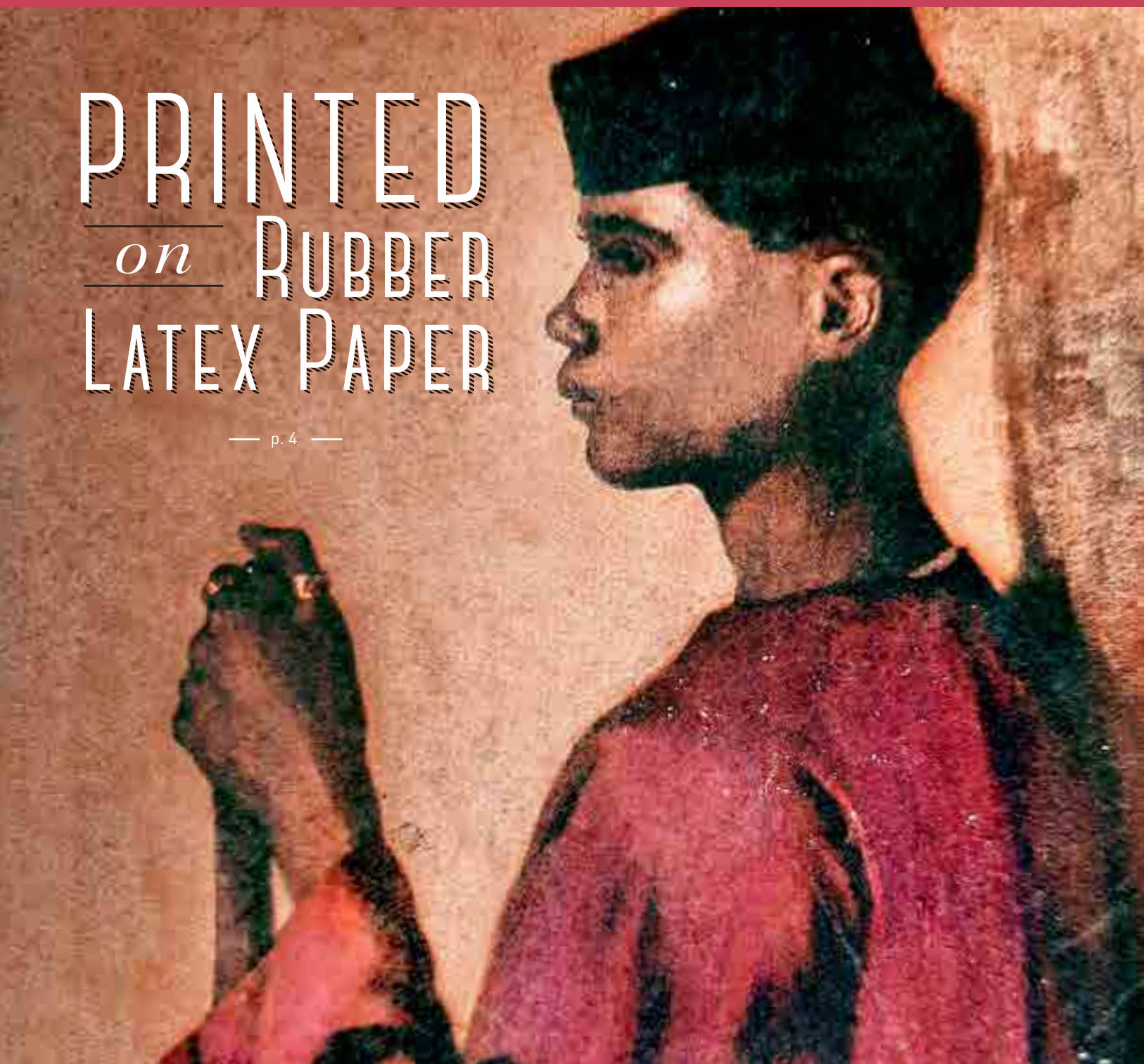
NLB | National Library Singapore
biblioasia.nlb.gov.sg

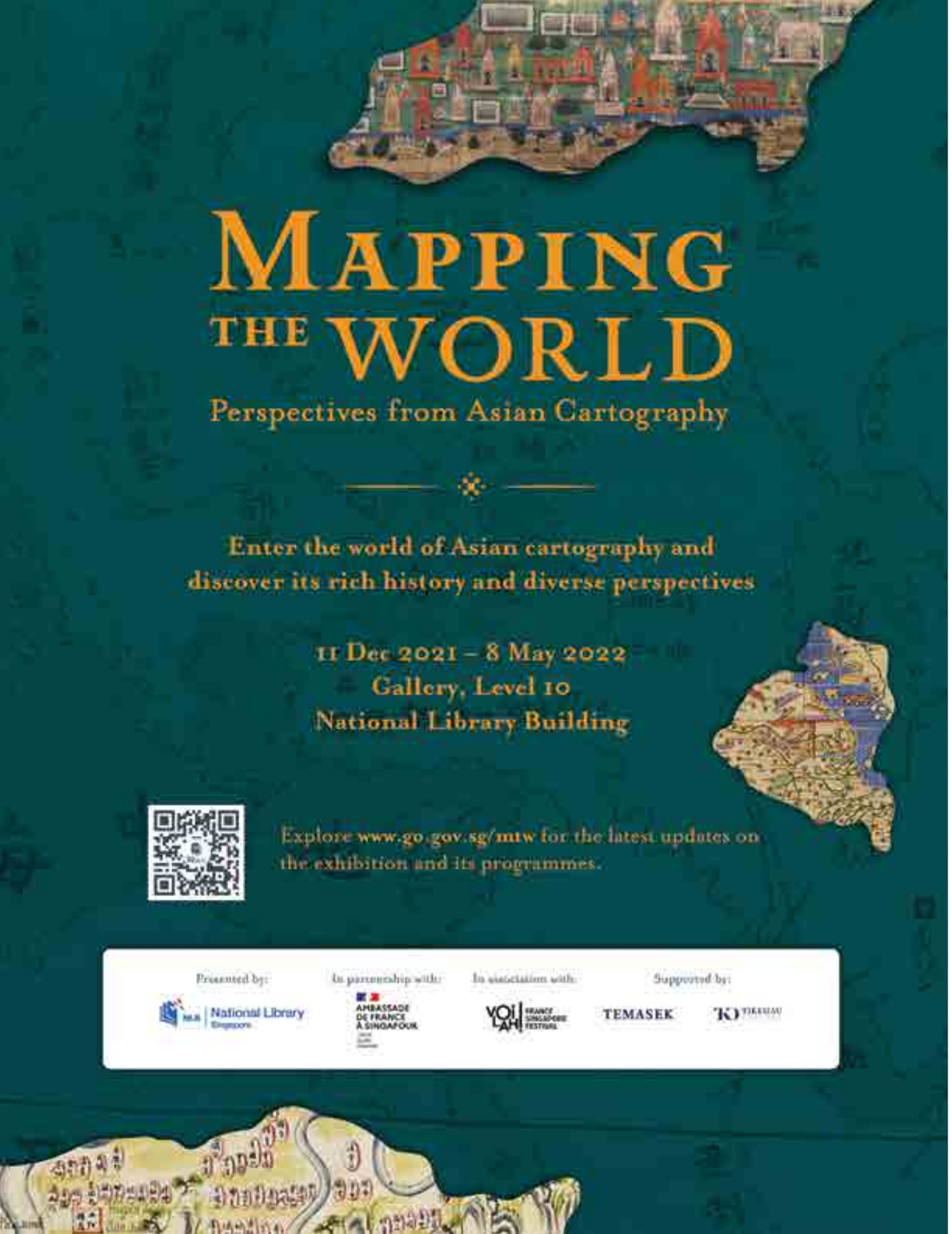
biblioasia

Vol. 18 Issue 01 APR–JUN 2022



PRINTED *on* RUBBER LATEX PAPER

— p. 4 —



Director's Note

Having worked as a librarian for over 15 years, I have a special place in my heart for books and, by extension, paper. Paper is an ideal material for conveying knowledge widely: it is cheap, relatively easy to make and holds ink well. But that doesn't mean it can't be improved. Back in the 1920s, someone came up with the idea of adding a little liquid latex into the paper-making process to get paper that is stronger, more flexible and more water-resistant. It was a good idea, at least on paper (pun intended). However, for various reasons, the product never caught fire. Read our cover story by Alex Teoh to find out why rubber latex paper never took off.

Around the time when this unique paper was making waves, the Orang Seletar were literally riding the waves in the strait between Singapore and Johor. They lived on boats and harvested nature's bounty back when borders were porous. Ilya Katrinnada speaks to the Orang Seletar of today to learn how their life has changed in the last century.

The Orang Laut are unique in being able to live off the land (and sea). Not so for the rest of us, who rely on supermarkets and wet markets for our produce. Speaking of wet markets, the term is actually a local one of relatively recent coinage. Up until a few decades ago, they were simply known as markets. Join Zoe Yeo as she wanders through the aisles of history and shares some of her interesting finds.

One of the pleasures of the wet market is the flower stall, where you can get inexpensive flowers. However, while these stalls may offer a wide range, what they will not have are the orchid hybrids that Singapore presents to VIPs. These hybrids are bred specifically by the Singapore Botanic Gardens and are not available for sale anywhere. If you are an orchid lover, don't miss Rebecca Tan's essay on the roots of orchid diplomacy in Singapore.

In this issue of *BiblioAsia*, we also delve into a history of the Padang, peek into the pioneering Kamala Club, visit the old Kandang Kerbau Hospital, examine the life of cinema magnate Tan Cheng Kee, explore the streets of Opera Estate, and sample the unique nature of Chinese food in Singapore.

All in all, another issue with plenty to chew on. Bon appétit!

Ms Alicia Yeo
Director
National Library

Editorial & Production

Editor-in-Chief
Jimmy Yap

Senior Editor
Veronica Chee

Engagement Editor
Soh Gek Han

Editorial Consultant
Francis Dorai

Contributors
Vandana Aggarwal
Asrina Tanuri
Ilya Katrinnada
Low Sze Wee
Barbara Quek
Joanna Tan
Kevin Tan
Rebecca Tan
Alex Teoh
Zoe Yeo

Design and Print
Oxygen Studio
Designs Pte Ltd

Please direct all correspondence to
National Library Board
100 Victoria Street #14-01
National Library Building
Singapore 188064
Email: ref@nlb.gov.sg
Website: www.nlb.gov.sg

On the cover
Detail from the cover of *British Malaya: General Description of the Country and Life Therein* published by the Malayan Information Agency (1929).

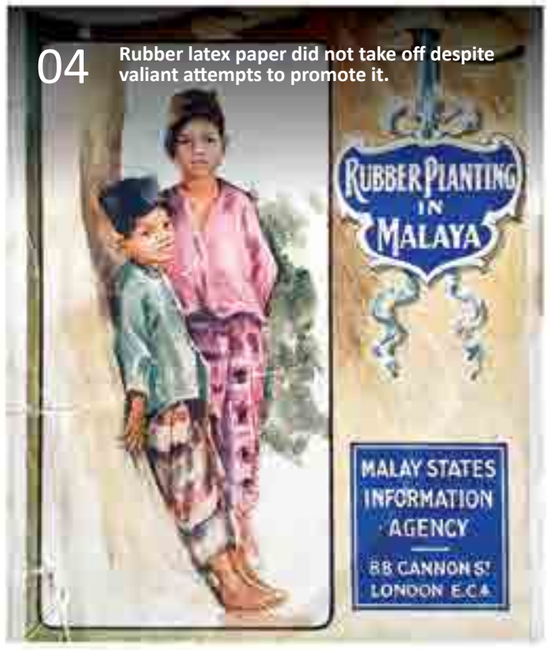
BiblioAsia is a free quarterly publication produced by the National Library Board. It features articles on the history, culture and heritage of Singapore within the larger Asian context, and has a strong focus on the collections and services of the National Library. *BiblioAsia* is distributed to local and international libraries, academic institutions, and government ministries and agencies. Members of the public can pick up the magazine at the National Library Building and public libraries. The online edition can be accessed with the QR code on the right.

biblioasia.nlb.gov.sg

ISSN 0219-8126 (print)
ISSN 1793-9968 (online)

CONTENTS

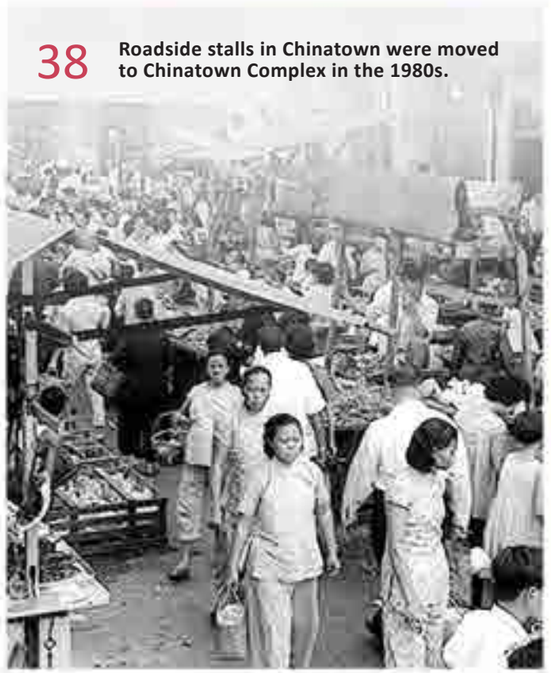
biblioasia
VOLUME 18 ISSUE 01 APR JUN 2022



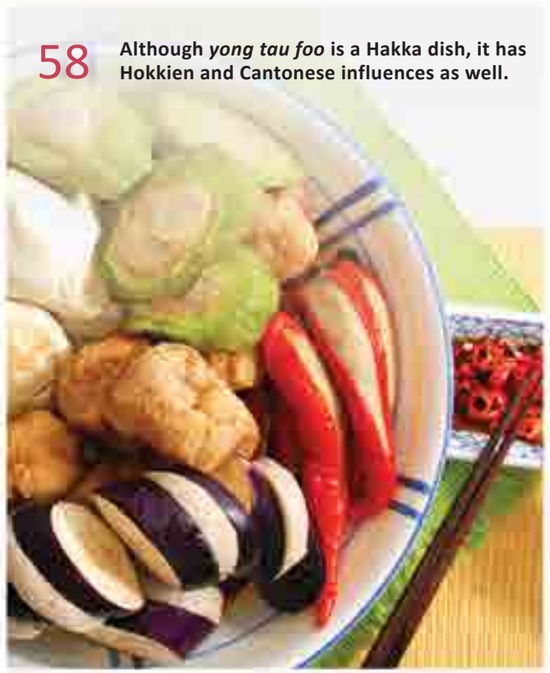
04 Rubber latex paper did not take off despite valiant attempts to promote it.

08 A colourful look at Singapore's orchid diplomacy.

16 The Orang Seletar hunt wild boar with the help of their pet dogs.



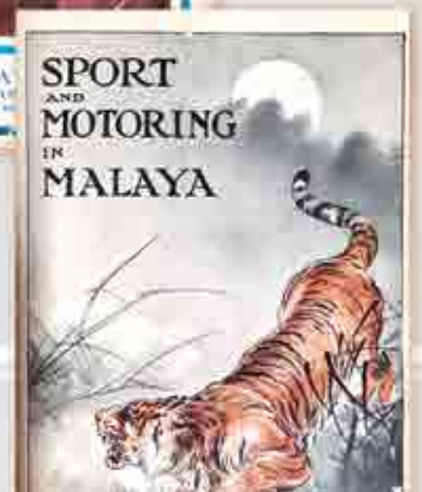
38 Roadside stalls in Chinatown were moved to Chinatown Complex in the 1980s.



58 Although *yong tau foo* is a Hakka dish, it has Hokkien and Cantonese influences as well.

Image credits, clockwise from top left: Malay States Information Agency (1924); Jefree bin Salim; Shutterstock; Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, National Archives of Singapore; Jimmy Yap.

Titles published by the Malay States Information Agency/ Malayan Information Agency and printed on rubber latex paper. (Clockwise from right) *Images reproduced from Eric MacFadyen, Rubber Planting in Malaya (London: Malay States Information Agency, 1924). (Not available in NLB holdings); Sport and Motoring in Malaya (London: Malay States Information Agency, 1924). (Not available in NLB holdings); British Malaya: General Description of the Country and Life Therein (London: Malayan Information Agency, 1929). (Not available in NLB holdings).*



PRINTED *on* RUBBER LATEX PAPER

An innovation patented in 1920 produced paper that was more durable, had greater tensile strength and was resistant to folding, as **Alex Teoh** tells us.

(Left) Cover and title page of *Mining in Malaya*, which was printed on rubber latex paper. *Images reproduced from Gordon Eastley Greig, Mining in Malaya (London: Malay States Information Agency, 1924). (From National Library, Singapore, Call no. RCLOS 622.09595 GRE-[RFL]).*

(Above) The title page of each handbook published by the Malay States Information Agency for the British Empire Exhibition states: "The text portion of this pamphlet is printed on Rubber Latex Paper." *Image reproduced from Gordon Eastley Greig, Mining in Malaya (London: Malay States Information Agency, 1924). (From National Library, Singapore, Call no. RCLOS 622.09595 GRE-[RFL]).*

During the British Empire Exhibition held at Wembley Park, England, from 23 April to 1 November 1924, a number of handbooks were published and distributed that promoted the economy and produce of British Malaya. Published by the London-based Malay States Information Agency, these handbooks included titles such as *British Malaya: Trade & Commerce*; *Rubber Planting in Malaya*; *Coconut Industry in Malaya*; *Big Game Shooting & Motoring in Malaya*; and *Mining in Malaya*.[1]

The agency was set up in 1910 as the Malay States Development Agency, which was renamed Malay States Information Agency the next year. Its mission was to provide information to prospective investors to boost land cultivation and trade in British Malaya. Through various public relations initiatives, advertisements and exhibitions, Malaya's primary produce like rubber, coconut, pineapple and gambier and minerals such as tin were made known to the British Empire and the world. In 1928, the agency was renamed yet again as the Malayan Information Agency and occupied a building called Malaya House in London's Trafalgar Square.

In addition to producing handbooks about topics related to Malaya, the agency also subtly aimed to show off Malayan products in other ways. On the title page of each handbook published by the agency for the British Empire Exhibition is the line: "The text portion of this pamphlet is printed on Rubber Latex Paper." The printed pages appear off-white, slightly glossy and, after all these decades, still in good condition. The wove paper has a uniform surface, not ribbed or watermarked, and has a thickness of around 0.1 mm (similar to the 70gsm paper used today for photocopying).

What is Rubber Latex Paper?

Rubber was, of course, the chief agricultural product of the Malay Peninsula at the time.[2] Commercially planted since 1895, British Malaya supplied more than half of the world's rubber by the 1930s.[3]

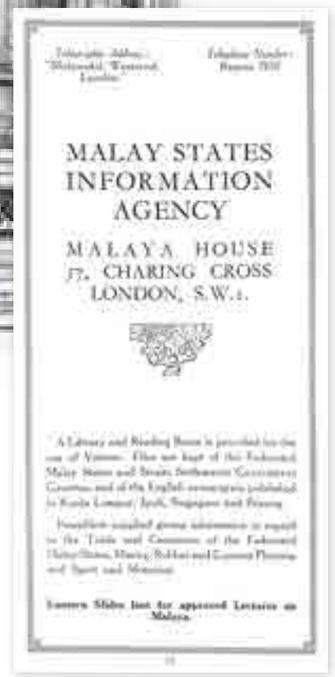
Rubber latex paper was made by mixing liquid latex into paper pulp during paper-making. This process was developed by Professor Frederick Kaye of the Manchester College of Technology and patented in 1920.[4] It was then commercially tested with free shipments of rubber latex to paper mills in England, Holland, Belgium and the United States.[5]

During the 1920s, the price of rubber slumped and rubber export restrictions were instituted to halt falling prices. As such, any new uses of rubber to increase demand would have been welcomed by Malayan planters and rubber investors.

The use of rubber latex in paper-making garnered considerable news coverage in 1922 and 1923. In April 1922, the *Straits Times* noted that rubber latex appeared to "improve the texture [of paper] and makes the paper more uniform when viewed by transmitted light. The feel of the paper, especially with paper containing large amounts of rubber, is much improved and becomes pleasant to the touch". It added that "paper containing rubber latex is more water-repellent than the same paper without rubber, and a suitable treatment of the fibres in paper-making with rubber latex will give a water-proof paper". In addition, the "electrical resistance and dielectric properties of paper may be improved by the addition of rubber latex". The paper became more absorbent with better hydration, while the production cost was also reduced considerably.[6]

In addition, rubber latex paper also reportedly had increased "folding

Alex Teoh is a paper and book conservator, providing collection care for rare manuscripts, collectible prints, antique maps and antiquarian books. He is interested in the local material culture of the written text in Southeast Asia.



(Above) A sketch of Malaya House in Trafalgar Square, London. The building housed the Malayan Information Agency. *Image reproduced from British Malaya: General Description of the Country and Life Therein (London: Malayan Information Agency, 1932), back cover. (From National Library, Singapore, Call no. RCLOS 959.5 MAL).*

(Right) An advertisement of the Malay States Information Agency in 1928. *Image reproduced from Federated Malay States Railways: Pamphlet of Information for Travellers 1928: Tours in the Malay Peninsula (Kuala Lumpur: Federated Malay States Railways, 1928), 87. (From National Library, Singapore, Call no. RRARE 959.51 FED; Microfilm no. NL28657).*

resistance" (a measure of the paper's resistance to cracking along the crease when folded) and "bursting strength". "[A]n untreated manila paper gave a folding resistance of 726, and a bursting strength of 41 lb. (per square inch calculated to a thickness of 1–10th millimetre), while the same paper, treated, increased its folding resistance to 24,000, and its bursting strength to 60 lb. An ordinary printing paper, untreated, had the low folding resistance of 2; treated, this rose to no less than 250, or 125-fold; the increase in bursting strength was from 7 lb. to 20 lb."[7]

Besides paper-making, there were suggestions to use rubber latex for other things like making paper food containers that would be "stronger, tougher, and more damp-proof than at present".[8] The possibility of using rubber latex for currency notes was also raised.[9] There was also a suggestion that Malaya start manufacturing paper as well.[10]

However, paper manufacturers were not entirely receptive to using rubber latex. Due to rubber export restrictions and shipment costs, variable prices and additional costs worried the paper mills. There were also concerns about the licencing cost of this technology, the effect of latex on the pulp mixing equipment and the lack of demand for rubber latex paper.

A *Singapore Free Press* report summarised the problem: "In the first place, excepting in rubber producing countries, there is no general demand for rubber latex paper, and consequently a strong case has to be made out for the inclusion of rubber latex in the raw ingredients, which go to form the finished paper material." Paper manufacturers were also reluctant to "add more than 2 per cent of rubber latex to the total ingredients of the paper pulp, and in practice manufacturers have found that even this 2 per cent, instead of finding its way to the finished paper, merely tends to accumulate on the various exposed surfaces of the paper-making machinery causing the machinery to become 'tacked up' which results in the necessity at the end of the run in which the rubber latex has been used, for a complete cleaning up of the machinery". Manufacturers claimed that the tackiness interfered with the running of the machinery, "resulting in a loss of time in cleaning up the machine after its use, and a consequent loss of money which in turn has to be added to the cost of the paper".[11]

Commercial Latex Paper

There were some efforts to use rubber latex paper commercially. It was used for the printing of company reports of several major publicly listed companies and associations in Malaya, including Guthrie & Co., Fraser and Neave, Ltd., Robinson and Co., Singapore United Rubber and the Planters' Association of Malaya.[12] In 1923, London's *Investors' Chronicle* became the first newspaper to be printed on rubber latex paper.[13]

For the Malaya Pavilion at the British Empire Exhibition in 1924, the 2,000 copies of various pamphlets on different topics produced for sale used up two tons of paper, 3 percent of which was made of rubber latex.[14]

A company that manufactured latex paper was Messrs Lepard and Smiths, Limited, one of the oldest paper merchants in London. They produced envelopes, bank and bond papers as well

(Right) G.H. Kiat & Co. advertising its latex paper. *Image reproduced from "Page 6 Advertisements Column 1," Malaya Tribune, 19 June 1923, 6. (From NewspaperSG).*

(Far right) A Rickard Ltd. advertisement encouraging consumers to use latex paper. *Image reproduced from "Page 2 Advertisements Column 2," Straits Times, 9 November 1925, 2. (From NewspaperSG).*

as cream laid writing papers, known as "Latex Papers", at their warehouses in London. These were then shipped and stored in Singapore and elsewhere to meet demand.[15]

In Singapore and Malaya, latex paper was advertised and sold by major merchandisers like Fraser and Neave, Ltd.[16], John Little & Co., Ltd.[17] and G.H. Kiat & Co., Ltd.[18]

In 1925 and 1927, printing company Rickard on Cecil Street embarked on a targeted advertising campaign for its latex paper. The marketing slogan in the daily newspapers was "Keep Up the Price of Rubber by Having All Your Printing Done on Latex Paper" and "To Managers of Rubber Estates – Insist on Having All Your Printing – Letter Heads, Memos, Check Rolls, Etc. Etc. Done on Latex Paper".[19] The bookshop G.H. Kiat & Co. attempted to prod companies into using the paper by asking: "Are You Helping the Rubber Industry by Using Latex Paper?"[20]

In 1926, John Little & Co. offered a new series of Christmas greetings cards featuring "etchings of local beauty spots by Mrs G. Sinclair", printed on a special grade of latex paper.[21] Three years later, John Little launched its exclusive stationery brand of writing pads, note paper and envelopes called Rubtext Stationery. These used "distinctive high quality paper with semi-smooth finish" and were made in two finishes, antique and ripple, with each finish in four colours – white, sea blue, maize and mauve.[22]

However, after the 1930s, mentions of rubber latex paper dried up in the Malayan press. Although the term "rubber latex paper" may not be familiar to the younger generations today, we still have handbooks and publications that serve as reminders of this fascinating attempt to create a new market for a product that was very much a part of the history of Singapore and Malaya. ♦

NOTES

1 The National Library has some of these titles. See Malay States Information Service, *British Malaya: Trade & Commerce* (London: Malay States Information Agency, 1924). (From National Library, Singapore, Call no. RDTYS 381.09595 BRI); Theodore Rathbone Hubback, John H.M. Robson and Howard Henry Banks, *Big-game Shooting* (London: Malay States Information Agency, 1924). (From National Library, Singapore, Call no. RRARE 799.29595 HUB; Microfilm no. NL29281); Gordon Eastley Greig, *Mining in Malaya* (London: Malay States Information Agency, 1924). (From National Library, Singapore, Call no. RCLOS 622.09595 GRE-[RFL])

2 Eric MacFadyen, *Rubber Planting in Malaya* (London: Malay States Information Agency, 1924). (Not available in NLB holdings)

3 The writer referenced the 1926 edition which is not available in NLB. The earliest version that NLB has is the 1935 edition. See Ralph Lionel German, *Handbook to British Malaya* (London: Malay States Information Agency, 1935). (From National Library, Singapore, Call no. RRARE 959.503 HAN-[JSB])

4 "Rubber and Paper," *Straits Times*, 24 July 1922, 9. (From NewspaperSG)

5 "Latex in Paper-making," *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 5 October 1922, 13; "The Kaye Process," *Straits Times*, 11 October 1922, 12. (From NewspaperSG)

6 "Rubber for Paper Making," *Straits Times*, 22 April 1922, 2. (From NewspaperSG); "Latex in Paper-making"; "The Kaye Process."

7 "Latex Additions in Papermaking," *Malaya Tribune*, 12 May 1922, 3; "Latex in Papermaking," *Straits Times*, 18 May 1922, 9. (From NewspaperSG)

8 "Rubberised Paper," *Malaya Tribune*, 26 October 1922, 2. (From NewspaperSG)

9 "Use of Latex in Paper-making," *Straits Times*, 16 November 1922, 10. (From NewspaperSG)

10 "Rubber Latex in Paper," *Straits Times*, 18 January 1923, 9. (From NewspaperSG)

11 "Latex Paper," *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 25 June 1924, 6. (From NewspaperSG)

12 "Untitled," *Straits Times*, 17 November 1922, 8; "Singapore United Rubber," *Straits Times*, 27 December 1922, 11; "Untitled," *Straits Times*, 13 June 1923, 8; "Company Reports: Fraser and Neave, Ltd.," *Malaya Tribune*, 17 March 1923, 8; "Robinson and Co.," *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 7 April 1923, 16. (From NewspaperSG)

13 "First Rubber Newspaper," *Malaya Tribune*, 8 January 1923, 7; "Rubber Paper," *Straits Times*, 8 January 1923, 9. (From NewspaperSG)

14 "Malayan Propaganda," *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 1 May 1924, 6. (From NewspaperSG)

15 "Latex Paper," *Malaya Tribune*, 13 January 1923, 10. (From NewspaperSG)

16 "Latex Paper in Singapore," *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 24 March 1923, 10; "Page 1 Advertisements Column 1," *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 24 March 1923, 1. (From NewspaperSG)

17 "Page 8 Advertisements Column 1," *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 17 June 1929, 8. (From NewspaperSG)

18 "Page 6 Advertisements Column 1," *Malaya Tribune*, 19 June 1923, 6. (From NewspaperSG)

19 "Page 2 Advertisements Column 2," *Straits Times*, 9 November 1925, 2; "Page 2 Advertisements Column 2," *Straits Times*, 7 November 1927, 2; "Page 2 Advertisements Column 2," *Straits Times*, 2 December 1925, 2. (From NewspaperSG)

20 "Page 6 Advertisements Column 1."

21 "Page 8 Advertisements Column 1," *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 3 November 1926, 8. (From NewspaperSG)

22 "Page 8 Advertisements Column 1," *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 17 June 1929, 8. (From NewspaperSG)

FLOWER POWER

Singapore's Orchid Diplomacy

Singapore's diplomatic efforts may take several forms, including naming orchid hybrids after foreign dignitaries. **Rebecca Tan** tells us more.

(Facing page) The *Paravanda* Nelson Mandela, named after the former president of South Africa, bears flowers that have a bright greenish-yellow hue with a reddish tinge, resembling the colours of the South African flag. *Courtesy of the National Parks Board.*

Rebecca Tan is an Associate Librarian with the National Library, Singapore. She is part of the digital heritage team and works on curating and promoting access to the library's digital collections.

In August 2021, during a visit to Singapore, United States Vice President Kamala Harris was welcomed to the Istana by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong. As a welcome gift, she was presented with a spray of purplish-pink orchids named after her, the *Papilionanda* Kamala Harris (*Vanda* Kulwadee Fragrance × *Papilionanthe hookeriana*).[1]

Whenever world leaders visit a foreign country in an official capacity, they are usually given tokens of appreciation and enjoy tours of the country's attractions. In Singapore, however, some receive something special – an orchid hybrid named after them. This initiative – known as "orchid diplomacy" – serves as a gesture of friendship to promote goodwill between Singapore and other countries and plays an important role in building bilateral ties, as it is accorded to dignitaries such as royalty, heads of state and heads of government.[2]

Why orchids specifically? And why hybrids? Orchids, which belong to the family Orchidaceae, are chosen for their vibrant colours, hardiness and resilience. They help to project a strong image of Singapore. Hybrids, created by crossing two different breeds of parent plant species, reflect Singapore's multicultural heritage and globally oriented outlook.[3] The parent plants may even be hybrids themselves.

Selected orchid hybrids are named after visiting heads of state and heads of government as well as celebrities and important guests to the Singapore Botanic Gardens.[4] This tradition dates back to 1956, and today there are over 200 of such orchids in the National Orchid Garden at the Singapore Botanic Gardens.[5] VIP orchids, including those named in honour of the wives of heads of state and heads of government, are housed in the VIP Orchid Garden, while celebrity orchids can be viewed at the Celebrity Orchid Garden.

The first VIP orchid is the *Aranthera* Anne Black (*Arachnis* Maggie Oei × *Renanthera coccinea*), named after Lady Anne Black in 1956. She was the wife of Robert Black, a former governor of Singapore.[6] This hybrid makes a good cut flower as older flowers in a spray do not wither when new

ones bloom. Following independence in 1965, Singapore formalised the procedures for the naming of VIP orchids.

Cultivating Orchid Hybrids

The creation of orchid hybrids is undertaken by the Orchid Hybridisation Programme managed by the Singapore Botanic Gardens.[7] Various characteristics are taken into consideration when hybridising orchids, such as large and long-lasting flowers, high flower count, good arrangement of sprays, and the "look" of something new. However, not all crosses succeed due to factors like infertile parent plants or rot in the seed pods.[8]

The hybrid breeding process entails five steps: (1) deciding the type of orchid hybrid and then searching for the "parents" with the right characteristics; (2) transferring the pollen from the male parent to the female parent for fertilisation; (3) sowing the orchid seeds in a culture medium containing nutrients so that the seeds can germinate and grow into seedlings; (4) growing the seedlings in flasks for six to 12 months before they are transferred to pots in a nursery; and (5) waiting for the plants to flower, which usually takes two to three years of growing the orchids in pots.[9]

According to Peggy Tan, former president of the Orchid Society of South East Asia, a toothpick is used to harvest the pollen from a flower, which is immediately placed onto the stigma of another flower. If pollination succeeds, the flower will fade but remains on the stem until a seed pod develops several weeks later. However, if an orchid's resultant flowers are defective, then the plant may be discarded.[10]

Yam Tin Wing, senior researcher of orchid breeding at the Singapore Botanic Gardens, noted in 2009 that only 10 percent of orchid hybrids were found "suitable to be used in orchid-naming ceremonies". "It's like waiting for a baby to be born," he said. "You don't know what it will look like, or the characteristics it will have. Some orchids may look good, but are weak plants. Others may grow well but not have any flowers."[11]

Orchid hybrids take anywhere between two and six years to flower from the day the parents are crossed. For example, the *Aranda* Lee Kuan Yew (*Arachnis hookeriana* × *Vanda* Golden Moon), named after Singapore's founding prime minister when he passed away in 2015, took four years to bloom after its parents were crossed.[12]

To ensure there are always orchid hybrids ("Very Important Plants") available for naming after VIPs, the Botanic Gardens stores hundreds of hybrids that have bloomed but remain unnamed.[13] According to a *Straits Times* report in 1984, some orchids "may bloom in obscurity for as much as a decade before getting a name – as they flower at a time when no celebrity is visiting. But a lucky few are christened in their first bloom".[14]

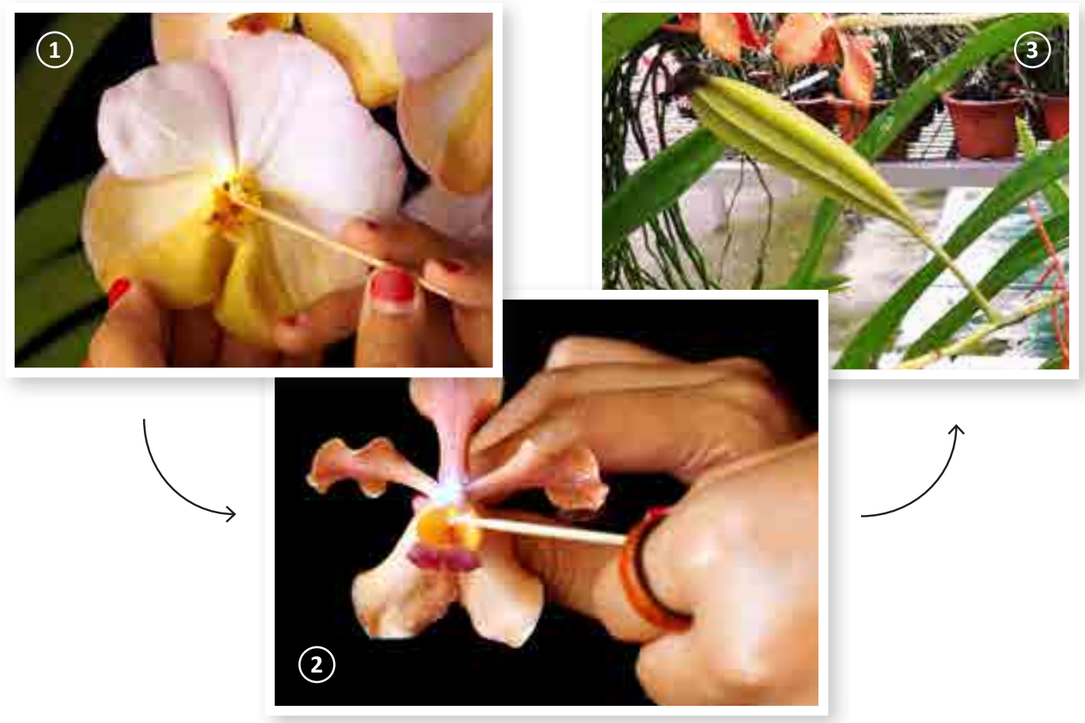
To conserve the VIP orchid collections, these orchids are sent to the Gardens' Micropropagation Laboratory for mass propagation, and subsequently to the National Orchid Garden's nursery to be nurtured till they flower. These flowering plants are then used for displays and further propagation when stocks are low.[15]

Selecting VIP Orchids

Several months before a notable dignitary is set to visit Singapore, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) provides the Singapore Botanic Gardens with a dossier on the visitor. Based on the information, several orchids are shortlisted. The recommendations are then sent to the MFA and the visiting dignitary's representatives.[16] Simon Tan, Assistant Director of the National Orchid Garden, commented in 2015 that "the MFA advises [the garden] on taboo colours" and preferred colours. The Singapore Botanic Gardens will then choose the orchids according to these requirements.[17]

Much care is also taken in selecting an orchid that befits the dignitary it will be named after. For example, the *Paravanda*

During the pollination process, (1) pollen is carefully removed from the pollen plant and (2) transferred to the seed plant. (3) If fertilisation succeeds, a seed pod will develop several weeks later. *Courtesy of the National Parks Board.*



(Left and above) The first VIP orchid is the *Aranthera* Anne Black, named in 1956 after the wife of Robert Black, former governor of Singapore. *Photos by and courtesy of Jimmy Yap.*

(Below) President of South Africa, Nelson Mandela, at the National Orchid Garden, 1997. The *Paravanda* Nelson Mandela was named after him during his visit to Singapore. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

(Facing page) During the visit by Prince William and Catherine, the Duchess of Cambridge, to the National Orchid Garden on 11 September 2012, the royal couple was presented with an orchid named after them, the *Vanda* William Catherine. *Courtesy of the National Parks Board.*

(Above) Queen Elizabeth II touring the Singapore Botanic Gardens, 1972. Accompanying her are (from left) Permanent Secretary to the Ministry of National Development Cheng Tong Fatt, Minister for Law and National Development E.W. Barker, and Acting Director of the Singapore Botanic Gardens A.G. Alphonso. The queen had an orchid named in her honour, the *Dendrobium* Elizabeth. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

(Left) The *Dendrobium* Elizabeth has twisted petals and the sepals are yellow with light greyish-purple streaks. *Photo by and courtesy of Jimmy Yap.*

Nelson Mandela (*Papilionanda* Mas Los Angeles × *Paraphalaenopsis labukensis*), named in honour of the anti-apartheid leader and president of South Africa when he visited Singapore in March 1997, has "a bright greenish-yellow hue with a reddish tinge, resembling the colours of the South African flag". It won the second prize at the 18th World Orchid Conference held in France in March 2005.[18]

Another example is the *Dendrobium* Memoria Princess Diana (*Dendrobium* Pattaya Beauty × *Dendrobium* Fairy Wong), christened on 22 September 1997, a month after Princess Diana's death.[19] Yam noted that the orchid was white, a "very regal or royal colour" that also reflected the late Princess of Wales' efforts to promote peace, such as by banning land mines. He added that the flower "has a tinge of pink on its petals which make it seem warm and approachable, just like the personality of the Princess".[20]

In yet another example, the orchids *Aranda* Lee Kuan Yew and *Vanda* Kwa Geok Choo (*Vanda* Amelita Ramos × *Vanda* Harvest Time) – named after the founding prime minister and his wife – were chosen to match in terms of colour, form and stature. They also share common species in their lineages.[21]

Said then Minister for National Development Khaw Boon Wan in a blog post on 24 March 2015: "For some time, we have been looking out for a suitable orchid hybrid to name after Mr Lee. NParks [National Parks Board] officers who have staffed him on his many visits to the SBG [Singapore Botanic Gardens] have a good sense of what he enjoyed and liked amongst the flora and fauna."[22]

VIPs may also have a say in which orchid is named after them. Then British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher personally selected her orchid, the *Dendrobium* Margaret Thatcher (*Dendrobium Concham* × *Dendrobium lasianthera*), during her visit to Singapore in April 1985. Chua Sian Eng, Commissioner of Parks and Recreation, explained to Mrs Thatcher that "the orchid was chosen for its vigour and growth". Sporting petals that resemble antelope horns, the orchid won three prizes at the Singapore Orchid Show in 1987.[23]

When Japan's Crown Prince Naruhito (now Emperor) wed Masako Owada in June 1993, then President of Singapore Wee Kim Wee presented the royal couple with an orchid that had been specially flown to Tokyo to commemorate the wedding. This was a white orchid, the *Dendrobium* Masako Kotaishi Hidenka (also known as *Dendrobium* Her Imperial Highness the Crown Princess Masako; *Dendrobium* Singa Snow × *Dendrobium* Subang). The crown princess had selected this particular hybrid after viewing photos of different orchids.[24]

Once an orchid is named, it is registered with the Royal Horticultural Society in London, the international registration authority for orchid hybrids. VIPs are presented with the orchid's official birth certificate – with details such as the hybrid's parents, appearance, date of pollination and flowering – and in some cases they get to keep the orchid too.[25]

If the VIPs wish to grow their namesake orchid in their home country, the Singapore Botanic Gardens will provide them with the orchid plant cutting with flower stalks, accompanied by instructions on how to care for the orchid. The plant cutting is cushioned and secured in a box, and the flowers are wrapped. The Singapore Botanic Gardens also ensures that any plant import documents requested by the VIP's home country are complete and in good order.[26]

After being presented with their namesake orchids, dignitaries may go on to view other VIP orchids of significance to them. Following the unveiling of the *Vanda* William Catherine (*Vanda* First and Last × *Vanda* Motes Toledo Blue), Britain's Prince William and Catherine, the Duchess of Cambridge, viewed the *Dendrobium* Elizabeth (*Dendrobium* Mustard × *Dendrobium* Noor Aishah; Noor Aishah is the wife of Singapore's first president, Yusof

(Above) The *Papilionanda* Xi Jinping-Peng Liyuan is named in honour of the Chinese President and his wife. *Photo by and courtesy of Jimmy Yap*.

(Left) The *Dendrobium* Mahathir Siti Hasmah, a hybrid of *Dendrobium* Kiyoshi Blue and *Dendrobium* Pink Lips, is named after Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, the former prime minister of Malaysia, and his wife, Tun Dr Siti Hasmah binti Haji Mohamad Ali. *Photo by and courtesy of Jimmy Yap.*

Ishak) and the *Dendrobium* Memoria Princess Diana, named after Prince William's grandmother and late mother respectively. Singapore was the royal couple's first stop in their Asia-Pacific tour to commemorate Queen Elizabeth's Diamond Jubilee in 2012.[27]

Dignitaries may also enjoy other aspects of the Botanic Gardens during their visit. In November 2015, after the *Papilionanda* Xi Jinping-Peng Liyuan (*Vanda* Kulwadee Fragrance × *Papilionanthe* Miss Joaquim) was named in honour of the Chinese President and his wife, the couple enjoyed a four-course lunch at the Corner House restaurant in the Botanic Gardens. They were hosted by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and his wife Ho Ching. The orchid has pink petals with fine red spots, an orangey-red prominent lip with dark red markings, and an orangey-yellow centre.[28]

Non-VIP Orchids

The naming of orchids after prominent personalities has also been expanded to include not only royalty and dignitaries, but also celebrities and Singaporeans who have brought honour to the country.

In 2006, local singer Stefanie Sun became the first Singaporean celebrity to have an orchid named after her to honour her success as a recording artiste. Sun chose the pure white hybrid, which was named *Dendrobium* Stefanie Sun (*Dendrobium* Memoria Princess Diana × *Dendrobium bigibbum* var. *superbum* [syn. *Dendrobium phalaenopsis*]). "It is such a special thing to have a flower named after you. And I thought the pure white orchid is very simple and elegant," she said.[29]

And in recognition of Joseph Schooling's and Yip Pin Xiu's achievements at the 2016 Olympic and Paralympic Games respectively, the two athletes were honoured with their own orchids the following year. The *Dendrobium* Joseph Schooling (*Dendrobium* Elizabeth × *Dendrobium* Strattokai) has petals that are "yellow and slightly twisted while the sepals are greenish yellow", whereas Yip's orchid, the *Dendrobium* Yip Pin Xiu (*Dendrobium* Kathy Ong Mei Lee × *Dendrobium* Pink Lips), sports sepals that are "white with a faint blush of purple while the white petals are infused with magenta".[30]

International celebrities who have orchids named after them include Hong Kong superstar Jackie Chan, singers Elton John and Ricky Martin, operatic tenor Andrea Bocelli, Korean actors Kwon Sang Woo and Bae Yong Jun, and even fashion designer Michael Kors. Apparently, Chan was so happy with his *Dendrobium* Jackie Chan that "he put his arms around it, hugged, and took a picture with it" in 2005. The orchid petals have been described as looking like "the nose of the dragon". The primatologist and anthropologist Jane Goodall also has an orchid that bears her name "in recognition of her extraordinary contributions to nature conservation and animal welfare."[31]

Orchids for Events and Milestones

Orchids may even be named after significant events held in Singapore, and these are placed in the Tan Hoon Siang Mist House at the National Orchid Garden. In January 1992, during the Fourth Asean Summit, wives of the Asean heads of government and ministers unveiled the *Dendrobium* Asean Lady (*Dendrobium* Garnet Beauty × *Dendrobium bigibbum* var. *superbum* [syn. *Dendrobium phalaenopsis*]).[32] In December 1996, the *Mokara* WTO (*Mokara* Khaw Phaik Suan × *Ascocenda* Fortune East) was named after the inaugural World Trade Organisation Conference and its 5,000 delegates.[33]

Orchids are also named to commemorate milestones. In 2015, when Singapore celebrated 50 years of independence, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong officially named the SG50 orchid the *Papilionanthe* Singapore Golden Jubilee orchid (*Papilionanthe* Snowdon × *Papilionanthe* Pojo). According to the National Parks Board, this orchid with purple and white flowers traces its lineage back to Singapore's national flower, the *Papilionanthe* Miss Joaquim (previously known as *Vanda* Miss Joaquim), "signifying the nation's growth from strength to strength".[34]

Also in the same year, the *Dendrobium* Golden Friendship (*Dendrobium* Memoria Olive Hu × *Dendrobium discolor*) was unveiled to celebrate 50 years of diplomatic ties between Singapore and Australia. It was grown from a Singaporean hybrid and an Australian species, and named by then Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott.[35]

A Leader in Orchid Cultivation

Singapore's reputation for orchid cultivation dates to the 1950s. After the Japanese Occupation, businessman-lawyer Tan Hoon Siang, who later became president of the Malayan Orchid Society (today's Orchid Society of South East Asia), bred an orchid hybrid that put Singapore on the world map of orchid cultivation. The orchid seeds were then sown in the Singapore Botanic Gardens in 1949, flowering in 1952.

Tan named the flower *Papilionanda* Tan Chay Yan (previously known as *Vanda* Tan Chay Yan; *Vanda dearei* × *Papilionanda* Josephine van Brero) after his late father, a commercial rubber planter from Melaka and a grandson of merchant and philanthropist Tan Tock Seng. The mauve and salmon-coloured orchid received a First Class Certificate from the Royal Horticultural Society at the Chelsea Flower Show in 1954. The orchid garnered much attention from orchid growers around the world and many came to see the orchids in Singapore. Tan himself also has an orchid in his honour – the *Papilionanda* Tan Hoon Siang, a hybrid of *Papilionanda* Josephine van Brero and *Vanda* Somsri Pink.[36]

Since then, Singapore has become well known for its expertise in breeding orchids. The Singapore Botanic Gardens has intensified its acquisition of new species and hybrids, and set up a seed bank for conserving the genetic material of these orchids. These efforts help ensure the continued viability of "orchid diplomacy", and the richness of the collections in the National Orchid Garden.[37]

To date, the Orchid Hybridisation Programme has produced more than 630 registered hybrids. Many of these hybrids, in addition to being potential VIP orchids, are also cultivated for use in landscaping and as potted plants.

While some might hanker after an orchid named after a favourite celebrity, these plants are, unfortunately, not for sale. The National Parks Board and Gardens by the Bay explained in 2015: "VIP orchids are named after individuals as a gesture of goodwill and friendship. Each named orchid is exclusive to the individual and is not for sale. This is what makes the orchid significant and special."[38] Hence, the only way to admire these beautiful flowers is to make a trip to the National Orchid Garden. ♦

The author is grateful to the National Parks Board and Peggy Tan, former president of the Orchid Society of South East Asia, for providing additional information for this essay.

NOTES

1 Gabrielle Andres, "US Vice President Kamala Harris Receives Namesake Orchid, Official Welcome at Istana," *Channel NewsAsia*, 23 August 2021, https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/us-vice-president-kamala-harris-orchid-welcome-istana-official-visit-2130576.
2 National Parks Board, email, 10 December 2021; Lin Suling, "Commentary: Prince Charles' Orchid and the Art of Diplomatic Gift-giving," *Channel NewsAsia*, 3 November 2017, https://www.channelnewsasia.com/commentary/commentary-prince-charles-orchid-and-art-diplomatic-gift-giving-987426.
3 Lin, "Commentary: Prince Charles' Orchid and the Art of Diplomatic Gift-giving."
4 Nigel Taylor, "Orchids Are Named After Celebrities Too," *Straits Times*, 27 April 2013, 10. (From NewspaperSG); Natasha Ann Zachariah, "Growing VIP Orchids," *Straits Times*, 24 October 2015, 4–5. (From NewspaperSG)
5 National Parks Board, email, 10 December 2021.
6 Whang Lay Keng and Lim Siu Ann, "Flower Power," *NParks Buzz* 4, no. 43 (2019), https://www.nparks.gov.sg/nparksbuzz/issue-43-vol-4-2019/gardening/flower-power.
7 The Orchid Hybridisation Programme was initiated in 1928 by Richard Eric Holttum, then director of the Singapore Botanic Gardens. His first hybrid, *Spathoglottis* Primrose (*Spathoglottis aurea* × *Spathoglottis plicata*), bloomed in 1931.
8 National Parks Board, email, 10 December 2021.
9 Elysa Chen, "He Grows Orchid Hybrids for VIPs," *New Paper*, 22 November 2009, 10–11. (From NewspaperSG)
10 Peggy Tan, email, 10 January 2022.
11 Chen, "He Grows Orchid Hybrids for VIPs."
12 Feng Zengkun, "It Takes Years for a Newly Created Orchid Hybrid to Flower," *Straits Times*, 10 July 2015, 15. (From NewspaperSG)
13 Timothy P. Barnard, *Nature's Colony: Empire, Nation and Environment in the Singapore Botanic Gardens* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2016), 220. (From National Library, Singapore, Call no. RSING 580.735957 BAR); "We Grow Our VIPs," *Straits Times*, 9 August 2009, 109. (From NewspaperSG)
14 "From Princesses to Premiers," *Straits Times*, 18 March 1984, 3. (From NewspaperSG)
15 National Parks Board, email, 17 December 2021.
16 Barnard, *Nature's Colony*, 220.
17 Zachariah, "Growing VIP Orchids."
18 Janelle Yong, "Power Flower: These Orchids Are Named After VIPs," *AsiaOne*, 24 August 2021, https://www.asiaone.com/lifestyle/power-flower-these-orchids-are-named-after-vips.
19 Alexis Lai and Nick Thompson, "William and Catherine View Princess Diana Orchid in Singapore," *CNN*, 12 September 2012, https://edition.cnn.com/2012/09/11/world/asia/princess-diana-orchid-singapore/index.html.
20 Teo Yun Yun, "Singapore Orchid for 'England's Rose'," *New Paper*, 2 October 1997, 13. (From NewspaperSG)
21 Yong, "Power Flower."
22 "Remembering Lee Kuan Yew: Orchid Named After Mr Lee Kuan Yew Matches the Hybrid Named After Late Mrs Lee: Khaw Boon Wan," *Straits Times*, 24 March 2015, https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/orchid-named-after-mr-lee-kuan-yew-matches-the-hybrid-named-after-late-mrs-lee-khaw-boon.
23 Teo Yun Yun, "VIPs in Full Bloom," *New Paper*, 10 June 1997, 5; Irene Hoe, "A Bloom of Vigour for the Lady," *Straits Times*, 9 April 1985, 8; "Orchid Named After Thatcher Wins Three Honours," *Straits Times*, 12 September 1987, 13. (From NewspaperSG)
24 Teo, "VIPs in Full Bloom"; "An Orchid Gift for Japanese Royal Bride," *Straits Times*, 29 May 1993, 28; "S'pore Orchid for Japan's Royal Newlyweds," *Straits Times*, 8 June 1993, 1. (From NewspaperSG)
25 Chen, "He Grows Orchid Hybrids for VIPs"; Gwendolyn Ng, "Worthy Boasts & Other Quirks," *Straits Times*, 9 August 2009, 109. (From NewspaperSG)
26 National Parks Board, email, 17 December 2021.
27 "Orchid Named After Duke and Duchess of Cambridge," National Parks Board, 11 September 2012, https://www.nparks.gov.sg/news/2012/9/orchid-named-after-duke-and-duchess-of-cambridge; Alexis Lai and Nick Thompson, "William and Catherine View Princess Diana Orchid in Singapore."
28 "Orchid Hybrid Named in Honour of President Xi Jinping and His Wife at Botanic Gardens," *Straits Times*, 7 November 2015, https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/orchid-hybrid-named-in-honour-of-president-xi-jinping-and-his-wife-at-botanic-gardens; Rachel Au-Yong, "Orchid Hybrid Named After Chinese President and Wife," *Straits Times*, 8 November 2015, 7. (From NewspaperSG)
29 "Sun Flower," *Straits Times*, 17 December 2006, 6. (From NewspaperSG)
30 "Joseph Schooling, Yip Pin Xiu Have Orchids Named After Them," *Today*, 7 August 2017, https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/orchid-named-after-joseph-schooling-yip-pin-xiu.
31 Yam Tin Wing, *Orchids of the Singapore Botanic Gardens* (Singapore: Singapore Botanic Gardens), 148. (From National Library, Singapore, Call no. RSING 584.4095957 YAM); Chen, "He Grows Orchid Hybrids for VIPs"; Tay Suan Chiang, "Orchid's Name is for Life," *Straits Times*, 15 May 2010, 11; "We Grow Our VIPs"; Lin, "Commentary: Prince Charles' Orchid and the Art of Diplomatic Gift-giving"; "10 Celebrity Orchids Who Are Named After Famous People," *Singapore Women's Weekly*, 15 November 2016, https://www.womensweekly.com.sg/gallery/entertainment/10-celebrity-orchids-named-famous-people/.
32 Angeline Song, "Secret Asean Lady Orchid," *New Paper*, 23 January 1992, 10. (From NewspaperSG)
33 Teo, "Singapore Orchid for 'England's Rose'"; "Golden Tribute," *Straits Times*, 11 December 1996, 2; "Oh, for at Least an Hour with the Orchids...," *Straits Times*, 11 December 1996, 42. (From NewspaperSG)
34 "PM Lee Names SG50 Orchid," *New Paper*, 8 August 2015, 4. (From NewspaperSG); "NParks Unveils Singapore Botanic Gardens UNESCO World Heritage Site Plaque and Commemorative Stamps," National Parks Board, 6 August 2015, https://www.nparks.gov.sg/news/2015/8/nparks-unveils-singapore-botanic-gardens-unesco-world-heritage-site-plaque-and-commemorative-stamps.
35 Whang and Lim, "Flower Power"; Zachariah, "Growing VIP Orchids."
36 "$900 Orchid On Show Today," *Straits Times*, 6 September 1957, 5; Lim Hong Hee, "Orchid Story," *Singapore Free Press*, 29 March 1957, 3; Grace Tan, "Vanda Tan Chay Yan, a Worthier National Flower," *New Nation*, 26 April 1981, 21. (From NewspaperSG); "National Orchid Garden," Singapore Botanic Gardens, last updated 28 January 2022, https://www.nparks.gov.sg/sbg/our-gardens/tyersall-entrance/national-orchid-garden.
37 National Parks Board, email, 10 December 2021.
38 Nigel Taylor and Prisca Teh, "Plants and Seeds Sold at Two Gardens," *Straits Times*, 7 September 2015, 23. (From NewspaperSG)

THE ORANG SELETAR

ROWING ACROSS CHANGING TIDES

Singapore was once a home to the seafaring Orang Seletar who now reside in Johor Bahru. **Ilya Katrinnada** takes them on a tour around Singapore visiting Merlion Park, Sembawang Park and Lower Seletar Reservoir Park.

An Orang Seletar with his dogs (*angkook* in the Orang Seletar language), 2018. These pets are loyal companions. *Photo courtesy of Jefree bin Salim.*

"I remember playing over there when I was a kid!" Atie[1] exclaimed while pointing to the sea. A fisherwoman now in her late 30s, her wide eyes glinted with unmistakeable joy. Her excitement was matched by the 15 or so other people around us. Eagerly looking out the windows of the minibus, they chattered in their native Kon Seletar language as we drove along Yishun Dam, giving us a glimpse of Seletar Island, a place that is intimately tied to the history of the Orang Seletar.

Back in the 1980s and 90s, when Atie was a young girl swimming in the waters surrounding Seletar Island, the Orang Seletar travelled freely on their boats across the Tebrau Strait[2] between Malaysia and Singapore. Today, more than 20 years later, Atie, together with some of her fellow Orang Seletar, were visiting Singapore again. Not by boat this time though. They were here as tourists, having travelled by land across the Causeway from their village of Kampung Sungai Temon in Johor Bahru, passing through both countries' immigration checkpoints. My team member Chan Kah Mei and I played host.

This one-day tour[3] in October 2019 around parts of Singapore – where they once lived – was the least we could do for them given the incredible hospitality they had shown us since we embarked on our research project in 2018 with another team member, Ruslina Affandi. We had set out to collect oral history interviews from the Orang Seletar, and were able to do so thanks to their time and generosity in sharing their stories.

Ilya Katrinnada is an educator and writer with a keen interest in the intersections of creativity, community and education. Having graduated with a major in anthropology, she currently works as a special education teacher.

Who Are the Orang Seletar?

A nomadic sea people, the Orang Seletar[4] have for centuries called the Tebrau Strait (Johor Strait) their home as they roamed along the mangroves, shores and rivers in the northern part of Singapore and on the southern side of peninsular Malaysia. They relied heavily on their multifunctional *pau kajang* – a wooden boat that typically houses a family of up to six people. Besides serving as a mode of transportation, the vessel was also their home – a place where they slept, cooked and played.

Each *pau kajang* had a thatched roof made of *mengkuang* (screw pine), or *pandan* leaves, that shielded its inhabitants from the relentless tropical sun and heavy rains.[5] The distinct way the leaves were woven identified the Orang Seletar from other Orang Laut communities living around Singapore, such as the Orang Gelam who occupied the Singapore River, the Orang Kallang who situated themselves at the Kallang River, and the Orang Selat who travelled around the Southern Islands.

Periodically, families anchored their boats along the coastline. Besides

Orang Seletar children in their *pau kajang* at Seletar Island, 1950s. *Dr Ivan Polunin Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

Seletar Island (in the Johor Strait off the northern coast of Singapore), pit stops on the Singapore side of the strait included Jurong, Kranji, Choa Chu Kang, Punggol and Pulau Ubin. Here, they set up *bente* – temporary villages of small pile-houses where the community could gather. The Orang Seletar went wherever they could forage for their daily needs. Their intimate knowledge of the natural environment, passed down through generations, helped them navigate their surroundings, whether out at sea or in the mangrove swamps. They gathered tubers, wild yams and fruits, and dug crabs from the ground. With the help of their dogs, they hunted for wild boar. Fish were caught using handmade spears, and the surplus catch was traded for necessities such as cloth, rice and sago.

The Orang Seletar sourced crucial raw materials such as *meranti* (*Shorea* spp.) and *seraya* (*Shorea curtisii*)[6] to build their *pau kajang*. They capitalised on the healing properties of mangrove plants to cure a variety of ailments, such as *nyirih*, which soothed skin conditions and healed the wound of the belly button of newborns. Historically animists, the Orang Seletar believed that spirits inhabited the world around them. They were respectful in their interactions with the environment, taking precautions to avoid disturbing any unseen beings.

Today, there are nine Orang Seletar settlements in Johor Bahru with a combined population of some 2,000. Many have adopted Christianity or Islam, and intermarriage outside of the community is not uncommon. In Singapore, the Orang Seletar have largely assimilated into the local Malay community. They used to reside in coastal villages, such as those at the mouths of the Kranji and Kadut rivers as well as Seletar Island, before these areas made way for development.[7]

An Indigenous People of Singapore

The minibus stopped at the roadside by the Merlion Park. As we were taking photos with the Merlion overlooking the Singapore River, our guests took out their handwoven *tajak* (headdress) to wear. We strolled by the river, eventually arriving at the statue of Stamford Raffles at Empress Place.

When Raffles first set foot on Singapore in January 1819, the Orang Seletar made up a fifth of the 1,000 or so inhabitants recorded by Raffles.[8] It was also documented that there were about 20 to 30 Malays in the temenggong's entourage at the time. The fact that the number of Orang Seletar and Malays were reported separately imply that the two were seen as distinct ethnic groups, despite similarities in their physical appearance. This still rings true today.

While the Orang Seletar refer to themselves as Kon Seletar or simply Kon, our interviewees said that it was the Malays who had given them the name "Orang Seletar". Cultural geographer David Sopher suggests that the name *Seletar* is a Malay version of the Dutch term *selatter* which in turn was adapted from the Portuguese *selat*.[9] Meaning "straits", *selat* was adopted by writers in the 16th century to collectively refer to the different subgroups of sea nomads in the Melaka Strait. Hence, the presence of sea nomads in and around Singapore has been recorded as early as the 1500s.

The Orang Seletar have their own version of how the name Singapura came about. Several interviewees told us that their ancestors were hunting for wild boar on the island when they spotted a strange animal that looked like a lion. When Sang Nila Utama arrived in the 13th century, he had asked the Orang Seletar what the name of the island was. They replied "Singa Pulau" from which "Singapura" was derived.

Singapore's Pioneer Generation

Our next stop was Sembawang Park. We walked to the beach which gave us a panoramic view of the southern end of Johor. "That's Kilo's village," our guests told us. They pointed in the direction of the Orang Seletar village of Kampung Kuala Masai. The village and the beach were not only separated by the narrow body of water before us, but also by immigration checkpoints located about eight kilometres west of the Singapore-Johor Causeway.

The Causeway was completed in 1923, and the Orang Seletar were among those who helped in the construction. They also have dark stories about the structure. Kelah bin Lah, also known as Kilo, is a fisherman in his early 40s from Kampung Kuala Masai and a well-respected member of his village. He claimed that his grandfather had witnessed screaming young children being buried in the piling works of the Causeway during its construction. This was done because it was believed to strengthen the foundations of physical structures. As a result, Kilo's father and uncle were advised to always have their children within sight and not allow them to go to school for fear that they would be kidnapped and sacrificed for the subsequent building of homes in the vicinity. After the Causeway was completed in 1923, the Orang Seletar continued to travel on their boats, utilising hidden tunnels on the underside of the bridge to cross from one side of the strait to the other.

The Orang Seletar were also involved in other ambitious development projects in Singapore's early years, such as the clearing of mangroves in Jurong and Yishun for the construction of factories. Lel bin Jantan, an uncle of Kilo's, spent five years in the 1960s working as a labourer in Singapore, doing piling work for the construction of houses in Geylang Serai, Jalan Kayu and Pasir Panjang, among others. In the 1970s, he lived on Seletar Island for about four years before he had to move as a reservoir was about to be constructed in the area. His baby son was buried there after succumbing to an illness.

Migration to Johor Bahru

The minibus pulled up at the entrance of Lower Seletar Reservoir Park. Kah Mei and I brought our guests to the bank of the reservoir, which was neatly lined with grey stones. To our right was a shallow, empty pool with fountain spouts, enclosed by terraced steps – likely a popular spot for young families on weekends. On our left was an expansive golf course.

We made our way to the boardwalk leading out to the reservoir. While walking, I could hear our guests talking about the fish in the water beneath us. Several informational panels on the boardwalk prompted us to stop. These panels provided an overview of the history of the area. The first panel paid homage to the communities who used to frequent the place, including the Orang Seletar.

"This is Tok Batin Buruk,"[10] Jefree bin Salim said as he pointed to a black-

The Orang Seletar in their *pau kajang*, 1950s. Third from the left is Tok Batin Buruk. *Dr Ivan Polunin Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

(Above) Tok Batin Entel (a son of Tok Batin Buruk) with his wife at Kampung Pasir Putih, Johor Bahru, 2018. *Photo by and courtesy of Ilya Katrinnada.*

(Left) A photo of Mah, wife of Tok Batin Buruk, surrounded by her children, 1950s. The young boy on the extreme left is Entel, currently the village headman of Kampung Pasir Putih. *Dr Ivan Polunin Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

and-white photo on the panel. Jefree had a camera in his hand, as he usually does. Having taught himself photography, Jefree has since been visually documenting the Orang Seletar community across the nine villages in Johor Bahru. A son of the headman of Kampung Sungai Temon, Jefree, who is in his early 40s, is active in advocating for the rights of his people and has contributed his images to court cases against commercial developers looking to gain control over the land that his village sits on.

Taken at Seletar Island in the 1950s by Ivan Polunin, the photo depicts some Orang Seletar sitting atop their *pau kajang*. In the middle of the photo is Tok Batin Buruk, Jefree's granduncle, who was the headman at the time. We were told that Tok Batin Buruk was a spiritually powerful man.

Jefree's mother, Letih, told us that Tok Batin Buruk once used his spiritual prowess, along with a handkerchief, to help the then sultan of Johor court the Princess of Kelantan. This story reflects the close patron-client relationship between the Orang Seletar and the sultan in the past. Before World War II, they worked for the sultan, who paid them to catch crabs and fishes. They also often received invitations to the palace and accompanied the sultan on his hunting trips.

Tok Batin Buruk had a son, Entel, who is currently the village headman of Kampung Pasir Putih. Now in his mid-70s, Entel recalls living on Seletar Island for about two months when he was around

18 years old. He later applied to live on the island where his parents earned a living cutting mangrove wood for charcoal, but his application was unsuccessful.

Entel's younger sister, Mina, is in her early 60s. She has lived in Kampung Pasir Putih for more than 20 years. Together with her husband and her daughter's family, they occupy a small concrete house right by the sea, rearing mussels and selling their catch for a living. Kah Mei, Ruslina and I visited them in 2018. From their patio, we could see a gigantic ship to the west, Singapore's public-housing flats in the distance to the south, and a forested island a stone's throw away to the southeast – Pulau Ubin. "I used to go there in a *pau kajang*," Mina said. While Mina recalls spending time in Sungei Buloh, and on Ketam Island and Tekong Island, among other places, she told us that she had never been to Seletar Island. What she

(Below) A map showing the locations of the Orang Seletar's docking spots in Singapore as well as present-day Orang Seletar villages in Johor Bahru. *Courtesy of Ilya Katrinnada.*

(Bottom) The Orang Seletar rearing mussels at Kampung Sungai Temon in Johor Bahru, overlooking high-rise waterfront development in the background, 2018. *Photo courtesy of Jefree bin Salim.*

(Above) Orang Seletar girls in traditional wear, which include a handwoven *tajak* (headdress), 2019. Nowadays, the traditional attire is worn for performances during special occasions such as weddings and designated special days like the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples. *Photo courtesy of Jefree bin Salim.*

(Left) The Orang Seletar at the Lower Seletar Reservoir Park, 2019. The reservoir was once the Seletar River that drained into the Tebrau Strait. *Photo courtesy of Jefree bin Salim.*

(Below) Posing for the obligatory Merlion photo at the Merlion Park, 2019. Some of the Orang Seletar are wearing their *tajak* (headdress). *Photo courtesy of Jefree bin Salim.*

knew about the place came from stories related by her parents.

Living Histories

During their lifetime, the two siblings, Entel and Mina, have seen immense changes overtake their once-seafaring community. Their ancestors had the liberty of travelling freely along the Tebrau Strait, choosing where and when to row or dock their boats. Unfortunately, the Orang Seletar were eventually compelled to give up their nomadic lifestyle and move to settlements in Johor Bahru.

This turning point began in around 1948, during the Malayan Emergency, when the British government urged them to relocate to villages so as to control movement in the strait. According to anthropologist Clifford Sather, many families began spending their nights in

self-built wooden houses at Kuala Redan (an estuary in Johor), and returning to their *pau kajang* to fish in the daytime.[11] Another permanent settlement was established in Bakar Batu in the 1950s.

There were, however, families who chose not to settle on land but continued living in their boats. Anthropologist Mariam Ali writes that someone she spoke to mentioned the presence of many Orang Seletar on Seletar Island in around 1963 or 1965. Many moved out in around 1967 – after Singapore gained independence. Without any form of citizenship or identification cards, the Orang Seletar were afraid of being arrested by the police. Almost two decades later, in 1986, those still living in the Seletar area had to relocate due to further development projects.[12]

Up until 1987, the Orang Seletar who had taken up Malaysian citizenship were still granted unrestricted movement across the Tebrau Strait into Singapore territory, albeit unofficially. But following the arrest of an Orang Seletar who was exploited to smuggle illicit goods across the strait, Jefree said that they were no longer able to access Singapore waters. Although Jefree's mother dates this incident to the 1980s, he recalls tagging along on fishing trips to Lim Chu Kang and Woodlands as a young boy in the 1990s. Interestingly, a relative of Jefree's recently managed to fish at the Singapore side of the waters upon handing over his Malaysian identity card to the coastguards on duty. Once done, he retrieved his card from the guards before returning to his village in Johor.

Standing on the boardwalk at Lower Seletar Reservoir Park, it felt surreal to think that some of our guests and their ancestors had travelled here on their boats. This was back when the reservoir was a flowing river that drained into the Tebrau Strait. We walked to the end of the boardwalk to the large patio. Kah Mei and I helped our guests take a group shot – a rare modern-day photo of the Orang Seletar at what used to be the Seletar River. ♦

In 2018 and 2019, a project was set up to formally archive the voices of one of Singapore's indigenous groups – the Orang Seletar. Nine people from four Orang Seletar kampongs in Johor Bahru were interviewed. The project team aims to eventually deposit these interviews at the National Archives of Singapore.

The author is grateful that what had started out as an independent passion project turned into genuine, longstanding friendships. She would like to express her heartfelt thanks to her project teammates, Ruslina Affandi and Chan Kah Mei, as well as to the Orang Seletar who contributed to the project: Eddy bin Salim, Jefree bin Salim, Kelah bin Lah @ Kilo, Komeng, Letih, Lel bin Jantan, Tok Batin Entel, Tok Batin Salim bin Palun and Mina binte Buruk. Special thanks are also due to Jefree bin Salim for contributing photographs for this essay.

(Below) Kelah bin Lah @ Kilo (in white), Lel bin Jantan (in pink) and their family in Kampung Kuala Masai, Johor Bahru, 2018. *Photo by and courtesy of Ilya Katrinnada.*

(Bottom) Tok Batin Buruk's daughter Mina (seated) and her husband (in white shirt) with their children and grandchildren at Kampung Pasir Putih, Johor Bahru, 2018. *Photo by and courtesy of Ilya Katrinnada.*

NOTES

1 This name is a pseudonym.

2 The Tebrau Strait is perhaps more popularly known as the Johor Strait. In the Kon Seletar language, the term *tebrau* refers to a big fish.

3 The tour was part of a longer three-day visit, during which the Orang Seletar were invited to watch *Tanah · Air 水 · 土: A Play in Two Parts* by Drama Box. The play highlighted the displacement of the indigenous Malays and Orang Seletar of Singapore.

4 The Orang Seletar are one of the 18 Orang Asli (indigenous people) ethnic groups in Malaysia. They are also part of the Orang Laut (Sea People), an umbrella term for the various groups of sea nomads who occupied the waters surrounding the Melaka Strait. The Orang Seletar refer to themselves as Kon and speak their own language.

5 Amir Ahmad and Hamid Mohd Isa, "The Influence of Environmental Adaptation on Orang Seletar Cultures," 7th International Seminar on Ecology, Human Habitat and Environmental Change in the Malay World, 27 January 2015, Repository University of Riau, https://repository.unri.ac.id/xmlui/handle/123456789/6662.

6 Amir Ahmad and Hamid Mohd Isa, "The Influence of Environmental Adaptation on Orang Seletar Cultures."

7 Mariam Ali, "Singapore's Orang Seletar, Orang Kallang, and Orang Selat: The Last Settlements," in *Tribal Communities in the Malay World: Historical, Cultural, and Social Perspectives*, ed. Geoffrey Benjamin and Cynthia Chou (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2002), 273–92. (From National Library, Singapore, Call no. RSING 305.8959 TRI)

8 "1819 Singapore Treaty," in *Singapore Infopedia*. National Library Board Singapore. Article published 15 May 2014

9 Clifford Sather, *The Orang Laut* (n.p.: Academy of Social Sciences in cooperation with Universiti Sains Malaysia, Royal Netherlands Government, 1999), 12. (From National Library, Singapore, Call no. RSEA 306.08095951 SAT)

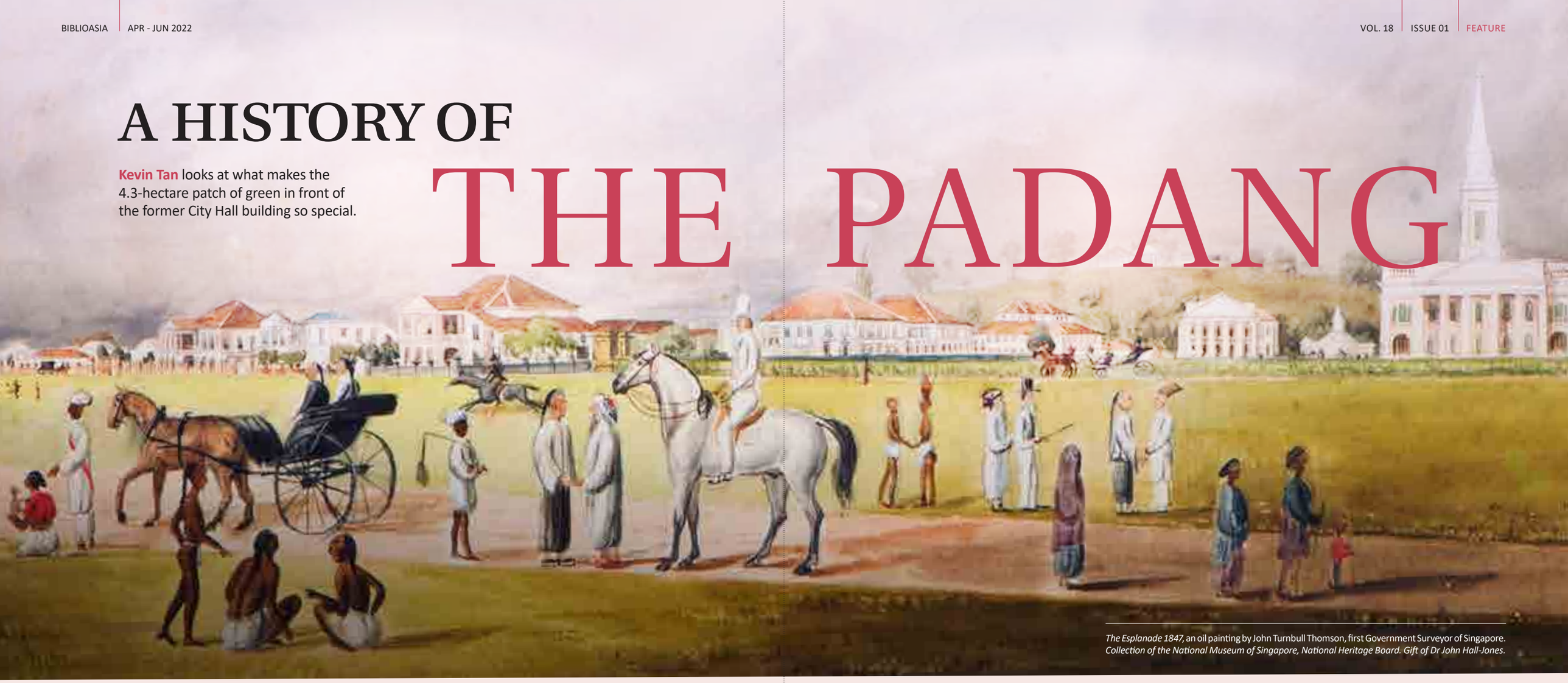
10 *Tok Batin* is a title used to refer to a village headman. This term was coined by the Malays, and is commonly used today. In the Orang Seletar language, the headman is called *Pak Ketuak*.

11 Sather, *The Orang Laut*, 8.

12 Mariam Ali, "Singapore's Orang Seletar, Orang Kallang, and Orang Selat: The Last Settlements," 273–92.

A HISTORY OF THE PADANG

Kevin Tan looks at what makes the 4.3-hectare patch of green in front of the former City Hall building so special.



The Esplanade 1847, an oil painting by John Turnbull Thomson, first Government Surveyor of Singapore. *Collection of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board. Gift of Dr John Hall-Jones.*

The Padang occupies a special place in Singapore's history. Younger Singaporeans know it as the traditional site for many National Day Parades while older Singaporeans will remember it as the venue for the installation of Yusof Ishak as Yang di-Pertuan Negara (Malay for "Head of State") in December 1959. Four years later, it was at the Padang that founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew announced Singapore's merger with Malaysia. A little further back, in September 1945, a victory parade was held at the Padang to commemorate Japan's formal surrender following the end of World War II.

Given the many historic events associated with the site, there is little doubt that the Padang deserves to join Singapore's list of national monuments. However, it was only after the Preservation of Monuments Act was amended in November 2021 to expand the definition of monument to include sites that the Padang could be designated as a national monument. The gazetting of the Padang as a national monument will safeguard the 4.3-hectare site for future generations of Singaporeans.

Early History

The earliest written reference to the Padang, which means "field" in Malay, is found in the 17th-century *Sulalat al-Salatin* (*Genealogy of Kings*),[1] better known as *Sejarah Melayu* or *Malay Annals*. The *Sejarah Melayu* refers to it as "the plain near the mouth of the river Tamasak [Temasek]".[2] Sang Nila Utama, a Srivijayan prince from Palembang, is said to have spotted the legendary *singa* (lion) on the Padang in the 13th century while on an expedition to Bentan (Bintan). Awed and inspired by what he saw, Sang Nila Utama decided to establish a kingdom on the island of Temasek in around 1299. He named it Singapura (Sanskrit for "Lion City").

Five hundred years later, on the afternoon of 28 January 1819, Stamford Raffles and William Farquhar of the British East India Company landed at the mouth of the Singapore River, went ashore and met Temenggong Abdul Rahman, the local chief of Singapore. The temenggong gave Farquhar a free hand as to where to pitch his tents and Farquhar picked the plain, saying: "I think the best place is here on this open space." Farquhar's men then offloaded their tents and provisions, cleared the plain of scrub and bushes and set up camp. The next morning, they erected a 30-foot flagpole and hoisted the Union Jack. The writer Munshi Abdullah noted that at the time, most of the island was covered in thick jungle, save for the middle of the open space which "only had myrtle, rhododendron and eugenia trees".[3]

On 6 February 1819, in the presence of Farquhar, the temenggong and a company of sepoys, Raffles signed a treaty with the newly installed Sultan Husain Mohamed Shah of Singapore that allowed the British to establish a trading post on the island.[4] At the time, the southeastern edge of The Plain – as the Padang was then known – formed part of Singapore's original shoreline. It was only after land was reclaimed from the sea along this shoreline in 1889 that The Plain achieved its current width.

For the first few years, this open ground, which was initially used as the Sepoy Lines to house troops, was known as The Cantonment. Later, it was simply referred to as The Plain.[5] In 1831, it became known as the Esplanade until the turn of the 20th century when the field was commonly referred to as The Padang.[6] William Daniell's 1830 aquatint

Dr Kevin Y.L. Tan is Adjunct Professor at the Faculty of Law, National University of Singapore, and Visiting Professor at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University. He specialises in constitutional and administrative law, Singapore legal history and international human rights. He has written and edited over 50 books on the law, history and politics of Singapore.

etching, *View of Singapore Town and Harbour from Government Hill*, gives us an idea of what the Padang would have looked like at the time.[7]

A Colonial Playground

For the first 10 years after Raffles' arrival, the Plain was simply a swathe of green abutting the beach.[8] The public would flock to the Plain for casual recreation, especially in the evenings. Games, horse races and band performances were held for the public's enjoyment. One of the earliest ceremonies to take place there was the firing of the salute by the artillery on 23 April 1824 to commemorate the king's birthday, while the earliest recorded band performance was in June 1831 when the band of the Madras Native Infantry visited Singapore.[9]

From January 1841, the Esplanade, the name it was then known by, became the regular venue for New Year's Day celebrations. Off the coast, a regatta was staged, and on land, a variety of events were held. These included grease-pole climbing competitions, pony races, foot races, soccer matches and dance performances.

In his famous oil painting, *The Esplanade from Scandal Point*, John Turnbull Thomson – Singapore's first Government Surveyor – recorded an evocative scene of how it would have looked like around 1851. (Thomson had, in fact, depicted a similar scene in his earlier painting simply titled *The Esplanade 1847*.)

By the late 1840s, the Esplanade was a busy place. Indeed, it grew so crowded that in 1845, the Municipal Committee, fearing for the safety of users, especially young children, decided to enclose it with bollards and chains to protect the "green sward" from "the incursions of pony-racing drunken sailors".[10]

The Esplanade's open, green space lent itself naturally to cricket matches. In 1837, there was a report of objections to some Europeans playing the sport at the Esplanade on Sundays.[11] In 1852, a meeting was held to establish the Singapore Cricket Club and a small pavilion was erected at the western end of the Esplanade as a clubhouse for the new club.[12] This pavilion was later rebuilt in the 1870s and then again in 1901, after which the building acquired much of its current form.

The Singapore Recreation Club, which occupies the eastern end of the Esplanade, had its new clubhouse declared open by then Governor of the Straits Settlements John Anderson and his daughter on 2 September 1905.[13] The club building, albeit renovated many times over the decades, is still located there today.

Centre of Imperial Power

The Padang's emergence as Singapore's most important colonial civic space was organic, rather than by design. If it was intended as a *maidan* – the Persian term for a planned urban field around which major official buildings were built, as can be found in India and Penang – as architectural historian Lai Chee Kien argues,[14] then that planning came very late in Britain's colonisation of Singapore, almost 100 years after Raffles first set foot on the island.

Raffles had instructed that the north bank of the Singapore River be reserved for civic and public purposes, but his plan was thwarted when Farquhar allowed Europeans to build their private residences on the fringe of the Padang. One of these houses was later converted into the London Hotel, and subsequently renamed Hotel de l'Esperance and thereafter as Hotel de l'Europe.[15]

The first move in transforming the Padang into a centrepiece of British power was the Municipal Commission's (formerly the Municipal Committee) acquisition of part of the Hotel de l'Europe site nearer the junction of Coleman Street in 1899 for its new Municipal Building.[16] Due to World War I and other delays, the new Municipal Building (renamed City Hall in 1951) was completed only in 1929.

Hotel de l'Europe was demolished in 1900 and rebuilt as Grand Hotel de l'Europe, which was completed in 1905. In 1932, the once-great hotel went bankrupt and the government acquired the site two years later to construct the Supreme Court to replace the old Court House (The Arts House today), which had been built in 1827 as a residence for Scottish merchant John Argyle Maxwell and renovated many times over.[17]

The Padang's formal appearance was aided by its enlargement in 1859, its encirclement by Connaught Drive and St Andrew's Road, and its framing by the Singapore Cricket Club on one end and the Singapore Recreation Club on the other. However, it was not until the late 1930s – with the completion of the Municipal Building in 1929 and the Supreme Court in 1939 – that the Padang and its surrounds became a symbol of British colonial power. This transformation took half a century.

In the years leading up 1939, the Padang bore witness to many events and installations that reinforced its significance as a civic centre and symbol of colonial authority. Probably the most significant

View of the Padang, 1911. In the background from left: clock tower of Victoria Memorial Hall, Singapore Cricket Club, Old Court House and Grand Hotel de l'Europe. The statue of Stamford Raffles can be seen on the right. *Arshak C. Galstaun Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

(Above) Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten, Supreme Allied Commander Southeast Asia, addressing the crowd on the steps of the Municipal Building ahead of the Japanese Surrender Ceremony on 12 September 1945. *Kenneth Chia Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

(Right) Crowds at the Padang, outside the Supreme Court, awaiting anxiously for the decision in the custody battle for Maria Hertogh, 1950. *Dr Khoo Boo Chai Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

was the celebration of the Golden Jubilee of Queen Victoria's reign on 27 and 28 June 1887, which included a carefully planned and precisely executed military pageantry followed by sporting events, religious services, processions, and culminating in a grand ball at Government House (now Istana) on 28 June.[18]

The highlight of the day's events on 27 June was the unveiling of Raffles' statue by then Governor of the Straits Settlements Frederick Weld to serve as "a permanent memorial of the Jubilee". Located at the "centre of the sea side" of the Esplanade,[19] the eight-foot-tall (2.4 m) bronze statue was cast by famed British sculptor-cum-poet Thomas Woolner who had "carte blanche" for its construction. (Frequently, and somewhat ingloriously, hit by stray footballs during matches, the statue was eventually moved from the Esplanade to Empress Place on 6 February 1919 as part of Singapore's centenary celebrations.[20])

After the British surrendered to the Japanese on 15 February 1942, the Padang became the site for the display of Japanese imperial power.[21] The Municipal Building was commandeered by the Syonan Tokubetsu-si (Municipal Administration)

(Above) A massive crowd of 120,000 at a rally organised by the Chinese Chamber of Commerce on 25 August 1963 to demand reparations from Japan for wartime atrocities. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

(Facing page) Yang di-Pertuan Negara Yusof Ishak taking the salute during the march-past at the National Loyalty Week parade on 3 December 1959. He had just been sworn in as the first Malayan-born head of state. The state flag was used officially for the first time. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

as the headquarters of the civil administration. During the Japanese Occupation, the Padang continued to serve as a parade and ceremonial ground.

The official programme for the Tentyo-Setu (Emperor's birthday) published on 28 April 1942 reported that "schoolboys will march to the Municipal Building; and that at 11 am, Mayor Shigeo Odate will appear on the balcony of the building to shout three 'Banzais' and make a speech".[22] In a public display of comity with Indian nationalism, Japanese Prime Minister Tojo Hideki and Indian National Army (INA) leader Subhas Chandra Bose reviewed a parade mounted by INA troops on 6 July 1943 in front of 25,000 spectators.[23]

Beyond ceremonial events, the Japanese took a practical attitude towards the Padang. On 17 February 1942, shortly after the fall of Singapore, they used it as an assembly ground to hold and interrogate the European population – civilians and prisoners-of-war – before marching them off to internment camps in Changi and Katong.[24] In 1944, the Padang was turned into a plot for planting tapioca as part of the Grow More Food Campaign which proved ultimately futile.[25]

After the British reimposed its authority on Singapore, it celebrated the end of the war with a grand surrender ceremony at the Municipal Building and a military parade at the Padang in September 1945. On 12 September 1945, before the surrender ceremony, Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten, Supreme Allied Commander Southeast Asia, inspected the parade, "stopping here and there to talk to a British marine, a Dogra, a Punjabi, a British soldier and a French soldier".[26]

Of Contestation and Confrontation

Given the Padang's role at the heart of British colonial power, it comes as no surprise that it was also the site of confrontation, rallies, protests and demonstrations. The first confrontation was silent but deeply symbolic. On 6 January 1946, a contingent of 16 guerrilla leaders of the Malayan Resistance Movement, led by Chin Peng, received the Burma Star and the 1939–45 War Medal from Mountbatten at an award ceremony. As they did so, 11 of them gave silent clenched-fist salutes. Two years later, the Malayan Communist Party, led by Chin Peng, launched its anti-colonial armed struggle from the Malayan jungle.[27]

The Padang was also where the Maria Hertogh riots first erupted. On 11 December 1950, "mob violence broke out… in front of the Supreme Court" at around 1 pm over an appeal related to the custody lawsuit of Maria Hertogh. "Two Malays were shot, and several other Malays and Muslims were injured."[28] Riots broke out throughout the city and when law and order was finally restored on 13 December, 18 people had died and 173 injured.[29]

Because it was so easy to stage large rallies and gatherings at the Padang, it was just as easy to capitalise on these huge crowds to foment trouble. Take the 1963 protest rally organised by the Chinese Chamber of Commerce, for example. Held on 25 August, the rally was organised to demand reparations from Japan for its wartime atrocities. A massive crowd of some 120,000 people – reportedly one of the largest in Singapore's history – gathered at the Padang.[30] In the run-up to this rally, the Special Branch and the Criminal Investigations Department discovered that pro-communist elements planned to exploit the meeting to stage an anti-Malaysia campaign. The entire police force – 5,000 men and troops – was placed on emergency alert.[31]

As then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew started speaking, the agitators began their organised booing. Lee challenged them to "come up to the City Hall and present their case" and then ordered floodlights to be turned on the several thousand pro-communist elements who had "formed a belt from one end of the Padang to the other".[32] The booing died down and the agitators faded into the crowd. A potential public order disruption had been averted.

The People's Padang

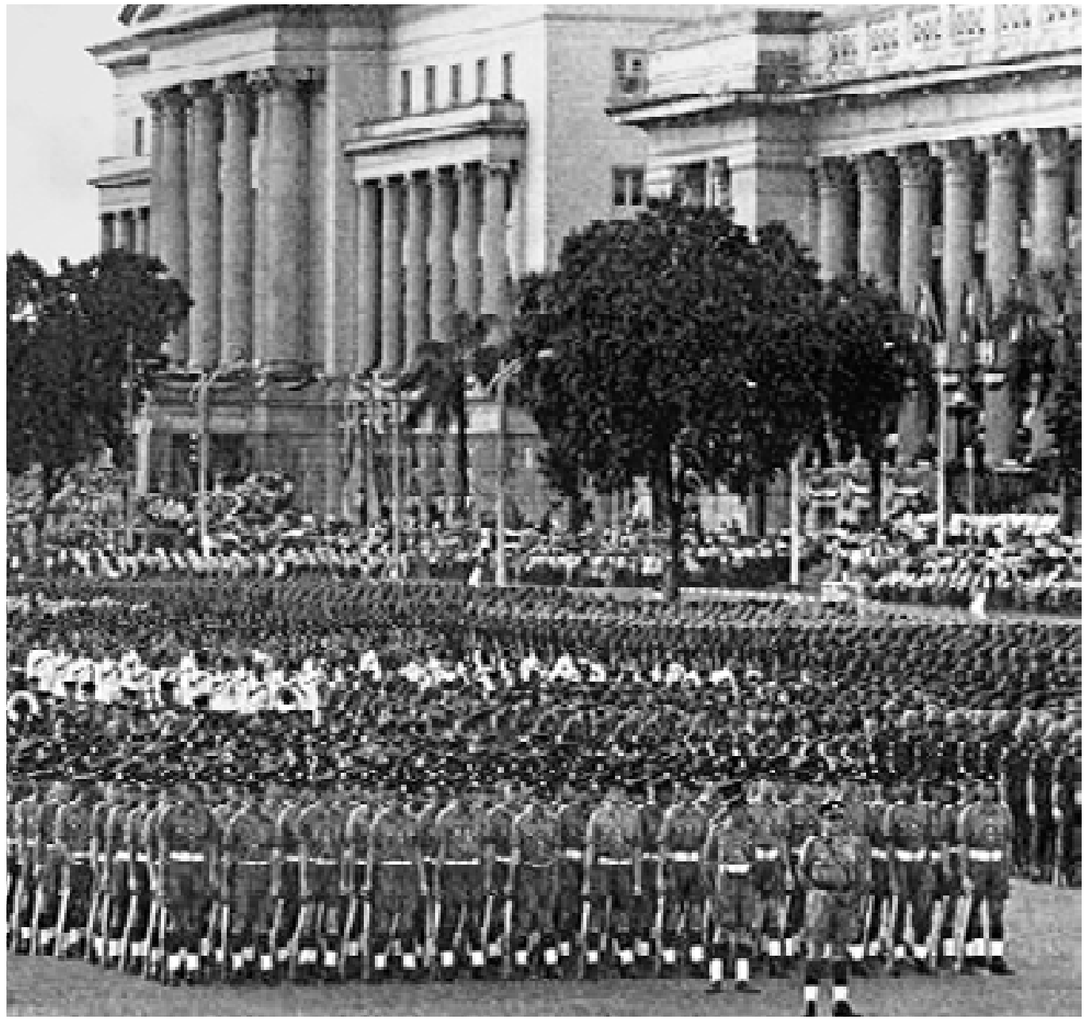
In 1959, Singapore became a self-governing state after the People's Action Party won the much-anticipated and fiercely contested general election on 30 May 1959 by a huge margin. Speaking at a victory rally on the steps of City Hall on 3 June, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew told the crowd that his party had planned election rallies at the Padang at night but could not have them because "a small group of Europeans who were given this field by the former Colonial Government, refused it, although they only use it in the day time for a few people to play games". "Well," he noted, "times have changed, and will stay changed."[33]

From 3 to 10 December 1959, this zeitgeist was translated into National Loyalty Week, a campaign to evoke a sense of loyalty and patriotism in the citizens of the newly self-governing state. By 8 am on 3 December, a crowd of 10,000 had gathered at the Padang. Inside City Hall, Yusof Ishak was sworn in as Singapore's first Malayan-born Yang di-Pertuan Negara in a historic nine-minute ceremony. Following a 17-gun salute, the state flag was unfurled for the first time and the "huge crowd which jammed the Padang and its approaches... down Nicoll Highway, stood and joined in the singing of the new national anthem", *Majulah Singapura*, composed by Zubir Said. A big march-past lasting over an hour followed.[34]

At the conclusion of National Loyalty Week on 10 December, a star-studded Aneka Ragam Ra'ayat (People's Cultural Concerts) was held on the steps of City Hall. These shows featured a multiracial and multicultural programme with the hope that a new Malayan culture would emerge through "the interaction of our rich and varied cultures".[35]

The Padang was also witness to a pivotal moment in Singapore's history:

National Day Parade, 1968. No one flinched in a spontaneous display of grit and resilience in the midst of a raging thunderstorm. *Yusof Ishak Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*



merger with Malaysia. After many rounds of fraught and complex negotiations over the terms of the merger, an agreement was finally signed on 9 July 1963. On 31 August 1963, Prime Minister Lee unilaterally declared Singapore's *de facto* independence at the Padang as "trustees for the Federal Government (in) these 15 days".[36]

Two weeks later, on Malaysia Day, Prime Minister Lee spoke at the Padang again in front of thousands of people. His voice shaking with emotion and with tears welling up in his eyes, he declared his hope, in a 275-word proclamation, that the merger would be "a relationship between brothers, not a relationship between master and servant".[37] However, the relationship was not a happy one, and on 9 August 1965, Singapore separated from Malaysia and became an independent and sovereign nation.

A Place for the Nation

When Singapore celebrated its first anniversary as an independent state with a parade on 9 August 1966, it was only natural that it be held at the Padang. Over 23,000 Singaporeans took part in the parade which began at 9 am (parades were held in the evening from 1973 onwards). Six contingents of the People's Defence Force were on parade, and four government ministers marched as officer cadets in that contingent.[38] It was a simple but momentous parade that instilled great pride in the new nation. Two years later, in 1968, it became "a gigantic display of the rugged society" as an hour-long downpour pelted the parade formations and spectators relentlessly.[39]

As an independent state, Singapore continued to use the Padang as a major parade ground and gathering space to galvanise the people, instil pride in them and rally them to a cause. It comes as no surprise that it was the sole site for the annual National Day Parade (NDP) for the next 10 years. It was only in 1975 that decentralised parades were held, but the main parade returned to the Padang every few years.

Other than the NDP, the Padang continues to be the venue for sporting events at local, regional and international levels. For many years, the finals of the inter-school rugby competition were held at the Padang, which is also home to the Singapore Cricket Club International Rugby 7s.[40]

The Padang was also the backdrop to the world's first-ever night-time Formula 1 Grand Prix. During the inaugural race on 14 September 2008 – as Fernando Alonso raced around the 5.06-kilometre Marina Bay Circuit to clinch first place – images of the Padang were beamed live into living rooms across the world.[41] Singapore had truly come of age as a global city and destination.

Given its age, historical significance and global prominence, it is timely that the legislation has been amended to allow the Padang to take its place on the list of Singapore's national monuments. ♦

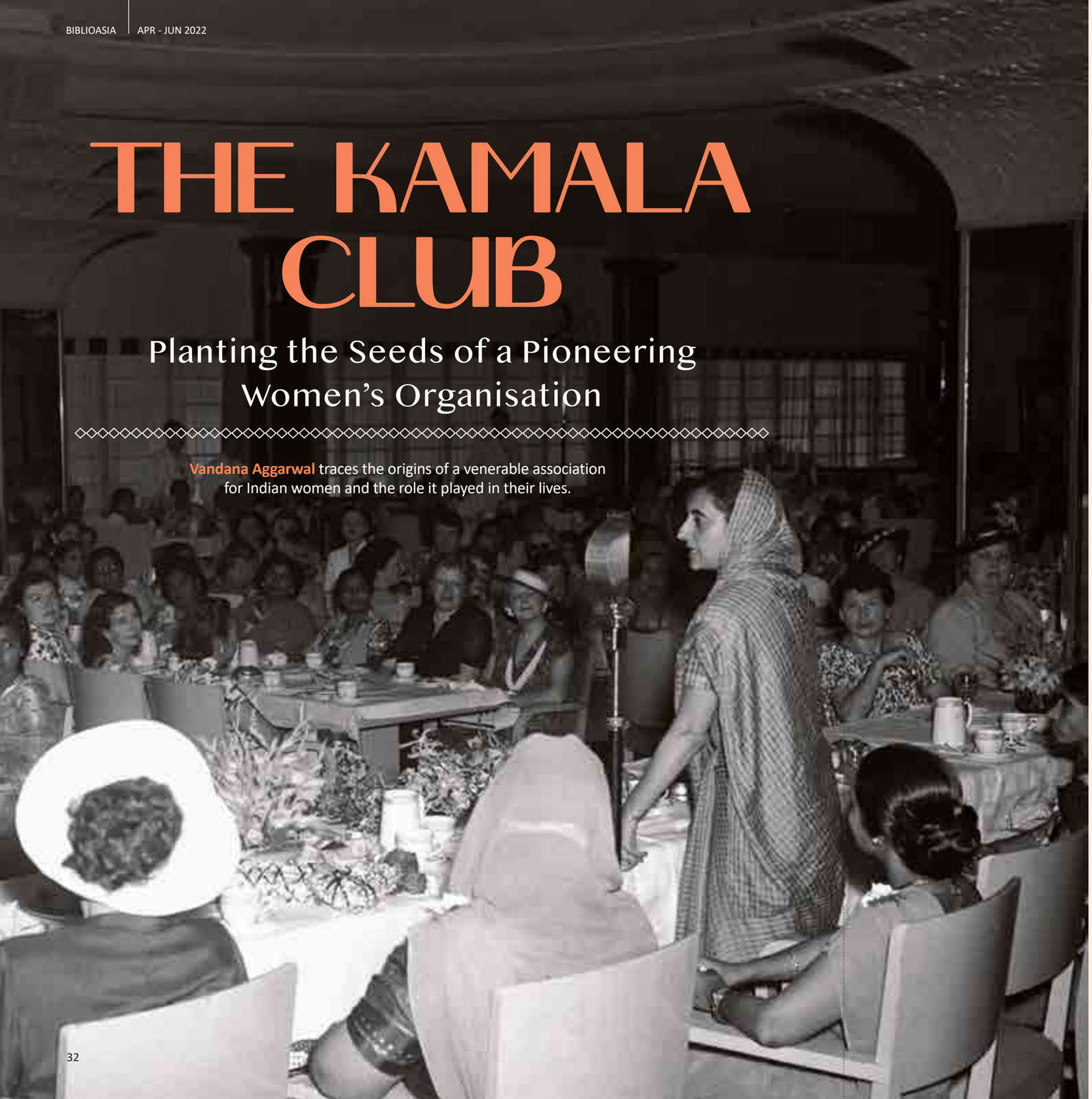
NOTES

1 *Sulalat al-Salatin* (*Genealogy of Kings*) is one of the most important works in Malay literature. It was likely composed in the 17th century by Bendahara Tun Seri Lanang, Prime Minister of the Johor Sultanate.
2 John Leyden, *John Leyden's Malay Annals* (Malaysia: MBRAS, 2001), 43. (From National Library, Singapore, Call no. RSING 959.51 JOH)
3 Munshi Abdullah, "The Hikayat Abdullah," trans. A.H. Hill, *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 38, no. 3 (June 1955): 128, 130. (From JSTOR via NLB's eResources website)
4 Munshi Abdullah, "The Hikayat Abdullah," 137–141.
5 Charles Burton Buckley, *An Anecdotal History of Old Times in Singapore* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1984), 286. (From National Library, Singapore, Call no. RSING 959.57 BUC)
6 "Our Esplanade," *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 23 August 1900, 3; "Editorial," *Straits Times*, 12 August 1903, 4. (From NewspaperSG)
7 This famous etching was published in Sophia Raffles, *Memoir of the Life and Public Services of Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles, F.R.S. &c. Particularly in the Government of Java, 1811–1816, and of Bencoolen and Its Dependencies 1817–1824; with Details of the Commerce and Resources of the Eastern Archipelago, and Selections from His Correspondence* (London: John Murray, 1830), 525. (From BookSG)
8 For a depiction from the shoreline, see the painting titled *Singapore, From the Esplanade* by Captain Charles Ramsay Drinkwater Bethune published in James Augustus St John, *Views in the Eastern Archipelago: Borneo, Sarawak, Labuan, &c. &c. &c.* (London: McLean, 1847), 65. (Not available in NLB holdings)
9 Buckley, *Anecdotal History of Old Times in Singapore*, 30.
10 "Untitled," *Straits Times*, 20 December 1848, 2. (From NewspaperSG)
11 Roland St John Braddell, "The Good Old Days" in Walter Makepeace, Gilbert E. Brooke & Roland St John Braddell, eds., *One Hundred Years of Singapore*, vol. 2 (London: John Murray, 1921), 317. (From National Library, Singapore, Call no. RCLOS 959.51 ONE)
12 Braddell, "Good Old Days," 321.
13 "Recreation Club," *Eastern Daily Mail and Straits Morning Advertiser*, 4 September 1905, 3; "Singapore Recreation Club: New Pavilion Opened," *Straits Times*, 4 September 1905, 5. (From NewspaperSG)
14 Lai Chee Kien, "The Padang: Centrepiece of Colonial Design," *BiblioAsia* 12, no. 3 (Oct–Dec 2016): 40–4.
15 Vernon Cornelius and Joanna H.S. Tan, "Former Supreme Court Building," in *Singapore Infopedia*. National Library Board Singapore. Article published 2011.
16 "Municipal Commission," *Singapore Free Press*, 17 May 1900, 10; "A Desirable Acquisition," *Singapore Free Press*, 25 May 1900, 317. (From NewspaperSG)
17 "Europe Hotel's Future," *Singapore Free Press*, 21 July 1932, 8; "Facilitation of Justice," *Morning Tribune*, 2 April 1937, 24. (From NewspaperSG)
18 "Jubilee Celebration, Singapore," *Straits Times Weekly*, 29 June 1887, 7; "The Jubilee," *Straits Times Weekly*, 6 July 1887, 7. (From NewspaperSG)
19 "The Jubilee."
20 "Centenary of Singapore," *Straits Times*, 7 February 1919, 27. (From NewspaperSG)
21 Constance Mary Turnbull, *A History of Singapore, 1819–2005* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2009), 199. (From National Library, Singapore, Call no. RSING 959.57 TUR)
22 Turnbull, *History of Singapore, 1819–2005*, 205; "Tentyo-Setu Celebrations," *Syonan Shimbun*, 30 April 1942, 5. (From NewspaperSG). [Note: Odate Shigeo was Mayor from March 1942 to July 1943. He was replaced by Naito Kanichi who held the office until the end of the Japanese Occupation.]
23 Turnbull, *History of Singapore, 1819–2005*, 217–18; "With 'Freedom or Death' for Motto, Men Ready to Die for Indian Independence," *Syonan Shimbun*, 9 July 1943, 1. (From NewspaperSG)
24 Turnbull, *History of Singapore, 1819–2005*, 196–97.
25 Lee Geok Boi, *The Syonan Years: Singapore Under Japanese Rule 1942–1945* (Singapore: National Archives of Singapore and Epigram, 2005), 163 (From National Library, Singapore, Call no. RSING q940.535957 LEE-[WAR]); Joshua Chia Yeong Jia, "Grow More Food Campaign," in *Singapore Infopedia*. National Library Board Singapore. Article published 2016.
26 Turnbull, *History of Singapore, 1819–2005*, 221; "Japanese in Malaysia Surrender at Singapore," *Straits Times*, 13 September 1945, 1. (From NewspaperSG)
27 "Guerrilla Leaders Decorated by Supremo," *Straits Times*, 7 January 1946, 3. (From NewspaperSG); Shereen Tay, "Communist Party of Malaya," in *Singapore Infopedia*. National Library Board Singapore. Article published 30 March 2018.
28 "2 Malays Shot: Cars Burnt," *Singapore Standard*, 11 December 1950, 9; "Police Open Fire on Rioting Mob," *Malayan Tribune*, 11 December 1950, 1. (From NewspaperSG)
29 "Maria Hertogh Riots," in *Singapore Infopedia*. National Library Board Singapore. Article published 28 September 2014.
30 "Padang Rally: Big Security Alert," *Straits Times*, 25 August 1963, 3. (From NewspaperSG)
31 "Padang Rally."
32 R. Chandran, F. Rozario, R. Pestana and Lim Beng Tee, "Lee Foils Bid to Spark Off Trouble at Rally," *Straits Times*, 26 August 1963, 3. (From NewspaperSG)
33 Lee Kuan Yew, "Victory Rally at the Padang," speech, 3 June 1959, transcript. (From National Archives of Singapore, Document no. lky19590603)
34 "Singapore Rejoices," *Straits Times*, 4 December 1959, 1. (From NewspaperSG)
35 "A Memorable Week Ends," *Straits Times*, 10 December 1959, 1; "Lee: We'll Breed New Strain of Culture," *Straits Times*, 3 August 1959, 4. (From NewspaperSG)
36 "Lee: We Are Freel," *Straits Times*, 1 September 1963, 1. (From NewspaperSG)
37 "Lee's Proud Moment," *Straits Times*, 17 September 1963, 4; "Singapore Celebrates its Proudest Moment," *Straits Times*, 17 September 1963, 15. (From NewspaperSG)
38 Chew Hui Min, "National Day Parade 1966: 10 Things About the Inaugural Parade," *Straits Times*, 5 March 2015, https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/national-day-parade-1966-10-things-about-the-inaugural-parade; "Day and Night of Joy and Fun in Singapore," *Straits Times*, 10 August 1966, 1; "Ministers and MPs Seen in Uniform by Public for the First Time," *Straits Times*, 10 August 1966, 6. (From NewspaperSG)
39 Jackie Sam and Judith Yong, "The Rugged Society's Day...," *Straits Times*, 10 August 1968, 1. (From NewspaperSG)
40 "About Us," Singapore Cricket Club, accessed 15 February 2022, https://www.sccrugbysevens.com/.
41 "Singapore – Marina Bay," Formula One World Championship Limited, accessed 15 February 2022, https://www.formula1.com/en/information.singapore-marina-bay-streetcircuit.7LXNQUCHTyR5yMQPlik7Lv.html; "Do You Remember... F1's First Ever Night Race," Formula One World Championship Limited, 14 September 2015, https://www.formula1.com/en/latest/features/2015/9/do-you-remember----f1s-first-ever-night-race.html.

THE KAMALA CLUB

Planting the Seeds of a Pioneering Women's Organisation

Vandana Aggarwal traces the origins of a venerable association for Indian women and the role it played in their lives.



Vandana Aggarwal is a teacher and a freelance journalist. An active citizen archivist for the National Archives of Singapore, she is the author of *Voice of Indian Women: The Kamala Club Singapore* (2018). She enjoys reading and researching about history.

For over six decades, one organisation has been playing an important role in bringing women from the Indian subcontinent together in Singapore: the pioneering Kamala Club. Through social gatherings, festive celebrations and enrichment classes, this club gave South Asian women the chance to meet, socialise and learn in a secular setting. While festive events and enrichment classes have slowed down because of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Kamala Club (*kamala* means "lotus" in Hindi) continues to serve its members through an online community with over 1,200 followers, highlighting cultural events, organising guided tours to places like the Indian Heritage Centre and even online yoga sessions for women.

Clubs for Women

While the Kamala Club was established in the 1950s, its roots actually go further back – to two women's organisations that sprang up in the early 1930s: the Lotus Club and the Ladies' Union. In 1930, the Indian and Ceylonese Ladies' Club was launched under the auspices of the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) and was renamed the Lotus Club the following year. A second association, the Ladies' Union, was set up in 1931.

These clubs, which began as social clubs, were important vehicles for the advancement of Indian women in Singapore. At the time, the traditional Indian woman's role was home-bound, and some women were even customarily shielded from the gaze of men whom they were not related to. The clubs also gave women who came from different parts of the Indian subcontinent a chance to connect with other women of their community. At the same time, it allowed these women to meet with women of different backgrounds, castes and creeds. From educating women on childcare, health and hygiene, and providing a venue for relaxation, these clubs also carried out fundraising for charitable causes, organised educational talks and provided a platform for women to hone their leadership skills.

The idea for an organisation for Indian women to meet regularly had been mooted by the famous Indian poet, philosopher and writer Rabindranath Tagore during a visit to Singapore in 1927.[1] (While an Indian Association existed at the time, it mainly catered to men.)

In November 1930, Mrs Edward Vethanayagam Davies (also known as Checha Davies)[2] and Mrs John Truman Navaratnam Handy[3] invited women from various Indian and Ceylonese groups in the community to a reception at the YWCA and explained to them the rationale behind setting up an association just for them.[4]

As there was enough interest, the Indian and Ceylonese Ladies' Club was launched in December 1930 under the auspices of the YWCA. The club's objective was to "bring together the women of these communities in some creative activities, in recreation and in friendliness, at the same time developing the qualities of leadership lying dormant in so many women".[5] As women from the Persian, Arab and Malay communities began joining, the association was renamed Lotus Club in 1931 to better reflect the diversity of its members.[6]

Membership increased and included prominent members of Singapore society such as Mrs Mirza Mohammed Ali Namazie and Mrs Rajabali Jumabhoy.[7] By 1932, the Lotus Club had 100 members speaking about 15 different languages and representing the major religions of India and Malaya.[8] At gatherings and events, "it was sometimes necessary to address the members in no fewer than seven languages".[9]

Mrs Kizhakke Mukkapuzha Raman Menon (also known as Amala Menon),[10] honorary secretary of the Lotus Club, attributed the club's popularity to the

(Facing page) Indira Gandhi, daughter of then Prime Minister of India Jawaharlal Nehru, addressing members of the Lotus Club and the Ladies' Union in June 1950. *Source: The Straits Times © SPH Media Limited. Reprinted with permission.*

fact that it met the social needs of its members. She said: "The popularity of the club is demonstrated by the way the educated and well-to-do ladies patronise it. The club has been the means of bringing together many ladies who would never have met each other otherwise and possibly never have enjoyed the pleasures of social life."[11]

Although the Lotus Club appeared to be a success, a rival organisation – the Ladies' Union – helmed by Mrs Bridget Catherine Beatrice Chelvanathan Handy[12] was launched in 1931. In a pointed reference to the affiliation of its rival club to the YWCA, Mrs Handy said: "[T]he Ladies' Union is the first independent organisation in Malaya started and run entirely by Indian and Ceylonese ladies. The Union is in no way connected with any other association, religious or otherwise, and tolerance and mutual help are its watchwords." The club proudly declared that it would be run on "independent and pucca Indian lines" (*pucca* means "staunch" in Hindi).[13] To attract women from all walks of life, membership was kept affordable at 25 cents per month or $3 for an annual subscription.[14]

At the time, the Lotus Club, which comprised women from more affluent families, was looked upon as a club for the elite while the Ladies' Union was considered its poorer cousin.

Naturally, the setting up of two similar clubs raised some eyebrows. In a letter published in the *Malaya Tribune*, a reader wrote: "As an Indian earnestly interested in the welfare and advancement of the ladies of my community, I would request the members of both organisations not to introduce the competitive spirit, but to work together in a spirit of co-operation and sisterliness… if there is lack of understanding and intolerance on their part, both will disrupt the life of the community and prove a curse instead of a blessing."[15]

In the early years, the rivalry between the two clubs was keen. The Lotus Club celebrated its first anniversary in February 1932 by inviting Lady Clementi, wife of then Governor and Commander in Chief of the Straits Settlements Cecil Clementi to a reception and designated her "godmother" of the club.[16] Not to be outdone, the Ladies' Union also invited Lady Clementi to its first anniversary garden party in 1932. She was subsequently made the club's patroness.[17]

In a bid to play peacemaker, Lady Clementi proposed at the end of 1933 that the "Lotus Club and the Ladies' Union be amalgamated, but at the meeting between the presidents and secretaries of the two institutions, the representatives of the Lotus Club said the proposal would not be approved by their club".[18]

The two clubs continued to consolidate their respective positions in society. While the Lotus Club used the facilities at the YWCA for its activities, the Ladies' Union managed to secure "a piece of land on the Balestier plain, which ha[d] been levelled and enclosed by zinc sheets" in 1932. As the land was big enough to construct a clubhouse with tennis and badminton courts, the Ladies' Union initiated a building fund for a new clubhouse.[19] So as not to lose out, the Lotus Club also hoped to have "its own home" and started a building fund in 1934.[20]

Members of the Kamala Club at the old clubhouse in Balestier, 1950s. *Image reproduced from Vandana Aggarwal, Voice of Indian Women: The Kamala Club Singapore (Singapore: The Kamala Club, 2018), 53. (Available via PublicationSG).*

Bringing Women Together

Rivalry notwithstanding, the Lotus Club and the Ladies' Union played an important role in the lives of Indian women in Singapore at the time. Mrs Lakshmi Naidu, a founding member of the Ladies' Union, recalled in a 1982 oral history interview: "Those days, our Indian ladies, they don't go anywhere, they don't mix with people, they always stay at home. That's why we brought [them] outside and [taught] them sewing, making paper flower, then once in a [while] we [get] doctors or somebody to lecture them."[21]

Events organised by these two clubs also created opportunities for women who practised *purdah* to take tentative steps outside the home. *Purdah* is a religious and social practice of female seclusion. Among other things, it involves physical segregation from men unrelated to them through the use of walls, screens and curtains. In May 1935, to celebrate the Silver Jubilee of King George V's accession to the throne, the Lotus Club organised a dinner where male guests were invited for the first time to the club's event. Because several women still practised *purdah*, special planning was required.[22] The dinner was hailed as an attack on "the citadel of orthodoxy and social customs which impose isolation on Asiatic ladies".[23]

Beyond social events like dinners and outings, the women became involved in charity work, and organised bazaars and funfairs to raise funds. In September 1933, proceeds from a charity sale held by the Ladies' Union went to the Child Welfare Society and Leper Asylum.[24] Similarly, the Lotus Club organised a fete in October that year that managed to raise $800. Half was put aside for the building fund and the other half used to help unemployed Indians in the community.[25] In June 1935, the Lotus Club, together with the Indian Association, organised a charity concert at the Victoria Theatre in aid of the Quetta Relief Fund for an earthquake that devastated Quetta, in today's Pakistan, in May of that year.[26]

These women's organisations also provided opportunities for cultural

(Top) Committee members of the Lotus Club discussing a fundraising gala for the University of Malaya Fund, 1949. *Image reproduced from the Straits Times, 27 July 1949, 7. (From NewspaperSG).*

(Above) Members of the Ladies' Union on the stage of Victoria Theatre after their variety performance in aid of the Jubilee Fund, 1935. This would have been unheard of 50 years ago as many women would still be practising purdah, the custom of female seclusion. *Image reproduced from the Straits Times, 10 November 1935, 4. (From NewspaperSG).*

activities. In 1932, members of the Lotus Club came together to form an orchestra. The orchestra performed at the charity concert presented by the Lotus Club in aid of the Jubilee Fund in October 1935. The concert also included plays and dance performances by other club members.[27] The Ladies' Union organised its own variety show for the Jubilee Fund. Members performed songs in Telegu, Hindustani, Tamil and Hindi; presented dances; and put up sketches and plays. The women even took on the male roles in the plays.[28]

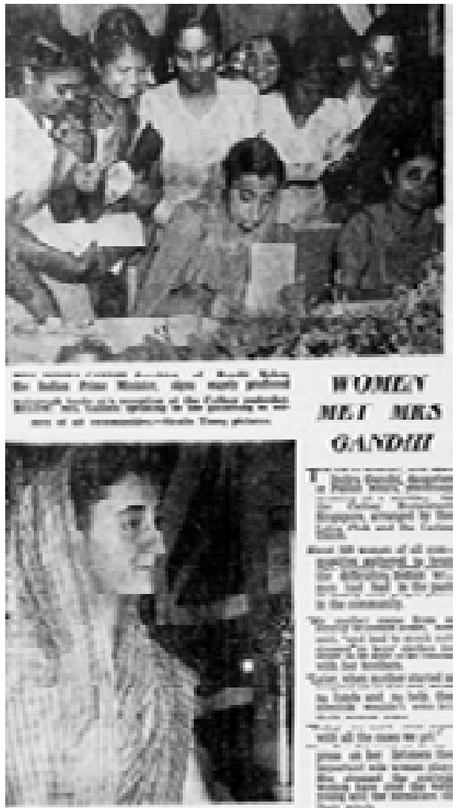
The clubs also organised educational talks that ran the gamut of subjects from childcare to the role of women at home and in society. Among the speakers was freedom fighter and future Prime Minister of India Jawaharlal Nehru, who visited Singapore in 1937. In his talk, he urged the members of the Ladies' Union to be independent. "We want women with self-reliance, character and beauty, but we do not want dolls to play with," he said. "A country is judged by the standard of its womenfolk. If they are backward and

illiterate then their country is no good, no matter what their menfolk may be."[29]

Some women took Nehru's advice to heart, especially in the post-war years. In 1948, Mrs Malathi Pillai of the Ladies' Union and secretary of the Singapore Regional Indian Congress became the first woman to contest the Singapore Legislative Council election.[30] Two years later, Mrs Mary Lobo of the Lotus Club was appointed a Justice of the Peace.[31] In 1954, Mrs Lakshmi Naidu was awarded the Singapore Certificate of Honour for her voluntary work during and after the Japanese occupation.[32] These Indian women, unlike their predecessors who led cloistered lives, were defining a new public role for themselves, and it is likely that their activities in the Ladies' Union and the Lotus Club helped them prepare for a larger stage.

(Below) When then Prime Minister of India Jawaharlal Nehru visited Singapore in June 1950, his daughter Indira Gandhi addressed a joint meeting of the Lotus Club and the Ladies' Union, and spoke about the important role of women in society. *Image reproduced from "Women Met Mrs Gandhi," Straits Times, 19 June 1950, 5. (From NewspaperSG).*

(Below right) The Lotus Club and the Ladies' Union merged to form the Kamala Club in 1950, with Mrs Kizhakke Mukkapuzha Raman Menon (pictured) as its first president. The club was officially declared open on 21 May 1951. *Image reproduced from "Two S'pore Women's Clubs Amalgamate," Singapore Standard, 21 May 1951, 2. (From NewspaperSG).*



Two S'pore Women's Clubs Amalgamate

Standard Staff Reporter

THE LOTUS Club and the Ladies' Union, two well-known clubs for Indian and Ceylonese women of Singapore, have now been amalgamated into one club, called the Kamala Club.

The suggestion to unite, it is understood, came from Mr. Jawaharlal Nehru, the Indian premier, during his last visit to Singapore in June, 1950.

The club that has emerged out of this union, The Kamala Club, will be officially declared open today when there will be a farewell function to its president, Mrs. K. M. R. Menon, who is leaving Malaya after 30 years' residence, and a tea-party in honour of Mrs. Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit's visit.

Mrs. Menon said yesterday that the Lotus Club and the Ladies' Union had both functioned for the past 20 or 25 years, and had rendered great services to Indian and Ceylonese women in social, educational and other fields.

The Kamala Club would continue and expand the work of its members.

The move by the Indian and Ceylonese women of Singapore was described as a "revolution" as it takes place at a time when there is talk of ending the existing Indian communities.

Mrs. Menon is the wife of Mr.

NOTES

1 "Indian and Ceylonese Ladies," *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 3 June 1931, 12. (From NewspaperSG)
2 At the time, Indian women were referred to by their husband's name. Mrs Edward Vethanayagam Davies moved to Singapore after her marriage in 1925. She was an educator, social worker and advocate of women's rights. Apart from the Lotus Club, she was also a founding member of the Inner Wheel Club of Singapore and was closely involved in the establishment of the Singapore Council of Women where she served in its executive council. Mrs Davies was posthumously inducted into the Singapore Women's Hall of Fame in 2014.
3 Not to be confused with Mrs Ellice Handy, Mrs John Truman Navaratnam Handy was a socially active Ceylonese lady of Tamil descent.
4 "Singapore Y.W.C.A.," *Malaya Tribune*, 15 November 1930, 14. (From NewspaperSG)
5 "Work of Y.W.C.A. in Singapore," *Malaya Tribune*, 24 July 1931, 13. (From NewspaperSG)
6 "Work of Y.W.C.A. in Singapore."
7 "Indian and Chinese Women," *Malaya Tribune*, 30 July 1931, 9. (From NewspaperSG) [Mirza Mohammed Ali Namazie was a Persian businessman who commissioned and financed the Capitol Theatre. Rajabali Jumabhoy was a prominent businessman and one of the founders of the Indian Association; he was also a member of the Legislative Assembly.]
8 "Indian Ladies' Club," *Straits Times*, 6 March 1932, 10. (From NewspaperSG)
9 "Indian Women's Social," *Malaya Tribune*, 3 February 1932, 7. (From NewspaperSG)
10 Mrs Kizhakke Mukkapuzha Raman Menon, originally from Kerala, played an active part in club activities even after the merger of the clubs. Her husband K.M.R. Menon was a mathematics teacher at Raffles Institution.
11 Mrs K.M.R. Menon, "Emancipation!" *Malaya Tribune*, 18 April 1931, 3. (From NewspaperSG)
12 Mrs Bridget Catherine Beatrice Chelvanathan Handy was a Sri Lankan who moved to Malaya at a young age. She had travelled extensively and was an advocate of women's rights. Her husband, Dr J.M. Handy, was one of the first medical men to come from Jaffna, Sri Lanka, at the invitation of the British government in Singapore.
13 "Indian and Ceylonese Ladies."
14 Mrs Lakshmi Naidu, oral history interview by Tan Beng Luan, 17 December 1981, transcript and MP3 audio, Reel/Disc 8 of 11. (From National Archives of Singapore, Accession no. 000110)
15 R.R. Samy, "Woman's Corner," *Malaya Tribune*, 18 July 1931, 2. (From NewspaperSG)

Then President of the United Nations General Assembly Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit addressing members of the Kamala Club, 1954. She was the first woman appointed to the post. She was also a sister of Prime Minister of India Jawaharlal Nehru. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

Amalgamation of the Clubs

The Lotus Club and the Ladies' Union were dormant during the Japanese Occupation (1942–45) but when peace returned, the clubs once again resumed their social, cultural and fundraising activities. One of the highlights of the post-war era occurred in June 1950 when Nehru, by then the prime minister of newly independent India, visited Singapore again. During his visit, his daughter Indira Gandhi addressed a joint meeting of the two clubs and, citing her mother as an example, spoke about the important role of women in society. Nehru himself graced the occasion and addressed the women briefly.[33]

Gandhi's talk at the joint meeting was a precursor to the eventual merger of the Ladies' Union and the Lotus Club, which was decided on 17 October 1950.[34] The motives were practical ones. "The harsh reality was that both the clubs were struggling with low membership, as many of the women had moved back to India after the war. The founding members were older, and to survive, the clubs had to merge into one unit."[35]

The new club was named Kamala Club, ostensibly at the wish of Nehru, after his late wife Kamala.[36] But according to Ambassador-at-Large Gopinath Pillai – whose mother was present at the meeting to merge the two clubs – Nehru had not made any suggestions regarding this. Citing Nehru, however, made the new name more palatable to members.[37]

The Kamala Club was officially declared open on 21 May 1951 and since then, the club has helped countless Indian women develop warm friendships with other like-minded women.[38] Its members continue to work together to make a difference. Like the lotus flower it is named after, the Kamala Club has blossomed and remains relevant today. ♦

16 "Indian Women's Social," *Malaya Tribune*, 3 February 1932, 7. (From NewspaperSG)
17 "Ladies' Union," *Malaya Tribune*, 8 April 1933, 9. (From NewspaperSG)
18 "The Ladies Union," *Malaya Tribune*, 10 March 1934, 13. (From NewspaperSG)
19 "Ladies' Union."
20 "The Lotus Club," *Malaya Tribune*, 13 December 1934, 16. (From NewspaperSG)
21 Mrs Lakshmi Naidu, oral history interview by Tan Beng Luan, 24 February 1982, transcript and MP3 audio, Reel/Disc 9 of 11. (From National Archives of Singapore, Accession no. 000110)
22 Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia, "purdah," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 9 May 2008, https://www.britannica.com/topic/purdah.
23 "Lotus Club," *Straits Times*, 13 May 1935, 12. (From NewspaperSG)
24 "For Charity," *Straits Times*, 28 August 1933, 12. (From NewspaperSG)
25 "Lotus Club," *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 8 February 1934, 3. (From NewspaperSG)
26 "Amateur Talent at Victoria Theatre," *Straits Times*, 29 June 1935, 13. (From NewspaperSG)
27 "Jubilee Fund," *Malaya Tribune*, 7 October 1935, 18. (From NewspaperSG)
28 "Variety Show for Jubilee Fund," *Straits Times*, 26 October 1935, 17. (From NewspaperSG)
29 "'A Country Is Judged by Its Women Folk'," *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 29 May 1937, 6. (From NewspaperSG)
30 "Indian Quit Congress for Polls," *Straits Times*, 22 January 1948, 1. (From NewspaperSG)
31 "Mrs. Mary Lobo Appointed J.P.," *Indian Daily Mail*, 7 April 1950, 4. (From NewspaperSG)
32 "Singapore," *Straits Times*, 10 June 1954, 1. (From NewspaperSG)
33 "Women Met Mrs Gandhi," *Straits Times*, 19 June 1950, 5. (From NewspaperSG)
34 "Kamala Club Formed," *Indian Daily Mail*, 20 October 1950, 4. (From NewspaperSG)
35 Vandana Aggarwal, *Voice of Indian Women: The Kamala Club Singapore* (Singapore: The Kamala Club, 2018), 29. (Available via PublicationSG)
36 "Singapore Women Entertain Mrs Indira Gandhi," *Indian Daily Mail*, 19 June 1950, 1. (From NewspaperSG)
37 Aggarwal, *Voice of Indian Women*, 30.
38 "Two S'pore Women's Clubs Amalgamate," *Singapore Standard*, 21 May 1951, 2. (From NewspaperSG)

No Longer "Dirty, Unhygienic, Crowded and Messy"

The Story of Singapore's Changing Wet Markets

Wet markets have existed in Singapore since 1825. **Zoe Yeo** looks at how these markets have changed over time.

The bustling morning market in Chinatown's Pagoda Street, c. 1970. In the early 1980s, stallholders were moved into what is now called Chinatown Complex, referred to colloquially as Chinatown Market. *Courtesy of Kinokuniya Book Stores of Singapore Pte. Ltd.*

Zoe Yeo is a Librarian with the National Library, Singapore. She is part of the team that oversees the statutory functions at the National Library Board. She manages the Legal Deposit function and collection, including its collection policies, workflows and enforcement as well as engagement with publishers and the public.

To most people in Singapore, the wet market is so much a part of the landscape that it is barely worth noticing. However, the term is not in common use around the world. It was only in early 2020, at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, that the term "wet markets" was thrust into the international limelight. The first diagnosed cases were linked to the former Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market (now closed) in Wuhan, China, in late 2019. The coronavirus was classified as a zoonotic disease,[1] which raises speculation that the virus had jumped from wild animals sold at that market to humans.

To explain the concept of a wet market, the *National Geographic* in April 2020 described it as "large collections of open-air stalls selling fresh seafood, meat, fruits, and vegetables". These markets "sell and slaughter live animals on site, including chickens, fish, and shellfish". The "wet" in wet markets is attributed to "live fish splashing in tubs of water, melting ice keeping meat cold, the blood and innards of slaughtered animals".[2] Unfortunately, "wet market" is often conflated with "wildlife market" even though most wet markets don't sell wildlife.

Although the interest in wet markets, particularly the one in Wuhan, skyrocketed in 2020, many are unaware that the term "wet market" may have first arisen in Singapore. The term began to appear in the late 1970s. A *Straits Times* article published on 13 July 1978 noted that the Trade Department said that it was "reluctant to introduce the sale of frozen fish in 'wet' markets for fear of profiteering by hawkers" and also "fear that some hawkers may thaw the fish and sell it as fresh".[3] The use of quote marks around the word wet suggests that it was a novel term.

The term "wet market" was formally recorded in the Oxford English Dictionary in 2016 and was defined as a "market for the sale of fresh meat, fish, and produce" in Southeast Asia.[4]

Prior to "wet markets", the words "market" and *pasar* were commonly used in local newspapers. The Malay word *pasar* is a loanword from "bazaar" which originated from Persia to refer to a town's public market district.[5] *Pasar* was so widely used locally that the transliteration of the Malay word, 巴剎 (*ba sha*), was coined and it became the official Chinese term used for wet markets in Singapore and in some parts of Southeast Asia.[6]

(Top) A scene at a local wet market, c. 1900. *Lim Kheng Chye Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

(Above) Rochor Market, 1930s. An open-air carpark sits on the site today. *Lim Kheng Chye Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

Singapore's Early Wet Markets

Although there is a lack of documentation on markets in the pre-colonial era, evidence shows that markets and bazaars have appeared organically where trading took place. These markets were makeshift sites scattered across the island, where vendors would lay out their produce on the ground or in baskets, in open areas or under a shed.[7]

The Telok Ayer Market is believed to be the first purpose-built market in Singapore. In November 1822, Stamford Raffles appointed a Town Committee to implement his vision of reorganising the town that had grown in a haphazard manner. In his directive, he wrote: "As a measure of police it is proposed to remove the fish market to Tulloh [Telok]

Ayer without delay and it will be the duty of the committee to consider in how far the general concentration of the fish, pork poultry and vegetable markets, in the vicinity of each other, may not be advantageous for the general convenience and cleanliness of the place." The fish market had originally been located near the north end of Market Street on the riverbank that had shops selling market produce.[8]

The market in Telok Ayer opened in 1825, a simple timber structure erected partially over the sea on timber piles so goods could be loaded and unloaded directly onto boats. The roof of the market was formed by timber trusses, covered with *attap* (*nipah* palm leaves) and supported by timber posts. However, the market was soon declared structurally unsafe as the *attap* roof violated fire safety regulations.[9]

A new building replaced the dilapidated structure at the same site in 1833. Designed by George D. Coleman, who was also the first Government Superintendent of Public Works, the new market measured 125 feet (38 m) in diameter, twice the size of the original market. It was formed by two concentric rings of brick piers arranged octagonally. There were also three arches on each side of the octagon which were "necessary for the admission of light and air".[10]

English traveller Annie Brassey[11] visited the market in 1877 and was impressed by what she saw. "The fish market is the cleanest, and best arranged, and sweetest smelling that I ever went through," she wrote. "The poultry market is a curious place. On account of the intense heat everything is brought alive to the market, and the quacking, cackling, gobbling and crowing that go on are really marvelous," said Brassey.[12]

Due to a land reclamation project, the market was demolished in 1879 and the market stalls relocated to newly reclaimed land at Collyer Quay. A new market – which retained the octagonal shape of the original market – was designed by Municipal Engineer James MacRitchie and completed in 1894. Operating for almost 80 years, it ceased to function as a wet market in 1972, following the area's transformation into a commercial and financial district, and was gazetted as a national monument in 1973. Officially renamed Lau Pa Sat (Old Market) in 1989, the food centre is today a popular haunt for tourists as well as office workers in the Central Business District.[13]

By the end of the 19th century, the Municipal Commission had established four other markets: Ellenborough Market built in 1845, Clyde Terrace Market and Rochor Market established in the 1870s, and Orchard Road Market in 1891.[14]

Ellenborough Market

Ellenborough Market was located between Ellenborough Street and Fish Street (both expunged). The market was known in Malay as Pasar Bahru, which means "New Market". It was also nicknamed "Teochew Market" as many Teochews lived in the area. The market was noted for its fresh fish and dried seafood products. However, a fire that gutted the market in January 1968, during the lunar new year, affected some 1,000 hawkers and stallholders. The remnants of the market were later demolished, and Housing and Development Board flats, a market and a hawker centre were constructed at the site in the 1970s.[15] These were demolished in the 1990s to make way for Clarke Quay Central and Swissôtel Merchant Court.

Clyde Terrace Market

Clyde Terrace Market, also known as Pasar Besi and Ti-Pa-Sat (铁巴刹), meaning "Iron Market" in Malay and Hokkien respectively, was well known for its structure that was mostly constructed of iron. The market was initially a cluster of tiled sheds at Campong (Kampong) Glam Beach. In August 1871, the sheds were described in the press as "not only disgraceful in their outward appearance, but their internal condition is anything but inviting, and it is next to impossible to keep them clean".[16]

Preparations for a new market began in 1872 when iron pillars and other building materials were imported from England, with the laying of the foundation stone on 29 March 1873. Located near Clyde Terrace (present-day Beach Road) on the reclaimed stretch of land facing the sea, the market began operations around 1874. It later also functioned as a wholesale market and distribution centre where vendors purchased fresh produce and sold them in rural villages and other smaller markets.[17] Clyde Terrace Market was demolished

(Left) Ellenborough Market, c. 1910. A fire gutted the market on 30 January 1968. Housing and Development Board flats, a market and a hawker centre were constructed at the site in the early 1970s. *Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

(Below) Clyde Terrace Market, 1963. It was demolished in 1983 and the Gateway office complex stands at the site today. *Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

(Above) Orchard Road Market, c. 1911. The cast-iron fountain on the right currently stands at the courtyard of Raffles Hotel. *Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

(Right) Ladies waiting to be served at a meat stall at the Orchard Road Market, 1960s. *All rights reserved, Sons of David "Danny" Daniel, PictureSG, National Library, Singapore.*

in 1983 and the Gateway office complex stands at the site today.[18]

Rochor Market

Rochor Market, built in 1872, was a popular landmark in the Sungei Road district. The market served the surrounding community for more than a century before it was demolished in August 1982.[19] Little is known about this market and an open-air carpark occupies the site today.

Orchard Road Market

Located at what is now Orchard Point, Orchard Road Market was known by the locals as Tang Leng Pa Sat or Tanglin Pa Sat.[20] It sold fresh produce at higher prices compared to other markets in Singapore due to its wealthier European customers.[21] The fountain that currently stands in the courtyard of Raffles Hotel was once located in front of Orchard Road Market.[22] The market was demolished and replaced by Orchard Point in 1982.[23]

New-generation Wet Markets

In post-war Singapore, the government began building a new type of market that was co-located with cooked food stalls. These food stalls were manned by people who used to make a living as itinerant hawkers. A desire to remove street obstructions and to better monitor the hygiene of cooked food resulted in the setting up of hawker centres that adjoined markets.[24]

One of the earliest examples of this is Tiong Bahru Market, also known as Seng Poh Road Market in its early days. Opened in 1950, the market was described as a "dirty, unhygienic, crowded and messy single storey structure" by Lizzy Lee in her book, *巴刹 Pasar: The Personalities of Singapore's Wet Markets*.[25]

These wet markets became an integral part of new housing estates that were built. In many ways, the centre of each neighbourhood was the wet market. Over time, these wet markets underwent a series of upgrading as the authorities improved the lighting, ventilation and drainage in these structures. Today, the Tiong Bahru Market and Hawker Centre is a wheelchair-accessible two-storey building with a large central garden courtyard. The wet market is located on the first floor with the hawker centre on the second. Instead of being dark, dirty, smelly and wet, the market is airy, brightly lit, clean, mostly dry and not particularly malodorous.[26]

Live Slaughter of Animals

While most wet markets in Singapore were alike, there was one that was unique: Chinatown Market. This market was infamous for the sale of meat from animals such as snakes, crocodiles, monkeys, dogs, cats, rabbits and bats.[27]

It is believed that these animals were smuggled from outlying islands such as Pulau Ubin and neighbouring countries like Malaysia and Indonesia. The meat

from these animals were sought after for their "healing properties".[28]

Chinatown Market had originally consisted of stalls concentrated along Trengganu Street, Sago Street and Banda Street, with a few spilling onto Temple Street and Pagoda Street. A 1974 *New Nation* article noted that a stall at the junction of Smith and Trengganu streets was selling almost everything from rabbits, guinea pigs and turtles to anteaters, pythons, crocodiles and monitor lizards.[29]

"These are kept in makeshift cages about the stall and are only slaughtered when sold," the newspaper added. "Pieces of various meat and entrails are also displayed for the older-generation Chinese who still believe in the curative and or strengthening powers of these exotic meats cooked with various herbs. At night, in nearby Trengganu Street, you can even buy a bowl of these brews for only $1."[30]

In the early 1980s, stallholders were moved into what is now called Chinatown Complex, referred to colloquially as Chinatown Market. Some continued selling wildlife meat until the practice eventually died out, especially after Singapore became a signatory to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora in 1986.[31]

Chinatown Market was an exception though. In the other wet markets in Singapore, the only animals regularly slaughtered on the premises were chickens. Up till the 1980s, customers could select live chickens in wet markets and have them slaughtered on the spot. A total of 69,000 birds was estimated to be slaughtered daily at these markets, making up two-thirds of the total number of birds slaughtered in Singapore. As a result, "even in the cleanest markets, the poultry stalls always make their presence felt by their stench. People living near markets have also complained of the noise when live poultry is unloaded from lorries in the early morning," said the *Straits Times*.[32]

In March 1988, Cuppage Road Market became the first wet market to sell "dressed" (pre-slaughtered and cleaned) poultry as live slaughtering was no longer carried out at the market. This was a pilot at the market to gauge public acceptance.[33]

There were mixed reactions from customers. "How will I know if the chicken I buy is fresh?," asked one woman rhetorically. She noted: "[T]here's no way you can avoid the bad smell in a wet market. Even the fish stalls have a bad smell." However, others welcomed the change. Another woman commented that "marketing would be more pleasant and cleaner without the 'nauseating experience' of watching chickens being slaughtered".[34]

Two years later, the Ministry of Environment announced the decision to phase out poultry slaughtering at all local markets and centralising all slaughtering at poultry service abattoirs by early 1992. According to a news report, this was to "ensure that the birds are killed in hygienic conditions and prevent pollution of drains within the wet markets". The ministry also gave assurances that the birds would be slaughtered according to *halal* methods with the approval of the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura; MUIS).[35]

The Environment Ministry said that MUIS would issue the "halal" label to certified poultry abattoirs after the inspection of their premises. The label would be printed on a tag tied to the dressed poultry or on the wrapper of the poultry along with the date of slaughter (to indicate freshness) and the name of the abattoir.[36] The slaughtering of live poultry at wet markets officially ceased from March 1993.[37]

While the slaughter of chickens in wet markets had stopped, the sale and slaughter of wild-caught live soft-shelled turtles continued in some wet markets. It was only in December 2020 that the sale and slaughter of live turtles and frogs at wet markets in Singapore were banned following a review conducted by the Singapore Food Agency (SFA) in consultation with the National Parks Board and the National Environment Agency (NEA).

"While the public health risks posed by such slaughtering activity are low, SFA and NEA started phasing out slaughtering and sale of live frogs and turtles at market stalls since June 2020 to further reduce the risk and improve environmental hygiene and food safety," said the SFA.[38]

(Bottom left) The wet market on Sago Street in Chinatown, 1964. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

(Below) Live poultry kept in baskets at a wet market awaiting slaughter, 1950s. *Arthur B. Reich Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

(Bottom) Back in the day, Chinatown Market was infamous for the sale of meat from animals such as snakes, crocodiles, monkeys, dogs, cats, rabbits and bats. The meat was cooked and likely served in street stalls like this one, 1930s. *Lee Kip Lin Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

Chickens being slaughtered and cleaned in a wet market in Serangoon, 1986. Live slaughtering of poultry ceased from March 1993. *Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

The Future of Wet Markets

In July 1981, the Environment Ministry convened a committee to "recommend to the Cabinet what HDB [Housing and Development Board] markets of the future should look like". This was in response to a report on Singapore markets that had been presented to the Cabinet. The report highlighted that wet markets were not fully utilised due to their short operating hours, there were too many workers in wet markets (an estimated 10,000 to 20,000 workers) and that this labour source should be directed to trades of higher productivity, and wet markets were non-economical to operate since they consisted of mostly small-scale businesses.[39]

The committee, led by then Senior Parliamentary Secretary (Environment) Chor Yeok Eng, studied the matter and came to the view that wet markets should no longer be built and instead modern mini-supermarkets and air-conditioned groceries should replace these markets. The committee also recommended that starting from 1982, market stallholders be allowed to take up more than one stall in order to diversify and sell other items and that stallholders should be encouraged to extend their business hours.[40]

Chor noted that the lifestyle of Singaporeans had changed considerably compared to 30 years ago. One of the biggest changes was the growing number of families

NOTES

1 Najmul Haider, et al., "Covid-19 – Zoonosis or Emerging Infectious Disease?," *Frontiers in Public Health* 8, 26 November 2020, https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpubh.2020.596944/full.
2 Dina Fine Maron, "'Wet Markets' Likely Launched the Coronavirus. Here's What You Need to Know," *National Geographic*, 15 April 2020, https://www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/article/coronavirus-linked-to-chinese-wet-markets.
3 "Frozen Fish: Fear of Profiteering at 'Wet' Markets," *Straits Times*, 13 July 1978, 9. (From NewspaperSG)
4 "Wet Market," *Oxford English Dictionary*, accessed 3 February 2022, https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/227970#eid12103480.
5 Russell Jones, ed., *Loan-words in Indonesian and Malay* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2007), 235. (From National Library, Singapore, Call no. RSEA 499.22124 LOA); Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia, "bazaar," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 31 May 2016, https://www.britannica.com/topic/bazaar.
6 "巴刹: Market," Promote Mandarin Council, last updated 11 June 2020, https://www.languagecouncils.sg/mandarin/en/learning-resources/singaporean-mandarin-database/terms/market.
7 Alvin Tan, *Community Heritage Series II: Wet Markets* (Singapore: National Heritage Board, 2013), 5, accessed 3 February 2022, https://www.nhb.gov.sg/~/media/nhb/files/resources/publications/ebooks/nhb_ebook_wet_markets.pdf.
8 Lee Kip Lin, *Telok Ayer Market: A Historical Account of the Market from the Founding of the Settlement of Singapore to the Present Time* (Singapore: Archives & Oral History Dept., 1983), 9–10. (From National Library, Singapore, Call no. RCLOS 725.21095957 LEE); Charles Burton Buckley, *An Anecdotal History of Old Times in Singapore: From the Foundation of the Settlement... on February 6th, 1819 to the Transfer to the Colonial Office ... on April 1st, 1867* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1984), 74. (From National Library, Singapore, Call no. RSING 959.57 BUC)
9 Lee, *Telok Ayer Market*, 11, 16–17.
10 Tan, *Wet Markets*, 5; "Former Telok Ayer Market (now known as Lau Pa Sat)," National Heritage Board, last updated 2 November 2020, https://www.roots.gov.sg/places/places-landing/Places/national-monuments/former-telok-ayer-market-now-known-as-lau-pa-sat; Lee, *Telok Ayer Market*, 19, 21.
11 In July 1876, Annie Brassey boarded the *Sunbeam* to travel around the world with her husband, four children and a number of pet dogs. An account of her travels was published in 1878. See Annie Brassey, *A Voyage in the 'Sunbeam': Our Home on the Ocean for Eleven Months* (London: Longmans, Green, 1878). (From National Library, Singapore, Call no. RRARE 910.41 BRA; Microfilm no. NL25750); Bonny Tan, "Globetrotting Mums: Then and Now," *BiblioAsia* 14, no. 2 (Jul–Sep 2018).
12 John Sturgus Bastin, *Travellers' Singapore: An Anthology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 114–17. (From National Library, Singapore, Call no. RSING 959.5705 TRA-[HIS])
13 Tan, *Wet Markets*, 5; "Former Telok Ayer Market (now known as Lau Pa Sat)"; Lee, *Telok Ayer Market*, 19, 21.
14 Tan, *Wet Markets*, 5–7; "Former Telok Ayer Market (now known as Lau Pa Sat)."
15 Vernon Cornelius-Takahama, "Ellenborough Market," in *Singapore Infopedia*. National Library Board Singapore. Article published 1999; "22-storey Flats at Former Market," *Straits Times*, 27 July 1971, 9; "25 Years Ago," *Straits Times*, 7 February 1993, 2. (From NewspaperSG)
16 "From the Daily Times, August 22nd. The Campong Glam Beach," *Straits Times Overland Journal*, 26 August 1871, 3. (From NewspaperSG)
17 National Library Board Singapore, *Stories from the Stacks* (Singapore: National Library Board, 2020), 19. (From National Library, Singapore, Call no. RSING 016.95957 SIN)
18 Malay Heritage Centre, *Kampong Gelam: Beyond the Port Town* (Singapore: Malay Heritage Centre, 2016), 69. (From National Library, Singapore, Call no.: RSING 305.8992805957 KAM)
19 Ratnala Thulaja Naidu, "Sungei Road," in *Singapore Infopedia*. National Library Board Singapore. Article published 2017.

An aerial view of Tekka Market (Zhujiao Market), 1984. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

where both husband and wife worked. "As such, a wife has little time for marketing," he noted. "She can afford it only on Sunday or [during her] free time." As a result, wet markets, with the "small variety of goods and short business hours, will eventually fall short of people's demands".[41]

The last two traditional wet markets, with adjoining hawker centres, were built in Jurong East and Jurong West in 1984. Different lifestyles, changing preferences and new demands from residents were reasons cited by the HDB for phasing out wet markets. The *Straits Times* reported that "traditional wet markets [had] lost their popularity and the patronage of many people who prefer[red] to shop at modern supermarkets [with] more flexible marketing hours".[42]

Today, there are 83 wet markets in Singapore managed by the NEA and NEA-appointed operators.[43] In a survey conducted by the NEA in 2018, 39 percent of Singaporeans had not visited any wet markets in a year. This number has been steadily increasing, from 23 percent and 33 percent in 2014 and 2016 respectively.[44]

Apart from the waning interest in wet markets, the issue of succession is also a cause for concern. The current generation of stall owners are facing an uphill battle in convincing their children, who tend to be better educated, to take over the family business. "I think in the next 20 years or so there will be no more wet markets, there will only be supermarkets," lamented Lim Toh Khoon, a fishmonger at Fajar Shopping Centre's wet market.[45]

It remains to be seen what will happen to the wet market in the future. Will it become increasingly irrelevant as busy working people turn to the convenience of supermarkets? Or will there always be a demand for the personal touch that wet markets can offer? There is no doubt that older Singaporeans still prefer the wet market and have fond childhood memories of tagging along with their parents to the markets – experiencing the sights, smells and sounds of these local landmarks that are so uniquely Singaporean. ♦

20 Stephen Sim, "Singapore Streets Have Nicknames," *Straits Times*, 29 September 1949, 8; Jackie Sam, "Orchard Road in Retrospect," *Singapore Monitor*, 21 October 1984, 1. (From NewspaperSG)
21 "Don't Aid the Black Market," *Singapore Free Press*, 19 May 1947, 4; "Price Chief Flays Orchard Road Market 'Ring'," *Malaya Tribune*, 5 June 1948, 1; "2 Reasons for High Food Prices," *Singapore Standard*, 30 March 1951, 2. (From NewspaperSG)
22 Gretchen Liu, *Raffles Hotel* (Singapore: Landmark Books, 1992), 212. (From National Library, Singapore, Call no. RSING 647.94595701 LIU)
23 Marsita Omar, "Orchard Road Market," in *Singapore Infopedia*. National Library Board Singapore. Article published April 2021; Ray K. Tyers, *Ray Tyers' Singapore: Then & Now*, revised and updated by Siow Jin Hua (Singapore: Landmark Books, 1993), 162, 164. (From National Library, Singapore, Call no. RSING 959.57 TYE-[HIS]); "'New Look' Plan by URA for Orchard Rd," *Straits Times*, 2 December 1978, 13. (From NewspaperSG)
24 Tan, *Wet Markets*, 5; "买菜光景 不同 !" ["Grocery Shopping Scene Is Different"], 新明日报 [*Xin Min Ri Bao*], 8 August 1995, 16; 冯剑斌 [Feng Jianbin], "湿巴剎气数未尽" ["Not the End of Wet Markets"], 联合早报 [*Lianhe Zaobao*], 25 October 2009, 24. (From NewspaperSG)
25 Lizzy Lee, *巴剎 Pasar: The Personalities of Singapore's Wet Markets* (Singapore: National Library Board, 2014), 6. (From National Library, Singapore, Call no. RSING 381.1095957 LEE)
26 "Tiong Bahru Wet Market," The Best Singapore, 8 January 2021, https://www.thebestsingapore.com/best-place/tiong-bahru-wet-market/.
27 Sew Teng Kwok, oral history interview by Yoo Loo Feng, 13 October 1999, MP3 audio, Reel/Disc 9 of 23. (From National Archives of Singapore, Accession no. 002209); Thian Boon Hua, oral history interview by Jesley Chua Chee Huan, 25 July 2014, MP3 audio, Reel/Disc 12 of 66. (From National Archives of Singapore, Accession no. 003888)
28 Sew, interview; Thian, interview.
29 Serendipity, "Inscrutably Oriental," *New Nation*, 3 November 1974, 18. (From NewspaperSG)
30 Serendipity, "Inscrutably Oriental."
31 "You Could Eat Bats & Lizards Here in the Past," *New Paper*, 16 October 2004, 9. (From NewspaperSG)
32 "Wet Market Slaughtering To Be Phased Out by '92," *Straits Times*, 6 July 1990, 3; Tan Ban Huat, "Call for Study on Slaughter of Chickens at One Place," *Straits Times*, 12 January 1982, 10. (From NewspaperSG)
33 L.E. Prema, "Cuppage Market to Sell Dressed Fowls Only," *Straits Times*, 19 August 1987, 16. (From NewspaperSG)
34 Prema, "Cuppage Market to Sell Dressed Fowls Only."
35 "Wet Market Slaughtering To Be Phased Out by '92"; Susan Loh and Anne Tan, "Housewives Ready to Switch to Chilled Fowl," *Straits Times*, 3 August 1990, 33. (From NewspaperSG)
36 "Date and 'Halal' Marks for Abbatoir Poultry from July 15," *Straits Times*, 23 May 1992, 2; "Tags to Ensure Pre-Slaughtered Poultry is Fresh," *Straits Times*, 13 March 1992, 26. (From NewspaperSG)
37 "Wet Markets End Poultry Slaughtering," *Straits Times*, 28 February 1993, 21. (From NewspaperSG)
38 Ang Qing, "Sale and Slaughter of Live Turtles, Frogs Banned at Wet Markets in S'pore Due to Health Concerns," *Straits Times*, 14 July 2021, https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/sale-and-slaughter-of-live-turtles-frogs-banned-at-wet-markets-in-spore-due-to-health.
39 "Markets of the Future," *Straits Times*, 20 October 1981, 1. (From NewspaperSG)
40 "Markets of the Future."
41 "Markets of the Future."
42 Matthew Yap, "The Last Two Wet Markets," *Straits Times*, 12 October 1984, 2. (From NewspaperSG)
43 陈映蓁 [Chen Yingzhen], "湿巴剎 人情味不打折" ["The Personal Touch of Wet Markets"], 联合早报 [*Lianhe Zaobao*], 14 January 2021. (From Factiva via NLB's eResources website)
44 Rebecca Metteo and Lauren Ong, "As Young Home Cooks Seek Convenience, the Fate of Singapore's Wet Markets Hangs in the Balance," *Today*, 22 June 2019, https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/young-home-cooks-seek-convenience-fate-singapores-wet-markets-hang-balance.
45 Metteo and Ong, "As Young Home Cooks Seek Convenience."

LABOURING TO DELIVER

A History of KANDANG KERBAU Hospital

The old Kandang Kerbau Hospital was once known as the busiest maternity hospital in the world. **Joanna Tan** delivers the story behind a hallowed Singapore institution.

(Facing page) Newborn babies at the nursery of Kandang Kerbau Hospital, 1986. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

(Above) A newborn at the Kandang Kerbau Hospital, 1986. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

Singapore's total fertility rate is a concern among policymakers today. In 2020, Singapore's total fertility rate was just 1.1 births per woman, well below the replacement rate of 2.1.

The situation was very different five decades ago though. In the 1960s, Singapore's total fertility rate was a staggering 5.76.[1] The old Kandang Kerbau (KK) Hospital was so busy that it was nicknamed the "Birthquake" Hospital. Between the 1950s and early 1970s, more than 1.2 million babies were born there.[2]

In fact, in 1966 alone, 39,835 babies were born in the hospital. This earned the hospital a mention in the *Guinness Book of Records* for having the largest number of births in a single maternity facility – a record it held for a number of years. The publication described the hospital as the "largest maternity hospital in the world… with 316 beds and an annual 'birthquake' of over 26,000 babies".[3]

Dr Tow Siang Hwa, who was the University Head of Obstetrics and Gynaecology in the 1960s, recalled that the hospital had to "make use of all the space available" as there were insufficient beds. He said: "Some women even had to give birth under a bed where another woman was giving birth. To cope with the serious shortage of medical facilities, women who gave birth were sent home hours later if they stopped bleeding and showed no signs of complications. Nurses then visited the mother's home until the baby's umbilical cord dropped."[4]

The midwives were, of course, just as overwhelmed. "Last time the old KK in Labour Ward, especially night shift, is very tough," recalled Mary Hee Sock Yin who started working at KK Hospital in 1961. "And then you keep on delivering… the

Joanna Tan is a Senior Librarian with the National Library, Singapore, and works with the Singapore and Southeast Asia Collection. Her responsibilities include collection management and content development as well as providing reference and research services.

(Top) A maternity ward in the Kandang Kerbau Hospital, 1950. The hospital was handling between 2,000 and 3,000 deliveries per month during the post-war baby boom years so as many beds as possible were squeezed into the open ward. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

(Above) Kandang Kerbau Hospital, 1950. By then, the hospital was unable to accommodate the many babies delivered there so an extension plan was drawn up in 1951 to provide more beds, outpatient clinics and space for ancillary departments. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

patients, delivered until onto the floor. You have to put a green mat on the floor, to deliver the baby."[5] Fellow midwife Pong Siok Ing said that some deliveries were done with "patients lying on rubber macintoshes or on transport trolleys". She said that the "babies kept coming so fast that there was no time for us to sterilise the rubber gloves in between. We had to use our bare hands."[6]

Fifth General Hospital

While largely seen as a maternity hospital today, KK had its origins as Singapore's 5th General Hospital. It began operations in 1860 with the transfer of patients from other hospitals. The hospital was divided into a section catering to the Europeans known as Seamen's Hospital and another for locals known as Police Hospital.[7] It offered gynaecology and childbirth services from as early as the 1860s.[8]

The hospital was located at the site bounded by Serangoon, Selegie, Bukit Timah and Rochor roads. By at least the turn of the 20th century, it had become

known variously as General Hospital Kandang Kerbau or Kandang Kerbau Hospital. The term *kandang kerbau* means "buffalo pen" in Malay, and it is believed the hospital was so named as bullock carts belonging to the colonial transport department were parked nearby. The Chinese referred to the hospital as Tek Kah Hospital. *Tek kah*, or *zhu jiao* in Mandarin, literally means "under the bamboo trees" in Hokkien as the hospital lay beneath a hillock dotted with bamboo plants.[9]

Specialisation in Maternal Health

Migrants to Singapore in the 19th century were largely male. However, as more female migrants began arriving in Singapore in the first few decades of the 20th century, birth rates rapidly increased and naturally so did demand for maternity-related medical services.[10]

The Free Maternity Hospital on Victoria Street became overwhelmed and patients had to be turned away. With more patients than beds, KK Hospital was renovated, expanded and converted into the Free Maternity Hospital comprising three one-storey buildings. When KK Hospital officially opened as a maternity hospital on 1 October 1924, the Free Maternity Hospital on Victoria Street moved to KK Hospital.[11]

Later, when this new maternity hospital proved unable to meet demand, one of the buildings was torn down and a three-storey block with 120 beds was erected in 1934. However, the number of births continued increasing so rapidly that another new block was built, increasing the number of beds to 180 when it opened in July 1940. There were 6,184 births that year – all pro bono. Paying patients and gynaecological cases were treated at the General Hospital on Outram Road.[12]

In the pre-war years, KK Hospital was a well-regarded hospital. J.S. English, Professor of Midwifery and Gynaecology at the King Edward VII College of Medicine (1922–48) and Director of the hospital (1924–42), remarked in 1948 that "before the war… it was then one of the finest in the world… twice as large as any such hospital in England. People from all over the world who visited the Hospital were deeply impressed by the facilities and equipment we had then".[13]

Post-war Baby Boom

During the Japanese Occupation of Singapore (1942–45), KK Hospital was renamed Chuo Byoin (Central Hospital) and functioned as a general hospital serving both locals and Japanese civilians. Deliveries at the hospital dipped below 2,000 each year during that period. When the Occupation ended, the hospital resumed its pre-war role of caring for women's health. With the consolidation of all gynaecological and obstetric services at KK Hospital, it became the only maternity hospital in Singapore.[14]

In the immediate post-war years, population growth in Singapore accelerated and one of the contributing factors was the high fertility rate.[15] In 1948 alone, KK Hospital saw 10,000 births, almost twice the number before the war, earning the description "busiest baby factory in the British Empire". The hospital continued to handle slightly fewer than 1,000 deliveries per month until 1950 when the monthly figure rose above 1,000 babies, resulting in overcrowded labour wards.[16]

To address the bed shortage, the hospital made plans in 1951 for a new extension with "outpatient clinics and

A midwife conducting a home visit to provide postnatal care, 1957. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

Undergoing training at the Kandang Kerbau Hospital, 1958. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

ancillary departments", renovations to the existing wings and the addition of buildings to eventually increase bed capacity to 590, up from 240.[17]

Construction of the new extension began in 1953, but births continued to climb sharply with a new baby born every 10 minutes. As described in a 1953 *Straits Times* article: "[T]he Kandang Kerbau… last year dealt with over 17,000 maternity cases, and a total of over 20,000 admissions in its 240 beds. For what the record is worth, Singapore can claim to have the busiest and most overcrowded maternity hospital in the world today. London's famous Queen Charlotte's maternity hospital deals with 3,000 births a year. At Kandang Kerbau five times as many babies are born, nearly a third of the total born in the Colony."[18]

A number of measures were introduced in the 1950s to ease the hospital's burden. In 1950, the length of hospital stay for each patient was reduced from 10–12 days to three days. Midwives from the hospital's Domiciliary Aftercare Service, introduced in 1954, visited mothers who had been discharged 24 hours after confinement, and their babies, at home. They would report any abnormality to the hospital for follow-up action.[19]

In October 1953, then Governor of Singapore John Nicoll endorsed the idea of home births.[20] Under this policy, women with a normal prenatal examination could give birth at home if their home environment was conducive, and the Domiciliary Delivery Service was introduced in 1955 for this purpose.[21] Women who had received prenatal care at the hospital were offered the choice of home delivery. Staff then visited the women's home to assess its suitability for home birthing.[22]

Learning how to handle newborn babies at the Kandang Kerbau Hospital, 1958. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

World's Busiest Maternity Hospital

KK Hospital's new extension finally opened in August 1955, but the bed capacity still fell far short of the numbers needed to keep up with demand. Deliveries in 1956 and 1957 were a staggering 25,000 and 29,000 respectively, double the figure in 1951.[23] In 1958, there were about 110 births per day at the hospital, or more than 40,000 a year, according to Minister for Health A.J. Braga.[24] The number of babies born there continued to increase well into the 1960s.

Dr Yvonne Marjorie Salmon, a long-serving obstetrician-gynaecologist who spent 44 years at KK Hospital, recounted her experience during the "birthquake" in 1966 when 39,856 babies were born. She said: "[T]here were so many born, 100–140 per day, that we could hardly cope. It was like a war zone, with emergency beds placed in the corridors and mothers delivering on the theatre trolleys and mattresses on the floor. There were so many deliveries that postnatal mothers sometimes had to lie crosswise, three to two beds (a record for neighbourliness)."[25]

The baby boom continued unabated until the effects of the national family planning campaign, launched in 1960, were felt when the total fertility rate dropped to 3.07 in 1970, down from 3.22 in 1969.[26] In 1970, for the first time, deliveries at KK Hospital dipped below 30,000. Other government hospitals like Alexandra Hospital as well as private hospitals also started to take on some maternity patients, relieving KK Hospital of its caseload.[27]

Training and Education

In addition to providing maternity services, KK Hospital also provided final year medical students with intensive training that included a three-month stay on the hospital's premises.[28] Among those who underwent training at the hospital was the second president of Singapore, Dr Benjamin Henry Sheares (he served from 1971 until his death in 1981).[29]

Sheares succeeded J.S. English as Acting Professor of Midwifery and Gynaecology at the King Edward VII College of Medicine when the latter retired in 1948. (In 1951, Sheares was appointed Professor of Obstetrics and Gynaecology at the University of Malaya; the first local to assume this post.)[30] Like English, Sheares sought to improve maternal mortality and still-birth rates. Among his proposals were the implementation of a post-graduate course in obstetrics and gynaecology at the King Edward VII College of Medicine, with the doctors receiving their training at KK Hospital.[31] He also raised the standard of midwives, who now needed to have at least a primary English education and two years of training in a teaching hospital.[32]

Salmon, who had teaching duties at the hospital, said that the hospital in the 1960s provided good training for the staff: "As the 'C' Class (heavily subsidised) beds catering for the lower social classes were always fully occupied, the young doctors, medical students and nurses/pupil midwives had more practical experience compared with the present time."[33]

When KK Hospital was reorganised in 1962 comprising a University Training Unit and two Clinical Training Units, it was recognised and accredited by the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (RCOG) in London as a post-graduate training centre for aspiring gynaecologists.[34] This was a significant achievement as it meant that specialty training could be done locally instead of in the United Kingdom.

One of the first few doctors who received his training entirely in Singapore was Professor S.S. Ratnam (Shanmugaratnam s/o Sittampalam), who later headed the Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecoloy at KK Hospital and then at the National University of Singapore. Ratnam recalled that he and his fellow doctors were initially afraid of failing the Member of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (MRCOG) examinations in the UK, but most passed the examinations on their first attempt.[35]

Medical Breakthroughs

Doctors at KK Hospital also contributed to medical research. In the 1950s, as Professor of Obstetrics and Gynaecology of the University of Malaya's Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology at KK Hospital, Sheares invented a procedure known internationally as "Sheares Vaginoplasty" or "Sheares Operation" that created an artificial vagina for girls born without one.

Professor S.S. Ratnam and his team receiving the Guinness Stout Effort Award for their work on in-vitro fertilisation, 1983. Ratnam is pictured here carrying Asia's first "test-tube baby", Samuel Lee Jian Wei, who was delivered by Ratnam and his team at the Kandang Kerbau Hospital on 19 May 1983. Samuel's mother is standing beside Ratnam, while his father is behind her. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

S.S. Ratnam (left) and Benjamin Henry Sheares (right) at a banquet hosted by the Obstetrical and Gynaecological Society of Singapore (OGSS) at the Hilton Hotel, 1971. Ratnam was then the president of the OGSS, while Sheares was the president of Singapore. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

"This new procedure was the result of my work in the early post-war years when quite a few women came to me with undeveloped vaginas and I carried out the operation as it was practised then but felt it was not right. I thought it out and developed my own procedure," said Sheares. His procedure was described as "safer, more efficient and having better results than the traditional method". A woman who underwent this procedure successfully delivered a seven-pound (3.2 kg) baby naturally in 1954 and subsequently a second child as well.[36]

Sheares was also credited for being the first to perform caesarean sections using the lower segment method when he was Assistant Superintendent of KK Hospital during the Japanese Occupation.[37] This modern lower method minimised complications that could arise during surgery, resulting in a scar that was also stronger and better able to withstand future pregnancies.

"Under the old professor very few caesarean sections were carried out and they were all done by the classical method and not the modern lower segment method," Sheares recalled. "I had to continue doing what I knew was not right. I tried to keep up with the times by reading journals but could not do what I wanted at all. Those were frustrating and heartbreaking years because I knew I was killing babies unnecessarily when they could have easily been saved by the lower segment caesarean section." For his contributions, Sheares is known as the "father of obstetrics and gynaecology in Singapore".[38]

Another surgeon from KK Hospital who left his mark was Professor S.S. Ratnam. On 19 May 1983, Ratnam and

NOTES

1 "Births and Fertility, Annual," data.gov.sg, last updated 18 July 2020, https://data.gov.sg/dataset/births-and-fertility-annual; Chew Hui Min, "Singapore's Total Fertility Rate Falls to Historic Low in 2020," *Channel NewsAsia*, 26 February 2021, https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/singapore-total-fertility-rate-tfr-falls-historic-low-2020-baby-376711; "Population Trends Overview," National Population and Talent Division, last updated 14 January 2022, https://www.population.gov.sg/our-population/population-trends/overview.

2 Lea Wee, "A New KK, But Keep the Little Ones Coming," *Straits Times*, 29 September 1996, 2; Danny Lim, "He's Been Through a Birthquake," *New Paper*, 23 August 1997, 14; Arlina Arshad, "Old KK Hospital Now a Historic Site," *Straits Times*, 24 March 2003, 10. (From NewspaperSG)

3 Low Mei Mei, "Birthplace of Many Beside a Bamboo Grove," *Straits Times*, 24 March 1987, 16. (From NewspaperSG); Tan Kok Hian and Tay Eng Hseon, eds., *The History of Obstetrics and Gynaecology in Singapore* (Singapore: Obstetrical & Gynaecological Society of Singapore and the National Heritage Board, 2003), 49.

4 Lim, "He's Been Through a Birthquake."

5 Mary Hee Sock Yin, oral history interview by Patricia Lee, 20 September 1999, transcript and MP3 audio, Reel/Disc 3 of 11. (From National Archives of Singapore, Accession no. 002206)

6 Wee, "A New KK, But Keep the Little Ones Coming."

7 Tan and Tay, *The History of Obstetrics and Gynaecology in Singapore*, 53.

8 Singapore General Hospital (Singapore), *Singapore General Hospital: 50th Anniversary Publication 1926–1976* (Singapore: Singapore General Hospital, 1976), 50. (From National Library, Singapore, Call no. RSING 362.11095957 SIN)

9 Arlina Arshad, "Old KK Hospital Now a Historic Site"; Wee, "A New KK, But Keep the Little Ones Coming."

10 Saw Swee Hock, "Population Trends in Singapore, 1819–1967," *Journal of Southeast Asian History* 10, no. 1 (1969): 36–49. (From JSTOR via NLB's eResources website); Tan and Tay, *The History of Obstetrics and Gynaecology in Singapore*, 6.

11 Colin Cheong, *KK Women's and Children's Hospital: 150 Years of Caring 1858–2008* (Singapore: KK Women's and Children's Hospital, 2008), 25. (From National Library, Singapore, Call no. RSING 362.19820095957 KK); Medical Department (Singapore), *Annual Report of the Medical Department* (Singapore: Medical Department, 1947), 37, Internet Archive, https://archive.org/details/b31414989/page/36/mode/2up.

12 Benjamin Henry Sheares, "Speech by President Sheares at the Kandang Kerbau Hospital Recreation Club Dinner and Ball on Saturday: 23rd November 1974 at the Hyatt Hotel at 8 p.m," 23 November 1974, transcript (From National Archives of Singapore, Document no. PressR19741123)

13 "Delivered 82,000 of 'Em But Says I Still Don't Know About Babies," *Malaya Tribune*, 18 March 1948, 8. (From NewspaperSG)

14 Tan and Tay, *The History of Obstetrics and Gynaecology in Singapore*, 50, 63; "KKH Milestones," *Straits Times*, 20 November 2002, 6. (From NewspaperSG)

15 Saw, "Population Trends in Singapore, 1819–1967," 40.

16 Cheong, *KK Women's and Children's Hospital*, 33, 46.

17 Cheong, *KK Women's and Children's Hospital*, 50; Medical Department (Singapore), *Annual Report of the Medical Department* (Singapore: Medical Department, 1951), 164, Internet Archive, https://archive.org/details/b31415027/page/166/mode/2up.

18 "Ten Minute Babies," *Straits Times*, 8 October 1953, 6. (From NewspaperSG)

19 Tan and Tay, *The History of Obstetrics and Gynaecology in Singapore*, 373; SingHealth Group, "Milestones and Achievements," KK Women's and Children's Hospital, last updated 3 March 2021, https://www.kkh.com.sg/about-kkh/corporate-profile/hospital-milestones.

20 "Nicoll Backs Home Births Policy," *Straits Times*, 7 October 1953, 7. (From NewspaperSG)

21 Tan and Tay, *The History of Obstetrics and Gynaecology in Singapore*, 64

22 Cheong, *KK Women's and Children's Hospital*, 52.

23 Tan and Tay, *The History of Obstetrics and Gynaecology in Singapore*, 64.

24 "Home Midwifery Plan to Ease Crowding," *Straits Times*, 28 September 1958, 4. (From NewpaperSG)

25 Tan and Tay, *The History of Obstetrics and Gynaecology in Singapore*, 492; Arlina Arshad, "Old KK Hospital Now a Historic Site."

26 "Births and Fertility, Annual"; *Family Planning in Singapore* (Singapore: Govt. Printer, 1966), 3. (From National Library, Singapore, Call no. RSING 363.96095957 FAM)

Transfer of premature and neonatal babies from Kandang Kerbau Hospital to the new KK Women's and Children's Hospital on the last day of operations at the old hospital, 1997. *Kandang Kerbau Women's and Children's Hospital Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

his team delivered Asia's first "test-tube baby", a baby conceived through in-vitro fertilisation, at KK Hospital. Three years later, he and his team of doctors also helped to deliver the first baby in Asia born from gamete intrafallopian transfer (GIFT), which involves a direct transfer of the sperm and egg into the fallopian tube.

Ratnam was very proud of Singapore's contributions to the field of obstetrics and gynaecology. He said: "We had a number of firsts… the first in Asia IVF baby… the first GIFT baby born in Asia… the first in the world to be successful with micro-injection of sperms direct into the egg… We have made contributions not only to ourselves here, but to the world… Doesn't matter from which unit or institution the work comes from, but in Singapore."[39]

A New Beginning

In 1997, KK Hospital moved into its new building at 100 Bukit Timah Road and was renamed KK Women's and Children's Hospital, offering more facilities and better services to meet changing health demands. Paediatric medical services were also introduced.

KK Hospital continues to strive for excellence and innovation in women's and children's health services. The old Kandang Kerbau Hospital, where millions of children were born, has been designated a historic site by the National Heritage Board.[40] ♦

27 Kandang Kerbau Hospital (Singapore), *Kandang Kerbau Hospital 1924–1990*, 25.

28 "Thousands of Babies Work of Maternity Hospital," *Straits Times*, 15 July 1941, 10. (From NewspaperSG)

29 Wong Kim Hoh, "Helping Babes into the World," *Straits Times*, 13 November 2010, 8. (From NewspaperSG); Tan and Tay, *The History of Obstetrics and Gynaecology in Singapore*, 472.

30 J.H.H. Sheares, "Benjamin Henry Sheares, MD, MS, FRCOG: President, Republic of Singapore 1971–1981; Obstetrician and Gynaecologist 1931–1981. A Biography, 12th August 1907–12th May 1981," *Annals* 34, no. 6 (2005): 25C–41C, Academy of Medicine, Singapore, http://www.annals.edu.sg/pdf/34VolNo6200506/V34N6p25C.pdf.

31 Tan and Tay, *The History of Obstetrics and Gynaecology in Singapore*, 418.

32 Kandang Kerbau Hospital (Singapore), *Kandang Kerbau Hospital 1924–1990*, 18; Tan and Tay, *The History of Obstetrics and Gynaecology in Singapore*, 418.

33 Tan and Tay, *The History of Obstetrics and Gynaecology in Singapore*, 493.

34 SingHealth Group, "Milestones and Achievements"; Ministry of Health (Singapore), *Report of the Ministry of Health* (Singapore: Ministry of Health, 1962), 163, Internet Archive, https://archive.org/details/b31415714/page/152/mode/2up.

35 Ratnam, S S (Prof.) @ Shanmugaratnam s/o Sittampalam, oral history interview by Soh Eng Khim, 19 September 1997, MP3 audio, Reel/Disc 7 of 13. (From National Archives of Singapore, Accession no. 001936); Kandang Kerbau Hospital (Singapore), *Kandang Kerbau Hospital 1924–1990*, 18.

36 "Sheares: They Call Him the Father of Obstetrics and Gynaecology in Singapore," *New Nation*, 28 April 1976, 10–11. (From NewspaperSG); Cheong, *KK Women's and Children's Hospital*, 66.

37 Cheong, *KK Women's and Children's Hospital*, 38.

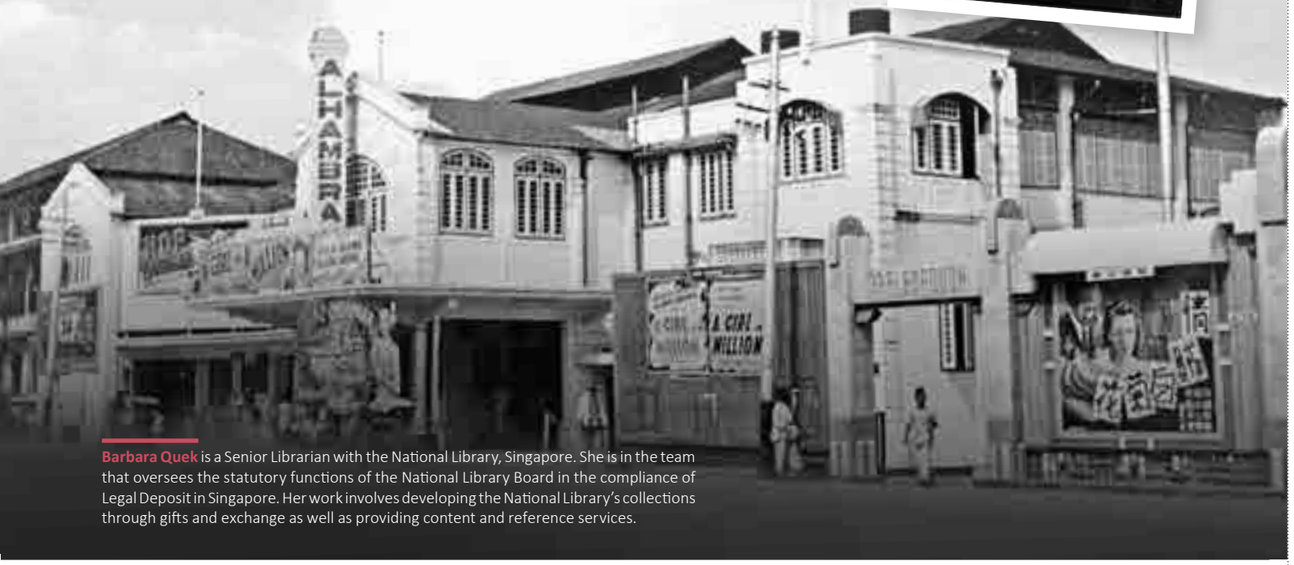
38 "Sheares: They Call Him the Father of Obstetrics and Gynaecology in Singapore"; Tan and Tay, *The History of Obstetrics and Gynaecology in Singapore*, 416.

39 Cheong, *KK Women's and Children's Hospital*, 130; Tan and Tay, *The History of Obstetrics and Gynaecology in Singapore*, 568.

40 SingHealth Group, "Milestones and Achievements"; Arlina Arshad, "Old KK Hospital Now a Historic Site."

Cinema Pioneer
TAN CHENG KEE

The Alhambra and Marlborough theatres were famous landmarks in pre-war Singapore. **Barbara Quek** looks at these cinemas, and the man behind the curtain.



Barbara Quek is a Senior Librarian with the National Library, Singapore. She is in the team that oversees the statutory functions of the National Library Board in the compliance of Legal Deposit in Singapore. Her work involves developing the National Library's collections through gifts and exchange as well as providing content and reference services.

Many older Singaporeans today will remember the names Runme Shaw, Run Run Shaw and Loke Wan Tho. These people were synonymous with the early cinema industry in Singapore. The two Shaws, who founded Shaw Brothers in 1925, operated major movie theatres in Singapore and were also film distributors. A decade later, Loke Wan Tho set up Associated Theatres, the forerunner of Cathay Organisation. The company also rolled out movie theatres around Singapore and made movies.

Largely forgotten though is Tan Cheng Kee, a pioneer of Singapore's entertainment industry. Tan owned theatres that were landmarks in Singapore: the Alhambra, the Marlborough and the Palladium. (He also owned Luna Park, an amusement park adjacent to the Alhambra on Beach Road.[1]) Three of the six theatres listed in the newspapers in the 1920s belonged to him.[2]

Tan Cheng Kee's Movie Theatre Empire

Born in 1875 in Melaka, Tan was the eldest son of Tan Keong Saik, the prominent businessman and municipal commissioner (after whom Keong Saik Road is named).[3] Tan Cheng Kee's foray into the industry began in 1909. That was the year he bought the Marlborough on Beach Road, which occupied the site of the former French Cinema owned by a Mr Joannes.[4] However, it was Tan's purchase of the Alhambra, also in 1909, that drew more attention. The Alhambra had its origins as a tent cinema at the junction of Hill Street and River Valley Road. Over the years, it moved and was renamed several times. By 1907, it was on Beach Road and was known as the Alhambra.[5] Fernand Dreyfus, a Frenchman, had taken over the Alhambra from Lionel Willis, and on 8 July 1909, Tan bought the Alhambra from Dreyfus.[6]

Tan subsequently had the Alhambra rebuilt. In February 1914, he told the *Malaya Tribune* that "in a very few days the construction of the new Alhambra would be in full swing".[7] Designed by local Eurasian architect J.B. Westerhout and completed in 1916, the new theatre was described by the *Malaya Tribune* as "a phoenix [that had] arisen from the ashes of the old" and "Mr Tan Cheng Kee, the owner, deserve[d] every praise for his enterprise for adding another fine building to our city".[8]

The newspaper reported that the Alhambra combined Eastern and Western architectural elements. "Though the two do not blend into a happy ensemble yet has this style been chosen with a view to make interior arrangements airy, and in this the architects have succeeded admirably," the newspaper wrote. It added approvingly that on entering the place, "every modern convenience will be found, including a ladies' cloak-room, a private telephone cabinet with writing tables, shaded lamp and chair, refreshment room and last, but not least, a spacious drawing-room". The presumably more expensive seats were in 12 boxes in two tiers upstairs. The boxes – each "holding six comfortable carved teak chairs" – "allow a view of all present". On the ground floor were brown wooden chairs, "each fitted with a hat rack [and] arranged [to] offer comfortable seating capacity". There were also fans on the walls.[9]

This picture house by the sea boasted a gigantic cinema hall that could seat about 3,500 and a tea garden with a live orchestra to entertain before the start of the show. Cinema manager Chia Soo Ann was full of praise for the orchestra and its conductor: "Many times we were mesmerised by his swinging and swishing baton as he led his musicians through the scenes."[10]

The Alhambra's location right next to the beach gave the theatre its nickname "Hai Kee" which means "by the sea" in Hokkien. In his book, *Rickshaw Reporter*, George L. Peet recalled that while at the Alhambra, "we could hear the junks swaying and creaking with the tide as we watched the screen, for the windows at the back of the dress circle upstairs (where the European patrons always sat) were open to the harbour outside".[11]

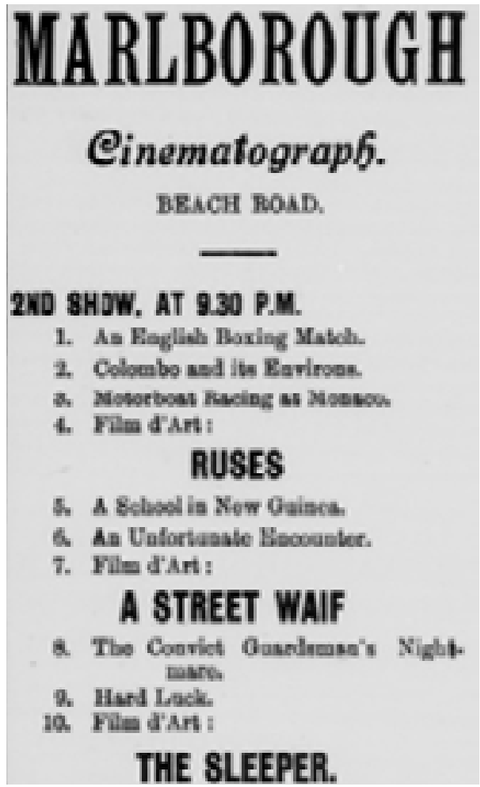
Tan was an ambitious man and in 1918, he acquired one of the Alhambra's main rivals, the Palladium on Orchard Road, for $25,000. The *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser* reported that "the show will be under new management, and Mr Cheng Kee's name is sufficient guaran-

(Above) The Alhambra (left) and Marlborough (right) theatres on Beach Road, 1947. Both theatres were demolished in the 1970s to make way for the Shaw Towers complex. *Tan Kok Kheng Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

(Top) A portrait of Tan Cheng Kee, c. 1910. He was the owner of the former Alhambra and Marlborough theatres on Beach Road. *Image reproduced from Alan Chong, ed. Great Peranakans: Fifty Remarkable Lives. (Singapore: Asian Civilisations Museum, 2015), 146. (From National Library, Singapore, Call no. RSING 305.895105957 GRE).*

(Below) Shows screened at the Marlborough in August 1909, before the introduction of "talkies" (films with sound). *Image reproduced from "Page 8 Advertisements Column 3," Straits Times, 17 August 1909, 8. (From NewspaperSG).*

(Below right) The Alhambra was the first cinema in Singapore to screen "talkies", or films with sound. The first talkie was *The Rainbow Man*. The public was lured by the promise of "the most perfect of all sound reproduction". *Image reproduced from "Page 6 Advertisements Column 2," Malaya Tribune, 5 November 1929, 6. (From NewspaperSG).*



MARLBOROUGH

Cinematograph.

BEACH ROAD.

2ND SHOW, AT 9.30 P.M.

1. An English Boxing Match.
2. Colombo and its Environs.
3. Motorboat Racing at Monaco.
4. Film d'Art:

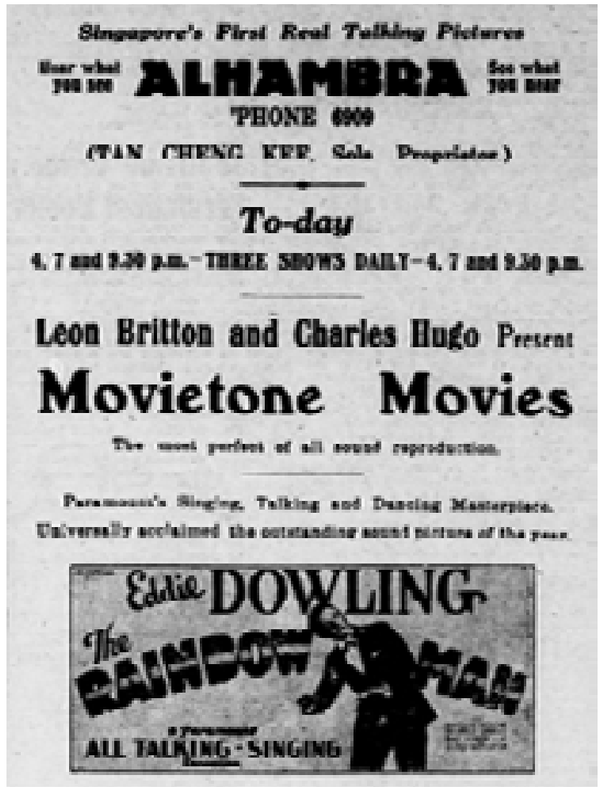
RUSES

5. A School in New Guinea.
6. An Unfortunate Encounter.
7. Film d'Art:

A STREET WAIF

8. The Convict Guardsman's Nightmare.
9. Hard Luck.
10. Film d'Art:

THE SLEEPER.



Singapore's First Real Talking Pictures

Hear what you see — ALHAMBRA — See what you hear

PHONE 6909

(TAN CHENG KEE, Sole Proprietor)

To-day

4, 7 and 9.30 p.m.—THREE SHOWS DAILY—4, 7 and 9.30 p.m.

Leon Britton and Charles Hugo Present

Movietone Movies

The most perfect of all sound reproduction.

Paramount's Singing, Talking and Dancing Masterpiece.

Universally acclaimed the outstanding sound picture of the year.

Eddie DOWLING in The RAINBOW MAN

ALL TALKING - SINGING

tee that it will maintain the high standard of the past".[12] In 1925, Tan remodelled the Palladium and renamed it the Pavilion.[13] This cinema was demolished and replaced by Specialists' Shopping Centre in 1971. The latter was in turn torn down for Orchard Gateway, which opened in 2014.[14]

Tan believed in upgrading his cinemas. In 1918, the *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser* reported that the Marlborough had been renamed the New Marlborough and "was recently rebuilt and transformed into a substantial and commodious picture palace with up to date electric fans and lighting, fitted with comfortable sitting to suit all classes of patrons".[15]

In order to accommodate "talkies" (films with sound), which were replacing silent films, Tan reportedly spent $100,000 on alterations and renovations on the Alhambra in 1930. These included insulation on the main ceiling and under the balcony, new upholstered arm seats and an increase in capacity from 800 to 1,200. Tan also announced that the Alhambra had secured screening rights from four well-known movie companies – Goldwyn-Mayer, United Artists, Fox Film Corporation and Warner Brothers – for their "sound-film productions", and that the cinema would reopen with a "talkie" screened every night, including Sundays. In November 1930, the management of the Alhambra announced a $250,000-agreement with Fox for its productions to be shown at the Alhambra from 1931–32.[16]

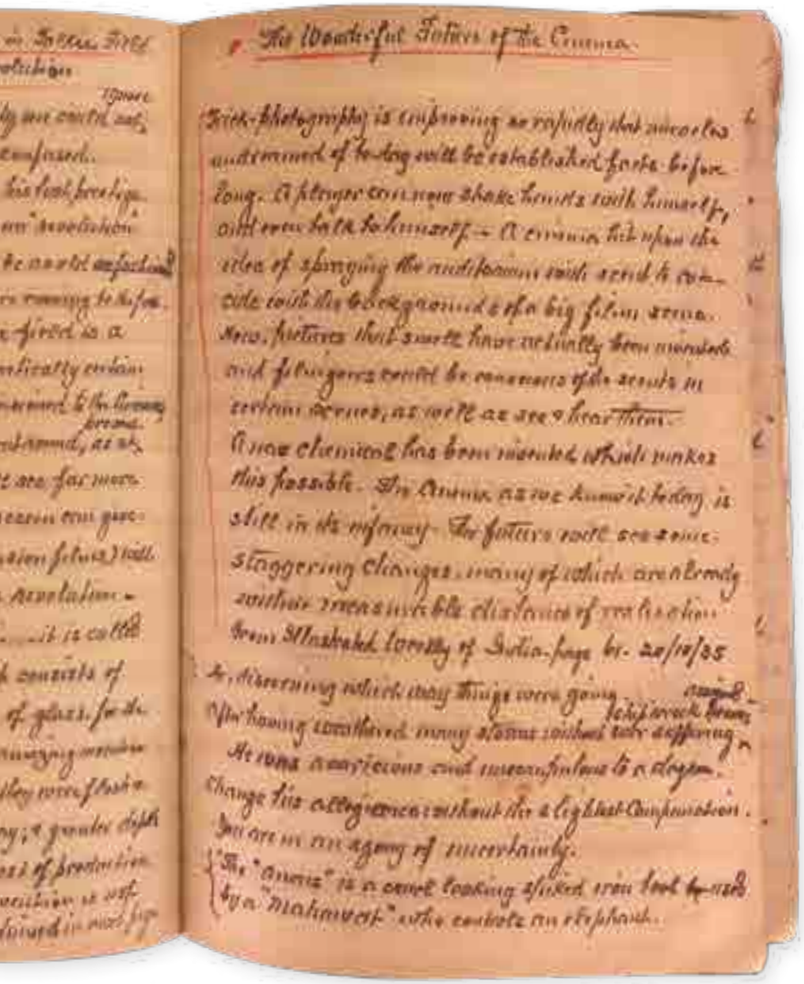
The Marlborough was also upgraded. In April 1930, the *Malaya Tribune* reported that the cinema hall had been rewired, the seating capacity increased from 550 to 682 and the operating room "enlarged to take in two machines, which are absolutely necessary in the case of the talkie performances, so as to ensure uninterrupted projection".[17]

Tan's management of the Alhambra came to an end when he leased out the cinema to the Shaw Brothers – which operated 60 cinemas and four amusement parks in Malaya at the time. This took effect from 1 April 1938, about a year before his death at the age of 64.

The *Straits Times* reported: "As the first step toward bringing the theatre back to its former status, an air-conditioning plant is being installed to make the Alhambra the first cinema in Malaya to possess such equipment. Shaw Brothers will take over control of the cinema as from April 1. During May, the building will be closed for a fortnight to enable extensive renovation and changes to be effected in interior and exterior decorations."[18]

The cinema opened as the New Alhambra in July 1938, and a special feature of the air-conditioning was the specially designed rotary filter that ensured clean air in the cinema hall. Other improvements include a bar, a new box office, improved seating, a new stage and the latest architectural tubular lighting. Shaw Brothers operated the cinema until the fall of Singapore in February 1942.[19]

During the Japanese Occupation of Singapore (1942–45), the Japanese military appropriated the Alhambra and screened Japanese propaganda films.[20]



Tan Cheng Kee writes about "The Wonderful Future of the Cinema" on this page in his notebook. *Image reproduced from Tan Cheng Kee, Tan Cheng Kee's Notebooks (Singapore, n.p., 1912–38). (From National Library Singapore, Call no. RRARE 384.8092 TAN). All rights reserved, Peter Wee, Katong Antique House Collection, National Library Board, Singapore.*

Tan Cheng Kee's Notebooks

Not much has been written about Tan Cheng Kee, especially compared to the Shaw brothers and Loke Wan Tho. However, the National Library has three notebooks that Tan left behind as well as his will.[21] These documents give an insight into the kind of person he was.

Tan believed in the importance of hard work and downplayed the role of luck. In his notebook, he wrote that "luck does not hold forever" and so a man is the "architect of his own fortune by means of his ability". He also strongly believed that "idleness is the handmaid of the devil".

At the same time, Tan also believed in turning to the divine for assistance. He wrote: "I feel that every step in my plan has been guided with Divine help and I hope this will continue until the end of all things" and "I ask daily for Divine help and I have succeeded beyond my dreams".

In his notebooks, Tan devoted many pages to the importance of writing a will, pertaining to family and business. He first made his will in 1935 and appointed Estate and Trust Agencies in 1937 as the executor and trustee of his will.[22] In his will, Tan ensured that his immediate and close family members had life interests in the properties that they resided in. He also bequeathed money to his uncle, cousin, clerk and cook.

What was interesting were his plans for the Alhambra and Marlborough after his death, which were bequeathed to his trustee. He instructed his trustee to "discontinue the business of a cinematograph exhibitor carried on by me" and let the Theatres "on rents to the highest bidders by tender from time to time for a period not exceeding three years each time". This was in line with how he had leased out the cinemas to the Shaw Brothers in 1938.

He also entrusted his trustee "to use his best endeavours to secure an extension or renewal of the leases" but in the event of the Government declining to extend or renew the leases, he directed his trustee "to cause the buildings therein to be demolished before the expiration of the leases tenders being called".[23]

Tan died on 12 September 1939 in his residence at 319 East Coast Road, and was laid to rest at Bukit Brown Cemetery. He left behind a son Tan Soon Lay, daughter-in-law Yeo Siok Tin, a daughter Josephine Tan, son-in-law Wee Guan Hong, and three grandchildren. His wife had died in 1927.[24]

In May 1947, there was a legal tussle for the sites of the Alhambra and Marlborough between the Commissioner of Land and the Executor and Trustees of the Estate of Tan Cheng Kee (deceased). Tan had obtained three leases from the government for a period of 30 years for the sites of the two cinemas, the last of which expired on 30 September 1943. The condition was that the sites should be used for show business only and could not be sublet; when the lease expired, the buildings remaining on the land would belong to the Crown.[25]

After the Japanese Occupation, the Executor and Trustees of the Estate continued to occupy the Alhambra and Marlborough sites under temporary occupation licences, with the condition that the land was not transferable. It was later revealed that the United Film Distributors Syndicate had been operating the cinemas without permission from the Land Office and was paying a percentage of the net takings from the cinemas to the Executor and Trustees of Tan's estate. A notice to quit was served by the Land Office on 31 January 1947.[26]

In September 1947, the court ordered United Film Distributors Syndicate to quit and vacate the Alhambra and Marlborough. A new company, Singapore Amusement Syndicate, then leased the cinemas from the government and began screening films in October that year.[27]

The Alhambra was subsequently acquired by Cathay Organisation and opened on 5 February 1951 after a facelift.[28] In December 1966, it was renamed the Gala following major renovations and a massive upgrading of the entire cinema. Earmarked for urban redevelopment, it was demolished in the late 1970s, in what was described as a "sad ending to a monumental building in the history of Singapore".[29]

Shaw Towers was built on the land where the Alhambra and the Marlborough once stood. Shaw Towers itself had two cinemas: Prince and Jade. However, Shaw Towers is now being torn down as well, to be replaced by a 35-storey integrated development with offices, retail and food and beverage offerings. It is not known whether there will be a cinema or cineplex in the new development. ♦

Tan's notebooks and will, as well as the receipt book for the rental of the Marlborough and Alhambra theatres (1 March 1935–3 August 1939), were donated to the National Library, Singapore, and are found in the Rare Materials Collection. For information on accessing titles in the Rare Materials Collection, visit https://www.nlb.gov.sg/research/rarecollections.aspx.

NOTES

1 Gloria Chandy, "The Pioneer Cinemas," *New Nation*, 19 March 1979, 9. (From NewspaperSG)
2 "Remembering Garrick," *Straits Times*, 13 May 1990, 26. (From NewspaperSG)
3 Song Ong Siang, *One Hundred Years' History of the Chinese in Singapore* (London: John Murray, 1923), 222. (From BookSG); "The Late Mr. Tan Keong Saik," *Straits Times*, 6 October 1909, 7; "Death of Mr. Tan Cheng Kee," *Malaya Tribune*, 12 September 1939, 2. (From NewspaperSG)
4 "Thirty Years of Film Entertainment," *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 2 January 1932, 20. (From NewspaperSG); Chua Ai Lin, "Cultural Consumption and Cosmopolitan Connections: Chinese Cinema Entrepreneurs in 1920s and 1930s Singapore," in *The Business of Culture: Cultural Entrepreneurs in China and Southeast Asia, 1900–65*, ed. Christopher Rea and Nicolai Volland (Vancouver: UBC Press, [2015]), 209. (From National Library, Singapore, Call no. 330.951 BUS)
5 "The Grand Cinematograph," *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 14 September 1907, 12; "Page 2 Advertisements Column 3," *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 16 October 1907, 2. (From NewspaperSG)
6 "Thirty Years of Film Entertainment"; "Mountain-air Climate in Singapore," *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 27 July 1938, 4; "Page 8 Advertisements Column 5," *Straits Times*, 9 July 1909, 8. (From NewspaperSG)
7 "Still Another Theatre for Singapore," *Malaya Tribune*, 12 February 1914, 5. (From NewspaperSG)
8 "The New Alhambra," *Malaya Tribune*, 13 January 1916, 9. (From NewspaperSG); Alan Chong, ed. *Great Peranakans: Fifty Remarkable Lives* (Singapore: Asian Civilisations Museum, 2015), 146. (From National Library, Singapore, Call no. RSING 305.895105957 GRE)
9 "The New Alhambra."
10 Chandy, "The Pioneer Cinemas"; Lim, Kay Tong, *Cathay: 55 Years of Cinema* (Singapore: Landmark Books, 1991), 72. (From National Library, Singapore, Call no. RSING 791.43095957 LIM)
11 George L. Peet, *Rickshaw Reporter* (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 1985), 133. (From National Library, Singapore, Call no. RSING 070.924 PEE)
12 "The Palladium," *Malaya Tribune*, 1 May 1918, 4; "Untitled," *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 2 May 1918, 275. (From NewspaperSG)
13 "Page 4 Advertisements Column 2," *Malaya Tribune*, 2 October 1925, 4; "Page 6 Advertisements Column 1," *Straits Times*, 1 December 1925, 6. (From NewspaperSG)
14 Susanna Kulatissa, "... Not Forgotten," *Straits Times*, 21 July 1985, 10; "Orchard Gateway Opens After Delay," *Straits Times*, 19 April 2014, 2. (From NewspaperSG)
15 "Picture Shows," *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 26 February 1918, 10. (From NewspaperSG)
16 "'Talkies' Every Night," *Malaya Tribune*, 11 Feb 1930, 8; "A $250,000 Deal," *Straits Times*, 14 November 1930, 14. (From NewspaperSG)
17 "Marlborough Theatre," *Malaya Tribune*, 19 April 1930, 8; "Talkies in Singapore," *Straits Times*, 19 April 1930, 12. (From NewspaperSG)
18 "Singapore Cinema to be Air-conditioned," *Straits Times*, 20 March 1938, 4. (From NewspaperSG)
19 "Air-Conditioning of the Alhambra Theatre Begun," *Straits Times*, 19 June 1938, 3; "Alhambra to Reopen in October," *Singapore Free Press*, 17 September 1947, 5. (From NewspaperSG)
20 "Alhambra to Reopen in October."
21 Tan Cheng Kee, *Tan Cheng Kee's Notebooks* (Singapore: n.p., 1912–38). (From National Library Singapore, Call no. RRARE 384.8092 TAN)
22 Tan Cheng Kee, *Will of Tan Cheng Kee* (Singapore: n.p., 1935–39). (From National Library Singapore, Call no. RRARE 384.8092 WIL)
23 Tan, *Will of Tan Cheng Kee*, 5.
24 "Death of Mr. Tan Cheng Kee"; "Domestic Occurrences," *Malaya Tribune*, 14 September 1939, 15; "Untitled," *Straits Times*, 28 January 1927, 9. (From NewspaperSG)
25 "Legal Tussle Over Sites of 2 Theatres," *Malaya Tribune*, 10 May 1947, 5. (From NewspaperSG)
26 "Legal Tussle Over Sites of 2 Theatres."
27 "Alhambra to Reopen in October."
28 "Alhambra to be Renovated," *Straits Times*, 13 January 1951, 5; "Face Lift for S'pore Cinema," *Straits Times*, 14 January 1951, 11. (From NewspaperSG)
29 Lim, *Cathay: 55 Years of Cinema*, 72; "100, Beach Road, Through the Years," *City Weekly*, 19 July 1996, 2; "Gala Cinema to Open with Charity Show," *Straits Times*, 21 December 1966, 24. (From NewspaperSG)

THE EVOLUTION OF CHINESE FOOD IN SINGAPORE

Chinese food in Singapore is a product of the country's history and geography, reveals **Low Sze Wee**.

Eating out is very much a part of the national identity of Singaporeans. Given the wide variety of eateries available here, from hawker stalls to Michelin-starred restaurants, this is not surprising.

Part of what makes Singapore a food paradise is that the country is a multicultural one, and the dishes reflect this as well as the country's unique history. At the opening of the Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre in 2017, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong observed that over time, the different ethnic groups here have retained their own culture and heritage, but each has also "allowed itself to be influenced by the customs and traditions of other races. The result has been distinctive Singaporean variants of Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Eurasian cultures, and a growing Singaporean identity that we all share, suffusing and linking up our distinct individual identities and ethnic cultures".[1]

The distinctive Singaporean variant of Chinese culture is visible in food, especially hawker food. Chinese hawker food in Singapore reflects the intermingling of different Chinese groups that migrated here as well as the influence of other cultures. This is despite the fact that these dishes have names that suggest that they come from a particular group, like Hainanese chicken rice or Hokkien *mee*.

Different Strands of Chinese Cooking

The much-loved dish of Hainanese chicken rice, which many claim to be Singapore's national dish, has its origins in boiled Wenchang chicken – a traditional dish from Wenchang county in Hainan. It was introduced into Singapore by early Hainanese migrants.[2]

Low Sze Wee is Chief Executive Officer of the Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre. Formerly head of the curatorial departments at the Singapore Art Museum and then National Gallery Singapore, Sze Wee has curated many local and international exhibitions, including important retrospectives on Singaporean artists and the Singapore pavilion at the 50th Venice Biennale in 2003.

(Left) *Yong tau foo* was introduced to Singapore by Hakka migrants. Today, it is a collective term for various stuffed, boiled items such as bitter gourd, chilli and eggplant. *From Shutterstock.*

(Facing page) Hainanese chicken rice has its origins in Wenchang county in Hainan, China. The chicken is cooked Cantonese-style and best eaten with a dip made of chilli, garlic and ground ginger. *From Shutterstock.*

While this dish has Hainanese roots, over time, hawkers have adopted the Cantonese method of preparing *pak cham gai* (Cantonese for "white chopped chicken"). This involves soaking freshly boiled chicken in iced water to produce a jelly-like silky texture in the skin. The addition of aromatics like lemongrass or *pandan* leaves when cooking the rice, and the use of a dip made from chilli, garlic and ground ginger makes this dish very much a product of this region as well.

Today, this delicious hawker dish is ubiquitous: halal versions are very popular in food courts, there are long queues at Michelin-rated stalls in hawker centres, and chain outlets that specialise in the dish jostle for space in malls. In 2016, there was even a version offered by Han Li Guang, chef-owner of Restaurant Labyrinth, which was awarded one Michelin star from 2017 to 2020.[3]

Yong tau foo is another example of the confluence of different Chinese dialect groups. The dish as we know it today is a collective term for various stuffed, boiled items but it originally referred to just one thing – stuffed tofu (*yong* means "stuffed" in the Hakka dialect). Its origins may be traced back to the nomadic Hakka people of northern China, where dumplings were a key part of their lunar new year celebrations. However, as they migrated south, they could not find the wheat flour needed to make the dumplings. Hence, they improvised by stuffing ground meat into tofu instead. This was likely the first incarnation of our local *yong tau foo*.

When the Hakkas arrived in Southeast Asia in the 19th century, they started using seafood and fish paste for the filling as these ingredients were readily available here. This dish was later adopted by Cantonese hawkers in Singapore who started using different items like bitter gourd, chilli and eggplant to hold the filling.

Hokkien *mee* is another dish that showcases different regional influences. Despite its name, Hokkien *mee* also has significant Cantonese influence. This can be seen in the evolution of local fried Hokkien *mee*, which is a dish of thick yellow Hokkien noodles and *beehoon* (rice vermicelli) with prawns, pork belly, chives, egg, squid and fish cake cooked in crispy cubes of lard.

Instead of the flat noodles in traditional Hokkien *mee* from Fujian, the Singaporean version uses round yellow noodles and is served with *sambal belacan* (chilli paste with fermented shrimp) and lime, ingredients more commonly found in Malay cuisine. The Cantonese influence is evident as the dish is fried over a very hot fire to achieve *wok hei* (literally "breath of the wok" in Cantonese, referring to the smoky flavour created by stir-frying

over high heat), a foundational Cantonese cooking technique.

Local Ingredients and Ethnic Diversity

Chinese food in Singapore does not merely reflect the admixture of different Chinese groups who migrated here; Singapore's geography also plays an important role. When they came to Southeast Asia, the Chinese started using more locally sourced spices, fruit and vegetables in their cooking. This led to the use of ingredients such as *pandan* (screwpine), nutmeg, torch ginger, coconut and banana.

The local version of *popiah* illustrates this. A spring roll containing ingredients such as turnip, carrots, bean sprouts and thinly sliced fried tofu, *popiah* was originally from Fujian and Chaoshan. Singaporean version has *bangkuang* or *jicama* (Mexican turnip) instead of bamboo shoots as the latter were not readily available in Singapore at the time.

In addition to local ingredients, the cosmopolitan nature of a port city like Singapore also played a part in shaping local Chinese food. *Laksa*, for example, is now a common dish found in many restaurants and hawker centres. The dish is essentially a Chinese noodle soup cooked with a blend of Malay spices, fish stock and coconut milk. *Tau pok* and cockles were later added to the original dish. Regional touches are the inclusion of *belacan*, lemongrass and dried chilli.

This popular dish is today most associated with the Peranakan Chinese, descendants of early Chinese traders who had settled down in Southeast Asia and married local women.

Through their familiarity with Malay cooking techniques and Southeast Asian ingredients, the Peranakan Chinese are also known for their localised version of the Chinese rice dumpling (*bak chang* in Hokkien and *zongzi* in Mandarin; glutinous rice stuffed with meat and wrapped in bamboo leaves).[4]

The Peranakan Chinese version, known as *nonya* dumpling, uses candied wintermelon in the filling, hence its colloquial name *puah kiam ti chang*, which means "sweet and salty dumpling" in Hokkien. Believed to have "a cooling effect", wintermelon is commonly used in traditional Chinese desserts. Coriander powder and aniseed powder – spices used in Malay cooking – are used to flavour the braised pork filling.

Another example of Malay influence in the dumpling is the extraction of the juice from the petals of the local butterfly pea flower (*bunga telang*) to colour the rice, a technique borrowed from Malay *kueh*-making. *Nonya* dumplings also use *pandan* leaves to encase the rice. Apart from adding fragrance, *pandan* leaves are also more easily available in Southeast Asia compared to bamboo leaves which are traditionally used for wrapping dumplings in China.

In addition to Asian influences, hawker food bears the hallmarks of Singapore's colonial past. This can be seen in the popular breakfast set of toast slathered with *kaya* (jam made from coconut milk, eggs and sugar) and accompanied by freshly brewed *kopi* (Malay for "coffee") or *teh* (Hokkien for "tea").

This was served in Hainanese-run *kopitiams* (coffee shops) in early Singapore and remains a breakfast staple for many Singaporeans today. During the colonial period, the Hainanese worked as cooks in wealthy Peranakan Chinese and British homes and even aboard British ships. After the Japanese Occupation (1942–45), some Hainanese who had lost these jobs sought to make a living by running *kopitiams*.

There, they served food and drinks commonly seen in their former employers' homes such as the Western-style breakfast of eggs with toast, eaten with coffee or tea. As fruits like strawberries were not easily available in Singapore to make jam, the Hainanese, like the Peranakan Chinese, adapted and used coconut milk, eggs and *pandan* leaves to make *kaya*. And in a twist on half-boiled eggs with salt and pepper, the Hainanese drizzled dark soy sauce over the eggs, thereby putting their own local spin on this British breakfast classic.

Hainanese curry rice is another example of the mix of east and west. Curry rice is a rice dish served with pork chop, curry

Nonya dumplings, which are different from Chinese dumplings, use candied wintermelon in the filling, the local blue pea flower as a colouring and *pandan* leaves to encase the rice. *From Shutterstock.*

(Above) Singapore Hokkien *mee* uses thick yellow Hokkien noodles and *beehoon* (rice vermicelli), which are cooked with prawns, pork belly, chives, egg, squid and fish cake, topped off with *sambal belacan* and lime. *From Shutterstock.*

(Left) *Kaya* toast paired with half-boiled eggs is a popular breakfast item in Singapore. *From Shutterstock.*

chicken, *babi pongteh* (Peranakan-style braised pork) and *chap chye* (braised mixed vegetables), all heavily doused in curry gravy. The pork chop is an adaptation of the Western dish, using ground crackers as coating instead of breadcrumbs. Curry chicken, *babi pongteh* and *chap chye* are well-known Peranakan Chinese dishes. These days, options like sambal prawn and squid, sardine, prawn fritter and *assam* fish are also available.

A Rich Legacy

Cultural exchange in Singapore was and continues to be multidirectional; cultures in close proximity tend to influence each other. Indian *mee goreng* is a good example. This fried noodle (*mee* and *goreng* are Hokkien and Malay for "noodle" and "fried" respectively) dish did not originate in India though. Initially sold by early Indian-Muslim hawkers in Singapore from tricycle-mounted woks, Indian *mee goreng* is now a popular supper dish at 24-hour eateries. The dish combines Chinese yellow noodles with dark soy sauce, Western tomato sauce, or ketchup, and tomatoes, with chilli and curry flavours from Indian cooking, all fried in a hot wok.

Rojak is another example of how different cultures influence each other's food. Meaning "mixture" in Malay, this dish is believed to have evolved from *rujak buah* (fruit rojak) of Indonesia. Chinese *rojak* in Singapore combines local vegetables and fruit (turnip, cucumber, bean sprouts and pineapple) with Chinese ingredients like *tau pok* (beancurd puff), *tau kua* (firm beancurd) and *you tiao* (fried dough fritters). The ingredients are tossed and served with a dark sauce of *hae ko* (fermented shrimp sauce), *belacan* (fermented shrimp paste), tamarind, chilli, lime, sugar and peanuts.

Chinese *rojak* is different from Indian *rojak*, however, which was said to have been invented by early Indian migrants. Comprising potatoes, eggs, tofu and prawns fried in batter, Indian *rojak* is served with chopped raw onions, chilli and cucumber, then dipped in a sweet and spicy chili sauce.

As different cultures continue to meet, interact and learn from each other in Singapore, new, delicious creations will arise. As there is no limit to human creativity, the possibilities are endless. ♦

NOTES

1 "PM Lee Hsien Loong Spoke About Singaporean Chinese Culture and the Singaporean Identity at the Official Opening of the Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre on 19 May 2017," Prime Minister's Office, 19 May 2017, https://www.pmo.gov.sg/Newsroom/pm-lee-hsien-loong-official-opening-singapore-chinese-cultural-centre.

2 "Hainanese Chicken Rice," in *Singapore Infopedia*. National Library Board Singapore. Article published 2016.

3 Meryl Koh, "Restaurant Labyrinth Serves Up Chicken Rice, with No Rice," *The Peak*, 17 May 2016, https://www.thepeakmagazine.com.sg/gourmet-travel/restaurant-labyrinth-creates-chicken-rice-no-rice-han-li-guang/; "Awards," Restaurant Labyrinth, accessed 14 February 2022, https://www.restaurantlabyrinth.com/awards.

4 This is eaten during the Duanwu Festival (Dragon Boat Festival) to commemorate Qu Yuan (c. 340 –278 BCE), a Chinese poet and politician in the State of Chu during the Warring States Period.

Many of the hawker dishes mentioned are featured in the Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre's permanent exhibition, "SINGAPO人 – Discovering Chinese Singaporean Culture".

For more information, visit https://singaporeccc.org.sg/permanent-exhibition/.

Living in Harmony

The History of Opera Estate

Asrina Tanuri traces the development of Opera Estate from its early beginnings as coconut and rubber plantations to a private residential estate.

Today, no one buying a home in Opera Estate would bat an eyelid at paying over a million dollars for a place there. This is in stark contrast to the 1950s when developers first began selling homes there. Back then, a one-storey terrace house in Opera Estate would sell for just under $10,000.

In those days, life in the estate was a bit of a struggle. It was off the beaten track, buses did not ply the area and residents had to deal with constant flooding. However, some six decades later, life is very different.

Opera Estate is a private residential estate bordered by New Upper Changi Road, Bedok South Road, Upper East Coast Road and Siglap Road. The street names in the estate were inspired by European operas and *bangsawan* (traditional Malay opera).

The area was part of almost 500 acres of coconut and rubber plantations owned by the Frankel family. Abraham Frankel had arrived in Singapore in 1888 from a poor village in Lithuania to pursue a better life for his family, and eventually became a prominent and wealthy merchant. The Frankels' sprawling landholdings in Siglap (which was near the sea at the time before land reclamation) included a house in which the family lived until World War II.[1]

Around 1947, the land was acquired by Crédit Foncier d'Extrême-Orient, a pioneer Franco-Belgian land developer in Singapore, for about $1.1 million. The deal was brokered by Nassim & Co. Limited.[2] The area was eventually divided into Frankel Estate and Opera Estate.

Private Residential Development

The development of Opera Estate into a residential area began in the 1950s.[3] Crédit Foncier d'Extrême-Orient divided up the land and sold the plots to various developers who embarked on different housing projects in the estate. These included Crédit Foncier itself, the Singapore Trading Company and Nassim & Co.

Nassim & Co. in turn sold off a small parcel of land to a developer, Chua Chye Chua, in 1957. Chua recalled: "[T]he environment there… it was a semi-deserted place, jungle-like environment with a lot of rubber trees, ponds for the ducks and… pig [farms]. Then you have small hillocks made of limestone and so on. … [After I purchased the land], I have [*sic*] to do all this clearance, filling up all the ponds, knocking down the hillocks before I could start building. It took me some time."[4] Chua built 12 bungalows with modern sanitation which were sold between $15,000 and $18,000 each.

According to him, the houses in Opera Estate were not targeted at the wealthy: "They were the usual working-class people who are clerical workers or some semi-professional ones and so on. These are the kind of houses they can only afford to buy. Other houses in the other parts of Singapore would probably cost them well over a hundred thousand [dollars]. A hundred thousand [dollars] in those days were big money."[5]

In addition to bungalows, there were also smaller and cheaper terrace houses. The homes sold by Crédit Foncier were on Dafne and Aida streets and were one-storey terrace houses with asbestos roofs and cement floors. Their prices started at $9,760.[6] Nassim & Co. sold single-storey terrace houses along Fidelio Street starting from $14,000. Each came with two bedrooms, a utility room, a spacious lounge and dining room, and a front and back garden.[7] In 1957, Nassim & Co. advertised a "modern two-storey bungalow" with three bedrooms in Opera Estate for $24,900.[8]

In a *Berita Harian* article about Opera Estate in 1989, *bangsawan* actor Shariff Medan, one of the estate's early residents, said he bought his single-storey terrace house on Dido Street for only $7,800. He recalled that the area was not popular at the time. "Tetapi ramai orang tak suka tempat ini sebab jalannya berlekuk, berlumpur, tak ada kemudahan dan banyak nyamuk."[9] (Translation: But many people did not like this place because the roads were full of potholes and muddy. The area also lacked facilities and was infested with mosquitoes.)

(Facing page) Jalan Bintang Tiga, 2020. Floods are no longer an occurrence there. *Photo by and courtesy of Irene Loh.*

(Left) In 1957, a two-storey a bungalow in Opera Estate cost $24,900. *Image reproduced from "Page 3 Advertisements Column 1," Straits Times, 21 March 1957, 3 (From NewspaperSG).*

(Below) Swan Lake Avenue is named after a ballet by the Russian composer Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky. Jalan Bintang Tiga is derived from *Jula Juli Bintang Tiga*, a popular Malay *bangsawan*. *Bintang tiga* means "three stars" in Malay. *Photo by and courtesy of Veronica Chee.*

Asrina Tanuri is a Manager (Research) with the National Library, Singapore, where she provides information services to government agencies. Her research areas include community safety and security, and adult learning.

Mrs Nancy Tan, 75, lived in a bungalow on Tosca Street in the 1950s and 60s until she got married and moved out. Her mother had bought the bungalow for $30,000 in the mid-1950s. She recalled that the area was very quiet back then. "Tosca Street had only one row of houses," she said. "On the opposite side of the road was a grassy field where cows used to graze. My mother would collect the cow dung to be used as fertilisers for her plants. There was a small, rocky hill on Aida Street and I've seen goats on the hill. An Indian man would go around the estate on a bicycle selling goat's milk."[10]

One of Opera Estate's most prominent residents was the first president of Singapore, Yusof Ishak, who lived on Aida Street when he was still a journalist. He was known among the neighbours to have a keen interest in gardening.[11] Journalist David Kraal had his first encounter with Yusof Ishak and his wife at Kraal's uncle's new terrace house in the neighbourhood. Kraal recalled: "Before we said our goodnights, the gallant journalist [Yusof Ishak] picked a choice orchid from his nearby garden and handed it to my flower-loving mother. It was the perfect end to a fine evening."[12]

From the backyard of Mrs Nancy Tan's former home on Tosca Street, she could see Yusof Ishak's house. She recalled of his wife: "Puan Noor Aishah was a very warm and friendly lady. She would give us *kueh* during Hari Raya."[13]

Another well-known figure that resided in Opera Estate was Singapore's first Minister for Home Affairs and Social Welfare, Othman Wok.[14]

(Top) Opera Estate is a private residential estate located in the eastern region of Singapore. It was developed in the 1950s. *Photo by and courtesy of Asrina Tanuri.*

(Above) Yusof Ishak and Puan Noor Aishah with their children in their Opera Estate home on Aida Street, 1955. *Yusof Ishak Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

A Plea for Bus Services

As residents began moving into their new homes in Opera Estate, they found commuting difficult as no public buses were plying the estate.[15] In a letter written in June 1958 to the authorities appealing for a bus company to service the area, the residents wrote: "It is a tragic sight, nay, pathetic to see office workers (men and women of all ages) climb the steep incline and walk one mile to Changi Road panting and perspiring, in order to get a bus to their offices in town; schoolchildren ranging from six years and upwards rushing from as early as seven o'clock in the morning to get to one of the 12 schools in Katong or Geylang areas."[16]

Residents had to rely on pirate taxis instead, who charged unreasonably high fares.[17] It was only after a concrete bridge replaced a makeshift one made from coconut tree trunks and the widening of a road to accommodate buses that a daily bus service eventually began running in May 1959. The service was provided by Katong-Bedok Bus Service and started from Guillemard Road and ran through Opera Estate via Frankel Estate.[18]

The Flood Menace

Opera Estate also used to be prone to flooding. The floods mainly occurred in the areas bound by New Changi Road, Fidelio Street and Dido Street, as well as Carmen Street, Carmen Terrace and Lakme Terrace.

In October 1973, a heavy morning downpour caused massive floods that submerged more than a hundred houses under three to four feet (1 to 1.2 m) of water. The *Straits Times* reported that "housewives, who had anticipated flooding because it had occurred on four previous occasions during the rainy spell this month rushed back from markets and telephoned their husbands to return and help in evacuating furniture and goods". The Chua family on Aida Street was badly hit as their rock garden, which was worth thousands of dollars, was damaged. Their pet dog also drowned in the flooding.[19]

Floods continued to plague residents well into the 1990s. Each time heavy rainfall was forecasted, residents would move their belongings to higher ground. After the floodwater receded, residents had to spend hours clearing the debris and cleaning their homes, salvaging what could be saved and discarding the rest.

One such resident was Basil Fernando, who had a piano and radio destroyed in a flood in 1974. Since then, he had been diligently recording every flood in a logbook. He told the *WEEKENDeast* weekly newspaper in 1996: "After the floods, you see the neighbours throwing away their carpets. Once our neighbours came back from a holiday to find their speakers destroyed." He said that if it rained at night, his family would stay up in case it flooded.[20]

Mdm Irene Loh, 75, was a resident of Jalan Bintang Tiga. She recalled the flooding that occurred in the 1980s and 90s: "Once it rained so heavily that water entered the kitchen from the overflowing drain behind my house. At the same time, water also gushed in from the front. The entire first floor was flooded. My daughters even saw some fish swimming in the living room, but luckily there were no snakes."[21]

In 1996, the Ministry of Environment embarked on a $46-million drainage project to ease the flooding in the estate.[22] Taking about six years to complete, the scheme involved "impound[ing] the stormwater in an underground pond and then pump[ing] it into the main canal" to "control and regulate the rate of flow in the canal". An underground storage tank was built under the Opera Estate Primary School field which would temporarily store rainwater during heavy storms.[23]

The Kampong Spirit

Life in Opera Estate wasn't just about fighting floodwaters though. The kampong spirit of *gotong royong* (communal help) was very much alive in Opera Estate from the beginning. In the late 1950s, the Opera Estate Residents' Association was established to foster community bonding. The association aimed to "make this estate a model housing estate where conditions of living should be ideal, and, in this respect, earnestly solicit your (the residents) co-operation, assistance and guidance". The committee aimed to "better our living conditions in this estate". These included "getting the first public telephone installed, police patrols, *jaga* patrols, street lighting, roads and drains, street name plates [and] traffic signs".[24]

In 1960, "Operation Chantek" (*chantek* is now spelt *cantik*, which means "pretty" in Malay) was initiated to clear overgrown lallang and potholes containing stagnant water in an unoccupied land between Rienzi Street and Norma Terrace. Resident Donald Tan led a group of 20 volunteers for the operation. "The place has been an eyesore ever since the estate was built about five years ago. I am glad we are doing something about it at last," he said.[25]

The following year, some 60 members of the Opera Estate Residents' Association came together to repair two damaged roads in the estate that were reported to be in a "derelict condition". Not only did they take on the hard labour of repairing the roads, the residents also bore the expenses for the repairs.[26]

Jalan Bintang Tiga – Singapore's First Friendly Street

The neighbourhood spirit is perhaps best exemplified by Jalan Bintang Tiga's "Let's Makan" party, a tradition first initiated by cartoonist James Suresh in 2001 to celebrate National Day with a few of his neighbours. The small potluck party evolved into a bigger street party that takes places annually in August to foster the spirit of neighbourliness. Neighbours come together to contribute and help prepare the multicultural food spread and organise games for the children.[27]

Flooding at Jalan Bintang Tiga after an hour-long thunderstorm, 1974. In 2002, the Opera Estate Drainage Scheme was completed to alleviate the flooding problem in the estate. *Source: The Straits Times © SPH Media Limited. Reprinted with permission.*

Suresh, co-creator of the popular local comic book series *Mr Kiasu*, moved into Opera Estate in 1993. In 2015, he told the newspaper *Today*: "Organising the annual street party is just a small way to bring neighbours together in acknowledgement of our common space and neighbourly ties. It also provides opportunities for us to show our care and concern for each other."[28]

Over the years, the attendance grew as old neighbours who had moved out returned for the event and new residents joined in. Mdm Irene Loh, who now resides on Aida Street, and her family still make it a point to attend the street party. She said: "I look forward to the event each year as it's a time to catch up with former neighbours, soak up the atmosphere and look at the mango tree in my old home."[29]

The Singapore Kindness Movement began supporting the annual event in 2013 by sponsoring the tent and some food. Six years later, it named Jalan Bintang Tiga Singapore's first "Friendly Street" with a special identity motif affixed to its street sign.[30]

Guests who have been invited to the street party include former Emeritus Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong; former Member of Parliament for Joo Chiat SMC, Charles Chong; Member of Parliament for Marine Parade GRC (Joo Chiat) Edwin Tong; former Non-constituency Member of Parliament Yee Jenn Jong, who grew up in Opera Estate; and William Wan, General Secretary of the Singapore Kindness Movement.

(Left) The Singapore Kindness Movement named Jalan Bintang Tiga Singapore's first "Friendly Street" in 2019. The street sign has a special identity motif affixed to it. Member of Parliament for Marine Parade GRC (Joo Chiat) Edwin Tong (left), and William Wan (right), General Secretary of the Singapore Kindness Movement, unveiling the sign. *Courtesy of the Singapore Kindness Movement.*

(Below) Children taking turns to hit the piñata at Jalan Bintang Tiga's "Let's Makan" party in 2019. *Courtesy of the Singapore Kindness Movement.*

HOW THE STREETS GOT THEIR NAMES

According to the Advisory Committee on the Naming of Roads and Streets in 2002, the name "Opera Estate" and the street names within were probably suggested by a developer.

Aida Street	*Aida* is an opera by Giuseppe Verdi set in ancient Egypt.
Carmen Street and Carmen Terrace	*Carmen* is an opera by Georges Bizet.
Dafne Street	*Dafne* is an opera by Richard Strauss.
Dido Street	*Dido and Aeneas*, an opera set in ancient Greece, was written by Henry Purcell.
Ernani Street	*Ernani* is another opera by Verdi.
Fidelio Street	*Fidelio* is Ludwig van Beethoven's only opera.
Figaro Street	*The Marriage of Figaro* is an opera by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart.
Jalan Bangsawan	*Bangsawan* is the art of traditional Malay opera.
Jalan Bintang Tiga	*Jula Juli Bintang Tiga* is the title of a popular Malay *bangsawan. Bintang tiga* is Malay for "three stars".
Jalan Khairuddin	This street is named after Khairuddin Amiruddin, a *bangsawan* star popular in Singapore in the 1920s.
Jalan Terang Bulan and Terang Bulan Avenue	*Terang Bulan* ("bright moon") is a *bangsawan*. A popular Indonesian song in the 1930s, it was adapted from the French song *La Rosalie*.
Lakme Street and Lakme Terrace	*Lakmé* is an opera by Léo Delibes set in 19th-century India.
Maria Avenue	Possibly named after Maria Callas, the American-born Greek soprano who was one of the most renowned and influential opera singers of the 20th century.
Metropole Drive	The Opéra-Théâtre de Metz Métropole is a theatre and opera house located in the city of Metz in France. The opera house opened in 1732 and is the oldest in France.
Norma Terrace	*Norma* is an opera by Vincenzo Bellini.
Rienzi Street	*Rienzi* is an opera by Richard Wagner.
Swan Lake Avenue	*Swan Lake* is a ballet by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky.
Tosca Street and Tosca Terrace	*Tosca* is an opera by Giacomo Puccini.

REFERENCES

Dunlop, Peter K.G. *Street Names of Singapore*, 39, 65, 68, 77, 82-83, 116, 118, 131, 153, 178, 210, 225, 263, 296, 308, 312. Singapore: Who's Who, 2000. (From National Library, Singapore, Call no. RSING 959.57 DUN)

Hanim Mohd Saleh. "'Estet Bangsawan' di Opera Estate," *Berita Harian*, 10 November 1989, 8. (From NewspaperSG)

Ng, Desmond. "Named After Famous Operas," *New Paper*, 19 June 2002, 39. (From NewspaperSG)

Ng, Yew Peng. *What's in the Name? How the Streets and Villages in Singapore Got Their Names*, 66, 108, 137, 141, 150, 154, 191, 194, 213, 280, 326, 341, 372, 404, 416, 422. Singapore: World Scientific, 2018. (From National Library, Singapore, Call no. RSING 915.9570014 NG)

Sulaiman Jeem. "Pak Din – Tokoh Bangsawan Yg Ta' Ada Tolok Banding-nya," *Berita Harian*, 18 April 1964, 7. (From NewspaperSG)

NOTES

1 Joan Bieder, ed., *The Jews of Singapore* (Singapore: Suntree Media, 2007), 29, 80–81. (From National Library, Singapore, Call no. RSING 959.57004924 BIE); Lisa Ginsburgh, "Worlds Apart in Singapore: A Jewish Family Story," *Asian Jewish Life*, no. 15 (October 2014), https://asianjewishlife.org/pages/articles/AJL_Issue_15_Oct2014/AJL_Issue15_CoverStory_Worlds_Apart_in_Singapore.html; "Death of Mr. A. Frankel," *Malaya Tribune*, 28 May 1928, 7. (From NewspaperSG)

2 "Homes Will Rise on this Million $ Land," *Singapore Standard*, 2 April 1951, 2; "$500,000 Estate Deal in S'pore," *Malaya Tribune*, 8 March 1947, 1; "40 New Homes for Squatters," *Singapore Free Press*, 5 May 1951, 5. (From NewspaperSG); Thomas Coomans, "China Papers: The Architecture Archives of the Building Company Crédit Foncier d'Extrême-Orient (1907–1959)," *ABE Journal Architecture Beyond Europe*, no. 5 (2014, December), ResearchGate, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/277885016_China_Papers_The_architecture_archives_of_the_building_company_Credit_Foncier_d'Extreme-Orient_1907-59.

3 Victor R. Savage and Brenda S. Yeoh, *Toponymics: A Study of Singapore Street Names* (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 2004), 20. (From National Library, Singapore, Call no. RSING 915.9570014 SAV)

4 Chua Chye Chua, oral history interview by Jesley Chua Chee Huan, 23 July 1999, MP3 audio, Reel/Disc 13 of 23. (From National Archives of Singapore, Accession no. 002140)

5 Chua Chye Chua, interview.

6 "Credit Foncier Starts New Building Project," *Singapore Standard*, 3 January 1956, 9. (From NewspaperSG)

7 "Page 7 Advertisements Column 1," *Straits Times*, 27 October 1956, 7. (From NewspaperSG)

8 "Page 3 Advertisements Column 1," *Straits Times*, 21 March 1957, 3. (From NewspaperSG)

9 Hanim Mohd Saleh, "'Estet Bangsawan' di Opera Estate," *Berita Harian*, 10 November 1989, 8. (From NewspaperSG)

10 Mrs Nancy Tan, interview, 5 January 2022.

11 Mohd Anis Tairan, *Kampungku Siglap: Memoir Mohd Anis Tairan* (Singapore: Majlis Pusat Pertubuhan-Pertubuhan Budaya Melayu Singapura, 2010), 33. (From National Library, Singapore, Call no. RSING 959.57 MOH)

12 David Kraal, "The President, My Friend," *Straits Times*, 6 September 1985, 2. (From NewspaperSG)

13 Mrs Nancy Tan, interview, 5 January 2022.

14 Ravi Veloo, "The Story of Singapore's Race Relations As Seen Through His Eyes," *Straits Times*, 25 January 1997, 44; Jackie Sam, "3 New Ministers," *Straits Times*, 18 October 1963, 1. (From NewspaperSG)

15 "4,000 Still Have to Hike a Mile to Bus-Stop," *Singapore Standard*, 25 October 1958, 5. (From NewspaperSG)

16 "Appeal to Govt. for Bus Service," *Singapore Standard*, 25 June 1958, 5. (From NewspaperSG)

(Top) Shophouses on Swan Lake Avenue, 2022. *Photo by and courtesy of Veronica Chee.*

(Above) Bangsawan Park on Jalan Bangsawan, 2022. It has a children's playground and an exercise area. *Photo by and courtesy of Veronica Chee.*

The street party ran every year for about two decades. Unfortunately, because of the Covid-19 pandemic, the party did not take place in 2020 and 2021.

Amenities in the Neighbourhood

Very early on, a number of primary schools were set up in the area. Opera Estate Boys' School and Opera Estate Girls' School were established in 1959. The buildings of the two primary schools stood side-by-side along Fidelio Street. Both schools were then merged to form Opera Estate Primary School in 1985, which is still on Fidelio Street today.[31]

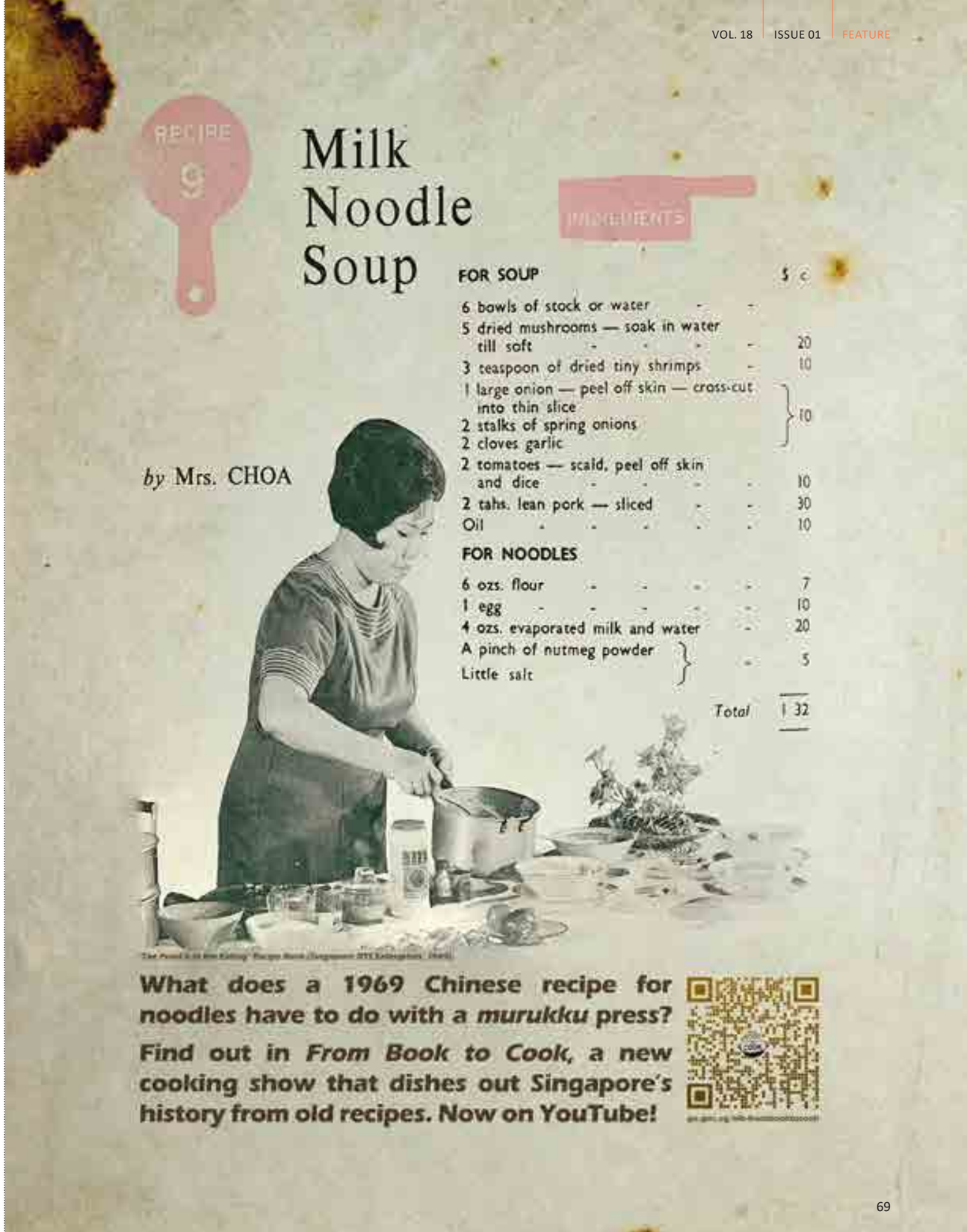
Located on Jalan Khairuddin, the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus (CHIJ) Opera Estate, also known as Opera Estate Convent, was also founded in 1959. In 1990, it merged with the primary school section of Katong Convent and both became known as CHIJ (Katong) Primary. The Red Cross Training Camp currently occupies the old school premises on Jalan Khairuddin.[32]

There are three parks in Opera Estate: Aida Park, which is between Aida Street and Bedok South Road; Bangsawan Park along Bangsawan Road; and Siglap Linear Park. The last was completed in 2002 and stretches from Swan Lake Avenue all the way to East Coast Park by the sea.[33] An open field on Swan Lake Avenue known as Opera Estate Football Field is also popular with residents.

Swan Lake Avenue is also where you can find a row of shophouses housing eateries such as Baker & Cook and Plank Sourdough Pizza, as well as a number of food catering companies.

Today, more than 60 years after the estate was first developed, most of the original houses have been torn down and replaced with modern, multi-storeyed homes worth millions. Many of the original residents have moved out and young families with children in tow have made Opera Estate their home. But one thing remains the same: Opera Estate is still a peaceful and quiet residential area with neighbours living together in harmony. ♦

17 "'Pirate' Taxi Men Have Monopoly in Opera Estate," *Straits Times*, 15 February 1959, 7. (From NewspaperSG)
18 "This 'Bridge of Sighs' for 4,000 Residents of Opera Estate in Singapore," *Sunday Standard*, 3 August 1958, 2; "Estate Gets New Bridge: Residents Thank Standard," *Singapore Standard*, 5 September 1958, 2; "Bus Service for Housing Estate," *Straits Times*, 31 May 1959, 5; "Now Opera Estate Gets Buses," *Straits Times*, 1 June 1959, 2. (From NewspaperSG)
19 Gerald Pereira, Maureen Chua and Jacob Daniel, "Flood of Protest After Big Downpour," *Straits Times*, 27 October 1973, 6. (From NewspaperSG)
20 Celine Tan, "Family Stays Awake If It Rains At Night," *WEEKENDeast*, 4 October 1996, 2. (From NewspaperSG)
21 Mdm Irene Loh, interview, 6 January 2022.
22 Tracy Lee, "Opera Estate Plan to Ease Floods," *Straits Times*, 29 September 1996, 29. (From NewspaperSG)
23 Abdullah Tarmugi, "Speech by Mr Abullah Tarmugi Minister for Community Development and Member of Parliament for Bedok GRC (Siglap) at the Launching Ceremony for the Opera Estate Drainage Scheme on Saturday 28 September 1996 at 11.35 am Opera Estate Primary School," 28 September 1996, transcript. (From National Archives of Singapore, Document no. at19960928s); Ng Joo Hee, "How We May Tame Storm Water," *Straits Times*, 18 November 2016, 18. (From NewspaperSG)
24 Opera Estate Facebook, accessed 7 January 2022, https://www.facebook.com/operaestatenc/; "Editorial," Opera News, no. 1 (2-A) (February 1959): 1. (From PublicationSG); "Opera News Makes Debut," *Singapore Standard*, 29 January 1959, 5. (From NewspaperSG)
25 Alan Khoo, "'Operation Chantek' in Opera Estate," *Singapore Free Press*, 30 March 1960, 7. (From NewspaperSG)
26 "Residents' 'Changkol Squad' Fix Estate Roads," *Singapore Free Press*, 1 June 1961, 4; "Example of the Good Citizens," *Singapore Free Press*, 2 June 1961, 6. (From NewspaperSG)
27 Mr Kiasu and His Kampung Spirit," *Tabla*, 16 October 2015, 1. (From NewspaperSG); "Singapore Names Its First Friendly Street," Singapore Kindness Movement, 17 August 2019, https://www.kindness.sg/news/singapore-names-its-first-friendly-street/; Marilyn Peh, "For the Past 20 Years, This Tight-knit Group of Neighbours Have Kept a Special Street Party Tradition Alive," *The Pride*, 2 September 2019, https://pride.kindness.sg/20-years-neighbours-jalan-bintang-tiga-james-suresh-street-party/.
28 James Suresh, "A Neighbourly Connection," *Today*, 5 March 2014, 45. (From NewspaperSG)
29 Mdm Irene Loh, interview, 6 January 2022.
30 "Singapore Names Its First Friendly Street."
31 "History," Opera Estate Primary School, accessed 7 January 2022, https://operaestatepri.moe.edu.sg/history/.
32 "Back Under One Roof After 14 years," *Straits Times*, 5 May 1990, 8. (From NewspaperSG); "History," CHIJ (Katong) Primary, accessed 7 January 2022, https://www.chijkcp.moe.edu.sg/our-ij-story/history.
33 Michelle Goh, *Celebrating Siglap* (Singapore: Straits Times Press, 2009), 67. (From National Library, Singapore, Call no. RSING 959.57 GOH)



15 Feb – 30 Jun 2022

New Light on an Old Tale

80th Anniversary of the Fall of Singapore

This year, we mark 80 years since the Fall of Singapore through artefacts that bear testament to our difficult path to nationhood and the price of peace that was paid by the sacrifices of many.

Come visit the "New Light on an Old Tale" exhibition, which is centred around the Japanese invasion of British colonial Singapore. This exhibition tells the story of the changing fortunes of a tiny island caught between two empires who were once friends turned foes.

National Archives of Singapore, Level 3 Atrium

Daily, 10am - 9pm

Free admission. Booking is not required.

Mainichi Newspapers Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF SINGAPORE

An institution of the National Library Board