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THE FORGOTTEN
MURALS OF
PAYA LEBAR
AIRPORT

WE'RE FISHING FOR IDEAS

Is there a slice of Singapore history you've always wanted to read about in *BiblioAsia*? We'd love to hear your suggestions. Drop us a line at ref@nlb.gov.sg



A fisherman casting his net, 1954. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Director's Note

I believe my first encounter with public art was at the old Plaza Singapura – “Wealth” and “Contentment”, two sculptures by local artist Ng Eng Teng. I remember being awed by the voluminous female figures soaring above me (both sculptures have since been relocated to a spot outside the University Culture Centre).

Today, one can encounter public art everywhere around Singapore, whether in the form of sculptures and murals, or something more ephemeral like a performance. This issue's cover story focuses on the murals at the former Paya Lebar Airport. Once iconic emblems of an iconic building, they are barely remembered today and are in danger of being completely lost. Dahlia Shamsuddin's poignant piece reminds us to stop, look, and reflect on the artworks around us as these may not be here tomorrow.

In the past, getting vaccinated meant scratching an inoculated person's arm and transferring bodily fluids onto the scratched arm of the person to be immunised. Thank goodness we have progressed since. Ong Eng Chuan's essay on the history of vaccination in Singapore is a fascinating look at how vaccination as a public health strategy dates back to 1819.

Everything changes. What we view as traditional today must have been new once. Asrina Tanuri and Nadya Suradi's dive into Malay wedding customs shows how these traditions have evolved, even within the short space of a few decades.

The time-honoured tale of Mulan, available in the National Library's Asian Children's Literature Collection, is examined by Goh Yu Mei, who uncovers different interpretations to this 1,500-year-old story reflecting changes over time and context. Also found in the same collection are other Asian tales espousing similar values of love and sacrifice. Michelle Heng shares some of these stories with us.

Gracie Lee's comprehensive overview of the history of printing in the Philippines amply demonstrates the impact of technological change on printing methods – from woodblock to moveable type. Zoe Yeo's story of Jurong Bird Park's fledgling years provides a backdrop to the exciting changes that will happen in 2022 as it relocates to Mandai.

These are just some of the highlights of this issue, which also looks at the origins of Straits-born cuisine by Lee Geok Boi, the history of the Banjar people in Singapore by Zinnurain Nasir and Nasri Shah, Julian Davison's account of architectural firm Swan & Maclaren in propagating the idea of apartment living here, and Lee Chor Lin's piece on Chinese graphic artists in pre-war Singapore.

Clearly, one thing that does not change is our commitment to bringing you great reads. Enjoy this issue and stay safe!

P.S.: If you have photographs of the murals that Dahlia writes about, please let us know.

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On the cover
Detail from the “Skyline of Singapore” mural by William P. Mundy. Photo by Darren Soh, 2008.

Errata
In the article “Nature Conservation in Singapore” published in *BiblioAsia*, Vol. 17, Iss. 1 (Apr–Jun 2021), we misspelt the name of the Minister for National Development during the editing process. He is Desmond Lee, not Desmond Lim. The online edition has been amended. We apologise for the mistake.

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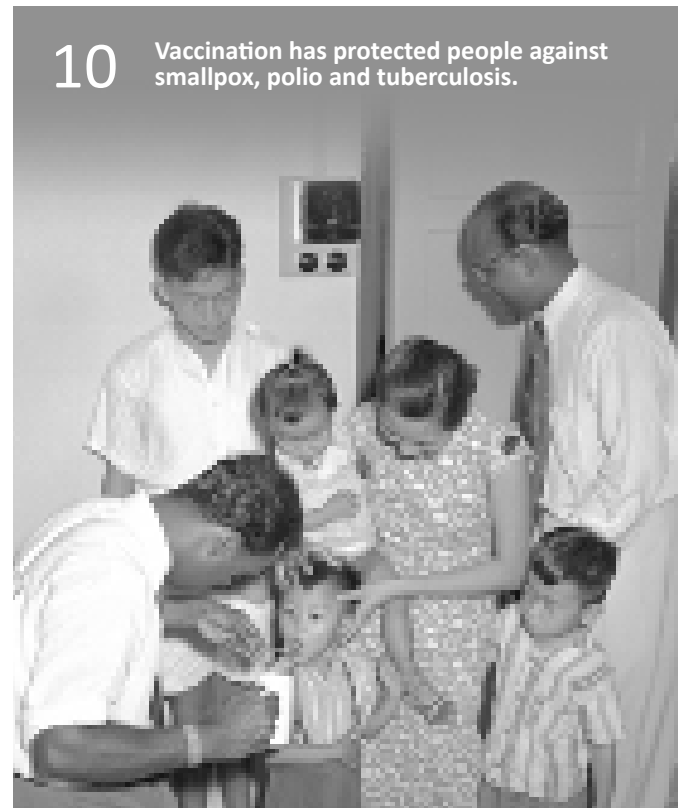
Through buildings like Amber Mansions and Eu Court, Swan & Maclaren helped to introduce the concept of apartment living in Singapore, says **Julian Davison**.

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Several talented graphic artists moved from China to Singapore from the 1920s. **Lee Chor Lin** highlights these artists and their works.



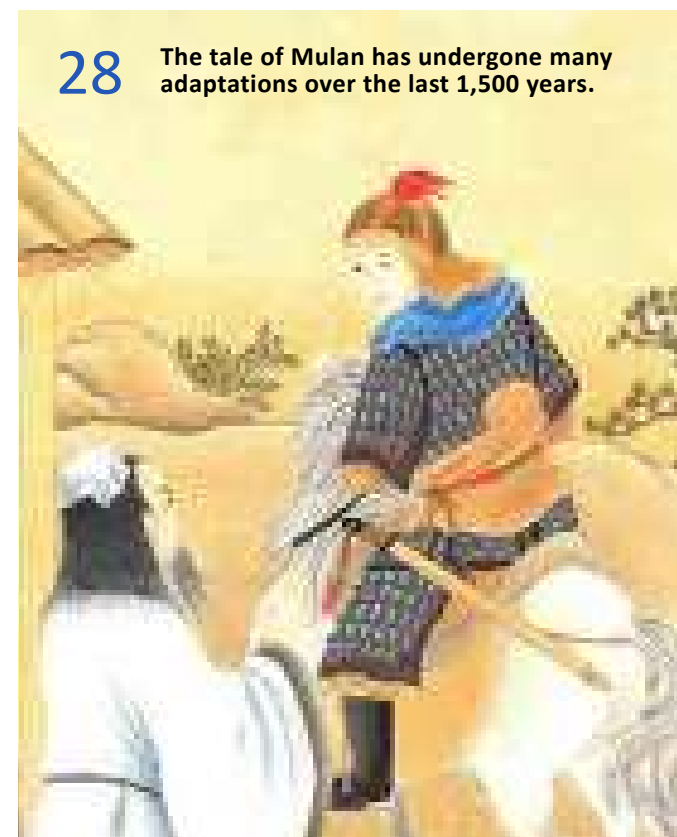
10 Vaccination has protected people against smallpox, polio and tuberculosis.



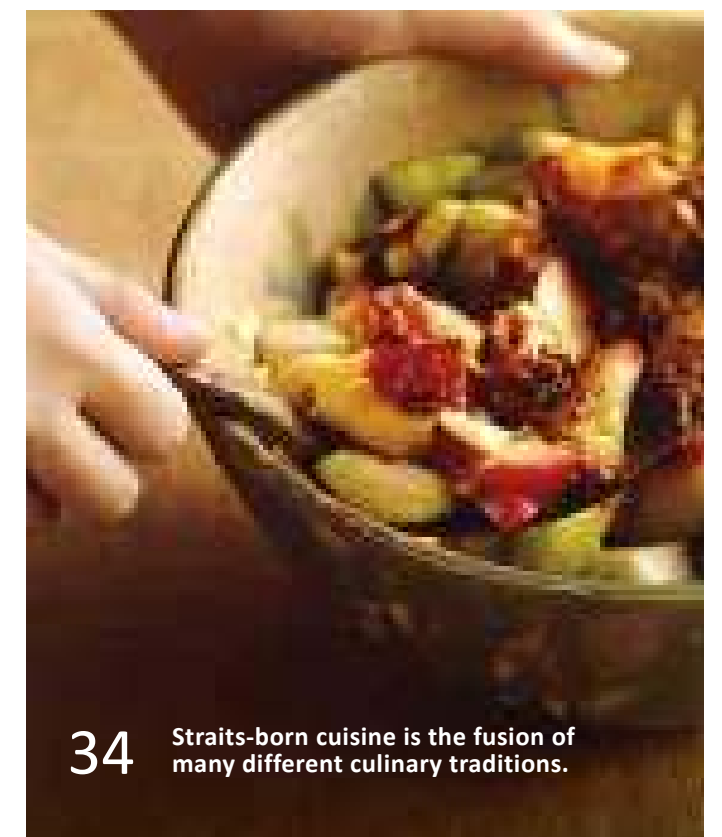
16 Urbanisation and modernity have led to changes in Malay-Muslim wedding customs and practices.



04 "Skyline of Singapore" is the only mural still intact at the old Paya Lebar Airport.



28 The tale of Mulan has undergone many adaptations over the last 1,500 years.



34 Straits-born cuisine is the fusion of many different culinary traditions.



THE FORGOTTEN MURALS OF PAYA LEBAR AIRPORT

Three large murals used to grace the walls of Paya Lebar Airport, depicting scenes from Singapore and Malaysia. **Dahlia Shamsuddin** has the inside story of how they came to be.

Before Changi Airport, there was Paya Lebar Airport. Opened in 1955, Paya Lebar Airport was Singapore's gateway to the world and one of the most modern airports of its time. However, as Singapore grew in importance as an air hub and a destination in its own right, further expansion was necessary to cope with the increasing number of passengers using the airport. In November 1962, work began on a new International Passenger Terminal Building. It was completed in April 1964 at a cost of \$3.5 million.

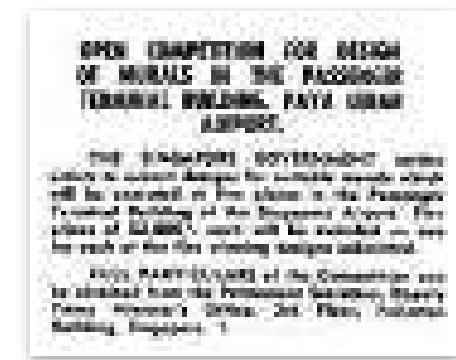
In a presumed effort to add a dash of colour to this new building, the government decided that large murals would adorn its walls. On 1 October 1962, a small notice published in *The Straits Times* invited artists to "submit designs for suitable murals which will be executed at five places in the Passenger Building of the Singapore Airport".¹ Each of the five winning designs would receive a cash prize of \$2,000.

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(Above) "Races and Religions of Malaysia" was designed by William P. Mundy. *Courtesy of William P. Mundy.*

(Right) The government notice inviting entries for the murals design competition. *The Straits Times*, 1 October 1962, p. 17. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

(Below) "Cultural Dances of Malaysia" was designed by Shamsuddin H. Akib. This mural and the one above are no longer intact. *Courtesy of William P. Mundy.*



In the end, however, only three designs were chosen. Two were done by a Singapore-based British art director, William P. Mundy, which showed what *The Straits Times* described as "a panoramic view of Singapore by night" and "a Malaysian panorama".² The third winning design, which depicted "the cultural dances of Malaysia", was created by one Shamsuddin H. Akib – my father.³

The Murals Competition

My father, a commercial artist, and Mundy (or Bill, as he prefers to be called) were colleagues at Papineau Advertising during the 1960s where Bill was the art director. My father and Bill were 30 and 26 years old respectively when they won the mural design competition.

My father is a self-taught artist. Born in Singapore in 1933, he started out as a peon (office boy) in the Commissioner-General Office but realised advancement prospects were limited and that he was capable of more. He briefly joined *The*

Straits Times as an apprentice artist before moving to Papineau Advertising as they were looking for someone who could write Jawi in a calligraphic style. My father had taken part in other competitions before, winning a poster competition on diphtheria in 1959 and later coming in second place in another poster competition for the National Language campaign organised by *The Straits Times* in 1964.⁴

Bill first came to Singapore in 1957 as a soldier during his national service. He was based at Gillman Barracks doing cartographic work. He left Singapore a year later after completing his national service before returning in 1960 to work in Papineau Advertising. He was hired as a visualiser and was promoted to art director after six months.

My father was already working in Papineau when Bill joined, and regards Bill as his mentor and friend. Bill was very particular and pushed my father and his colleagues hard at work, but they learned a lot from him as my father recalls.

When Bill and my father heard about the competition, they decided separately that they would take part but did not discuss their designs with each other. When my father found out that Bill was planning to submit two designs, he decided he would do the same. "If Bill can submit two designs, so can I," he told me.

Both men submitted two designs each, one portraying Singapore and the other Malaysia. My father's second design was titled "Some Fascinating Eating Manners of Singaporeans". This design was eventually not selected and was returned to my father. Unfortunately, my father cannot remember the details of this design, which is a shame given its intriguing title.





(Above) Deputy Prime Minister Toh Chin Chye (left) with William P. Mundy (middle) and Shamsuddin H. Akib (right), winners of the Paya Lebar Airport murals competition, at the prize-giving ceremony in City Hall on 23 March 1963. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

(Left) The official letter, dated 19 March 1963, informing Shamsuddin H. Akib that one of his designs had been selected. *Courtesy of Dahlia Shamsuddin.*

Submitting separate designs to represent Singapore and Malaysia was a strategic decision on the part of both men. They were not sure if the organisers would prefer a design focusing on Singapore or Malaysia, especially as this contest was being held in the months leading up to the formation of the Federation of Malaysia in September 1963.

They believed, probably rightly, that the chances of winning at least one prize would be higher by submitting two separate designs each. They guessed that the judging panel, led by Cathay Organisation head Loke Wan Tho, would comprise people from Singapore and Malaysia, and figured that these judges would likely have their preferences when it came to what would be considered as suitable designs for the new passenger terminal build-

ing. It turned out that Bill and my father guessed right.

The prize collection ceremony was held at City Hall on 23 March 1963, a Saturday morning. Deputy Prime Minister Toh Chin Chye presented Bill with a cheque for \$4,000 for his two winning creations while my father received \$2,000 for his design. Bill and my father never found out why only three designs were picked rather than the planned five. Bill's murals were titled "Skyline of Singapore" and "Races and Religions of Malaysia", while my father's was called "Cultural Dances of Malaysia".

The money was a princely sum at the time. In comparison, the monthly rent for a three-room flat in the newly completed Selegie House was \$90.⁵ With his prize money, Bill bought a green Triumph TR4

sports car which was waiting for him at the airport in London when he went back for a visit. He later had the car shipped to Singapore and he drove it around for the next 18 months before leaving for a new job in Hong Kong. My parents had more practical concerns; they were expecting their first child (me) a few months after my dad won the competition and the extra money would have come in handy.

My father's mural of the cultural dances of Malaysia, which measured about 9 metres by 1.5 metres, was installed on the ground floor of Paya Lebar Airport. As you entered the building and turned left, you would see my father's mural on the wall at the far end, above a bank of phone booths. That location turned out to be a popular spot for people to take photos before flying off.

Bill's mural of Singapore's cityscape at night was the longest of the three, at about 12 metres by 1.5 metres. It was installed on the opposite end of the building from my father's mural, at the staircase landing one floor up. Due to the open-concept design of the concourse, this mural was still visible from the ground floor though. Bill's second mural of Malaysian scenes, however, was much less visible as it was installed in the transit lounge on the ground floor. (The dimensions of this mural are not available.)

Of Mosaic and Iron

Although Bill and my father did not discuss their designs beforehand, the two men agreed on the basic material for the murals – Italian mosaic or coloured Smalti

glass. Bill had seen these being used in Singapore and thought that they would be suitable for the murals.

Bill had originally planned to return home to Britain for a visit shortly after the winners of the mural design competition were announced. As his flight from Singapore to London would include a stopover in Rome, at the prize-giving ceremony Bill told Toh that he was prepared to stop in Murano, Venice, for a few days to visit the mosaic factory and supervise the colour selection of the Smalti glass if the Singapore government would pay for the cost of his stay. Toh agreed, and the government made arrangements for Bill's stay in Venice and also provided him with an allowance.⁶

The three murals were rendered in different colour schemes and designs. My father's mural used red and orange Smalti glass pieces as the backdrop. To make the dancers more prominent, he designed them out of thin iron strips, in a dark colour. The figures were then affixed to the tiles so that they protruded slightly.

It was not an easy task assembling my father's mural. He recalls going to a shipyard in Tanjong Rhu to supervise the Chinese workers who were bending the iron to create the figures of the dancers, and one of them telling him "Wah! *Lu punya banyak susah!*" ("Wah! Your [design] is so difficult!").

My father's mural depicts four types of Malaysian dance forms – represented

by a pair of Indian dancers, a pair of Chinese *wayang* (opera) dancers, a traditional dancer from Sarawak and a pair of *mak yong* dancers from the state of Kelantan. (*mak yong* is a traditional form of dance-drama prevalent in the area.)

My family has a personal connection to Kelantan as my father's eldest sister had moved to the state with her husband in the mid-1940s, after the war. Over the years, my father would regularly visit my aunt up north. So the *mak yong* dancers were probably inspired by this link with Kelantan.

Bill's mural of Singapore at night depicts the financial district in 1962 from the vantage point of the Singapore River. Blue, purple and green were the predominant colours. The mural shows landmarks such as the General Post Office Building (present-day Fullerton Hotel) and the Asia Insurance Building (now known as Ascott Raffles Place), among other structures. Bill had chosen this scene because it was iconic, he told me.

(Right) Chan Thye Seng (right; former head of the Toa Payoh Branch Library) with Professor J. Clement Harrison, Dalhousie University, a speaker at the Commonwealth Asian Regional Workshop on Research Methodology in Librarianship, 1977. The background shows part of the "Cultural Dances of Malaysia" mural by Shamsuddin H. Akib. *Courtesy of Chan Thye Seng.*

(Below) View of the "Skyline of Singapore" mural by William P. Mundy and the concourse at Paya Lebar Airport, 1964. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*





For his second mural, Bill used well-known religious and non-religious landmarks, modes of transportation, a snake charmer, a satay seller, a lantern maker and Singapore's Merdeka Lion to depict different aspects of Singapore and Malaysia. He only used mosaic tiles in both his murals.

In Bill's case, the mosaic tiles arrived in Singapore in sheets from Italy with the design and colours already laid out according to his design. Affixing the mosaic tiles onto the wall was not a difficult task. My father's design with the iron figures, however, was more challenging to install; also, it was the only mural that was partly constructed in Singapore.

The Murals Today

Even though my family would go to Paya Lebar Airport in the 1970s, we never thought to pose for a photograph in front of my father's mural. Bill does not have a photograph of himself with his murals either. When the government announced plans in June 1975 to build a new airport in Changi to replace Paya Lebar,⁷ it never occurred to us to take a picture of my father's mural. We probably assumed that the Paya Lebar Airport building and the mural would be around forever and that we could always visit it. However, once Changi Airport became

operational in 1981, Paya Lebar Airport was transferred to the Republic of Singapore Air Force and became a military airbase.⁸ Gaining access to the building would no longer be easy.

In 2010, the Ministry of Defence (MINDEF) gave my father and me permission to visit Paya Lebar Airbase to view the murals. My reaction was "Finally! At last!" When we got there, we could easily spot Bill's mural of the Singapore skyline. However, we could not see the other two murals on the ground floor at all because the space had been partitioned into office cubicles, with walls hidden behind plasterboards.

Armed with a map from the 1964 souvenir programme for the opening of the new terminal, we walked around the ground floor, peering behind plasterboard walls. A small army of people from MINDEF and the Republic of Singapore Air Force even joined us in the search. Despite our best efforts, we were disappointed that we could not find the two murals.

In early 2012, Bill was on a visit to Singapore and I invited him to attend the opening of an exhibition at the National Library Building commemorating the 70th anniversary of the Battle of Singapore. At the event, we were told by someone who had seen all three murals that only

Bill's skyline of Singapore at the staircase landing was still intact.

Bill was silent when he heard the news. I asked about the state of the other two murals and was informed that the bottom half of Bill's mural on Malaysian scenes had been removed. The iron dancers in my father's mural had likewise been prised off and only the orange-red mosaic background remained. I went home and informed my father of the fate that had befallen his mural. Like Bill, my father said nothing when I broke the news to him.

In 2015, when Bill visited my father at home, I asked them how they felt upon hearing about the fate of the murals in 2012. They expressed their shock and sadness at what had happened. Bill also revealed that he liked my father's mural best because it was timeless. In a 2016 email to me, he said: "I thought your father's design the best of the three. It was so striking in oranges and red with very modern use of the dark metal."

It has been close to 60 years since Bill and my father won the mural competition. In the meantime, both men have gone on to distinguished careers. My father eventually left Papineau and joined publisher Donald Moore before working for various international advertising agencies in Singapore. In the 1980s, he

(Above) The only surviving mural, "Skyline of Singapore, made of Italian mosaic tiles by William P. Mundy at the former Paya Lebar Airport. Photo by Darren Soh, 2008.

(Above right) The designers of the murals, Shamsuddin H. Akib and William P. Mundy, at the former's home, 2018. Courtesy of Dahlia Shamsuddin.

became a freelance graphic artist and continued doing commissions until his late 60s. In 2015, he was awarded the Singapore Design Golden Jubilee Award for Visual Communication.

Bill left Singapore in 1964 and worked in Hong Kong and Bangkok before returning here in 1970 as the regional director of advertising agency Grant K&E. He went back to the United Kingdom in 1978 to become a fulltime artist. Described as one of the world's leading miniature portrait painters, Bill has painted the portraits of members of the British and Malaysian royal families.

Despite their many accomplishments, Bill and my father still regard the Paya Lebar Airport murals with much affection as winning the murals competition was one of the early highlights of their careers. My father told me that he had taken part in the competition because if he had won, his design would have been seen by many local and overseas visitors. It was a prestigious competition and being one of the winners brought him a lot of attention.

Bill said he was hopeful that at least one of his designs would clinch a prize and

was delighted when both were selected. In an email to me in May 2021, Bill wrote: "When I entered the competition in 1962/1963, my first idea was to capture the panoramic scene of the Singapore skyline at evening time; mainly by using various shades of blue, purple and green. What a contrast to today's amazing skyline with its magnificent modern skyscrapers. I hope my mural will be remembered as depicting a visual moment in time."⁹

My father, on his part, has one wish: that his mural be reconstructed one day.

Given that two of the murals have been lost, it is my hope that the remaining one – Bill's "Skyline of Singapore" – will be preserved. These murals captured my father's and Bill's experience of living and working in Singapore in the early 1960s. The murals also reflected their aspirations for a new, multiracial and independent country. Even after Singapore gained independence in 1965, the underlying message encapsulated in the murals – multiculturalism, development and progress – remains significant today. ♦

NOTES

- 1 Open competition for design of murals in the passenger terminal building, Paya Lebar Airport. (1962, October 1). *The Straits Times*, p. 17. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 2 Design for airport murals: 2 win prizes. (1963, March 24). *The Straits Times*, p. 8. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 3 This essay on the Paya Lebar Airport murals is based on a series of conversations with my father and William Mundy (Bill). The chats were conducted between 2009 and 2016 in Singapore. I also interviewed Bill via email in 2016. My father and Bill have maintained their friendship all these years. Bill is 84 years old and lives in Britain where he is a successful artist. My 88-year-old father worked for local and international advertising agencies in Singapore and he designed the original logos for Mendaki and the old Changi Hospital, the updated logo for the Singapore Heritage Society, and the original book covers for Alex Josey's *Lee Kuan Yew* (first published in 1971), Donald and Joanna Moore's *The First 150 Years of Singapore* (first published in 1969) and Mahathir Mohamad's *The Malay Dilemma* (first published in 1970).
- 4 Zhuang, J. (2012). *Independence: The history of graphic design in Singapore since the 1960s* (p. 76). Singapore: The Design Society. (Call no.: RSING 741.6095957 ZHU); Bahasa jiwa bangsa. (1964, August 13). *The Straits Times*, p. 18. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 5 Selegie House – how flats are rented out. (1963, May 31). *The Straits Times*, p. 17. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 6 Email correspondence with Bill Mundy, 2016 and 2021.
- 7 Changi to be future civil airport. (1975, June 3). *The Straits Times*, p. 1. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 8 From airbase to airport. (1981, December 29). *The Straits Times*, p. 43. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 9 Email correspondence with Bill Mundy, 1 May 2021.

Vaccinating a Nation

A Brief History



The history of vaccination in Singapore goes back to the days of William Farquhar. **Ong Eng Chuan** provides an overview of vaccination efforts to prevent epidemics from breaking out here.

(Above) A child receiving a spoonful of the oral Sabin vaccine at the Lim Ah Pin Road Clinic during a polio epidemic, 1958. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Ong Eng Chuan is a Senior Librarian with the National Library, Singapore, where he manages the Rare Materials Collection. His research interest is in early Singapore publications.

The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic has cast vaccination into the spotlight in the fight against the disease and to reduce its spread. Vaccination is not a new phenomenon in Singapore though. Most children here are routinely vaccinated against diseases such as measles and mumps.

Vaccinations for children are carried out under the National Childhood Immunisation Schedule overseen by the Ministry of Health. It covers diseases such as tuberculosis, diphtheria, hepatitis B, measles, pertussis (whooping cough), pneumococcal infection, poliomyelitis, rubella (German measles) and tetanus. Vaccination does not stop with children either. Many adults take the influenza (flu) vaccine, especially before travelling to colder climates, as well as the pneumococcal and hepatitis B vaccines. The elderly and people with certain chronic conditions are strongly advised to have the flu jab regularly as well.

The highly organised way in which the Health Ministry handles the programme for childhood vaccinations makes it seem like a modern medical practice. However, vaccination in Singapore actually has a long history. The very first vaccine – for smallpox – was introduced as early as 1819.

Smallpox and Vaccination in Early Singapore

Until fairly recently, smallpox, which is caused by the variola virus, was a much-feared disease. It was highly contagious, had a high mortality rate and those who survived were often disfigured for life. Thanks to a concerted global vaccination campaign, smallpox was eventually eradicated and on 8 May 1980, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the world free of the disease.¹

The first step towards eradicating smallpox began in 1796 when English doctor Edward Jenner used cowpox (a milder form of smallpox) to induce immunity against the more virulent smallpox.² This smallpox vaccine was the first vaccine to be introduced in Singapore.

In December 1819, the Resident of Singapore William Farquhar wrote to officials in Penang to request for supplies of the smallpox vaccine.³ The vaccine was sent to Singapore and a Vaccine

Department set up to administer the vaccination. However, this early attempt at a vaccination programme failed and the Vaccine Department was abolished in 1829. Subsequent efforts also produced erratic outcomes and as a result, smallpox remained prevalent in Singapore. In 1838, for example, a smallpox epidemic claimed hundreds of lives.⁴

These early vaccination programmes faltered due to resistance from the local population.⁵ Few residents came forward to be vaccinated and parents were unwilling to send their healthy children to be vaccinated for fear of putting them at risk.

Back then, vaccination was done using arm-to-arm transfer, i.e. getting pustular material from one vaccinated person to directly inoculate another person by scratching the material into the recipient's arm.⁶ This method needed a constant stream of people to help propagate the vaccine.

It was also difficult to obtain fresh vaccine lymph or material when the supply ran out. As Penang and Singapore did not produce the smallpox vaccine, fresh material had to be shipped from Calcutta.⁷ However, the tropical climate made it difficult to maintain the shelf life of the vaccine so by the time the vaccines arrived here, their effectiveness have been compromised. The authorities made attempts to obtain vaccine lymph from other sources such as Batavia (now Jakarta) and the Royal Jennerian Institute in London (which would take six weeks to reach Singapore by ship), in the hope that these would give better results.⁸

In 1863, when the incidence of smallpox increased again, the government was urged to take tougher measures, including making vaccination compulsory by law, following in the footsteps of the Dutch who had successfully introduced compulsory vaccination in the Dutch East Indies (present-day Indonesia).⁹

Stricter public health control measures were finally introduced after the Straits Settlements became a Crown Colony in 1867. The Quarantine Ordinance was passed by the Legislative Council in June 1868, followed by An Ordinance to Extend and Make Compulsory the Practice of Vaccination, which came into effect on 1 May 1869.¹⁰

The latter legislation led to the Ordinance for Registration of Births and Deaths of 1868. This was a necessary move to keep track of the number of children who were being vaccinated as well as the overall death rate in the population. It would also allow



(Top) People waiting to be vaccinated against smallpox outside the health centre on Outram Road in April 1959. After four cases of smallpox were discovered in Kampong Alexandra in 1959, government and city health authorities decided on an island-wide vaccination as a precaution. Source: *The Straits Times* © Singapore Press Holdings Limited. Reprinted with permission.

(Above) An International Certificate of Inoculation and Vaccination issued by the Singapore Port Health Office on 3 March 1947, certifying that the holder of this certificate had been vaccinated against smallpox and cholera. The certificate was established by the International Sanitary Convention for Aerial Navigation (1933) in The Hague, which came into force on 1 August 1935. Image reproduced from *Singapore: Certificates, Registration Cards, and Immigration Department Letters, 1947–1961*. Donated by Family of the late Mr Koh Chin Ghee and Mdm Ham Wee Lun. Collection of the National Library, Singapore. (Accession no.: B32441602K).

(Above right) A vaccination notice issued by the Registrar of Births and Deaths dated 13 October 1935. The notice was issued to the parents of a newborn, informing them to have the baby vaccinated within six months of birth pursuant to the provisions and directions of the Quarantine and Prevention of Diseases Ordinance, failing which there would be a penalty of \$10. Vaccination was provided free-of-charge at Infant Welfare Clinics listed in the notice. Collection of the National Library, Singapore. (Accession no.: B189780361).

the authorities to study the causes of death and gauge the success of the islandwide vaccination programme.¹¹ In addition, the Registrar of Births and Deaths was also

responsible for notifying all parents to vaccinate their newborn babies.

Smallpox continued to be a problem in Singapore up until the 1950s. After WHO



(Top) A nurse administering the Bacillus Calmette-Guérin (BCG) vaccination to a girl while other children await their turn, 1958. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

(Above) More than 2,000 parents and children packed the Lim Ah Pin Road Clinic to get vaccinated during an outbreak of polio, 1958. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

declared the virus eradicated, Singapore amended the legislation so that smallpox vaccination would no longer be required by law from March 1982.¹²

BCG and the Battle Against Tuberculosis

At the end of World War II, Singapore found itself in another battle, this time against tuberculosis (TB). TB is an infectious disease caused by the *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* bacteria. There are two types of TB infections – latent TB infection and TB disease. People with the former are asymptomatic and cannot spread the bacteria whereas people with the TB disease may infect others. If left untreated, TB can be fatal.¹³

In the aftermath of the Japanese Occupation (1942–45), the incidence

of tuberculosis increased sharply, especially among young children. In fact, it was the number one killer disease right up to the 1960s.¹⁴

The anti-tuberculosis vaccine, Bacillus Calmette-Guérin (BCG), had been developed by French scientists Albert Calmette and Camille Guérin in 1919. However, the vaccine only gained wider acceptance after studies providing evidence of its efficacy were conducted in the 1940s.¹⁵

The first large-scale BCG vaccination in Singapore was not carried out by government health authorities though. Instead, it was conducted by the Singapore Anti-Tuberculosis Association (SATA), a charity organisation. The idea of forming an organisation to fight TB had come from a group of prisoners-of-war interned at Changi Prison and

Sime Road Camp during the Occupation years. Eventually, a group of doctors and philanthropists banded together to form SATA in 1947.¹⁶

While government health officials were still reviewing the BCG vaccine, SATA, under its first medical director, G.H. Garlick, believed that providing children with protection against TB was an urgent task that could not wait.¹⁷

After obtaining a small consignment of the BCG vaccine from the Pasteur Institute in Paris, SATA launched its immunisation programme on 28 June 1949 by vaccinating 21 children.¹⁸ As new consignments of the vaccine began to arrive more regularly, SATA ramped up its vaccination drive.¹⁹

Two years later, the government's pilot BCG vaccination programme under the auspices of the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) began. In June 1951, a UNICEF team started conducting tests on pupils of the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus on Bras Basah Road, with the aim of eventually vaccinating the majority of the 130,000 schoolchildren in Singapore within four months. That same year, inoculations of newborns began but these were discontinued in 1952 due to the "lack of staff to do follow-up work".²⁰

By 1956, the Singapore government realised that administering the BCG vaccine to children at school entrance age was too late as statistics showed that many children had been infected even before starting school. In December that year, the Health Ministry announced that all babies in Singapore would be given the BCG vaccine soon after birth. SATA's medical director Garlick approved of this move. "The younger a child is inoculated the better," he said. "T.B. is so rife here that many children become infected at a very early age."²¹

Between 1956 and 1972, over one million vaccinations had been performed. It was estimated that more than 90 percent of infants and primary school students and 75 percent of secondary school students had been inoculated against TB by 1972.²² Students used to get booster jabs at age 12 or 16 but this was discontinued in 2001 as there was no scientific evidence that it was necessary.²³

TB remains a global public threat and is still endemic in Singapore, with a higher proportion of the elderly contracting the disease. In 2020, there were 1,370 new cases of active TB among Singapore residents, slightly lower than the 1,398 cases the year before.²⁴

Polio, Diphtheria, Measles and Rubella

During the post-war period, Singapore also had to deal with poliomyelitis, or polio, a crippling and life-threatening disease caused by the poliovirus. The virus is highly contagious and can infect a person's spinal cord causing paralysis and even death. Although the disease affects people of all ages, infants and children are particularly vulnerable.²⁵

A major polio outbreak between August and December 1958 killed 12 and caused 404 infants and children to be crippled by the disease.²⁶ As the number of polio cases continued to surge, there was added pressure on the government to act. Eventually, the Health Ministry decided to offer free polio vaccinations on a voluntary basis to children aged three to 10.

Between November and December 1958, over 200,000 children were immunised with the oral Sabin vaccine (named after its developer, Albert Bruce Sabin) in vaccination centres set up across the island.²⁷ However, this did not stop another outbreak from happening just two years later which crippled 196 people.

After the first outbreak, the government convened a committee to address the problem. The committee recommended vaccinating all children from birth to school-entry age. The government approved the recommendation and the immunisation programme began with

a mass campaign in 1962, when children up to 6 years old were vaccinated.

This led to a significant decline in the incidence of paralytic polio and polio cases in the following decade.²⁸ By 1975, a large segment of the population had been immunised. As a result, the circulation rate of the poliovirus among the community was decreased to such a low level that the chances of any person being infected and developing paralytic poliomyelitis had been "reduced to vanishing point".²⁹

Although Singapore was officially declared polio-free in 2000, vaccination against polio continued as the disease had not been eradicated worldwide. In 2019, some 1,000 Singapore athletes and officials heading to the Philippines for the SEA Games had to be vaccinated against polio when new cases were reported there, 19 years after the Philippines had been declared free of the disease.³⁰

Another infectious and potentially dangerous disease is diphtheria which is caused by the *Corynebacterium diphtheriae* bacteria. Afflicted people experience common symptoms such as sore throat and fever but in severe cases, infection can lead to difficulty in breathing, heart failure, paralysis and even death.³¹ Vaccination against diphtheria was developed in the early 1920s and introduced in Singapore before World War II. After the Japanese Occupation, the government offered free vaccinations against diphthe-

ria and other diseases such as pertussis (also known as whooping cough).³²

However, the response to the government's voluntary immunisation programme was lukewarm. Despite having no diphtheria epidemics in Singapore, the government decided to make diphtheria vaccination compulsory to reduce the number of increasingly isolated cases.

In 1961, the Legislative Assembly passed the Diphtheria Immunisation Ordinance making immunisation against diphtheria compulsory for all children under the age of one. Parents or guardians who failed to comply with the law would be liable to a fine not exceeding \$500 for the first offence and \$1,000 and/or jail of not more than a year for subsequent convictions. Free vaccination was offered at 27 maternal and children's healthcare clinics.³³

Today, diphtheria has been eradicated from Singapore although the disease is still endemic in many countries.³⁴ In 2017, an isolated case of diphtheria occurred in Singapore when a Bangladeshi construction worker succumbed to the disease, the first local case in 25 years.³⁵

By 1970, the Maternal and Child Health Services was providing a comprehensive programme of vaccination against tuberculosis, smallpox, poliomyelitis, diphtheria, whooping cough and tetanus through its network of 52 centres. In July that year, the government announced a new requirement that all



An anti-diphtheria immunisation campaign poster along Maxwell Road, 1957. In 1962, immunisation against diphtheria was made compulsory for all children under one. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Outbreak of rubella among soldiers



(Above) After an outbreak of rubella (German measles) at the Singapore Armed Forces Infantry Training Depot on Pulau Tekong in February 1984, all recruits were confined in camp for two weekends. *The Business Times*, 11 February 1984, p. 2. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.



(Left) A campaign brochure in Chinese by the Singapore Anti-Tuberculosis Association (SATA) promoting the use of SATA's mobile X-ray vans to screen for tuberculosis, c. 1950s–60s. *Collection of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board. Courtesy of SATA CommHealth.*

children entering primary one in 1971 would have to be immunised against these infectious diseases.³⁶

During the 1970s, due to frequent outbreaks of measles and rubella (also known as German measles), inoculation against these two diseases was introduced into the childhood vaccination programme.³⁷

Measles is caused by the measles (rubeola) virus. Its symptoms include high fever, cough, watery eyes, and spots and rashes. But measles can be dangerous, especially for babies and young children as it may lead to serious complications such as pneumonia and encephalitis (inflammation of the brain).³⁸

Rubella is caused by its namesake virus. Most people who are infected develop a mild illness, but as with measles, rubella can result in serious complications. It can cause infected pregnant women to miscarry or their babies to develop congenital birth defects.³⁹

Measles vaccination was introduced in October 1976 while rubella vaccination for female primary school leavers was introduced a month later. However, many parents were still reluctant to vaccinate

their children against measles because many held the traditional belief that it was good for children to get infected since it rids the body of “heat” or “cold” that causes rashes.⁴⁰

Vaccination against the disease became compulsory by law on 1 August 1985. In January 1990, the measles-mumps-rubella (MMR) vaccine replaced the separate jabs for measles and rubella. Although the three-in-one vaccine was more expensive, Acting Minister for Health Yeo Cheow Tong said that “for the child, having one shot is better than having three shots”. This injection would be administered to infants who were at least a year old.⁴¹

Hepatitis B Vaccine

In the 1970s, hepatitis B was a serious public health problem here. It was a disease that was endemic in Singapore and countries in the Asia-Pacific.⁴² The hepatitis B virus was first identified in the 1960s by American physician and geneticist Baruch S. Blumberg, who also developed the first vaccine for the disease. It soon emerged that this vaccine could help prevent a type of liver cancer called primary liver cancer.⁴³ Studies showed that chronic hepatitis B carriers had a high risk of developing primary liver cancer, which was a common type of cancer in Singapore at the time. In 1979, Singapore had the highest incidence of primary liver cancer in the world.⁴⁴

The association between hepatitis B and primary liver cancer fuelled a global race to produce the vaccine on a commercial scale. The Singapore government was also interested in the commercial production of the hepatitis B vaccine as the biotechnology industry was seen as an economically viable new sector. Unfortunately, Singapore’s vaccine production plan was eventually scrapped because the projected returns did not justify the \$20 million investment required for the project.

Although the scheme to produce the hepatitis B vaccine in Singapore was derailed, the fight against hepatitis did not stop. In 1983, 600 medical staff from the Health Ministry and the National University of Singapore became the first to receive the hepatitis B vaccine. Due to the high cost, the vaccination programme targeted selected population groups who were at higher risk of acquiring the disease, such as babies of infected mothers, health-care workers and national servicemen.⁴⁵

On 1 September 1987, a vaccination-at-birth service was rolled out to inoculate all newborns in Singapore at a reduced fee. There were 140,000 hepatitis B carriers in Singapore at the time, and the government wanted to ensure that the disease would not spread to the rest of the population. Singapore was also one of the few countries in the world to make the hepatitis B vaccination available to all newborns.⁴⁶

By 2000, more than 90 percent of infants had received the hepatitis B vaccination. While this age group was well protected against the disease, about half of Singapore’s adult population had no immunity against the virus. In 2001, the Health Ministry launched a four-year hepatitis B immunisation programme for students in secondary schools, junior colleges, centralised institutes, the institutes of technical education, polytechnics and universities.⁴⁷

Since the introduction of this programme in Singapore, the annual incidence of acute hepatitis B infection has declined from eight cases per 100,000 population in 1987 to 3.6 per 100,000 population in 2000. The nation’s research findings and experience in implementing a national hepatitis B vaccination programme were shared internationally. In 2001, WHO also endorsed the long-term safety and efficacy of the hepatitis B vaccine and recommended that it be implemented in all endemic countries and for all newborns.⁴⁸

Vaccinating Against Covid-19

As Singapore and the world struggle to contain the spread of Covid-19, vaccination has emerged as a key weapon in the fight.

Singapore has already begun vaccinating its population, having approved the emergency use of vaccines by Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna. Vaccinations began in December 2020 and as at 14 August 2021, close to 4.2 million people have been fully vaccinated while around 4.5 million have received at least the first dose.⁴⁹

On 31 May 2021, the government announced that vaccines which have been

approved for emergency use by WHO against Covid-19 could also be used in Singapore. At the moment, the list includes the vaccines by Johnson & Johnson, Sinovac and Oxford-AstraZeneca. This move will increase the pool of vaccines available for use here.⁵⁰

As Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said in his address to the nation on 31 May 2021, until a large proportion of Singapore’s population is vaccinated, more restrictions can then be lifted safely and gradually so that a semblance of normal life can return even as the virus becomes endemic here.⁵¹ ♦

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MALAY-MUSLIM WEDDINGS

Keeping Up with the Times

Customs and traditions change over time. **Asrina Tanuri** and **Nadya Suradi** trace how Malay-Muslim weddings in Singapore have evolved since the 1950s.

The insistent rhythms of the handheld *kompang* drum heralding the groom's arrival, the resplendent bride glowing with happiness and the upbeat music accompanying the feasting throngs: there is nothing quite like a traditional Malay wedding to inject colour and life into the humdrum rhythms of a public housing estate in Singapore. On their wedding day, the newlyweds are treated like royalty and

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accorded the term *raja sehari* ("King and Queen for a day").¹

As traditional as it appears though, Malay wedding customs in Singapore have changed considerably in the last few decades. These changes are part of a larger phenomenon of Malay customs evolving in response to modernity and current trends. As well-known writer and Malay culture expert Muhammad Ariff Ahmad noted in 1999:

"Pindahan dari sistem kehidupan kampung ke sistem kehidupan bandar dan hidup berbaaur dengan masyarakat yang bukan seadat resam itu merupakan dua faktor yang secara tidak langsung dan beransur-ansur telah mendorong perubahsuaian beberapa adat

Melayu lama menjadi adat baru yang sesuai diamalkan di Singapura, sekarang."²

(Translation: The move from living in a kampong to an urban lifestyle and living in a multicultural community are two factors that have indirectly and gradually led to the modification of some old Malay customs into new ones that are currently practised in Singapore today.)

Urbanisation – which resettled communities living in kampongs into high-rise flats in public housing estates – was certainly one of the main reasons behind the changes. The spirit of *gotong royong*, or communal help, that was marshalled at Malay weddings in kampongs – along with

traditional ceremonies associated with the *walimah*, or wedding feast, and its elaborate preparations – became eroded as more and more kampong folk moved into high-rise flats.

Economic growth and increased modernisation since Singapore's independence have also impacted traditional Malay weddings. Growing affluence, popular culture and a desire by young people to be seen as more "modern" have driven some of the changes as well, nudging couples towards more streamlined and pared-down customs, and introducing so-called "modern" flourishes.

In addition, a growing awareness of what constitutes Islamic practice has resulted in certain customs and rituals being abandoned because these have been deemed as non-Islamic.

Changing Times

Malay weddings incorporate both Islamic practices as well as customs that are specific to Malay culture.³ In Singapore today, the core ceremonies are the *nikah* (the solemnisation), *walimah* (the communal wedding feast), *bersanding* (sitting-in-state during the *walimah*) and *bertandang* (the ceremony to welcome the bride/in-laws). All of these have changed over the last 50 or 60 years, both in ways large and small.

Among these ceremonies, *nikah* is the only religious obligation stipulated by Islam. Traditionally, it takes place the day before *walimah* and *bersanding*. An

intimate affair attended by close family members and friends, the solemnisation ceremony is held at the bride's residence or at a reception venue. A religious official, known as the *tok kadi*, officiates and oversees the proceedings and also issues the marriage certificate.⁴

During this ceremony, it is customary for both parties to exchange *dulang hantaran* (trays of gifts), with the groom presenting to his bride a pre-agreed *duit hantaran* (cash gift) and the mandatory *mas kahwin* (literally "wedding gold").⁵ *Mas kahwin*, also known as *mahar*, is an obligatory gift from the groom to his bride to signify the beginning of a husband's responsibility towards his wife.⁶

In the past, it was common for the payment of *mas kahwin* to be presented to the bride after the wedding. In an oral history interview, trainee teacher Mohd Amin bin Abdul Wahab, who got married in 1941, recalled: "Belanja kahwin saya cuma seratus lima puluh ringgit. Mas kahwin [saya] dua puluh dua ringgit setengah, hutang" (I only spent \$150 [in total] on my wedding. My *mas kahwin* was a deferred payment of \$22.50).⁷

Today, grooms are expected to give at least \$100 for the *mas kahwin*, with the full amount given upfront. However, grooms can also opt to give gold or jewellery in lieu of cash.

The *duit hantaran*, also known as *hantaran belanja*, is a customary gift from the groom to the bride's family to cover

the expenses for the wedding day. In the late 1960s, the amount ranged between \$500 and \$1,000, with the money handed over before the *nikah* ceremony. From the 1980s, however, the *duit hantaran* began to take centre stage during *nikah*.

Grooms today are expected to fork out between \$8,000 and \$20,000, depending on how wealthy they are. The figure is sometimes tagged to the bride's educational background; the better educated the bride, the higher the amount expected. (The amount is usually negotiated beforehand.)⁸

The *nikah* ceremony is also an occasion for the groom to present gifts to the bride. In the past, these gifts were typically a set of clothes for the bride and a selection of Malay cakes and desserts. These gifts were creatively packaged, wrapped and displayed on trays decorated with flowers and ribbons. Some gifts even featured fabric intricately folded into swans or flowers, and individually wrapped chocolates made into structures such as floral arrangements, houses and baskets. These days, brides and grooms may exchange gifts such as jewellery, watches, shoes, wallets, handbags, cosmetics and electronic gadgets, in addition to cakes and chocolates. Some couples even present each other with expensive items like motorcycles and cars.⁹

Walimah Ceremony

The Malay wedding reaches its peak during the *walimah* and *bersanding* ceremonies,

(Facing page) A *bersanding* ceremony at a modern Malay wedding, 2017. This sitting-in-state ceremony is usually the highlight of a wedding, and is often accompanied by a *kompang* drum performance that is carried over from a preceding procession. Courtesy of Mohammed Farhan Bin Hassan.

(Below) A Malay wedding, 1960. The bride and groom are seated on the *tandu*, which are rattan sedan chairs attached to bamboo poles and carried on the shoulders by men from the bride's entourage. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

(Below right) A *tok kadi* (right; religious official) performing the *akad nikah*, or solemnisation ceremony, 1980. The *akad nikah* is an obligation in Islam. The *tok kadi* officiates and oversees the proceedings, and issues the marriage certificate. Hasnah Sapii Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.





A typical Malay wedding feast held in Singapore in the 1970s. Guests would be served either *nasi minyak* (ghee rice) or *nasi biryani* (spiced long-grain rice), accompanied by various dishes. Courtesy of Mohammed Farhan Bin Hassan.

the wedding feast and the sitting-in-state respectively. The wedding feast, which typically takes place the day after the *nikah*, usually starts at 11 am and ends at 5 pm. It is an informal gathering of family, relatives and friends, with guests numbering in the hundreds and sometimes thousands. They are served a feast of either *nasi minyak* (ghee rice) or *nasi biryani* (spiced long-grain rice), accompanied by various dishes.¹⁰ Up to the 1950s, when most Malays largely lived in kampongs, the *walimah* and *bersanding* ceremonies would be held under tents in the village.

These events were typically communal events involving the entire kampong in the spirit of *gotong-royong*. It was customary to round up family members and enlist the entire village to help out with both the wedding preparations as well as the festivities leading up to the wedding day.

Physically demanding tasks such as carpentry and house painting were handled by men, while women helped to decorate the bridal dais with palm and banana leaves and paper flowers, as well as cook for the volunteers. The wedding feast would also be painstakingly prepared and cooked by family, friends and neighbours, with some even contributing ingredients for the feast.¹¹

Abu Talib Bin Ally, who lived in Kampong Glam in the 1920s, recalled how friends and relatives would come over days before the wedding to help out at the bride's and groom's homes:

"Tiga hari, empat hari, nanti anak buah semua ramai-ramai tinggal sana. Masak, makan. Kalau kita masak-masak ni semua itu jam tak ada contract. Sendiri mesti mahu masak... [M]asak sendirilah, gotong-royong..."¹²

(Translation: Three or four days [before the wedding], friends and relatives would all gather at the [bride's and groom's] houses. To cook, to eat. Previously, you would not be able to hire a caterer so you had to cook [the food] yourself... Cook it yourself in the spirit of *gotong royong*.)

The food would be served in the traditional style called *makan berhidang*, in which each table receives portions enough for three to four people. Guests would be served by the *kendarat* (waitstaff) who deliver the food and drinks to the tables as well as water for washing hands.

Family members and friends would often volunteer to serve the guests.

The communal aspect of the wedding feast is no longer the case today as prominent writer Aliman Bin Hassan notes:

"Biasanya kalau dalam masyarakat kampung... bila mereka telah tinggal satu kampung, mereka bukan lagi menganggap mereka itu bersahabat, tapi bersaudara... Sebab itu bila ada majlis kerja kahwin, kita tidak risau tentang kendarat, tentang orang yang nak kopek bawang, nak potong lada... masak dan sebagainya... Tidak seperti sekarang ini. Sebab masing-masing sibuk dengan tugas. Masing-masing sudah mempunyai pelajaran. Jadi mereka tidak cukup masa untuk memberi sumbangan tenaga."¹³

(Translation: Usually, in the village community... when [villagers] live together, they no longer think they are just friends, but they consider themselves as family... Hence, when there was a wedding, we would not worry about who would be helping to serve the guests, who would be peeling onions, cutting chillies... doing the cooking and so on... Today

the situation has changed. Everyone is busy with work and studies. They do not have time to contribute to weddings.)

Kampong life ended as the government began resettling people from rural areas into public housing estates from the 1960s. As people no longer lived in the kampong, the wedding feast was instead held in the ground-floor void decks of flats. More significantly though, the move out of the communal kampong environment to the anonymity of a large public housing estate also led to the loss of the *gotong royong* spirit.¹⁴

As a result, the majority of Malay families today engage caterers for the wedding reception and outsource the *kendarat* roles. While the staple menu of *nasi minyak* or *nasi biryani* and the accompanying dishes largely remain, food is no longer served to guests at the table; instead, a buffet service is more likely provided (before the pandemic restrictions at least).

From the early 2000s, couples began engaging the services of wedding planners and gravitating towards grander, themed weddings. Depending on the theme, the wedding venue might be transformed into a lush English garden, a rustic kampong, a scene from a fairy tale or a whimsical wonderland. Guests are strongly encouraged to dress up according to the theme. In addition to the buffet spread, guests may be treated to live food stations, dessert tables and self-service photography booths.¹⁵

In recent years, one-stop wedding services that provide the wedding venue itself, along with decorations, food and door gifts, have been gaining popularity. And instead of void decks, many couples choose to hold their wedding receptions at outdoor locations such as gardens and beaches, community clubs, country clubs, restaurants and hotel ballrooms. Some may even have an additional dinner reception held in the evening just for a select group of friends and colleagues.¹⁶

The types of entertainment for wedding guests have also changed. Until the 1980s, it was common to have performances such as *kuda kepong* (a Javanese dance in which performers straddle wooden hobby horses and enter a trance-like state), *silat* martial arts demonstrations, and traditional orchestras and bands playing live music of various genres. The latter would include popular and traditional Malay music such as *zapin*,

masri, *inang*, *joget* and *dondang sayang*, as well as Hindi and English songs. There were even *joget lambak* (traditional mass dancing) sessions. These days, however, the scaled-down entertainment usually consists of just deejays spinning music.¹⁷

Bersanding Ceremony

The sound of the *kompang*, sometimes referred to as *rebana*, and a troupe singing along to the beating drums, signals the arrival of the groom and his entourage. Flanked by his *pengapit* (groomsmen), the groom begins a processional march known as *berarak*.

Accompanying him are two men carrying the *bunga manggar* (palm blossoms made from tinsel paper). The bride awaits on the bridal dais, her face shielded by a fan held by the *mak andam* (the makeup artist-cum-lady-in-waiting).¹⁸

To reach the bride, the groom must first overcome various *hadang* (road-blocks or obstacles). During the first *hadang*, witty *pantuns* (Malay poems) are exchanged between the *pengapit* and the bride's wedding party. The groom must also pay what is known as the *duit pagar*, or "gate fee". After the groom passes the tests, he is allowed to be seated in front of the bridal dais and a *silat pengantin* (Malay martial arts display) performed for him.¹⁹

The final *hadang* takes place at the bridal dais itself, this time between the groom and the *mak andam*. He pays her the *duit kipas* (fan money); once satisfied, she reveals the bride and the groom finally takes his seat on the dais beside the bride.²⁰

Traditionally, the groom's older relatives were roped in to be the groomsmen and expected to partake in the exchange of *pantuns*. These days however, the *pengapit* role is assumed by friends.

It has also become customary in Malay weddings for the groom and his groomsmen to perform a series of tasks, such as singing and dancing, before he is allowed to meet his bride, possibly borrowed from a similar Chinese tradition.

Pantuns are also rarely exchanged today. Instead, to appease the bride's side and avoid having to perform additional tasks, the groom would offer money to the bride's party so that he would be allowed to take his place by his bride on the dais.

Once the groom is seated on the dais, family members and guests take turns to go up and congratulate the couple and to have their photos taken with them. The *bersanding* ceremony ends with the bride and groom having their first meal together

as husband and wife, known as the *makan berdamai*. In the past, the couple would retreat to the bridal room to have their meal, accompanied by their *pengapit*. Today, the bride and groom are seated at a special dining table set up near the dais so that they can mingle and interact with their guests.²¹

The last leg of the ceremony is known as *bertandang* and takes place at the groom's residence. In the past, this would be held a week after the wedding feast. *Bertandang*, also known as *majlis sambut menantu* (welcoming the bride/in-laws), is when the groom brings his new bride back to his kampong to be introduced to the rest of his family members and other village residents. A second and smaller *bersanding* ceremony would be conducted at the groom's residence.²²

Today, however, the *bertandang* ceremony usually takes place on the same day as *walimah* and *bersanding*. After lunch, a wardrobe change and photos with guests, the newlyweds depart for the groom's home.²³

Back when Malays largely lived in kampongs, weddings typically spanned a week, from the *nikah* to the *bertandang* ceremonies. These days, couples are more likely to prioritise convenience, simplicity and practicality over tradition. Many choose to have the *nikah*, *walimah* and *bersanding* ceremonies on the same day instead of having the solemnisation performed the day before the wedding feast. Some couples even forego the *bertandang* ceremony altogether. As Malay dance pioneer and Cultural Medallion recipient Som Said has noted:

"Kalau kita nak cakap pasal masa kini, yang tinggal cuma pernikahan dan bersanding. Ringkas kerana mengikut tuntutan masa... Banyak yang dah takde. Banyak yang dihilangkan, bukan hanya dalam majlisnya tapi dalam peradaban, peralatan, persiapan semua... yang tak perlu tu sudah dikikis."²⁴

(Translation: If we want to talk about the present, what is left is just the *nikah* and *bersanding* ceremonies. Simple and practical due to time constraints... A lot have been done away with. Many aspects of the Malay traditions have been removed, not only in the ceremony but also in traditions, equipment, preparation... those that are not necessary are no longer practised.)

Berina Ceremonies

A tradition that used to be a major part of Malay weddings, but is rarely observed in Singapore today, is the *berina* comprising three ceremonies: *berina curi* (*curi* means “steal” in Malay), *berina kechil* (small henna ceremony) and *berina besar* (big henna ceremony). The traditional *tepung tawar* (blessing ritual) was the central element in all three *berina* ceremonies.

The *berina curi* and *berina kechil* ceremonies would take place before the solemnisation.²⁵ *Berina curi* was organised for the bride and involved her female relatives and close female friends. During this ceremony, the bridal party would perform the *tepung tawar* for the bride before applying henna on her hands and feet. It is traditionally held without the knowledge and consent of the groom's side, hence the name *berina curi*, and



usually takes place two days before the *nikah*, in the evening.²⁶

The *berina kechil* ceremony is held the next evening, involving both the bride and groom. The couple undergo *tepung tawar* separately, with the groom going first, followed by the bride.²⁷

The *berina besar* ceremony, on the other hand, would be held right after the solemnisation, usually at the bride's home. It comprised the *tepung tawar* and included a photography session, during which the bride might have up to 20 changes of outfits.²⁸

However, all three *berina* ceremonies are rarely conducted today, partly due to the costs and time involved. The *berina curi* and the *berina kecil* fell out of favour first; by the 1980s, only the *berina besar* was commonly performed.²⁹ This last ceremony, too, eventually disappeared by around the early 2000s.³⁰

Stricter Adherence to Islam

One of the key drivers of change has been a greater understanding and awareness of Islamic obligations. Rituals that are deemed *haram*, or forbidden under Islam, have been jettisoned. An example of this is the almost complete disappearance of the *tepung tawar* blessing ceremony because of its purported Hindu origins.

During *tepung tawar*, the person officiating the blessing first sprinkles rose water and yellow rice on the newlyweds and then dots henna as well as rice flour

During *tepung tawar* (a blessing ritual with Hindu origins), the person giving the blessing would sprinkle rose water and yellow rice on the newlyweds and dot some henna and rice flour mixed with water on their palms, as seen in this photo taken in 2009. *Courtesy of Nadya Suradi.*

mixed with water on their palms. A groomsman or bridesmaid wipes away the henna, while the person offering the blessing ends the ceremony by lightly touching an egg to the noses of the couple. During the *berina besar* ceremony, the officiator would be presented with a flower from the *pulut pahar* (a floral bouquet made of yellow glutinous rice, flowers and hard boiled eggs) as a token of appreciation.³¹

Today, the *tepung tawar* ritual is rarely practised. If it does take place at all, it happens during the *bersanding* ceremony and is officiated by the elders in attendance, including the parents of the bride and groom.

The *potong andam* (a beautifying ritual ceremony involving the bride-to-be and the *mak andam*), is another ritual that is no longer carried out today because it is perceived as non-Islamic. The purpose of this ceremony is to beautify the bride by cutting or shaving the fine hairs on her face and body.

During this process, the *mak andam* would recite mantras while removing the hair. A second part of the ceremony involves the *mak andam* observing how the cut hairs fall and using that to determine if the bride is a virgin. Due to the spiritual but non-Islamic nature of this ceremony, it is no longer conducted.³²

The aforementioned Javanese *kuda kepang* dance, which used to be a popular form of entertainment at weddings, also fell out of favour for the same reason.

In Singapore, the dance was commonly performed at Malay weddings in the 1970s and early 80s. Dancers would enter into a trance and perform feats like peeling coconut husks using



(Above) The *bersanding* ceremony ends with the bride and groom having their first meal together as husband and wife, known as *makan berdamai*, 2020. The newlyweds are seated at a special dining table set up near the dais so that they can mingle and interact with their guests. *Courtesy of Asrina Tanuri.*

(Above right) Despite changes to wedding rituals over the years, modern Malay weddings still retain some traditional features, such as this *silat pengantin* performed in the presence of the bridegroom to the beat of the *kompang* in 2017. *Courtesy of Mohammed Farhan Bin Hassan.*

their teeth, chewing or eating glass, and drinking buckets of water. However, in 1979, Majlis Agama Islam Singapura (Islamic Religious Council of Singapore) advised that the trance elements of *kuda kepang* contravened the tenets of Islam and urged Muslims to avoid such performances.³³ As a result, the practice has died out.

Not Just Singapore

Many of the changes that Malay wedding customs have undergone in Singapore are replicated in cities like Kuala Lumpur. The

makeshift tents in front of houses for the wedding feast (itself an adaptation from the communal space in a kampong) and the *gotong royong* spirit in preparing for the wedding ceremony and reception have given way to catered events at banquet halls or hotel ballrooms. Elaborate and time-consuming ceremonies have also been simplified. And, like bridal couples in Singapore, Malaysian couples are also opting for themed weddings with wedding planners helping to organise their big do, although the *tepung tawar* ritual is still practised in Malaysia.³⁴

Inevitably, customs and traditions will evolve in response to social and economic changes. As new norms and new expectations develop, Malay wedding customs will also evolve in tandem. ♦

The authors would like to thank Dr Azhar Ibrahim, Lecturer, Department of Malay Studies, National University of Singapore, for his help in reviewing the essay.

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Early Printing in the Philippines

Continuing with the series on printing in Southeast Asia, **Gracie Lee** explores the early history of printing and printed works in the Philippines.

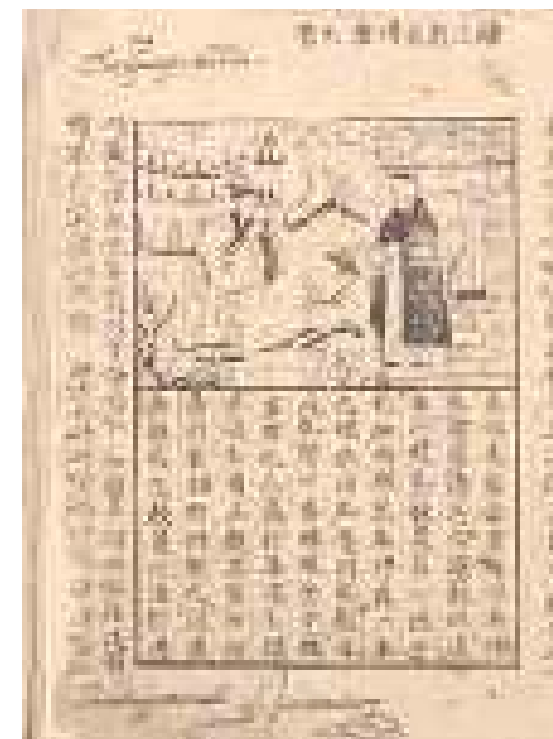
The spread of printing in Southeast Asia is closely intertwined with European colonisation and the arrival of missionaries in the region from the 16th century onwards. While the time-honoured art of woodblock printing (known also as xylography) had been used in Vietnam as early as the 11th century,¹ book printing was unknown in the rest of Southeast Asia where oral and manuscript traditions had existed for centuries.² The emergence of a print culture in the Philippines is particularly fascinating as it chronicles the transnational and cross-cultural transfer of printing knowledge among the Europeans, the Chinese and indigenous Filipinos within colonial Filipino society and economy.

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Map of the Philippine Islands (1924) compiled and published by John Bach, and the cover to the postal directory accompanying the map. The map was lithographed by Carmelo and Bauermann. *Gift of Mr Tan Yeok Seong. Collection of the National Library, Singapore (Accession no.: B19475837K).*



Doctrina Christiana, en Lengua Española y Tagala (1593), widely accepted as the oldest surviving book printed in the Philippines. The woodcut frontispiece of the Spanish-Tagalog version depicts Dominic de Guzmán, the founder of the Dominican Order. Library of Congress, Rare Book and Special Collections Division. Retrieved from Library of Congress website.



The Chinese version of the *Doctrina Christiana* titled 《辯正教真傳實錄》 (*Testimony of the True Religion*). Written by Dominican friar Juan Cobo and printed in 1593, one of the illustrations in the publication shows a Dominican friar with a book in his hand (presumably the Bible) conversing with a Chinese scholar. Image from the holdings of the Biblioteca Nacional de España. Retrieved from Biblioteca Digital Hispánica website.

Beginnings of Printing in the Philippines

According to the earliest written accounts of the history of the country, pre-colonial Philippines was a literate society with an indigenous writing system. In *Relación de las Islas Filipinas* (1604), one of the earliest works about the Philippines and its people, Spanish Jesuit priest and historian Pedro Chirino wrote: "All these islanders are much given to reading and writing and there is hardly a man, and much less a woman, who does not read and write in the letters used in the island of Manila."³ These writings were inscribed on perishable materials such as tree bark, leaves and bamboo tubes.⁴

Printing came on the heels of the spread of Christianity and Spanish colonisation during the 16th century. Although the beginnings of the first printing press in Philippines are obscure, most scholars

agree that the Dominicans, a Roman Catholic order, were the first to start printing in the Philippines. Much of the early printed literature in the Philippines consisted of catechism and language instructional texts published by various Catholic religious orders operating in the Philippines such as the Franciscans, the Jesuits and the Augustinians.⁵

Oldest Known Book Printed in the Philippines

The *Doctrina Christiana* (*Christian Doctrine*) is widely accepted as the oldest surviving book printed in the Philippines. This publication of Catholic teachings was printed in 1593 using the xylographic method in two editions. The version in Spanish-Tagalog was written for the local Filipino population and is attributed to Franciscan friar Juan de Plasencia, whose translation was approved by the

diocesan synod in 1582. The second was produced in Chinese for the conversion of the Chinese community in the Parián,⁶ a commercial enclave of Manila.

In a letter from the governor-general of the Philippines, Gómez Pérez Dasmariñas, to King Philip II of Spain dated 20 June 1593, Dasmariñas wrote that because of the existing great need, "he had granted a licence for the printing of the *Doctrinas Christianas*, herewith enclosed – one in the Tagalog language, which is the native and best of these islands, and the other in Chinese – from which I hope great benefits will result in the conversion and instruction of the peoples of both nations; and because the lands of the Indies are on a larger scale in everything and things more expensive, I have set the price of them at four reales a piece, until Your Majesty is pleased to decree in full what is to be done".⁷

Printing permits were required as books were a tightly controlled commodity during Spanish rule (1565–1898) in the Philippines. In 1556, a royal cedula (decree) was issued prohibiting the sale of books about the East Indies without a special licence.

In 1583, the Commissary of the Holy Office in Manila was instructed to inspect and seize imported books of prohibited titles. Restrictions were extended the following year such that “when any grammar or dictionary of the language of the Indies be made, it shall not be published or printed or used unless it has first been examined by the Bishop and seen by the Royal Audiencia [the colonial court]”.⁸

Up until the mid-20th century, there were two known versions of the *Doctrina Christiana* in existence – a Spanish-Tagalog edition held at the Library of Congress titled *Doctrina Christiana, en Lengua Española y Tagala (Christian Doctrine in Spanish and Tagalog Languages)* printed at the Dominican Church of San Gabriel in Manila, and an undated Chinese edition found in the Vatican Library titled *Doctrina Christiana en Letra y Lengua China (Christian Doctrine in the Chinese Language and Letters)* compiled by Dominican priests ministering among the Sangleyans (people of mixed Chinese and Filipino ancestry) and printed by Keng Yong, a Chinese living in the Parián district of Manila. In the absence of other known copies, these two texts were thought to be the ones referred to in the governor-general’s letter.⁹

In 1952, however, the discovery of another Chinese version at the Biblioteca Nacional de España (National Library of Spain) rippled across the scholarly community. Titled 《新刻僧師高母羨撰無極天主正教真傳實錄》 (*Xin Ke Seng Shi Gao Mu Xian Zhuan Wuji Tianzhu Zhengjiao Zhenchuan Shilu; A Printed Edition of the Veritable Record of the Authentic Tradition of the True Faith in the Infinite God, by the Religious Master Kao-mu Hsien*), also known as 《辯正教真傳實錄》 (*Bian Zhengjiao Zhenchuan Shilu, Testimony of the True Religion*), the work was written by Dominican friar Juan Cobo, who arrived in Manila in 1588. It was printed in the “second month of the spring in the year of our Lord 1593”.¹⁰

This new find has now been generally accepted as the Chinese version mentioned in the governor-general’s letter. According to Cobo, the book was “published with licence of the Bishop and the Governor” and when they first arrived in Manila, they commissioned a skilled craftsman to carve the woodblocks that were used in the printing of the book. The content takes the form of a dialogue, and was likely inspired by the dialogic exchange featured in Jesuit Michele Ruggieri’s 《天主實錄》 (*Tianzhu Shilu; The True Record of the Lord of Heaven*), the first Chinese catechism text printed in 1584.

Cobo’s work text contains a mix of treatises on theology, Western cosmography and natural history accompanied by illustrations of the cosmos, planets and animals.

In this respect, it also bears similarities with another earlier work. Penned in 1583 by another Dominican friar, Fray Luis de Granada, who was a noted theologian, writer and preacher, the *Introducción del Símbolo de la Fe (Introduction of the Symbol of Faith)* was an attempt to explain the Christian doctrine through natural theology – an argument that evidence of intelligent design in nature points to the existence of a creator God. This approach was probably designed to appeal to learned Chinese readers as shown in the illustration of a Western scholar-priest conversing with a Chinese scholar.¹¹

As for the copy in the Vatican Library, its provenance remains uncertain. One view contends that it predates the *Doctrina Christiana* in the Library of Congress and the National Library of Spain. Unlike most officially approved publications which were dated, this book was not. According to the title page it was printed with licence, but the omission of the year of publication has led some to speculate that the work was printed before the necessary permit could be secured due to the urgent need to evangelise to the Chinese community.

This view has been challenged by others who place the publication in the early 1600s based on studies of its linguistic and physical characteristics. Although its history cannot be conclusively determined, the identification of its printer, Keng Yong, throws a spotlight on the role that Chinese printers played in the development of early printing in the Philippines.¹²

Contributions of Early Chinese Printers

Brothers Juan de Vera and Pedro de Vera, known only by their baptismal names, were two early Chinese Christian printers involved in some of the earliest imprints found in the Philippines. Under the auspices of Francisco Blancas de San José, a Dominican priest, the first typographical press was set up by Juan de Vera in the Chinese settlement of Binondo.

In his ecclesiastical history of the Philippines, Dominican friar Diego Aduarte noted that Francisco Blancas de San José had written many books of devotion,

Memorial de la Vida Christiana en Lengua China (《新刊僚氏正教便覽》); *A Printed Edition of the Guide to the True Faith in God* was written by Dominican padre Domingo de Nieva. It was printed in 1606 by Chinese Christian printer, Pedro de Vera. The title page is in Spanish and main text is in Chinese. Retrieved from Österreichische Nationalbibliothek website.



Simbolo de la Fe, en Lengua y Letra China (《新刊格物窮理錄》); *Newly Printed Record of the Investigation of Things and Exhaustive Examination of Principle* was printed by Pedro de Vera in 1607. Shown here are the Chinese title page (left) and illustrations of the human anatomy and the underworld where souls wait to enter the realm of Paradise. Retrieved from Österreichische Nationalbibliothek website.

and “since there was no printing in these islands, and no one who understood it or who was a journeyman printer, he planned to have it done through a Chinaman, a good Christian, who, seeing that the books of P. Fr. Francisco were sure to be of great use, bestowed so much care upon this undertaking that he finally succeeded, aided by those who told him whatever they knew about it, in learning everything necessary to do printing; and he printed these books”.¹³

The “good Christian” was Juan de Vera who was commended as being a “very devout man, and one much given to prayer... He always heard mass, and was very regular in his attendance at church.” In addition to learning to be a printer, it was also noted that he “adorned the church most handsomely with hangings and paintings, because he understood this art”.¹⁴

Other contemporaneous accounts, in addition to Aduarte’s, also described Juan de Vera as the first typographical printer in the Philippines.¹⁵ Scholarly opinions, however, remain divided on whether his role extended to local type casting (typography), or if the printing press was imported from elsewhere, such as Goa or Japan.¹⁶

The oldest extant book produced in movable type (using individual movable pieces with each carrying a single letter or character) in the Philippines is thought to be the *Ordinaciones Generales Provintiae*

Sanctissimi Rosarii Philippinarum (The General Ordinances of the Philippine Province of the Holy Rosary), printed by Juan de Vera in 1604. Written in Latin, it lays out the precepts of the Dominican Province of the Rosary. Printed by order of the Provincial, Miguel Martín de San Jacinto, it has been suggested that the intent of the publication was possibly to prepare the mendicants as they head to their new mission in the Philippines.¹⁷ A copy of this work can be found in the Library of Congress.

Other notable works printed by Juan de Vera include the 1602 *Libro de Nuestra Señora del Rosario en Lengua y Letra Tagala de Filipinas (Book of Our Lady of the Rosary in the Language and Letters of the Philippines)*, a devotional work in Tagalog, and the *Libro de las Quatro Postrimerias del Hombre: En Lengua Tagala, y Letra Española (The Book on the Four Last Things of Man in Tagalog and Spanish)*, printed in 1604 and composed by Fray Francisco Blancas de San José.¹⁸

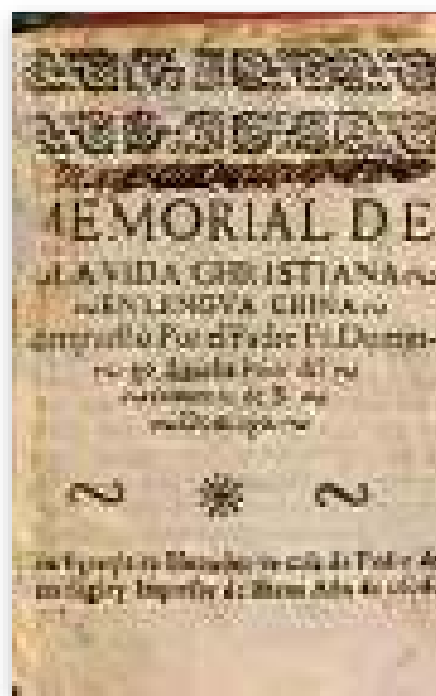
Pedro de Vera, believed to be the younger brother who assumed Juan de Vera’s responsibilities upon the latter’s death, was also behind some of the earliest imprints in the Philippines. In 1606, he printed *Memorial de la Vida Christiana en Lengua China* (《新刊僚氏正教便覽》); *Xinkan Liao Shi Zhengjiao Bianlan; A Printed Edition of the Guide to the True Faith in God*). Written by Dominican

priest, Domingo de Nieva (巴禮羅明教黎尼媽), the book aimed to help beginners grow in their faith through the exercise of spiritual disciplines, and was modelled after Fray Luis de Granada’s guide on spiritual formation titled *Memorial de la Vida Cristiana (Memorial of the Christian Life, 1565)*.

Pedro de Vera used a combination of Chinese and European printing methods for this book. For instance, preliminary information such as the title page, approbation, licences and dedication in Spanish were printed using movable type. The main text, preface and table of contents in Chinese were printed using woodblock printing. Copies of this two-part work can be found in the Jesuit Archives in Rome and the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek (Austrian National Library).¹⁹

He used the same approach in another work printed in 1607, *Simbolo de la Fe, en Lengua y Letra China* (《新刊格物窮理錄》); *Xinkan Gewu Qiongli Lu; Newly Printed Record of the Investigation of Things and Exhaustive Examination of Principle*). The preliminary information in Spanish was rendered in movable type, while the main text in Chinese and the illustrations of animals, the human anatomy and the underworld were produced using xylography.

This expository guide, composed by Dominican friar Tomás Mayor (哆媽氏), was an adaptation of Luis de Granada’s *Introducción del Símbolo de la Fe (Introduction of the Symbol of Faith)*. Copies of



Mayor's work can be found in the Jesuit Archives in Rome, the Austrian National Library and the Leiden University Library in the Netherlands. According to the Latin inscription on one of the copies in the Jesuit Archives, the book was subsequently suspended and expurgated from circulation due to its many errors.²⁰

The First Filipino Printer

From the early 17th century, the influence of Chinese printers began to wane as a generation of local Filipino printers emerged. Foremost among them was Tomás

Pinpin, who is credited as the first Filipino printer and typesetter.²¹ Today, his name is enshrined throughout the Philippines – such as the Limbagang Pinpin Museum in Abucay, Tomas Pinpin Street in Manila and an early 20th-century Tomás Pinpin obelisk that stands at the Plaza San Lorenzo Ruiz in Manila.²²

Pinpin was a printer and writer from Abucay, a municipality in the province of Bataan. It is commonly believed that he had learnt to print from an apprenticeship with Chinese artisans and/or Francisco Blancas de San José, who set up the first

movable type press in Binondo with Juan de Vera.

In 1608, Francisco Blancas de San José was posted to Abucay where he collaborated with Pinpin in the production of *Arte y Reglas de la Lengua Tagala (Art and Rules of the Tagalog Language; 1610)*, the first published grammar of the Tagalog language. As the first published text of its kind, the work became a blueprint for the writing of subsequent grammar books on the native languages of the Philippines.

Pinpin and fellow Filipino printer Domingo Loag also operated the typographical printing press that the Franciscans had established in Pila, Laguna. In 1613, they printed Franciscan friar Pedro de San Buenaventura's *Vocabulario de la Lengua Tagala (Vocabulary of the Tagalog Language)*, the oldest surviving Tagalog dictionary.²³

Pinpin's trailblazing achievements extended beyond the realm of printing. He also authored *Librong Pagaaralan nang manga Tagalog nang Uicang Castilla (Reference Book for Learning Castellano in Tagalog)*, celebrated as the first published work by an indigenous Filipino. Written to help fellow Filipinos learn Spanish, the guide was printed in Bataan in 1610 by Diego Talagay, thought by some to be Pinpin's assistant.

In 1637, Pinpin also published the booklet *Sucessos Felices (Fortunate Events)*. The 14-page publication describes the Spanish battle with pirates in Mindanao.

It has been estimated that between 1563 and 1640, some 100 books were published in the Philippines.²⁴

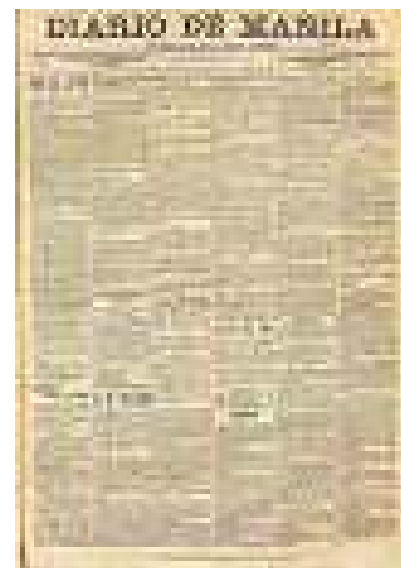
Later Developments

For much of the period between the 16th and 18th centuries, religious presses dominated the landscape of printing and publishing in the Philippines until the proliferation of the secular press in the 19th century – signalling a maturation of the printing and publishing industry in the country.

The first newspaper published in the Philippines, *Gaceta del Superior Gobierno (Gazette of the High Government)*, made its debut on 8 August 1811. Edited by the governor-general of the Philippines, Mariano Fernández de Folgueras, the Spanish-language newspaper focused on political news in Europe that affected Spain, principally the Napoleonic Wars. However, the newspaper was not published regularly. It ceased publication after just 15 issues, with the last edition released on 7 February 1812.

(Below) A replica of the Tomás Pinpin monument at the Limbagang Pinpin Museum. He is credited as the first Filipino printer and typesetter. The monument is sited at the Plaza San Lorenzo Ruiz in Manila. Courtesy of Limbagang Pinpin Museum.

(Bottom) *Arte y Reglas de la Lengua Tagala (Art and Rules of the Tagalog Language)* is the first published grammar of the Tagalog language. It was printed in 1610 by Tomás Pinpin. Shown here is the title page (left) and also the page of a hymn dedicated to the Purissima Virgen y Verdadera Madre de Dois Maria (Mary, the Most Pure Virgin and True Mother of God). Library of Congress, Rare Book and Special Collections Division. Retrieved from Library of Congress website.



(Above) The 31 August 1898 (No. 166) issue of *Diario de Manila*. This Spanish-language newspaper was one of the longest-running daily newspapers published in the Philippines during the period of Spanish rule. Retrieved from Biblioteca Digital Memoriademadrid website (CC BY-NC 2.5 ES).

(Above right) Portrait of a local seamstress (1858) by Baltasar Giraudier and C.W. Andrews from *Ilustración Filipina*, 1 April 1859 (No. 3). It was lithographed by Imprenta y Litografía de Ramírez y Giraudier, which was established in 1858 as a lithographic firm. Image from the holdings of the Biblioteca Nacional de España. Retrieved from Biblioteca Digital Hispánica website.

This paved the way for other Spanish-language newspapers, such as the first daily *La Esperanza* (1846–1849), and *Diario de Manila* (1848–1898?) one of the longest-running newspapers published during the Spanish colonial era. The first daily in

Tagalog, *Diariang Tagalog*, was published in 1882.²⁵

Some leading printing firms and publishing houses in the 19th century include the Imprenta y Litografía de Ramírez y Giraudier, which was established in 1858

as a lithographic printing firm, and Carmelo and Bauermann (1887–1938), a major publishing house co-founded by artist-engraver Don Eulalio Carmelo de Lakandula, and William Bauermann, a German lithographer and cartographer. Carmelo's son Alfredo (a famous Filipino aviator), operated the firm until 1938. Collectively, both firms produced some of the most beautiful prints on the Philippines, such as the images of Filipino life and landscapes in the illustrated magazine *Ilustración Filipina*,²⁶ and maps of the Philippines.

Another firm, Cacho Hermanos, which started as a printing shop set up in 1880 by the first lithographic printer in the Philippines, Salvador Chofre, is one of the longest surviving printers still in business today.

In 1901, the Bureau of Printing (today's National Printing Office) was created to take charge of all routine government printing jobs such as government gazettes, official reports and communication materials. The emergence of commercial and government printing sets the stage for the next phase of the history of printing and publishing in the Philippines as Spanish colonial rule drew to a close, to be replaced by another colonial master, the United States, in the early 20th century. ♦

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MULAN'S MANY FACES

Goh Yu Mei examines the National Library's Asian Children's Literature Collection to see how the story of Mulan has evolved over time, while **Michelle Heng** reviews other Asian tales in the acclaimed collection.

“唧唧复唧唧，木兰当户织。不闻机杼声，惟闻女叹息。”¹

(Translation: Click, click, click, click, Mulan is at her loom. One could not hear the sound of the loom weaving, but only Mulan's sigh.)

These are the opening lines in 《木兰辞》 (*Mulan Ci; The Ballad of Mulan*),² believed to have been composed during the Northern dynasties period (北朝, c. 386–581).³

Widely accepted as the earliest written version of the story of Mulan (木兰), the 62-line poem tells the inspiring story of a young woman who disguises herself as a man so that she can take her aged father's place when he is conscripted into the army to fight the Tartars. The ballad was subsequently included in 《乐府诗集》 (*Yuefu Shiji; Collection of Yuefu Poetry*), an anthology of poetry compiled by Guo Maoqian (郭茂倩) during the Song Dynasty (960–1276).

During the Tang dynasty (618–907), the story was retold as 《木兰歌》 (*Mulan Ge; The Song of Mulan*), a poem written by Wei Yuanfu (韦元甫). Several centuries later, during the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), Xu Wei

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(徐渭) composed the opera 《雌木兰替父从军》 (*Cimulan Tifucongjun; Female Mulan Took Her Father's Place in the Army*). The story was then turned into the novel 《北魏奇史闺孝烈传》 (*Beiwei Qishi Guixiao Liezhuan; The Legendary Story of a Filial and Heroic Girl from the Northern Wei*) by Zhang Shaoxian (张绍贤) during the Qing dynasty (1644–1912).⁴

Although filial piety and loyalty are constant themes in the different representations of Mulan, these values are portrayed differently by different authors. In Zhang Shaoxian's novel, for instance, Mulan takes her own life when she is forced to choose between returning home to care for her parents (i.e. filial piety), and remaining in the army to serve the emperor (i.e. loyalty). The tragic ending in this narrative of Mulan hints at a criticism of the interpretations of filial piety and loyalty in earlier versions of the tale.⁵

Recent efforts to reimagine the story of Mulan consist of books, stage adaptations, television serials and movies. These include the chapter “White Tigers” in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (1976)⁶ and, of course, Disney's *Mulan*, comprising an animated film in 1998 and a live-action drama film in 2020.

Given that the tale is about 1,500 years old, the story of Mulan has inspired numerous books and iterations in various languages and for different age groups,

including children. Some of these titles are available in the Asian Children's Literature Collection (ACL Collection) of the National Library (see text box on pp. 31–32).

The authors or editors of these titles have adopted different approaches in their versions by combining elements of older Mulan stories with new reinterpretations. These can be broadly categorised into two groups: retelling of *The Ballad of Mulan*, largely sticking to the original poem, and the rewriting of the story of Mulan, which involves adding significant new elements.

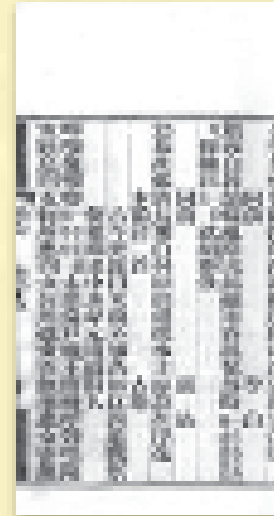
Retelling The Ballad of Mulan

“脱我战时袍，著我旧时裳。当窗理云鬓，对镜贴花黄。”⁷

(Translation: I remove my armour, change into my old dress; comb my hair by the window, and apply yellow powder in front of the mirror.)

Several titles in the ACL Collection closely follow the format in *The Ballad of Mulan. The Song of Mu Lan* (1995) by Jeanne M. Lee is a direct translation of the ancient poem alongside its original Chinese text.⁸ The English translation and the poem, which is faithfully reproduced in traditional Chinese calligraphy by Lee's father, Chan Bo Wen, are juxtaposed against watercolour paintings on silk by Lee, each corresponding to a scene described in the respective verses.

The first known written form of the poem about Mulan titled 《木兰辞》 (*The Ballad of Mulan*) and 木兰歌 (*The Song of Mulan*) by Wei Yuanfu (韦元甫) were compiled by Guo Maoqian (郭茂倩) in his anthology of poetry, 《乐府诗集》 (*Yuefu Shiji*). Image reproduced from 郭茂倩 [Guo M.Q.] (1264–1269). 《乐府诗集：一百卷·目录（二卷）》. Hubei: Chong Wen Shu Ju. Retrieved from Hathi Trust Digital Library website.



Lee dedicates the book “to all women, young and old” and notes that “the verses of the poem are still taught to children in China today and are sung in Chinese opera in different dialects”. These hint at the values of filial piety and loyalty conveyed in the story of Mulan, which are still relevant today and that Mulan is a good role model for women.

Another book, Song Nan Zhang's *The Ballad of Mulan* (1998), has adopted the same way of depicting the story as Lee, with the narrative in English and the original Chinese poem set against drawings depicting the different scenes.⁹ (Zhang, who was born in Shanghai and later migrated to Canada, also drew the illustrations in the book.)

“As dawn I leave my home,
That night I sleep by the Yellow River,
I hear my father's voice no more,
Only the rush of the river.”



(Facing page) A page from Jeanne M. Lee's *The Song of Mu Lan*. Lee painted the watercolours while her father wrote the text in traditional Chinese. Image reproduced from Lee, J.M. (1995). *The Song of Mu Lan*. Arden, North Carolina: Front Street. Asian Children's Literature Collection, National Library, Singapore. (Call no.: RAC 895.1 MUL-[ACL]).

(Left) These pages from Song Nan Zhang's *The Ballad of Mulan* describe the war and how Mulan earned respect for herself. Image reproduced from Zhang S.N. (1998). *The Ballad of Mulan*. Union City, California: Pan Asian Publications. Asian Children's Literature Collection, National Library, Singapore. (Call no.: RAC 398.220951 ZHA-[ACL]).

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(Left) There are some differences between these two imprints published by Newton Publications in Singapore. The 1998 edition (yellow cover) states “忠孝义” (loyal, filial, righteous) in the prefix of the title, while the 2000 edition (pink cover) says “代父从军” (joining the army in father’s place). 李想 [Li, X.]. (1998). 《花木兰》 [Hua Mulan]. Singapore: Newton Publications. (Call no.: RAC 398.2095102 HML-[FOL]); and 李想 [Li, X.]. (2000). 《花木兰》 [Hua Mulan]. Singapore: Newton Publications. Asian Children’s Literature Collection, National Library, Singapore. (Call no.: RAC 398.20951 LX-[FOL]).

(Right) The opera, 《雌木兰替父从军》 (Female Mulan Took Her Father’s Place in the Army), by Xu Wei (徐渭) during the Ming dynasty is reportedly the first known version of the story of Mulan that states her surname as Hua (花). Image reproduced from 沈泰辑 (1628–1644). 《名家杂剧: 三十种三十卷》 (16 volumes). China: [s.n.]. Collection of the Harvard-Yenching Library, Harvard University. Retrieved from Harvard Library website (CC BY 4.0).

In Zhang’s interpretation, each drawing is enclosed within a frame which is similar to how early Chinese books are bound. Although Zhang follows the original storyline closely, he also includes new details and lines. For example, the following lines describe the scene where Mulan appears before her fellow soldiers in female attire:

“What a surprise it was when Mulan appeared at the door!
Her comrades were astonished and amazed.
‘How is this possible?’ they asked.”¹⁰

The original line from *The Ballad of Mulan*, “出门看伙伴, 伙伴皆惊恐”, only states that when Mulan exits from her room and appears in front of her fellow soldiers, they are astonished. Her fellow soldiers’ question is a minor detail that Zhang has added.

At the end of Zhang’s book, there is a very short section titled “Historical Notes on Mulan” which explains the historical context of Mulan’s life and the development of the story from the early days until the present. It notes that the story (and poem) is a well-known folk tale studied by schoolchildren in China today. Zhang writes that the story continues to inspire Chinese women, and he dedicates the book to “everyone with an interest in ancient Chinese culture and literature”.

In Singapore, the story of Mulan has been rewritten as a Chinese picture book, 《花木兰》 (*Hua Mulan*), published by Newton Publications. Written by Li Xiang

(李想) with illustrations by Zhang He (张禾), it follows the original storyline closely, although the author has added minor new scenes such as Mulan’s father teaching her martial arts.

The picture book was first published in 1998, with a new edition two years later.¹¹ The 1998 edition contains the original poem in classical Chinese, a retelling of the story with additional details and a section on the historical context of the ballad. The 2000 edition includes the original poem rendered in simplified Chinese, which the 1998 version does not have.

Re-creating the Story of Mulan

“雄兔脚扑朔, 雌兔眼迷离; 两兔傍地走, 安能辨我是雄雌?”¹²

(Translation: The male rabbit hops rapidly, while the female rabbit has blurry eyes. When both are running side by side, how can one tell if I am male or female?)

Several other titles about Mulan in the ACL Collection involve much more rewriting, including significant details or scenes not found in the original poem, *The Ballad of Mulan*.

Fa Mulan: The Story of a Woman Warrior (1998) by Robert D. San Souci, and illustrated by Jean Tseng and Mou-Sien Tseng, is one such example. (This version by San Souci was probably the inspiration for Disney’s 1998 animated film).¹³ In his “Author’s Note”, San Souci explains that

he added scenes not explicitly mentioned in the original poem by “drawing on [his] study of the original poem in its historical and cultural context”.¹⁴

San Souci notes that the ballad had few details of the campaign against the Tartars so he obtained information on military organisation and strategy, as well as the advice Mulan shares with her generals, from Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War*. “It seems logical that Mulan, in her rise to generalship, would have studied this essential text in length – even committing its principles to memory,” he adds.¹⁵

San Souci also injects an element of romance in his Mulan story, drawing his inspiration from the reference to a pair of male and female rabbits in the original verse that he had interpreted as suggesting a marriage bond.

Other contemporary authors have used details that might have originated from Xu Wei’s opera, 《雌木兰替父从军》. For example, 《花木兰》 (*Hua Mulan*; 2002) by Yong Chun (永春) mentions Mulan’s surname, Hua (花), along with her father’s name, Hua Hu (花弧), which was first mentioned in Xu’s opera.¹⁶ In *Mulan: A Story in English and Chinese* (2014) by Li Jian, the author writes that “Mulan learned Chinese calligraphy and reading from her father at a young age”,¹⁷ while Gang Yi and Xiao Guo’s *The Story of Mulan: The Daughter and the Warrior* (2007) says that “[Mulan’s] father taught her archery and horseback riding”.¹⁸ These embellishments are found in Xu Wei’s opera and not in the original poem.

OF FAMILIAL LOVE AND SACRIFICE

By Michelle Heng

There is a Chinese proverb, 百善孝为先, which says that filial piety ranks first among all virtues.¹ Filial piety is a major tenet of Confucian thought and has remained the cornerstone of Chinese society for thousands of years.² According to the *Classic of Filial Piety* (孝经; *Xiaojing*), a Confucian classic treatise giving advice on filial piety, “Filial piety begins with the serving of our parents, continues with the serving of our ruler, and is completed with the establishment of our own character”.

The values of loyalty, respect and obedience to one’s parents and seniors, reflected in the tale of Mulan, are also universal virtues that find common ground in several Asian tales centred on sacrifices made by children for their elderly kinfolk in the National Library’s Asian Children’s Literature (ACL) Collection.³

An example of this is a retelling of *The Voice of the Great Bell* (1989),⁴ the story of a pure and beautiful Chinese maiden, Ko-Ngai, who makes the ultimate sacrifice when the emperor threatens to execute her father, Kouan-Yu, after he fails repeatedly to create the greatest of bells “strengthened with brass, deepened with gold, sweetened with silver” despite gathering the best artisans in the country for the monumental task. When the cast is made and the mould removed, the bell falls apart as the three metals did not combine. Ko-Ngai then sacrifices herself, as the only way the metals will bond is if a pure young maiden is thrown into the molten mass.

Other Asian tales focusing on the themes of familial love and filial devotion include those from Korea, Japan and Nepal. In the Korean tale titled *In The Moonlight Mist* (1999),⁵ the heavenly king rewards a woodcutter who sacrifices his own happiness for his mother’s welfare by reuniting him with his family in heaven.

The much-loved Japanese folktale, *The Wise Old Woman* (1994),⁶ tells of how a loving farmer shields his aged



Otogi-Banashi: A Miniature Toy-Book from Japan contains three miniature books on well-loved Japanese folktales as well as an introductory essay on the history of toy books and woodblock prints. Herring, A., & Hirose, T. (1969). *Otogi-Banashi: A miniature toy-book from Japan*. Tokyo: Ise-Tatsu. Asian Children’s Literature Collection, National Library, Singapore. (Call no.: RCL05 895.63 HER).

mother away from a cruel young lord who banishes elderly villagers, when they reach the age of 70, to the mountains and leave them to die there. When a nearby ruler threatens to invade the village unless the lord can perform three impossible tasks, only the farmer’s mother succeeds in solving them. The lord then reverses his decree and declares that elders “will be treated with respect and honour, and will share with us the wisdom of their years”.

In the Nepalese fable, *I, Doko: The Tale of a Basket* (2004),⁷ a man decides to abandon his ailing father by placing him in a basket on the temple steps. The man realises his mistake when his young son asks him to bring the basket back so that the son would not have to buy a new one when the time comes for him to carry his father to the temple to be abandoned. Told from the point of view of the basket called Doko, which has served the family



(Above) A son’s loving devotion to his elderly mother is fittingly rewarded and celebrated in this Korean folktale retold by Daniel San Souci. San Souci, D. (1999). *In the Moonlight Mist: A Korean Tale*. Honesdale, PA: Boyds Mills Press. Asian Children’s Literature Collection, National Library, Singapore. (Call no.: RAC 398.209519 SAN-[ACL]).

(Above right) Wisdom comes with age and experience, and nowhere is this more apparent than Yoshiko Uchida’s retelling of a traditional Japanese folklore, *The Wise Old Woman*. Uchida, Y. (1994). *The Wise Old Woman*. New York: Margaret K. McElderry. Asian Children’s Literature Collection, National Library, Singapore. (Call no.: RAC398.20952 UCH-[ACL]).

Michelle Heng is a Librarian with the National Library, Singapore. She has curated a tribute showcase, “Edwin Thumboo – Time-travelling: A Poetry Exhibition” in 2012, and compiled and edited an annotated bibliography on Edwin Thumboo, *Singapore Word Maps: A Chapbook of Edwin Thumboo’s New and Selected Place Poems* (2012) as well as the *Selected Poems of Goh Poh Seng* (2013).



Told from the perspective of a basket, *I, Doko*, depicts the significance of filial love in this poignant Nepalese folktale by Ed Young. Young, E. (2004). *I, Doko: The Tale of a Basket*. New York: Philomel Books. Asian Children's Literature Collection, National Library, Singapore. (Call no.: RAC 813.54 YOU).

for decades, the moral of the story is to treat old people with respect and deference even when they are ailing and are no longer "useful".

These timeless Asian tales for children have captivated the young and the young at heart alike for many generations. It was for the purpose of raising the profile and increasing the appreciation of Asian-centric children's literature that the ACL Collection was first initiated by the National Library of Singapore in the 1960s.⁸

The collection was initially stocked with children's literature of British and American origins but steadily evolved over the years to reflect a stronger Asian focus. Vilasini Menon, one of the original curators of the collection, recalled being tasked to revamp the ACL Collection: "Singapore was a British colony. There was an existing children's library, but the collection was in English for the English-speaking people and English expatriates. The books were all about pony-riding and English school stories, which were highly alien to our children."⁹

While recognising the collection's possibilities as a resource for teachers intending to introduce Asian culture and stories to their young charges in Singapore, Menon was also mindful of the possible needs of researchers when making acquisitions. She looked to library review journals to decide which titles should be purchased, and developed the collection's potential for cross-sectional study by including titles that reflected different attitudes towards Asia and Asians over time.¹⁰

In the early 1960s, most of the titles in the collection were translated into

English from their original languages because not many English titles were published in Asia.¹¹

Apart from its Asian-focused intent, the ACL Collection houses a treasure trove of uniquely crafted gems in the bookmaking tradition. *Otogi-Banashi: A Miniature Toy-Book from Japan* (1969)¹² is a bilingual publication penned in Japanese by Tatsugoro Hirose, with the English text by Ann Herring. Embedded within a cut-out space in the pages are three Lilliputian books of much-loved Japanese folktales: "The Old Man Who Makes The Flowers Bloom", "Momotaro" and "Kachi-Kachi Mountain". Featuring distinctive woodblock-printed illustrations, the bindings of the miniature books and

the slipcover are made of *chiyogami*, a traditional Japanese paper.¹³

Another gem is the visually arresting *Pang Tao (Flat Peaches): Eight Fairies Festival* (c. 1900–1950)¹⁴ about a legendary group of deities. Bound in an accordion format and containing 10 beautifully hand-coloured illustrations framed in silk brocade, this bilingual title in English and Chinese is available in the ACL Collection.

This book bears witness to how much the physical form of the book has evolved. Early books in China were made of narrow strips of bamboo tied together in a bundle using either silk or leather. Silk later replaced bamboo as a writing material and was rolled around rods like a scroll. With the invention of paper, books were made by folding a long strip of paper accordion-style.¹⁵

In the decades that followed, the ACL Collection has been redefined to concentrate on material written in the four official languages of Singapore, and aimed at children and young adults up to 14 years old. Comprising picture books, fiction and non-fiction as well as reference books, the collection includes titles from Southeast Asia, East Asia, Central Asia and West Asia.¹⁶

The ACL Collection aspires to captivate, inform and foster awareness among readers and researchers of Asia's rich cultural and literary heritage. The books in the collection, which number more than 12,000, are available for reference on Level 9 of the National Library Building. ♦

NOTES

- 1 雅瑟 & 苏阳 [Ya, S., & Su, Y.]. (2012). 《中华句源: 品味文化精髓, 感受传世经典》 [Zhonghua juyuan: Pinwei wenhua jingsui, ganshou chuanshi jingdian] (p. 202). Beijing: Beijing Book Co. Inc. (Call no.: Chinese 810.07 YS); Lee, C.Y. (2004). Emperor Chengzu and imperial filial piety of the Ming dynasty: From the Classic of filial piety to the biographical accounts of filial piety. In A.K.L. Chan & S.-H. Tan (Eds.). (2004). *Filial piety in Chinese thought and history* (pp. 144–151). London: RoutledgeCurzon. (Call no.: R 173 FIL)
- 2 Ebrey, P.B. (1996). *The Cambridge illustrated history of China* (pp. 70–72). Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press. (Call no.: R 951 EBR)
- 3 Wong, R. (2016). Introduction: The power of stories (pp. 11–15). In *Stories from Asia: The Asian Children's Literature Collection*. Singapore: National Library Board. (Call no.: R 809.89282)
- 4 Hearn, L., & Hodges, M. (1989). *The voice of the great bell*. Boston: Little, Brown & Company. (Call no.: RCL05 398.20951 HOD)
- 5 San Souci, D. (1999). *In the moonlight mist: A Korean tale*. Honesdale, PA: Boyds Mills Press. (Call no.: RAC 398.209519 SAN-[ACL])
- 6 Uchida, Y. (1994). *The wise old woman*. New York:

- Margaret K. McElderry. (Call no.: RAC398.20952 UCH-[ACL])
- Young, E. (2004). *I, Doko: The tale of a basket*. New York: Philomel Books (Call no.: RAC 813.54 YOU)
- Stories from Asia: The Asian children's literature collection*, 2016, pp. 22–25.
- Stories from Asia: The Asian children's literature collection*, 2016, p. 24.
- Stories from Asia: The Asian children's literature collection*, 2016, p. 25.
- Stories from Asia: The Asian children's literature collection*, 2016, p. 25.
- Herring, A., & Hirose, T. (1969). *Otogi-Banashi: A miniature toy-book from Japan*. Tokyo: Ise-Tatsu. (Call no.: RCL05 895.63 HER)
- Stories from Asia: The Asian children's literature collection*, 2016, pp. 132–133.
- 蟠桃八仙會 = Pang tao (Flat peaches), Eidht [i.e. Eight] Fairies Festival, a festival held on the 3d [i.e. 3rd day] of the 3d [i.e. 3rd] lunar month in honor of the Goddess Hsi Wang mu. (c. 1900–1950). China: [s.n.]. (Call no.: RCL05 398.0951 PAN)
- Stories from Asia: The Asian children's literature collection*, 2016, pp. 142–143.
- Stories from Asia: The Asian children's literature collection*, 2016, p. 26.

A Classic Tale

While Mulan's story strongly reflects Chinese culture and values, different authors deal with these elements in different ways, as the various versions of the story in the ACL Collection demonstrate.

The titles published in North America put more effort into providing background and context. Lee notes that the poem is still being studied in schools and performed as operas in China today. San Souci writes that he has incorporated elements from *The Art of War* and believes that Mulan could have looked up to the Maiden of Yue (越女; Yue Nü; a legendary swordswoman from the Spring and Autumn period) as a role model. Meanwhile, Zhang dedicates his book to all who are interested in Chinese culture and literature. In many ways, these authors appear to be attempting to explain the cultural context of Mulan's story to an unfamiliar audience.

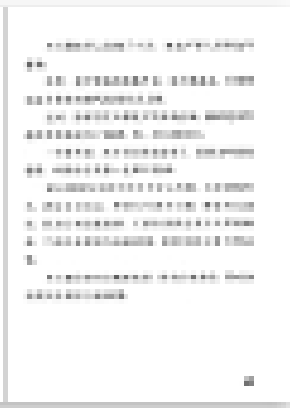
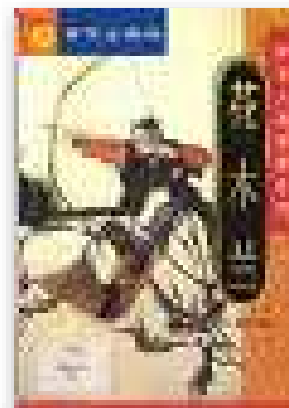
On the other hand, the authors whose books are published in Asia

appear to take it for granted that their audience has the necessary background. Yong Chun merely notes that Mulan exemplifies the Chinese values of loyalty (忠), filial piety (孝), benevolence (仁) and love (愛), while Li Xiang simply states on the back cover of his book that the original poem 《木兰辞》 is a gem passed down through history. No extra explanations are given.

These differences probably arise from the writer's perception of who the readers will be.

Differences in treatment notwithstanding, the fundamental story of Mulan taking her father's place in the army has not changed over the last 1,500 years. The enduring popularity of her story is testimony to the fact that this particular tale strikes a deep chord within people, regardless of time period or cultural milieu. And Mulan herself continues to serve as an inspiration and role model for children today. ♦

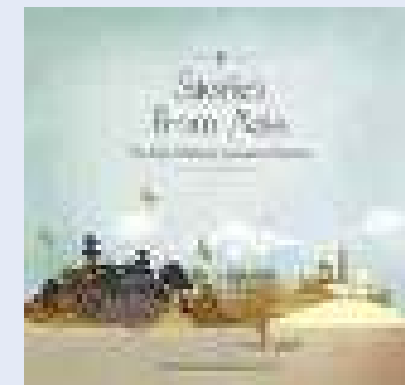
Yong Chun's 《花木兰》 has elements from the opera added to the basic story depicted in the poem, *The Ballad of Mulan*. 永春 [Yong, C.]. (2002). 《花木兰》 [Hua Mulan]. 新加坡: 新亚出版社. Asian Children's Literature Collection, National Library, Singapore. (Call no.: RAC Chinese C813.4 YC).



NOTES

- 1 李想 [Li, X.]. (2000). 《花木兰》 [Hua Mulan] (p. 18). Singapore: Newton Publications. (Call no.: Chinese RAC 398.20951 LX-[FOL])
- 2 Dong, L. (2006, April). Writing Chinese America into words and images: Storytelling and retelling of the song of Mu Lan. *The Lion and the Unicorn*, 30 (2), 218–233, p. 219. Retrieved from ProQuest Central via NLB's eResources website.
- 3 The period that followed the Eastern Jin dynasty (东晋, 317–420) and before the establishment of the Sui dynasty in 581 is commonly referred to as the Northern and Southern dynasties (南北朝). The Southern Dynasties (420–589) referred to the four dynasties, namely Song (宋), Qi (齐), Liang (梁) and Chen (陈), which ruled the southern part of China from Jiankang (建康, modern-day Nanjing). In contrast, the northern part of China was in a state of war from 304 to 439 [known to historians as the era of Sixteen Kingdoms (十六国)] until the Tuoba clan of the Xianbei established the (Northern) Wei dynasty (北魏) and conquered the most part of northern China. The regime under the Tuoba clan was short-lived and northern China was ruled under different clans and factions, each establishing their own dynasty. These

- dynasties were collectively referred to as the Northern dynasties. For more details, see Ebrey, P.B. (1996). *The Cambridge illustrated history of China* (pp. 89–93). Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press. (Call no.: R 951 EBR)
- 4 For more details on the different versions of Mulan in different periods in the history of China, see Lan, F. (2003, Summer). The female individual and the empire: A historicist approach to Mulan and Kingston's woman warrior. *Comparative Literature*, 55 (3), 229–245. Retrieved from JSTOR via NLB's eResources website; Edwards, L. (2016). *Women warriors and wartime spies of China* (pp. 17–39). Cambridge, United Kingdom; New York, New York: Cambridge University Press. (Call no.: 355.0092 EDW); Yang, Q. (2018). Mulan in China and America: From premodern to modern. *Comparative Literature: East & West*, 2 (1), 45–59. Retrieved from Taylor & Francis Online website.
- 5 Yang, 2018, pp. 49–50.
- 6 Kingston, M.H. (1989). *The woman warrior: Memoirs of a girlhood among ghosts*. London: Picador. (Call no.: 305.8951073 KIN)
- 7 李想, 2000, p. 19.
- 8 Lee, J.M. (1995). *The song of Mu Lan*. Arden, North Carolina: Front Street. (Call no.: RAC 895.1 MUL-[ACL])



Stories from Asia: The Asian Children's Literature Collection presents highlights from the collection held in the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library. The collection, over 12,000-strong, is located on level 9 of the National Library Building. This full-colour hardcover book sheds light on the literary and historical developments in children's literature about Asians and Asia. Apart from featuring unique and rare items from the collection, it also covers diverse topics such as the power of storytelling and imagination, Asian folktales, foreign perspectives of Asia and emergent Asian children's literature. The collection is recognised by UNESCO as one of the "nationally and internationally significant library collection".

The book is available for reference at the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library and for loan at selected public libraries (Call nos.: RSING 809.89282 STO and SING 809.89282 STO) as well as for digital loan at nlb.overdrive.com.

- 9 Zhang, S.N. (1998). *The ballad of Mulan*. Union City, California: Pan Asian Publications. (Call no.: 398.220951 ZHA-[FOL])
- 10 Zhang, 1998, unpaginated.
- 11 李想 [Li, X.]. (1998). 《花木兰》 [Hua Mulan]. Singapore: Newton Publications. (Call no.: Chinese RAC 398.2095102 HML-[FOL]); 李想, 2000.
- 12 李想, 2000, p. 19.
- 13 San Souci, R.D. (1998). *Fa Mulan: The story of a woman warrior*. New York: Hyperion Books for Children. (Call no.: RAC 398.2 SAN-[ACL])
- 14 San Souci, 1998, Author's note.
- 15 San Souci, 1998, Author's note.
- 16 永春 [Yong, C.]. (2002). 《花木兰》 [Hua Mulan]. Singapore: 新亚出版社. (Call no.: Chinese RAC C813.4 YC); Wang, Z. (2020, July). Cultural "authenticity" as a conflict-ridden hypotext: Mulan (1998), Mulan Joins the Army (1939) and a millennium-long intertextual metamorphosis. *Arts*, 9 (3), 78. Retrieved from MDPI website.
- 17 Li, J. (2014). *Mulan: A story in English and Chinese*. New York: Better Link Press. (Call no.: RAC 398.2 JIA-[ACL])
- 18 Gang, Y., & Xiao, G. (2007). *The story of Mulan: The daughter and the warrior*. Beijing: China Intercontinental Press. (Call no.: RAC 398.2 YI-[FOL])
- 19 Li, 2014, back cover.

THE EVOLUTION OF STRAITS-BORN CUISINE

Lee Geok Boi looks at what makes Peranakan cuisine unique and delves into old cookbooks to see how Straits-born cuisine came to be.

Bakwan kepiting. Babi pongteh. Ayam buah keluak. Many Singaporeans would describe these dishes as classic Peranakan or Straits Chinese dishes. However, the Malay word “peranakan” means “local born”, so perhaps a more accurate term

for this cuisine is not so much “Straits Chinese” but “Straits-born”.

The Straits, in this case, refers not only to the territories of the former Straits Settlements, namely Singapore, Melaka and Penang, but also the islands that make up the Indonesian archipelago – an area that historians refer to as Island Southeast Asia. Through centuries of trade and colonisation, the people of Island Southeast Asia melded ancient culinary traditions with colonial culinary cultures and introduced ingredients that

gave rise to several hybrid cuisines characteristic of the Straits-born communities – Eurasian (mainly of Portuguese, Dutch and English heritage),¹ Chetti Melaka (or Chitty Melaka)² as well as Penang, Melaka and Indonesian Chinese.

In Straits-born kitchens, housewives and servants whipped up meals that were rooted in the geography, history and traditional ingredients of Island Southeast Asia. These resulted in a fusion cuisine that we enjoy and are familiar with today.

The Rich Flavours of Straits-born Cuisine

What makes a cuisine Straits-born? Well, it would feature dishes that are an amalgamation of Indian, Chinese and European influences infused with traditional Malay-Indonesian and Southeast Asian cooking. The latter two cuisines evolved from what indigenous cooks first found in the wild and began cultivating in kitchen gardens, along with ingredients sourced from village markets.

Numerous aromatics such as lemongrass (*Cymbopogon*) or *serai* in Malay, and galangal (*Alpinia galanga*) or greater galangal, also known as *lengkuas* or blue ginger, are native to Southeast Asia. Several types of ginger such as the common ginger (*Zingiber officinale*) can be found across Asia – from South Asia through Southeast Asia to East Asia. Locally available plants that yield fragrant leaves used in Straits cooking include those from the kaffir lime or *limau perut* in Malay (*Citrus hystrix*), also known as the makrut lime, and the pandan (*Pandanus amaryllifolius*) or screwpine.

Certain local flowers are also used in Southeast Asian cooking. The blue pea flower or butterfly pea flower (*Clitoria ternatea*), known in Malay as *bunga telang*, is favoured as a natural food colouring in otherwise boring, white glutinous rice desserts while the superb fragrance of the torch ginger bud (*Etlingera elatior*), or *bunga kantan*, adds flavour to salads and curries.

As its scientific name suggests, the blue pea flower originally came from Ternate, one of the fabled Spice Islands of the Moluccas (now Maluku Islands). The Spice Islands are the original source of the world’s nutmeg (*Myristica fragrans*), candlenut or *buah keras* (*Aleurites moluccana*), and clove (*Syzygium aromaticum*).

In addition to aromatics, various useful plants that yield valuable cooking ingredients can also be found in this region. They include palms such as the coconut palm (*Cocos nucifera*) and sago palm (*Metroxylon sagu*).

East Java is the main source of *buah keluak*, the hard nut of the *kepayang* (*Pangium edule*), a tropical tree native to Indonesia, Malaysia and New Guinea. As hydrogen cyanide, a poison, is found in all parts of the tree, the nuts have to undergo a complicated process to neutralise the poison before they can be sold. Aficionados of *buah keluak* then go through another process to thoroughly clean and shell the nuts before cooking them with chicken or pork in this unusual-looking dish.

Global trade and the movement of traders added yet more ingredients to an already well-endowed Southeast Asian culinary tradition.³ Pepper (*Piper nigrum*), originally native to India, has been cultivated in Java and Sumatra since 200 BCE. Turmeric (*Curcuma longa*) and cardamom (*Elettaria cardamomum*), two members of the ginger family, are native to India, as are tamarind (*Tamarindus indica*), or *asam*, and the mango (*Mangifera indica*).

The Indian traders who introduced Buddhism and Hinduism to Southeast Asia

also brought with them seed spices that they had acquired through trade further westwards: coriander (*Coriandrum sativum*) from the southern Mediterranean, cumin (*Cuminum cyminum*) from West Asia, fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare*) from southern Europe and West Asia, and fenugreek (*Trigonella foenum-graecum*) from southern Europe and West Asia. These spices became essentials in the spice mixes used in Indian and Straits-born cuisines.

There is also Chinese influence in Southeast Asian cooking. Chinese traders,



(Facing page) Today’s Penang fruit rojak contains *hae ko* (black prawn paste); yesteryear’s had *belacan* mixed with peanuts and *teecheo* (Chinese sweet black sauce). Image reproduced from Lee, G.B. (2009). *Classic Asian Salads* (p. 188). Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Cuisine. Collection of the National Library, Singapore. (Call no.: RSING 641.83 LEE).

(Above) Aromatics, spices and ingredients used in Straits cooking include the pineapple, coconut, *jambu ayer*, torch ginger bud, lime, fresh and dried chillies, and *belimbing*. Image reproduced from Lee, G.B. (2021). *In a Straits-born Kitchen* (back cover). Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Cuisine. Collection of the National Library, Singapore. (Call no.: RSING 641.5959 LEE).

(Right) *Ayam buah keluak* is a typical Singapore Straits Chinese dish cooked using *buah keluak*, the hard nut of the *kepayang* (*Pangium edule*) tree. Image reproduced from Lee, G.B. (2014). *Asian Soups, Stews and Curries* (p. 70). Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Cuisine. Collection of the National Library, Singapore. (Call no.: RSING 641.813095 LEE).



Lee Geok Boi has a life-long interest in all aspects of food but especially in cooking it. She is the author of several books and a prolific writer of cookbooks focusing on Asian cuisines and, in particular, Southeast Asian recipes.

notably Hokkiens from Fujian province, began arriving in Southeast Asia as early as the 10th century. The Hokkiens describe Fujian as “eight parts mountains, one part water and one-part farmland”.⁴ They naturally turned to the sea to improve their economic lot and formed trading

hubs in Southeast Asian port cities along the maritime Silk Road, stretching from southern China past the waters of Island Southeast Asia westwards to South and West Asia.

One such hub in 15th-century Melaka evolved into the Baba Malay-speaking

Straits Chinese (Baba Malay being a creole language combining Malay and Hokkien) as well as giving rise to the Chetti Melaka. The Straits Chinese hub in Penang, which was founded as a British trading port in 1786, remained primarily Hokkien-speaking. These accidental settlers brought with them traditional Chinese condiments such as soya sauce (made from fermented soya beans) and other soya products. Originally from Southeast Asia, soya beans were domesticated in China as early as 1100 BCE.⁵

It is believed that the Chinese introduced fermentation technology to the region. However, the inhabitants of ancient Island Southeast Asia probably already knew much about fermented foods. These include *belacan* (fermented krill paste) and *chinchalok* (fermented krill), traditional foods that are popular regionally. Ancient Javanese records list some of the food and drinks once consumed in the 10th century such as fermented rice (*tapeh*) and fermented drinks like palm wine or toddy.⁶

The sugarcane (*Saccharum officinarum*) made its way to Indonesia and India perhaps as early as 8000 BCE. But what we call sugar today only became common from the 16th century onwards after sugar plantations using African slave labour in the West Indies produced sugar in quantities large enough to meet popular demand in Europe.⁷ Southeast Asian desserts were, and still are, sweetened with palm sugar, of which *gula melaka* (known as *gula jawa* in Indonesia) is just one kind. Different kinds of palms yield sweeteners in various hues and with different fragrances.

The arrival of the Portuguese in the 16th century brought about one of the biggest changes to the flavour profile of South Asian and Southeast Asian cooking. This was the introduction of the chilli (*Capsicum frutescens*) to Goa and Melaka following their colonisation by the Portuguese in 1510 and 1511 respectively. Chilli plants were originally native to Mexico and Central America and the word “chilli” means “hot pepper” in Nahuatl, the language of the Aztecs.

The subsequent arrival of the Dutch and British brought wheat flour and butter, without which Straits-born classics such as sugee cake and *kueh lapis*⁸ (also known as *spekkoek*, meaning “bacon cake” in Dutch) would not be possible. Traditional Southeast Asian *kueh* (or *kuih*; bite-sized snacks or dessert foods) were rice-based.

Baking as a cooking technique was first introduced to Southeast Asia in the

(Below) The arrival of the Dutch and British to Southeast Asia brought wheat flour and butter, without which the Straits-born classic *kueh lapis* would not be possible. Image reproduced from Lee, G.B. (2021). In *A Straits-born Kitchen* (p. 155). Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Cuisine. Collection of the National Library, Singapore. (Call no.: RSING 641.5959 LEE).

(Bottom) Typical Straits-born snacks include pineapple tarts, *kueh pie tee* shells filled with shredded bamboo shoots, coconut candy and *pulut hitam* drizzled with coconut milk. Image reproduced from Lee, G.B. (2021). In *A Straits-born Kitchen* (p. 116). Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Cuisine. Collection of the National Library, Singapore. (Call no.: RSING 641.5959 LEE).



(Above) *Kueh Belanda* (meaning “Dutch cake” in Malay), commonly known as “love letters” (crispy egg rolls), is a festive treat for the Lunar New Year. These are still best made on a charcoal-fired grill. Courtesy of Lee Geok Boi.

(Above right) During the colonial era, charcoal-fired ovens were used for baking *kueh bangkit*, a biscuit made of tapioca flour (*Manihot esculenta*), *santan* (coconut cream) and white or palm sugar. This is still a traditional festive treat made for occasions such as the Lunar New Year and Hari Raya Puasa. Courtesy of Lee Geok Boi.

colonial era, and charcoal-fired ovens were used for making *kueh bahulu* and *kueh bangkit*. The former is a type of small sponge cake baked with eggs, wheat flour and sugar, while the latter is a biscuit made of tapioca flour (*Manihot esculenta*; a South American native and probably a Portuguese introduction to Southeast Asia), *santan* (coconut cream), and white or palm sugar. These are traditional festive treats that are still made for occasions such as the Lunar New Year and Hari Raya Puasa (Eid al-Fitr).

Another festive treat is *kueh Belanda* (meaning “Dutch cake” in Malay), commonly known as “love letters” (crispy egg rolls), which are still best made on a charcoal-fired grill.

Interestingly, a recipe labelled as “Dutch” for *Ijzer Koekes*, translated as “Iron (thin) Cakes”, was found in a compilation of traditional Sri Lankan recipes first published in 1929.⁹ The recipe is identical to that for *kueh Belanda*. What Singaporeans call “love letters” are better known as *kueh kapit* in Penang, where the thin *kueh* is folded flat into a triangular shape rather than rolled into a cigarillo-like *ijzer koek* or love letter.

Tracing Straits-born Cooking

Unlike textiles or pottery, delectable dishes have an ephemeral existence. Fortunately,

recipes are almost always transmitted orally within families and communities and many of these traditional recipes have also found their way into cookbooks. This makes tracing the evolution of Straits-born cuisine easier and more accurate.¹⁰

What is probably the first local cookbook was *The Y.W.C.A. of Malaya Cookery Book: A Book of Culinary Information and Recipes Compiled in Malaya*, published in 1931.¹¹ It was edited by Mrs R.E. Holttum, wife of the director of the Singapore Botanic Gardens, and Mrs T.W. Hinch, wife of the principal of Anglo-Chinese School. The book was very well received and went through nine editions, the last in 1962.

The absence of a Straits Chinese category in this book suggests that Straits-born cuisine was not significant before World War II, or even as late as 1962. However, there are a few recipes in the Chinese section labelled as “Straits Chinese”: chicken satay, *otak-otak* (fish paste mixed with spices, wrapped in banana or coconut leaves and then grilled) and *popiah goreng* (fried spring roll).

Pork sambal was labelled “Possibly Straits Chinese”. This was a dish cooked with a spice paste consisting of onion, fennel, dried chillies and garlic. This dish is definitely Straits Chinese as traditional

Chinese food does not use fennel. One recipe in the book not labelled as Straits Chinese but which looks distinctly so is pig liver balls cooked with *ketumbar* (coriander) and *asam* (tamarind) water. The dish resembles a traditional Straits Chinese dish called *hati babi* (minced liver and pork, shaped into balls).

The Malay section of the YWCA cookbook has many recipes that we would today also label as Straits-born, such as *rendang* (beef or chicken braised in coconut milk with a spice mix or *rempah*), *opor* (chicken cooked in coconut milk with a spice mix) and *agar-agar* (*Spherooccus lichenoides*). *Agar-agar*, a Malay word, is a Southeast Asian seaweed that was once exported to China to be used as a fixative in paper and silk production, but cooked into a dessert jelly in this part of the world, and still is today.¹²

The first Singapore cookbook with many recognisable Straits-born recipes is *My Favourite Recipes* by Mrs Ellice Handy, a domestic science teacher.¹³ This slim publication of 94 pages first came out in 1952 as a fundraiser for the Methodist Girls’ School building fund. With numerous reprints and editions over the years – the latest published in 2014 – the cookbook has since become a classic. It contributed to the spread of Straits-born cooking

although only a few of the recipes were defined specifically as Straits-born.

Another domestic science teacher who produced a cookbook for her students was Lilian Lane, who taught at the Malayan Teachers' College in Penang between 1956 and 1959. Her 1964 *Malayan Cookery Recipes Tested in Malayan Schools* has identifiably Straits-born recipes: *otak-otak*, whole fish stuffed with chillies and *belacan*, mutton *kurmah*, satay and *rojak* (described as "Javanese fruit salad").¹⁴ The linkage between *rojak* and Java is fascinating because 10th-century Javanese copper-plate inscriptions describe "*rujak* [as] a salad of raw green fruit, mixed with sugar or seasoning".¹⁵

Given that Lane was based in Penang, it is interesting that her *rojak* recipe did not contain *hae ko* (black prawn paste), an essential ingredient in today's Penang and Singapore *rojak*. It did, however, have *belacan* mixed with peanuts and *teecheo* (Chinese sweet black sauce). The flavour of *teecheo* is the same as Indonesian *kicap manis*. Perhaps the ancient Javanese *rujak* used *kicap manis* in the dressing? *Hae ko* – which must not be confused with *belacan*, a basic Southeast Asian ingredient – is a genuine Penang-born product; Penang is still Singapore's only source of *hae ko* today.

Indonesia's contributions to Straits-born cuisine in Singapore can be seen in Mrs Susie Hing's *In A Malayan Kitchen*, published in 1956.¹⁶ Mrs Hing was from Semarang in central Java, the hub of the Indonesian Chinese community during

the Dutch colonial era. Several prominent Singaporean families have forebears who hailed from Semarang, among them the Kwa family, the in-laws of the late founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, whose own grandmother and father were born there.¹⁷

Mrs Hing's book had typical Indonesian recipes such as *opor ayam*, *rendang Padang*, *sate bakso* and *dendeng manis*. This last is a spiced savoury meat rather like Singapore's *bak kwa* but dried in the sun instead of being grilled. *Dendeng*, or dried meat, is a Javanese preparation that dates back to the 10th century, like *rujak*. An interesting question is whether Indonesian *dendeng* is the inspiration for *bak kwa*.

The cookbook also features typical Malayan-Singapore recipes such as *roti jala* (a lacy pancake eaten with curry), Hokkien *mee* and pineapple tarts, both the open and the closed pineapple-shaped tarts with spikes that were traditionally seen as Indonesian.

One interesting find in Mrs Hing's book is a recipe for *kroket tjanker* or *Java kwei patti*. This is a dish using deep-fried shells made the same way as today's *kueh pie tee* shells. But unlike today's *kueh pie tee*, which is filled with shredded bamboo shoots or yam bean, this *Java kwei patti* has a rich meat filling. Did today's *kueh pie tee* start out as a Dutch colonial dish? (The 1960 edition of Mrs Ellice Handy's *My Favourite Recipes* has a recipe for *kueh pie tee* that used a filling of bamboo shoots.¹⁸) Note that yam bean or *jicama* (*Pachyrhizus erosus*) was originally native

to Mexico, and was probably introduced to Southeast Asia during the Spanish colonial era in the Philippines.

The first local cookbook that identified itself as being Peranakan is *Mrs Lee's Cookbook*, originally self-published in 1974.¹⁹ (The author – Mrs Lee Chin Koon, née Chua Jim Neo – was the mother of Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew). In her book, she wrote: "Malay influence, because of mingling and intermarriage, has produced a unique Peranakan culture and set of customs distinct from those of the Chinese community who came from China. Our food, which is basically Malay or Indonesian in method and ingredients, were altered to suit our tastes."

Among the Indonesian influences recorded in her cookbook are recipes for *nonya ayam buah keluak* (chicken with stuffed *buah keluak* braised in a spicy tamarind gravy) and the eastern Javanese *nasi rawon*, which is beef stewed with *buah keluak* and served with rice. After all, her mother-in-law did come from Semarang.²⁰

Mrs Lee explained that she published the book because "it has been one of [her] ambitions to write a book about Straits Chinese food so that the younger generation, including [her] grandchildren and later their children, will have access to these recipes which were zealously kept within families as guarded secrets."²¹

Perhaps similarly inspired, her sister, Mrs Leong Yee Soo, also published her cookbook, *Singaporean Cooking*, in 1976.²² In the 1970s and 80s, Mrs Lee and Mrs Leong were among the first Peranakan women who were active in spreading knowledge about Straits-born cuisine through cooking classes. Indeed, family recipes were never actually kept secret but usually passed on to family members and favoured friends and through cooking classes.

In all likelihood, all these early cookbooks contained heritage recipes that had been tweaked and modified over time into family favourites.

Preservation and Alteration

In his book, *The Traditional Dietary Culture of Southeast Asia*, Akira Matsuyama proposes two concepts for studying the dietary culture of the region. One is to look at "conventionality" when traditional food is defined as food that has stood the test of time, and the other is "aboriginality" or the linkage of this food to the inhabitants of the area. Both conventionality and aboriginality are seen in Straits-born cooking.

(Below) This is the first local cookbook that identifies itself as Peranakan. Lee, C.K., Mrs. (1974). *Mrs Lee's Cookbook: Nonya Recipes and Other Favourite Recipes*. Singapore: [The Author]. Collection of the National Library, Singapore. (Call no: RSING 641.595957 LEE).

(Below right) Mrs Susie Hing's cookbook contains typical Indonesian recipes such as *opor ayam*, *rendang Padang*, *sate bakso* and *dendeng manis*. Hing, S., Mrs. (1956). *In a Malayan Kitchen*. Singapore: Mun Seong Press. Collection of the National Library, Singapore. (Call no.: RCL05 641.59595 HIN-[RFL]).



Matsuyama writes: "The preservation of tradition and acceptance of alteration are two aspects of the dietary culture of Southeast Asia."²³

These two trends – preservation and alteration – are hallmarks of Straits cuisine in Singapore. Today, creative cooks and chefs have been experimenting, introducing unlikely, new-fangled combinations such as *otak-otak* buns and foie gras *tau kua pau*. At the same time, they have also preserved much of the cuisine's conventional and aboriginal characteristics.

One of the traits of a great cuisine is its ability to retain its traditional roots while taking on new and interesting flavours with the introduction of non-traditional ingredients. Straits cuisine definitely falls into that category. ♦



Lee Geok Boi's newly published cookbook, *In a Straits-born Kitchen*, by Marshall Cavendish Cuisine features the recipes that she has inherited, collected, tweaked or experimented with over more than half a century. The book is available for reference at the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library and for loan at selected public libraries (Call nos.: RSING 641.5959 LEE and SING 641.5959 LEE). It also retails at major bookshops in Singapore.

NOTES

- Eurasians are persons with mixed European and Asian lineage. Most Eurasians in Singapore can trace the European part of their ancestry to the Portuguese, Dutch or British, while others are of Danish, French, German, Italian or Spanish descent. See Ho, S. (2013, July 25). *Eurasian community*. Retrieved from Singapore Infopedia website.
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- Looking at old locally published cookbooks means looking at Malayan cookbooks. The concept of a Singapore separate from Malaya did not come into being until 1965 when Singapore became an independent republic. The National Library does not have this 1931 edition, but it has the 1937, 1939, 1948, 1951 and 1962 editions. See Holttum, R.E., Mrs, & Hinch, T.W., Mrs. (Eds.). (1937). *The Y.W.C.A. international cookery book of Malaya*. [Kuala Lumpur]: Malayan Y.W.C.A. (Call no.: RRARE 641.59595 YWA; Microfilm no.: NL29320); Holttum, R.E., Mrs, & Waite, D.S., Mrs. (Eds.). (1939). *The Y.W.C.A. international cookery book of Malaya*. [s.l.]: Malayan Committee of the Young Women's Christian Association. (Call no.: RRARE 641.59595 YWC; Accession no.: B29232809B); Llewellyn, A.E., Mrs. (Ed.). (1948). *The Y.W.C.A. of Malaya international cookery book*. [Kuala Lumpur]: Y.W.C.A. of Malaya. (Call no.: RCL05 641.59595 YWC); Llewellyn, A.E., Mrs. (Ed.). (1951). *The Y.W.C.A. of Malaya & Singapore cookery book: A book of culinary information and recipes compiled in Malaya*. [s.l.]: Y.W.C.A. of Malaya and Singapore. (Call no.: RCL05 641.595951 YWC); Llewellyn, A.E., Mrs. (Ed.). (1962). *The Y.W.C.A. of Malaya cookery book; a book of culinary information and recipes compiled in Malaya*. [Kuala Lumpur]: Persatuan Wanita Keristian di Malaya, Y.W.C.A. of Malaya. (Call no.: RCL05 641.59595 YOU)
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19 Lee, C.K., Mrs. (1974). *Mrs. Lee's cookbook: Nonya recipes and other favourite recipes*. Singapore: [The Author]. (Call no: RSING 641.595957 LEE)

20 Lee, 1998, p. 27.

21 Lee, 1974, unpaginated.

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23 Matsuyama, 2003, p. 4.



Kueh pie tee shells being deep fried before they are served with a filling of bamboo shoots. Image reproduced from Lee, G.B. (2021). *In a Straits-born Kitchen* (p. 121). Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Cuisine. Collection of the National Library, Singapore. (Call no.: RSING 641.59595 LEE).

Urang Banjar

From South Kalimantan to Singapore

Zinnurain Nasir and Nasri Shah shed light on the Banjar people, a small but significant sub-ethnic Malay community from Borneo.

haram *manjarah waja sampai kaputing* is a traditional phrase in *basa* Banjar, or Banjarese, the native language of the Banjar people (Urang Banjar)¹ who originally hailed from South Kalimantan on the island of Borneo.

Literally translated as “Let not the steel [of a blade] stop short until its very point”, the imagery of steel and blade recalls the Banjar community’s martial history, beginning with the local sultanate’s skirmishes with Dutch and British traders in the 17th century right up to the Banjarmasin War of 1859.²

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Nasri Shah is a Curator with the Malay Heritage Centre. His past projects include “Mereka Utusan” (2016) and “Women in Action” (2018), which focused on histories of the Malay publishing industry and women’s rights movement respectively.

In the context of modern Singapore, the phrase is about persistence, about never giving up. In the words of former Malay-language teacher and a Banjar, Mohd Gazali bin Mohd Arshad, whose uncle Haji Mohamed Sanusi was the first Mufti of Singapore and also a Banjar, “... haram manjarah waja sampai kaputing. If we [are] to do anything, let us do it well... achieve and complete it well”. The phrase continues to be used today by the Banjar communities in cities such as Banjarmasin (now the capital city of South Kalimantan) and Martapura.

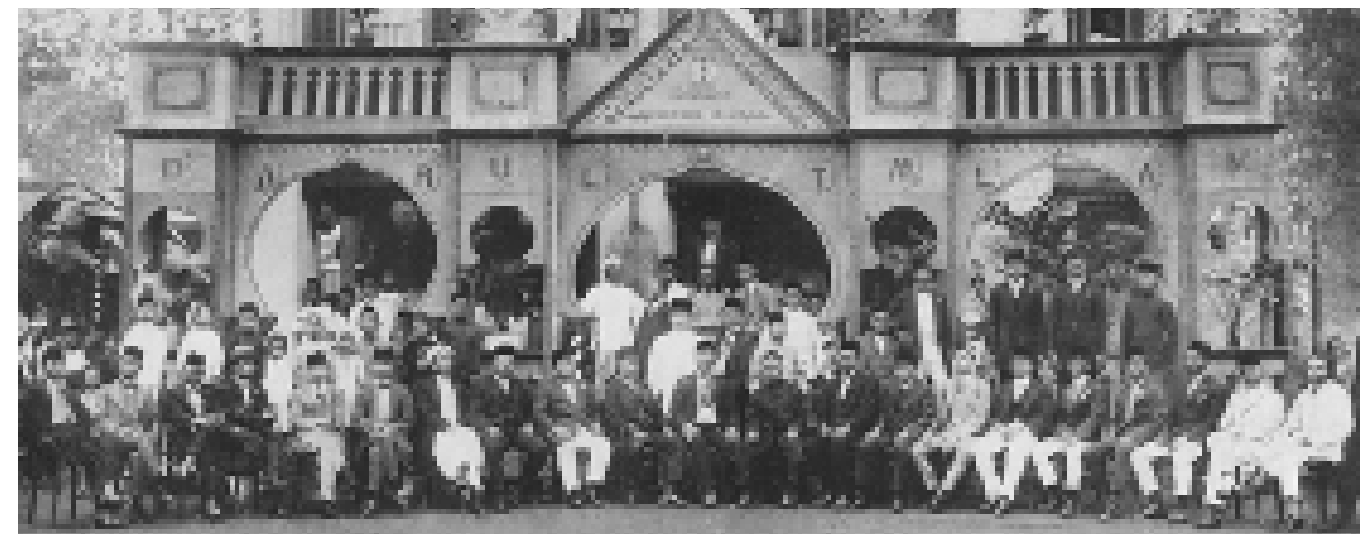
This phrase also greeted visitors to the “Urang Banjar: Heritage and Culture of the Banjar in Singapore” exhibition held at the Malay Heritage Centre from 28 November 2020 to 25 July 2021.³ The exhibition showcased the many ways in which Banjar culture has been localised since the arrival of the first Banjar people to Singapore in the 19th century, including the importance of the phrase as a rallying call for the community.

The Banjar community is one of the smallest sub-ethnic Malay communities in Singapore. In the 1990 Census of Singapore, only 12 people identified themselves as Banjarese.⁴ (Since then, the census has stopped publishing the numbers for sub-ethnic groups so updated figures are not available.)

What is believed to be the first documented count of the Banjarese community in Singapore dates to the 1911 *Report on the Census of the Colony of the Straits Settlements*. The census recorded that there were 377 Banjar individuals here, making up about 0.64 percent of the total population of Malays at the time.⁵

Pioneering Migrants

Members of the Banjar community in Singapore are able to trace their lineage to traders, diamond merchants, businessmen and travellers who arrived here from South Kalimantan via overland routes in the Malay Peninsula or by sea from as early as the beginning of the 19th century.



(Above) Banjar men at the Darul Ta'alam Club on Sumbawa Road, 1913. The road, located near the intersection of Jalan Sultan and Victoria Street or North Bridge Road, has been expunged. Courtesy of Abdul Latiff bin Omar.

(Facing page) A 1924 map of Singapore showing Kampong Banjar along Changi Road. Survey Department Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Merantau encapsulates the reasons and motivations behind migration within the Malay world – from the early groups of sojourners during ancient times to present-day travellers. The term is traditionally associated with the Minangkabau community of West Sumatra, whose matrilineal practices prompted young men to seek subsistence and fortune in other lands. However, *merantau* has also become a common practice and way of life for other communities and sub-ethnic groups in the Malay world, including the Urang Banjar.

Landak and Pontianak in West Kalimantan; Perak and Batu Pahat in the Malay Peninsula as well as Singapore are just some towns and cities that the Banjar community migrated to.

The first large-scale wave of migration is thought to have occurred in the 1780s. People moved from Banjarmasin to Sumatra as a result of conflict between the sultan at the time, Sunan Nata Alam, and a prince named Pangeran Amir.⁶ A little less than a century later, the outbreak of the Banjarmasin War prompted a further exodus of the Banjar people to Malaya and Singapore.

But the story of migration of the Banjar community across the Malay Archipelago is framed not only in terms of conflict; it was also a quest for new opportunities and life experiences. The numerous towns and cities in the Malay world afforded these migratory Banjar many options and it was just a matter of deciding which locale would best suit their needs. True to the aforementioned Banjar phrase, conflict and crisis failed to dampen the Banjar community’s spirit and resilience in persevering till the end (*waja sampai kaputing*).

The Banjar with ties to royalty and the nobility, as well as those with links to the diamond industry, such as diamond traders and merchants, flocked to Landak in West Kalimantan which had built up a reputation as a diamond mining district from the 18th century. By 1858, the diamond trade in Landak was predominantly in the hands of the Banjar community.

The Banjar people also regarded Landak as a safe haven since the Sultanate of Landak was allied with the Sultanate of Banjar. The increasing Dutch presence in South Kalimantan, coupled with the Banjarmasin War and the subsequent abolition of the Sultanate of Banjar in 1860, prompted a wave of migration.

Perak, on the western coast of the Malay Peninsula, was another destination for the Banjar people.⁷ The state had fertile land similar to the area surrounding the Barito River in South Kalimantan. The flooding that occurred around this river in the late 1880s prompted a mass movement of the Banjar people to Krian (Kerian) in the northwestern corner of Perak.

These migratory and settlement patterns would be replicated when the Urang Banjar migrated to Singapore. In 1824, the Dutch colonial government re-established Banjarmasin as a free port, which meant that cargo ships could ply routes to non-Dutch-controlled ports, including Singapore.⁸ Trade between both cities primarily consisted of textiles, including muslins, gurrahs and blatchu cloth, among others.⁹

Some of the earliest documented Banjar merchants emigrated to Singapore from the mid-19th century onwards, including Haji Mahmood bin Abdul Rahim and Haji

Osman bin Haji Abu Naim, who became successful diamond traders and prominent members of the local Banjar community. Haji Mahmood owned a large house spanning Lorongs 18 and 20 Geylang, one of several abodes reserved for his extended family of three wives and 18 children.¹⁰

By the turn of the 20th century, passenger ships began to ply regularly between Singapore and Banjarmasin, indicating a high demand for travel to these two destinations. In 1907, shipping companies were advertising first-class passenger routes from Singapore to Banjarmasin.¹¹

Due to the ease of travelling between the two cities, more Banjar people began arriving in Singapore and they soon established a small but significant presence in the local landscape.

Singapore’s Banjar Community

In Singapore, Banjar families and businesses established themselves in places like Kampong Gelam (Glam) and various locations in the eastern part of the island.

Kampong Gelam

Within Kampong Gelam there was a “Kampong Intan” (Diamond Kampong), said to be named after the Banjarese gemstone merchants and jewellery shops operating there in the late 19th century. According to oral histories and anecdotes, this kampong was located along present-day Baghdad Street.¹²

It is believed that there was another area in Kampong Gelam known as “Kampong Selong” (Ceylon Kampong), where Ceylonese gemstone traders plied their trade, and together with the Banjar mer-

chants, formed a thriving ecosystem where customers could purchase ready-made jewellery or even procure raw diamonds to be set into customised one-of-a-kind pieces. However, this diamond trade by the Banjar and Ceylonese likely declined after the Japanese Occupation (1942–45), most probably due to the increasing demand for African diamonds whose trade was controlled by the Europeans.

Sisters Fauziah and Faridah Jamal recalled that their family's diamond trading business and polishing workshop were located on Jalan Pisang (as was their home). Their late father, Haji Ahmad Jamal bin Haji Mohd Hassan, who was also a trustee of Sultan Mosque, was said to be one of a few, if not the only, Banjar diamond cutters and artisans living and working in the area in the early 20th century.

Said Fauziah Jamal: "We had our neighbours—a goldsmithing workshop, an old Chinese man who would be working on these pieces of jewellery, mostly gold pieces, and then we had my uncle who's working across the road... we had also another granduncle who had an office further down this road. Basically [Jalan Pisang] is where the activity of the diamond trade used to be."¹³

Sumbawa Road

Not so far away, near the intersection of today's Jalan Sultan and Victoria Street or North Bridge Road is said to be the site of a former club called the Darul Ta'alam Club, founded in 1893. A photo of this club, located along the now expunged Sumbawa Road, depicts several

well-dressed men, some of whom are presumably Banjar businessmen and merchants, gathered in front of a building with "Darul Ta'alam 20th Anniversary 15th Nov 1913" inscribed on its facade (see previous page).

The origins of the club and the identity of its founders are unclear. But by the time the photo was taken in 1913, the club was well patronised by merchants and individuals from other sub-ethnic Malay groups.

Besides serving as the headquarters for a football club of the same name, the Darul Ta'alam Club was also the venue for other social and communal gatherings, including serving as the main meeting place for organisations such as the Kesatuan Melayu (Malay Union). The building has since been demolished.

Geylang

As Geylang became a thriving residential and commercial centre in the 19th century, several Banjar merchants acquired property in the area, including the diamond trader Haji Mahmood bin Abdul Rahim.

Many newly arrived Banjar also made Geylang their home, such as the father of Haji Ahmad Jamal bin Haji Mohd Hassan (the grandfather of sisters Fauziah and Faridah Jamal) who lived at 681 Geylang Road. There were also other Banjar families residing at Lorongs 26 and 35 Geylang.

However, Geylang may have been more than just a centre for the Banjar community to live through. The evidence comes from a 1937 lithographed manu-

script titled *Kitab Perukunan Sembahyang Sheikh Arsyad (Sheikh Arsyad's Book of Commandments Pertaining to Prayer)*, which consolidates the writings of a famous Banjar religious scholar. In the frontispiece, the publisher indicates that the book was printed at 242 Lorong Engku Aman in Geylang, although the name of the publishing company is not mentioned.

Kembangan

Lorong Marican in Kembangan was home to Haji Arshad bin Haji Mahmood, the father of Mohd Gazali bin Mohd Arshad. "This house [at Lorong Marican] represented a house rich with history," said Mohd Gazali. "That was where my uncles gathered... to speak to my father and reminisce about their father and grandfather. It was only much later that I realised that it was because of who my grandfather [the diamond trader Haji Mahmood] was."¹⁴

The house was designed as a *rumah panggung*, a traditional house form built on stilts found in South Kalimantan, and similar housing were also once commonly seen on adjacent roads like Lorong Marzuki.

Hanging in Haji Arshad's home was a mandala-shaped diagram called the *ayat pendinding*, consisting of text written in Arabic. The text comprises words of prayers, composed specifically to protect a house and its occupants. The *ayat pendinding* was designed and made by Haji Arshad, and members of the Banjar community who visited Haji Arshad's home for religious classes would request copies of these *ayat pendinding* from him to be displayed in their own homes.

Kampong Banjar

In addition to the communities living in traditional Malay settlements like Geylang and Kembangan, there is also evidence of Banjar settlements by the coast. A 1924 map lists a "Kampong Banjar" along Changi Road.¹⁵

Although no existing members of the Banjar community today are familiar with this kampong, an account in the *Berita Harian* newspaper in 1987 by Kahar bin Kurus, 71, who once lived in the Changi area, describes life in the kampong. According to him, Kampong Banjar and the neighbouring kampongs were once thriving villages inhabited by various sub-ethnic Malay groups, including the Banjarese. The villagers, who earned a living primarily from fishing, lived in close-knit communities and held frequent gatherings to celebrate their small successes and muse over their daily affairs. "Para penduduk di situ juga sering mengadakan majlis-majlis keramaian dua tiga kali dalam setahun untuk menghiburkan hati setelah berpenat-lelah bekerja," he said. ("The villagers frequently hosted gatherings, at least two to three times a year, to reward themselves for their hard work.")¹⁶

These gatherings parallel an activity that the Banjar community today refers to as *arul ganal*, which means "big gatherings", a cultural event that is commonly held in South Kalimantan. Unfortunately, this kampong was expunged prior to World War II, and in a 1945 map, this site appears to have made way for Changi airfield.

The displaced inhabitants of Kampong Banjar moved south to nearby villages, notably Kampong Beting Kusah, Kampong Telok



(Above) Model of Mohd Gazali bin Mohd Arshad's childhood home on Lorong Marican, 2006. Courtesy of Mohd Gazali bin Mohd Arshad.

(Right) Haji Arshad bin Haji Mahmood (second from right), the father of Mohd Gazali bin Mohd Arshad, seated alongside (from the left) Haji Jamal, Haji Abdul Hamid and Haji Hussein. The lady behind them is Hajjah Jamilah, Haji Arshad's sister. The photo was taken outside Haji Arshad's family home on Lorong Marican, 1950s. Haji Arshad designed the mandala-shaped *ayat pendinding*. Courtesy of Mohd Gazali bin Mohd Arshad.



Paku and even to Kampong Ayer Gemuroh, at what is today's East Coast Park.¹⁷

In the 1970s, Kampong Ayer Gemuroh suffered a similar fate as Kampong Banjar and also had to make way for the expansion of Changi airfield.¹⁸ The Banjar people were resettled into high-rise flats and the kampong was expunged.

While estimates are not available, the number of people who identify as

being Urang Banjar in Singapore today is likely to be very small. However, no one should underestimate what the Urang Banjar, regardless of their numbers, are capable of. *Haram manyarah waja sampai kaputing* is still very much a part of what being a Banjar means today, and speaks to the determination of the Banjar people to face every challenge and to never give up, no matter the odds. ♦



(Far left) Many newly arrived Banjar from South Kalimantan made Geylang their home. This photo shows family members, relatives, friends and neighbours at 681 Geylang Road in the compound of Haji Mohd Hassan bin Haji Mohd Salleh's family home (he is seated in the middle), 1950s. His son, Haji Ahmad Jamal bin Haji Mohd Hassan (standing extreme left, first row), was a diamond cutter and artisan in Jalan Pisang in the early 20th century. Courtesy of Faridah and Fauziah binte Jamal.

(Left) Haji Arshad bin Haji Mahmood designed and made this mandala-shaped diagram called the *ayat pendinding*, which features Arabic text. The text comprises words of prayers, written specifically to protect a house and its occupants. Courtesy of Mohd Gazali bin Mohd Arshad.

NOTES

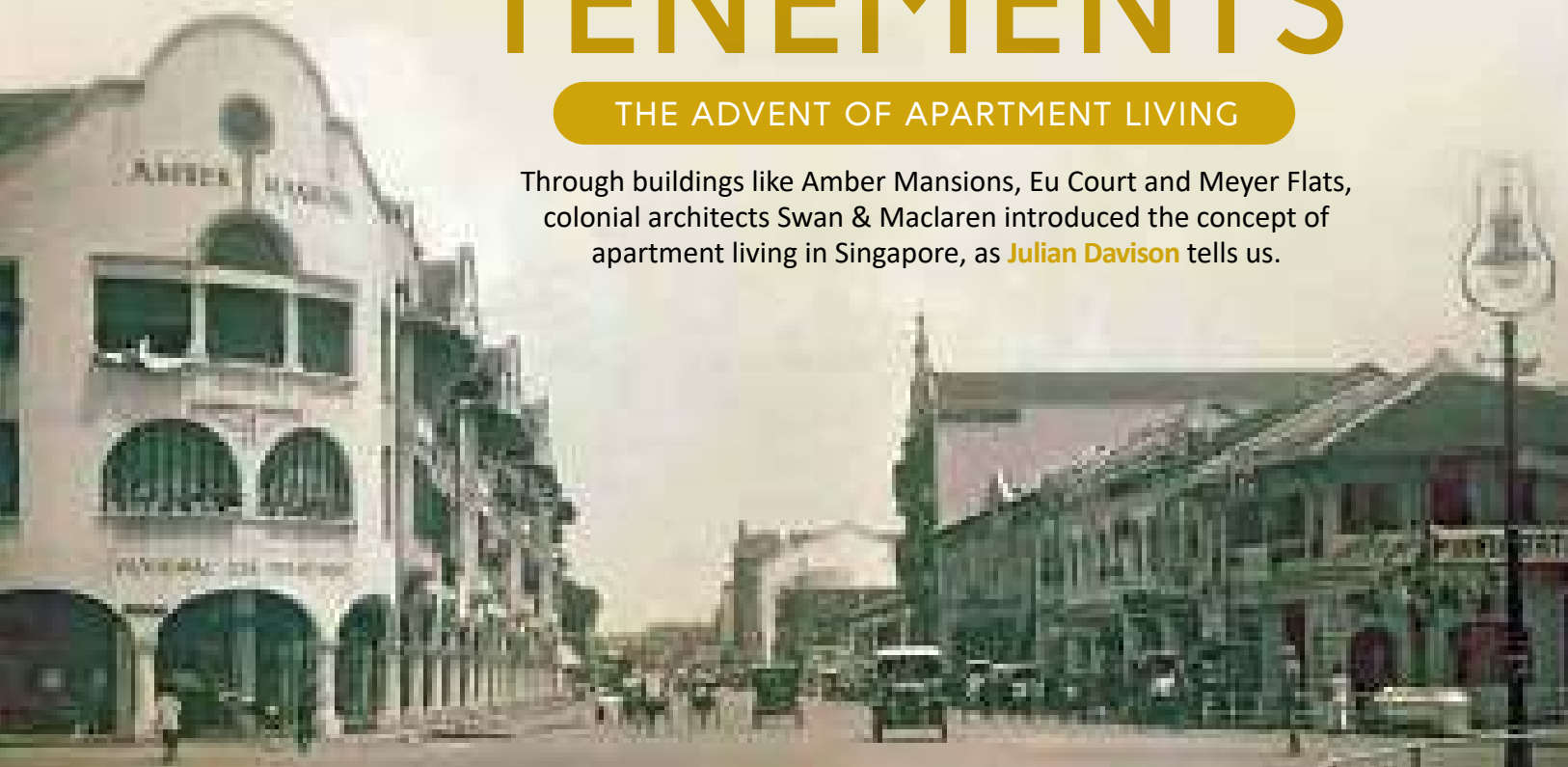
- In the Banjarese language, the Indonesian word "orang" for "person" is pronounced as "urang".
- The Banjarmasin War (1859–63) was a succession war in the Sultanate of Banjarmasin as well as a colonial war fought for the restoration of Dutch authority in the eastern and southern parts of Borneo.
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- [Note: The location of the former Diamond Kampong has also been suggested to be at the site now occupied by Raffles Hospital. See Imran Tajudeen. (2005). Reading the traditional maritime city in Southeast Asia: Reconstructing the 19th century port town at Gelam-Rochor-Kallang, Singapore. *Journal of Southeast Asian Architecture*, 8, pp. 1–25. (Call no.: RSING q720.95 JSAA)]
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MANSION BLOCKS, FLATS AND TENEMENTS

THE ADVENT OF APARTMENT LIVING

Through buildings like Amber Mansions, Eu Court and Meyer Flats, colonial architects Swan & Maclaren introduced the concept of apartment living in Singapore, as **Julian Davison** tells us.



Established in 1892, Swan & Maclaren (named after Archibald Alexander Swan and James Waddell Boyd Maclaren) is the oldest architectural practice in Singapore. Its architects, such as Regent Alfred John Bidwell, Denis Santry and Frank Lundon, designed many of Singapore's historic buildings, including Raffles Hotel, Teutonia Club (present-day Goodwood Park Hotel), Chesed-El Synagogue, Stamford House, Victoria Memorial Hall and Theatre, and Tanjong Pagar Railway Terminus.

The first 50 years of the firm's history is detailed in Julian Davison's *Swan & Maclaren: A Story of Singapore Architecture*, published by ORO Editions and the National Archives of Singapore in 2020. In this edited extract from Chapter 30, the author looks at some of the earliest apartment buildings in Singapore built by the firm. Note: Apart from the David Elias Building on Middle Road and the two rows of shophouses next door, all the other apartment blocks mentioned in this essay have been demolished.

The late flourishing of the black-and-white house notwithstanding, the residential architecture of Singapore in the early 1920s was notable for the emergence of a new way of living, namely the residential apartment block. In the West, the modern middle-class apartment dwelling has its origins in Baron Haussmann's reconstruction of Paris in the 1850s.¹

The idea gradually spread to other European cities and eventually the Americas – significantly, the Stuyvesant Apartments on East 18th Street. Generally recognised as New York's first purpose-built apartment block, it was designed by the Paris-trained architect Richard Morris Hunt in 1869 and was often referred to as the “French Flats”.

In Singapore, the earliest apartment dwelling per se was probably the Elias Building at the junction of Niven and Wilkie roads, followed by Manasseh Meyer's Crescent apartments in Tanjong Katong in 1912 and Meyer Mansions on North Bridge Road in 1918, all designed by Swan & Maclaren.

Amber Mansions, Orchard Road, 1920–22

After World War I (1914–18), the idea began to gather traction in a big way. The most prominent of the early post-war apartment blocks was Amber Mansions at the junction of Orchard Road and Penang Lane. Commissioned by the Singapore Building Corporation in 1919, Amber Mansions is often hailed as Singapore's first apartment block; clearly it wasn't. It is also often singled out for special mention as Singapore's first shopping centre. It wasn't that either.

Nevertheless, Amber Mansions was an important and innovative building that was popularly associated in the public's imagination with the emergence of a modern lifestyle in the years between the two world wars. It remained an architectural landmark symbolising that era until its demolition in 1984 to make way for Dhoby Ghaut MRT Station.

The Singapore Building Corporation, despite its civic-sounding name, was actually a property development company owned by influential Jewish businessman Joseph Aaron Elias, better known as Joe Elias.² The three-storeyed Amber Mansions at the bottom end of Orchard Road was named after the Elias family's Jewish clan name; Amber Road, where the Elias family owned a lot of property, came by its name the same way.

Joe Elias's father, A.J. Elias, was one of the pioneers of apartment living in Singapore with his Bidwell-designed, two-storey duplex development at the junction of Wilkie and Niven roads.³ It was an experiment that his son determined to repeat, albeit several years after the death of Elias senior in 1902.

Drawings submitted to the Municipality for planning permission reveal that Amber Mansions was originally intended to be entirely residential, but subsequently the ground floor was remodelled to be rented out as commercial premises – Malayan Motors and the Municipal Gas Department were among the first tenants. Several of the residential units on the floors above were



(Facing page) Amber Mansions, Orchard Road, c. 1922. The Cape Dutch Revival-style elevations of Amber Mansions almost certainly point to Denis Santry as the author of this building, the architect having previously worked in South Africa during a period when a revival of traditional Cape Dutch architecture was at its height. Courtesy of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

(Above) Building plan for Amber Mansions, Orchard Road, 1920 (253-2/1920). Building Control Division Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

likewise redesigned as office spaces, which were then taken up by lawyers and architectural practices.

Viewed from the junction of Orchard Road and Dhoby Ghaut, the most striking feature of Amber Mansions was its bowed elevation as the building turned the corner from Orchard Road into Penang Lane, surmounted by a large Dutch gable.⁴

Perhaps more significant, architecturally, was the complete absence of any Classical ornament or detailing, the facades being more or less stripped of

all surface decoration. Broad, flattened arches spanned the intervals between the piers of the five-footway verandah at street level, while the Dutch gable that articulated the corner was repeated at intervals along each wing. Otherwise, the building wore an uncommonly severe facade.

Amber Mansions cost around \$400,000 to build, the contracting work being undertaken by Soh Mah Eng, who was Swan & Maclaren's regular partner in the post-war era.

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(Top) Institution Hill Mansions, River Valley Road, 1920. This building was primarily intended as accommodation for United Engineers' expatriate staff members, and surplus units were made available for rent to members of the general public. *Courtesy of Glen Christian.*

(Above) Eu Court at the corner of Hill Street and Stamford Road, c. 1930. *Courtesy of Glen Christian.*

Completed in early 1922, the apartments were initially a little hard to dispose of, owing to a downturn in the Singapore economy as a result of the depression in the United States (1920–21). However, following a shareholders' meeting in December that year, when the Singapore Building Corporation decided to lower the rents by between \$20 and \$25 per unit (the upper range previously had been \$175 per month), they were snapped up quite speedily. The fact that the residential units were so easily dispensed with in difficult times was indicative of the fact that apartment living was a fashionable, as well as affordable, modern lifestyle choice.

The retail units were a little harder to let and a year later, there were still eight units vacant. The directors of the company, however, were "confident that the class of shopkeeper who seems glued to High Street at exorbitant rents will sooner or later recognise the advantage of carrying on his trade in what is undoubtedly the principal European thoroughfare in town".⁵ And so they did.

Institution Hill Mansions, River Valley Road, 1920

Institution Hill Mansions on River Valley Road date from the same year as Amber Mansions and were designed by Swan & Maclaren for their regular engineering partners, United Engineers. (The latter was formed in 1912 through the amalgamation of Howarth Erskine & Co., Swan & Maclaren's long-standing collaborators, with Riley, Hargreaves & Co., Singapore's oldest engineering firm.)

Erected at a cost of \$290,000, the Institution Hill apartments were primarily intended to provide accommodation for United Engineers' European staff members. The initial scheme would comprise two residential blocks, each with three storeys and 18 units, although eventually only one block was built.

The layout of the apartments was quite similar to Amber Mansions and consisted of a living room, dining room and two bedrooms, with a shared bathroom and a box room for storage; there was also a "boy's room" attached to the kitchen for a live-in domestic servant. Although the external elevations were unmistakably "modern" in their restrained detailing, they were less austere than Amber Mansions. With their Mock Tudor gables and loggia-style verandah-balconies, they represent a kind of Arts and Crafts take on the apartment lifestyle.⁶

Eu Court, Hill Street and Stamford Road, 1925

Although Amber Mansions was well received upon completion in early 1922, it would be another three years before Swan & Maclaren received their next commission for an apartment block. It came from businessman and philanthropist Eu Tong Sen (who built up Chinese medicine purveyor Eu Yan Sang) and was for a three-storey, L-shaped block of flats at the corner of Hill Street and Stamford Road.⁷

There were to be eight retail units on the ground floor and as many residential apartments on each of the floors above. The latter offered a choice of two- or three-bedroom flats, with a living room, dining room and kitchen. There were garages, too – a sign of the times – with servants' quarters above that were located across a courtyard at the rear of the property.

Architecturally, the style was "Stripped Classical", a kind of reductive Classicism popular in the early decades of the 20th century, where the details have been greatly simplified, or stripped away, but there is still an adherence to the principles of Classical architecture in terms of symmetry, proportion and the arrangement of the elevation.⁸

The most striking feature, however, was a Chinese-style rooftop pavilion, or gazebo, which articulated the meeting of the two wings, the one on Hill Street, the other on Stamford Road. The latter added a local touch to what would otherwise have been a wholly modern building – Chinese Art Deco would probably be the best description.

Popularly known as Eu Court, this landmark building aroused considerable controversy when it was demolished in 1992 to allow for the widening of Hill Street. In the end it was a toss-up between Eu Court or Stamford House as to which should go, and Eu Court was the loser.

Meyer Flats, Katong, 1927–28

The Elias Building aside, the earliest apartment block to be erected in Singapore was The Crescent on Meyer Road designed by Regent Alfred John Bidwell for Jewish businessman Manasseh Meyer in 1912.⁹ In 1927, a companion block was commissioned for the site next door, comprising 12 commodious units spread over three floors.

Neighbours they may have been, but stylistically, these two buildings were worlds apart – The Crescent, a gracious study in tropical Edwardian elegance and charm; the newcomer, devoid of extraneous embellishments, with the details of the facade pared

down almost to the point of parsimony. Indeed, the most striking aspect of the latter building is what is absent, namely balconies and verandahs, a surprising omission given the building's seaside location.

In the case of the Meyer Flats, as the new arrival was christened, the grid-like distribution of the windows, each with a tiled air vent below the sill, allowed for a limited kind of pattern-making. Otherwise, the only part of the building that was singled out for particular attention were the two entrances at either end of the seaward elevation and the stairwells that were placed over them. They were identical and came with a flat, reinforced-concrete canopy roof over the front door, above which was positioned a large octagonal window with the name "Meyer Flats" emblazoned across the top. This window lit the entrance lobby and stairwell, while a second window, a quasi-Venetian affair this time around, illumined the upper stairwell and top landing.

These details aside, Meyer Flats was an austere building, in sharp contrast to The Crescent next door. The latter, with its open verandahs and generous fenestration (arrangement of windows), was purpose-built to make the most of the sea breezes by way of natural ventilation.

Meyer Flats, on the other hand, was essentially a European-style building, being much more closed in, with modest window openings and an absence of verandahs and balconies. Indeed,

Entrance to Meyer Flats, Meyer Road, 1970. *Lee Kip Lin Collection, PictureSG, National Library, Singapore.*





Building plan of Meyer Flats, Meyer Road, 1927 (141/1927). Building Control Division Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

apart from the louvered shutters and tiled air vents, the only real concession to Singapore's monsoon climate was the high, hipped roof and broadly extended eaves.

In this respect, Meyer Flats can be seen as representative of a gradual shift towards a more European style of residential architecture that took place in Singapore between the wars. Similar changes were taking place in the archetypal Singapore house which, by the late 1920s, had begun to move away from the traditional Anglo-Malay-style bungalow or villa that had defined the residential architecture of colonial Singapore more or less since the days of Raffles, towards more compact, European-style houses, with smaller windows, lower ceilings and greatly reduced verandah areas.

In both instances, what we see is a kind of Europeanisation of the building character that corresponded with a more Western-oriented outlook and lifestyle on the part of Singapore's expatriate community. In this last respect, Meyer Flats represents a parallel development to the "mansion-block" housing schemes that were popular in London at around the same time.

David Elias Building, Middle Road, 1927–28

Amber Mansions, Institution Hill Mansions and Meyer Flats: three upmarket residential developments that were evidently built with a European clientele in mind – their respective locations and self-aggrandising designation as "mansions" for the first two indicate as much.¹⁰

Likewise, the apartment blocks commissioned by Eu Tong Sen at the junction of Stamford Road and Hill Street. Which is not to say that there was any overt colour bar in place that would have prevented members of Singapore's emerging Asian

middle class – businessmen, office staff, clerical workers, school teachers and even young professionals – from renting a unit in one of these apartment blocks. If they could afford it, that is. But then somewhere in between the purpose-built apartment block and the shoebox cubicle of the repeatedly subdivided shophouse, there was a kind of halfway house – the tenement.

The word "tenement" today comes with pejorative associations but in the 1920s, the dictionary definition of a "tenement house" was simply "a dwelling house erected or used for the purpose of being rented, esp. one divided into separate apartments, or tenements, for families".¹¹

In Singapore, the term only begins to appear in planning submissions to the Municipal Engineer after World War I, usually in connection with the laudable efforts of civic-minded individuals and charitable organisations looking to provide decent but affordable housing for less well-off sectors of society; the "tenement", like the "flat", was a new building typology.

The first designated tenement accommodation designed by Swan & Maclaren is a landmark development from 1927, the David Elias Building at the corner of Middle Road and Short Street.

David Elias was a second cousin of Joe Elias and also his brother-in-law, as he had married Joe's sister Miriam. David was in the import-export business, but in 1926 he decided to follow Joe into real estate with the redevelopment of a site at the junction of Middle Road and Selegie Road.

At the time, the land was occupied by a single "compound house", standing in its own grounds.¹² As the footprint of the house was small, relative to the size of the property, and in a densely populated neighbourhood of overcrowded

shophouse dwellings that constituted Singapore's Jewish quarter, or Mahallah, it seemed to David that the site could be used in a more beneficial way.

To this end, David commissioned Swan & Maclaren to design two rows of two-storey "tenement shophouses" on Short Street and also next door, at the junction of Middle Road and Short Street, a much larger, three-storey construction, today's David Elias Building. The latter had shops and offices on the ground floor, with tenement apartments on the floors above.

Part of the ground floor of the David Elias Building was occupied by David and Joe's own business, D.J. Elias and Company, with Messrs Cold Storage & Co. as the anchor tenant. This was one of Cold Storage's first ventures outside of Orchard Road, where the importer of frozen comestibles had first set up shop in early 1905.

In truth, the tenement-shophouses were not much different in terms of their layout and internal arrangements to the typical Singapore shophouse of the period, but there is something about these buildings that is reminiscent of similar housing typologies in contemporary Shanghai called *lilong*.¹³ Possibly it is the Shanghai plaster rendering that brings the association to mind, or the cantilevered bay windows on the upper storey, which are rather different from the usual shophouse fare and which help to contribute to the slightly exotic flavour of these buildings.

The windows themselves are doubly unusual on account of the "blind" balustrading beneath the window sills, comprising pre-cast concrete balusters (series of pillars supporting a railing) that echo traditional wooden balusters turned on a lathe.

The David Elias Building next door, though much larger in scale – three storeys

instead of two, with a hipped roof – is stylistically very similar to its neighbours, sharing a rusticated basement floor with segmental arches spanning the five-footway as well as those distinctive cantilevered bay windows on the floors above.

A Jewish "Star of David" motif appears at regular intervals on the main elevations – this was, after all, at the heart of the Mahallah – and also adorns the two Deco-style pediments, which

bookend the Middle Road elevation; the latter also bear the legend "D.J. Elias Buildings" and the date of completion, which was 1928.

Completed in September that year, David Elias's new venture was hailed by *The Straits Times* as "an important addition to the housing amenities of Singapore".¹⁴ "Built on a site which was previously occupied by a single house and compound," the article continues, "they afford, at



(Left) David Elias's tenement shophouses, 2017. Located on Short Street, they consist of two terraces of three units each, placed back to back. The rear terrace, seen here, was accessed by a lane leading off Middle Road. Courtesy of Julian Davison.

(Below) The David Elias Building, 2017. The building is located at the junction of Middle Road and Short Street. Courtesy of Julian Davison



NOTES

- Georges-Eugène Haussmann, commonly known as Baron Haussmann (1809–91), was a French official who served as prefect of Seine (1853–70) and was chosen by Emperor Napoleon III to carry out a massive urban renewal programme of new boulevards, parks and public works in Paris.
- For more information about Joseph Aaron Elias, see Chia, J.Y.J. (2017). *Joseph Aaron Elias*. Retrieved from Singapore Infopedia website.
- The architect who designed A.J. Elias' two-storey building was Regent Alfred John Bidwell, who joined Swan & Maclaren in 1895. He became a partner in 1899.
- A gable is the triangular-shaped top part of a wall that meets the sloping roofs of a building. A Dutch gable has curved sides rather than straight sides.
- Company meetings. Singapore Building Corporation. (1923, December 26). *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, p. 4. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- A loggia is a design feature of Italian origin and refers to an arcaded gallery or corridor, open on at least one

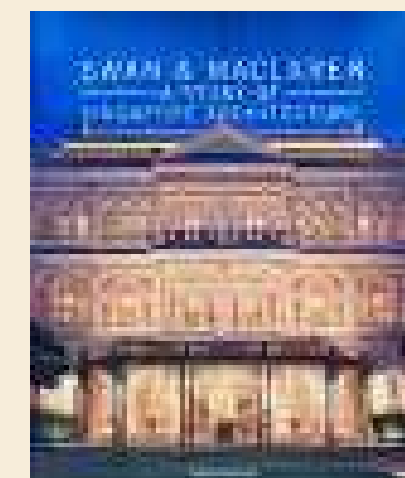
side and affording a protected seating place with a view. The Arts and Crafts Movement, which emerged in England in the latter half of the 19th century, was an aesthetic movement in the decorative and fine arts. This movement later spread to Europe and America.

- For more information about Eu Tong Sen, see Chow, A. (2014, September 15). *Eu Tong Sen*. Retrieved from Singapore Infopedia website.
- Classical architecture originated in ancient Greece and Rome, and is characterised by symmetry, regular proportions, columns, and the use of stone or marble as a primary building material.
- For more information about Manasseh Meyer, see Tan, B. (2010). *Manasseh Meyer*. Retrieved from Singapore Infopedia website.
- In Britain, the use of the word "mansion" (usually in the plural) to describe a block of flats was something that crept in during the late 19th century as property developers tried to encourage an emerging generation of middle- and upper-class urbanites to buy into what at the time was a wholly new residential typology – it lent a "touch of class", or so people thought.

reasonable rents, very acceptable housing accommodation in a congested district".

Not only was David Elias "to be congratulated on a well designed block of buildings", but also for demonstrating "how sites in the centre of town can be used to the best advantage... in striking contrast to the old wasteful shophouse properties which are their immediate neighbours".

Commendable though the D.J. Elias Building may have been, it was, however, but a very small step in the right direction, given the huge housing problems Singapore faced at the time. ♦



Swan & Maclaren: A Story of Singapore Architecture (2020) is published by ORO Editions and the National Archives of Singapore. The book is available for reference at the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library and for loan at selected public libraries (Call nos.: RSING 720.95957 DAV and SING 720.95957 DAV). It retails at major bookshops in Singapore and is also sold online.

- Harris, W.T., & Allen, F.S. (Eds.). (1923). *Webster's new international dictionary of the English language, based on the international dictionary of 1890 and 1900* (p. 2127). Springfield, Mass., USA: G. & C. Merriam Company. Retrieved from Internet Archive website.
- The term "compound house" refers to a free-standing dwelling situated on its own land, the latter being typically surrounded by a masonry wall on all sides, especially in an urban setting. The etymology of the term "compound", as used in this content, as opposed to, say, a chemical compound, is said to have come from the Malay word *kampung*, or village.
- Li* means neighbourhood and *long* means lane. *Alilong* is a type of housing that developed in Shanghai in the 19th century and is a characteristic of the city. It melds Western architectural details with traditional Chinese spatial arrangements.
- Buildings in Singapore. (1928, September 15). *The Straits Times*, p. 10. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

How Jurong Bird Park Was Hatched



Caribbean flamingoes feeding and preening at the Flamingo Pool. These birds are identified by their tri-coloured beak – grey at the base, pink in the middle and black at the tip. *Courtesy of Jimmy Yap.*

On the 50th anniversary of its opening, [Zoe Yeo](#) gives us a bird's-eye view of the setting up of one of Singapore's most popular tourist attractions.

Jurong Bird Park is one of Singapore's more successful attractions, beloved by tourists and locals alike. I recall numerous trips during my formative years with my parents and siblings to observe the birds. I even took enough pictures to obtain the "I am a Young Ornithologist" badge, which was awarded by the Singapore Science Centre under its Young Scientist Badge Scheme. Now as an adult, I still love visiting the park to marvel at the different bird species.

I am not the only one who enjoys going there. In 2019, before the Covid-19 pandemic hit, the park welcomed

750,000 visitors who came to see the 3,500 birds that make up 400 species. However, what many may not know are the myriad challenges that the park had to overcome just to get to the point of opening on that fateful day some 50 years ago in January 1971.

The plan for a bird park was the brainchild of Minister for Finance Goh Keng Swee in the late 1960s. He said the idea first occurred to him in September 1967 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, during a World Bank meeting when "during a free moment, [he] visited the Rio Aviary".¹

The following year, Goh visited the aviary in Bangkok, which convinced him that it would be a good idea to set up a bird park in Singapore. As he noted: "The authorities managing the Bangkok Aviary which I made a point to visit assured me their main problem was what to do with the millions of bahts they had accumulated over the years."²

Goh proposed to establish the bird park in Jurong because while touring the area scouting for possible sites, he "found that there were some islands, some area along the Jurong River which was not used, covered with bush or undergrowth. So I said it's a good idea to make it beautiful."³

At the inaugural meeting of the Jurong Town Corporation in June 1968,

Goh shared his vision of a bird park for Singapore and by the end of the year, the site for the new attraction had been identified: a 20.2-hectare plot on the western slope of Bukit Peropok (now known as Jurong Hill). The eminent aviculturist and bird curator John Yealland and aviary architect J. Toovey, both from the Zoological Society of London, were involved in planning the new aviary. (Yealland was regarded as the "world's top bird curator" at the time.)⁴

The society provided the services of the two experts for free and during their two-month visit here, they drew up the plans and design for the aviary. The two men also promised that the aviary "would easily be Asia's best, and one of the best in the world because of its size and unique terrain".⁵

When the idea of a bird park was mooted in 1968, Singapore had gained independence just three years before. As a result, there were questions about

whether an aviary was the best way to use limited resources. As Goh himself acknowledged at the park's opening in January 1971: "It is more than possible that there may be people in Singapore who question the propriety of building the Jurong Bird Park at a time when the Republic is assailed by so many problems."⁶

Goh described the origins of the bird park as "impeccable, and its conception, immaculate". He also noted that the park would be self-supporting and that it would be open to all, for a modest fee. On the other hand, Goh said he did not want to overstate the case for the park: "It is well to concede from the outset that the Bird Park will not make our society more rugged...". In addition, he added that the bird park would "have negligible effect on the productivity of workers in the Republic". The park's efficacy as a means of tightening national cohesion was also "open to doubt, as is its contribution to raising cultural and

education standards of the population. I am afraid the Bird Park will achieve none of these admirable ends," he said, somewhat tongue-in-cheek. "But it will add to the enjoyment of our citizens, especially our children. At the risk of appearing less than God-fearing, I give this as my final justification."⁷

A Rocky Start

One of the early challenges faced by the bird park was that it had to have a significant bird collection in order to attract visitors. And since the endeavour started from scratch, the park's pioneer chairman and managing director, Woon Wah Siang, pursued many different channels in order to find enough birds to fill the park. He was reported to have said: "I attended every National Day cocktail party just to ask for birds."⁸

Beyond attending cocktail parties, Woon also approached ambassadors and foreign dignitaries here for help. He penned a 10-page letter to the British

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(Top) Minister for Defence Goh Keng Swee (centre) arriving for the opening of Jurong Bird Park, 1971. Woon Wah Siang, the park's chairman and managing director, is on the far right. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

(Above) Goh Keng Swee tours Jurong Bird Park during its opening, 1971. In the background is the man-made waterfall aviary. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

High Commissioner, Arthur de la Mare, listing over 350 bird species and seeking assistance in obtaining these birds from the United Kingdom. The document was first forwarded to the London Zoo, who felt that they had “already been of considerable assistance” after providing guidance and donating a number of birds and they “did not feel like that they could reasonably be expected to do more”. The London Zoo also claimed to be in dire financial straits and could not “envisage any further gifts being made”.⁹ The United Kingdom’s Wildfowl Trust were also approached but they shared the same sentiments as the London Zoo.¹⁰

In addition to obtaining birds, there was also the challenge of keeping them safe. On top of preventing the birds from flying away, the bird park had to deal with thefts as well. In September 1969, a rare cassowary, two peacocks and a pair of storks were actually stolen from the park and sold off.¹¹

Apparently, a day after the birds were stolen, three men approached a bird shop in Geylang with an offer to sell “Indonesian birds”. The shop assistant asked to see the birds and was taken to a house in Changi. “A price of \$500 was offered, but this was later bargained down to \$250. The shop assistant then took them back to his shop and paid the money there.”¹²

The birds were then put up for sale at the shop but they began “drawing unmanageable crowds and the owner decided to transfer them to [his] farm” in Choa Chu Kang. After reading about the stolen birds in the newspapers, the owner contacted the police who recovered the birds.¹³

There were also engineering challenges involved in building the bird park. The flight-in aviary used 18 steel cables, each weighing about three tons, which had to be stretched across the top of the 2-hectare space. On either end of the slope, where the cables were attached, piling was necessary to ensure that these cables did not come loose.¹⁴

But it was perhaps the man-made waterfall that was the most challenging to build. Said to be the highest in the world at the time, it had “8,000 gallons of water pouring from a height of 100 feet every minute”. Huge granite rocks were used as the backdrop, “each weighing no less than a ton”. These boulders had to be held together with steel cables to prevent them from sliding down.¹⁵

Eventually, all the challenges were overcome and a date was set for the opening: 29 June 1970. However, on 28 June, *The Straits Times* announced that the park’s opening, scheduled for the following day, would be postponed. The two-paragraph statement reported that the “aviaries, the man-made waterfall and the flight-in aviary were all completed but certain improvements had yet to be made”.¹⁶

According to Lee Oon Pong, the director of Employment at the Ministry of Defence (1970–75), who worked closely with Goh, the last-minute postponement was because the latter did not feel that one of the key attractions, the man-made waterfall, was up to mark.¹⁷

Goh, who was by then Minister for Defence, along with board members of Jurong Town Corporation, had visited the bird park about a week before the scheduled official opening. When he got to the waterfall, however, Goh was appalled when he saw muddy water cascading down what was supposed to be a highlight of the park. The water was brown because the waterfall was pumping water from the duck pond, which had been contaminated with mud due to the ongoing construction works at the park.¹⁸

Recalled Lee: “[He] looked at Woon Wah Siang and said ‘Wah Siang, you want me to open this?’ [Woon] was dumbfounded. [Goh said], ‘If you want me to open the bird park... when I throw a five-cent coin into the brook... I expect to see [it] at the bottom, then I’ll open it.’ ... Then he just walked off.” Woon had to scramble to call up all the invited guests to apologise.¹⁹

The bird park swiftly acquired a filtration plant costing a quarter of a million dollars. It was installed near the waterfall and was “capable of filtering and cleaning the water so that what thunders down is crystal clear”.²⁰

In August 1970, *The Straits Times* reported that as there was still ongoing work in the bird park, there would be a four-month wait until December that year before the attraction could open to the public, even though the aviaries, lakes and the artificial waterfall had been built. But not everyone realised that the park’s opening had been postponed and unsuspecting visitors were turned away.²¹

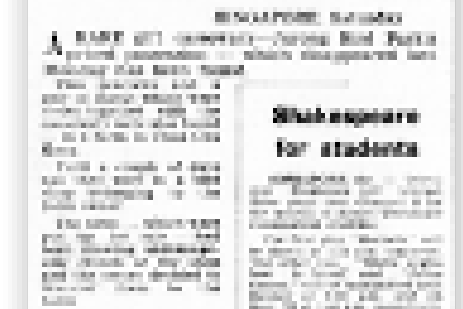
A month later, in September, the bird park again announced that its opening would be delayed as it would be introducing two new innovations – control of temperature of the aviary through landscaping and a new feeding method

– both aimed at improving the welfare of the feathered residents of the park.²²

With a new filtration system in place and all amenities ready, the park was finally opened on 3 January 1971. It was reported to be the biggest aviary in the world at the time, sprawling over 20.6 hectares with more than 7,000 birds, some of them gifted to the park by 12 countries, 40 private collectors and seven zoos.²³ At the opening, Goh, still looking to make more improvements, issued a call to guests for more birds, specifically falcons.²⁴

“I had originally planned to introduce falconry displays as part of the bird park’s activities,” he said. Goh added, in his inimitable tongue-in-cheek manner, that

One cassowary for sale, cheap—until yesterday...



(Right) In September 1969, a rare cassowary, two peacocks and a pair of storks were stolen from the park and put up for sale. The police managed to recover the birds. *The Straits Times, 14 September 1969, p. 8. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.*

(Below) The dramatic man-made waterfall has always been a popular backdrop for taking photographs, as evidenced by this photo from 2000, featuring the author and her family. *Courtesy of Zoe Yeo.*

(Below right) A cassowary, like the one stolen in 1969. *Courtesy of Wildlife Reserves Singapore.*



he was not hopeful that “modern industrial nations” would have anyone but “perhaps in some quiet corner of the world, in some last refuge of reaction and obscurantism, people still happily engage in falconry without let or hinderance from tiresome moralisers. If one of your Excellencies represents such a 20th century Ruritania, may I suggest that our respective Governments immediately enter into a Bilateral Technical Assistance Agreement for the Promotion of Falconry in Singapore”.²⁵

The absence of falconers was apparently not a major deterrent and the park quickly became a popular new haunt for Singaporeans, recording more than 8,000 visitors on the first Sunday of its opening.²⁶ A year later, the park was reported to have collected more than \$1 million in revenue since its opening, with some 645,800 people having visited by then. The park also chalked up a low bird mortality rate of 0.6 percent, one of the lowest in the world where the mortality rate averaged around 2.5 to 3 percent.²⁷

Breeding and Conservation

Apart from being a place for the general public to admire and appreciate birds, the park also planned to raise money by breeding and selling them. The first breeding programme started in 1972, with the aim of breeding “the 350 species in the park for sale to individuals and zoos at home and aboard”.²⁸

The first few species successfully bred for sale were the night heron, ibis, white-crested laughing thrush and the water-fowl. The prices of these birds depended on the demand and rarity of the species.²⁹ In 1976, the breeding of foreign birds in the park was reported to be a “tremendous success”, with a total of 137 birds, mostly species from Europe, America, India and Egypt, hatching the year before. These birds included the spoonbill, the ring-necked parakeet, the Alexandrine parakeet, the black swan and the scarlet ibis.³⁰

The bird park eventually stopped breeding birds for sale and instead

(Top right) The oriental pied hornbill is making a resurgence in Singapore with the help of the Jurong Bird Park. *Courtesy of Wildlife Reserves Singapore.*

(Middle) In 2019, Jurong Bird Park became the first zoological institution to breed the endangered Santa Cruz ground doves. *Courtesy of Wildlife Reserves Singapore.*

(Right) The straw-headed bulbul, successfully bred by Jurong Bird Park in 2017, is coveted by songbird traders because of its unique vocalisation. *Courtesy of Wildlife Reserves Singapore.*



embarked on efforts to conserve rare bird species, especially those from Southeast Asia. In 1995, the park became the first zoological institution to breed the black hornbill, a vulnerable species native to Southeast Asia.³¹

The straw-headed bulbul, a critically endangered species native to Singapore, was also successfully bred by Jurong Bird Park in 2017. The bulbul is coveted by songbird traders due to its unique vocalisation, making it a target of poachers.³²

The park also works with the National Parks Board, Nanyang Technological University and researchers on the Singapore Hornbill Project. The oriental pied hornbill disappeared in Singapore in the mid-1800s because of hunting and loss of habitat, but re-emerged some 140 years later when a pair of wild hornbills was recorded on Pulau Ubin in 1994.³³

The collaborative project initiated in 2004 aims to enhance the population and distribution of this locally endangered bird. This includes providing artificial nesting boxes and reducing anthropogenic threats – such as overzealous bird watchers and photographers disturbing nesting activities – by fencing nesting areas with thick vegetation to minimise disturbance. About a decade ago, 40 to 50 hornbills were recorded on Pulau Ubin and at least two pairs had flown to Changi.³⁴ Since then, oriental pied hornbills have been spotted in various locations around Singapore.

(Right) The Kings of the Skies Show featuring majestic birds of prey is a favourite with visitors. Shown here is the Malay fish owl which catches prey with its strong and steady talons. *Courtesy of Jimmy Yap.*

(Below) The indoor penguin exhibit features the king penguin (seen here), Humboldt and rockhopper species. Temperatures are kept at 10–15 °C, with a special lighting system creating the four seasons to help the birds maintain their bio-rhythm. *Courtesy of Jimmy Yap.*

The bird park also participates in international projects on the conservation of endangered species. In 2018, some 60 Santa Cruz ground doves were flown from the Solomon Islands to Singapore, becoming the world’s only “assurance colony” of the species outside of the Islands. A large population of the ground doves had been wiped out in a volcanic eruption in Tinakula in 2018, and the 60 birds were part of a flock that had been confiscated from poachers after the eruption. The assurance colony ensures that a population of the species is safe under human care in case of a catastrophic population decline in the wild. In 2019, the Jurong Bird Park became the first zoological institution to breed these birds.³⁵

Celebrating 50 Years

Since its opening 50 years ago, the Jurong Bird Park has welcomed 30 million visitors. To commemorate the half century since the opening of the aviary, the park planned a year-long celebration with events and activities throughout 2021. The aviary kickstarted its jubilee celebrations by reverting to its 1971 admission price of \$2.50 for all residents in the month of January 2021. (The usual price of a ticket for local residents is currently \$34 for adults and \$23 for children.)

Big John, a cockatoo who has been with the aviary since its opening in 1971 will also be making appearances in special shows throughout the year. The bird park

also invites people to upload photographs taken in the park to Facebook and Instagram with the hashtag #JBP50. These photos would be featured as part of the aviary’s “Memories of Jurong Bird Park” exhibition in 2021.³⁶

In 2016, it was announced that Jurong Bird Park would be moving to Mandai to form an integrated nature and wildlife precinct together with a new Rainforest Park and the three existing wildlife parks in Singapore (the Singapore Zoological Gardens, the Night Safari and the River Safari).

The new and improved bird park will include themed walk-through aviaries designed after different regions and ecosystems of the world – stretching from the rainforests of Africa to the bushlands of Australia – allowing visitors to immerse themselves in the naturalistic habitats of





the birds.³⁷ Slated to open in 2022, it will mean moving out from Jurong after 51 years, which will no doubt sadden some. However, the new location will allow the bird park to enjoy the synergies of being close to similar attractions. In addition, the new designs for the various aviaries will allow the bird park's ambitions to truly take flight. ♦

(Left) In 2022, Jurong Bird Park will move to Mandai to form an integrated nature and wildlife precinct comprising a new Rainforest Park and the three existing wildlife parks in Singapore (Singapore Zoological Gardens, Night Safari and River Safari). Courtesy of Wildlife Reserves Singapore.

(Below) An artist impression of Crimson Wetlands, one of the themed aviaries to be built at the new bird park in Mandai when it relocates there in 2022. Courtesy of Wildlife Reserves Singapore.



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PRESERVING THE SOUNDS OF SINGAPORE

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CHINESE GRAPHIC ARTISTS

in Pre-war Singapore

Advertising art began playing a bigger role in the economy after several talented graphic artists moved from China to Singapore from the 1920s onwards. **Lee Chor Lin** highlights their works.

Lee Chor Lin is an art historian and museum consultant. She was director of the National Museum between 2003 and 2013 where she transformed the museum and museum scene in Singapore. She is also a Lee Kong Chian Research Fellow (2019).

As Singapore became one of the most dynamic global cities during the first half of the 20th century, it began to attract new migrants due to the myriad opportunities and lifestyles offered by a modern and booming metropolis. By the late 1920s, established and novice artists from China began converging in Singapore due to the job opportunities as well as the instability back home caused by natural disasters, incessant civil wars and Japanese aggression. As a result, in the years leading up to the fall of Singapore in February 1942, the art scene here was thriving and new styles of art were being created.¹

Print advertising production also flourished during this period because the demand for news and information led to an exponential growth in the publishing industry, powered by large-scale printing technology.

Singapore's pre-war economy, comprising small businesses involved in trade, manufacturing and publishing, created a demand for artistic input as these companies sought to do branding, brand differentiation and product communication. Graphic artists who were proficient in Chinese and English were able to capture a culturally pluralistic marketplace.

Chinese graphic artists, trained abroad as well as locally, were now able to combine the vividness of images with the power of the written word to entice both consumers and customers in Singapore's new mercantilist economy. This was an area of artistic endeavour that has hitherto been overlooked.

Chinese Advertisement Art in Singapore

Newspapers and magazines were a significant platform for companies looking to reach consumers. By 1932, the combined circulation of the five major Chinese dailies in Singapore exceeded 48,000, this in a community of only 418,000 people.² In addition to the dailies, readers in Singapore had a choice of evening papers, tabloids and magazines.

However, newspapers and popular magazines were not the only channels for brands to reach consumers; there were also paid advertisements in school

yearbooks and those produced by clans and guild associations. By the early 1940s, there were about 173 Chinese-medium schools in Singapore, with the more established ones – such as Tuan Mong (端蒙學校), Chinese High (南洋華僑中學) and Catholic High (公教中學) – regularly publishing annual reports and graduation books for students. These were often funded through donation drives by the schools' board of directors and parents, whose businesses bought advertising slots and pages in the publications to help support their production.

Yearbooks of trade guilds and clan associations were even more strategic avenues than school publications for advertisements. Here, the readership would be highly selected and targeted, exposed to product placement as well as being attuned to signals of the advertisers' financial standing, since slots were charged by size.

Some of the more impressive art works appeared in the commemorative books of trade associations. For example, those by the Singapore Dried Goods Guild (星洲雜貨行) published in the 1950s, for instance, featured meticulously rendered illustrations.

Two publications of great research value in this area were published for Chinese national trade fairs in 1935 and 1936, where artists were engaged to design and manage stall booths and the exhibition catalogues. The latter featured beautiful and elaborate lithographs interspersed with long textual chapters of meeting proceedings, and industry and trade essays. Lee Printing, one of the companies in Lee Kong Chian's vast business empire, took the first page of the 1935 catalogue to showcase its printing services and graphic design capability.

The repertoire of most studios in the pre-war years also included outdoor signages. Walls could be used for advertising, particularly those that were owned privately. In 1938, at their Third Annual Exhibition, members of the Society of Chinese Artists (華人美術研究會) posed for a photograph on the grounds of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce with a gigantic wall advertisement of the neighbouring Lim Shing Hong Jewellery (林盛豐金莊) in the background.

(Facing page) An advertisement by Xu Diaolun for Khiauw Hing, which sold chemical products and liquor from Shanghai, China, published in the catalogue of the Chinese National Trade Fair in 1935. *National University of Singapore Library Collection.*





(Above) A coloured advertisement of the Lee Printing Company found in the catalogue of the 1935 Chinese National Trade Fair. National University of Singapore Library Collection.



(Above right) During the Third Annual Exhibition of the Society of Chinese Artists in 1938, members posed for a photograph on the grounds of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce. A gigantic wall advertisement of the neighbouring Lim Shing Hong Jewellery is captured in the background. Liu Kang Family Collection.

Although it is difficult to ascertain the number of people involved in graphic design and the making of print advertising, there were enough of them to form a society of their own. The Singapore Commercial Art Society was formally established on 28 February 1937; by the following year, it had organised sketching trips. Following the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War in July 1937, the society also actively contributed to the China War Relief Fund.

Artists and Their Studios

While the buoyant economy of pre-war Singapore provided opportunities for artists to live and work in the city, art-making remained a challenging vocation for most artists. Few were able to paint fulltime so many held other jobs to make ends meet.

A number of them taught art in the Chinese schools that proliferated at the time which were founded on the Modernist belief that art and physical education were integral to building good character. Otherwise, these artists would work in the “commercial” sector – drafting shop drawings for architects, designing furniture and printing textile. Many found jobs more easily in companies creating advertising artwork.

An example of the phenomenon is artist Xu Qigao (許奇高) from Jieyang city

in Guangdong province. A Tokyo-trained Modernist who had already made a name for himself in China, Xu came to Singapore to escape violence inflicted in his hometown by the Kuomintang (KMT) government between the late 1920s and the early 30s.

In 1936, Xu staged an exhibition in Singapore, which was sponsored by Chima Studio (“Red Horse”) (赤馬畫室).³ While he was here, Xu lodged with his aunt and uncle. His cousin Tan Teo Kwang (陳潮光) remembered seeing Xu drawing advertisements. (Xu lived with the Tans until he returned to China in 1947).⁴ His stint with Chima shows that even established artists had to find ways to supplement their fine-art endeavours.

While Xu’s commercial work has yet to surface, we do have the creations of four of his contemporaries – Tchang Ju-ch’i (張汝器), Xu Diaolun (許鈞綸), Leong Siew Tien (梁小天; Liang Xiaotian) and Chong Beng Si (鍾鳴世). Their signed works enhance our understanding of the nature of art-making and their connections to Singapore’s pre-war business scene.

Ju Chi Studio (汝器畫室) and The United Painters (朋特畫室)

One of the most prominent and active artists in pre-war Singapore, Tchang Ju-ch’i had his life brutally cut short by World War II in 1942. A student at the Shanghai

Academy of Art, Tchang left for France to pursue art but had to turn back after running out of funds. It is unclear when he arrived in Singapore but by late 1928, he had certainly settled down here and by the following year, he was involved in a number of projects.

Apart from teaching art at Yeung Cheng (養正學校) and Tuan Mong schools, and a small artist collective called The Painting Society (繪畫研究會),⁵ Tchang was also picture editor and editor of *Sin Chew Jit Poh*’s (星洲日報) weekly supplement.

At the invitation of Chen Lien Tsing (陳鍊青), the chief editor of *Lat Pau* (叻報), Tchang redesigned the masthead of its literary section, *Coconut Grove* (椰林; *Yelin*), and subsequently guest-edited *Yehui* (椰暉), *Lat Pau*’s illustrated weekend pictorial, for half a year between October 1930 and April 1931. During this period, Tchang made a name for himself as an accomplished cartoonist and when he opened Ju Chi studio (汝器畫室) in early 1930, it was widely publicised in both *Lat Pau* and *Sin Chew Jit Poh*.

In 1934, Tchang and U-Chow (莊有釗) set up The United Painters (朋特畫社) at 181 Tank Road, offering a suite of services such as advertisement graphic design and painting, oil painting, sculpture and badge design (U-Chow, also known as Chong Yew Chao or Chuang Yew Chao, was married to Tchang’s first cousin).

The pair worked well together. Tchang’s good-natured personality and connections with Chinese businessmen worked hand-in-glove with U-Chow’s forte – carpentry and light construction which were useful for interior decoration and large-scale structures. In May 1937, when Singapore was mobilised to celebrate the coronation of King George VI, The United Painters was commissioned to erect illuminated arches on Carpenter Street.⁶

As their business expanded, Tchang and U-Chow were enlisted to work on large projects. In November 1939, the duo – together with Lim Hak Tai, principal and founder of the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) – designed the Yunnan-Burma Railway Photography Exhibition, which was organised by the China Relief Fund. The clean and modern design featuring a series of V-shaped hanging frames won them a rare mention in the press.⁷

Their design for the expansion and renovation of the Astra cinema in the Royal Air Force Changi Airbase was equally impressive.⁸ Tchang continued to be a sought-after designer, helming the design and installation committees of prestigious trade fairs, China War Relief fundraisers

and art exhibitions as well as becoming the founding president of the Society of Chinese Artists in September 1935.

Tchang was also prolific as an illustrator and designer, and left behind a large body of work in print. His major clients featured in *Lat Pau* and *Sin Chew Jit Poh* included Kwang Heng Goldsmiths (光興金莊), Asiatic Coffee and Long Long Laundry Blue.

While Tchang pursued a more conventional style for Long Long’s laundry detergent, his works for Kwang Heng Goldsmiths and Asiatic Coffee demonstrate his strong grasp of geometricised shapes with clean lines, the clever use of silhouettes as well as the inclusion of black and white contrasts.

Instead of using brush calligraphy in the traditional style to render the Chinese characters of his main headings, Tchang would hand draw characters in his unique style. The characters were quirky, elegant and usually tilted slightly to accentuate his handiwork. His graphic style is unique and recognisable, and with his assistant illustrators such as Tsou Chin Hai (周金海), a distinctive house style for the studio can be discerned.

During his editorial stint at *Lat Pau*’s *Yehui*, Tchang had to source for and pro-

duce content to fill the pictorial weekend supplement, a two-page spread. He would also enter design competitions organised by international brands handled by British agents.

Tchang signed off most of his works with 器 (qi), the last character of his name. The four 口 (“mouth”) in the character would be transformed into a doodle with a comic face. Like many of his illustrations, the signature is immediately recognisable and instrumental in the identification of his works, now scattered in the advertising sections, supplements and section mastheads of many newspapers and magazines.

Xu Diaolun (許鈞綸)

Even after two years of intensive research, not much information about Xu Diaolun (許鈞綸) has surfaced. However, the evidence suggests that Xu may have been a high-profile person in a number of social circles in Singapore – as an art teacher in Ai Tong School (愛同學校), a founder of the Zhao’an Association (詔安會館), a member of the Khoh Clan Association (星洲許氏高陽公會), the main driving force behind the formation of the Singapore Commercial Art Society, a member of the Hokkien Associa-

(Below) Members of the Decoration Committee of the Chinese National Day Fundraiser for the China Relief Fund, 1938. Tchang Ju-ch’i is in the front row on the far right, while U-Chow is in the back row on the extreme left. Lee Brothers Studio Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

(Centre) Advertisements by Ju Chi Studio published in the *Sin Chew Jit Poh* newspaper between 1929 and 1930. Ju Chi Studio was set up by Tchang Ju-ch’i in February 1930. *Sin Chew Jit Poh*, 27 September 1930, p. 2; and *Sin Chew Jit Poh*, 7 September 1929, p. 2. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

(Below right) An advertisement of Ju Chi Studio placed in the 27 September 1930 edition of the *Lat Pau* newspaper (p. 8). It features Tchang Ju-ch’i’s unique signature with the four 口 (“mouth”) transformed into a doodle. National University of Singapore Library digital collection.



tion Executive Committee (福建會館常務委員會), an activist supporting China in its war against Japan, and one of the proponents of a public library (大眾圖書館).⁹

In a commemorative publication by Ai Tong School on its 25th anniversary in 1937, Xu was described as a 33-year-old Hokkien who had previously worked as a director at the Education Department of Dongshan, Fujian (福建东山). His essay titled “圖畫科的教學理論和實際” (Teaching Art: Theory and Practice) appears in this publication

and demonstrates his knowledge as an experienced art educator.¹⁰ In 1933, he had been involved in the short-lived communist rebellion in Fujian and he appeared on KMT’s wanted list of rebels.¹¹ That explained how Xu ended up in Singapore, how he quickly became involved in a number of progressive social and patriotic activities here, and how he secured a position in the well-established Hokkien school, Ai Tong.

Above all, Xu was an accomplished graphic artist who went by his *nom de*

plume 吊命, a homonym of his real name Diaolun (釣倫). He was a versatile artist, like many of his colleagues, and could accommodate the different tastes and demands of clients.

In the Ai Tong School publication, Xu contributed an advertisement featuring toy-like soldiers armed with bullets and rifles on the march, symbolising the strength of its advertiser, Shanghai New Asiatic Pharmaceutical Company (上海新亞化學製藥廠).¹² Xu seemed to have made inroads into the Shanghai network in Singapore as his other client was the Shanghainese-owned Khiau Hing (僑興), a company that sold chemical products and liquor from China.

In Chinese High School’s 1938 yearbook, Xu worked on an advertisement for local biscuit factory Hock Ann. He also took part in competitions and in 1935, his illustration for Tolley Brandy won first prize in the brand’s annual advertisement illustration contest.

Xu’s works are characterised by minute articulation and detailed embellishment. He drew women in long ankle-length tight-fitting *cheongsam*, seated tilted at an angle to accentuate their svelte figures. His lines are clean and slightly rigid, while his calligraphy is stately and seal-like. There is no mention of him in the Chinese press from around 1941, but his works in advertising illustrations continue to remind us of his artistry.

Xiaotian Huashi (小天畫室)

Leong Siew Tien (Liang Xiaotian) came to Singapore, possibly via Hong Kong, and later established the studio Xiaotian Huashi (小天畫室) on Cross Street in the 1930s. In the late 1920s, Leong was part of the Kreta Ayer literati scene. He was an urban legend, writing and drawing satirical cartoons for the *Nan Fan Periodical* (南蕪三日刊; *Nanxun sanrikan*), which had a strong following among the Cantonese community living in the area.¹³

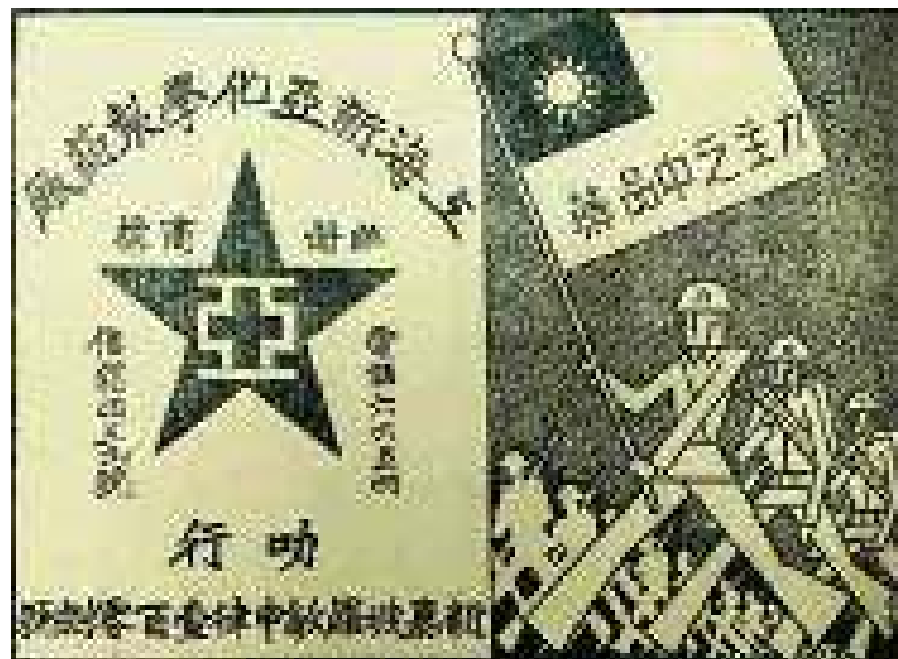
Leong’s versatility in Chinese ink and watercolour painting is documented in publications of the Chung Shan (Clan) Association (中山會館) and the Society of Chinese Artists, where he was a member.

While his watercolour works are competently executed, Leong’s classical training is visible in his Chinese-ink works, which recall the Shanghai School (上海畫派) influence, characterised by powerful calligraphy-style brushwork and dynamic compositions.

In 1948, Leong joined a group of old-school scholars, calligraphers and

(Below) A work by Xu Diaolun for Shanghai New Asiatic Pharmaceutical in *Ai Tong School 25th Anniversary Commemorative Publication* (1937, p. 51). The advertisement features toy-like soldiers armed with rifles and bullets. *National University of Singapore Library Collection.*

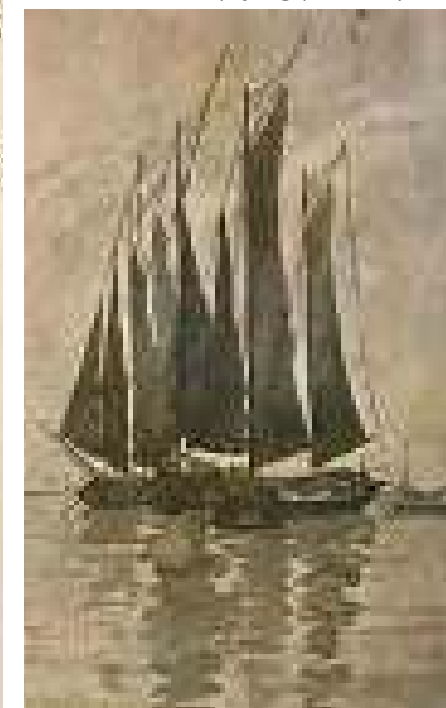
(Bottom) Xu Diaolun’s work for Hock Ann Biscuits in Chinese High School’s 1938 yearbook. *National University of Singapore Library Collection.*



(Left) A Chinese ink painting by Leong Siew Tien published in Chung Shan Association’s commemorative book, 1950. *National University of Singapore Library Collection.*

(Below) “Seascape” (watercolour) by Leong Siew Tien in the Society of Chinese Artists exhibition catalogue, 1939. *Liu Kang Family Collection.*

(Below right) A photo engraving by Leong Siew Tien in the catalogue of the 1935 Chinese National Trade Fair. *National University of Singapore Library Collection.*



Shanghai-influenced artists to form the Seal and Inscription Society (金石学会; *Jinshi Xuehui*), a hobbyist gathering dedicated to the study and appreciation of ancient inscriptions, etymology, calligraphy and seal-carving.

Professionally, Leong worked as a fulltime graphic artist in his own studio. The studio provided a range of services, including head-shot portrait painting on ceramic plaques (generally for tombstones, advertising illustrations and lithograph plate-making).

The signatures that Leong left on his commercial works suggest that he focused on three areas – illustration, for which he signed off as 小天繪製 (*Xiaotian huizhi*); lithograph plate-making, where he used 小天製版 (*Xiaotian zhiban*); and photo-engraving, when he was known as 小天電版 (*Xiaotian dianban*).

Leong’s commercial art features old Shanghai-style composition made popular at the turn of the 20th century, in which products or *cheongsam*-clad ladies were meticulously drawn using clean lines, perfect for monochrome printing, while text was rendered in striking classic seal characters. He was also an active member of the Singapore Commercial Art Society until the late 1970s.

Cupid Studio (天使畫室)

Established by Chong Beng Si (鍾鳴世) around 1937, Cupid Studio operated from a shophouse at 270 Telok Ayer Street, strategically positioned to serve the Chinese businesses in the vicinity of Robinson Road, Cecil Street, Telok Ayer, Amoy Street and Club Street.

Chong was also assistant to Lim Hak Tai, principal and founder of NAFA. Chong handled administrative and estate-related matters for the school in addition to teaching Western art. He was also one of the earliest members of the Society of Chinese Artists. And, like many of his fellow contemporary artists, Chong made his living creating commercial advertisement art.

Chong’s clientele included major brands in Singapore such as the Nanyang Elephant brand of rubber shoes made by Nanyang Manufacturing, which belonged to Lee Kong Chian; Hua Hong Manufacturing (cooking oils); and Yeo Hiap Seng Sauce Factory.

Most of his artworks used formalistic and clear composition where the products were vividly illustrated, with the brands and brand-owners’ names rendered in strong and beautiful Westernised non-calligraphic typography.



Chong Beng Si (right) and Lim Hak Tai (middle) in front of Cupid Studio at 270 Telok Ayer Street. Lim was the founder and principal of the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts. *Lim Hak Tai Archives, National Gallery Singapore.*



(Left) An advertisement for Nanyang Elephant Brand shoes by Cupid Studio in *Ai Tong School 25th Anniversary Commemorative Publication*, 1937. *National University of Singapore Library Collection*.

(Below) An advertisement for Nanyang Elephant Brand shoes by Cupid Studio in the *Chinese High Teachers Training Programme yearbook*, 1948. *National University of Singapore Library Collection*.



Chong deftly created Chinese characters and used decorative elements such as italics, shadowing and sans serif text to complement the non-Chinese letters and words.

In general, Chong's graphic works display a sure grasp of the Western graphic art sensibility – functional although not necessarily cutting-edge. His fine art works featured in the exhibitions by the Society of Chinese Artists, generally in oil or watercolour, are not stunning but they are competent and pleasing.

Leaving a Legacy

A number of these graphic artists formed the Singapore Commercial Art Society in 1937. In recounting its history, long-time Chairman Siew Suet Pak (邵雪白) remembered the persistence of Xu Diaolun in pushing to form the society.¹⁴ Leong Siew Tian and U-Chow were among the artists, either as freelancers or studio owners, who were members.¹⁵ The society continued to function well into the 1990s, although new printing technologies and desktop graphic design had made the skills of the society's members obsolete by then.

Studying the history of art-making in Singapore provides an insight into the workings of Singapore's economy which, until very recently, was essentially a history of trade and one powered by thousands of small and medium-size businesses, including the individuals who designed, made signages, laid out pages of books, and printed publications for domestic and international publishers and readers.

The story of these graphic artists of a bygone era will contribute greatly to our appreciation of Singapore's art history as well as its economy, its tenacity and responsiveness to change. ♦

NOTES

- "Art making in a cultural desert" lecture by Lee Chor Lin on 27 November 2019, part of the lecture series for the exhibition "Living with Ink: The Collection of Dr Tan Tsze Chor" (8 Nov 2019–26 Apr 2020), Asian Civilisations Museum; Lee, C.L. (2021, June). Colonising the coconut groves: Artistic legacies of British colonial Malaya. *(Post)Colonialism and Cultural Heritage*. Humboldt Forum, Berlin.
- See Table 4.6 circulation rates of Singapore newspapers, 1919–1932 in Kenley, D.L. (2003). *New culture in a new world: The May Fourth Movement and the Chinese diaspora in Singapore, 1919–1932* (p. 101). New York: Routledge. (Call no.: RSING 959.57004951 KEN). For Singapore's population of the period, see Table 5.14, percentage distribution of Singapore's total population by ethnic group in Pan, L. (Ed.). (1998). *The encyclopedia of the Chinese overseas* (p. 200). Singapore: Archipelago Press. (Call no.: RSING 304.80951 ENC)
- Chima ("Red Horse") Art Studio, run by Xie Song An (謝松龔), was an established company by the early 1930s. Xie himself made a donation of \$200 (in Chinese currency) in 1932 towards relief funds for the flood in Shanghai while the staff contributed half a month's

- salary voluntarily. It is unclear if Xie was himself an artist, but he was an active member of the Chinese community in Singapore, making regular cash donations and serving on the decorating committee for the high-profile fundraiser of the China Relief Fund in 1938.
- Personal correspondence with Tan Teo Kwang, c. 2017–2018.
- 第19页 广告 专栏 1. (1929, March 16). *南洋商报* [*Nanyang Siang Pau*], p. 19. Retrieved from NewspaperSG. [The same advertisement appeared in the 1, 8, 13, 19, 20 and 21 March 1929 editions of the newspaper.]
- Singapore & coronation reflections. (1937, May 10). *The Malaya Tribune*, p. 3. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 星華籌賑大會主辦南洋國商報報漢緬公路攝影展覽會舉行隆重開幕高總領事主持開幕禮稱觀此影展可加強抗戰信念主席李光前謂此影展會足以發揚吾民族復興精神會場佈置由美術專家多人設計極為精緻. (1939, November 25). *南洋商报* [*Nanyang Siang Pau*], p. 7. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 漳宜軍人影院重新改建. (1939, December 8). *南洋商报* [*Nanyang Siang Pau*], p. 6. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 大眾圖書館不久將在本坡出現. (1937, January 14).

- 南洋商报* [*Nanyang Siang Pau*], p. 5. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 許鈞繪 (Xu, D.L.). (1937). 圖書科的教學理論和實際 (p. 65). In *愛同學校二十五週年特刊* [*Ai Tong School 25th Anniversary Commemorative Publication*]. (Not available in NLB holdings)
- 福建事变 / 閩变. See 杨伯凯 123, 参加'福建事变'的农工当主要人物简介. Retrieved from 中国农工民主党福建省委员会 website.
- Shanghai New Asiatic Pharmaceutical Company, founded in 1926, was one of China's leading nationalist entrepreneurial efforts in the first half of the 20th century, and a current major pharmaceutical player in Shanghai.
- 梁山. (1983, July 14). 牛车水的旧文. *联合早报* [*Lianhe Zaobao*], p. 39; 梁山. (1984, December 17). 新加坡早期的小报. *联合早报* [*Lianhe Zaobao*], p. 40. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- First commercial art course graduation exhibition: Officially opened by Inche Sha'ari bin Tadin*. (1972). Singapore: Singapore Commercial Art Society. (Not available in NLB holdings)
- 美術廣告研究會會員, 會選出第一屆職員. (1939, July 4). *南洋商报* [*Nanyang Siang Pau*], p. 7. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

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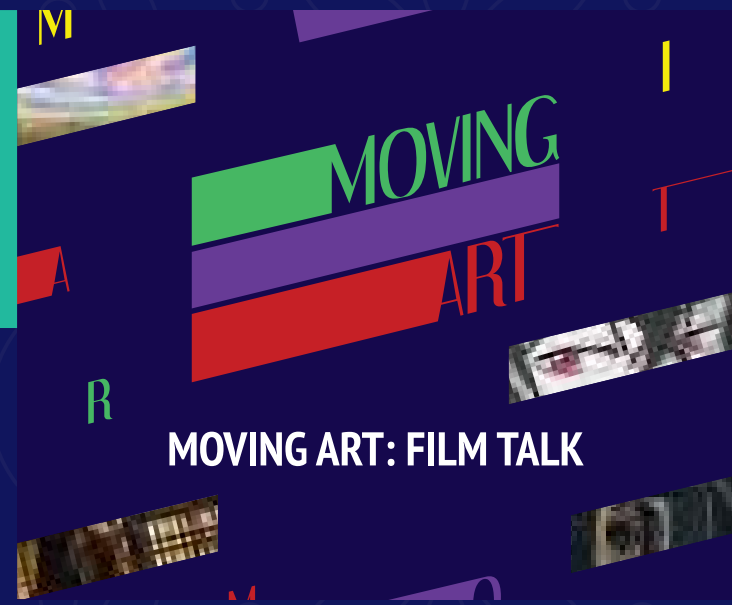
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