tons of granite stone were brought in from Johor. In the same year, a newly built floating dock, with lifting capacity of 50,000 tons, was commissioned at Sembawang, and a floating crane with a lifting capacity of 100 tons also arrived.

However, the building momentum almost ground to a halt when a new Labour government came into power in Britain in 1929. As the government was unable to abort the project, it decided to slow down the pace of construction.

In 1931, the Japanese army invaded Manchuria. Faced with the looming



## DOCKYARD STRIKES

The dockyards were not spared the highly politicised labour movement that swept through Singapore in the 1950s and 60s. On 30 April 1955, around 1,300 port workers employed by the Singapore Harbour Board (SHB) Staff Association went on strike for better wages and working conditions. In June, the strike found greater support when unions representing 40,000 workers in Singapore threatened to join their shipyard counterparts.

The strike ended on 6 July after an agreement was reached between the association and the SHB management. According to one estimate, the protracted negotiations over the three-month period took up nearly 100 hours, with the SHB forking out at least \$500,000 a year as a result of the wage increases it offered to the striking workers.

The government became concerned that labour activism could derail its efforts to commercialise the dockyards. With the incorporation of Keppel and Sembawang shipyards as business entities in 1968, house unions were set up to represent employees of each shipyard, with the hope of aligning the union's objectives with that of the new business enterprise.

was the creation of jobs for a young and growing population.

In October 1960, a United Nations Industrial Survey Mission led by Dutch economist Albert Winsemius visited Singapore to conduct a feasibility study and provide advice on how to steer its fledgling economy. In the final report submitted in June 1961, the team identified ship repair and shipbuilding as a potential industry as it would take advantage of Singapore's natural deep harbour and strategic location while providing employment to thousands. In line with this vision, one of the government's first moves was to restructure and reorganise the ship repair operations of the SHB and Sembawang Naval Base.

A two-step process to restructure the SHB began in 1964. First, the Port of Singapore Authority (PSA) was set up as a statutory board to take over the functions, assets and liabilities of the SHB. The new entity would also manage port operations and serve as the government port regulator.

Second, SHB's dockyards, which had

The first female apprentices at Sembawang Shipyard, 1970s. The shipyard set up its own apprenticeship training centre in 1972 to train a new generation of Singaporean engineers and managers, who would eventually take over the reins from British managing agent, Swan Hunter. *Image reproduced from Chew, M. (1998). Of Hearts and Minds: The Story of Sembawang Shipyard (p. 116). Singapore: Sembawang Shipyard Pte Ltd. (Call no.: RSING 623.83 CHE).*



more than a century of commercial ship repair experience, were restructured as a separate business entity. In September 1968, Keppel Shipyard Pte Ltd, with shareholdings held by the Singapore government, was incorporated to take over SHB's ship repair operations. The SHB ceased to exist.

After Singapore gained independence in 1965, the British gradually reduced its military presence in the region. The formation of Sembawang Shipyard Pte Ltd in 1968 was precipitated by Britain's surprise announcement in January that year of an early withdrawal of its military forces in Singapore, including the closure of Sembawang Naval Base, by 1971.

In June 1968, the Singapore government began the process of converting the naval base into a government-linked commercial entity known as Sembawang Shipyard Pte Ltd. The shipyard began operations in December the same year after the British government sold the naval base to Singapore for a token sum of \$1. The assets of the naval base were valued at £2 million and included a 100,000-dwt drydock, five floating docks, a mile-long deepwater berthside, full craneage and 22 hectares of workshop facilities.

### A New Vision for Keppel and Sembawang

In 1968, Hon Sui Sen, then Chairman of the Economic Development Board, was appointed the first chairman of both Keppel and Sembawang shipyards. His first priority was to transform the two shipyards into for-profit business enterprises. The same year, British shipbuilding group, Swan Hunter of Tyneside, England, was

appointed as managing agent to help the shipyards build up their capabilities and resources. These included the development of international commercial and marketing networks that were critical for success in the ship repair business.

By then, decades of monopolistic practices had made Singapore's ship repair business uncompetitive. The same job that took 20 days to complete in Singapore required a mere six days in Hong Kong. Furthermore, charges were generally 15 percent lower in Hong Kong compared to Singapore.

One stumbling block was caused by Sembawang's elaborate naval dockyard design. In comparison, commercial dockyards had compact designs, making them more cost-efficient. New skillsets and business processes in areas such as international networks, marketing, commercial estimating and billings had to be developed, as these capabilities had not been the concerns of a naval dockyard. Swan Hunter's brief included training local managers and technical staff as well as transferring essential skills and knowledge to a new generation of Singaporean shipyard engineers and managers, who would eventually take over the reins.

The two shipyards set up their own apprenticeship training centres – Keppel in 1969 and Sembawang in 1972. Many young Singaporeans who completed these apprenticeship programmes formed the backbone of Singapore's maritime industry in the 1980s and 90s.

Keppel and Sembawang shipyards became major beneficiaries of scholarship programmes aimed at nurturing local talent to fill key positions in Singapore's

maritime and shipping industry. Recipients of various government and the Colombo Plan scholarship schemes were among the first generation of local engineers and managers at the two shipyards.

Before Swan Hunter's managing contract with Keppel ended in 1972, a group of Keppel's key local officers drafted a localisation plan and submitted the blueprint to the chairman of the board. The blueprint was accepted and a local management team took over the shipyard on 1 June 1972, helmed by its new chairman, a prominent Eurasian named George Bogaars. Chua Chor Teck, a former naval dockyard apprentice and naval architecture graduate, was appointed general manager. Briton C.N. Watson of Swan Hunter was retained as interim managing director until 1974, when Chua took over.

Keppel's new management built a 150,000-dwt drydock on reclaimed land in Tuas, and the new yard commenced business in June 1977 when the dock was completed. In 1979, work on another drydock for ultra-large crude carriers of up to 330,000 dwt began at the Tuas shipyard.

In 1980, Keppel Shipyard Limited (KSL) shares were listed and traded on the Stock Exchange of Singapore, with the launch of an initial public offering of 30 million shares at \$3.30 each. Besides the Singapore government, KSL shareholders included institutional investors and private individuals.

Swan Hunter's contract with Sembawang Shipyard was for 10 years beginning from 1968: the first three years to commercialise the naval dockyard and the subsequent seven years to transform it to a full-fledged ship repair enterprise.

In 1970, senior civil servant Pang Tee Pow was appointed the board chairman of Sembawang Shipyard and Lim Cheng Pah, also from the public service, became its first local senior manager. As the director of personnel and training, Lim led the localisation initiative to nurture and train local staff. In 1972, the year that Sembawang first began commercial operations, the company achieved a revenue of \$71.2 million, with a profit of \$15 million. This positive start gave Sembawang the confidence to seek public funds through an initial public offering on the Singapore Stock Exchange in June 1973. The company raised \$51 million through the issue of 25 million shares at \$2.04 each. In 1975, a new and larger drydock catering to the repair market for very large crude carriers was completed.

By the time Swan Hunter personnel left in 1978, almost all the managers in Sembawang were Singaporeans, except for the managing director C.N. Watson, who had previously been with Keppel. Lim succeeded Watson as managing director in 1983, thus completing the entire localisation process.

Over the next three decades, Keppel and Sembawang would emerge as major players in Singapore's maritime and shipping industry as well as leaders in the global offshore rig construction business.

Today, Keppel Shipyard is a division

of Keppel Offshore & Marine, one of the core businesses of conglomerate Keppel Corporation. Keppel Shipyard has three yards in Singapore – Tuas, Benoi and Gul – which together operate five drydocks.

Sembawang Shipyard was renamed Sembcorp Marine Admiralty Yard in 2015. Today, it has five docks, the largest being the 400,000-dwt Premier Dock, as well as KG VI Dock, which is one of the deepest in Southeast Asia. Admiralty Yard is one of the four major yards in Singapore operated by Sembcorp Marine Limited. ♦



A ship undergoing repair in Keppel Shipyard, c. early 1990s. *Image reproduced from Lim, R. (1993). Tough Men, Bold Visions: The Story of Keppel (p. 65). Singapore: Keppel Corporation Limited. (Call no.: RSING 338.76238309 LIM).*

## NOTES

- "Beaching" refers to the act of laying the vessel on its side on a beach to conduct hull repair and maintenance work.
- A drydock is a large dock from which water can be pumped out, and is used for repairing a ship below its waterline. Also sometimes referred to as a "graving dock".
- New Harbour was renamed Keppel Harbour in 1900 after Admiral Henry Keppel, who five decades earlier, in 1848, had sailed the naval ship *HMS Meander* into New Harbour for repair and was astonished to find deep water so close to the shore. He reported to the Board of Admiralty in London and then to the Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company on the discovery of this deep harbour for steamships and its potential as a port.
- TPDC's Articles of Association gave veto rights to the London Consulting Committee (which functioned more like a London Board) for expenditures beyond \$20,000. See Bogaars, G. (1956). *The Tanjong Pagar Dock Company, 1864–1905 (p. 171)*. Singapore: Govt. Print. Off. (Call no.: RCL05 959.51 BOG)
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# GROUNDBREAKING

## THE BEGINNINGS OF CONTEMPORARY ART IN SINGAPORE

1988 has been held as the watershed year in which contemporary art in Singapore took root with the establishment of The Artists Village. Jeffrey Say debunks this view, asserting that the art movement began earlier.

"[T]he emergence of the Singapore artist collective The Artists Village<sup>1</sup> arguably marks the beginning of contemporary art in Singapore."<sup>2</sup>

This assertion by curator and art critic Iola Lenzi reflects a view that has been long accepted in writings on Singaporean contemporary art. Art curator Russell Storer, in his discussion of sculptor and painter Tan Teng-Kee's 1979 performative

work *The Picnic*, dismissed it as "a flash of avant-gardism within a conservative artistic environment... a form that did not take hold in Singapore for another decade until the establishment of The Artists Village in 1988".<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, Kwok Kian Chow's *Channels and Confluences: A History of Singapore Art* (1996) points to the contributions of The Artists Village and its founder Tang Da Wu to the contemporary art scene in Singapore, while generally overlooking other significant developments prior to 1988.<sup>4</sup>

In fact, the beginnings of Singapore's contemporary art scene can be traced back at least two to three years before the formation of The Artists Village. Art historian T.K. Sabapathy has cautioned that "all too often each and every endeavour of developing new or alternative methods of making art, especially installation and performance, is invariably and unthinkingly attributed to the influence of the Village and/or Da Wu".<sup>5</sup>

### What is Contemporary Art?

Contemporary art is complex in its definition. While it is not within the scope of this essay to delve into the theoretical debates about the term, it would be useful to arrive at some definition that takes the context of Singapore art into consideration.

"Contemporary art" has been described as art produced by artists living today. Historically, contemporary art is taken to refer to new art practices such as installation, performance and video that emerged in the 1960s in Europe and America. It was a reaction against modern art, which was felt to be detached from the realities of life.

Contemporary art flourished at different times in different places in Southeast Asia. In Singapore, contemporary art is rooted in the social transformation that took place during the 1970s and 80s. As a young nation, the focus then was on generating economic wealth, along with the pursuit of rapid urbanisation and technology.

Urbanisation invariably resulted in entire communities being uprooted and relocated to high-rise housing which, in turn, led to a general weakening of societal and familial relationships. This resulted in a sense of displacement, and gave rise to issues of identity and alienation.

In the context of these conditions, young Singaporean artists responded in diverse ways to "issues relating to the nature of art, and questions regarding the self in relation to social, cultural and environmental conditions".<sup>6</sup> By the mid-1980s, these artists began using a variety of new artistic techniques that were vastly different in their intent and approach compared with the abstract art forms of the preceding decades.

### Precursors and Antecedents

Even before the emergence of a well-defined contemporary art scene in mid-1980s Singapore, there have been several "flashes" or "moments", as it has been described, of contemporary art as early as the 1970s. However, it would be inaccurate to regard these instances as the budding of contemporary art in Singapore as they did not lead to the proliferation of a sustained critical practice of the form. The three early works (see text box overleaf) often cited as belonging to the genre of contemporary art are Cheo Chai-Hiang's *5' x 5' (Singapore River)* (1972), Tang Da Wu's *Earth Work* (1980) and Tan Teng-Kee's *The Picnic* (1979).

These works incorporate aspects of conceptual, performance and installation art, and are generally regarded as a departure from conventional painting and sculpture. In the 1980s, a number of artists – such as Teo Eng Seng and Eng Tow – began moving away from the modern towards the contemporary by creating works that can be described as bold and experimental in

their use of materials and forms. Although it is difficult to establish the exact influence that such practices had on the works of young artists at the time, it would not be too far-fetched to assume that some of the momentum was carried over to the 1980s, setting the scene for contemporary art to flourish in Singapore.

### The Role of Art Institutions

It would take an act of rebellion by a group of Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) students to radically shift the history of contemporary art in Singapore. Three of these students – Salleh Japar, S. Chandrasekaran and Goh Ee Choo – became pioneering figures in the contemporary art scene. Salleh recounted that the trio had, very early on, begun resisting the teaching system at NAFA, which required students to copy what they saw in a naturalistic manner and to follow the tradition of the

Nanyang School. Finding the teaching dull and unimaginative, the students went on to build a more experimental portfolio in parallel to their mandatory school portfolio.<sup>7</sup>

As a further gesture of dissent, the three young rebels, together with two other students, Koh Kim Seng and Desmond Tan, decided not to participate in their graduation show. Instead, the five staged their own "graduation" show – *Quintet* – at Arbour Fine Art in May 1987.

The founding of LASALLE College of the Arts, then known as St Patrick's Arts Centre, by Brother Joseph McNally in 1984 was a catalyst in the growth and development of Singapore's contemporary art scene (LASALLE has since acquired a reputation for its contemporary arts education, while NAFA is better known for its more traditional approach in the training of artists).

According to an interview with former LASALLE student Ahmad Abu Bakar

Tang Da Wu's *Gully Curtain* (1979) was created on-site by hanging seven pieces of linen in a gully in Ang Mo Kio for three months. The resulting soiled and water-stained linens were then displayed at the National Museum Art Gallery in the exhibition titled *Earth Work* in 1980. Tang Da Wu, *Untitled*, 1979, Gelatin silver print, 39 x 49 cm. Collection of National Gallery Singapore. Image courtesy of National Heritage Board.



A wooden box made by young artists – Tang Mun Kit, Baet Yeok Kuan, Lim Poh Teck and Chng Chin Kang – being pushed from the former St. Joseph's Institution to Marina Square for the *More Than 4* event staged as part of the 1988 Arts Festival Fringe. Courtesy of Koh Nguang How.



(Diploma of Fine Arts, class of 1989), now a ceramicist and sculptor, the school focused more on conceptual thinking rather than artistic skills during its early years.<sup>8</sup> The highly influential artist Tang Da Wu, who began teaching at LASALLE in 1988, encouraged students to think out of the box and invited them to his performances and events.<sup>9</sup> LASALLE students also became involved in a number of external contemporary art events and activities during this period.<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, much of the study of contemporary art practices were taking place outside the classroom.

Before the establishment of the Singapore Art Museum in 1996, the National Museum Art Gallery was the state museum where art exhibitions were held. The role played by this art gallery, which opened in 1976, in the development of contemporary art in Singapore cannot be understated. Although the gallery did not provide a platform for young local artists, the numerous shows it staged that featured the works of well-known international artists would have inspired students from LASALLE and NAFA.<sup>11</sup> It is highly plausible that exposure to these international shows would have had an impact on more intrepid art students as

well as emerging artists, many of whom could have been influenced by the experimental works on display.

Foreign cultural institutes in Singapore, such as Alliance Francaise, The British Council, the Australian High Commission (which organised the Australian Art Award for Young Artists)<sup>12</sup> and the Goethe-Institut, also served as platforms for learning and exhibitions. The Goethe-Institut was especially instrumental in providing an alternative space for the display of contemporary art: its exhibitions of works by German artists and film screenings would undoubtedly have been seen by young local artists and, in turn, energised their own practice. In addition to hosting the graduation shows of NAFA and those of young emerging artists,<sup>13</sup> the Goethe also had a library that was well stocked with art books—a useful resource for young artists looking for ideas from outside Singapore.

### Groundbreaking Art

Interestingly, many of the visual art exhibitions that featured cutting-edge works by young and emerging artists during this period were organised as part of the Fringe segment of the Singapore Festival of Arts. The Fringe showcased events featuring visual and performing arts that frequently

crossed from one discipline to the other. The Fringe was exactly what the term stood for – non-mainstream events that encouraged greater experimentation and diversity of visual expressions, which in turn expanded the scope of contemporary art practice in Singapore.

In the 1986 edition of the Fringe, the works of 12 young artists were shown in five venues<sup>14</sup> here. One of the shows, *Not the Singapore River*, held at the now defunct Arbour Fine Art in Cuppage Terrace, would become part of local art history. Although short-lived, Arbour Fine Art and its co-owner, Lim Jen Howe, played an instrumental role in providing a platform for untested young artists brimming with fresh ideas to exhibit their works.

By naming the exhibition *Not the Singapore River*, Lim had intended to usher in a new era in the local art scene, representing a break from the so-called second-generation artists who were either painting abstractions, or clichéd and idyllic scenes of the Singapore River and Chinatown. The five artists featured in *Not the Singapore River* were Goh Ee Choo, Oh Chai Hoo, Katherine Ho, Yeo Siak Goon and Peter Tow. Although the works exhibited were primarily paintings, their experimental interplay of form and

### THREE ARTWORKS AHEAD OF THEIR TIME

In 1972, Cheo Chai-Hiang submitted a proposal, titled *5' x 5' (Singapore River)*, to the annual exhibition of the Modern Art Society. The proposal contained a set of instructions directing the exhibitors to draw a square measuring five feet by five feet straddling the wall and the floor. Cheo's work was an example of conceptual art, in which the idea or the concept was more important than the actual execution or aesthetics. At one level, the work was a parody of the clichéd representations of the Singapore River popular among painters then. On another level, it was a critical work meant to provoke discourse about the general state of art in Singapore, which had hitherto been dominated by international abstraction. Given its iconoclastic nature, *5' x 5' (Singapore River)* was not selected for the 1972 Modern Art Society exhibition.

Even before Tang Da Wu returned from undergraduate studies in the UK in 1979, he had begun engaging in experimental art forms such as performance and installation. In 1980, Tang presented

an exhibition titled *Earth Work* at the National Museum Art Gallery. *Earth Work* featured lumps of earth, soil and clay as well as linens and wooden boards that had been exposed to the sun, rain and soil. One of these works, *Gully Curtain* (1979), was created on-site by hanging seven pieces of linen in a gully in Ang Mo Kio, which was then being developed into a public housing estate. Left in the gully for three months, the resulting soiled and water-stained linens became part of his exhibition at the gallery.

Tan Teng-Kee staged *The Picnic* as an outdoor event at the field outside his flat in Normanton Estate on 14 September 1979. While there was nothing extraordinary



about the exhibition of several of Tan's paintings and sculpture, what was highly unusual was the inclusion of a series of actions that is today regarded as the first documented instance of performance art in Singapore. One of the works featured was a 100-metre-long painting, *The Lonely Road*, which Tan sliced into smaller paintings in response to what potential buyers wanted. The climax of the event was *Fire Sculpture*, which saw one of Tan's constructions – wrapped in newspaper and supported by long wooden poles – incinerated with a torch. *The Picnic*, however, was an isolated occurrence in Tan's practice, which was primarily sculpting.

In 1972, Cheo Chai-Hiang's proposal *5' x 5' (Singapore River)* – which provided instructions for a blank square measuring five feet by five feet to be drawn over a wall and adjoining floor – to the Modern Art Society for its annual exhibition was rejected due to its iconoclastic nature. This display is a recreation of the original work. *Cheo Chai-Hiang, 5' x 5' (Inched Deep), 1972, remade for display in 2015, mixed media, 150 x 150 cm. Collection of National Gallery Singapore. Courtesy of National Heritage Board.*



(Top) *Quintet* – by (from left) Koh Kim Seng, Goh Ee Choo, S. Chandrasekaran, Desmond Tan and (behind in glasses) Salleh Japar – was staged at Arbour Fine Art in May 1987, with works displayed on the wall, floor and ceiling in seemingly random fashion. According to *The Straits Times*, *Quintet* was a “coordinated attempt... to shape new approaches to art display and appreciation in Singapore”. Source: *The Straits Times* © Singapore Press Holdings Limited. Reprinted with permission.

(Above) The Art Commandos during one of their outdoor performances at the 1998 Arts Festival Fringe that combined music, dance, drama and visual arts. The paraphernalia and artworks seen in the photo were all made using materials that had been salvaged. Courtesy of Koh Nguang How.

space, and the use of motifs and symbols as metaphors for self-reflexivity leaned towards contemporary art.

The aforementioned *Quintet* exhibition by NAFA's five young artists, held at Arbour Fine Art in May 1987, was arguably the most significant art exhibition in the second half of the 1980s, and its radical origins have been noted by various writers. The reviewers of the show were quick to point out the innovative

components of *Quintet*,<sup>15</sup> with its works displayed on the wall, floor and ceiling in seemingly random fashion.

While the art works of Desmond Tan and Koh Kim Seng of *Quintet* conformed to the conventions of easel paintings, those of Salleh Japar, Goh Ee Choo and S. Chandrasekaran broke new ground in Singaporean art. Drawing from Asian heritage and philosophy, their works were a direct reaction to Western-centric art

practices prevailing in Singapore. The use of objects such as sand, stones, dried leaves, barbed wire and even a kitchen wok, arranged as installations on the floor or as constructions on the wall – and the creation of a total and immersive art environment in the process – were the key elements that made it so revolutionary.

Significantly, too, *Quintet* was the precursor of the well-documented *Trimurti* that was staged in 1988 – the same year The Artists Village was launched. *Trimurti* is regarded today as a seminal exhibition in the history of Singaporean contemporary art (see text box overleaf).

In 1988, an unsung figure in Singaporean contemporary art history, the French-born multidisciplinary artist Gilles Massot, conceived and organised Art Commandos, a group of about 30 individuals who launched “raids” into the city area as part of the 1988 Arts Festival Fringe. The “raids” constituted one of the first instances of intervention by a group of creative individuals in a public space.

After having trained for a week under different mentors in an experimental workshop in Sentosa that combined visual art, music, drama and dance, the Art Commandos settled into their “base camp” at the former St Joseph's Institution (now Singapore Art Museum), from where they fanned out into various parts of the city, including Orchard Road. The performances were spontaneous and involved members of the group expressing themselves in song, dance and drama,



## TRIMURTI: A RETURN TO ASIAN AESTHETICS

In March 1988, Goh Ee Choo, Salleh Japar and S. Chandrasekaran staged an exhibition at the Goethe-Institut titled *Trimurti*. The exhibition was, in many ways, a crystallisation of the ideas and concepts that they had been working on in *Quintet* that took place in May 1987. In *Quintet*, these three artists drew extensively from Asian philosophical systems relating to ideas of creation and the cosmos, but with *Trimurti*, these ideas became more fully fledged and explicit as concepts underpinning the exhibition.

*Trimurti* is a Sanskrit word that describes the Hindu triumvirate of Shiva (the Destroyer), Vishnu (the Preserver) and Brahma (the Creator). These roles were symbolically appropriated and executed by Chandrasekaran, Goh and Salleh respectively in the exhibition.

Goh Ee Choo during one of his ritualistic performances for *Trimurti* in 1988. Courtesy of Goh Ee Choo, S. Chandrasekaran and Salleh Japar.



and using a variety of artistic props made from readily available materials.

Massot had earlier co-curated a six-day interdisciplinary event from 19 to 24 November 1987 called the Yin Yang Festival, organised by the National University of Singapore Society. It included an outdoor performance by S. Chandrasekaran, which saw the artist leading a procession of chanting performers carrying stones while clashing cymbals resonated in

*Trimurti* was an assertion of the ethnic and cultural identities of the three artists (Indian, Chinese and Malay), combined into a syncretic unity – an acknowledgement of Singapore’s multiethnic and multicultural society. Unlike *Quintet*, *Trimurti* had all three artists engaged in ritual-like performances, in addition to installations as well as painted and sculptural works that are charged with symbolism – all geared towards transforming the gallery into what the artists called an “energy space”.

After this event, Goh, Salleh and Chandrasekaran never exhibited collectively again, but went on to forge successful individual careers as artists. The only exception was in 1998, when the artists reprised *Trimurti* in the exhibition *Trimurti and Ten Years After* at the Singapore Art Museum.

S. Chandrasekaran performing at the Yin Yang Festival at the National University of Singapore Guild House in November 1987. He is seen here laying a trail of stones into the children’s pool at the Guild House. Not surprisingly, the exhibition invited much negative feedback from a public and press unused to such experimental art forms. (See *The Straits Times*, 24 November 1987, p.25). Photo below courtesy of Neo Kim Seng.



Art, baloney. You're just playing with paint over a heap of stones!



that involved active audience engagement. Titled *More Than 4*, it was staged by four young artists – Tang Mun Kit, Baet Yeok Kuan, Lim Poh Teck and Chng Chin Kang.

Occupying old classrooms, corridors and other spaces, the artists responded to the building’s former life as a school by using materials and furniture salvaged from the premises in their installations. Experimental works were placed alongside school remnants such as blackboards, desks and notice boards. The artists also made personal interventions in public spaces; in one instance, a girl wrapped in white and strapped to the front of a wooden box was pushed from the school to Marina Square. Outside Raffles City, a shirtless Tang Da Wu “ran up to the girl at top speed and

screamed into her face...” He then grabbed the girl and said: ‘This is live art’.”<sup>17</sup>

In September 1988, Cheo Chai-Hiang presented an installation titled *Gentleman in Suit and Tie*. Artist and archivist Koh Nguang How recalls how, at the opening event, 60 audience members, each equipped with a charcoal stick and a piece of paper pre-printed with a man’s image, simultaneously started running their charcoal sticks over the image – in effect producing 60 portraits in one fell swoop – as guest-of-honour and then principal of LASALLE College Brother Joseph McNally walked the length of the gallery while a flautist played in the background.

Cheo’s work can be framed within what is known as relational aesthetics, in which the artist is viewed as merely a facilitator and art is regarded as the exchange of information between the artist and the audience.<sup>18</sup> “The artist, in this sense, gives audiences access to power and the means to change the world.”<sup>19</sup> It is clear that Cheo was years ahead of his time.

### Public Reception and Perception

The public reception to contemporary art in Singapore has been mostly overlooked in existing writings. One of the strongest indicators that a contemporary art scene had emerged in the mid-1980s was the public discourse that took place in response to its development. By its very nature, contemporary art is meant to be provocative and interactive, demanding, as it were, the audience to participate. The coverage of the visual arts in the press and other writings during this period were largely attempts to make sense of some of the avant-garde and experimental art practices that had begun surfacing. The cutting-edge quality of contemporary art inevitably elicited strong reactions from the public.

During S. Chandrasekaran’s performance for the Yin Yang Festival in November 1987, for instance, players at a nearby tennis court got into a heated exchange with members of the artist’s procession, questioning whether splashing paint over a heap of stones can be considered art.<sup>20</sup> In July 1988, a member of the public wrote to

*The Straits Times*, expressing disappointment with the Art Commandos, criticising the artistic quality of the performers and the lack of good content.<sup>21</sup>

Much of the criticisms, particularly in newspapers and magazines, took aim at the seemingly gimmicky and experimental nature of the works, which themselves were a barometer of a growing interest in forms and practices that were shifting from the more familiar art of the 1970s and early ’80s that were expressed mainly through paintings, sculptures and salon photography. The reactions from both audience and journalists ranged from utter bewilderment to complete denial that what they were witnessing was art. But ironically, headlines such as “Art or gimmick?”<sup>22</sup> and “A year when the young hogged the limelight”<sup>23</sup> were ample evidence that new art forms were emerging in Singapore.

Among those who contributed art reviews and columns to *The Straits Times* was the prolific art historian T.K. Sabapathy, whose incisive remarks and critical tenor were hallmarks of his writing. Sabapathy’s reviews were a reflection of the personal relationships that he had forged with many contemporary artists during their formative years.

It is clear that the growth of Singapore’s contemporary art scene cannot be single-handedly attributed to the establishment of The Artists Village in 1988. There is sufficient evidence that contemporary art was already beginning to take root in the early 1980s and made especially significant inroads between 1986 and 1988 when young artists, disillusioned with outmoded ways of making, displaying and viewing art, began experimenting with new techniques and forms that would in time be regarded as contemporary art.

A confluence of various factors – institutional support and reception by the media, innovative individuals and groups, and cutting-edge exhibitions – were responsible for the development of contemporary art in Singapore during this period. This would provide the momentum needed to carry contemporary art forward to the 1990s and beyond. ♦

*The author hopes this essay will lead to further discourse on the individuals, exhibitions and institutions that have contributed to the growth of the contemporary art scene in Singapore. As part of his research, he interviewed three individuals who have been instrumental in this area: artist and photography historian Gilles Massot; artist and archivist Koh Nguang How; and ceramicist and sculptor Ahmad Abu Bakar. The author would also like to thank Salleh Japar and Goh Ee Choo for allowing access to their archival materials, and to Seng Yu Jin and S. Chandrasekaran for sharing their knowledge.*

### NOTES

- The Artists Village (TAV) is an artist colony founded by artist Tang Da Wu in 1988 at Lorong Gambas in Sembawang. Tang invited young artists such as Wong Shih Yaw, Lee Wen, Amanda Heng and Zai Kuning to set up their studios in a *kampung* setting there. In the following year, TAV became active with open studio shows, installations and performances held at Lorong Gambas and venues such as the National Museum Art Gallery. In 1990, Lorong Gambas was repossessed by the government for redevelopment and TAV moved to a number of different temporary locations.
- Lenzi, I. (c. 2009). The Artists Village and the birth of contemporary art in Singapore: Koh Nguang How in conversation with Iola Lenzi. In I. Lenzi (Ed), *Concept, context, contestation: Art and the collective in Southeast Asia* (pp. 190–195). Bangkok: Bangkok Art and Cultural Centre Foundation. (Not in NLB holdings)
- Storer, R. (2016). Melting into air: Tan Teng-Kee in Singapore. In R. Storer, C. Chikiamco & A. Tan (Eds.), *A fact has no appearance: Art beyond the object* (pp. 55–67). Singapore, National Gallery, Singapore. (Call no.: RSING 709.5909047 FAC)
- Kwok, K. C. (1996). *Channels and confluences: A history of Singapore art*. Singapore, Singapore Art Museum. (Call no.: RSING 709.5957 KWO)
- Sabapathy, T.K. (1993, June). *Trimurti: Contemporary art in Singapore. Art and Asia Pacific*, pp. 30–35. (Not in NLB holdings)
- Sabapathy, Jun 1993, pp. 30–35.
- Sheares, C. (Interviewer). (1998, April 15). *Oral history interview with Salleh Japar* [Transcript of recording no. 002018/4/1, p. 8]. Retrieved from National Archives of Singapore website. Art history has shown that new movements – from the Impressionists to the Vienna Secessionists – invariably started when students and young artists rebelled against prevailing art practices that they deemed to be conservative, constraining and outmoded.
- Interview with Ahmad Abu Bakar, 16 February 2019.
- Interview with Ahmad Abu Bakar, 16 February 2019.
- These included Art Commandos, Yin Yang Festival and Cheo Chai-Hiang’s *Gentleman in Tie and Suit*.
- Interview with artist and archivist Koh Nguang How, 13 February 2019. In 1978, the National Museum Art Gallery held an exhibition of noted American artist Helen Frankenthaler. In 1987, it co-organised a show by prominent contemporary Chinese painter Liu Haisu and also showcased a contemporary German kinetic art exhibition in the same year. In 1978, it held an exhibition of German expressionist prints.
- A biennial art competition organised by The Singapore Business Art Council in association with the Australian High Commission. The top prize was a 12-week scholarship to study at the City Art Institute in Sydney and at the Canberra School of Art.
- Interview with Koh Nguang How, 13 February 2019. Ms Moh Siew Lan, a cultural officer at Goethe-Institut, approached Goh Ee Choo, Salleh Japar and S. Chandrasekaran – course mates at NAFA – to hold a group show at Goethe as a follow-up to *Quintet*. This resulted in the seminal exhibition *Trimurti*.
- Arbour Fine Art, Gallery Fine Art, Art Forum, Chesham Fine Art and Saxophone Bar and Restaurant.
- Sabapathy, T.K. (1987, May 14). Art on the ceiling, walls and floor. *The Straits Times*, p. 25. Retrieved from NewspaperSG; Chua, B.H. (1987, Aug/Sept). Young artists make a break: Installation at Arbour. *Man*, 18–20.
- The Yin Yang Festival included art and photography exhibitions, dance and music performances, talks, an art camp, video shows, and installation works. See Ong, C. (1987, November 24). The clashing of cultures. *The Straits Times*, p. 25. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- Wong, M. (1988, 20 June). Art or gimmick. *The Straits Times*, p. 29. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- Relational aesthetics was coined by the French curator and art critic Nicolas Bourriaud in the 1990s to describe art based on human relations and their social contexts.
- Tate. *Art term: Relational aesthetics*. Retrieved from Tate website.
- The Straits Times*, 24 Nov 1987, p. 25.
- Commandos: antics or art. (1988, July 1). *The Straits Times*, p. 31. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- Wong, M. (1988, 20 June). Art or gimmick. *The Straits Times*, p. 29. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- A year when the young hogged the limelight. (1987, December 27). *The Straits Times*, p. 9. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.



# Doctor, Doctor!

## Singapore's Medical Services

Milestones in Singapore's medical scene – among other subjects – are captured through fascinating oral history narratives in a new book written by **Cheong Suk-Wai** and published by the National Archives of Singapore.

Life is a race against time. That much was clear to midwife **Sumitera Mohd Letak** after she helped a patient with dangerously high blood pressure who had just given birth. "She was bleeding like hell," Sumitera recalled. "Her baby was gasping away and I had to suck mucus out of her baby's mouth... I had to, by hook or by crook, take them to hospital."

Alas, the mother, baby and midwife were on St John's Island, which is about 6.5 km south of mainland Singapore. What was worse, it was the middle of the night. Sumitera added: "It was low tide, so I had to wake up the whole row of people in the quarters there to give me a helping hand." The roused boatmen put the ailing mother and baby in a big *sampán*. Sumitera and the woman's husband and mother climbed in too and they rushed to Jardine Steps at Keppel Harbour. Upon their arrival, the ambulance from Kandang Kerbau (KK) Hospital was nowhere in sight, so Sumitera left the woman in the care of her husband and the harbour police.

She flagged down a taxi and, with the baby in her arms and its grandmother in tow, rushed to KK Hospital. Sadly, the baby died there, but its mother was saved. "She was in hospital for three weeks because her blood pressure did not come down," Sumitera recalled, adding that, fortunately, "the hospital treated her for free".

Sumitera, who was born in 1942, joined Singapore's medical service as a midwife in the 1960s. She was among those in the Public Health Division who went out in

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"travelling dispensaries" twice a month. These dispensaries were ships kitted out with a pharmacy and medical equipment. With it, she visited Singapore's outlying islets, including Semakau, Sebarok, Sudong and Seraya. The ship would berth itself some distance away from the shore, so she had to "go right up to the island in a motorboat, and then on to the community centre".

Well into the 1960s, healthcare in Singapore was largely rudimentary, and not just on the nation's outlying islands. Renowned gynaecologist **Dr Tow Siang Hwa**, who headed KK Hospital in the 1960s, said that at the time, "women walked into KK Hospital to have their 12th or 15th baby. Maternal complications of the most horrendous kind were a common experience. Maternal deaths from bleeding, from obstetric complications, from obstructed labour and from malpractice outside." Speaking to the Oral History Centre in July 1997, Tow added: "All this is never seen again today."

Singapore's colonial administrators had provided free clinics for the needy, but these were few and far between. "The colonial government did give us free medical care at Outram Park outpatient clinic," Chinatown resident **Soh Siew Cheong** recalled. In the 1960s, Tow recalled that fewer than 50 medical specialists practised in Singapore. Among those training to be one was **Dr Yong Nen Khiong**. Yong, who became a heart surgeon, recalled his

college days at the University of Malaya in Singapore: "My medical cohort had 100 students. I took the bus to college every day... I was doing open heart surgery, practising on dogs."

When Singapore attained self-government in 1959, its leaders had to overcome the most fundamental problems to give the nation a fighting chance to thrive. Founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew listed his Cabinet's priorities as the setting up of defence forces; the provision of affordable public housing for all; the restructuring of the education system; more stringent family planning to curb over-population; and the creation of jobs for the tens of thousands who were unemployed then. Against all these pressing necessities, Lee judged the development of medical services and improvement in healthcare to be, perhaps, fifth or sixth on his list of to-dos. To compound matters, the government was strapped for cash.

So Singaporeans made do, as they always had, with traditional folk medicine or, more often, store-cupboard remedies.

**Eugene Wijeyesingha**, a former Principal of Raffles Institution, recalled that, as a boy, he cut his foot deeply while running around barefoot playing cops and robbers with his mates. "Blood was dripping and we went to someone's house nearby," he said. "They got a piece of cloth, put coffee powder and sugar on it, and wrapped the

cloth round and round my foot. They hadn't cleaned it first. But the wound healed; no tetanus or anything like that."

Housewife **Yau Chung Chii** remembered well the kitchen-table wisdom passed down to her generation. Speaking in Cantonese, Yau said, for example, that pregnant women would avoid lamb, lest it gave their babies epilepsy. Upon giving birth, women would be fed pig's trotters stewed with ginger and black vinegar, a dish thought to be effective in ridding their bodies of gas. She added that, however, some mothers told their doctors that they feared the vinegar would be so acidic that "it would melt their plastic stitches". She added: "The doctors said, 'No such nonsense. But if you believe it, don't eat it'."

The Malays had plant-based pastes and potions for women in confinement. Midwife Sumitera remembered two – *param* and *jamu*. "*Param* was a herbal concoction that you rubbed all over the mother's body. It opened the pores, out of which impurities oozed... if you went near those using *param*, they smelled so sweet, [with] none of that fishy afterbirth smell which was caused by the poor flow of blood."

*Jamu* was consumed to expel any blood clots after giving birth. "It's a spicy herbal paste; you mixed it with water and drank it. It also helped the womb contract and return to normal size faster." Sumitera

**(Facing page)** A van converted into a travelling dispensary to reach those living in the rural areas of Singapore. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

**(Right)** Many swore by traditional Chinese tonics brewed from roots, barks and seeds, such as those dispensed here in 1983 by Eu Yan Sang (余仁生) medical hall on South Bridge Road. This medical hall was founded by Eu Tong Sen, after whom the street is named, who treated the ailments of the humblest folk. Eu Yan Sang has since grown into a globally renowned brand. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.





never forgot how basic the islanders' lives were even after Singapore became independent. Women and girls who were menstruating folded cloth, into which they crumpled newspaper, to stanch their bleeding. They would not heed Sumitera's advice to use the sanitary pads that she distributed to them regularly. "They said they would keep it and use it only when they travelled to mainland Singapore."

### Singaporean Trailblazers

Amid this rough-and-ready approach to personal hygiene, some Singaporean doctors were already blazing trails in caring for patients.

Pathologist **Prof Kanagaratnam Shanmugaratnam**, for one, made sure that anyone in Singapore who had cancer could seek treatment for it without difficulty. Shanmugaratnam, whose son Tharman is a former Deputy Prime Minister of Singapore (and currently Senior Minister), set up a population-based cancer registry in 1968. At the time, he said, "there were hardly any private clinics in Singapore". His fellow doctors, however, were "very supportive" in voluntarily notifying him and his team of anyone who developed cancer. He also personally scrutinised hospital discharge forms, as he put it, "so we did not miss a case".

Another trailblazer was **Dr Tay Chong Hai**. In 1969, he was among the first Singaporeans to discover a disease that was

later named after him. Tay's Syndrome, as it became known, is a disease associated with intellectual impairment, short stature, decreased fertility, brittle hair, and dry, red and scaly skin, making an eight-year-old child look 80 years old.

In 1972, Tay made newspaper headlines when he saved many Singaporeans from over-the-counter pills and tonics that had life-threatening levels of arsenic. These included Sin Lak pills, which killed a woman who had taken them to cure her asthma. He fingered poverty as the root of such drug-related deaths. "It has to do with the cost of living," he mused. "So such over-the-counter drugs are the first line of treatment."

Fortunately, he noted, "Singapore is good with regulating" and so there were fewer deaths than there might have been from such self-medication.

Also, in 1972, Tay became the first doctor to identify Hand, Foot and Mouth Disease (HFMD) in Singapore. His wife, who is also a doctor, alerted him that she was treating many babies with mouth ulcers and rashes on their backs and legs. Jurong was the site of Singapore's first HFMD epidemic in the 1970s, but the disease – caused by the coxsackievirus – soon spread islandwide. In 1974, together with six other doctors, Tay published a paper on the outbreak of the disease in the September issue of the *Singapore Medical Journal*.

### SARS: All Hell Breaks Loose

The yearly panic about HFMD is nothing compared to the terror that seized many Singaporeans when the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) began infecting people here in March 2003.

The very contagious SARS, which originated in diseased civet cats in China, hit Singapore in March 2003, after air stewardess Esther Mok caught it from an elderly man in Hong Kong, with whom she had shared an elevator. Mok, also known as Patient Zero then, survived SARS but watched her parents, uncle and pastor die from the disease, which spreads through infected droplets.

Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH) in Novena, where Mok had sought treatment, was designated SARS Central, the nerve centre for treating SARS patients, although the disease subsequently spread to Singapore General Hospital (SGH), Changi General Hospital and National University Hospital, in that order. Ironically, according to hospital administrator **Liak Teng Lit**, he first got wind of SARS at a dinner thrown by TTSH on 14 March 2003: "My friend Francis Lee had heard a conversation at his table during this dinner that staff of TTSH were falling sick."

Healthcare officers moved as swiftly as the spread of the SARS virus after that and, Liak recalled, on 21 March 2003, the public finally heard about the epidemic. "Basically, all hell broke loose," he said.

Pathologist Kanagaratnam Shanmugaratnam greeting President Benjamin Henry Sheares at a conference on cancer in Singapore in 1975. Prof Shanmugaratnam, whose son Tharman is a former Deputy Prime Minister (and currently Senior Minister in the Cabinet), initiated a cancer registry in Singapore in 1968 so that no one with cancer here would have to go without treatment. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*



The highly contagious Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) dominated newspaper headlines in Singapore between March and July 2003, including this frontpage story in *The Straits Times* on 27 March 2003. This report documented the unprecedented closure of all pre-schools, and primary, secondary and pre-university schools. During those four fretful months, SARS claimed the lives of 33 of the 238 people infected with the virus in Singapore. *The Straits Times*, 27 March 2003, p. 1.

Bus driver **Ang Chit Poh** said the private bus business plunged such that most drivers switched to other trades for good. Those who remained in the business had to disinfect their buses day after day in the hope that it would restore the confidence of passengers who had abandoned this transport option. Traditional Chinese medicine practitioner **Tan Siew Mong** recalled the prices of popular herbs and roots going through the roof as, once again, people resorted to folk remedies as their shields against SARS.

Liak, who was then Chief Executive Officer of Alexandra Hospital – the only Singapore hospital whose patients did not die of SARS – recalled how landlords were so fearful, they kicked out nurses who rented their rooms. He recalled: "They had no place to stay." So his staff and the hospital's volunteers cleared

a rundown former nursing quarters within the hospital's grounds to house the stranded nurses.

Liak ordered new beds and furnishings for them from IKEA, the Swedish flat-pack furniture giant. Enter unsung hero Philip Wee, who was then General Manager of IKEA in Singapore. "He and his team personally brought and installed the beds in the hospital," Liak said, his voice breaking as he recalled this. "We tried to pay for the beds, but they said, 'Compliments from IKEA for helping the country fight SARS'."

Once the quarters were fully habitable, Liak invited Jennie Chua, then General Manager of Raffles Hotel – and the first woman to have held that post – to, as he put it, "declare Hotel Alexandra open".

Besides IKEA's Wee, Liak was also very impressed with Ho Ching, the Chief Executive Officer of Temasek Holdings and wife of current Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong. He recalled Ho updating everyone concerned about the SARS situation in various countries "late into the night". "She was also very creative," he recalled. "People were worried about Malaysian motorists coming into Singapore, so she

said why not set up a drinks stall with thermo-scanners, so that we could check the motorists for fever while they drank their *liang teh* (cooling tea)."

For his part, Liak – who usually did not walk around the hospital grounds much – made it a point to stroll through its corridors two or three times a day "to show confidence" to all. Things were, nevertheless, tense. He tried to ease it with some black humour. "I said, 'If we die, it's game over. If we live, COEs will be cheap and property prices will crash, so we will be able to buy bungalows on the cheap.'"

Liak realised that Singaporeans were in the grip of such fear because they knew next to nothing about SARS, and their imagination was working overtime. So he partnered the South West Community Development Council in a campaign to demystify the coronavirus that causes SARS. They worked with a cartoonist to depict the virus as a silly creature with a crown, and then got members of parliament and ministers to "whack" an effigy of this cartoonish creature.

He and his colleagues also exhorted everyone to wash their hands as often as they could. "If you can't do anything, you





Anxious Singaporeans waiting to be screened for Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) at the Accident & Emergency Department of Tan Tock Seng Hospital in 2003. Source: *The Straits Times* © Singapore Press Holdings Limited. Reprinted with permission.

feel helpless," he mused. "So when you wash your hands, you feel better." This is how Liak and his team boosted community morale during the crisis. Liak, in fact, believed that that rigorous handwashing saved his colleagues' lives. "We actually had four patients with the SARS virus at Alexandra Hospital – they even coughed in the faces of my staff." Not one among them succumbed to the virus, though. Many called them "lucky", but Liak said it was more likely thanks to their vigilance and, yes, hand-washing throughout.

While everyone in Singapore's healthcare system was reminded repeatedly to don protective masks and gowns, and keep washing their hands, some chafed against the sheer inconvenience of it all. Nurse **Loo Yew Kim**, who began her career at Kwong Wai Shiu Hospital in 1969 and worked there until she retired more than 40 years later, was at first peeved at the nagging of younger doctors for her and her fellow nurses to wash their hands after every step they took in caring for patients. "I really resented that," she recalled in Mandarin in 2014. "We were by then in our 50s and 60s, so it was not as if we didn't know that we should wash our hands."

Loo and other nurses also fumed at having to don protective gear every minute of every day during the SARS epidemic. "Sweat would be dripping down my face from the mask," she huffed. It

was all so inconvenient, she added, that at some points, she would just fling her mask aside as it kept getting in the way of saving lives. "I will never forget the SARS period," she stressed.

In June 2003, SARS was finally contained in Singapore, but not before claiming the lives of 33 among the total of 238 reported SARS patients.

Liak explained that SARS illustrated how much the world had changed due to globalisation. "Germs will always mutate and, often, viruses exchange material with human beings and animals... but in the past, whenever it mutated and killed an entire village, it could not spread after that because it had nowhere to go. But because transport became globalised, SARS could go from a Guangzhou village [in China] to towns and then cities. That is how dangerous the world has become."

Worse, he added, people were now eating more meat, leading to increasingly intensive animal farming, which was unhealthy and stoked the spread of viruses which, once mutated, would be very hard to curb.

**Prof Tan Ser Kiat**, who was SGH's chief during SARS, mused: "If a terrorist infected himself with smallpox, the incubation period of the virus would be long enough for him to mingle with everyone else. Smallpox would then spread like wildfire. This is what we are afraid of." That was because, unlike droplet-borne SARS, smallpox is air-borne,

meaning "I wouldn't know who has got it until it's too late," he said.

### The Goats That Saved Lives

More than most countries, perhaps, Singapore has had an excellent track record of mounting successful health campaigns. Among its biggest wins by far has been the eradication of diseases such as polio, diphtheria and rheumatic heart disease.

Diphtheria, in particular, was endemic in Singapore as tuberculosis was in the early half of the 20th century. The person to thank for its eradication is **Prof Ernest Steven Monteiro**. During the Japanese Occupation, Monteiro was in charge of Middleton Hospital, which was TTSH's infectious diseases wing. The Japanese had taken two of his brothers away, and he never saw them again. He thinks the Japanese spared his life because "they were very short of doctors... and also very health-conscious, especially about infectious diseases such as diphtheria".

At the time, Monteiro was among the very few doctors in Singapore specialising in the study of infectious diseases. He hit upon a solution to cure diphtheria after reading a book in which a doctor

had tried to produce an anti-diphtheria serum by injecting the diphtheria organism into a goat named Mephistopheles. In the play *Faust* by German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Mephistopheles was an agent of Satan.

Monteiro tried that same experiment. After cultivating diphtheria, he extracted its toxins and injected that into the necks of goats. Then, once the goats were producing serum to combat the toxins in them, Monteiro extracted the serum from the goats and injected that into a child with severe diphtheria. The child recovered.

In 1958, Monteiro introduced the oral polio vaccine in Singapore, developed by American medical researcher Albert Sabin. Some 250,000 children were immunised against the disease, which was endemic then. This was despite much opposition from his compatriots in medicine, as the vaccine had not been tested on a large population in the United States. The vaccine, however, proved effective in blocking the poliovirus and Singapore became polio-free.

His son, **Dr Edmund Hugh Monteiro**, who once headed TTSH's Communicable

Disease Centre, said that despite his father's diphtheria breakthrough during World War II, the disease was "a growing problem" in Singapore from the mid-1950s. This was, he added, in spite of doctors' pleas to parents to get their children immunised against diphtheria. In the 1960s, he recalled, "only 55 per cent of children had that immunisation". To eradicate the scourge, the younger Monteiro knew the immunisation rate had to be at least 90 percent.

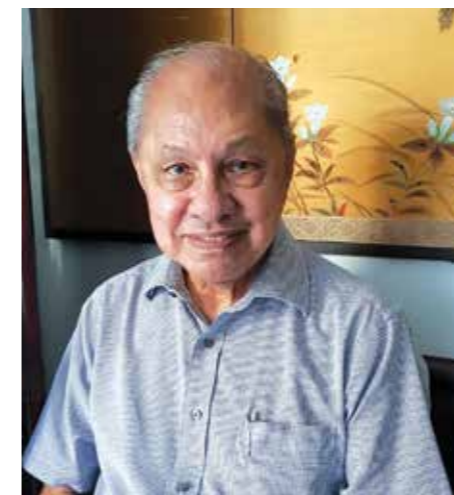
So, in 1962, the government made immunisation against diphtheria compulsory on pain of paying a \$2,000 fine, a sum too high for most families in those days. "As far as I can remember," said the younger Monteiro, "no parent has ever been brought to court and fined." Better yet, he noted, once a child turned up at a doctor's for immunisation, he or she would most likely accept being immunised against tetanus, polio and so on. In this way, he said, Singapore soon eradicated diphtheria. He recalled further: "In those days, when they published details about the immunisation programme in *The Straits Times*, immunisation teams

would be present for about a week in housing estates.

"And these nurses would actually climb the stairs or go up in lifts and tell parents there, 'Bring your children down for immunisation.' That was the sort of service that was provided – on your doorstep and for free. That set the stage for these childhood diseases to be eradicated." By 1977, he recalled, diphtheria and polio had become things of the past for Singaporeans.

**Dr Koh Eng Kheng**, a doctor in private practice, said the government's anti-diphtheria drive was a fine example of how concerted public health campaigns had to be. Quoting former American President Theodore Roosevelt, he said the success of such campaigns hinged on the government penalising anyone who tried to dodge immunisation. "You cannot soft-pedal these things," Koh said.

Lawyer **Nadesan Ganesan**, a former Chairman of the Football Association of Singapore, remembered government nurses vaccinating him against cholera during the Japanese Occupation, which



(Far left) Trailblazing doctor Ernest Steven Monteiro had the brainwave to develop an anti-diphtheria serum in goats. With this serum, he and his team eradicated diphtheria in Singapore. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

(Bottom left) Dr Edmund Hugh Monteiro, who is the son of Prof Ernest S. Monteiro, was just as driven as his illustrious father in that he was among the earliest doctors in Singapore to treat HIV/AIDS patients, at a time when they were shunned by most. Courtesy of Edmund Hugh Monteiro.

(Left) One of the many inoculation centres for cholera in 1963. Lawyer Nadesan Ganesan, who was vaccinated against cholera during the Japanese Occupation, remembers that the job was very painful as the needle was blunt, causing his arm to swell up. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



was another illness that plagued Singapore right into the post-war period and into the 1970s. “There were only two or three nurses vaccinating us, and their needles were blunt to begin with. You could hear the sound ‘tok’ whenever they poked your arm... because the needle was so blunt, our arms swelled and we were all sick for three days. But we recovered lah and it was good because they helped us not get cholera.”

In 1984, measles struck Singapore in a big way. The government ordered the compulsory immunisation against measles and, once again, measles went the way of diphtheria and polio.

Unbeknownst to Singapore’s medical service, it was about to have another terrifying battle on the cards, against which immunisation was powerless – Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS).

### Could Mosquitoes Give Me AIDS?

Edmund Hugh Monteiro remembers Singapore’s very first AIDS patient. It was a man admitted to then Toa Payoh Hospital in 1986 for fever and diarrhoea, and shingles to boot. But the hospital transferred him to the Communicable Diseases Centre – where Monteiro was the Director – when they found that he had a salmonella infection. Monteiro thought about how the man’s immune system could have broken down so badly. He tested the man for AIDS. “And it was positive.”

It was not long before the centre’s senior staff wanted to transfer out because they feared having to care for AIDS patients. “AIDS was something which they were not used to and it was too terrifying. Some among them were not personally panicking, but their family members were saying, ‘You better get out.’ So there was, unfortunately, a lot of ignorance as to how the disease was spread.” That was triggered by the government designating his centre in 1985 as the lone place in Singapore to treat AIDS patients.

The flurry of fearful queries continued from his staff. “If the mosquito bites an AIDS patient and then bites me, will I get HIV?” was the biggest worry. Monteiro said that what he found “most assuring” about AIDS was that, apart from sexual intercourse with the AIDS patient, “you’d have to stick yourself with a needle” to be infected. “In other words,” he said, “you didn’t have to be

gloved, gowned and masked whenever you went to see the patient.” In fact, he noted, it was far easier to be infected with Hepatitis B and C than it was to get AIDS.

The stigma against its patients, however, persisted. Monteiro especially rued the unfeeling attitude of some doctors towards AIDS sufferers. “We talk to people very early in their medical careers, tell them that if they are going to become doctors, sometime in their career, they are going to have to treat a person with AIDS. It’s unlikely that you will go through a medical career for 20, 30 years without having to manage a person with AIDS.”

There was, he recalled, “one young doctor who wanted to specialise in infectious diseases ‘as long as I don’t have to manage AIDS patients’. So we closed the door on that person and said, ‘You’d better find another discipline if you can.’”

### First, Do No Harm

The case of that young doctor with an aversion to AIDS patients begs the question: what makes a good doctor?

Edmund Hugh Monteiro recalled his father giving him this advice: “You want to do medicine? Okay, two things. One, you never stop learning. Two, you may have to sacrifice your lunch... I think what he meant was that patients can sometimes be overpowering in their demands.”

Prof S.S. Ratnam (left) bouncing Samuel Lee Jian Wei, his first test-tube baby, on his lap while the baby’s mother Tan Siew Ee looks on. Prof Ratnam was a fertility expert who introduced in-vitro fertilisation (IVF) to Singapore, giving much hope to spouses for whom conception was difficult. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*



He then cautioned: “You need to put them off at certain stages, and not make it out that medicine is a profession where everyone is to be heroic and self-sacrificing. You need to draw a line, I mean, you will just be burnt out with patients’ problems... if I draw a line somewhere, I can actually function better than if I just didn’t know what I was supposed to do.”

Kanagaratnam Shanmugaratnam the pathologist thought that a doctor’s empathy for his patients’ predicaments was a hallmark of great medicine. “We inspire them to be interested in the nature of disease because that’s how they can be good surgeons or physicians. To understand suffering, to speak freely, to ask us things which require clarification.”

He added: “And it’s a huge pleasure to be able to solve problems for the medical students. Medicine is not a nine-to-five job; you cannot be a specialist with that kind of mentality. So one has to work long hours, studying in the evenings, keeping up with medicine.”

### First Test-Tube Baby

For many years, the parents of **Samuel Lee Jian Wei** could not conceive a child naturally. Fortunately, they were in an age when science had made much progress. On 25 July 1978, Louise Joy

Brown, the first baby created from sperm fertilising a human egg in a test tube, was born in Manchester, England.

Back in Singapore, the brilliance of surgeon Prof S.S. Ratnam meant that this artificial method of conception, known as in-vitro fertilisation (IVF), was available to the Lees from the early 1980s.

Samuel was born on 19 May 1983 at KK Hospital. He was a triumph for medicine in Singapore and so captured everyone’s imagination the moment he came into the world. Samuel recalled: “From the age of three or four, I kept hearing the words ‘IVF’ and ‘test-tube baby.’”

At the age of six, he finally met Ratnam the surgeon who had made his birth a reality. “He asked me some questions, like ‘How have you been doing?’ He was quite friendly and treated me very nicely... When I was young, I was quite shy, but he made me laugh so I felt very comfortable with him.”

Given a choice, though, Samuel would rather not have been Singapore’s first test-tube baby. “It’s so that I would not get so much unwanted attention,” he rued. As recently as 2015, he was in the spotlight again, as his profile was included in Singapore’s official SG50 book, *Living the Singapore Story*.

Access to Ratnam’s September 1997 interview with the Oral History Centre is restricted, so his views on Samuel and other subjects cannot be quoted here for now. But fellow doctor Tow Siang Hwa, who handpicked Ratnam to succeed him at KK Hospital from 1969, can shed light on how skilful Ratnam was. Speaking in July 1997, Tow recalled: “S.S. Ratnam was my handpicked trainee... He was intelligent and had the makings of a professor.” In 1969, when Tow left KK Hospital to start his own practice, he told Ratnam: “Ratnam, I am going to leave, but you will succeed me.

“That was the vision I had, that he would succeed me,” Tow mused. “By then, the ship was high and sailing; the groundwork had been done and now it was for him to keep it going. And he sailed the ship well because in no time, he was reaching the highest levels.”

Tow, who helmed KK Hospital in the 1960s, had raised the reputation of the nation’s medical capabilities. In 1960, his expertise in molar pregnancy – in which an embryo is abnormal, resembling a cluster of grapes, and cannot develop fully – stunned an expert at Leeds University, who encour-

aged him to submit the discovery for a prestigious lecture in Britain. Before long, inspectors from Britain’s Royal College of Obstetrics & Gynaecology recognised KK Hospital as being of the highest medical standards, from the way it ran its operations to how it cared for patients. Tow said: “Now this was a major, major advance. It meant that obstetrics & gynaecology were on a par with medicine and surgery. So we were able to train our specialists locally.

“So, from that day, instead of having five specialists for the whole population of Singapore, today, in 1997, we have 200 specialists.” ♦



This essay is an extract from the book, *The Sound of Memories: Recordings from the Oral History Centre, Singapore*, published by the National Archives of Singapore and World Scientific Publishing. The hardcover, paperback and ebook retail for \$46, \$28 and \$19.95 respectively. The book is also available for reference at the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library (Call no.: RSING 959.57 CHE) and for loan at selected public libraries (Call no.: SING 959.57 CHE). The ebook is available for loan on the NLB Mobile app.

### LIST OF INTERVIEWEES

- 1 Ang Chit Poh (Accession no.: 004159) was a bus driver who witnessed how private bus business were affected during the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) crisis from March till July 2003.
- 2 Edmund Hugh Monteiro (Accession no.: 001956) treated many among Singapore’s first HIV/AIDS sufferers. He is former Director of the Centre for Communicable Diseases. He got his smarts, wisdom and compassion from his father, the trailblazing doctor Ernest Steven Monteiro.
- 3 Ernest Steven Monteiro (Accession no.: 000488), the father of Edmund Hugh Monteiro, was the first Asian to hold the Chair of Clinical Medicine at the University of Malaya, and later Dean of the Faculty of Medicine at the same university. He succeeded in cultivating an anti-diphtheria serum in goats.
- 4 Eugene Wijesingha (Accession no.: 001595) began his career as a teacher at Raffles Institution (RI) in 1959. He was later Principal of Temasek Junior College from 1980 till 1985 and then Principal of RI from 1986 till 1994, when he retired.
- 5 Kanagaratnam Shanmugaratnam (Accession no.: 001562) was a pathologist who came to be known as Singapore’s “Father of Pathology”. His son Tharman was Singapore’s Deputy Prime Minister from 2011 till 2019.
- 6 Koh Eng Kheng (Accession no.: 002000) was among Singapore’s most beloved family physicians. He opened Chung Khiaw Clinic in 1957 and was still seeing patients a few months before his death in July 2006. In 1972, he was appointed President of the Singapore Medical Association and was later President of the College of General Practitioners Singapore.
- 7 Liak Teng Lit (Accession no.: 003867) is the former Chief Executive of Toa Payoh Hospital, Changi General Hospital, Alexandra Hospital and Khoo Teck Puat Hospital. Under his watch, Alexandra Hospital had the fewest patients suffering from Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) when the epidemic hit Singapore in 2003.
- 8 Loo Yew Kim (Accession no.: 003501) grew up in the grounds of Kwong Wai Shiu Hospital, where her foster parents were cleaners. Upon leaving school, she became a patient care assistant – a post we would now refer to as a nurse – at the hospital.
- 9 Nadesan Ganesan (Accession no.: 003279) is a lawyer and former Chairman of the Football Association of Singapore. He survived the Japanese Occupation, and vowed never to touch tapioca or sweet potato again.
- 10 Samuel Lee Jian Wei (Accession no.: 003407) is Asia’s first test-tube baby, born on 19 May 1983 to a security supervisor and a secretary. He was named Samuel by Professor S.S. Ratnam, the surgeon who carried out in-vitro fertilisation to aid his conception.
- 11 Soh Siew Cheong (Accession no.: 003274) grew up in Chinatown in the days when gangsterism was rife. He trained as an engineer and was among the pioneering batch of local civil servants in Singapore.
- 12 Sumitera Mohd Letak (Accession no.: 001915) started out as a midwife, travelling to and from mainland Singapore to the outlying islands to care for women there. She later took up nursing and continued to help mothers in need, winning volunteerism awards along the way.
- 13 Tan Ser Kiat (Accession no.: 003084) was the Group Chief Executive of SingHealth from its inception in 2000 till 2012. An Emeritus Consultant in the Department of Orthopaedic Surgery at the Singapore General Hospital, he is also President of the Singapore Medical Council.
- 14 Tay Chong Hai (Accession no.: 002537) is the first Southeast Asian to have had a disease named after him – Tay’s Syndrome. In the late 1990s, he discovered another disease, eosinophilic arthritis. With his wife, Dr Caroline Gaw, they first alerted Singaporeans to the existence of Hand, Foot and Mouth Disease.
- 15 Tow Siang Hwa (Accession no.: 001920) was among Singapore’s pioneering gynaecologists. As Head of what is now KK Women’s and Children’s Hospital from 1960, he secured accreditation for it from the prestigious Royal College of Obstetrics and Gynaecology in Britain. He later left for private practice and set up Tow Yung Clinic.
- 16 Yau Chung Chii (Accession no.: 000427) was steeped in Chinese kitchen wisdom. She was by turns a salesclerk at Daimaru departmental store, a telephonist and a typist.
- 17 Yong Nen Khiong (Accession no.: 003548) was among the Chinese residents of Singapore who settled in the Japanese wartime settlement of Endau in Johor in the mid-1940s. He later became a heart surgeon.



# TO WRECK OR TO RECREATE

## GIVING NEW LIFE TO SINGAPORE'S BUILT HERITAGE

Nearly 70 years have passed since a committee was set up to look into the preservation of buildings and sites with historical value. **Lim Tin Seng** charts the journey.

A 1980s aerial illustration of Kreta Ayer, the core of Chinatown. The Urban Redevelopment Authority's 1986 conservation plan of the city centre identified six historic areas for conservation, one of which was Chinatown. *Courtesy of the Urban Redevelopment Authority.*

Historic and nationally significant buildings are among Singapore's most important cultural assets, and the protection of its built heritage is an integral component of the nation's overall urban planning strategy.

The beginnings of the city's preservation efforts can be traced back to 1950, when a committee was set up to look into the preservation of individual buildings and sites with historic value. In the ensuing decades, these efforts grew to encompass more concrete initiatives that emphasised both the conservation and preservation (see text box on page 50) of entire areas, along with a greater focus on heritage buildings and their relationship with the surrounding built environment.

### Early Colonial Efforts

The idea of conserving and preserving Singapore's built heritage is not a recent initiative. It did not emerge with the unveiling of the Urban Redevelopment Authority's Conservation Master Plan in 1986, nor did it surface when the Preservation of Monuments Act was enacted earlier in 1971. Its history in fact goes back to the postwar period when the colonial government formed the Committee for the Preservation of Historic Sites and Antiquities in 1950.<sup>1</sup>

Headed by Michael W. F. Tweedie, who was then Director of the Raffles Museum, the committee was tasked to recommend ways to maintain the tomb of Sultan Iskandar Shah, the last ruler of 14th-century Singapura, and a 19th-century Christian cemetery. Both these sites on Fort Canning Hill were in a dilapidated state due to years of neglect and exposure to the elements.

In 1951, the committee concluded that "the best way of commemorating the people who were buried there" was to turn Fort Canning into a public park.<sup>2</sup> As part of the scheme, crumbling tombstones from the Christian cemetery were salvaged and embedded into the walls of the new park, while tombs that were still intact, such as that of pioneer

architect George D. Coleman's, were preserved for their historical value.<sup>3</sup>

In 1954, the committee was given another assignment. Headed by members Carl Alexander Gibson-Hill and T.H.H. Hancock – curator of zoology at the Raffles Museum and senior architect of the Public Works Department respectively – the team was asked to draw up a list of historic sites in Singapore.<sup>4</sup> The purpose was to put up plaques at these sites describing their significance. The plaque inscriptions would be in English but if the site was of Malay or Chinese origins, then Malay and Chinese text would be correspondingly inserted alongside the English inscription.

The committee identified some 30 sites, most of which were built in the 19th century.<sup>5</sup> These included secular buildings and structures like Victoria Theatre, Elgin Bridge, H.C. Caldwell's House, 3 Coleman Street (also known as Coleman House) and Old Parliament House, as well as places of worship belonging to the major religions practised in Singapore, such as St Andrew's Cathedral, Cathedral of the Good Shepherd, Sri Mariamman Temple, Thian Hock Keng Temple and Masjid Hajjah Fatimah. Iskandar Shah's tomb and the gateways of the Christian cemetery at Fort Canning were also included in the list.<sup>6</sup>

Besides identifying historic sites, the committee was also keen to restore historic buildings and preserve them for posterity. However, it admitted that the endeavour would be difficult and could only be undertaken if there were sufficient funds. Tweedie noted that many of the buildings were owned privately, which meant that the government would have to pay exorbitant sums to the owners in order to acquire them.<sup>7</sup>

Despite the lack of funds, the need to preserve historic sites was included in the urban planning process when the Singapore Improvement Trust (SIT) – predecessor of the Housing & Development Board – was tasked to "prepare... and amend from time to time a list of ancient monuments... and buildings of historic and/or architectural interest" for the 1958 Master Plan.<sup>8</sup> Although the list did not guarantee preservation, but only the consideration for the possibility of preservation, the 1959 Planning Ordinance nevertheless provided for the enactment of rules relating to the protection of the sites and buildings identified on the list.<sup>9</sup>

To compile the list, the SIT took into account the age of the sites as well as their historical and architectural significance. It also consulted members of the Commit-



tee for the Preservation of Historic Sites and Antiquities, including Gibson-Hill and Hancock.<sup>10</sup> For this reason, the SIT's heritage list was quite similar to the one drawn up by the preservation committee, with 20 of the 32 sites identified by the SIT found on the earlier list. The new additions included Outram Gaol, 3 Oxley Rise (or Killiney House), Kampong Radin Mas cemetery and the Indian cemetery in Geylang.<sup>11</sup> SIT's list, like the one drawn by the preservation committee, comprised both secular and non-secular sites and buildings, underlining the deference the colonial government accorded to the religions observed by its resident communities (see text box opposite).

SIT's heritage list was drawn up in consultation with a society known as Friends of Singapore. The society was founded in 1937 by the well-known lawyer Roland St John Braddell and other leading

public figures, including Song Ong Siang, a prominent member of the Straits Chinese community who later served as the society's first president. The society had included in its charter "the preservation of historical buildings and sites" as one of the projects it could initiate "for the embellishment or the cultural improvement of Singapore".<sup>12</sup>

During its formative years, however, Friends of Singapore achieved little in terms of conserving Singapore's historic landmarks. It was only in 1955 that the society made some progress when it launched a public campaign calling for the preservation of Coleman House (built in 1829 as the private residence of prolific colonial architect George D. Coleman) and the commemoration of the 1942 battle site in Pasir Panjang, where the Malay regiment fought the Japanese Army.<sup>13</sup>

Arguing that the scheme was for the "improvement of the city and the benefit

of the people", the society planned to restore Coleman House and turn it into "a home of the arts", where exhibitions and concerts could be held. To support its case, the society published a pamphlet detailing the historical significance and the architectural value of the house.<sup>14</sup> As for the Pasir Panjang battle site, the society opposed the War Department's plan to construct a mess hall there and recommended that a commemorative park be created instead.<sup>15</sup>

Besides Coleman House and the battle site, Friends of Singapore also made public calls for nature sites such as Bukit Timah and Ulu Pandan to be preserved and turned into proper nature parks to attract tourists.<sup>16</sup> In addition, in 1957, the society came out to support the SIT when Chartered Bank Trustee Company, the owner of Killiney House at 3 Oxley Rise – built by Thomas Oxley, surgeon-general of the Straits Settlements – tried to have the 1842 property removed from the 1958 Master Plan heritage site list as he was worried that the "ancient monument" status of the house would affect its sale price.

During the inquiry, the society gave evidence to explain why Killiney House should be preserved, pointing out that it was one of the last surviving "planter's home" from the 1840s, and among the first residences built in the island's interior. In addition, the house had a dovecote to house pigeons and stables for horses, which made it architecturally unique in the Straits Settlements.<sup>17</sup>

**Demolition and Urban Renewal**

When the People's Action Party (PAP) came into power in 1959, preserving Singapore's built heritage was initially accorded little, if any, attention. The new government had other more pressing concerns, chief of which was to improve the housing situation.<sup>18</sup>

It was estimated that in 1960, a quarter of a million people were living in overcrowded slums in the 688-hectare city centre, and another one-third in squatter areas—all of whom urgently needed rehousing. Many structures in the city centre were at least a century old and falling apart or had been crudely built by the squatters. Besides being potential fire hazards, these homes also lacked proper ventilation and sanitation. In addition, most were only two or three storeys high, and thus made uneconomical use of valuable land.<sup>19</sup>

To solve the problem, the government launched an aggressive public housing programme in 1960 to build housing estates beyond the city centre. The Housing &

Development Board (HDB) replaced the SIT, while the Urban Renewal Department (URD; the predecessor of today's Urban Redevelopment Authority) was created as a department under the HDB to spearhead an urban renewal programme for redeveloping the central area.

In the initial years, urban renewal mainly concerned itself with the demolition of old buildings, clearing of slums, resettlement of the people from the city centre, and the planning of new buildings that maximised the redevelopment

potential of the land. As the aim was "the gradual demolition of virtually the whole 1,500-odd acres of the old city and its replacement by an integrated modern city",<sup>20</sup> the priority to preserve historic sites was very low.

When the 1964 redevelopment of Precinct South 1 was rolled out, Outram Gaol, which was on the heritage list of the 1958 Master Plan, was demolished along with many colonial-era shophouses to make way for flats. In 1965, the privately owned Coleman House was razed to build the

Peninsula Hotel, while other buildings, such as Raffles Institution and Killiney House, were pulled down in the 1970s to free up space for commercial projects.

In less than a decade after the urban renewal programme was officially launched in 1966, nearly 300 acres of the central area had been redeveloped.<sup>21</sup> During the same period, the HDB built more than 130,000 flats in new housing estates. These provided accommodation for some 40 percent of the population, most of whom previously lived in the central area.<sup>22</sup>

**Heritage Sites Identified in Postwar Singapore**

\* indicates a site that is common to both lists.

**Committee for the Preservation of Historic Sites and Antiquities (1954)**

- 1 Raffles Institution\*
- 2 H.C. Caldwell's House\*
- 3 Cathedral of the Good Shepherd\*
- 4 St Andrew's Cathedral\*
- 5 Victoria Theatre\*
- 6 Tanah Kubor Temenggong, Telok Blangah\*
- 7 Church of St Gregory the Illuminator (Armenian)\*
- 8 3 Coleman Street (Coleman House)\*
- 9 Hokkien Temple, Telok Ayer Street\*
- 10 Teochew Temple, Phillip Street\*
- 11 Silat Road Temple\*
- 12 Tua Pek Kong Temple, Palmer Road\*
- 13 Hajjah Fatimah Mosque, Java Road\*
- 14 Keramat Habib Nor, Tanjong Malang\*
- 15 Chulia Mosque, South Bridge Road\*
- 16 Chulia Mosque, corner of Telok Ayer Street and Boon Tat Street\*
- 17 Sri Mariamman Temple, South Bridge Road\*
- 18 Sri Sivam Temple, Orchard Road\*
- 19 Keramat Iskandar Shah, Fort Canning\*
- 20 Corner of Ellenborough Building\*
- 21 Gateways of Fort Canning Cemetery\*
- 22 Chettiar Temple, Tank Road\*
- 23 Elgin Bridge
- 24 Buddhist Temple, Kim Keat Road
- 25 Tan Seng Haw, Magazine Road
- 26 Ying Fo Fui Kun, Telok Ayer Street
- 27 Ning Yueng Wui Kuan, South Bridge Road
- 28 Benggali Mosque, Bencoolen Street
- 29 Assembly House (Old Parliament House)
- 30 Yeo Kim Swee's Godown, North Boat Quay

**Singapore Improvement Trust (1958)**

- 1 Raffles Institution\*
- 2 H.C. Caldwell's House\*
- 3 Cathedral of the Good Shepherd\*
- 4 St Andrew's Cathedral\*
- 5 Victoria Theatre\*
- 6 Tanah Kubor Temenggong, Telok Blangah\*
- 7 Church of St Gregory the Illuminator (Armenian)\*
- 8 3 Coleman Street (Coleman House)\*
- 9 Hokkien Temple, Telok Ayer Street\*
- 10 Teochew Temple, Phillip Street\*
- 11 Silat Road Temple\*
- 12 Tua Pek Kong Temple, Palmer Road\*
- 13 Hajjah Fatimah Mosque, Java Road\*
- 14 Keramat Habib Nor, Tanjong Malang\*
- 15 Chulia Mosque, South Bridge Road\*
- 16 Chulia Mosque, corner of Telok Ayer Street and Boon Tat Street\*
- 17 Sri Mariamman Temple, South Bridge Road\*
- 18 Sri Sivam Temple, Orchard Road\*
- 19 Keramat Iskandar Shah, Fort Canning\*
- 20 Corner of Ellenborough Building\*
- 21 Gateways of Fort Canning Cemetery\*
- 22 Chettiar Temple, Tank Road\*
- 23 Outram Gaol
- 24 Killiney House (3 Oxley Rise/Belle Vue House)
- 25 Geok Hong Tian Temple, Havelock Road
- 26 Indian Temple in Kreta Ayer
- 27 Arab Street Keramat
- 28 Sultan's Gate House (or Istana Kampong Glam)
- 29 Cemetery, Kampong Radin Mas
- 30 Indian cemetery off Lorong 3, Geylang
- 31 Sun Yat Sen Villa
- 32 Sri Perumal Temple, 397 Serangoon Road

**(Below)** 3 Coleman Street (or Coleman House) was the former personal residence of Singapore's first Government Superintendent of Public Works, George D. Coleman. When he left Singapore in 1841, the landmark building was occupied by a succession of hotels and residences, including Hotel de la Paix shown here in the 1880s. The building was demolished in 1965 and the Peninsula Shopping Centre currently occupies the site. *Lee Kip Lin Collection, all rights reserved, Lee Kip Lin and National Library Board, Singapore.*

**(Bottom)** This stately house at 3 Oxley Rise (Killiney House) was built in 1842 by Dr Thomas Oxley, Surgeon-General of the Straits Settlements and after whom Oxley Rise was named. When Jewish businessman Manasseh Meyer bought the house in 1890, he renamed it Belle Vue. The house was demolished in 1982 to make way for a private housing estate. *Ronni Pinsler Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*





### A Move Towards Conservation, Rehabilitation and Rebuilding

The seemingly random demolition of historic buildings, however, did not mean that the government was completely unaware of the need to preserve the city's historic sites. When it engaged Erik Lorange, a United Nations town planning adviser, to propose a long-term framework for urban renewal in 1962, the Norwegian suggested taking measures to "rehabilitate" suitable buildings instead of tearing them down.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, when a second UN team arrived in 1963 to follow-up on Lorange's work, it advised that urban renewal did not necessarily mean demolishing old buildings in favour of erecting new structures. Instead, the process should have three imperative aspects: conservation, rehabilitation and rebuilding.

The process of identifying areas worth preserving in Singapore, followed by a programme to improve such areas with a better environment as well as the demarcation of remaining areas to be demolished and rebuilt, was conceived based on the observation that the districts undergoing renewal were thriving instead of decaying. The three-member UN team emphasised that a "commitment [should] be made to identify the values of some of Singapore's existing areas and build and strengthen these values". This would include the "recognition of the value and attraction of many of the existing shophouses and the way of living, working and trading that produced this particularly Singapore type of architecture". The UN team also added that preserving parts of the old city such as Chinatown would be beneficial as they could function as "escape hatches from sameness and order".<sup>24</sup>

The recommendations raised in the 1963 UN findings were supported by Singaporean architects such as William Lim and Tay Kheng Soon. Notably, the Singapore Planning and Urban Research Group (SPUR) – an urban planning think tank founded by Lim and Tay as well as architect Koh Seow Chuan and others like Chan Heng Chee – published a response in the 1967 issue of its periodical, which noted that "redevelopment is necessary as part of the evolution of any City". However, the think tank cautioned that the magnitude of redevelopment should be kept to a minimum and carried out using the "same three processes" of conservation, rehabilitation and rebuilding as proposed by the UN team.

More critically, on identifying buildings that were worthy of preservation, the SPUR emphasised that this should be "by reason of their historical, architectural or other special significance", and the approach should be taken from the perspective of the local context rather than the Western definition, which tended to focus more on grandiose buildings and monuments. This way, even Singapore's modest vernacular buildings, dismissed by some as insignificant, could be appropriately assessed for their historical significance.<sup>25</sup>

Perhaps one of the clearest signs that the government was mindful of the need to preserve Singapore's built heritage came from the town planners themselves. In 1969, Alan Choe, who was then head of URD, wrote that although Singapore had only a "few buildings worthy of preservation" and that many of the buildings in the central area were "overdue for demolition", urban renewal should not just be the "indiscriminate demolition of properties of historical, architectural or economic value". Instead, town planners were urged to introduce

preservation measures that would "sustain and improve the colourful character of Singapore".<sup>26</sup>

In fact, the URD had already moved to preserve some buildings, including Hajjah Fatimah Mosque, in Stage 2B of the redevelopment of Precinct North 2B in 1967. This won praise from then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew. In a letter to Choe, Lee wrote that he had read the preservation efforts "with satisfaction", and commended Choe for taking steps on "preserving what little there is of historic interest and recording in pictorial form for posterity [the buildings that] must economically be destroyed".<sup>27</sup>

### The Creation of a Preservation Board

Although it was not publicly made known, Singapore's town planners had been discussing with architects and academics on how historic sites should be preserved during the revision of the 1958 Master Plan.<sup>28</sup> In 1963, the Committee on Ancient Monuments, Lands and Buildings of Architectural and/or Historic Interest was set up to review the 32 historic sites identified by the SIT back in the 1950s.

Comprising town planners, surveyors and representatives from the National Museum and the Singapore Institute of Architects (SIA) – such as the director of the National Museum, Christopher Hooi Liang Yin, and W.I. Watson from the SIA – the committee felt that the age criterion that the SIT used to select historic sites should be removed, and the cost of preservation added as a factor for consideration.<sup>29</sup>

In addition, the committee said that sites that had been rebuilt should be excluded from the list, while "sites of character" and "places or objects of interest to tourists", including small monuments, be considered as historic sites.<sup>30</sup> Based on this new selection criteria, the committee ended up removing some of the historic sites from the SIT's heritage list. These included Coleman House, Raffles Institution, Outram Gaol, Killiney House and a number of places of worship as these had been substantially renovated or rebuilt.<sup>31</sup> However, new ones – such as the Istana, Old Parliament House, City Hall, Telok Ayer Market, Tan Kim Seng Fountain, Lim Bo Seng Memorial and the Cenotaph – were added.<sup>32</sup>

Besides revising SIT's list, the committee also began to "examine and recommend the manner of controlling or regulating development" at the identified historic sites. This included identifying the various forms of preservation, and resolving the problems

of compensation and acquisition. As early as the first meeting, the committee agreed that the identified historic sites could either be preserved fully so that the complete structure was left intact, or partially such that only portions of it were retained. For sites that were "allowed to be demolished and replaced by more economic or intensive uses", they would be preserved through documentation, i.e. "measured drawings" and photographs. Some of the sites that were preserved in this manner before they were demolished included Outram Gaol, Coleman House, Raffles Institution, Killiney House and the surviving corner of Ellenborough Building.<sup>33</sup>

At the outset, the committee also agreed that both funds and the means of acquiring the historic sites from private owners should be made available before preservation was carried out. As such, it proposed forming a national monuments trust with statutory autonomy. Backed by legislation, the trust would have the legal authority to carry out its functions – including the ability to acquire properties that had been identified as historic sites for preservation, raising funds and providing financial aid for preservation work, as well as carrying out activities to raise public awareness on preservation. In addition, the trust would recommend new sites for preservation and the most appropriate preservation methods to be used.<sup>34</sup>

In 1969, the government formally announced plans to set up a national monuments trust.<sup>35</sup> Two years later, the Preservation of Monuments Board (PMB) was set up following the enactment of the Preservation of Monuments Act. The board was responsible for safeguarding specific monuments as historic landmarks that provided links to Singapore's past. It identified buildings and structures of historical, cultural, archaeological, architectural or artistic interest, and recommended them for preservation as national monuments.

The PMB's functions also included the documentation and dissemination of information on these monuments, the promotion of public interest in monuments, and the provision of guidelines and support on the preservation, conservation and restoration of monuments. The board's definition of national monuments comprised religious, civic, cultural and commercial buildings.<sup>36</sup>

Among the first monuments to be gazetted by the PMB on 28 June 1973 were the Old Thong Chai Medical Institution, Armenian Church, St Andrew's Cathedral, Telok Ayer Market (Lau Pa Sat), Thian Hock Keng Temple, Sri Mariamman



The old Thong Chai Medical Institution building at 50 Eu Tong Sen Street (formerly 3 Wayang Street) in 1967. The building was gazetted as a national monument on 28 June 1973, one of the first eight buildings in Singapore mandated for preservation by the Preservation of Monuments Board. Courtesy of the Urban Redevelopment Authority.

Temple, Hajjah Fatimah Mosque and the Cathedral of the Good Shepherd.

In order to document information on the gazetted monuments, the board teamed up with the School of Architecture at the University of Singapore to produce a series of measured drawings. Comprising floor plans, elevation sections and other architectural details, these drawings were important as most of the gazetted monuments did not have plans that were drawn to scale. Thong Chai Medical Institution is the first monument to have its drawings completed in 1974. The rest were completed by 1977.<sup>37</sup>

### From Historic Buildings to Historic Districts

Shortly after the PMB announced the first national monuments to be gazetted, the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) – which replaced the URD in 1974 – began looking into the conservation and rehabilitation of entire areas and districts.<sup>38</sup> This holistic approach took the preservation of Singapore's built heritage to another level by providing protection not only to buildings of historical, architectural and cultural significance, but also to their traditional settings, thus allowing the distinct identity and character of an entire area to be preserved.

The first holistic conservation projects that the URA undertook were the rehabilitation and conversion of 17 Melaka-style terrace houses on Cuppage Road for commercial use, 14 Art Deco colonial shophouses on Murray Street

as restaurants, nine Tudor-style former government quarters on Tanglin Road as offices and a shopping mall, and six colonial shophouses on Emerald Hill Road as a pedestrian-only mall with a distinct Peranakan flavour.<sup>39</sup>

In its 1982 review of the urban design structure plan of the city centre, the URA expanded its holistic conservation approach by coming up with a conservation blueprint. The plan, which was unveiled in 1986, identified six historic areas for conservation: Chinatown, Kampong Glam, Little India, Singapore River, Emerald Hill and the Heritage Link – the last being a civic and cultural belt comprising Empress Place, Fort Canning Park and Bras Basah Road.<sup>40</sup> Covering four percent of the central area, the blueprint aimed to preserve the architecture and ambience of these areas through various means. These included improving pedestrian walkways and signage, as well as organising activities that would raise awareness of the character of these places.<sup>41</sup>

The URA introduced conservation guidelines to help developers conserve their properties while, at the same time, preserving the historical character of the area.<sup>42</sup> In 1987, the URA embarked on a project to restore 32 dilapidated shophouses in Tanjong Pagar. As part of a larger programme to rejuvenate all the 220 state-owned shophouses in the vicinity, the project was considered the first to show concrete proof that it was both technically possible and commercially viable to restore old shophouses that occupy several streets



Raffles Institution at its first site bounded by Stamford, North Bridge, Bras Basah and Beach roads in 1971. Established in 1823 as the Singapore Institution, the building was demolished after the school moved to Grange Road in 1972. On the site now stands Raffles City complex. Courtesy of the Urban Redevelopment Authority.



in an entire conserved area. The project also sought to “educate the public and industry on the importance of heritage conservation by revealing the buildings’ long hidden beauty”.<sup>43</sup> The URA selected the shophouse at 9 Neil Road to be restored first as the prototype. This set the standard on how restoration work should be carried out on the other shophouses in Tanjong Pagar and the conserved areas.

In subsequent years, the conservation blueprint was implemented through a comprehensive master plan launched in 1989, which saw Chinatown, Little India, Kampong Glam, Emerald Hill, Cairnhill, Boat Quay and Clarke Quay gazetted as Singapore’s first historic districts.<sup>44</sup> At the same time, the Planning Act was substantially amended in the same year to enable the URA to function as the national conservation authority. The amendments included empowering the URA to identify

areas of historical significance for conservation, set guidelines on how conservation works should be carried out, and act as the approving authority for developers who wanted to carry out works on their properties located in conservation areas.<sup>45</sup>

### The Way Forward

Since the first conservation areas were gazetted in 1989, the work of the PMB and the URA have continued unabated. The PMB remained a statutory board under the Ministry of National Development until 1997 when it was transferred to the Ministry of Information and the Arts (now Ministry of Communications and Information). In 2009, the PMB merged with the National Heritage Board, and was renamed Preservation of Sites and Monuments (PSM) in 2013.<sup>46</sup>

Between 1973 and 2018, the number of gazetted national monuments

increased from eight to 72. In addition to the monuments, the PSM also erected heritage markers at places of historical significance describing important events and key personalities associated with the place.<sup>47</sup>

As for the URA, it is continuously identifying new areas to be conserved and updating its conservation guidelines to improve the standard of conservation works. As at 2018, some 7,000 buildings in more than 100 locations have been conserved.<sup>48</sup> An integral part of the URA’s conservation strategy is to ensure that the essential architectural features and spatial characteristics of the buildings are retained while allowing flexibility for adaptive reuse, i.e. the process of reusing an existing building for a purpose other than what it was originally designed for. In fact, the URA’s fundamental conservation principle – applicable to all

conserved buildings, irrespective of scale and complexity – is maximum retention, sensitive restoration and careful repair.<sup>49</sup>

To recognise monuments and buildings that have been well restored and conserved, the URA launched the Architectural Heritage Awards in 1995. The annual awards honour owners, developers, architects, engineers and contractors who have displayed the highest standards in conserving and restoring heritage buildings for continued use. The awards also promote public awareness and appreciation for the restoration of monuments and buildings in Singapore.<sup>50</sup> The first recipients of the awards in 1995 were River House in Clarke Quay, Armenian Church, 77 Emerald Hill

Road, 161 Lavender Road, 149 Neil Road and 11 Kim Yam Road. To date, more than 100 buildings, including the Cathedral of the Good Shepherd, Sultan Mosque and Chijmes, have received the awards.<sup>51</sup>

In addition, the URA launched an annual event in 2017 that celebrates Singapore’s built heritage and sensitively restored buildings. Known as the Architectural Heritage Season, the festival organises a variety of activities – talks, seminars, exhibitions and tours – for the public. For the inaugural festival, the URA invited community partners such as professionals, students and volunteers, to conduct guided tours and to share their expertise in technical restoration.<sup>52</sup>

An artist’s impression of Sultan Mosque in Kampong Glam as seen from Bussorah Street. Kampong Glam was one of six historic areas identified by the Urban Redevelopment Authority for conservation in 1986. *Courtesy of the Urban Redevelopment Authority.*



### PRESERVATION VS CONSERVATION

The term “conservation” is often used interchangeably with “preservation” when it comes to matters pertaining to urban planning. However, these terms can hold different meanings.

Preservation can be seen as a narrower concept involving physical work carried out or guidelines drawn up to ensure that a property of cultural value is preserved for posterity. Supported by research and education, preservation

work includes the examination, documentation, treatment and preventative care of a property.

In Singapore, the Preservation of Sites and Monuments is the national authority that advises on the preservation of nationally significant monuments and sites. It is guided by the Preservation of Monuments Act that provides “for the preservation and protection of National Monuments”.

Conservation, on the other hand, is a much broader concept.

Instead of perceiving a property as an individual entity, its historical and cultural value is considered in tandem with the surrounding built environment. Conservation can be applied to buildings (individually or in clusters), localities (streets, blocks, environments or precincts) and even special gardens or landscapes. In other words, conservation does not just focus on the physical aspects of the structures that are worth preserving, but also the stories behind them.

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In many countries, conservation efforts initially viewed buildings as individual entities with scant attention paid to the relationship between buildings or to the relationship between buildings and their immediate surroundings. The same thinking applied to Singapore. While a building conservation policy had existed in Singapore since 1950, the policy for conserving specific areas only developed from the 1960s onwards. The first initiatives to holistically conserve areas took place in the 1970s and early ‘80s when the URA embarked on a several small projects to restore rows of colonial shophouses in Murray Street, Cuppage Road, Emerald Hill and Tanglin Road. This subsequently turned into a full-scale master plan that saw larger areas such as Chinatown, Kampong Glam and Little India designated as conservation areas.

Today, Singapore continues to carry out its mission to protect its built heritage and the conservation of historic districts through the twin efforts of the PSM and URA. While what has long met the wrecker’s ball cannot be rebuilt, the future holds bright for historically important buildings and heritage areas that have survived the ravages of time. ♦

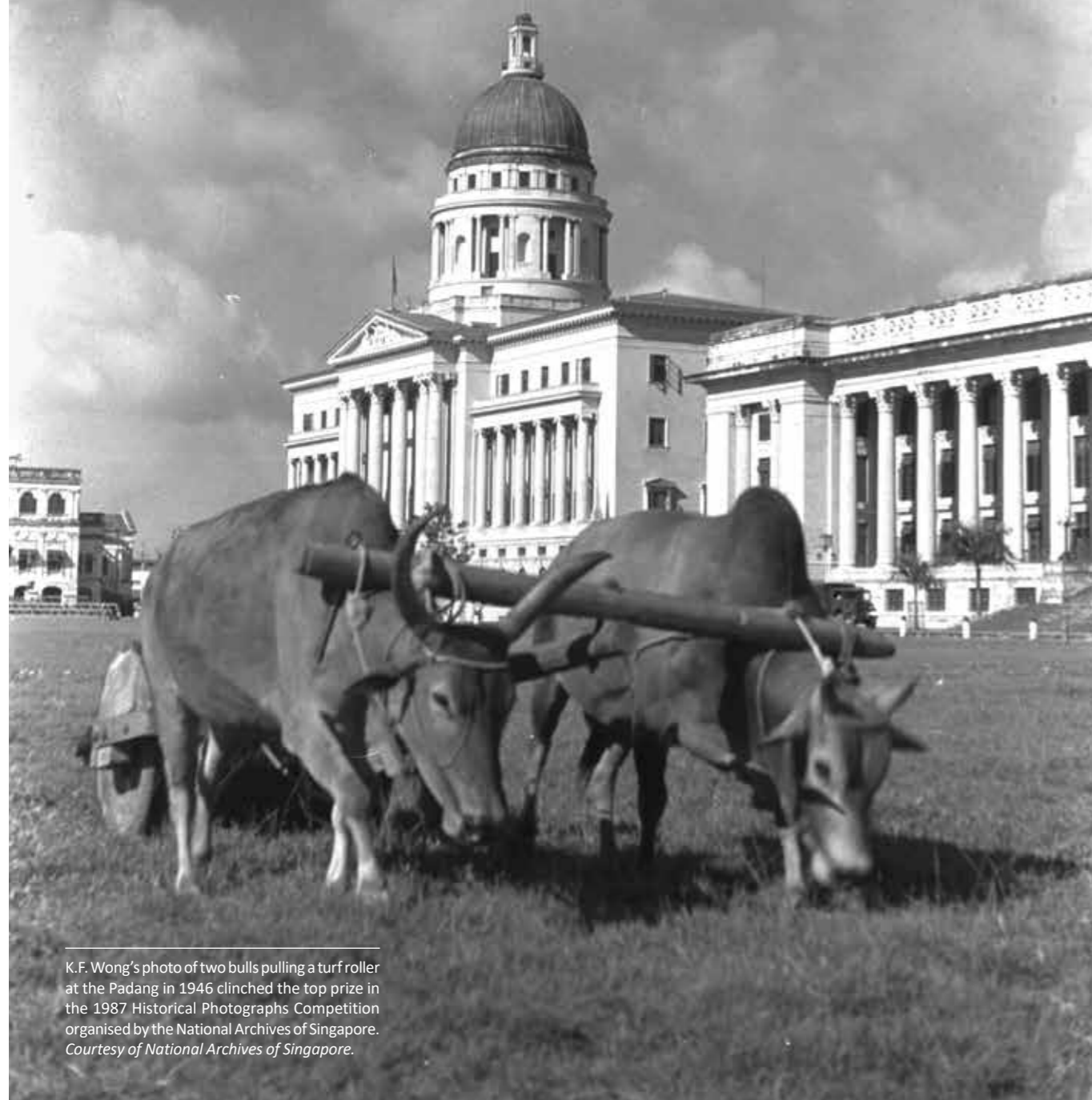
*The author would like to thank Kelvin Ang, Director of the Conservation Department (Conservation Management), Urban Redevelopment Authority, for his valuable advice and inputs in the research and writing of this essay.*



# From the Archives

## The Work of Photographer K.F. Wong

K.F. Wong shot to international fame with his images of Borneo, though not without controversy. Zhuang Wubin examines Wong's work and sees beyond its historical value.



K.F. Wong's photo of two bulls pulling a turf roller at the Padang in 1946 clinched the top prize in the 1987 Historical Photographs Competition organised by the National Archives of Singapore. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

*i*

In 1989, exactly 30 years ago, the late Minister S. Rajaratnam officiated the opening of a solo exhibition by photographer Wong Ken Foo, more popularly known as K.F. Wong (1916–98). Organised by the National Archives of Singapore, "Light on Historical Moments—Images on Singapore" featured 159 photographs that Wong had taken from the mid-1940s to the 1960s.

This was a tumultuous period in Singaporean history: the British had returned after the end of the Japanese Occupation in 1945, and instead of being welcomed with open arms, they found a population resentful of their colonial masters. The political awakening among the people sparked a series of events that would eventually lead to self-government, and then full independence in 1965.

In his speech, Rajaratnam pointed out that an understanding of the "history of the private, everyday lives of Singaporeans", however humdrum their daily routines might be, would be crucial in "moulding a Singaporean consciousness".<sup>1</sup> It is interesting that Wong, who was born in Sarawak, would be selected for this nation-building endeavour, even though he was by no means unfamiliar with Singapore.

In 1947, Wong and his friends opened Straits Photographers, a photo studio at Amber Mansions on Orchard Road. An advertisement in *The Straits Times* on 10 June 1948 highlighted his "artistic portraits and transparent oil painting[s]".<sup>2</sup> Wong ran the business as the studio manager until 1956, when he decided to return to his photography business in Sarawak.

Before opening Straits Photographers, Wong and his partners had already established the well-known Anna Studio in Kuching in 1938, followed by a branch bearing the same name in Sibul in 1941. Shuttling between the three studios kept Wong busy, but whenever he was in Singapore, he would head out before dawn to photograph street scenes, festivals and markets in the early morning light.<sup>3</sup>

In 1946, during a visit to Singapore, Wong photographed two bulls pulling a turf roller at the Padang. That photograph was a winner, clinching the top prize in the 1987 Historical Photographs Competition organised by the National Archives.<sup>4</sup> Wong's participation in the competition led to his aforementioned solo exhibition in 1989.

Earlier in June 1988, the National Archives had purchased over 2,000 photographs, mostly of Singapore, from Wong. Leading up to the exhibition, between 1988 and 1989, the Chinese daily *Lianhe Zaobao* published many of his old photographs of Singapore. Showcasing Wong's old photographs was timely as the images bore testament to the country's rapid growth and development since independence in 1965, and provided an important visual narrative of the young nation.<sup>5</sup>

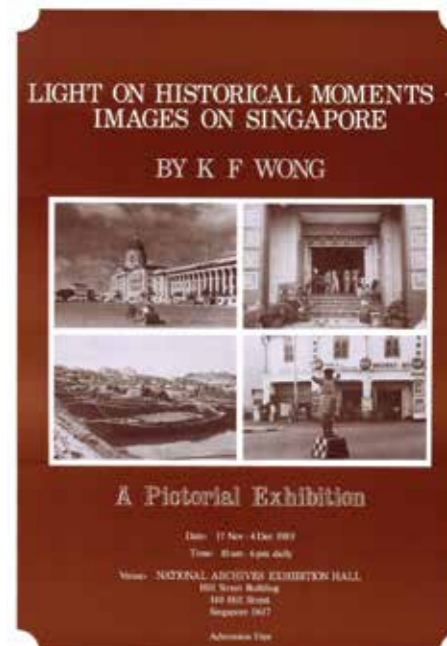
### A Self-made Photographer

K.F. Wong was born in the Henghua agricultural settlement of Sungai Merah in Sibul, Sarawak, in 1916. His parents were among the first group of Henghua migrants who had arrived from Fujian province in China and settled in Sibul in 1912. Most of them were poor Christian farmers who were recruited by missionaries through the regional Methodist network, spanning Xianyou county in the Putian region of eastern Fujian province to Sarawak in Borneo. In Sarawak, these farmers were employed by Charles Brooke, the "White Raja" of Sarawak,<sup>6</sup> to clear forested areas for agriculture.

Life was extremely tough in this part of Borneo, with tropical diseases and headhunters threatening the survival of the new immigrants. So many lives were

(Below) Photographer K.F. Wong. Image reproduced from Wong, K.F. (1979). *Borneo Scene* (p. 9). Kuching: Anna Photo Company. (Call no.: RSEA q959.52 WONG).

(Right) The poster publicising K.F. Wong's solo exhibition, "Light on Historical Moments—Images on Singapore", organised by the National Archives of Singapore in 1989. The exhibition featured 159 photographs on Singapore that Wong had taken from the mid-1940s to the 60s. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.





A Chinese street storyteller regaling his enraptured audience with legends, folktales, Chinese classics and martial arts stories by the Singapore River, 1960. Photograph by K.F. Wong. *Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*



lost at the time that there arose a popular Chinese saying in the community: “今日去埋人, 明日被人埋” [“Today you help to bury someone, tomorrow you would be buried by others”]. Nevertheless, the migrants persevered, opening up more farming areas along the banks of Igan River in 1928 and Sungai Poi in 1929.<sup>7</sup>

Twice, Wong’s father moved the family back to China in the hope that his children would receive a better education. However, widespread banditry at his home village in Xianyou finally convinced him to bring his two boys back to Sarawak in 1932. While completing his lower secondary studies at the Chung Hua School in Sibu, Wong would spend his vacation time in his father’s plantation, where he befriended indigenous Iban<sup>8</sup> workers and became enchanted by their stories and way of life.

Wong’s artistic talent was already apparent in school. Both his teacher and father wanted him to study at the Art Academy of Shanghai but he had already fallen in love with photography. Wong’s first encounter with the camera occurred when the school hired a studio photographer to take some pictures. Wong’s interest in photography was immediately piqued and he bought a Kodak box camera to dabble with. Winning the first prize of a school photography contest boosted his confidence. Unfortunately, his father disapproved of photography as a profession, dismissing it as an idle pastime for those who were not interested in proper work.<sup>9</sup>

In 1935, Wong left Sarawak to further his studies and hone his photography skills. His initial plan was to find a photo studio in Singapore where he could learn from a

master photographer. He had set his eyes on Brilliant Studio (巴黎照相商店) on South Bridge Road, but was rejected even though he offered to work without salary for three years. The Cantonese, who dominated the photo studio business at the time, were unwilling to accept an apprentice from a different dialect group.<sup>10</sup>

Towards the end of 1935, Wong ended up in Quanzhou, China, and started apprenticing at Xia Guang Studio (夏光照相馆). To appease his father, Wong also studied art in a private art school, majoring in charcoal drawing. In 1937, he found work at the popular Anna Studio in Xiamen (the experience made such an impact that he named the photography business he would later open in Sarawak as Anna Studio).

Not long after, the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–45) broke out, forcing Wong to flee Xiamen, bringing his wife and one-year-old daughter back to the countryside of Xianyou county before returning alone to Sarawak. He would be reunited with them only in 1975, almost 40 years later.

The Anna Studio in Kuching, which Wong opened in 1938, was originally located across the post office on Rock Road (on the stretch that has since been renamed Jalan Tun Abang Haji Openg). As his business grew, Wong became friends with people of all political persuasions and social class. The fame of Kuching’s Anna Studio spread far and wide, even reaching the ears of Japanese soldiers when Malaya and subsequently British Borneo fell to the Japanese Imperial Army in December 1941.

During the dark years of the Japanese Occupation, Wong was forced to keep

Anna Studio open. Business remained brisk in Kuching as the Japanese soldiers enjoyed having their portraits taken. They would frequent his studio, often accompanied by “comfort women” – girls and women who were forced to provide sexual services to Japanese soldiers in occupied territories – some of whom were abducted from as far away as Bandung in West Java.<sup>11</sup> It was during the Japanese Occupation when the studio moved to 16 Carpenter Street, the address that would witness the glory years of Kuching’s Anna Studio until its relocation in 1986 to Rubber Road.

Wong’s cordial relationship with his customers held him in good stead during the war years: towards the end of the Occupation, some of the younger Japanese officers who frequented Wong’s studio warned him to escape after learning that he would be arrested.<sup>12</sup>

### Making his Mark

After the war, Wong’s reputation as a photographer grew. From around 1947 to the 1980s, his photographs were published in *The Straits Times* and the popular *Straits Times Annual*.<sup>13</sup> Many of his single images featured political events, landscape views and portraits of important personalities in Sarawak and Brunei. He also published several photo essays detailing, for instance, a Malay wedding and the historical landmarks of Penang.

Wong continued to receive commissioned jobs through his studios in Singapore and Sarawak to take portraits of colonial officers, and photograph state functions, archaeological expeditions, movie stars and army servicemen. Some of these images appeared in *The Straits Times* as well as other publications outside of Singapore, taking on a journalistic slant. His photographs of Sarawak and, to a lesser extent, Brunei, helped to bring these territories closer to readers of *The Straits Times* in Malaya and Singapore.

Like most postwar practitioners of art photography, Wong was closely involved in the Pictorialism movement or, more colloquially, salon photography. In Southeast Asia, salon photography became increasingly popular with the rise of amateur photo clubs and competitions, which led to numerous exhibition opportunities. In 1950, Wong established his name in the First Open Photographic Exhibition hosted by the British-backed Singapore Art Society, clinching the silver medal for his work “Beauty’s Secret” – a still-life study of a vase of flowers – in the Pictorials section.



A roadside Chinese herbal tea stall in Chinatown, 1962. Photograph by K.F. Wong. *Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*



It was at the First Open Photographic Exhibition when Wong became acquainted with Malcolm MacDonald, Commissioner-General for Southeast Asia and a well-known art patron. MacDonald, who graced the exhibition opening, would become a firm supporter of Wong's works, helping to entrench the latter's name in the world of photography. MacDonald also wrote the introductory chapters to the two photobooks that Wong would later publish.

In the Second Open Photographic Exhibition in 1951, Wong bagged the silver medal again, this time in the Landscapes section for his work titled "A Symbol of Peace", depicting a farmer tending to his field in Bali. It was the highest award given out for that year's event, as there was no gold medal winner.

In 1955, Wong was made an Associate of The Royal Photographic Society of Great Britain (RPS) – one of the most prized accolades in salon photography. The following year, together with a few other amateur photographers, Wong helped to establish the Sarawak Photographic Society. In 1958, the society organised the first British Borneo Territories Photographic Exhibition in Kuching, with Wong as one of the jury members. Further recognition came in 1959 when he was elected a Fellow of RPS, having received full marks for each of his 12 entries that he had submitted in his bid for accreditation. At the time, Wong was only the second Chinese in Southeast Asia to have been awarded the fellowship.<sup>14</sup>

### Photographing the Indigenous Peoples

By 1960, Wong had become one of the most decorated photographers in Asia. Although his winning submissions to salon contests included still-life studies and landscape photography, Wong truly distinguished himself from other competitors with his striking photographs of the indigenous Dayak peoples of Sarawak and, to a lesser extent, Sabah.<sup>15</sup>

Wong first began taking pictures of the Dayaks during the Japanese Occupation, and continued to visit the different communities, probably until the 1970s. Describing them as leading a "near-primitive life", Wong wrote in 1960: "To feel satisfied with life, they need only food to feed themselves, the bare minimum in terms of clothing, and shelter from the sun. Without the material desire of the civilised man, they are the happiest people in the world."<sup>16</sup>

While Wong's photographs of the indigenous communities have important

evidential value, his work is often clouded by his attempts to celebrate their primitive ways. Sunny Giam, a fellow salon photographer and frequent writer of photography for newspapers in Singapore in the 1950s and '60s, wrote: "This genuine love for the natives, his desire to see the truth with his eyes, his rejection of all that is tragic in life and his exaltation of the happiness of the pagans, have enabled him to produce excellent photographs of them."<sup>17</sup>

Visual sociologist Christine Horn, however, was more critical, taking Wong to task for romanticising the "traditional Indigenous lifestyle while suggesting that its extinction through the influence of development and modernisation was both unavoidable and desirable". Horn also notes that Wong's photographs were "created for the commercial market, and provided picturesque compositions of good-looking people in serene surroundings".<sup>18</sup>

Indeed, many of Wong's photographs were sold as souvenirs in his photo studios. Some of them were also submitted for salon competitions, which placed a premium on aesthetics and technical competency. In this sense, it is perhaps not surprising to learn that one of his iconic portraits of a Dayak girl was in fact created through darkroom manipulation, the analogue precursor to the cut-and-paste of modern-day Photoshop. The girl was photographed in Kapit in Sarawak, while the sakura tree in the same image had been shot in Kyoto, Japan.<sup>19</sup>

Nevertheless, Wong's photographs attained an ethnographic dimension when they were published in newspapers, accompanied at times by "expert" accounts of the Sarawak indigenous peoples written by Christian priests and colonial officials.<sup>20</sup> As Wong's photographs circulated through newspapers and periodicals, his authority as the pre-eminent ethnographer of indigenous communities was further cemented. To this end, *The Straits Times Annual* played a crucial role.

In 1957, Vernon Bartlett, a former Member of Parliament in England and a journalist with *The Straits Times* in the 1950s, reviewed the 1957 edition of *The Straits Times Annual*. He praised it as a must-have Christmas gift for readers living in the West, who knew "Malaya only by proxy, through the letters of relatives and friends". In the same review, Bartlett also expressed concern over Wong's pictures of winsome Iban girls, which were so lovely

(Clockwise from left) A Dayak mother and daughter; an Iban in full war costume – complete with a ceremonial headdress of hornbill feathers and silver belts and chains – performing a war dance; a Kayan girl separating padi husk from rice in her longhouse; and an Iban wedding couple. Dayak or Dyak is a loose term for the more than 200 ethnic sub-groups in Borneo – Iban, Kayan and Punan being just three examples. Images reproduced from Wong, K.F. (1960). *Pagan Innocence*. London: Jonathan Cape. (Call no.: RCLOS 991.12 WON-[GBH])

that he rued the day when Sarawak might be "invaded by the kind of leering tourists" who had "done so much to destroy the unselfconscious beauty of Bali".<sup>21</sup> Through their circulation in the print media, Wong's photographs of indigenous peoples helped put Sarawak on the global tourism map.

In 1953, on the occasion of Malcolm MacDonald's visit to Kapit, the Sarawak colonial government appointed Wong as the official photographer. In one particular photograph, Wong captured MacDonald walking hand in hand with two bare-breasted Iban girls as they welcomed him to their longhouse. The conservative papers in Britain seized upon this image, insinuating that MacDonald had enjoyed a far-from-innocent relationship with the girls.<sup>22</sup> Ironically, because of the controversy, Wong received even more requests from media agencies around the world to purchase the image, further enhancing his reputation.

### Two Landmark Photobooks

Wong produced two acclaimed photobooks from his collection of photographs of indigenous peoples, which have since become collectors' items. *Pagan Innocence* was published in London in 1960,<sup>23</sup> possibly the first photobook on the Dayaks.<sup>24</sup> In his introduction to the publication, Malcolm MacDonald proclaimed emphatically: "Mr K.F. Wong is a magician with his camera. Every photograph that he takes is a work of art."<sup>25</sup>

*Pagan Innocence* is indeed an impressive photobook. Wong's photographs are beautifully reproduced on the right-hand side of each spread, with the left page unadorned except for a single line of caption. The nudity depicted in *Pagan Innocence* made the book all the more infamous. Partly in anticipation of a backlash, a reviewer of the photobook took aim at those "fuddyduddies" who considered the female bosom as something shameful.<sup>26</sup> The photobook became so popular that French and Swiss editions were later published.





## SELECTED EXHIBITIONS OF K.F. WONG

**1948:** “Annual Regatta Photographic Exhibition” (with Hedda Morrison), Chung Hua School, Sibul, Sarawak.

**1958:** “My Friends, The Dyaks”, Raffles Museum, Singapore.

**1959:** K.F. Wong Solo Exhibition, Chinese Photographic Association of Hong Kong, Hong Kong.

**1983:** 黄杰夫作品展览 [K. F. Wong Exhibition], National Art Museum of China, Beijing, China.

**1989:** “Light on Historical Moments – Images on Singapore”, National Archives Exhibition Hall, Singapore.

**2017:** “Indigenous Grace”, Old Court House, Rainforest Fringe Festival, Sarawak.

Wong’s studio in Kuching was credited as the publisher of his second photobook, titled *Borneo Scene* (1979), with the printing undertaken by Chung Hwa Book Company in Hong Kong.<sup>27</sup> Mak Fung, a veteran Hong Kong publisher and esteemed salon photographer, was the editor. *Borneo Scene* served a dual purpose: it not only showcased some of Wong’s greatest works, but was also pitched as a travel guide for potential visitors to Borneo, especially photographers.

The text makes clear the relationship between tourism and photography, pointing out the picturesque sights in different parts of Borneo for readers to visit and photograph. Given Wong’s life-long interest in indigenous peoples, there is also an ethnographic slant to the photobook. A closer look at the photographs reveal, for instance, the gradual covering up of exposed bosoms by the native women, a legacy of the impact of the “outside” world. Wong focused mainly on portraiture and festivities in the book, avoiding scenes showing the daily routine and hardships of the indigenous communities, except on rare occasions such as when he chanced upon a Penan tribe of nomadic hunter-gatherers preparing for the birth of a newborn in the forest.<sup>28</sup>

### Scenes of Singapore

Most of the images credited to K.F. Wong found in the National Archives feature Singapore’s street scenes taken between 1945 and 1966. Apparently, by the late 1980s, Wong had given up staging his shots, a widespread practice in salon photography even today. Instead, he shifted his focus to the capture of fleeting moments and the myriad expressions of human life taking place on the streets.<sup>29</sup>

Nevertheless, Wong’s earlier photographs of Singapore prior to this change in direction still appear candid and natural. This is because Wong photographed situations and events where his presence would not be an issue – on busy temple

days in Chinatown, during the frenetic Thaipusam procession, or when storytellers spun their magic on their earnest audiences by the Singapore River.

Wong’s oeuvre was broad; he also photographed labourers working in a pepper factory and documented the grittier side of life, such as the infamous Chinese death houses<sup>30</sup> along Sago Lane in Chinatown. Esteemed local photographer Kouo Shang-Wei (1924–88), who shared a similar beginning in salon photography, held a much different view, chastising those who brought foreigners to places like Sago Lane.<sup>31</sup>

These days, Wong’s photographs in the National Archives tend to be featured in exhibitions and publications that illustrate the progress Singapore has made over the decades. Although Wong was the most titled salon photographer of his generation, and his photographs of indigenous peoples are still highly sought after by collectors today, his works are rarely shown at the National Gallery Singapore (NGS). This is surprising given NGS’ focus on the modern art of Southeast Asia.

The fact that Wong’s images are held in the National Archives conditions how we think about his work today – as archival and evidential in content. Perhaps it is time to reassess Wong’s work vis-à-vis his photographic contemporaries collected by the NGS to examine how photography is perceived by the arts community as well as the wider public in Singapore. ♦

## NOTES

- 1 Knowledge of past important in shaping consciousness, says Raja. (1989, November 17). *The Straits Times*, p. 30. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 2 Page 12 advertisements column 1. (1948, June 10). *The Straits Times*, p. 12. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 3 莫美颜 [Mo, M.Y.]. (1989, November 12). 快门霎那捕捉永恒 [Shutter in a split-second captured eternity]. *Lianhe Zaobao*, p. 6; 李永乐 [Li, Y.L.]. (1989, November 12). 拥抱往事 [Embrace the past]. *Lianhe Wanbao*, p. 11. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 4 Hoe, I. (1987, March 6). 41-year wait for the big winner. *The Straits Times*, Home, p. 10. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 5 王玉云 [Wang, Y.Y.]. (1988, November 20). 黄杰夫轶过历史 [K.F. Wong traverses history]. *Lianhe Zaobao*, p. 6. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 6 The White Rajahs were a dynastic monarchy of the British Brooke family, who ruled Sarawak from 1841 to 1946. The first White Rajah was James Brooke, who ruled until his death in 1868. As a reward for helping the Sultan of Brunei suppress “insurgency” among the indigenous peoples, Brooke was proclaimed the Rajah of Sarawak.
- 7 房汉佳 & 林韶华 [Fong, H.K., & Lim, S.H.]. (1995). 《世界著名摄影师黄杰夫》 [World famous photographer K.F. Wong] (pp. 9–10). 福州: 海潮摄影艺术出版社. (Not available in NLB holdings)
- 8 The Ibans or Sea Dayaks are a subgroup of the Dayaks, the indigenous peoples of Borneo. Most Ibans are located in Sarawak.
- 9 Fong & Lim, 1995, p. 24.
- 10 Fong & Lim, 1995, p. 25.

11 Fong & Lim, 1995, p. 39.

12 K.F. Wong’s reflection of life. (1998, October 18). *Sarawak Tribune*, Panorama. (Not available in NLB holdings)

13 K.F. Wong’s photographs also appeared in *Straits Times Pictures 1948 and Straits Times Pictures 1949*. Published by *The Straits Times*, these are annual compilations of photographs taken by staff photographers and other prominent practitioners from Malaya and British Borneo.

14 *Sarawak Tribune*, 18 Oct 1998.

15 Giam, S. (1960, August 4). Genuine love for the Dyaks made him outstanding photographer. *The Singapore Free Press*, p. 8. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

16 Wong, K.F. (1960, September). 风土摄影十五年 [Fifteen years of photography in Borneo]. *Photoart*, 12. (Not available in NLB holdings)

17 *The Singapore Free Press*, 4 Aug 1960, p. 8.

18 Horn, C. (2015). *The Orang Ulu and the museum: Investigating traces of collaboration and agency in ethnographic photographs from the Sarawak Museum in Malaysia* (p. 139) [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Melbourne, Australia: Swinburne University of Technology. (Not available in NLB holdings)

19 Fong & Lim, 1995, p. 106.

20 Howell, W. (1948, June 21). The Sea Dyaks of Borneo. *The Straits Times*, p. 4. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

21 Bartlett, V. (1957, October 27). It is really a winner. *The Straits Times*, p. 12. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

22 Sanger, C. (1995). *Malcolm MacDonal: Bringing an end to empire* (p. 329). Liverpool, UK: Liverpool University Press. (Call no.: RSING 941.082092 SAN). [Note: I would like to thank Alexander Shaw for pointing out this reference.]

23 Wong, K.F. (1960). *Pagan innocence*. London: Jonathan Cape. (Call no.: RCLOS 991.12 WON-[GBH])

24 *Sarawak Tribune*, 18 Oct 1998.

25 MacDonald, M. (1960). Introduction. In *Pagan innocence* (p. 7). London: Jonathan Cape. (Call no.: RCLOS 991.12 WON-[GBH])

26 Romney, H. (1960, October 24). Caught with the camera: The Dyaks in a passing moment. *The Straits Times*, p. 8. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

27 Wong, K. F. (1979). *Borneo scene*. Kuching: Anna Photo Company. (Call no.: RSEA q959.52 WON)

28 Wong, 1979, pp. 180–81.

29 Loh, T.L. (1989, November 16). Life seen through a Leica. *The New Paper*, p. 11; 莫洁莹 [Mo, J.Y.]. (1987, September 22). 摄影家黄杰夫的新路向: 反映人生百态 贵在追求自然 [The new direction of master photographer K.F. Wong: Reflect the different dimensions of human life, with an emphasis on the pursuit of candid moments]. *Lianhe Wanbao*, Domestic News, p. 2. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

30 These were funeral houses where people without kin would live and wait out their last days. In the late 19th century, death houses began sprouting on Sago Lane. Many shops selling funeral items also opened along the street. Death houses were banned in 1961.

31 郭尚慰 [Kouo, S.W.]. (1981, July 3). 我为全斗焕总统访新铺路 [I paved the way for President Chun Doo-hwan’s visit to Singapore]. *Nanyang Siang Pau*, p. 10. Retrieved from NewspaperSG. See Zhuang, W. (2018). Kouo Shang-Wei: An introduction. In *Shifting currents: Glimpses of a changing nation*. Singapore: National Library Board, p. 21. (Call no.: RSING 915.957 KOU-[TRA])

**“I HASTEN TO BEG  
YOUR INDULGENCE...”**

## When Declassifying Can Also Mean Decoding

When the National Archives embarked on the declassification initiative to unlock documents previously labelled as “secret” and “confidential” for public access, it also had to decipher what was actually written says **K.U. Menon**.

“Those who control the present,  
control the past and those who  
control the past control the future.”

— George Orwell

George Orwell’s famous line from his dystopian novel *1984* is a sobering reminder of how important it is to be aware of the origins and sources of information we receive.

It is also a warning about the mutability of information. Through much of

history, warring nations have plundered or destroyed the archives of other nations in their bid to expunge the identity of the vanquished. In World War II Europe, the Nazis looted not only art and historical treasures from the countries they invaded but also their precious manuscripts.

### Singapore Policy History Project

These were some of the underlying concerns that led to the establishment of the Singapore Policy History Project (SPHP). Initiated by the Ministry of Communications and Information (MCI) just prior to Singapore’s 50th anniversary of independence in 2015, the SPHP

proposed a framework for the systematic declassification of public records under the care of the National Archives of Singapore (NAS).

The intention is to gradually release information that will enhance Singaporeans’ understanding of the rationale behind certain government policies and how they have evolved. It is also about setting the record straight: declassifying previously inaccessible public records – including those categorised as “secret” or “confidential” – will provide people with factual information on the political and historical development of Singapore.

In short, the declassification initiative will open up aspects of our history that were previously locked up and placed beyond the reach of the ordinary man in the street.

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Many key decisions made in government today, for example, in relations with other countries and dealings with multilateral agencies, are based on assessments of personalities and precedents that go back many decades. For instance, in 2014, many Singaporeans did not grasp the gravity of the situation when Indonesia named two warships after the men who bombed MacDonal House in March 1965 until the historical context was made clear from archival records for all to see. In March 2015, there was a sense that many younger Singaporeans who stood in long queues to pay their respects to the late former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew were probably unaware of the extent of his contributions to the nation.

Citizens, researchers and academics, especially historians, have long been lobbying for greater access to our public records. Archival research is primary research based on substantive evidence from original archival records. It is a methodology used by researchers to collect data directly from the sources, rather than depending on data gleaned from previously published research.

Recognising the rights of citizens to access their own history, a National Museum exhibition in 2015 featured the very important declassified secret document known as the “Albatross File”. Belonging to one of Singapore’s founding fathers Dr Goh Keng Swee, the secret file offered insights into the negotiations leading up to separation from Malaysia in 1965. It was a defining moment in our history, and the exhibition included, among other things, handwritten notes of meetings with Malaysian leaders.

In an interview in 1980, Dr Goh admitted that the Albatross referred to Malaysia. He said: “By that time, the great expectation that we foolishly had – that Malaysia would bring prosperity, common market, peace, harmony, all that – we were quickly disillusioned. And it became an albatross round our necks”. This is the first time in history that the existence of the file was revealed to the public.

The MCI began the pilot phase of declassifying files under its purview in late 2013 with a team of researchers, including retired senior public officers, in the first-ever systematic declassification project undertaken in Singapore.

Interestingly, one of the things that struck the team while trawling through old documents from the late colonial and



Malaysian Finance Minister Tun Tan Siew Sin (fourth from left) visiting Jurong Industrial Estate with his Singapore counterpart, Dr Goh Keng Swee (fifth from left), in 1964. Goh’s vision of Singapore and Malaysia having a common market was blocked by Tan. The two men clashed on this and over several key economic issues, convincing Goh that the only way Singapore could survive was to break away completely from Malaysia. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

postcolonial period of our history was how the use of language in the civil service has evolved over the years. They were struck by the archaic and formal language, often liberally peppered with humour or sarcasm – and sometimes a blend of the two – employed by civil servants.

### Language as a Weapon

For Britain, close to two centuries of colonial rule did not rest entirely on the might of its military forces. Britain also wielded power through other means, and language was a powerful weapon. Extending the use of the English language to the seemingly underdeveloped and backward colonies of Asia was seen as a way of bringing order, political unity and discipline to its colonies.

The British viewed its rule as a form of “autocratic nationalism”, and mandating English as the official language enabled it to monopolise public discourse and to impose arbitrary definitions on terms that framed British policy.<sup>1</sup> As one scholar aptly observed, “colonial structures depended on native scaffolding”.<sup>2</sup>

One offshoot of that native scaffolding was Babu (or Baboo) English – a particularly florid, sometimes pompous and unidiomatic version of English incorporating extreme formality and politeness that was widely employed by

administrators, clerks and lawyers in India. “Babu” or “Baboo” came to be a term of derision used by the British to refer to impertinent “natives” who had the temerity to imitate traits which perhaps only God and ethnology had assigned exclusively to the English gentleman.

### GRAND OPENINGS

Much of the formal correspondence between civil servants and the public during the late colonial and immediate postcolonial period in Singaporean history invariably begins as follows:

“I am directed to inform you that...”

“I am directed to acknowledge receipt of your letter of...”

“I have pleasure in sending you herewith...”

“Honoured and much respected Sir, with due respect and humble submission, I beg to bring to your kind notice”

“With regards to... I am directed to state that...”

“I beg of you to dispatch to me at your earliest convenience...”

“I hasten to beg your indulgence...”

### Postwar Singapore

Here are two samples of correspondence that illustrate the delightful use of Babu English in colonial Singapore.

1 A letter addressed to the Government Printer (a British official responsible for the Government Printing Office) during the reign of King George VI, from the President of a Singapore trade union organisation. This mis-sive was sent just before Christmas.

2 A letter from the President of the Singapore Government Printing Office Employees Union to the Colonial Secretary complaining about the infringement of the rights of non-pensionable employees.

December 1950

*The Government Printer*

“The consecrated reverence associated with ever succeeding nativity anniversaries of the LORD is again about to be revived on the 25th instant for the one thousand nine hundred and fiftieth occasion, and in view of this auspicious day, I, on behalf of the Union offer you and through you to the other senior officers our heartiest wishes . . .

*I also pray that HIS most gracious and Divine Majesty who has been infinitely merciful to us all the years of our life, would be pleased to accept our most unfeigned thanks for HIS innumerable blessings to all of us, graciously pardoning the manifold sins and Infirmities of our life past and bountifully bestowing upon all of us all those graces and virtues which may render us acceptable to HIM,*

*We also pray that HIS holy image may be again renewed within everyone of us, and by contemplating HIS glorious perfections, we may all feel daily improved within us that Divine similitude the perfection whereof we all hope will at last make us forever happy in that full and beatific vision we all aspire after.*

*In conclusion it is their fervent prayer that the Omnipotent Providence would grant your Excellency that strength and fortitude, wherewith to carry out the manifold responsibilities of your Excellency’s high office.*

*I am, Sir,*

*Your Excellency’s most obedient and humble servant*

Dec 1952

*The Honourable  
The Colonial Secretary  
Singapore  
Sir,*

*I am directed to acknowledge receipt of your letter jPC. C4S2/50/19 of the 12th instant, clarifying the issue pertinent to the justification of the above salaries structure by hypothetical deduction, and to observe that the assumption created by the above exposition is one of invidious distinction between the non-pensionable and pensionable offices.*

*As this issue was raised specifically to improve the lot of those who, at the moment of their promotion were in the non-pensionable status, the subsequent declaration set out in your letter under review, to the effect that there is overlapping, but, that itself, is not contributory to any loss, is therefore untenable.*

*The committee is also greatly perturbed over the policy which imposed a res’iliarity of promotion based on a definitely retrograde step, and in the circumstances it urges the government to consider the indemnifying of those who, before their emplacement into the pensionable establishment were promoted to the post of assistant Composing Room Foreman.*

*The committee is further of the opinion that under whatever form of policy this administration may have been guided in the past, with regard to its civil service, it nevertheless has left behind that heritage of a permanent and disparaging mark of its indubitable character upon the successive fortunes of the holders of this office, which it is our sincere hope that those concerned would be adequately recompensed, even at this distance of time.*

*I am further enjoined to submit that, even as all obnoxious and iniquitous laws of every civilised countries are repealed and substituted from time to time by a more judicious and equitable form of statutes to meet varying circumstances of justifiable cases, it would therefore seem obvious in similar circumstances to introduce regulations befitting this particular case, which assuredly calls for an immediate substitution of the existing regulations.*

*I am, Sir*

*Your obedient servant*



## Pre-independent Singapore

The team found many letters written in elegant English, as seen in these two examples here, while researching the files of the final years leading to independence.

1961

*"At a state function where a Minister is the host, no special precedence is accorded to the Parliamentary, Political and Permanent Secretaries of his Ministry. I would even say that it is not quite correct to imply that the Minister himself takes precedence over all guests on such an occasion. He takes a seat which would enable him to discharge his duty as the host to attend on the guest of honour; it should not be taken to mean that the Minister is arrogating to himself precedence over all the guests, some of whom may rank above him in the Table of Precedence.*

*You realize, no doubt, that there can be no departure from strict protocol at a state function without the express approval of his Excellency The Yang di-Pertuan Negara. There may, of course, be occasions when certain individuals voluntarily waive their rightful precedence. I would suggest, for instance, that when your Minister is the host, his Parliamentary, Political and Permanent Secretaries may consider it a gracious gesture to seat themselves immediately below all other Parliamentary, Political and Permanent Secretaries respectively. Your suggestion that they should be given precedence over all the other guests is, if I may say so, not only wrong but churlish."*

Here is a well-crafted reply from the Secretary to Prime Minister to the Permanent Secretary (Culture) on the correct protocol with regard to the seating of senior civil servants at state functions.

3

- 4 A terse letter from the Director of Information Services (Culture) to the Permanent Secretary (Home Affairs) on why a printing permit should not be granted to a certain individual.

June 1959

*D. I. S. (for PS Culture) to PS (Home affairs)*

*Reference your minute CSO.267/53 of 15.6.59. On the ground that every man is free to make a fool of himself this permit could be granted. The editor is of no standing and appears to use the paper to indulge his political whims and personal feuds. It exhibits the kind of irresponsibility that might lead it to become an instrument of others who are less innocent in their political activities.*

2. *I would have thought that the breach of the previous permit in transferring the printing press from Singapore to India was serious enough to justify a refusal of any further permit. Moreover the content seems to indicate that the editor is more concerned with the affairs of Southern India and those whom he considers Southern Indian expatriates than with any essential Singapore purpose.*

*The documents submitted with your minute are returned herewith.*

## Independent Singapore

- 5 A spirited riposte from a senior staffer of a local publication to the Parliamentary Secretary (Culture). The context of this episode is perhaps better understood from subsequent developments. The publication's top three executives were detained under the Internal Security Act in 1971 and the publication ceased operations two years later. The government statement made clear that the publication "... has made a sustained effort to instil admiration for the communist system as free from blemishes and endorsing its policies..."<sup>3</sup>

- 6 And finally, this crisp, pointed note from the Assistant Director of the Ministry of Culture to the editor of a Chinese newspaper. Never mind the flawed grammar. Its genius lies in its brevity.

December 1979

*Dear Sir*

*It is noted that your paper has been publishing news sensationalizing robbery, rape, sex and murder etc. Such news are unhealthy. If you persist in reporting news of this nature, we will seriously consider revoking your permit.*

*Yours faithfully*

XXXXXX

## The Death of Writing

To be sure, the abundance of jargon and obfuscation that can accompany the use of English in the civil service is nothing new. It is something that was first raised by Singapore's first-generation leaders, Mr Lee Kuan Yew and Dr Goh Keng Swee in particular, in the early 1980s.

But is the problem worse today, given the pervasiveness of the internet, social media and mobile phone messaging? How has technology impacted the way we use the English language? In a world where instantaneous responses have become the

Sept 1970

*Parliamentary Secretary*

*"My personal representative has given me an account of the meeting held in your office . . . . The account given, and I have no reason to doubt its veracity is most distressing . . .*

*Instead of putting across your objections in a reasoned manner, it would appear that yours was mainly a diatribe and tirade against this newspaper. Specifically, you objected to our having published part of the text in its original English version. I cannot fathom your rationale here. To accuse us of a lack of character in so doing is uncalled for and indefensible, not to mention that your charge is, in fact, a non sequitur.*

*So long as the contents do not contravene the laws of this country, it is not for us to dictate to our clients in what manner and in what language their paid advertisements should take. You must have followed Chinese papers enough to know that using English in parts is not unknown, but this is merely an incidental point.*

*It is ironic that at other times we are accused by Authority of being chauvinistic in our language emphasis. I rather suspect therefore the cause of your displeasure lies elsewhere. Could it be that we did not seek prior permission from your office to accept such advertisements, as was intimated?*

*We cannot accept authoritarianism in which all thinking and decision making must be done on our behalf. Are we to turn ourselves into mindless regimented rigid digits? Can any authority lay claim to absolute fallibility? Indeed, can any bureaucratic authority have the time, the energy, the wisdom to rule on myriad questions if they are all to be brought before its august presence?*

*. . . With due respect Sir, I have often wondered why those in authority could not simply develop and exercise a little empathy for those whose goodwill is, though not essential, helpful in the aggregate. Is it not easier all round to go about things in a pleasant rather than nasty way?*

*Co-operation you can have, willing or begrudging, depending upon the tone you set for the conduct of our relationship. You could resort to dictation, of course, as we are often reminded, but then wouldn't it mean too hefty a weapon for the target in view; too high a price to pay in terms of democratic ideals for the gain in mind?*

*Yours Faithfully*

XXX

norm, proper conversations and carefully thought out and crafted communications seem to have taken a back seat.

Sadly, one of the causes of the loss of clarity in writing today must surely be the demise of letter writing. As email replaces snail mail, the price of speed is the slide of composition into truncated note. In this age of ephemerality, words appear to be designed to be short-lived. And so it is – given the short screen life of electronic mail, one might well ask, where are the gems of elegant writing to be found today? ♦

## NOTES

- 1 Ferguson, N. (2003). *Empire: How Britain made the modern world*. London: Allen Lane. (Call no.: RCLOS 909.0971241 FER-[USB])
- 2 Al-Jubouri, F.A.J. (2014). *Milestones on the road to dystopia: Interpreting George Orwell's self-division in an era of 'Force & Fraud'*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing. (Not available in NLB holdings)
- 3 Three newsmen held. (1971, May 3). *The Straits Times*, p. 1. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.



VISIT THE SINGAPORE  
POLICY HISTORY PROJECT





# Oriental 英保良集團 Emporium

## The End of an Era

The Emporium chain of department stores entered the scene when the retail market in Singapore was still in its infancy. **Kam Kit Geok** takes a closer look at a much-loved shopping icon.

**Kam Kit Geok**, who discovered and joined the archival profession by chance, works at the National Archives of Singapore. She finds archival work meaningful and interesting, and enjoys learning new things through the archives.

Those who lived in Singapore from the mid-1960s to the '80s will very likely remember shopping at the Emporium chain of Chinese-inspired department stores and supermarkets, or eating at an Oriental Restaurant – all of which were managed by the Emporium Holdings Group. Sandy Wong, who deposited her memory with the Singapore Memory Project,<sup>1</sup> recalled happy times spent at an Oriental Emporium:

“[T]he most popular [department store in the 1980s] would be the Oriental Emporium. I remembered my aunt mentioning that they opened almost all the stores on the same day, across various locations in Singapore. We thoroughly enjoyed ourselves and... always ask[ed] for toys... Oriental Emporium... was... a favourite for many in the 1980s.”<sup>2</sup>

Many people remember Oriental Emporium as the go-to shopping destination when they were growing up. This was where they happily browsed the toys section, “[ran] up and down the staircases” or hung out with their family and loved ones after dinner.<sup>3</sup> Some remember the department store as “a practical and affordable place to shop”.<sup>4</sup>

The first Oriental Emporium opened in Raffles Place in 1966 – the brainchild of Teochew brothers Lim Tow Seng and Lim Tow Yong, who hailed from Swatow, China. Elder brother Tow Seng came to Singapore first to work as an apprentice and saved up enough money to open his first business called Lim Seng Huat (林信发) in 1938, an import-export trading house specialising in China-made sundry goods. Tow Yong, the younger brother, joined his brother’s business in 1941.

In its heyday in the mid-1980s, Emporium Holdings<sup>5</sup> operated more than 70 department stores, supermarkets and restaurants across Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei and Hong Kong. These were the boom years for the company, and within



(Facing page) Seven-year-old Lim Hong Siang poses with his cousin Amy Lim in front of the Oriental Emporium in Raffles Place, 1967. They are dressed in their brand new clothes for the Chinese New Year celebrations. Source: *The Straits Times* © Singapore Press Holdings Limited. Reprinted with permission.

(Above) Lim Tow Seng (right) accompanying Minister for Education Ong Pang Boon on a tour of Lim Seng Huat Industries in Tanglin Halt at its opening in July 1969. This was the first business that Lim started before the Oriental Emporium chain. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

(Above right) Oriental Emporium in Raffles Place, which opened on 1 December 1966. Image reproduced from *东方百货有限公司开业特辑* [Oriental Emporium Limited] (p. 2). (1966). Singapore: M.C. (P). (Call no.: RSING q381.141095957 DFB).

a span of 18 years, it grew to become one of the largest retail groups in Singapore and Malaysia.

### Emporium Enters the Scene

With the closure of Whiteaways at Fullerton Square and Gian Singh on Battery Road in the early 1960s, Robinsons – which had acquired John Little in 1955 – became the sole department store still standing in Raffles Place. Shopping at Robinsons was considered a luxury at the time as the range of Western products it carried was expensive and catered mainly to the expatriate community and affluent locals.<sup>6</sup>

Mabel Martin, a stenographer, remarked that Robinsons was the place where “you had to have enough money to buy”.<sup>7</sup> Ng Joo Kee, who used to live on Chulia Street in Raffles Place, recalled that Robinsons catered “more for expatriates, for the Eurasians and not for the locals”, and as a child, he felt rather intimidated when shopping there.<sup>8</sup>

The opening of the first Oriental Emporium in Raffles Place on 1 December 1966 was thus warmly welcomed as it provided a new and much more affordable shopping experience. The department store occupied two storeys in



the former premises of Gian Singh, which was located just opposite Robinsons. In his message in the publication commemorating the opening of the department store, Chairman Lim Tow Seng said that Oriental Emporium was built to complement the government’s efforts in promoting tourism and to provide a budget-friendly alternative shopping option for the ordinary people.<sup>9</sup>

Now, for the first time, there was a department store in town that catered to both locals and tourists who were looking for reasonably priced goods. Ng Joo Kee for one remembers that he felt more at ease shopping at the Oriental Emporium compared to Robinsons, and that his family preferred the former as the prices were lower, and the store carried a wide variety of Chinese products.<sup>10</sup>

From the start, Emporium sourced its products mainly from China because of their reasonable prices and relatively good quality and product range. Part of the popularity of Emporium was its reputation as the first department store in Singapore to sell a wide variety of China-made products, including canned food, cotton garments, blankets, pillows, stationery, toiletries and other household items.



The shopping experience at Emporium was further enhanced by open-shelf displays, providing customers with ample space to browse and handle the products. The strategies paid off: consumers responded most enthusiastically, and Emporium raked in sales of \$5 million in its first year of operations.

In January 1968, less than two years after its flagship store opened in Raffles Place, Emporium unveiled a second department store, Eastern Emporium, in the busy shopping district of High Street. The three-storey Eastern Emporium was touted by *The Straits Times* as a comprehensive department store selling China-made and local consumer goods.<sup>11</sup> The store was fully air-conditioned and served by modern lifts.

In the subsequent year, Emporium acquired Chinese Emporium Private Limited at International Building on Orchard Road. This marked the company's first foray into the Orchard Road area. This was followed by the acquisition of Yuyi Pte Ltd in 1970, a

Chinese-style department store on Grange Road, just opposite Orchard Cinema.

### Emporium Expands and Diversifies

In the wake of Singapore's rapid economic growth in the 1970s, consumers became more affluent and shopping evolved from being a necessity to a lifestyle choice. With greater purchasing power and more leisure time on their hands, people had higher expectations of the quality and variety of products they could buy, and were also more willing to splurge on better-made imported goods. Emporium Holdings was quick to seize the opportunity by diversifying its retail offerings. To cater to the needs of customers from different segments of society, Emporium established a second department store chain.

The Oriental Emporium chain would continue to sell budget-friendly China-made and local products, while a more upmarket brand was launched in 1978 with the opening of the first Klasse Department

(Far left) The paper carrier bag of Emporium Holdings used in the 1980s. Courtesy of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

(Left) A paper carrier bag from Klasse Department Store in Lucky Plaza, 1970s. Courtesy of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

(Below) Lim Tow Seng established Lim Seng Huat, an import-export trading house specialising in China-made sundry goods in 1938. The company participated in various trade fairs at the Great World and New World amusement parks in the 1950s and '60s. Image reproduced from 《英保良二老板拿督林道荣局绅：新马汶百货钜子传奇》[The Legend of Dato' Lim Tow Yong JP, founder of Emporium Holdings]. (2012). Penang: Chang Jiang CPM gong si. (Call no.: Chinese R 381.141092 XSJ).



## Milestones

- 1938 Lim Tow Seng establishes Lim Seng Huat, an import-export trading house specialising in China-made sundry goods, in half of a shophouse space on Pickering Street, before moving to 13 Circular Road later. The Circular Road shophouse later becomes the head office of Emporium Holdings Group.
- 1950s–60s Lim Tow Seng and his brother Lim Tow Yong participate in trade fairs at Great World and New World amusement parks to promote their products.
- 1966 Oriental Emporium department store opens in Raffles Place on 1 December.
- 1968 Eastern Emporium on High Street opens.
- 1969 Chinese Emporium Private Limited on Orchard Road is acquired.
- 1970 Yuyi Private Limited on Grange Road is acquired.
- 1973 Emporium Holdings Group is established and opens a number of stores: Oriental Emporium & Supermarket in People's Park and Jurong; Katong Emporium & Supermarket, Toa Payoh Emporium; and Sin Hua Emporium at Happy World amusement park.
- 1974 Oriental Emporium in Balestier and Queenstown open.
- 1977 Oriental Emporium opens in Rochor.
- 1978 Klasse Lucky No. 1 in Lucky Plaza and Oriental Emporium in Ang Mo Kio open.
- 1979 Oriental Emporium in Raffles Place and Eastern Emporium on High Street close when their leases expired.
- 1980 Official opening of eight outlets and two restaurants on the same day on 28 March: Oriental Emporium & Supermarket in Clementi, Woodlands, Bukit Timah and Bukit Merah; Oriental Emporium in Bedok; S-Mart Supermarket in Bedok; Klasse Department Store and Café De Klasse in Peninsula Plaza; Plaza Department Store & Supermarket in Ang Mo Kio; and Oriental Restaurants in Ang Mo Kio and Bedok.
- Oriental Slasher Emporium in Hong Lim Complex; Oriental Emporium & Supermarket in Holland Village; and Oriental Restaurants in Clementi and Bukit Merah open later in the year.
- 1981 15th anniversary of Emporium Holdings; opening of new head office in Ang Mo Kio; Oriental Emporium & Supermarket opens in Geylang; and Home Furnishing Centre opens in Redhill.
- 1982 Oriental Emporium & Supermarket opens in Serangoon.
- 1983 Klasse Department Store opens in Centrepoint shopping centre, along with Chao Phraya Thai Seafood Restaurant in Ang Mo Kio; Small World Superstore in Parkway Parade; and Yokoso Superstore in Tanjong Katong Complex.
- 1985 Oriental Kimisawa Superstore opens in Hougang.
- 1987 Emporium Holdings Group is liquidated.

The Oriental Emporium department store in the Lion City Hotel complex on Haig Road, 1994. Lee Kip Lin Collection. All rights reserved, Lee Kip Lin and National Library Board, Singapore.

Store in Lucky Plaza. The glitzy, multi-storey Lucky Plaza mall had just opened in the heart of the Orchard Road shopping belt to much fanfare with its upmarket shops and boutiques, and a glass-clad external "bubble lift", purportedly the first of its kind in Southeast Asia.

Klasse Department Store was well placed to capture a slice of the luxury shopping segment comprising local consumers and tourists looking for quality merchandise. It was stocked with expensive designer goods from prominent American brands (Sears, Burlington, Cannon and Samsonite) to British glassware (Pyrex) and Japanese products (三爱服装).

To align with the store's branding, Emporium Holdings recruited staff who were bilingual and comfortable speaking languages such as English and Japanese. Gone was Emporium's trademark Mandarin-collared uniform, which was replaced with a smart rust-coloured and beige outfit comprising an A-line skirt, waistcoat and a short-sleeved shirt.

In the meantime, the Oriental Emporium chain of department stores and supermarkets began expanding into public housing estates and new satellite towns. In 1973, it opened the first neighbourhood store in Toa Payoh – called Toa Payoh Emporium – to provide a one-stop shopping experience for residents. On the opening day, *The Straits Times* reported that unlike other emporiums, this one "being in a residential estate, great emphasis... [was] made to have on sale household merchandise, foodstuff, canned goods and confectionery and other products on similar lines as a supermarket".<sup>12</sup>

Oriental Emporium stores were strategically located in high-density areas in the heart of town centres and near transport facilities in order to reach out to residents. The two-storey Toa Payoh Emporium, for instance, was situated in Toa Payoh Central, near the bus terminal and other amenities such as the stadium, two cinemas and a church.

*The Straits Times* reported in glowing terms that Emporium department stores had become social spaces where one could "renew old acquaintances or to strike up new friendships" and were a "welcome relief from the drudgery of routine home chores" for housewives. Shopping had become an aspirational goal "contribut[ing]



immensely towards elevating the standard of living of people in a modern society".<sup>13</sup>

### Emporium Comes into its Own

There was no stopping the expansion of the Emporium Holdings Group. On 28 March 1980, it pulled a major feat by opening no less than 10 new outlets on the same day: Oriental Emporium & Supermarket in Clementi, Woodlands, Bukit Timah and Bukit Merah; Oriental Emporium in Bedok; Oriental Restaurants in Ang Mo Kio and Bedok; a Klasse Department Store and Café De Klasse in Peninsula Plaza serving Western and local cuisines; S-Mart Supermarket in Bedok; and Plaza Department Store & Supermarket in Ang Mo Kio.<sup>14</sup>

To diversify its retail offerings to customers, Emporium extended the concept of a "one-stop shopping experience" by setting up restaurants and confectioneries within its department stores. Oriental Emporium Ang Mo Kio, for example, housed an Oriental Restaurant and the Gingerbread House confectionery. The latter sold a wide array of Western-style buns, breads and cakes and even offered islandwide deliveries, while the restaurant provided catering services for special occasions such as birthdays and weddings. One could literally shop and eat at the Oriental Emporium in Ang Mo Kio all day long without stepping out of its premises. This is nothing new in today's retail scene of course, but back in 1980, this concept was revolutionary.

To compete with the influx of Japanese department stores, such as Isetan and Yaohan, which made inroads into Singapore in the 1970s and 80s, Emporium launched Yokoso Superstore – Singapore's first round-the-clock supermarket and department store – in Tanjong Katong Complex in January 1983. This was a time

when 24-hour stores were unheard of: the first 7-Eleven 24-hour convenience store only opened five months later in June 1983. To prepare for the opening of Yokoso Superstore, senior staff were sent to Japan to undergo training, and Japanese retail experts were also brought in. In 1985, Emporium collaborated with the Japanese again, this time with supermarket chain Kimisawa, to set up Oriental Kimisawa Superstore in Hougang.

Another first by Emporium in Singapore's retail history was the establishment of the Small World Superstore in Parkway Parade shopping centre in December 1983. This was a three-storey children's department store specialising in children's merchandise and with facilities like an amusement and food arcade. It housed the American fast food restaurant Chuck E. Cheese, a photography studio, playground, children's hair salon, mini aquarium and a performance stage.

### The End of an Era

When Singapore experienced its first post-independence economic recession in 1985, Emporium Holdings took a severe hit.<sup>15</sup> Confronted by financial difficulties on multiple fronts, the company was liquidated in 1987 and the Lim brothers who founded Emporium Holdings were declared bankrupt the following year.

The Emporium Holdings Group was acquired by various entities over the years. In the 1990s, there were sporadic newspaper reports on the Emporium brand, such as the opening of a refreshed Oriental Emporium in Ang Mo Kio in 1997.<sup>16</sup> But with increasing competition, the brand did not survive the times, forcing Emporium to shutter the doors of all its department stores on 22 July 1999 without prior notice





### THE TIES THAT BIND

The story of Emporium Holdings Group would not be complete without mentioning the special bond shared by the company and its employees. When Emporium began battling rumours of financial difficulties during the 1985 economic recession, about 200 staff members organised a special lunch banquet at the Oriental Restaurant in Ang Mo Kio to show their unity and support for the management. During the lunch, staff presented the management with a signed declaration to demonstrate their confidence in the company and pledged to be more efficient in their work. Unfortunately, Emporium Holdings fell victim to the economic recession in 1987.

In September 1996, nine years after the liquidation of Emporium Holdings, ex-employees of the company organised a get-together dinner themed “Sparkling Memories” to show their appreciation for former managing director, Lim Tow Yong (Lim Tow Seng passed away in January 1992). About 800 former staff attended the dinner.

Fast forward to 2006, Lim published an advertisement in the Chinese newspaper, *Lianhe Zaobao*, on 17 October inviting former employees to a dinner to show his appreciation for their support over the years. A quote in the invitation card is particularly memorable: “不在乎天长地久，只在乎一起走过闪烁的日子”，which means “It matters not if it doesn’t last an eternity, what matters are the bright days that we have spent together”.<sup>1</sup> Some 1,400 former staff attended the dinner held on 20 December 2006, and each was given a red

The newspaper advertisement by Lim Tow Yong inviting former employees of Emporium Holdings Group to a get-together dinner in 2006. A memorable quote in the invite stands out: “不在乎天长地久，只在乎一起走过闪烁的日子” (“It matters not if it doesn’t last an eternity, what matters are the bright days that we have spent together”). *Lianhe Zaobao*, 17 October 2006, p. 7.



packet containing \$100.<sup>2</sup> The strong bond and camaraderie forged between boss and staff was still palpable 20 years following the demise of Emporium Holdings.

In an interview with *The Straits Times* on 29 October 2006, Lim spoke about how the dinner organised by his staff in 1996 had motivated him and ignited his fighting spirit to restart the business in 1999. (Lim was then aged 75 and had just been discharged from bankruptcy).<sup>3</sup> He said: “It [the dinner] just touched my heart and I have never forgotten it. I’ve thought about it every day for the last 10 years and I told

myself that I must work hard and one day pay them back.”<sup>4</sup> Lim passed away in April 2012.

#### NOTES

- 1 第7广告专栏3. (2006, October 17). 《联合早报》 [Lianhe Zaobao], p. 7. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 2 Sim, M. (2006, December 24). \$150,000 dinner, \$100 hongbao for 1,400 staff who stood by him. *The Straits Times*, p. 8. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 3 Lim Tow Yong ventured to Sabah, Labuan and Brunei, partnering local retailers to open new stores in 1999. By the age of 82, he had become a millionaire again.
- 4 Sua, T. (2006, October 29). Bounces back from bankruptcy. *The Straits Times*, p. 10. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

— more than 30 years after the first Oriental Emporium opened in Raffles Place in 1966.

Although the Emporium retail giant has exited from Singapore’s shopping scene, the company is still noteworthy for the innovative concepts it pioneered in the local retail scene. For over three decades, the Emporium chain of department stores, supermarkets and restaurants delighted scores of shoppers and customers — many of whom still have fond memories of the brand. ♦

#### NOTES

- 1 The Singapore Memory Project, launched in 2011, is a whole-of-nation movement by the National Library Board that aims to capture and document memories and moments related to Singapore from individuals and organisations.

- 2 Wong, S. (n.d.). *Oriental Emporium go to place in the 80s*. Retrieved from Singapore Memory Project website.
- 3 Leong, W.H. (n.d.). *Emporium at Clementi*. Retrieved from Singapore Memory Project website.
- 4 Raghawan, V. (n.d.). *Emporium’s store*. Retrieved from Singapore Memory Project website.
- 5 Tow Seng became the chairman of Emporium Holdings, while Tow Yong was the managing director.
- 6 Balasingamchow, Y.-M. (2018, July–September). Going shopping in the 1960s. *BiblioAsia*, 14 (2). Retrieved from BiblioAsia website.
- 7 Chew, D. (Interviewer). (1984, January 27). *Oral history interview with Mabel Martin* [Transcript of recording no. 000388/6/4, p. 45]. Retrieved from National Archives of Singapore website.
- 8 Yap, W.C. (Interviewer). (1997, November 3). *Oral history interview with Ng Joo Kee* [Transcript of recording no. 001970/4/3, pp. 26–29]. Retrieved from National Archives of Singapore website.
- 9 《东方百货有限公司开业特辑》 [Oriental Emporium Limited] (p. 1). (1966). Singapore: M.C. (P). (Call no.: RSING q381.141095957 DFB)
- 10 Yap, W.C. (Interviewer). (1997, November 3). *Oral history interview with Ng Joo Kee* [Transcript of recording no.

- 001970/4/1, p. 7]; Yap, W.C. (Interviewer). (1997, November 3). *Oral history interview with Ng Joo Kee* [Transcript of recording no. 001970/4/2, pp. 6–7]; Yap, W.C. (Interviewer). (1997, November 3). *Oral history interview with Ng Joo Kee* [Transcript of recording no. 001970/4/3, p. 29]. Retrieved from National Archives of Singapore website.
- 11 Lim, B.T. (1968, January 15). Now the Emporium comes to busy High Street. *The Straits Times*, p. 14. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 12 Toa Payoh Emporium fulfils a vital need. (1973, June 30). *The Straits Times*, p. 18. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 13 *The Straits Times*, 30 Jun 1973, p. 18.
- 14 谢诗坚 [Xie, S.J.]. (2012). 《英保良二老板拿督林道荣局绅：新马汶百货钜子传奇》 [The Legend of Dato’ Lim Tow Yong JP, founder of Emporium Holdings]. Penang: Chang Jiang CPM gong si. (Call no.: Chinese R 381.141092 XSI)
- 15 National Library Board. (2014). *Singapore experienced its first post-independence recession*. Retrieved from HistorySG website.
- 16 Oriental Emporium to get a new look. (1997, December 21). *The Straits Times*, p. 2; Business as usual at Emporium Holdings outlets. (1998, July 11). *The Straits Times*, p. 70. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

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