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biblioasia

Vol. 21 Issue 01 APR–JUN 2025

— p. 04 —

Rediscovering the Bali trip

that led to the landmark 1953 exhibition

Director's Note

In 1953, four artists – Chen Wen Hsi, Chen Chong Swee, Cheong Soo Pieng and Liu Kang – held an exhibition in Singapore where they showed paintings and sketches inspired by their 1952 trip to Bali and Java, an exhibition that has since been hailed as a landmark in Singapore's art history.

However, while the exhibition has been much discussed in the ensuing decades, much less is known about the actual trip itself. All this has changed with a new exhibition by the National Library Board – *Untold Stories: Four Singapore Artists' Quest for Inspiration in Bali 1952* – which is accompanied by a new book, *Bali 1952: Through the Lens of Liu Kang*.

Based on previously unseen photos of the trip to Bali and Java, as well as plenty of original research by Gretchen Liu, the daughter-in-law of Liu Kang, the book and exhibition will be welcomed by anyone interested in an important moment in Singapore art.

In this issue of *BiblioAsia*, we are focusing on the 1952 trip. It starts with Gretchen Liu's account of how she found Liu Kang's old shoebox containing around one thousand forgotten negatives capturing the seven weeks that the four artists spent in Indonesia. But why were they attracted to Bali? Librarian-curators Nadia Ramli and Goh Yu Mei examine the allure of Bali and the construction of the island's mystique, an effort that goes back more than a century.

To understand why these four artists were groundbreaking, a good place to start is Low Sze Wee's article on how artists such as Liu Kang straddled East and West. Besides serving as the Group Director (Museums) at the National Heritage Board, Low was also involved as a consultant for the *Untold Stories* exhibition.

As fascinating as the Bali trip and exhibition are, this issue covers lots of other ground. Fans of Dick Lee's "Home" should not miss the piece on Singapore's search for National Day songs penned by Prof Bernard Tan, who weaved in his personal experience as chairman of the Sing Singapore organising committee. Meanwhile, librarians Rosxalynd Liu and Nathaniel Chew examine the history of deaf education in Singapore, while Alvin Tan looks at Mazu worship at the Thian Hock Keng temple. Finally, if you think you know all about Badang the Strongman, William L. Gibson will make you think again.

As usual, you can't throw a rock without hitting an interesting article to read in *BiblioAsia*. I hope you enjoy this issue and do make time to visit our latest exhibition at Level 10 of the National Library Building by 3 August 2025.

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On the cover
The four artists at Kallang Airport for their flight to Jakarta, 8 June 1952. (From left): Liu Kang, Chen Chong Swee, Cheong Soo Pieng and Chen Wen Hsi. *© Liu Kang Family.*

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

biblioasia.nlb.gov.sg

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

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VOLUME 21 ISSUE 01 | APR JUN 2025

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FORGOTTEN PHOTOGRAPHS

of the 1952 Trip to Bali

A treasure trove of negatives found in an old shoebox sheds new light on a trip that led to an exhibition now regarded as a milestone in the history of Singapore art.

By Gretchen Liu

Note: This article is adapted from the preface of *Bali 1952: Through the Lens of Liu Kang: The Trip to Java and Bali by Four Singapore Pioneering Artists*.

Gretchen Liu is a former journalist, writer and an independent scholar with an interest in visual culture and heritage. She is the editor and author of several books. Most recently she has been researching the early life of her father-in-law Liu Kang, a journey that has taken her deep into early 20th-century Chinese art history.

Bali 1952: Through the Lens of Liu Kang chronicles the 1952 sketching adventure to Java and Bali by four artists – Chen Wen Hsi, Chen Chong Swee, Cheong Soo Pieng and Liu Kang. It features a selection of the photographs that Liu Kang took during the seven-week trip, from 8 June to 28 July. Forgotten for decades, they were unearthed in 2016 together with a diary he kept during the first half of the trip and nine letters written home.

My father-in-law, Liu Kang (1911–2004), was one of a small group of China-born, Shanghai-trained artists who settled in Singapore before and after World War II and animated the nascent art scene with a desire to portray their new homeland in art that showed its tropical character. Like many others who are eventually bitten by the family history bug, I regret that I did not learn more about his early life when he was around to answer questions. I never did ask him about the 1952 trip to Bali. In 2011, I was inspired to begin piecing together the details of his artistic journey when I saw the display of archival materials borrowed from the family for the exhibition *Liu Kang: A Centennial Celebration*, which marked the centenary of his birth and commemorated the donation of over 1,000 artworks to the National Heritage Board.[1]

I was initially curious about Liu Kang's time in Shanghai, which coincided with a time of enormous social and cultural change in China. The cosmopolitan port city was then known as the "Paris of the East" and the vestiges of the past are still visible today. As I walked through the former French Concession, with its elegant tree-lined sidewalks and largely intact early 20th-century architecture, it was easy to think of him striding down the very same streets. Could I retrace his footsteps? Where had he taught? Who were his friends? How had his life intersected with other artists of the period?

(Facing page) A young Balinese woman waits for customers at her *warung* (small shop), selling daily necessities and small luxuries. *© Liu Kang Family.*

(Above right) Liu Kang focuses his lens on a large mirror in the verandah of the Dutch-style Maskerdam building in Puri Agung Karangasem, eastern Bali. (From left) Cheong Soo Pieng, Chen Wen Hsi, Luo Ming (Shanghai art school classmate) and Liu Kang. *© Liu Kang Family.*

(Right) Inventively arranged, a towering shipment of basketry makes its way to market. *© Liu Kang Family.*

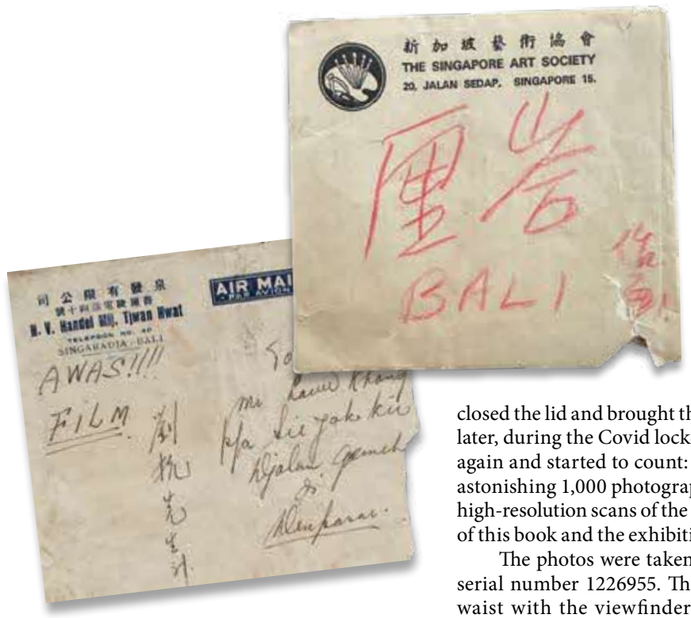
Over the next few years and numerous visits to Shanghai, I pieced together the arc of his early life: art studies at Shanghai's two influential art schools, the Shanghai Art Academy and the Xinhua Art Academy, in the 1920s; his journey from Shanghai's French Concession to Paris for further art education, 1929–32; a teaching stint at the Shanghai Art Academy, 1933–37; his sudden departure from Shanghai at the start of the Second Sino-Japanese War in August 1937; his efforts to survive the Japanese Occupation, 1942–45; and finally his post-World War II art activities in Singapore, including his leadership roles in art societies.

After his death in 2004, Liu Kang's studio-study in the family home at 20 Jalan Sedap was tidied up and left essentially untouched. In 2016, the family finally faced the challenging question of what to do with the contents of the spacious room. Cognisant of its historical value, the family reached out to the National Library Singapore. The task of sorting through the large collection of books and memorabilia of a lifetime commenced in June 2017.

Over the next three months, a small team of library staff made 19 visits to the house. The joint effort included my sister-in-law, Liu Tow Sen. We worked our way through the books, letters, documents and certificates, catalogues and clippings, photographs and negatives, travel memorabilia and ephemera. Items set aside for donation were recorded. That September, 54 boxes were packed and taken away to the National Library. The bulk of the materials donated then are from the 1940s onwards and relate to Liu Kang's years in Singapore.

Over those three months, I gained a deeper understanding of my father-in-law. He was a serious bibliophile who amassed a large collection of art and travel tomes in English and Chinese. Among his books on Bali is the classic *Island of Bali* by Miguel Covarrubias, a UK edition published in 1937 and

Ni Pollok, the wife of Belgian artist Adrien Jean Le Mayeur de Merprès, performing a segment of the *legong lassem*. The *legong* dance form is characterised by intricate finger movements, complicated footwork, and expressive gestures and facial expressions. *© Liu Kang Family.*



(Top) An example of Liu Kang's "filing system". The envelope reads 巴厘作画 (Bali sketching). *© Liu Kang Family.*

(Above) Bali ephemera tucked away in Liu Kang's study included this envelope posted from Singaraja c/o Sie Yok Kie in Denpasar. The artists used this address for correspondence to and from Singapore. *© Liu Kang Family.*

purchased from City Book Store in Collyer Quay that he signed and dated 1949. He was an avid amateur photographer from an early age: we found negatives dating back to the mid-1920s.

I marvelled at the extensive paper trail left behind, especially the letters both received and written home, that survived the test of time, including those penned during the 1952 trip. Liu Kang, it seems, had a strong sense of history. The dislocations that affected the lives of many of his generation may have enhanced his instinct to keep and preserve. He may have intuited that one day the art world he inhabited would be of interest not only to Singapore art historians but also scholars of modern China.

One afternoon in March 2016, I visited the study to do a preliminary investigation, opening drawers and cupboards at random. At the back of one of the cabinets, I saw a flash of colour that turned out to be a faded Bata shoebox. I pulled it out and carefully lifted the fragile lid. Inside were neat rows of brown and pink envelopes. Each envelope was labelled in a mixture of English and Chinese. The brown envelopes contained 6 cm × 6 cm negatives, and the pink envelopes turned out to have matching sets of prints the same size. I pulled out a few of the prints and realised they were scenes of Bali. I closed the lid and brought the box home. Four years later, during the Covid lockdown, I opened the box again and started to count: Liu Kang had taken an astonishing 1,000 photographs during the trip. The high-resolution scans of the negatives form the basis of this book and the exhibition that it accompanies.

The photos were taken with a Rolleiflex f/3.5, serial number 1226955. The camera is held at the waist with the viewfinder mounted on top. The receipt for the camera, also found, revealed that it was a last-minute acquisition – purchased on 7 June 1952, the day before the artists' departure, from Wah Heng & Company, the well-known photo supply store at 95 North Bridge Road, for $522.75. Each roll of black-and-white film produced 12 exposures. Liu Kang developed the film and had the contact prints made as he travelled through Java and Bali. Alas, the fate of the camera is unknown. While a Rolleiflex camera was found in his study, it was a model from the early 1960s according to its serial number.

Chen Chong Swee and Cheong Soo Pieng also carried cameras. A skilled photographer,

The Bata shoebox was discovered in March 2016, filled with envelopes tightly packed and neatly arranged. Brown envelopes contained negatives, with matching sets of contact prints in the pink envelopes. *© Liu Kang Family.*

(Left) Liu Kang in his study at the family home at 20 Jalan Sedap, 1990s. *© Liu Kang Family.*

(Below left) In the shady corner of a temple wall, Cheong Soo Pieng finds a comfortable vantage point for photography. *© Liu Kang Family.*

Chen Chong Swee favoured Leicas, according to his son Chen Chi Sing. During the trip, he shot on 35 mm black-and-white film and also developed his film along the way.[2]

Unfortunately, Chen Chong Swee had a devastating experience when four rolls of film were ruined by a Bali photo studio. "But I am exceedingly exasperated by one irrecoverable loss," he lamented in a letter to his wife. "There are so many wonderful images lost – there can never be another opportunity to capture them again. I can never get those photos back. For the pictures snapped from here on, I'm just going to take them all back and have them developed in Singapore."[3] The loss is significant: with 36 photos per roll, 144 images were gone forever. I am deeply grateful to Chi Sing for his support of this book. He generously shared the letters that his father wrote home as well as his father's photographs and artworks.

It has not been possible to identify the camera used by Cheong Soo Pieng. According to his son Cheong Wai Chi, it was likely a Chinese brand. The artists exchanged photographs, and there are 16 in a specific format, 9 cm × 5.5 cm with a distinctive white deckle-edged border, including a group photo with Dutch painter Rudolf Bonnet in Ubud, that suggest they may have been taken by Cheong Soo Pieng. But other images in this format may instead have been purchased from a photo studio in Denpasar.

Mention must also be made of the fifth participant in the Bali portion of the field trip. Luo Ming can be seen also carrying a camera in Liu Kang's photographs. A fellow Shanghai Art Academy alumnus, he began a lengthy journey through Southeast Asia in the late 1940s.[4] Art school ties were rekindled when he visited Singapore in 1948. After a chance meeting with the artists in a Jakarta cafe, he decided to join their Bali sketching adventure. Luo Ming returned to China in 1954, and the fate of his photographs remains unknown.

Details of the trip come from several sources. First, Liu Kang's diary, which was also found in his study and remains with the family. He purchased a steno notebook on his first day in Jakarta and recorded people met, places visited, amusing travel anecdotes and his private thoughts. The last entry is dated 29 June. Then there are the letters penned to wives – 11 extant from Chen Chong Swee to Tay Peck Koon, and nine from Liu Kang to Chen Jen Ping – which were reassuring, affectionate and informative.

Eager to put minds at ease, both Chen Chong Swee and Liu Kang posted short letters on 9 June confirming their safe arrival in Jakarta. In subsequent letters one can sense the artists' eagerness to share their experiences with those at home – comments on hotels (the good, the bad, the amusing), restaurants and meals (the unusual, the delicious), shopping (many visits to bookstores to purchase art supplies) and transportation (car, train and small boat, comfortable and chaotic). The travellers also inquired about children and revealed a tinge of homesickness. Of interest to art historians are hitherto unknown details of two life drawing residencies in Bali, the first near Denpasar and the second in Ubud.

The voices of the artists are gathered from other sources. All four artists wrote or spoke about the trip and its impact on them, but some more than others. Chen Wen Hsi and Liu Kang shared memories in their oral history interviews, recorded by the Oral History Centre in the early 1980s. The first language of the four artists was their Chinese dialect, and then Mandarin. Liu Kang was also fluent in French and could read and speak some English. (His extensive library consisted mainly of books in English.) It is fair to assume that the artists, living in a British colonial society, were exposed to periodicals, especially pictorial ones, in languages other than Chinese.

As I pieced together the story of the trip, I felt an irresistible urge to see whether it was possible to connect photographs with the art that was created during the trip or shortly after, hence the inclusion of works, mostly sketches and drawings and also some oil paintings, so that others may now explore the relationships discovered. I am grateful to the staff of the National Gallery Singapore and NUS Museum, Chen Chi Sing and the private collectors who assisted with this quest.

The photographs in the book appear as Liu Kang framed them. After 70 years, the negatives were in reasonably good condition. However, inevitably after prolonged storage in a warm and humid environment, there were some instances of fading, discolouration and staining that resulted in tonal shifts, and some diminished image density. The digital restoration process involved adjustments to exposure settings, tonal density and the application of digital retouching and enhancement techniques tailored to the specific characteristics of the negatives.

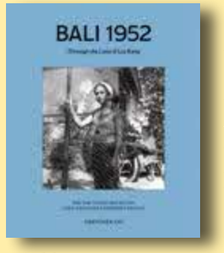
Women formally dressed for a temple ceremony carry their offerings. *© Liu Kang Family.*

Liu Kang focused his lens on landscape, architecture and scenes of daily life, a combination of documentation, art and street photography – the chance encounters, random incidents and candid scenes that capture a moment in time. In this way, the photographs offer not only a comprehensive record of the field trip, but also a snapshot of a particular moment in Indonesian history. While we will never know why he took so many photographs (for pleasure? to publish?), the forgotten photographs can at last be seen. As to what light they may shed on the larger story of Singapore's art history, that is for others to discuss and debate. ♦

(Left) Chen Chong Swee is on the far right reaching for a drink. *© Liu Kang Family.*

(Below) I Wayan Rindi performing the *kebyar duduk*. The name *kebyar duduk* is derived from the way in which the dance is performed: in an almost seated position (*duduk*). *© Liu Kang Family.*

A group photograph for remembrance. (From left) Cheong Soo Pieng (squatting), Yan Zihe, Chen Chong Swee, Luo Ming (squatting), Liu Wenbang (Liu Kang's cousin), Liu Kang and Chen Wen Hsi. *© Liu Kang Family.*



Gretchen Liu's *Bali 1952: Through the Lens of Liu Kang: The Trip to Java and Bali by Four Singapore Pioneering Artists* was published in conjunction with the exhibition, *Untold Stories: Four Singapore Artists' Quest for Inspiration in Bali 1952*, held at Level 10 of the National Library Building from 14 February to 3 August 2025. The book is available for reference at the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library (call no. RSING 779.995986 LIU), for loan at selected public libraries (call no. SING 779.995986 LIU), and for sale at physical and online bookstores.

NOTES

1 Yeo Wei Wei, ed., *Liu Kang: Colourful Modernist* (Singapore: The National Art Gallery Singapore, 2011). (From National Library Singapore, call no. RSING 759.95957 LIU). The book was published in conjunction with the exhibition *Liu Kang: A Centennial Celebration* organised by the National Art Gallery, supported by the National Heritage Board and presented at the Singapore Art Museum, 29 July–16 October 2011.

2 Chen Chi Sing has two of his father's cameras, a Rolleiflex and a Leica M3, a 35 mm rangefinder released in 1954. The camera used during the Bali trip was likely the precursor to the Leica M3.

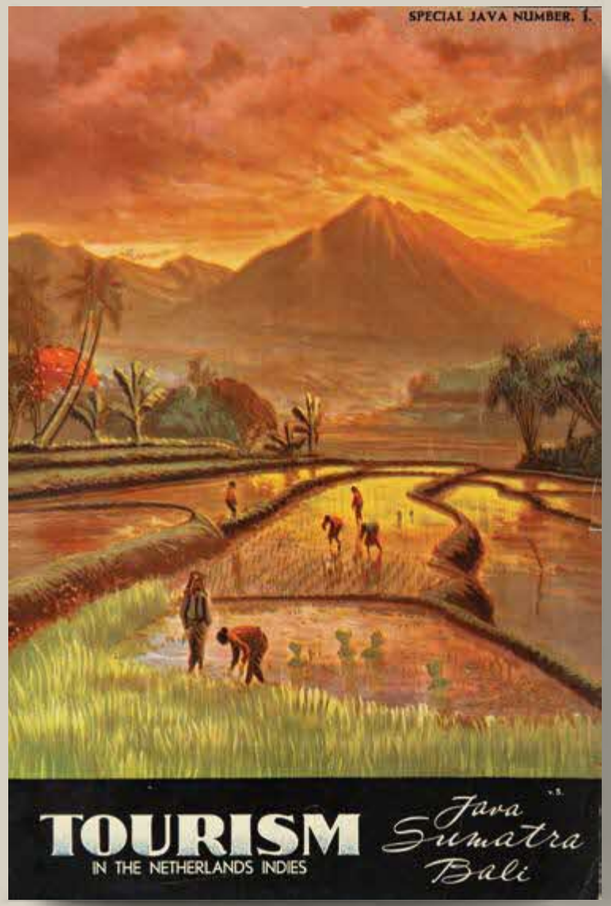
3 Chen Chong Swee, letter to his wife (Tay Peck Koon), 5 July 1952. Translated from the original letter digitised by National Gallery Singapore Library & Archive with kind permission from Chen Chi Sing. Some of Chen Chong Swee's Java and Bali photographs were featured in the book by Phua Chay Long 潘醒农, 《东南亚名胜》 [Celebrated places in Southeast Asia] (Singapore: Nantao Publishing House, 1954). (From National Library Singapore, call no. RSING 959 PCL)

4 Luo Ming was the other participant of the Bali sketching trip. He was a graduate of the Shanghai Art Academy in Western painting. In 1947, he left Hong Kong, where he taught, and travelled to Thailand, Malaya, Singapore, Hong Kong and Indonesia, painting and holding solo exhibitions. In 1948, he spent several months in Singapore and held an exhibition of his art that year, which was was sponsored by the Society of Chinese Artists. See "Art Display Is Planned," *Singapore Free Press*, 16 July 1948, 5; "Huajia Luo Ming shi bu ri fanguo" 画家罗铭氏不日返国 [Painter Luo Ming will return to China soon], 南洋商报 *Nanyang Siang Pau*, 16 August 1948, 6 (From NewspaperSG)

THE CONSTRUCTION OF BALI'S MYSTIQUE

In 1953, four pioneering Singapore artists held an exhibition of artworks arising from their travels to Bali the previous year. Their trip was inspired by an image of the island as an untouched Eden.

By Nadia Ramli and Goh Yu Mei



The Travellers Official Information Bureau of The Netherlands Indies published a series titled *Tourism in the Netherlands Indies* during the 1930s. *Image reproduced from Tourism in the Netherlands Indies (Batavia-Centrum, Java: Travellers Official Information Bureau of the Netherlands Indies, c. 1930s–1940s). (From the Liu Kang Collection, National Library Singapore, call no. RCLOS 915.98 TINI-[LK]).*

Mention Bali and the image that springs to mind is that of a paradise on earth, with its verdant hills, cascading rice terraces, pristine beaches, mesmerising dances and beautiful local women. This image, however, did not appear out of nowhere. Key to shaping popular imagination have been cultural products like books and films that use the island as a backdrop which, in turn, reinforce the image of Bali as a paradise. The 2010 biographical romantic drama *Eat Pray Love* – a movie starring Julia Roberts about a woman who searches for self-discovery as she journeys to Italy, India and Bali – is a well-known example of a movie that capitalises on Bali's allure.[1]

The construction of Bali as a beautiful, mysterious and exotic destination is an effort that goes back to the early 20th century. An image initially constructed by colonial administrators who wanted to create a tourist destination eventually took on a life of its own as artists, writers, photographers, journalists and filmmakers descended on the island.

Among the artists who were influenced by this image of Bali and who, in turn, also helped to burnish this image in the region were four pioneering Singapore artists – Liu Kang, Chen Chong Swee, Chen Wen Hsi and Cheong Soo Pieng. In 1952, they embarked on a seven-week journey across Indonesia from 8 June to 28 July, culminating in Bali. Inspired by the island's lush landscapes, rich culture and artistic traditions, the artists' 1953 exhibition of paintings and sketches arising from this trip is considered a major milestone in Singapore's art history.[2]

In his oral history interview, Liu Kang recalled: "We had an impression of the island of Bali from a long time ago because we regularly saw reports on Bali in books and illustrated magazines, especially those with pictures introducing Bali. [We] felt that Bali had incredible natural scenery, the attire their locals wore and their dances were all excellent subject matter for drawing."[3]

The Hidden Side of Paradise

Bali's reputation as an island paradise today emerged from a complex interplay of historical, political and sociocultural factors. Colonial narratives, coupled with the strategic promotion of the island as a tourist attraction, combined with the rise of leisure travel in the early 20th century made destinations in Southeast Asia such as Bali more accessible to Western travellers. These factors, together with the island's unique cultural and physical landscape, created a captivating portrayal of Bali. However, the romanticised image of paradise often obscures the impact of colonisation on Bali and its people.

The first documented European contact with Bali was in 1597 when merchants from Amsterdam, led by Cornelis de Houtman, arrived on the island after a two-year journey. The Dutch fleet was reportedly impressed by the Balinese prosperity and hospitality, in contrast to the austere Islamic sultanates of Java.[4] The trip was instrumental in opening up the East Indies and the Indonesian spice trade to the Dutch as well as the eventual formation of the Dutch East India Company in 1602.

In the 17th and 18th centuries, the growth and expansion of the Dutch East India Company laid the groundwork for deeper Western influence in the region. By the 19th century, the Dutch had asserted control over Bali through a series of military interventions, fuelled by pretexts like the Balinese practice of *tawan karang*, or the right to salvage shipwrecks. The Dutch final conquest of Bali in the early 20th century, marked by fierce battles and *puputan* (carrying out mass ritual suicides to avoid the humiliation of surrender), could be seen as symbolic of the local resistance against the brutality of colonisation.[5]

After the violent invasion of Bali, the Dutch colonial government sought to create a more "favourable" image with policies that aimed to, on the one hand preserve and protect the Indo-Javanese civilisation from modern influences and, on the other, promote tourism.[6] This also tied in with the agenda by the Dutch to stifle political activity and contain the spread of nationalism in the rest of the archipelago.[7]

A Colonial Fantasy

The Dutch developed infrastructure and promoted Bali as an exotic, untouched getaway, intertwining their economic and political ambitions with the island's tourism.[8] The establishment of the Association for Tourist Traffic in Netherlands India ("Netherlands India" refers to the Dutch East Indies, the colony of the Netherlands' in Southeast Asia, primarily consisting of present-day Indonesia) marked an era of tourism efforts for the island, casting the Dutch East Indies as a coveted travel destination.[9]

By 1914, travel guides and brochures were promoting Bali as the "Gem of the Lesser Sunda Isles" and mythologising the archipelago with language like "Mystic Isles of Java, Sumatra and Bali" and "Romance of the East".[10] The 1928 inauguration of the Bali Hotel (present-day Inna Bali Heritage Hotel), the island's first foray into "modern" hospitality, was orchestrated under the auspices of the Koninklijke Paketvaart Maatschappij (KPM; Royal Packet Navigation Company), a shipping line.[11]

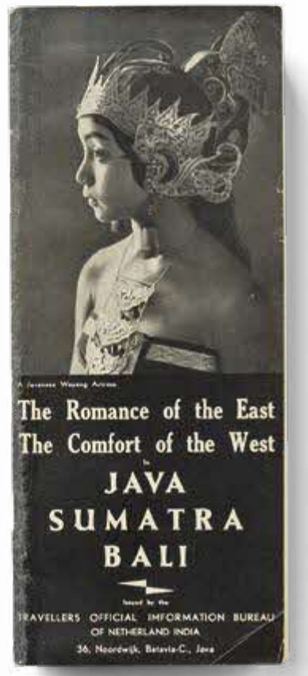
The KPM and other shipping lines also sponsored a number of early tourist pamphlets and publications such as the journal, *Sluyter's Monthly*, which was later renamed *Inter-Ocean: A Netherlands East Indian Magazine Devoted to Malaysia and Australasia*.[12] These efforts, coupled with the introduction of regular steamship services between Java and Bali in the 1920s, facilitated the influx of visitors seeking their slice of paradise.

"Picture Perfect"

Bali's allure was also fuelled by the artists, photographers and writers who descended on the island in search of inspiration. Depictions of the island, from canvases to celluloid, created a compelling narrative that resonated with Western fantasies of Bali as a paradise.[13]

The island often drew comparisons to French painter Paul Gaugin's romantic image of Tahiti as an "untouched paradise". Early European artists such as Wijnand Otto Jan Nieuwenkamp and Gregor Krause played a significant role in shaping the perception of Bali through their art. Nieuwenkamp, who was Dutch, was one of the first European artists to visit Bali. His illustrated albums and publication, *Bali en Lombok* (1906–10), introduced the island

Early publications about Bali contain instances of romanticised language typical of colonial-era tourism materials. *Image reproduced from "The Romance of the East, the Comfort of the West in Java, Sumatra, Bali" in Indonesia Travel Ephemera (Java: Travellers Official Information Bureau of Netherland India, c. 1920s–1930s). (From John Koh Collection, National Library Singapore, call no. RCLOS 915.9804 JOH-[JK]). Donated by Cynthia and John Koh.*



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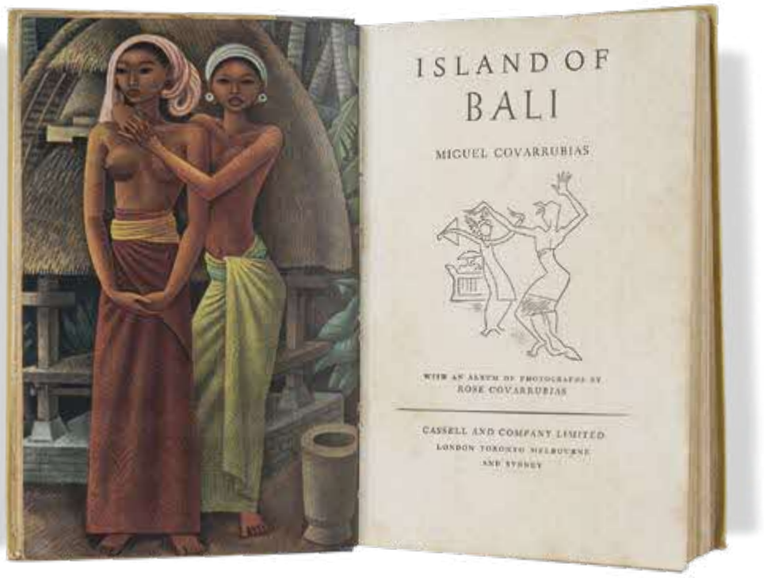

The Mexican artist Miguel Covarrubias's *Island of Bali* (1937), based on his extended stay there in 1930 and 1933, remains a seminal text on Balinese culture for non-Balinese readers. *Image reproduced from Miguel Covarrubias, Island of Bali (London: Cassell, 1937). (From Liu Kang Collection, National Library Singapore, call no. RCLOS 959.864 GOV-[LK]).*

to a wider audience. Together with the German physician and photographer Gregor Krause, they advanced Bali's appeal through the first exhibition of Balinese art in Amsterdam in 1918.[14]

Krause's 1920 publication, *Bali 1912*, paints a vivid portrait of Bali's landscapes, people and customs. The book showcases a collection of nearly 400 photographs curated from thousands taken during his stint as a medical officer in Bangli, near Ubud, from 1912 to 1914.[15] His lens captured an idyllic vision of indigenous life that would later inspire other artists and writers. The Mexican painter Miguel Covarrubias, German artist Walter Spies and Austrian novelist Vicki Baum were among those drawn to Bali's shores, their subsequent works further contributing to the island's reputation as a paradise.[16]

Drawn to Bali

Early European artists created an idyllic and even more romanticised vision of the island. Walter Spies, the Russian-born German polymath who visited Bali in 1927 and remained there until World War II, was part of a small yet influential expatriate community that shaped Bali's image in the Western imagination.

Armed with an extensive knowledge of Balinese culture, Spies made his home in Ubud a mandatory stop for artists, writers, scholars and other visitors to Bali.[17] He also encouraged Dutch artist Rudolf Bonnet, who arrived in 1929, to stay on in Bali. The two men, together with a member of the Ubud ruling family, Cokorda Gde Agung Sukawati, and several Balinese artists, including I Gusti Nyoman Lempad, became involved in the Pita Maha Guild, which sought to stimulate art and professionalise local artists.[18] Bonnet also designed and planned the construction of Museum Puri Lukisan showcasing traditional Balinese art, whose main building was completed in 1956.[19]

The Belgian artist Adrien-Jean Le Mayeur de Merprès, who settled in Bali in 1932 after extensive travels, created Impressionist paintings often featuring his Balinese wife and muse – the renowned *legong* dancer Ni Wayan Pollok Tjoeglik – in idyllic garden settings as well as Balinese women in sun-drenched scenes.[20] His seaside home in Sanur was a popular spot for artists and tourists, offering dance performances and meals for a fee.[21] Le Mayeur held four successful exhibitions in Singapore in 1933, 1935, 1937 and 1941.[22] He said that Bali was his inspiration and his life. "I shall never leave Bali," he once declared, "for I believe it will never be 'spoiled'."[23]

The four Singapore artists – Liu Kang, Chen Chong Swee, Chen Wen Hsi and Cheong Soo Pieng – visited Le Mayeur during their 1952 Bali trip. The artists also attended one of the couple's popular tourist programmes consisting of "Balinese dance and gamelan performances together with a sumptuous meal served under the frangipani trees".[24]

Other artists who captured Bali in their works and had exhibitions in Singapore include Julius and Tina Wentscher, the world-renowned painter and sculptor respectively, and the Russian artist Anatole Shister. The Wentschers held a joint exhibition at the YWCA in 1936. Their works, created in Java and Bali, included sculptures of a Balinese prince and a Balinese dancer, Sandri, and portrait paintings of Balinese girls.[25]


BALI WILL NEVER BE "SPOILED"

Tourist Traffic Preserves Ancient Ceremonies

"BALI is my inspiration, my life," said M. A. J. Le Mayeur, the noted Belgian painter who has spent the last few years on the "enchanted isle" of Netherlands India, in a special interview.

POLOK, THE BALINESE DANCER, and her cousin Ketjog, the gamelan player, who are to perform at the International Fete at the Volunteer Drill Hall tonight.

The Belgian artist Adrien-Jean Le Mayeur de Merprès found inspiration in Bali's tranquillity and serenity. His wife and muse is the renowned *legong* dancer Ni Pollok. *Image reproduced from "Bali Will Never Be 'Spoiled'," Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser, 26 February 1937, 6. (From NewspaperSG).*

Shister showcased his Bali paintings and drawings at the Robinson's department store in October 1947. The exhibition drew the colony's elite, including Governor-General of Malaya Malcolm MacDonald, American Consul General Paul Josselyn and former Chinese Consul General Kao Ling Pai. Shister was "completely enchanted" by Bali. "The Balinese," he said, "have a mystery in their faces which is difficult for an artist to capture."[26]

Pages of Paradise

Written accounts by travellers also shaped public perception and understanding of Balinese culture, people and landscape. These narratives, which ranged from fiction to memoirs, served as tales for armchair tourists, offering them vicarious experiences and personal insights into the island.[27] Some of these early authors include American journalist Hickman Powell, Austrian novelist Vicki Baum and Mexican artist Miguel Covarrubias.[28]

Ethnographic works by anthropologists Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson portrayed Bali as a timeless paradise, unaltered by modernity. They documented Balinese culture extensively through thousands of photographs, film footage and detailed field notes, making a lasting impact in the field of visual anthropology.[29]

Amid the uncertainties immediately after World War II, there were fewer travellers to Bali as noted by Singapore's *Straits Times*: "There are regular air services linking it with Batavia and a first-class hotel in the little capital, Denpasar, but the unsettled conditions in Asia have caused the tourist trade to dwindle almost to nothing. Only the most privileged or the most persistent are able to overcome the currency and visa difficulties which complicate travel in the East."[30]

Tourism in Bali began to pick up in the late 1940s and early 1950s, and articles by Western travellers extolling the beauty of the island, as well as mentions of their visit to Le Mayeur's home and meeting his wife Ni Pollok, were frequently published in Singapore's newspapers. Writing for the *Straits Times* in 1949, F.H. Halpern was happy to find that after a lapse of about 10 years, Bali has "returned to complete tranquility" and the "inhabitants have changed so little in character customs and appearance".[31]

Bali continued to enthrall travellers with its reputation as a paradise, and its charm was portrayed through images of bare-breasted women and descriptions of the arts, specifically the dances and music. Elizabeth E. Marcos, who visited Bali with two correspondents from the *London Times*, wrote in a 1950 *Straits Times* article: "This is the land of uncovered breasts; fabulous costumes; rich carvings and weird figures; lavish offerings to the gods; posturing men and women beating rhythm to the gamelan and perhaps where the transmigration of souls is a daily occurrence." Marcos added: "As I sat under the arbor of J. Le Meyeur's garden, pelted by frangipani and bougainvillea blossoms, watching Pollok in a difficult pose, straining to hold her arms in a dance movement, while her husband hurried to catch the last rays of the dying sun, I had the most unsophisticated feeling of having been transported into paradise."[32]


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An absorbing and fascinating story of the primitive people on the Island of Bali and the part played in their existence by BLACK MAGIC.
With an all native cast that does credit to a beautiful Story and Production.
SEE—
The famous trance dances!
The cockfights!
The worship of the Goddess of Death—RANGDA!
The infant mortality plague!
The famous ceremony of "GALOONGAN" etc. etc.

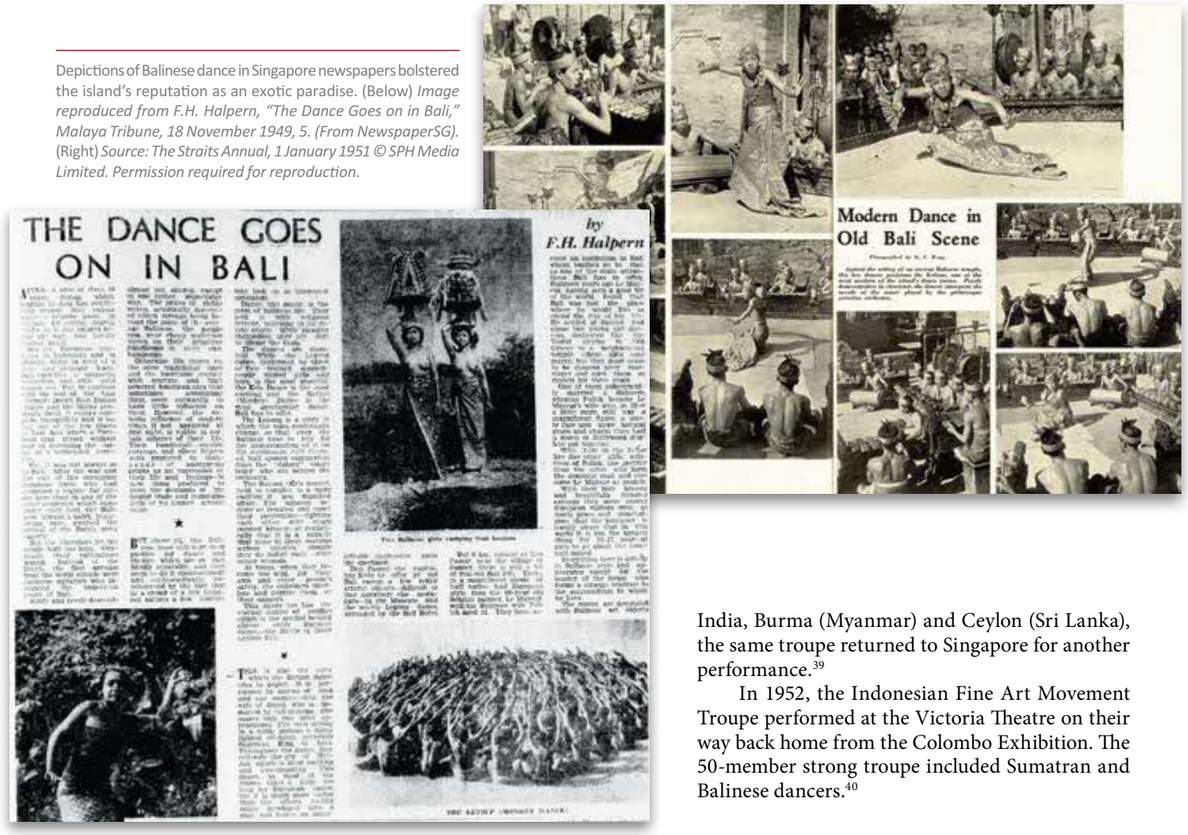
This film titled *Black Magic* is most likely André Roosevelt and Armand Denis's *Goona Goona* released under a different name. *Image reproduced from "Black Magic," Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser, 27 August 1934, 7. (From NewspaperSG).*

Bali in Entertainment

The film industry further popularised the image of Bali not only in the West, but in Singapore too. André Roosevelt and Armand Denis's "educational documentary" *Goona Goona: An Authentic Melodrama of the Island of Bali* (1932), shot entirely on location, was a huge success in America.[33] "Goona goona" became a popular slang for sex appeal in the United States, and later a general term for native-exploitative films set in remote parts of the world.[34] (Originally, "goona-goona", or *guna-guna*, refers to an Indonesian term for love spells cast upon unwilling victims.)[35]

In Singapore, one of the earliest mentions of a screening of a Bali-based film was in 1934 titled *Black Magic* at the Alhambra theatre. This was likely *Goona Goona* but released under a different name.[36] Another film shot on location in Bali was *Legong: Dance of the (Temple) Virgins*, which opened in Singapore in 1935 at the Alhambra, featuring an all-Balinese cast and filmed in technicolour. Centred on a *legong* dancer and a gamelan musician, the film was a box-office success in America and played for 10 weeks at the New York World Theatre in 1935.[37]

Balinese dance troupes first gained international exposure at the Colonial Exhibition in Paris before gradually touring the world, presumably as part of cultural missions.[38] In 1935, a group known as the Royal Balinese Dancers performed at the Capitol in Singapore. Comprising 40 dancers and gamelan musicians, the troupe presented a programme of 11 items which included stories from the Hindu epic Mahabharata as well as Balinese, Javanese and Dayak dances. The following year, after a successful tour of



Depictions of Balinese dance in Singapore newspapers bolstered the island's reputation as an exotic paradise. (Below) *Image reproduced from F.H. Halpern, "The Dance Goes on in Bali," Malaya Tribune, 18 November 1949, 5. (From NewspaperSG).* (Right) *Source: The Straits Annual, 1 January 1951 © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.*

India, Burma (Myanmar) and Ceylon (Sri Lanka), the same troupe returned to Singapore for another performance.[39]

In 1952, the Indonesian Fine Art Movement Troupe performed at the Victoria Theatre on their way back home from the Colombo Exhibition. The 50-member strong troupe included Sumatran and Balinese dancers.[40]

Bali in the Chinese Imagination

Bali attained some prominence in the Chinese-speaking world in 1935 when *Legong: Dance of the Virgins* (蓬岛春光) was screened in Shanghai. This was also the year that a touring Balinese dance troupe stopped by Shanghai and Hong Kong.[41]

The image of Bali as an island paradise, famous for its beautiful women, was further promoted through various publications.《良友画报》(*Young Companion*), a popular magazine launched in Shanghai in 1926 and widely circulated within China as well as Southeast Asia, published two features on Bali in May 1935 and December 1939. In the title of both features, Bali was referred to as "蓬岛" (Isle of Penglai), alluding to the mythical mountain island where immortals reside.[42]

Nearer home, this image of Bali as a divine realm was also evident in《荷属东印度概览》(*Netherlands East Indian Sketch*), a 1939 introductory book to the Netherland East Indies with a focus on the Chinese communities. Published in Singapore, the book described Bali as "仙天福地" – a paradise where immortals live.[43]

While Bali was typically touted as an exotic location with its beautiful and charming women, other aspects of the island such as Balinese dances, arts and crafts, temples, and religious and cultural practices, like cremation rituals and cock-fighting, were also showcased. As early as 1931, 《中华图画杂志》(*The China Pictorial*), another popular magazine founded in 1930 in Shanghai, described Bali as "mysterious" and introduced the history and culture of Bali accompanied by photographs in a feature story.[44]

The July 1942 issue of《昭南画报》(*Syonan Gaho*) published in Singapore during the Japanese Occupation, featured images of Balinese dance and performances, which captured the spiritual and religious aspects of Bali. Among the images were illustrations by Covarrubias.[45]

The inaugural issue of《星洲周刊》(*Sin Chew Weekly*), published on 19 April 1951, included photographs by K.F. Wong featuring aspects of Balinese life, including different Balinese dances.[46]

The Enduring Image of Bali

The lasting image of Bali as an island paradise showcases the remarkable power of perception and representation. From the early Dutch encounters to the artistic endeavours of the 20th century – including the transformative 1952 trip by Singapore's pioneering artists – Bali's influence has extended far beyond its shores, enriching art, literature and popular culture across the seas. This romanticised portrayal of Bali, while captivating, exists alongside the complex realities of its people, culture and history. ♦

An exhibition titled *Untold Stories: Four Singapore Artists' Quest for Inspiration in Bali 1952* is held at Level 10 of the National Library Building from 14 February to 3 August 2025. It features a selection of the photographs from the trip to Bali undertaken by pioneering Singapore artists, Liu Kang, Chen Chong Swee, Chen Wen Hsi and Cheong Soo Pieng, in 1952.

NOTES

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A BRIDGE BETWEEN *East and West*

Liu Kang's works show the influence of Western artists such as Cézanne, Gauguin, Van Gogh and Matisse, as well as the tradition of Chinese ink painting.

By Low Size Wee

Life by the River (1975) by Liu Kang, oil on canvas, 126 × 203 cm. *Collection of National Gallery Singapore, courtesy of National Heritage Board.*

In November 1953, four artist-friends – Liu Kang, Chen Wen Hsi, Chen Chong Swee and Cheong Soo Pieng – held a joint exhibition showcasing more than 100 paintings and sketches inspired by their trip to Java and Bali a year earlier. It was the first time in Singapore that a group of local artists had organised a thematic exhibition based on their painting trip. The exhibition at the British Council was very well received and continues to be regarded as a milestone in Singapore's art history today.[1]

Among the four artists who participated in the *Bali* exhibition, Liu Kang was the only one who painted primarily in oil, whereas the other three moved freely between Western oil and Chinese ink paintings. In fact, when the well-known visiting Chinese artist Xu Beihong (徐悲鸿) saw Liu's oil painting at a group exhibition in Singapore in 1940, he exclaimed, "你才是马諦斯的老师" ("You are truly the teacher of Matisse").[2]

The work in question depicted a Malay village scene with attap houses surrounded by banana and coconut trees, and with the local folk and their chickens and ducks in the foreground. Although Xu did not explain what he meant, Liu speculated that his painting likely stood out because most of the other artists' works were more "naturalistic" ("画得比较写实"). Liu's style, on the other hand, was simpler, using flat colours and linework, rather than light and shade, to depict his subjects ("很爽朗、简洁，注重线条，不注重光线，色彩比较平浮的").[3]

The comparison of Liu with the famous French artist Henri Matisse was not unexpected. After all, oil painting is an art medium that was introduced to Asia from the West. In addition, Liu had spent time in Paris in the 1930s and was a great admirer of Matisse's works.[4] However, it is important to note that Liu's practice was not derivative of Western norms; he was not merely copying Matisse. Rather, Liu's chosen medium and style arose because he saw close affinities between Western modern art and Chinese ink aesthetics. This was something that he often reiterated in his writings and artworks.

Low Sze Wee is Group Director (Museums), National Heritage Board Singapore. He is the former Chief Executive Officer of the Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre.

Liu Kang's Artistic Journey

Born in 1911 in Fujian, China, Liu spent his childhood years in the town of Muar in Johor. In 1926, at the age of 15, he returned to China to further his studies. A year later, he enrolled in the Shanghai Academy of Fine Arts (also known as Shanghai Art Academy), which later broke off to form Xinhua Academy of Fine Arts (or Xinhua Art Academy) and graduated from the latter in 1928.

Between 1928 and 1933, he continued his studies at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière in Paris where he had the chance to exhibit at the annual Salon d'Automne.[5] His works from that period bear strong influences from the French Impressionist and Post-Impressionist artists.

In 1933, Liu returned to China and taught Western painting at the Shanghai Academy of Fine Arts until the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War in 1937, which led him and his wife to move to Singapore and later Muar. After the end of the Second World War, he settled down in Singapore where he ran a studio producing advertisements and cinema posters. Apart from teaching art in various schools, he was very active in the local art community, serving in various societies and committees. Liu's works have been shown internationally in places such as Taiwan, Hong Kong and Beijing.

In 2003, Liu donated his life's works to the Singapore Art Museum. For his contributions to the Singapore art scene as artist, teacher and writer, Liu received the Bintang Bakti Masyarakat (Public Service Star) and Pingat Jasa Gemilang (Meritorious Service Medal) in 1970 and 1996 respectively. He died in 2004.

Inspiration from the West

Liu's interest and engagement with the West was an enduring one, spanning his years in Shanghai to his time in Paris and, later, Singapore. His lifelong interest in Western art probably started when his primary school teacher in Muar, recognising his love for art, gave him a book of reproductions of Western art. Liu spent many happy hours copying artworks from the book.[6]

When Liu returned to China to further his studies, the country had become a modern republic with the collapse of the Qing dynasty in 1911. In the wake of China's humiliating defeat to a technologically superior West, many artists regarded Chinese painting, with its traditional emphasis on copying from old masters, as fossilised and irrelevant to a new China. There was intense debate over the creation of art for a new nation and era, and the role that the West could play in the process.

Breakfast (1932) by Liu Kang, oil on canvas, 44.5 × 53.5 cm. *Collection of National Gallery Singapore, courtesy of National Heritage Board.*

By the 1920s, Shanghai had become the art centre of China. Apart from Chinese painting, art schools like the Shanghai Academy of Fine Arts and the Xinhua Academy of Fine Arts also taught Western oil painting since a number of their teachers had studied Western art in Paris or Japan.[7]

After graduating from the Xinhua Academy of Fine Arts in 1928, Liu left for Paris to continue his art studies until 1933. Being at the heart of the Western art world then, Liu had the opportunity to study paintings previously known only from reproductions. He recalled: "After seeing an exhibition of Cézanne still-life paintings, the next morning we would be arranging a still-life 'a-la Cézanne' and painted it in his style, using his colour scheme. We tried to enter his state of mind when he was painting the subject."[8] Liu also visited many art museums to study Western masterpieces, and went on painting trips to Italy, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Belgium, Denmark and the United Kingdom.[9]

Admiration for Matisse

Liu readily acknowledged his influence by modern Western artists.[10] "Art was a subject I did well in school," he said. "I started on pencil drawings and was weaned on Western art. In my paintings, you can detect my debt to Van Gogh, Matisse and Gauguin; I was an earnest student of their styles. They are vigorously descriptive, with a strong sense of space and perspective."[11]

Farmer's House (1930) by Liu Kang, oil on canvas, 44 × 53 cm. *Collection of National Gallery Singapore, courtesy of National Heritage Board.*

Works from Liu's Paris period in the early 1930s – such as *Autumn Colours* (1930), *Farmer's House* (1930) and *Breakfast* (1932) – reflect the influence of the abovementioned artists in terms of the "expressiveness of brush strokes, imposing presence of forms, and flattening and merging of planes to construct colour blocks".[12] Among the Western artists, Liu admired Matisse greatly.[13] He regarded the latter, along with Picasso, as the two key artists of 20th-century Western art.[14] Liu said of Matisse: "My artistic career has been very much influenced by this leader of the Fauvist school. Matisse influenced me in many ways – the pursuit of innovation, the expansion of bold vision and the sublimation of images."[15]

Liu was impressed by Matisse's paintings with their brilliant colour, fluid lines and emotional exuberance. Shading, modelling and perspective are secondary to colour, which is used to create mood and emotion.[16] Although Matisse's works are never fully non-representational, they often evoke the abstraction found in music, where a sense of rhythm and harmony is conveyed through the play of lines and colours.

Matisse once wrote: "Expression, for me, does not reside in passions glowing in a human face or manifested by violent movement. The entire arrangement of my picture is expressive; the place occupied by the figures, the *empty spaces around them*, the proportions, everything has its share [emphasis added]."[17] He further wrote: "I cannot copy nature in a servile way; I am forced to interpret nature and submit it to the *spirit of the picture*. From the relationship I have found in all the tones, there must result a living harmony of colours, a harmony analogous to that of a musical composition [emphasis added]."[18]

Affinities with Chinese Ink Aesthetics

Matisse's emphasis on negative and positive space, and his desire to go beyond representation are tenets shared by Chinese ink painting aesthetics. In traditional Chinese painting, portions of the paper are left unpainted to suggest the sky, water or ground, depending on the context. A harmonious balance is sought between the painted and unpainted parts.

Likewise, in the "写意" (*xieyi*; writing the idea) style of painting favoured by the literati artists, the expressive qualities of painting were preferred over purely objective depictions. The traditional scholar-artist was not concerned with physical likeness, but focused on capturing the spirit or essence of the subject, which in turn was seen as a reflection of the artist's temperament and character.

Hence, Matisse's modernist approach, with its emphases on subjectivity rather than representation, was consistent with literati "写意" (*xieyi*) principles.[19] In this respect, Liu saw affinity between Matisse's practice and his own Chinese cultural heritage. He said: "From an Easterner's point of view, what Matisse did was not new because we have never stressed *chiaroscuro* and perspective. We have always counted on lines for depiction, and have never been that concerned with realism of the image."[20] Liu even went so far as to regard Cézanne, Van Gogh, Gauguin and Matisse as "Chinese artists" in Western art history.[21]

Straddling East and West

Liu was able to draw such insights because he belonged to a special generation of Chinese artists who were exposed to both Chinese and Western art traditions. In the early 20th century, China was just opening up to the possibilities of the West. Many intellectuals like the political reformer Kang Youwei (康有为) argued that China's progress needed to be propelled by Western science and technology.

The May Fourth Movement in 1919 further ignited the drive to strengthen China through cultural reforms, resulting in traditional Confucian concepts giving way to Western ideas. Consequently, China's education system sought to integrate Western knowledge as a way of modernising the country. Art education was no exception.

In the past, Chinese painting was traditionally taught by making students copy the works of senior artists and masterpieces. Increasing contact with the West and Japan in the early 20th century led to the emergence of art schools in China that favoured Western-style – or, at least, what was then perceived to be more scientific – methods of instruction. Hence, the first Chinese government art schools to teach Western art emphasised draughtsmanship, focusing on perspective, light and shade as well as accuracy of depiction.[22]

Common teaching methods included using pencil, charcoal, watercolour and oils for drawing from plaster casts, still-life and nude studies, and painting from nature.[23] Concurrently, these art academies continued to teach Chinese ink painting. However, Western art, with its structured methodology of instruction, was easier to teach. Hence, the academies tended to start with Western art as a foundation course. Chinese art was deemed more conceptual and therefore usually offered at the advanced level. This marked a new generation of artists who were more distanced from Chinese art. However, they were also the first who were at least familiar with, if not proficient in, both Western and Chinese art traditions.[24]

With such a bicultural foundation, Liu often sought to imbue a sense of Chinese identity in his Western oil paintings.[25] He said: "I am an Oriental… When I pick up a brush, the forms and artistry which flow out from my hand are discernibly different."[26] On another occasion, he said: "I have tried to reveal the robust spirit, profound content and refined taste of her [China's] culture in my paintings."[27] This was also something that Liu's mentor, Liu Haisu (刘海粟), constantly urged his students to do, which was to "paint Western art through Chinese eyes and feelings".[28]

Liu sought to achieve this on two levels. First, he avoided reworking his canvases as much as possible to retain an air of spontaneity, a quality much admired in "写意" (*xieyi*) painting. Liu's son, Liu Thai Ker, an architect and former master planner of the Urban Redevelopment Authority of Singapore, said of his father's method of painting: "He could spend many more days staring at the canvas, just constructing the entire painting in his mind, including the use of colours and the application of brushstrokes. The actual execution of the painting normally takes up a relatively short time and involves little working over. The discipline is not unlike that of a Chinese painter, in the sense that once a line or a patch of colour is put down on the paper, it is final and beyond correction. Thus, spontaneity is preserved, the freshness and boldness captured."[29]

Liu also paid increasing attention to the use of lines in his paintings. Upon his return to China from Paris in 1933, Liu started studying Chinese painting and calligraphy with a new intensity. "[He] combined Chinese brush technique with an Impressionist palette to convey the ephemeral effect of light on his landscapes… There was a tentative effort at delineating objects with dark lines which, at a later stage, was to become a dominant feature in his work."[30]

As observed by art historian Kwok Kian Chow, when comparing three of Liu's works, a gradual thickening of outlines in defining object and spaces could be discerned, "suggesting an affiliation with the linear brush quality of Chinese ink painting".[31] Kwok further noted: "In the 1940s, Liu was infusing his oil paintings with Chinese ink brushwork and particularly the abbreviated and caricature-like descriptive brushwork of folk genre paintings."[32] In Liu's paintings such as *Durian Vendor* (1957), *Sarongs* (1969) and *Life by the River* (1975), there is an evident use of black or dark outlines to accentuate forms, and convey a sense of liveliness.

Liu's peers also noted the influence of Chinese ink techniques on Liu's works. Lee Siow Mong, president of the China Society, said: "Although he [Liu Kang] is a finished product in Western pictorial art, I can see that the outstanding quality of his works is the infallible technique of his brushwork which is the essence of Chinese pictorial art. His lines are delicately Chinese, and no doubt his Chinese scholarship has given him this advantage… The colourful Malayan scenes have given him courage to use colour, and I must say that I have always recognised Mr Liu's works by the vigour of his colour."[33]

Tradition and Modernity

Liu was not alone in his pursuit of marrying Western and Chinese art forms. He was part of a generation of artists who were actively seeking to create works that reflected their identities as modern artists in China in the early 20th century. However, due to various circumstances, a number of them, like Liu,

Durian Vendor (1957) by Liu Kang, oil on board, 47.5 × 119.5 cm. Gift of the artist's family. *Collection of National Gallery Singapore, courtesy of National Heritage Board.*

At the Market (1964) by Cheong Soo Pieng, oil on canvas, 122 × 179 cm. *Collection of National Gallery Singapore, courtesy of National Heritage Board.*

(Above Left) *Washing by the River* (1950) by Chen Chong Swee, Chinese ink and colour on paper, 146 × 40 cm. Gift of the artist's family. © Family of Chen Chong Swee. *Collection of National Gallery Singapore, courtesy of National Heritage Board.*

(Right) *The Dayak Plays the Musical Instrument* (1975) by Yeh Chi Wei, oil on canvas, 158 × 49 cm. © Yeh Toh Yen. *Collection of National Gallery Singapore, courtesy of National Heritage Board.*

left China and eventually settled down in Singapore between the 1930s and 1950s.

In their new home, these artists could continue their modernist pursuits without much interference, unlike in China where modern art was discouraged by the Chinese Communist Party which came to power in 1949. In the relatively more stable environment of Singapore, these Chinese migrant artists continued to work and hone their craft. Local schools provided them with employment as art teachers, while art societies gave them platforms for exhibitions and artistic exchange. Books and information on world art were also more readily available.

By the 1950s, the lively art scene and market in Singapore were supported by a growing network of collectors, exhibition venues, art societies, writers, curators and art supplies shops.[34] The critical and commercial success of the 1953 *Bali* exhibition is a reflection of the many opportunities given to Liu and his peers to integrate their understanding of Western and Chinese art, and the appreciation of their artistic innovations in Singapore.

This led to considerable experimentations in both the ink and oil media. Artists like Chen Chong Swee incorporated Western fixed-point perspective and the use of shadows in their ink paintings – traits not usually found in traditional Chinese paintings. Others like Chen Wen Hsi adopted Western modern styles such as Cubism and Abstraction to create unconventional compositions for their ink paintings.

There were similarly innovative approaches in oil paintings. For instance, Cheong Soo Pieng favoured the prominent use of black lines and thin washes of colour to imbue his oil paintings with the atmospheric mood associated with "写意" (*xieyi*) landscapes. Others like Yeh Chi Wei incorporated archaic-style Chinese inscriptions in their oil paintings to convey the flavour of ancient ink rubbings.

These artists demonstrated an openness to new ways of expression, and the ability to draw freely from diverse sources of art traditions and practices in their pursuit of modern art.

The study of modern Asian art is complex. Artists like Liu grappled with the forces of tradition and modernity as they sought to create works that expressed the society they lived in during an era of unprecedented changes and opportunities. Hence, it is problematic to categorise their works in Western-centric terms. It is neither helpful nor illuminating to regard Liu as a "teacher" or "follower" of Matisse. Rather, such artworks need to be understood within their own specific socio-historical contexts. This is especially critical in throwing light on how Asian societies (of which artists form a part) assert their identities in an ongoing dialogue with Western modernity. ♦

NOTES

1 "Bali – By 4 Chinese Artists," *Straits Times*, 10 November 1953, 2. (From NewspaperSG)

2 In Liu Kang's oral history interview, he mentioned this incident twice, using slightly different phrases. In one account, Xu was supposed to have said, "This painting is truly the teacher of Matisse" ("这张画才是马諦斯的老师"). See Liu Kang, oral history interview by Tan Beng Luan, 7 December 1982, transcript and MP3 audio, Reel/Disc 21 of 74, National Archives of Singapore (accession no. 000171), 186–194; 刘抗 Liu Kang, "四十五年来新加坡的西洋画," (Development of Western painting in Singapore in the past 45 years) in *Liu Kang: Essays on Art & Culture*, ed. Sara Siew (Singapore: National Art Gallery, 2011), 232–33. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RSING 709.50904 LIU); 刘抗 Liu Kang,刘抗文集 [Essays by Liu Kang] (新加坡: 教育出版社, 1981), 304. (From National Library Singapore, call no. RCLOS 709.2 LK)

3 Liu Kang, interview, 7 December 1982, Reel/Disc 21 of 74, 186–94.

4 Born in 1869 in France, Henri-Émile-Benoît Matisse moved to Paris to study art in 1891. He experimented with many styles and went on to create brightly coloured paintings, applied with a variety of brushwork styles, ranging from thick impasto to flat areas of pure pigment. Such paintings, when exhibited at the 1905 Salon d'Automne, gave rise to the first of the avant-garde art movements, Fauvism (from the French *fauves*, or "wild beasts"), named by a contemporary art critic who derided its arbitrary combinations of brilliant colours and energetic brushwork. Subsequently, although Matisse's styles changed over the years, his underlying aim was always, as he had put it, to discover "the essential character" of things and to produce an art of "balance, purity and serenity". He died in 1954. See Henri Matisse, "Notes of a Painter," 1908, https://www.arthistoryproject.com/artists/henri-matisse/notes-of-a-painter/; Jack D. Flam, ed. *Matisse on Art* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1978), 37.

5 There is still some ambiguity over whether Liu Kang had instead attended École nationale supérieure des Beaux-arts since his brother-in-law Chen Jen Hao (with whom he travelled to Paris) was said to have studied at that art school. See Chen Jen Hao, *Painting and Calligraphy* (Singapore: Siaw-Tao Chinese Seal Carving Calligraphy and Painting Society, 2006).

6 Chia Wai Hon, "Introduction," in Liu Kang, *Liu Kang at 87* (Singapore: National Arts Council and National Heritage Board, 1997), 10–11. (From National Library Singapore, call no. RSING 759.95957 LIU)

7 Both Japan and France were sources of Western-style art education for early Chinese artists. By the late 19th century, Japan was already a modern nation-state with an education system based on the Western model. By 1876, the government had set up the first official institution of art education that aimed to apply modern European techniques to traditional Japanese methods with instructors hired from Italy. Similarly, Liu Kang recalled that the teachers in Western painting at the Shanghai Academy of Fine Arts in the late 1920s were highly interested in Impressionism as many had studied in France. Teachers such as Chen Hong, Wu Dayu and Gao Leyi frequently mentioned the importance of the fleeting effects of light, warm and cool colour relationships as well as dynamic brushwork, and admired artists like Manet, Monet and Degas. See Liu Kang, "An Artist in Art Education," in Chen Renhao 陈人浩, 人浩书画: *The Collection of Chinese Calligraphy and Painting by the Late Mr Chen Jen Hao* (新加坡: 新加坡中华书学协会, 1984), n.p. (From National Library Singapore, call no. RCLOS 759.95957 CJH)

8 Chia, "Introduction," 16.

9 Chia, "Introduction," 15.

10 This has also been noted by other commentators such as the artist Pan Shou and art promoter Frank Sullivan, who mentioned Liu Kang's admiration of Cézanne, Gauguin, Utrillo, Dufy and, particularly, Van Gogh and Matisse. See Liu Kang 刘抗, 刘抗画集 [Collection of Liu Kang's paintings] (Singapore: n.p., 1957), n.p. (From National Library Singapore, call no. RCLOS 759.95957 LK-[LK])

11 Richard Lim, ed., *Singapore Artists Speak* (Singapore: C.H. Yeo, 1990), 68. (From National Library Singapore, call no. RSING 709.5957 SIN)

12 Kwok Kian Chow, *Channels and Confluences: A History of Singapore Art* (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 1996), 52. (From National Library Singapore, call no. RSING 709.5957 KWO)

13 Liu wrote two articles on Matisse, one in 1951 (pp. 28–37) and the other in 1971 (pp. 122–132). See Liu, 刘抗文集, 28–37, 122–32.

14 Liu, *Liu Kang at 87*, 30.

15 Liu, *Liu Kang at 87*, 26.

16 Matisse's writings are illuminating in this aspect. He wrote: "The chief function of colour should be to serve expression as well as possible. I put down my tones without a preconceived plan. If at first, and perhaps without my having been conscious of it, one tone has particularly seduced or caught me, more often than not once the picture is finished, I will notice that I have respected this tone while I progressively altered and transformed all the others. The expressive aspect of colours imposes itself on me in a purely instinctive way. To paint an autumn landscape, I will not try to remember what colours suit this season, I will be inspired only by the sensation that the season arouses in me; the icy purity of the sour blue sky will express the season just as well as the nuances of foliage. My sensation itself may vary, the autumn may be soft and warm like a continuation of summer, or quite cool with a cold sky and lemon yellow trees that give a chilly impression and already announce winter. My choice of colours does not rest on any scientific theory; it is based on observation, on sensitivity, on felt experiences." See Flam, *Matisse on Art*, 38.

17 Flam, *Matisse on Art*, 36.

18 Flam, *Matisse on Art*, 37. Liu Kang also quoted the same passage from Matisse's "Notes of a Painter". See Liu, *Liu Kang at 87*, 31–32.

19 Chen Wen Hsi, Liu Kang's peer and one of the four artists in the joint exhibition, recalled: "People said that it [Post-Impressionism] was the school of 'external appearance'. That is, they paid attention to light and air. So, while Impressionist works were fuzzy and did not have very clear lines, the Post-Impressionists had clearer and broader strokes. There was a lack of subjectivity in this. It is like painting something by referring to the lines of symmetry. After this, there were Fauvism and Cubism. Here, it is the application of subjectivity. You are gradually applying subjectivity to control the look of the picture." See Chen Wen Hsi's oral history interview transcript Part 2 in Chen Wenxi, *Convergences – Chen Wen Hsi Centennial Exhibition* (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2006), 20. (From National Library Singapore, call no. RSING 759.95957 CHE-[LKY])

20 Liu, *Liu Kang at 87*, 35.

21 Quoting from Liu, 刘抗文集, 213, and cited by Kwok Kian Chow, *Journeys: Liu Kang and His Art* (Singapore: National Arts Council and Singapore Art Museum, 2000), 14. (From National Library Singapore, call no. RSING 759.95957 LIU)

22 Ralph Crozier, "Post Impressionists in Pre-War Shanghai: The Juelanshe (Storm Society) and the Fate of Modernism in Republican China," in *Modernity in Asian Art*, ed. John Clark (Australia: Wild Peony Limited, 1993), 136. (From National Library Singapore, call no. RART 709.5 MOD)

23 Mayching Kao, "The Quest for New Art," in *Twentieth-Century Chinese Painting*, ed. Mayching Kao (Hong Kong; New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 130.

24 Ong Zhen Min, "A History of the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (1938–1990)" (Master's thesis, National University of Singapore, 2006), 26–30, http://scholarbank.nus.edu.sg/handle/10635/15776.

25 Liu Kang once said that China had remained the source of his artistic vision and that he was always conscious of the vastness of the country, the sense of scale, the depth of vision, the inner strength and greatness which characterise Chinese culture and art." See Gretchen Mahbubani, "Journey of a Pioneer Artist," *Straits Times*, 1 December 1981, 1 (From NewspaperSG)

26 Quoting from "Postscript," in Liu Kang, *The Paintings of Liu Kang* (Singapore: National Museum, Singapore, 1981), n.p. (From National Library Singapore, call no. RCLOS 759.95957 LIU); Chia, "Introduction," 17.

27 Liu, *Liu Kang at 87*, 27

28 Chia, "Introduction," 10.

29 Quoting from "Preface III," in Liu, *The Paintings of Liu Kang*; Chia, "Introduction," 21.

30 Chia, "Introduction," 17.

31 Kwok, *Channels and Confluences*, 52.

32 Kwok Kian Chow, *From Ritual to Romance – Paintings Inspired by Bali* (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 1994), 42. (From National Library Singapore, call no. RCLOS 759.9598 SI-[LK]).

33 "Lee Siow Mong, "Introduction" in Liu, 刘抗画集, n.p.

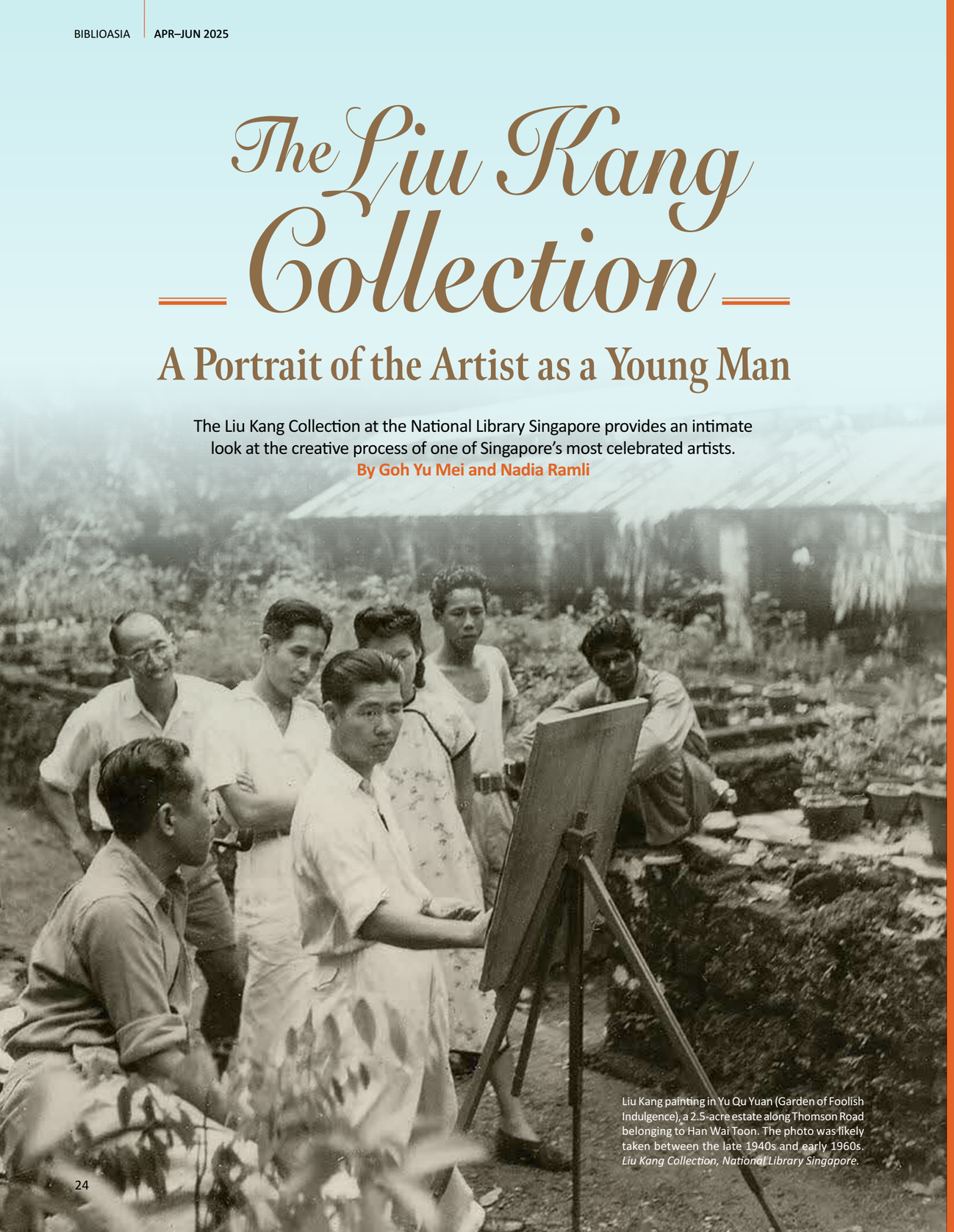
34 There were multiple players such as art promoters like Frank Sullivan, art historians like Michael Sullivan, collectors like Loke Wan Tho, and gallery and art supply shop owners like Tay Long. There was also a growing art market in the 1950s. For instance, paintings, worth a record $9,800, were sold at a joint show by Liu Kang, Chen Wen Hsi, Cheong Soo Pieng and Chen Chong Swee in 1951. See Kwok, *Channels and Confluences*, 40, 69.

The Liu Kang Collection

A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man

The Liu Kang Collection at the National Library Singapore provides an intimate look at the creative process of one of Singapore's most celebrated artists.

By Goh Yu Mei and Nadia Ramli



Liu Kang painting in Yu Qu Yuan (Garden of Foolish Indulgence), a 2.5-acre estate along Thomson Road belonging to Han Wai Toon. The photo was likely taken between the late 1940s and early 1960s. *Liu Kang Collection, National Library Singapore.*

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One of Singapore's pioneering artists, Liu Kang (1911–2004) played a significant role in the development of the Singapore art scene. He, together with many of his contemporaries – such as Chen Chong Swee, Chen Wen Hsi and Cheong Soo Pieng – had turned to Southeast Asian subjects as inspiration for their artworks.

Influenced by both Eastern and Western art traditions, these artists also experimented and developed new art forms. Art historians have noted this trend, now commonly known as Nanyang art or Nanyang style, as one of the most significant movements in the history of art in Singapore.

"Nanyang" (南洋), literally the "South Seas", was historically used to refer to the maritime region south of China, and more commonly to Southeast Asia in the early 20th century. In 1979, art historian T.K. Sabapathy remarked that the Nanyang artists "adopted an experimental approach by using styles and techniques derived from two sources: Chinese pictorial traditions and the School of Paris".[1] (The School of Paris refers to artists living and working in Paris in the early 20th century who employed a diversity of styles and techniques such as Fauvism, Cubism and Expressionism.[2])

Liu Kang was one of the artists closely associated with the development of this art trend in Singapore, what he termed "equatorial style". He recognised the need for original expressions of art in colonial and post-colonial Malaya, and a new style of painting that captured the spirit of the tropics.[3]

The Liu Kang Collection

In 2017, the family of the late Liu Kang donated to the National Library Singapore more than 7,000 items that belonged to him. Dating from the 1920s to the 2000s, these include books; correspondences; ephemera such as postcards and posters; manuscripts; and personal documents and photographs – providing insights into the life and legacy of one of Singapore's pioneering artists.

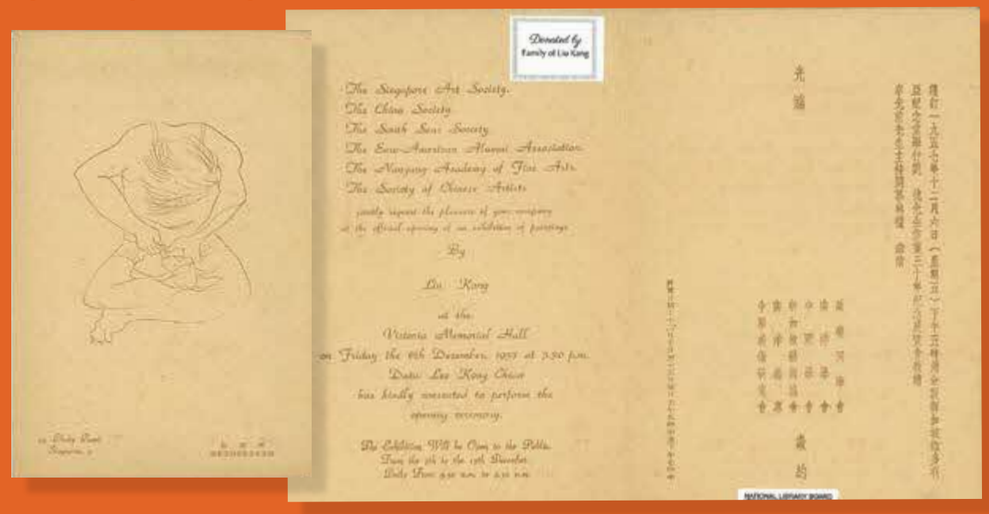
Liu Kang's interest in photography is evident from the huge volume of photographs in the collection. These show him working in his studio; his sketching trips; his students and fellow teachers in schools he had taught at; his gatherings with other artists; the activities of art societies; and the exhibitions that he had organised, participated or visited.

There are also items such as the catalogue, guest book and invitation card to his first solo exhibition in 1957; notes for his public talks and lectures; his letters and correspondences detailing some of the preparatory work that went into the organising of exhibitions for overseas artists; and his autobiographical article.

Guestbook and invitation card for Liu Kang's first solo exhibition in 1957

Liu Kang held his first solo exhibition, 刘抗先生作画三十年纪念展览会, at the Victoria Memorial Hall from 7 to 15 December 1957, when he was 46 years old. The exhibition commemorated the 30th anniversary of his artistic journey.

The invitation card to the exhibition's opening featured a sketch of a sculptor at work, which is likely to be inspired by Liu Kang's trip to Bali in 1952. It provided details on the date, time and venue of the opening ceremony, and the guest-of-honour – the well-known businessman and philanthropist Lee Kong Chian.



The invitation card to Liu Kang's solo exhibition, 刘抗先生作画三十年纪念展览会, held in 1957. *Liu Kang Collection, National Library Singapore.*

(Above) The guestbook of Liu Kang's first solo exhibition, 刘抗先生作画三十年纪念展览会, held in 1957. *Liu Kang Collection, National Library Singapore.*

(Right) The title of the painting, "Scene in the street", in the draft exhibition catalogue (bottom) was replaced with "Street scene. Bali" in the printed catalogue (top). This suggests that Liu Kang deliberated over the titles of his artworks. *Liu Kang Collection, National Library Singapore.*

Similar information on the opening ceremony was recorded on the first leaf of the guestbook. It is a red accordion-style book that has a fabric cover with dragon motifs. Many personalities from Singapore's cultural sphere attended the event. The guests who signed the guestbook included artists such as Chen Chong Swee, Huang Pao Fang, Lim Tze Peng and Wee Beng Chong as well as other critics, historians, writers and art collectors.

Draft of Liu Kang's first solo exhibition catalogue in 1957

The draft of Liu Kang's first solo exhibition catalogue includes an introduction by Lee Siow Mong, president of the China Society, and an essay by Michael Sullivan, curator of the University of Malaya's art museum. The draft offers a glimpse into Liu's creative process and evolution of design ideas leading up to the printed exhibition catalogue.

Photographs of the exhibition, "Bali: Liu Kang, Chen Wen Hsi, Chen Chong Swee, Cheong Soo Pieng" held at the British Council in 1953

In 1952, Liu Kang, together with Chen Chong Swee, Chen Wen Hsi and Cheong Soo Pieng, went to Java and Bali in search of artistic inspiration. A year later, in November 1953, the four men held a seminal joint exhibition at the British Council in Singapore. This exhibition has been viewed as a "turning point" for the history of modern art in Singapore. Art historians Jeffrey Say and Seng Yu Jin noted its "new visual language that was distinctly modern in the local context".[4] This new visual language refers to the experimentations in artistic styles that would retrospectively be viewed as exemplifying Nanyang art.

The exhibition, which showcased over 100 paintings and sketches, was well received and drew large crowds. Opened by Indonesian Consul-General Mohamed Razif, the exhibition was visited by

(From left) Mrs Loke Wan Tho, Indonesian Consul-General Mohamed Razif, Carl Alexander Gibson-Hill and Liu Kang at Liu Kang's exhibition held at the British Council, 1953. *Liu Kang Collection, National Library Singapore.*

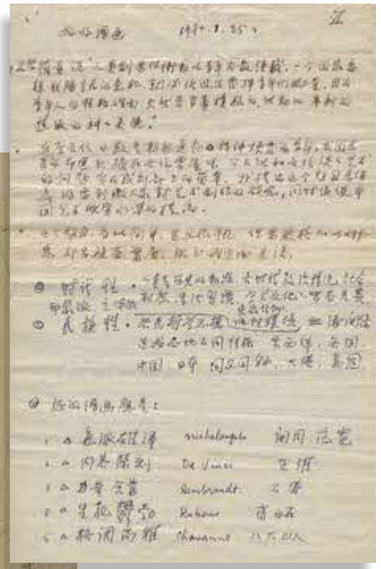
prominent figures in Singapore, including Malcolm MacDonald, Commissioner-General in Southeast Asia; Carl Alexander Gibson-Hill, the last expatriate director of the Raffles Museum; and Loke Wan Tho, cinema magnate and founder of Cathay Organisation, and his wife.[5]

《说自家》(On Myself), an autobiographical article by Liu Kang

Liu Kang's autobiographical article is titled《说自家》(On Myself). This 18-page manuscript offers a deeply personal and introspective look at the artist's life as he shares his perspectives and recollections of his years in Paris. It was probably written in the early 1950s, making this the earliest known account by Liu Kang on the beginning of his art journey.

In the opening lines of the autobiographical article, Liu Kang offered a candid and revealing portrait of himself. He wrote that he saw himself more as a teacher than an artist, as he spent much of his time in the classrooms rather than on his own art. Liu Kang also recalled moments in his life that may have contributed to his art.

Liu Kang was also known for writing on various topics in relation to the arts, beside articles on fine art and other artists. In particular, his anthology of essays,《刘抗文集》(Essays by Liu Kang),



(Above) "A Good Piece of Painting", a talk given at the Young Men's Christian Association on 25 January 1972. *Liu Kang Collection, National Library Singapore.*

(Left) Liu Kang's autobiographical article, 1950s. *Liu Kang Collection, National Library Singapore.*

first published in 1981 in conjunction with his retrospective exhibition, covers music, dance, literature and medical science among others.[6] Many of his manuscripts and clippings of his articles, which are not published in the anthology, form part of his collection donated to the National Library.

Notes of Liu Kang's public lectures

Liu Kang wrote notes for his public talks, some of which were published in newspapers and in the 1981 anthology. Not all the transcripts of his talks have been published. Fortunately, the notes for three of his talks have been donated to the National Library, providing insights into his thought process.

These are notes for "A Good Piece of Painting" (Young Men's Christian Association; 25 January 1972), "On Oil Painting" (National Library; 17 June 1972) and "How to Appreciate a Painting" (early 1980s). In the notes for "On Oil Painting", Liu Kang wrote that copying the masterpieces of well-known artists as practice would help to improve one's art skills and that one could start with sketching sculptures, still life, landscapes and portraits.

These notes provide us with a better understanding of Liu Kang's views on art, and the guiding principles of his creative process.

Photographs of Han Wai Toon's rambutan orchard, Yu Qu Yuan (愚趣园)

Han Wai Toon, a collector and expert in antique ceramics, held frequent gatherings at his residence and rambutan orchard on Thomson Road – Yu Qu Yuan (愚趣园; Garden of Foolish Indulgence). The Chinese literati and scholars would meet to enjoy fresh rambutans and appreciate his collection of ceramics, and ink and calligraphic works. Liu Kang was one of the visitors to the orchard. Besides his knowledge on antique ceramics, Han was also known for his rambutans grown with special grafting techniques that he had experimented with.

Other notable guests included the Chinese artist Xu Beihong (徐悲鸿), who dedicated a painting of rambutans to Han, and writer Yu Dafu (郁达夫), who wrote "不辞客路三千里，来啖红毛五月丹" (Travelling three thousand *li* just to taste rambutans in May). When Han returned to China in 1962, his friends commissioned a work by the artist Lim Mu Hue titled *Han Rambutan Orchard* as a farewell gift.[7]

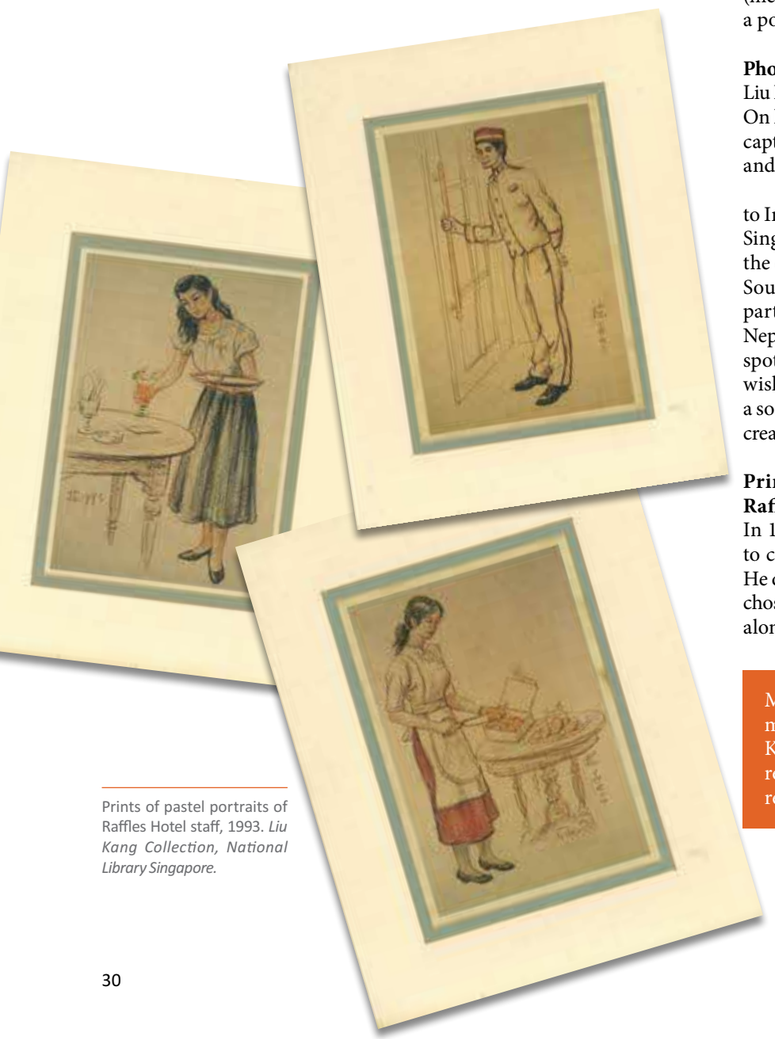
(Above) Guests at Yu Qu Yuan (Garden of Foolish Indulgence) along Thomson Road. The photo was likely taken between the late 1940s and early 1960s. *Liu Kang Collection, National Library Singapore.*

Photographs of Chung Cheng High School graduation trip in 1948

Liu Kang taught art in schools for most of his working life in Singapore. In 1948, he led the graduating batch of senior high students from Chung Cheng High School on a three-week trip to the Malay Peninsula, visiting various towns and cities such as Muar, Melaka, Cameron Highlands, Ipoh and Penang. Several of the photos taken during the trip show Liu Kang with a sketchbook.

(Below) Chung Cheng High School students in the Malay Peninsula, 1948. *Liu Kang Collection, National Library Singapore.*

Liu Kang (left) showing Liu Haisu (right) his portrait, 1987. *Liu Kang Collection, National Library Singapore.*



Prints of pastel portraits of Raffles Hotel staff, 1993. *Liu Kang Collection, National Library Singapore.*

Photographs of Liu Kang painting Liu Haisu's portrait in 1987

Liu Haisu (刘海粟) was a prominent Chinese painter who became acquainted with Liu Kang in the 1920s when the latter was enrolled at the Shanghai Art Academy. Liu Haisu was then the principal of the academy. After Liu Kang arrived in Paris in early 1929 to study art, Liu Haisu, who went on a study trip to Europe in the same year, sought his help in finding accommodation. In 1932, Liu Haisu invited Liu Kang to teach art at the academy.

After Liu Kang left Shanghai in 1937, the two men remained in contact despite the political turmoil in Southeast Asia and China. In 1987, Liu Haisu visited Singapore for his exhibition that Liu Kang had helped coordinate. These photographs captured a private moment that was not reported in the newspapers. Liu Kang had painted a pastel portrait of Liu Haisu, and the latter in turn inscribed on the portrait the Chinese text "抗弟为画像至难得" (meaning that it was rare that Liu Kang had drawn a portrait of him).

Photographs from Liu Kang's trip to India in 1971

Liu Kang was also an avid photographer and traveller. On his sketching trips, he often took photographs to capture the subjects and motifs that inspired him, and subsequently his paintings.

The photographs taken during Liu Kang's visit to India in 1971 with more than 20 other prominent Singapore artists capture the people and culture of the country.[8] Led by Yeh Chi Wei, president of the Southeast Asia Art Society, the cultural trip was part of a month-long tour across 17 cities in India, Nepal, Thailand and Burma.[9] "Besides visiting scenic spots and admiring great architecture, our greatest wish was to use its rich spirit and majestic styles as a source of inspiration and reference for our artistic creation," Liu Kang wrote in his essay, "I Love India".[10]

Prints of Liu Kang's commissioned sketches of Raffles Hotel staff

In 1993, the Raffles Hotel commissioned Liu Kang to create a collection of pastel portraits of its staff. He drew more than 20 sketches, eight of which were chosen to be exhibited at the hotel's museum in 1994, along with some of Liu Kang's artworks.[11] ♦

Members of the public who wish to access the materials can enquire at Level 11 of the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library or visit https://reference.nlb.gov.sg/getting-started/accessing-reference-items/.

(Above) Indian musicians playing the tabla, sitar and harmonium, 1971. *Liu Kang Collection, National Library Singapore.*

(Left) *Indian Musicians* by Liu Kang (1972), oil on canvas, 73 × 94 cm. *Gift of the artist's family. Collection of National Gallery Singapore.*

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THE SEARCH FOR Home, Truly

(and Other National Day Songs)

The effort to find songs that express a national identity goes back to the 1970s.

By Bernard T.G. Tan

Emeritus Professor Bernard T.G. Tan is a retired professor of physics from the National University of Singapore who also dabbles in music. Some of his compositions have been performed by the Singapore Symphony Orchestra. He is a former chairman of the Sing Singapore organising committee.

Dick Lee's "Home" is arguably one of the most well loved of all our National Day songs. While the song is indelibly associated with the voice of Kit Chan, who performed it at the National Day Parade (NDP) in 1998, it is also a song that is regularly sung in unison at subsequent NDPs.

The popularity of National Day songs like "Home" and "Stand Up for Singapore" is the result of a decades-long effort to create national songs that can be sung communally. This effort to find a song that represents the nation (apart from "Majulah Singapura", the national anthem) goes back at least to the 1970s.

The Early Years

In 1975, the National Theatre Trust and Radio and Television Singapore launched a nationwide songwriting competition named "Our Songs".[1] Eight winners were chosen from the 51 entries, with music teacher Mary Tan's "A Pretty Island" winning the top prize at the concert on 4 May 1975. Some of the song entries which are still sung today include "The Fair Shore of Singapore" by Oon Siew Lian, "Sing a Song of Singapore" by Samuel Liew and "Selamat Datang ke-Singapura" by Rudy Mosbergen.

The second competition in 1976 had a lyric writing competition followed by a songwriting competition using the winning lyrics.[2] A total of 206 song lyrics in the four official languages were received, and three entries from each language were chosen for the songwriting competition launched in January 1977. The winning entry at the grand finals of the competition on 11 June that year was "Salute to Singapore" by Alex Abisheganaden (who would be conferred the Cultural Medallion in 1988). The third competition was launched in 1978 and had its grand finals on 31 May 1979. The winners were "It's National Day", "Mooncake Festival" and "City of Lights" (in English), "Happy New Year" and "Celebrating New Year" (in Chinese), "Sangeduthu Oothuvolam" (in Tamil) and "Gembira Di Hari Raya" and "Pesta Hari Nasional" (in Malay).[3]

In 1979, the organisers invited seven composers and six poets to write Singapore songs. As the lyrics were written in Chinese (no English writers and poets responded to the project), the songs composed were in Chinese. Thirteen songs were showcased at the "Our Songs" concert on 15 March 1980, featuring composers Leong Yoon Pin, Samuel Ting, Goh Say Meng, Lee Tack Fah, Lim Tiap Guan, Sim Peng Kwang and Kam Kee Yong. This was followed by a second concert on 28 June with 12 songs. Some of the featured Singapore composers in this second concert were Shen Ping Kwang, Kam Kee Yong, Lim Tiap Guan, Lee Tack Fah, Samuel Ting, Leong Yoon Pin and Goh Say Meng.[4]

A third presentation of 17 songs on 22 February 1981 was organised under the banner of the Singapore Composers' Circle, which was founded in July 1980 by the National Theatre Trust.[5] The new composers featured in this third concert were Chiew Keng Hoon, Chuang Heng Siong, Quek Yong Siu, Lee Yuk Chuan and Lee Kian Long.[6] Some of the choirs which performed regularly in this series include the Heralds Choral Society, the Young Voices Choir and the Mellow Art Choir.

Around this time, there was an attempt to turn the song "Singapura" into a national song. This song – popularised by the Dutch-Indonesian singer Anneke Gronloh in the early 1960s – had been adapted from an Indonesian tune and was sung originally in Malay. In 1980, a new version of the song was suddenly promoted on primetime TV. This new version used the same melody but had new lyrics in English. A *Straits Times* report cited sources saying that the national broadcaster was "playing the role of 'pied piper of Singapore' on the suggestion of the Ministry of Culture to find a series of local songs in Malay, Chinese and English that Singaporeans can call their own". The report added that Singapore's quest for national songs was a follow-up to an effort to find a national dress for men and women that had been initiated by the Ministry of Culture in April 1980.[7]

"Songs of Singapore"

The quest to find national songs gathered momentum in the early 1980s. In 1981, the Ministry of Culture began to form a committee to look for locally written and composed songs in an initiative funded by the Singapore Cultural Foundation.[8] This search for new national songs, dubbed the "Songs of Singapore" project, was launched in March 1982 by Culture Ministry parliamentary secretary Wan Hussin Zoohri. "Singaporeans must sing more spontaneously and frequently to develop that sense of camaraderie so integral to unity and nationhood," he told the *Straits Times*. Another reason he gave was that there was "a need for some Singapore songs which Singaporeans may sing with confidence at international and regional gatherings".[9]

The poster for "Our Songs" songwriting competition in 1977. The winning entry was "Salute to Singapore" by Alex Abisheganaden. *Courtesy of Bernard G.T. Tan.*

(Facing page) Kit Chan performing "Home" at the National Day Parade preview on 1 August 2015. *Source: The Straits Times © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.*

This hinted at one of the driving forces behind this new national song effort. Apparently, whenever delegates were asked to showcase something from their own culture at international meetings and conferences, the Singapore delegation invariably ending up singing either the now rather tired "Singapura" or even the national anthem, "Majulah Singapura". Ministers and senior civil servants strongly believed that something had to be done to create more Singapore songs that they could sing at these events.

The campaign was run by a new "Songs of Singapore" committee eventually formed in early 1982 and chaired by me. In January 1983, the committee announced that the best songs would be picked by a public popularity poll sometime in the middle of 1983.[10] "[T]he committee believes that if these are to be songs of Singapore, then they must be songs Singaporeans like," the *Straits Times* reported.[11]

A poster for Sing Singapore: A Festival of Songs, 1994. *Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

By "scouring army camps, junior colleges, community and youth groups, university halls of residence, among other places for more songs", the committee was able to collect more than a thousand songs during the "Songs of Singapore" campaign. The committee was not concerned about the artistic quality or the musical idiom, but simply wanted songs written spontaneously by the man in the street, which would appeal to the average Singaporean.[12]

While public enthusiasm was high, songwriting skills were then at a fairly rudimentary stage and I cannot recall any songs collected which eventually made it to the national pantheon of songs. However, the campaign did fulfill its objective of arousing interest in songs that Singaporeans could call their own, and songwriting skills did indeed improve eventually.

Commissioned National Day Songs

By the mid-1980s, the search for national songs began to shift to a higher gear. Singapore had attained self-governance in 1959, which meant that 1984 was the 25th anniversary of that important milestone. As a result, the authorities were anxious to find a suitable song to mark the occasion. Richard Tan, the deputy director of the Psychological Defence Division in the Ministry of Communications and Information, drove the effort.[13]

The ministry put out a tender which was won by ad agency McCann Erickson and out of it came one of our most popular national songs, "Stand Up for Singapore", which became the 1984 NDP theme song.[14] It was not revealed at the time, though, that the lyricist and composer of the song was Hugh Harrison, a Canadian, who had been commissioned by the ad agency.[15]

"A time to celebrate, a time to stand up for Singapore" – a poster for the 25th anniversary of nation-building, 1984. The National Day song that year was "Stand Up for Singapore". *Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

Two years later, Tan led the search for a successor to "Stand Up for Singapore". The next song chosen, "Count on Me, Singapore", also by Harrison, became the NDP song in 1986.[16] Harrison's third song, "We Are Singapore", was selected for NDP 1987.[17] All three songs by Harrison have since become solid favourites of Singaporeans and are regularly featured at various NDPs.

"Sing Singapore"

By the late 1980s, the focus shifted briefly to the promotion of community singing of the existing repertoire. In January 1988, a new national programme called Sing Singapore was launched to "promote community singing as a way of life in Singapore". A songbook and a set of two cassette tapes containing 48 songs in English, Malay, Mandarin and Tamil were issued. The songs included earlier National Day songs as well as old favourites such as "Di-Tanjong Katong". The inaugural Sing Singapore was launched with a concert on 30 January 1988 on the steps of City Hall.[18]

Tan told the *Straits Times* that it was important to gather more songs and create and establish more opportunities for community singing. "We hope that by August, people will be able to sing at least 10 of the songs and we'll have a singing National Stadium on National Day," he added.[19]

Driving the programme was the newly established Sing Singapore committee, which consisted of representatives from the public and private sectors. They included the ministries of communications and information, community development, defence, education and home affairs; the Singapore Armed Forces; the People's Association; the Singapore Broadcasting Corporation; Fraser & Neave; and Singapore Press Holdings.[20]

The campaign incorporated a national community singing contest organised by the Ministry of Community Development to showcase the national songs being promoted.[21] In addition to schools and the private sector, there was an enthusiastic response from the public sector and some 2,300 civil servants formed 60 singing groups to take part. The grand finals took place on 23 July 1988.[22]

The five public sector teams that made it to the grand finals were BG Melody (from the Parks and Recreation Department), Fantastic Force (from the Police), MAS Voices (from the Monetary Authority of Singapore), Sweet Melodies (from the Singapore Armed Forces) and Telechords (from the Telecommunications Authority).[23] In the end, the Fantastic Force won the first prize in the public sector category and the overall challenge trophy.[24]

The entire campaign came to a rousing end on 31 August 1988 at the National Stadium. On that same evening, "Majulah Singapura" was performed by the Singapore Symphony Orchestra and Chorus in a "new, richer and grander arrangement". At the event, Communications and Information Minister Yeo Ning Hong noted that more than 524 groups comprising over 16,000 participants had taken part in Sing Singapore.[25]

The next edition of Sing Singapore was launched at the National Stadium on 29 December 1989.[26] As 1990 was the 25th anniversary of Singapore's independence, a new national song, "One People, One Nation, One Singapore", was commissioned, with lyrics by Australian Jim Aitchison and music by Singaporean composer Jeremy Monteiro.

The 1990 Sing Singapore competition was held on 21 July at the Indoor Stadium, and songbooks and music cassettes were produced for sale to the public.[27] By this time, Sing Singapore had become more of a performance-oriented contest rather than a songwriting campaign, with the accent on encouraging community singing. In 1992, the competition returned to the Kallang Theatre, with the top prizes being won by the NUS Kent Ridge Alumni Singers.[28]

An initiative by NTUC Income in 1991 led to the national song, "It's the Little Things", by Patrick Seet and Ivan Chua.[29]

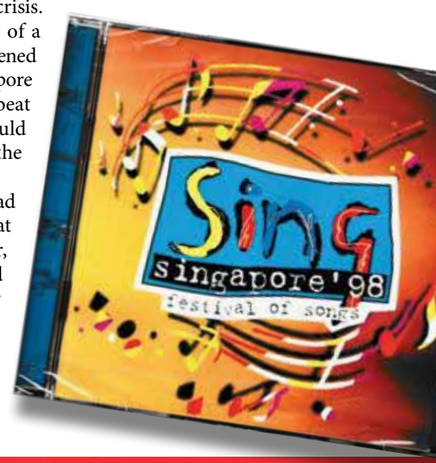
After the National Arts Council (NAC) was established in 1991, the new body took over the responsibility for the campaign. In 1993, the NAC brought back the creation and collection of Singapore songs into Sing Singapore. It also came up with a new branding – A Festival of Songs – for the 1994 campaign. In October 1993, the NAC invited Singaporeans to submit original songs. It attracted 48 groups that performed at the Ngee Ann City Civic Plaza in May and June the next year.[30] The 1996 competition was called Song Fest, a catchier version of A Festival of Songs.[31] Between 1991 and 1998, there seems to have been no new songs meant for National Day though.

It was around this time that I was appointed chairman of the Sing Singapore organising committee. One of the new committee's first tasks was to find a National Day song for 1998.[32] Instead of holding an open competition, we approached a number of established Singaporean songwriters and composers to submit songs for our consideration.[33] Dick Lee was among those who responded, but unlike the others, he submitted a melody without lyrics.

This Is Home, Truly

To understand how "Home" came about, we need to step back to look at Singapore that year. In 1998, the national mood in Singapore was not a happy one. The collapse of the Thai baht in July 1997 had plunged the region into the Asian financial crisis. In December 1997, the crash of a SilkAir plane in Indonesia deepened the gloom. We in the Sing Singapore committee realised that an upbeat National Day song in 1998 would be severely out of touch with the prevailing national mood.

None of the songs which had been submitted was quite what we were looking for. However, the melody Dick had submitted was certainly not "rah-rah" or upbeat, but lyrical and pensive in nature. We requested he add lyrics to his melody and suggested some themes he could work with.



(Below) The Sing Singapore 1998 compact disc. Songs include "Singapore Town", "Five Stars Arising", "Home", "Munnaeru Vaalibaa" and "Singapura". *Courtesy of Bernard G.T. Tan.*

(Bottom) The Sing Singapore 1990 calendar. Singapore celebrated its 25th anniversary of independence in 1990 and a new national song, "One People, One Nation, One Singapore", was commissioned. *Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

Dick wrote one verse based on the notion of Singapore as "our home", but we needed a second verse to make a complete song. After he had added the new verse, we felt that it needed a bit of tweaking, I called him in Hong Kong, where he was then based, and over this phone conversation, the second verse was finalised and "Home" was born.

Although the committee knew that Dick had produced an outstanding song in consonance with the national mood, we wondered if the song's slow tempo would be acceptable to the NDP organisers. I made a simple choral arrangement of the song and pitched it to the NDP committee, explaining why the song was not the usual upbeat "rah-rah" song. The committee immediately understood and readily agreed that "Home" would be the National Day song for 1998.

The musical arrangement for "Home" was placed in the very capable hands of Sydney Tan, and the choice of Kit Chan to sing it was an inspired one. They made a memorable recording of the song, which was immediately embraced and warmly received by Singaporeans. Since then, "Home" has become a permanent feature of all subsequent National Day celebrations. Kit has even adopted the song as a personal theme song, often singing it at her concerts. Other local singers such as JJ Lin and pop group The Sam Willows have put their spin on the song.[34]

The song has also been performed by foreign artists during their concerts in Singapore. In April 2024, at American pop star Bruno Mars' concert, the audience started singing to "Home" when one of the singer's band members, musician John Fossitt, played an instrumental rendition of the song during his keyboard solo. More recently, in July 2024, South Korean artist Solar (the leader and vocalist of girl group Mamamoo and its sub-unit Mamamoo+) sang "Home" at her concert.[35]

It should be mentioned that for 1998, there appears to have been two other National Day songs: "My People, My Home" with lyrics by Cultural Medallion poet Lee Tzu Pheng and music by Phoon Yew Tien, and "City for the World" by Roger Jenkins (lyrics) and Iskandar Ismail (music).[36]

While "Home" was a very hard act to follow, the two subsequent National Day songs – "Together" by Ken Lim for 1999 and "Shine on Me" by Jim Lim for 2000 – were creditable efforts. In 2001, singer-songwriter Tanya Chua's "Where I Belong" was the National Day song and it quickly became a firm favourite of many Singaporeans. The following year, another song written and composed by Dick, "We Will Get There", and sung by Stefanie Sun, became another much-loved National Day song and is my personal favourite National Day song.

In 2003, the Sing Singapore committee selected its last National Day song – "One United People" by Joshua Wan – which was sung by Stefanie Sun. I decided to step down from the committee soon after, and as it turned out, the committee was subsequently disbanded.[37] The responsibility for National Day songs was then passed on to the National Day organisers themselves.

Looking back, I believe the Sing Singapore committee can take pride in the fact that it had fulfilled its duties, having produced some landmark and beloved songs that resonated with Singaporeans like "Home", "Where I Belong" and "We Will Get There".

After 2003 and the Pandemic

The National Day songs since 2003 have varied in style and genre as well in their reception by the general public. I particularly like Dick's song, "Our Singapore", for the nation's 50th anniversary of independence in 2015, with its signature wordless refrain. The 2009 NDP song, "What Do You See?", by the indie rock band Electrico might not have been everyone's cup of tea, but it was musically interesting and well performed. It is one of the few NDP theme songs that do not have the word "Singapore" in its lyrics.

A contesting team performing at the finals of Sing Singapore: A Festival of Songs, 1994. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

In 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic shut down Singapore and most of the world, and as a result, a new form of musical performance took shape – the Zoom performance – where musicians recorded their own parts separately which were then combined into a single performance.

In June 2020, as the circuit breaker was lifted, singer Joanna Dong – with members of the Singapore Symphony Chorus, Youth and Children's Choir as well as musicians from the Singapore Symphony Orchestra – recorded Dick Lee's "We Will Get There" from home. The version featured a highly effective arrangement by Gabriel Hoe and the performance undoubtedly helped to raise the spirits of Singaporeans during the dark days of the pandemic.[38]

Post-pandemic, my favourite NDP song is "The Road Ahead" by singer-songwriter Linying in 2021. The song looks beyond the dark days of the pandemic to a brighter future.[39]

Joanna Dong (top left), with members from the Singapore Symphony Chorus, Youth and Children's Choir, as well as musicians from the Singapore Symphony Orchestra, recording Dick Lee's "We Will Get There" from home in June 2020. *Image from "Singapore Symphony Choruses Present: We Will Get There," 16 June 2020, YouTube video, 4:42.*

An Appeal

The selectors of National Day songs have the difficult and near-impossible task of choosing songs that not only encapsulate the hopes and dreams of a nation, but at the same time also cater to the musical tastes of every citizen. It is certainly not easy to compose a song that reflects the mood of a nation and musically appeals to the majority of the population.

I would therefore appeal to Singaporeans to receive each new National Day song with open minds and show much appreciation for the hard work put in by the composers, lyricists, singers, musicians, arrangers and producers in creating the song and making it accessible to everyone. Please listen to each new National Day song with receptive ears and spare a thought for the tremendous efforts that have gone into bringing the song to you. ♦

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SIGNS OF PROGRESS

Deaf Education in Singapore

The first school for the deaf in Singapore was established in 1954, paving the way for deaf education and the development of Singapore Sign Language.

By Rosxalynd Liu and Nathaniel Chew

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When pioneering deaf educator Peng Tsu Ying first came to Singapore from Shanghai in the late 1940s, the situation for the Deaf community left much to be desired. Deaf children had no schools and deaf individuals did not have an association to bring them together and represent their interests. In an interview with *The Deaf American* magazine, Peng recalled that when he first came to Singapore, "I couldn't find a single deaf person!"[1]

Determined to change things, Peng would go on to found Singapore's first school for the deaf in 1954. A pioneer activist for the deaf, the efforts of Peng, and others, eventually led to the formation of the Singapore Deaf and Dumb Association in 1955. This association would later open the Singapore School for the Deaf on Mountbatten Road in 1963 and a vocational institute for the deaf to acquire basic technical skills in 1975.[2]

Peng Tsu Ying (second from right) with teachers and students of the Singapore Chinese School for the Deaf, 1956. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

Peng Tsu Ying's School for the Deaf

Peng and his mother came to Singapore in 1948 to join Peng's father who was running a greeting card business here. Despite experience as a teacher, on top of book-keeping skills and the ability to correspond in both Chinese and English, Peng, then 21, struggled to find employment – simply because he was deaf.[3]

Peng was born in Shanghai, China. When he lost his hearing at around age 5, his parents brought him to Hong Kong where he studied at the School for the Deaf and Dumb. During the Japanese Occupation, Peng returned to Shanghai and enrolled at the Chung Wah School for the Deaf for his secondary education. He became well versed in English, Chinese and American sign languages, and also taught briefly at the Hong Kong School for the Deaf and Dumb.[4]

Intending to put his prior teaching experience to good use in Singapore, Peng enquired at the Department for Social Welfare but was told there was no school for the deaf yet in Singapore at the time. Undeterred, Peng decided to take on this effort himself. He began advertising his services in a local Chinese newspaper which garnered responses from several parents of deaf children. His first class comprised four students, the maximum that he could accommodate in a room in his parents' home.[5]

Peng taught using the sign language he had learned in Shanghai, as well as through written Chinese and English. He believed that the deaf could master sign language easily. "You may think the sign language is difficult to learn. To a deaf and dumb child, that extra intelligence to pick up the sign language easily is there," he told the *Straits Times* in July 1952.[6]

As Peng continued to receive applications, he saw the need to make a far greater impact on the local Deaf community and provide them with a proper school as well as the resources to run it. He went door to door seeking donations, successfully collecting more than $3,000 by October 1951.[7]

"I have been deaf ever since I was a child, and I know how miserable life can be when one is not able to converse, and to make myself understood," he told the *Sunday Standard* in July 1951. "That is why I am determined to complete my plan so that the deaf in Malaya can be relieved of their misery, and be given a chance to be useful citizens."[8]

It took three years before the Singapore Chinese School for the Deaf opened in 1954 on Charlton Road in Upper Serangoon. Peng became the principal, and together with his wife, Ho Mei Soo, who was also deaf, taught Shanghainese Sign Language at the school.[9] The school was renamed Singapore Sign School for the Deaf in 1957.

Despite his deafness, in 1958, Peng participated in motor racing, winning a total of 36 trophies before giving up the sport in 1967 due to financial reasons. He told *The Deaf American* in 1975: "I can tell you that my main reason for taking part in motor sports was to prove to the hearing world that being deaf is no handicap to being skillful."[10]

Peng died on 24 October 2018 from heart failure at age 92 and he was honoured with the Public Service Medal (Posthumous) at the National Day Awards the next year for his selfless dedication to deaf education in Singapore.[11]

(Above) Principal Peng Tsu Ying at the graduation ceremony of the Singapore Sign School for the Deaf, 1961. He wrote his speech on the blackboard. *Source: The Straits Times © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.*

(Left) A lesson in progress at the Singapore Chinese School for the Deaf, 1956. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

Efforts by the British Red Cross Society

At around the same time that Peng was raising funds for his school, the Singapore Branch of the British Red Cross Society – with the support of the Education Department and Social Welfare Department – started a class for deaf children on Dunearn Road in January 1951, taught by the Manchester University-trained Mrs E.M. Goulden.[12]

Unlike Peng's school where classes were taught in sign language, Goulden practised the oral method of instruction, training children in lip-reading and using their residual hearing. This involved using drums to stimulate hearing and enhance rhythm, as well as modern hearing aids when they became available in the mid-1950s. "The chief objective in starting this class is to teach deaf children how to lip-read and to speak in a reasonably clear manner. It is slower but I think the children will be able to pick it up," she told the *Singapore Free Press* in an interview.[13]

Singapore now had two entities conducting classes for the deaf, but demand for places quickly outpaced capacity. Although the Red Cross Society opened up more classes in York Hill in around 1954, there were still more than 100 deaf children on its waitlist in 1955. Peng was also turning down new applicants to his school.

Apart from the lack of capacity, the school buildings themselves left much to be desired: the Red Cross classes were held in makeshift classrooms at a social welfare home and a child welfare centre, while the Singapore Sign School for the Deaf was no more than

an attap hut. In May 1958, the *Straits Times* wrote that the school founded by Peng was a "shabby, (but efficient and spotlessly clean) unpainted, clapboard building". When a deafness expert from New Zealand visited the British Red Cross School for the Deaf in York Hill in August that year, he described the building as "most unsatisfactory".[14]

The Singapore Association for the Deaf and the School for the Deaf

Recognising the need to provide better facilities and resources for the Deaf community, the government initiated the formation of the Singapore Deaf and Dumb Association (now known as Singapore Association for the Deaf [SADeaf]) in August 1955 to take charge of welfare for the deaf and address the educational challenges they faced, and Peng became a member of the association. Its foremost priority was the construction of a new school, for which the government had set aside land.[15]

A public call was also launched for deaf persons to register themselves with the association – the first attempt to develop a database of Singapore's deaf population and better understand the scale of services required.[16]

(Below) The Singapore Sign School for the Deaf in an attap hut, 1960. The school was formerly known as the Singapore Chinese School for the Deaf. *David Ng Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

(Bottom) The Singapore School for the Deaf on Mountbatten Road, 1963. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

Several milestones were achieved in deaf education in the following decades. In the 1960s, Malay was added as an option to the curriculum of English and Chinese in both Peng's school and the Red Cross school.[17] In November 1963, the two schools merged to form the Singapore School for the Deaf (SSD) at a new Mountbatten Road campus.[18] Peng was appointed principal of the sign section. In 1967, three students from the school became the first deaf children to sit for the Primary School Leaving Examination, taking the same papers as everyone else, and they passed.[19]

In 1971, the SADeaf began planning for a vocational institute for the deaf beside the SSD so that deaf students could learn basic technical skills. In February 1975, the Vocational Institute of the Singapore Association for the Deaf received its first batch of 50 students who learned skills such as metalwork, woodwork and basic electricity based on the same syllabus used in mainstream vocational institutes.[20]

After more than 50 years of supporting the Deaf community, the SSD closed in 2017 due to dwindling enrolment as medical advances in screening and the development of assistive devices saw a drop in the number of children with untreated serious hearing loss.[21]

Today, the majority of deaf and hard-of-hearing students attend mainstream schools with support made available for accessible learning. Designated mainstream schools offer specialised approaches, such as Mayflower Primary School and Beatty Secondary School, where SgSL (Singapore Sign Language) is taught in addition to English. For a small number of students, special-education schools offer additional support. These include Canossian School, which started as a boarding school for deaf children in 1956.[22]

Studying in Mainstream Schools and Tertiary Institutions

A key policy shift in the 1970s saw deaf students begin to study in mainstream schools. The "open-education policy" sought to expand the number of places available to deaf children, provide more pathways to secondary education and facilitate greater social integration.[23]

Deaf students in mainstream schools received special support in the form of technical equipment such as speech trainers as well as through resource teachers. One such teacher was Lim Chin Heng, who was himself profoundly deaf. As a resource teacher in Upper Serangoon Secondary School, he would sit in on mathematics classes, using sign language to explain to deaf students who had difficulty understanding the lesson.[24]

In an interview with the *Straits Times* in September 1995, conducted through both a sign-language interpreter and handwritten notes, Lim said: "I saw the children progressing under my care, and how they were looking to me as a role model. I realised that they needed someone who could understand them."[25]

Despite measures by the SADeaf and the government, educational levels for the Deaf community continued to lag far behind the hearing community. In 1991, there were only 81 deaf students enrolled in tertiary institutions in Singapore and abroad, including the six in the four local universities.[26]

(Above Left) An official delivering a speech with concurrent translation into sign language during the opening of the Singapore School for the Deaf on Mountbatten Road, 1963. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

(Above) Reciting the pledge in sign language (extreme right) at the preview of the National Day Parade, 2004. *Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

The challenges facing the deaf and their families were many – the most compelling of which was whether deaf individuals should learn using sign language or English. This decision had far-reaching impacts, such as the need for costly hearing aids and expensive speech therapy, the variety of schools the deaf could attend and even how far they could progress in their education.[27]

In a letter to the *Straits Times* in 2004, Emilyn Heng, a mother of two sons with severe-profound deafness, shared the obstacles her sons faced in a mainstream school. "Like all hearing-impaired students, they experienced innumerable difficulties: the inability to follow group discussions, or, on occasion, failing to hear what their teachers had been saying," she wrote. Despite these challenges, her sons excelled academically. The elder was awarded the Defence Science and Technology Agency Overseas Merit Scholarship to study computer science at Carnegie Mellon University in the United States, and the younger took biology, chemistry and physics and two special papers at National Junior College, and also learnt to play the piano. "Against all odds, the hearing impaired, if they are focused and determined, and have strong parental support, can and will excel," she added.[28]

Communication Tools for the Deaf

Before communication or interpretation devices for the deaf became available, communication between the Deaf community and the hearing relied almost solely on interpreters or notetakers, who could either be interpreters from SADeaf or a family member.[29] The need for professional interpreters was especially noticeable in the healthcare setting, where signing fluency and health literacy were of paramount importance for interpreting medical consultations accurately.[30]

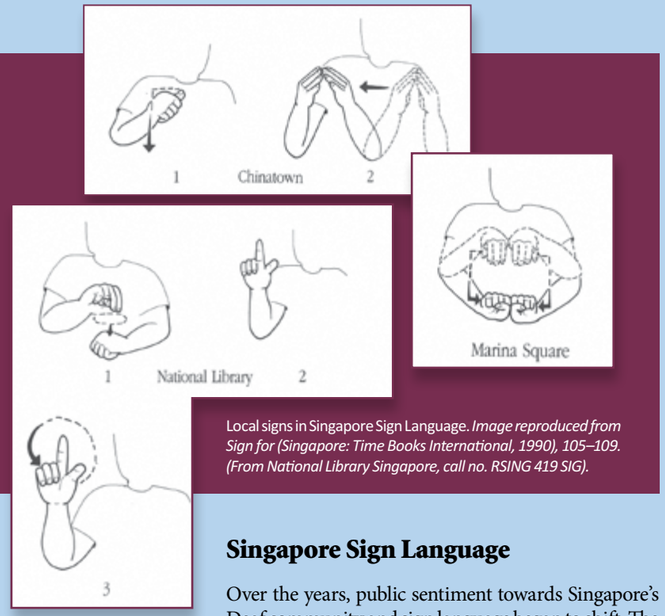
There was, and still is, a dearth of professional SADeaf interpreters today. The SADeaf presently has two deaf and six hearing staff interpreters, supported by a group of ad-hoc community interpreters, to serve Singapore's estimated Deaf community of 500,000 in various settings such as schools, law courts, corporate events and government functions, etc.[31]

The latter half of the 1980s witnessed a boom in consumer-centric communications technology, such as the tele-typewriter and the pager, providing a much-needed boost. However, it was not until 1991 that communication between the deaf and the hearing was simplified with the proliferation of fax machines in homes, offices and businesses. This increasingly became the Deaf community's tool of choice when communicating with the hearing community. "I can also send faxes to my banks and other institutions when I need to speak to them without any third-party help," said teacher Lim Chin Heng.[32]

Eventually, mobile phones and text messaging facilitated better communication between the deaf and the hearing. Telecommunications providers also recognised the significance of the Short Message Service to the Deaf community, with Singtel and MobileOne introducing customised and cheaper mobile plans.[33]

In 2006, Singapore's national broadcaster, Mediacorp, started having real-time English subtitles accompanying the daily evening news on Channel 5, with the exception of the "live news report" section.[34] Interpreters were, however, not seen on live national broadcasts until 2012 during the National Day Rally. The broadcast featured live sign language interpreters but without subtitles.[35] Nevertheless, it was a step welcomed by the Deaf community, who had had to rely on webcasts for previous rallies and major broadcasts.

A turning point came in July 2013 when the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities was ratified in Singapore. Singapore agreed to ensure that persons with disabilities enjoyed equal human rights and to prohibit discrimination based on disability, which included the Deaf community.[36] Since then, the Deaf community has advocated for interpreters and subtitles to be provided in all national broadcasts. Selected theatre and orchestral performances also had sign language interpreters, an encouraging sign that Deaf accessibility was now more than just an afterthought.[37]



Local signs in Singapore Sign Language. *Image reproduced from Sign for (Singapore: Time Books International, 1990), 105–109. (From National Library Singapore, call no. RSING 419 SIG).*

Singapore Sign Language

Over the years, public sentiment towards Singapore's Deaf community and sign language began to shift. The traditional emphasis on training the Deaf community to hear and speak has evolved into a more holistic appreciation of sign language as a key element of Deaf culture and identity. "Lend them a helping hand and communicate with them by methods they can understand. Let us help the deaf by not insisting that they speak to us," said Jerry Goh Ewe Hong, president of the SADeaf.[38]

The sign language used in Singapore today is SgSL, a term first coined by Andrew Tay in 2008, a Deaf interpreter and Singapore Sign Language specialist, citing its importance in helping the deaf recognise and develop their Deaf identity and belonging to the Deaf community as a cohesive whole, besides serving as a common sign language for communication.[39]

SgSL is a combination of Shanghainese Sign Language, American Sign Language, Signing Exact English (a sign system modelled after the English language, including its grammar and syntax) and locally developed signs. Before SgSL, the earliest form of sign language used in Singapore was Peng's Shanghainese Sign Language, which he taught in his school. Over the years, it was influenced by other forms such as American Sign Language introduced by Norman C. K. Tsu, a graduate of Gallaudet College in Washington, D.C., and one of Peng's earliest collaborators at his sign school.[40]

From 1976, the SSD adopted the Total Communication approach (which integrates various communication methods such as speaking, hearing, fingerspelling, signing, reading, etc.) as an official policy of the SADeaf. But it was Total Communication along with Signing Exact English that made it possible for deaf students at the SSD to follow the regular school curriculum and sit for the Primary School Leaving Examination. This was the predominant language of instruction in the 1980s, used in conjunction with spoken English.[41] Subsequently, unique local signs were invented by the Deaf community.

In 1990, these local signs were included in *Sign for Singapore*, a pictorial guide by the SADeaf to familiarise users and learners with the language and consequently bridge the existing communication gap with the deaf. It contains some 700 signs frequently used in daily life in Singapore, as well as signs for common local references such as Changi Airport, the MRT (Mass Rapid Transit), satay, durian and Deepavali.[42]

In the 1990s, the SADeaf said it wanted to have sign language recognised as Singapore's fifth official language. "Making sign language an official language is a long-term plan of the association," Tan Hwee Bong, executive director of the SADeaf, told the *Straits Times* in 1994. "The deaf community seeks official recognition for sign language to be on par with the four existing official languages." It hoped to have "sign language used on television, in banks and other places, and at more public events".[43]

At around the same time, the SADeaf noted an increasing number of people taking up its sign language classes for various reasons – from wanting to interact with deaf and hard-of-hearing family members and friends to hoping to volunteer their services to the deaf. Another reason given was the "hip" factor.[44]

Up to the early 2010s, those who wished to learn SgSL would generally have to do so via one of three ways: at the SADeaf, schools for the deaf, or through informal learning such as videos and learning communities. Another option became available in 2015 when the Nanyang Technological University (NTU) offered SgSL as an elective module.[45] Yale-NUS College also started offering sign language as a learning module in 2020, with instructors from the SADeaf.[46]

The launch of the SgSL Sign Bank in September 2019 to document local signs marked the SADeaf's first steps towards building a full SgSL dictionary and the eventual recognition of SgSL as an official language in Singapore.[47] Signs were collected by first filming Deaf participants producing signs in SgSL sentences. Common signs were then reviewed by a Deaf panel to confirm the signs' wider recognition, acceptance and usage.[48] There are presently more than 700 signs in the sign bank.[49] In September 2024, NTU and the SADeaf launched a free e-book on SgSL. It contains common words and uniquely Singapore terms with GIFs, or looping animations, to illustrate how to sign them. This marked the latest effort to boost knowledge of SgSL and raise its visibility.[50]

The Ministry of Social and Family Development announced in February 2024 that a review on making SgSL Singapore's official sign language was underway. This move was welcomed by many in the Deaf community. "SgSL's recognition is very important because it gives us – the deaf community – a true sense of identity," said Lily Goh, a Deaf arts and music practitioner and performer. "With this recognition, accessibility is enhanced, and standards are increased. Better access will result in better education… such as improving comprehension levels. It could also maybe give us better employment opportunities."[51]

In Singapore, the journey of deaf education and accessibility (both physical and digital) is a story of progress, adaptation and advocacy. From the efforts by Peng Tsu Ying, the British Red Cross Society and the SADeaf to set up schools, to the innovative use of new technology, and the community's push to expand awareness of Deafness and sign language, each milestone marks a step towards a more inclusive society for the Deaf community. ♦

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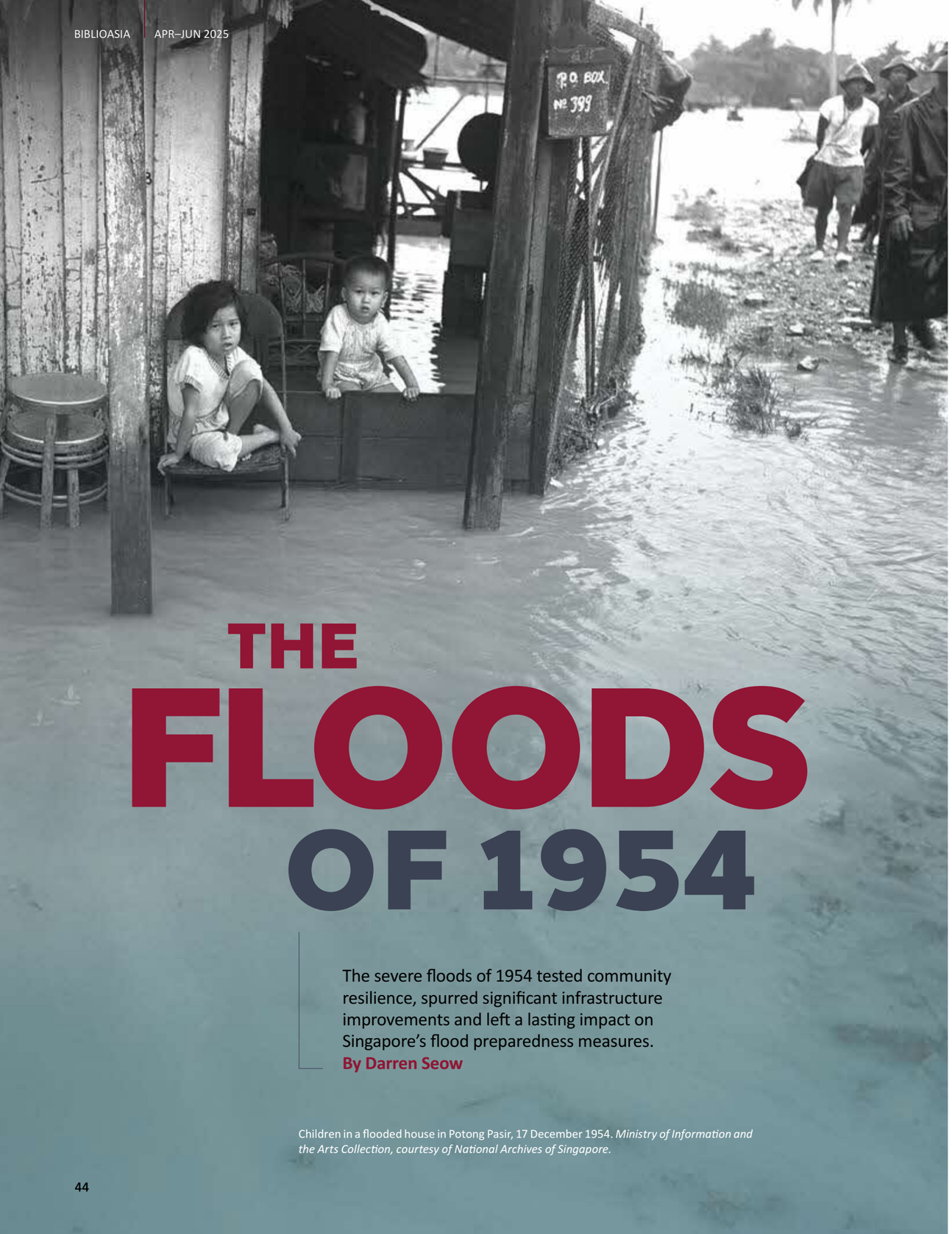


THE FLOODS OF 1954

The severe floods of 1954 tested community resilience, spurred significant infrastructure improvements and left a lasting impact on Singapore's flood preparedness measures.

By Darren Seow

Children in a flooded house in Potong Pasir, 17 December 1954. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

Darren Seow is a Senior Librarian with the National Library Singapore. His responsibilities include content development, research, and the provision of reference and information services.

It started as a heavy drizzle on the evening of 8 December 1954. Then at 11.20 pm, a torrential downpour began that continued throughout the night, into the next day and then into the night again. In the end, a record 10.9 in (276.86 mm) of rain fell over 24 hours.

It rained so much that at 4.40 pm on 9 December, Kallang Airport was closed to traffic and aircraft on their way to Singapore were diverted to Butterworth in Penang over 800 km away. The rain caused flooding in some 2,500 acres of land, with Bedok being the most severely affected. Other badly flooded areas were Bukit Timah, Grove Estate, Orchard Road, Telok Ayer, Robinson Road, Cecil Street and Anson Road.[1]

Among those rescued were a mother and her newborn (just 12 hours old), who had to be saved from their flooded home on Aljunied Road. "Rescuers, wading in water chest high in semi-darkness, carried the mother to safety on a stretcher. The baby, curled up in blankets, was carried by a relative," reported the *Straits Times*.[2]

Although floodwaters began to recede on 10 December, many areas were still submerged in water, including Bedok, Potong Pasir, Bukit Timah and Geylang Serai. Floodwaters had entered homes, damaging furniture and personal belongings. "When the people return to their homes they will find plenty of mud and debris. The only people who were happy were children swimming in the ponds," said City Engineer George Edmond who toured the flood areas that day.[3]

What the unfortunate people of Singapore did not know at the time was that these scenes would be repeated just a week later.

Thanks to the annual northeast monsoons, December in Singapore is usually a damp month. However, even by monsoonal standards, December 1954 stood out. That month, some 26.81 in (680.97 mm) of rain were recorded, making it the wettest December since 1869.[4] And it was not only during the month of December that people here had to endure heavy rains. According to the Public Works Department (PWD), the last quarter of 1954 was the wettest in 85 years. The PWD noted that no less than 53 in (1,346 mm) of rainfall were recorded at the airport.[5]

As a result of the unusually heavy rainfall that Singapore experienced in the last quarter of 1954, especially in October and December, the island's drainage systems were overwhelmed, which resulted in extensive flooding. Thousands of people were made temporarily homeless, and farmers lost crops and livestock. The flooding resulted in loss of life as well.[6]

Following the catastrophic floods of 1954, the government began to take a more holistic approach to flood management. Soon after, the PWD set up a branch dedicated to designing flood alleviation schemes throughout Singapore.

Large parts of Bedok being submerged, 9 December 1954. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

A family inside their flooded home in Bedok, 9 December 1954. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

October Floods

The first severe floods of 1954 began on 23 October when a violent three-hour rainstorm lashed Singapore. By 10 am, floodwaters, worsened by the rising tide, had exceeded 4 ft (1.2 m), prompting evacuations from vulnerable locations. The Meteorological Department recorded 4.22 in (107.19 mm) of rainfall between 6.30 am and 9.30 am, with 3.41 in (86.61 mm) falling in the first hour alone.[7]

As water levels rose, hundreds of motorists were stranded along Bukit Timah, Thomson, Balmoral, Balestier, Newton, Orchard and Changi roads. The flooding along Bukit Timah Road was so severe that traffic between Singapore and Johor had to be rerouted, leaving many government officials residing in Singapore unable to commute to Johor for work. Motorists were also forced to abandon their flooded cars in the middle of the road and wade home.

Houses and huts on low-lying areas along Bukit Timah and Dunearn roads were submerged in more

A violent three-hour rainstorm on 23 October 1954 wreaked havoc across Singapore, causing flooding in many areas and making scores of people homeless. *Source: The Straits Times, 24 October 1954 © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.*

THE SUNDAY TIMES

SINGAPORE, SUNDAY, OCTOBER 24, 1954 — 15 CENTS

Traffic held up: homes inundated: workers stranded: gardens ruined

FLOOD CHAOS IN S'PORE

Business at a standstill: huge losses reported

SINGAPORE LAST NIGHT — FAMILIES GO VISITING BY BOAT

Strike peace hopes dashed

'Million to one' Johore ambush

STRAITS TIMES ANNUAL

Children receiving meals at St Andrew's School, 17 December 1954, which served as a flood relief centre. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

than 4 ft of water. One farmer living off Dunearn Road lost all his belongings, save for a few ducks, when the water reached the roof of his house. The police responded swifty to manage traffic jams and help stranded motorists.[8]

The October floods also affected 400 homes housing some 3,000 people in the Bedok resettlement village. The area was inundated when the surrounding mud dyke was breached in two places, with one gap spanning 20 ft (6 m). Acting Commissioner of Lands S.G. Burlock later explained that the dykes were not high enough to prevent water from overflowing from the Bedok Road catchment valley. The *Straits Budget* estimated damages at $250,000 to livestock and food items in the Bedok resettlement village.[9]

The governor of Singapore, John Nicoll, visited the Bedok resettlement village that night. The village headman told him that 150 acres had been submerged under 3.5 ft (1.1 m) of water, marking the most serious flood in two decades. Experts from the City Council investigated and explained that "water from Tampines and Changi Roads had not been able to flow out to the sea because of the narrowness of the mouth of the Bedok River".[10]

Social welfare officials provided meals to affected villagers and sampans were used to evacuate people from submerged attap huts. Many sought shelter with friends and relatives, while the village school and wayang area were converted into temporary sleeping quarters.

Among those affected was 74-year-old Low Yoke, who had been rescued from drowning. After leaving her home, she "fell into a ditch and was about to disappear under water when two men heard her cries". Despite her age and her brush with death, she returned by sampan to her waterlogged home later that night to retrieve her wedding ring that she had kept in the bedroom. She was not merely being sentimental though. At least one home had been burgled and the villagers formed a vigilante group to guard the area.[11]

Torrential Rains in December

A little over a month later, the heavens opened on 8 December and, once again, the Bedok resettlement village bore the brunt of the damage. Farmers in the area were estimated to have suffered losses to crops and poultry amounting to $750,000. Goh Seng Kin, a father of five, said he "lost 120 pigs, 2,000 chickens and 1,500 ducks, estimated at $6,000". Ho Boon Chiang, who owned the largest plot of land in Bedok, reported $4,800 in damages to vegetables, pigs, poultry and fodder.[12] The Social Work Department (SWD) subsequently made relief payments totalling $27,240 to 493 families at $10 per person.[13]

Unfortunately, another major storm swept through Singapore about a week later. It began raining at 5 am on 16 December and by mid-morning, the rivers had swelled. By midday, kampongs were waterlogged, and eventually Potong Pasir, Bedok and Braddell Road – areas most affected the previous week – were flooded yet again. At Braddell Road kampong, near the swollen Kallang River, hundreds of villagers were evacuated by sampans.[14]

Once again, the villagers of Bedok were not spared. The floodwaters breached the bund in Bedok resettlement village at 3 pm and despite PWD teams stacking sandbags and reinforcing the bund with poles, water surged through the gaps. Personnel from the Police Reserve Unit deployed five sampans and two rubber boats to help villagers remove their belongings. By 6 pm, however, water levels had risen to 4 ft (1.2 m), and over 250 villagers sought shelter at Bedok Boys' and Girls' School, where the SWD provided hot meals.[15]

By nightfall, thousands of flood victims had been housed in various relief centres across Singapore, where they were provided with hot meals, beverages and clothing. Nicoll visited St Andrew's School, which had been converted into a mass dormitory. Upon learning that only one float and a few sampans were

Workers building dykes during the Bedok flood, 9 December 1954. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

available for rescue operations in Potong Pasir, he made a radio call instructing the Royal Air Force to despatch evacuation boats.[16]

In some ways, the people sheltering in the relief centres were fortunate. Five people lost their lives during a rescue operation off Braddell Road on 17 December. At around 2 am, amidst a downpour, the police were evacuating a family of seven – two grandparents, their daughter and four grandchildren – by sampan when the vessel was caught in a strong current and drifted close to the Braddell Bridge over the swirling Whampoa River. The boat struck a submerged sewage pipeline near the bridge, capsizing and throwing all the occupants into the water, which had risen to around 5 ft (1.5 m). Five family members lost their lives: the grandmother, her daughter and three grandchildren; the grandfather and his 6-year-old grandson survived. Clinging onto the overturned boat, the grandfather said he "could hear shouts for help from his wife and daughter but could do nothing to help them". The capsized sampan, one of 22 deployed by the police, was never recovered, underscoring the dangerous conditions that night.[17]

As floodwaters steadily receded on 18 December, Nicoll visited the affected areas, starting at Potong Pasir and concluding at Lorong Tai Seng. He pledged support to vegetable, poultry and pig farmers in Bedok, Potong Pasir, Geylang Serai and Lorong Tai Seng to help them rebuild their livelihoods.[18]

The Bedok Problem

The floods of 1954 had hit the low-lying, coastal Bedok resettlement area particularly hard and the press coined the term "Bedok problem" to describe the issue. The villagers living in Bedok were particularly bitter because they had been resettled there, unwillingly, just two years prior. They had previously been living in Paya Lebar but were forced to move to make way for the new Paya Lebar Airport. Now their farms were being repeatedly flooded.[19]

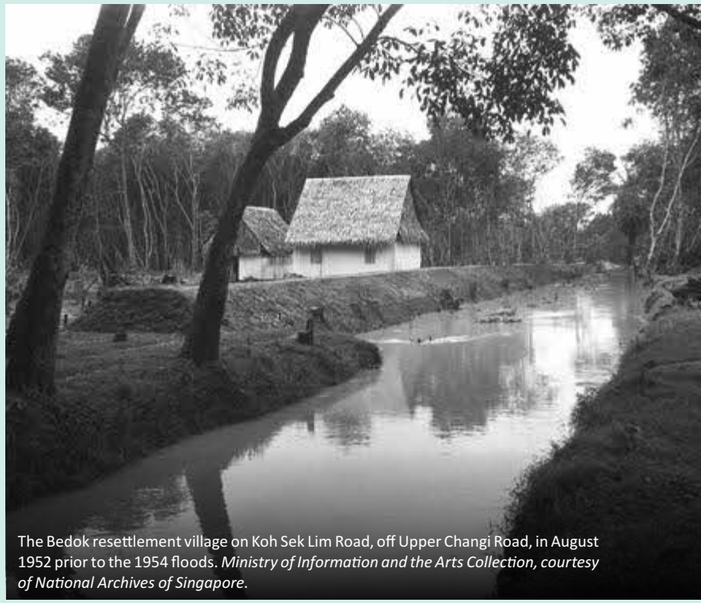
After the first round of flooding in December, Legislative Councillor Elizabeth Choy toured the area, and told the press: "They [the farmers] obliged the government by moving from the Paya Lebar area, and it is our duty to see that they do not suffer." The *Straits Times* argued that the government had "a moral obligation" to provide "better drainage and other flood prevention measures at Bedok" and a "special responsibility" towards those who relocated from Paya Lebar.[20]

Even after the floodwaters receded, their problems did not. Shops that had previously extended credit for vegetable seeds and fodder now insisted on cash payments. Pleading for assistance, the farmers sought immediate cash loans from the government to help them start anew. By 20 December, the SWD had disbursed $29,760 in relief payments to 289 families.[21]

Relief Efforts

Welfare and relief services were provided by the SWD. During the serious flooding incidents in October and December 1954, the SWD was mobilised three times to provide emergency aid in Bedok, Potong Pasir, Braddell Road, Lorong Tai Seng and Geylang Serai. It collaborated with other government departments and voluntary organisations, including the British Red Cross Society, St John Ambulance Brigade and the Singapore Flood Relief Fund Committee.[22]

Within hours, the SWD had set up temporary shelters and began distributing hot drinks, meals, blankets, clothing, rice and tinned milk. Families also received cash relief payments. The SWD worked with other government teams to register flood victims and conduct relief surveys in affected areas.[23]



The Bedok resettlement village on Koh Sek Lim Road, off Upper Changi Road, in August 1952 prior to the 1954 floods. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

The Singapore Flood Relief Fund, organised by the *Straits Times*, was formed on 11 December to provide immediate relief to those affected by the floods. Among the first contributors were the American actress Ava Gardner, who was in Singapore at the time, film mogul Loke Wan Tho and the Shaw Brothers, each of whom donated $500.[24]

Addressing the Singapore Legislative Council on 14 December, Colonial Secretary William Goode announced that the government would contribute $50,000, 10 tons of milk and 4,500 clothing items to the Singapore Flood Relief Fund. Governor Nicoll himself donated $500. Goode also announced that a project to widen and straighten Bedok River (Sungei Bedok) and raise the bunds by 2 ft 6 in (76 cm) between Changi Road and the sea outlet was nearing completion.[25]

By 29 December, over 30,000 flood victims had received aid from relief centres in all flood-stricken areas. More than $210,250, along with 500 bags of rice, 500 cases of milk, thousands of clothing items, and substantial quantities of kerosene, tinned food and biscuits had been distributed. Fund chairman, F.W. Harvey of the Salvation Army, expressed his gratitude. "There has never been anything like this in Singapore," said Harvey. "It has been tremendous. During those first terrible days the fund met and broke the brunt of the flood's destruction. Gifts poured in, distribution was speedy and the co-operation of workers was wonderful."[26]

No Compensation for Bedok Farmers

While affected villagers received emergency relief funding, the government would not provide compensation to the Bedok farmers. On 23 December, Under-Secretary J.D. Higham replied to Tan Kang Phuang, chairman of the Bedok Village Flood Relief Committee, that "the principle of compensation could not be accepted", but assured that the government would "give 'special treatment' to victims of the floods" until they could resume crop cultivation and livestock rearing.[27]

Higham said that $120,000 had been invested in drains, bunds and a sea gate, though he acknowledged that "unfortunately the recent floods were too much for these defences". "Work is being done now to strengthen and raise the bunds and preparations are being made to cut a straight channel through to the sea for the Bedok River." He added that the government "regrets that the people of the Bedok resettlement area should have had to endure during recent months such grievous hardship".[28]

The farmers were surprised that the government had rejected calls for compensation and on 18 January 1955, 200 farmers and their wives protested, renewing demands for compensation. They claimed their relocation from Paya Lebar to Bedok had been against their will to make way for the new airport. Many farmers were in debt and they urged the government to "put them back [financially] to where they were before the December flood".[29] The following day, Higham reiterated that compensation was not feasible. He explained that the farmers had received relief payments, day-old poultry, fertilisers and vegetable seeds. "This is all we can do," reported the *Straits Times*.[30]

Improving Flood Control

After the severe floods of 1954, the government recognised that a coordinated approach to manage the flood situation in Singapore was necessary. "The need for overall direction and planning of flood alleviation schemes on an Island-wide basis became obvious after the recurrence of serious flooding in December," noted the PWD's 1955 annual report. In March that year, a new Drainage Branch within the PWD was set up "whose sole duty it is to undertake surveys and to obtain data for the design of flood alleviation schemes for the Colony". The chief drainage engineer's assessment revealed that extensive flood prevention measures were necessary, with projected costs reaching several million dollars.[31]

A primary initiative centred on Bedok and its resettlement area. The flood control scheme comprised four key elements: an impounding reservoir in the Bedok River valley to regulate water flow; a larger culvert outlet through Changi Road to improve drainage; a 9,400-foot (2,865 m) canal to channel water to the sea; and an elevation of Changi Road to prevent flooding. This $523,000 project was launched on 23 November 1955, with Minister for Communications and Works Francis Thomas in attendance.[32] The Bedok Flood Alleviation Scheme was completed in 1956.[33]

As a small, highly urbanised tropical island, flooding is a perennial issue in Singapore and the government has, over the decades, taken numerous steps to address the problem in different parts of the island. Today, the threat of floods is combined with the challenges of climate change. By 2100, sea levels could rise by up to 1.15 m. This poses a serious threat to Singapore, where about 30 percent of its land lies less than five metres above mean sea level, especially in the East Coast area.[34]

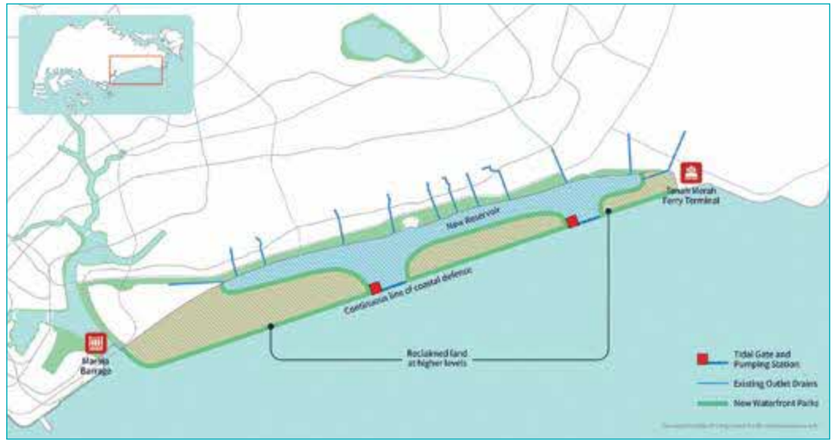
In response, Singapore has implemented comprehensive defences, including coastal barriers and enhanced drainage systems designed to withstand rising waters. For instance, Marina Barrage, which opened in 2008, functions as both a flood control measure and a reservoir.[35] Additionally, naturalised waterways such as those developed under the Active, Beautiful, Clean Waters Programme (launched in 2006) and flood-resilient infrastructure are being constructed to manage excess water.[36]

Building on these efforts, then Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong spoke about the "Long Island" concept at the 2019 National Day Rally as a potential solution to protect the East Coast area from rising sea levels. (The concept was first mooted under the 1991 Concept Plan.)[37]

According to the Urban Redevelopment Authority, "Long Island" would involve reclaiming about 800 hectares of land off the East Coast, potentially in the form of "islands", to protect the low-lying area from sea level rise and strengthen Singapore's flood resilience.

Under this plan, land will be reclaimed to a higher level and form a continuous line of defence for protection against rising sea levels, with 12 outlet drains along the coast draining water into a new reservoir with two centralised tidal gates and pumping stations. It will be similar to Marina Barrage and will keep out seawater during high tides and discharge stormwater into the sea during heavy rainfall.

This integrated solution aims to protect Singapore's coastlines, prevent flooding, increase water resilience, create land for future development and offer recreational opportunities for the East Coast. Speaking at the CNA Summit on 20 February 2025, Minister for National Development and Minister-in-Charge of Social Services Integration Desmond Lee said: "['Long Island'] will take many decades to complete; we've just started. But we have to start coastal protection work now, because the price of delay or failure will be too high for future generations to bear."[38] ♦



"Long Island" involves reclaiming land to a higher level to form a continuous line of defence for protection against rising sea levels. *Courtesy of the Urban Redevelopment Authority of Singapore.*

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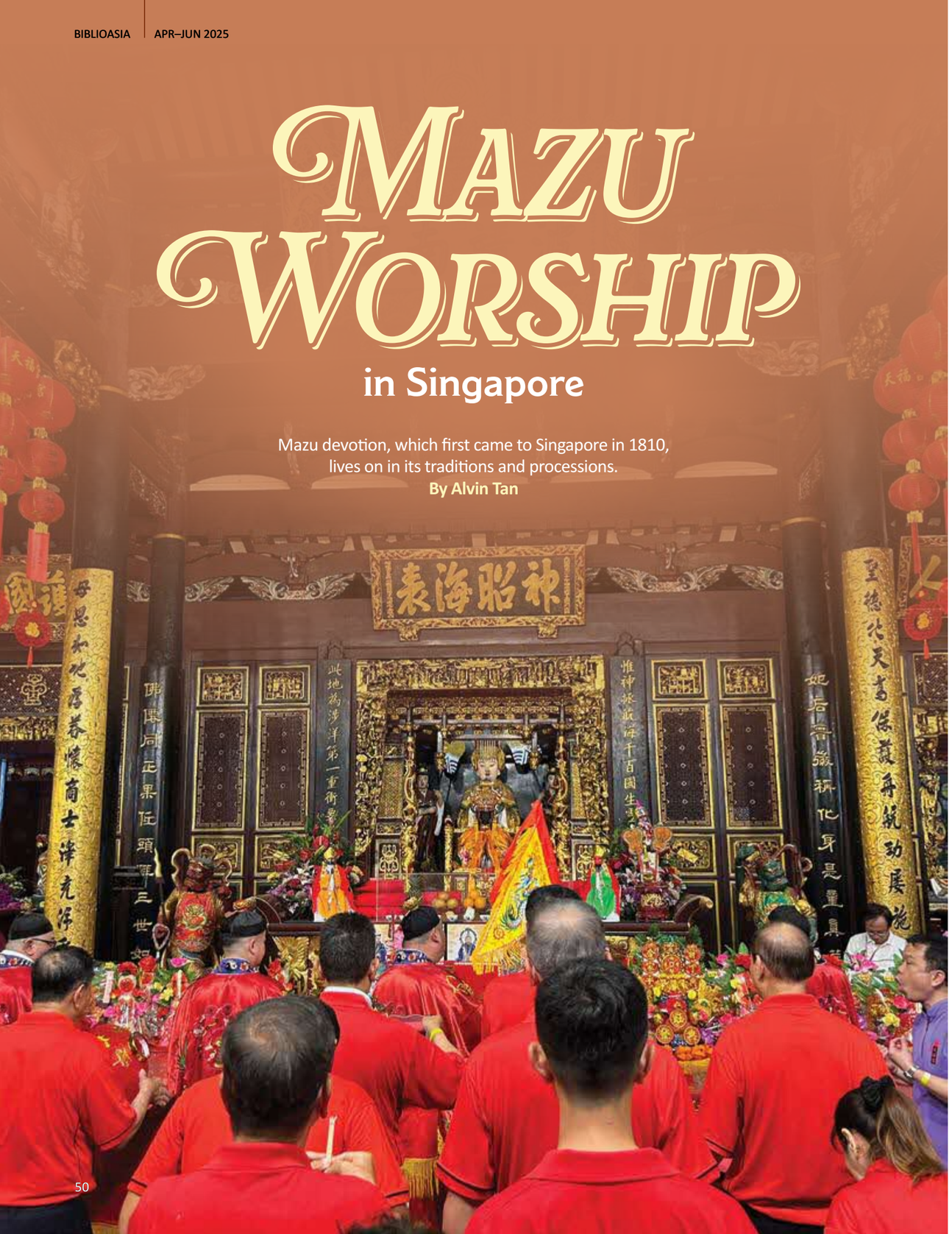
Mazu Worship in Singapore

Mazu devotion, which first came to Singapore in 1810, lives on in its traditions and processions.

By Alvin Tan



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Amidst a sea of outstretched arms wielding mobile phones, selfie sticks, the odd camera and smouldering joss sticks, her throng of devotees surged forward as the procession began at about 7 pm, under steadily darkening and increasingly overcast skies that threatened to break anytime. It was all a very fitting backdrop for Mazu (妈祖) – Goddess of the sea, and of the wind and rain – as she began her procession from Thian Hock Keng temple (天福宮) on 1 May 2024 (or the 23rd day of the third lunar month). Last held in 2019, the Excursion of Peace was the climax of almost a week of festivities that had begun three days earlier, on 28 April 2024.

From Local Deity to Empress of Heaven

As in the case of many Chinese deities, Mazu – also known as Lin Moniang (林默娘) – was a historical personage who was first recognised as a deity by the people of Meizhou island, Putian, in Fujian province during the late 10th century.[1] Born in 960, she was later given the name *mo* (默; silent) as she did not cry from the time she was born till the end of her first month.[2] Legend has it that Mazu's birth "was attended to by auspicious portents. She was an exceptionally pious girl, and at age of 13 she met a Taoist master who presented her with certain charms and other secret lore. When she was 16, she manifested her magic power by saving the lives of her father and elder brother, whose boat had capsized.[3] The name *niang* (娘; young lady) was accorded as a mark of respect several hundred years after her death in 987.[4]

Devotion to Mazu began in the Song dynasty (960–1270). To "all who must hazard their lives upon the waters", Mazu was regarded as the most important deity.[5] As early as 1288, Mazu temples were found in all the maritime provinces of coastal China.[6] Four hundred years later, the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) co-opted her into the official pantheon of deities overseen by the Board of Rites in the imperial court.[7]

Mazu is best known by her appellation, Tian Hou (天后; Empress of Heaven), conferred in 1737 during the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) by Emperor Gaozong. In rank and status, she is equal to all male deities with the exception of the Emperor of Heaven.[8] These efforts to elevate her into the official pantheon of deities reflected her widespread popularity.

(Facing page) Devotees praying at the shrine of Mazu before her birthday procession, 1 March 2024. *Photo by Daryl Lim Wei Jie.*

Given that Mazu's realm is the sea, it is unsurprising a maritime-centred mythology has been built around her. In China's history, the most significant maritime voyages took place from 1403 to 1433 during the Ming dynasty. Helmed by Admiral Zheng He, the voyages went as far as India and littoral East Africa. Mazu was venerated onboard Zheng He's ships, with daily prayer and incense offerings for thanksgiving and to petition for protection and assistance. These must have been heeded for Mazu's intervention miraculously saved the fleet from shipwreck during its fifth voyage.[9]

Mazu is often portrayed clothed in "a gown with embroidery work and a crown with glass beads", and clasping an imperial tablet in both hands. She is flanked by two deities, Shunfeng'er (顺风耳; Favourable-Wind Ear) and Qianliyan (千里眼; Thousand-Li Eye), who are respectively all-hearing and all-seeing, and serve as her bodyguards and aides.[10] It must be noted that both attributes were indispensable to sailors in an era when modern navigational aids did not exist.

Building Thian Hock Keng

Mazu's history in Singapore is tied closely to the history of Chinese immigrants here. According to some accounts, Mazu worship predated Stamford Raffles' arrival in Singapore. As early as 1810, Chinese immigrants were working on the island's pepper and gambier plantations and they brought Mazu with them. Eventually, a small joss house was built along the waterfront to worship her.[11]

Later Chinese immigrants, who came from coastal provinces in southern China, continued this devotion as they travelled on junks with Mazu altars onboard. Arriving in Singapore after a long, hazardous voyage, they naturally made their way to the humble joss house located along the waterfront to give thanks for a safe voyage.[12]

Mazu devotion transcended dialect lines, reflecting the widespread devotion to her in southern China. In 1820, the Teochews set up Yueh Hai Ching Temple (粤海清庙) on Phillip Street to venerate her. And in 1857, the Hainanese built Kheng Chiu Tin

Mazu and her two bodyguards. On the left is Qianliyan (千里眼; Thousand-Li Eye) and on the right Shunfeng'er (顺风耳; Favourable-Wind Ear). *Collection of the Asian Civilisations Museum.*

Hou Kong (琼州天后宫) along Malabar Street.[13] At the same time, Mazu was also worshipped by those who engaged in activities related to the sea such as charcoal traders, motorboat owners and fishermen.[14]

As the port of Singapore grew and fortunes were made, prominent businessmen provided the impetus to build temples dedicated to Mazu as a form of thanksgiving. In the Hokkien community, the businessman and philanthropist Tan Tock Seng led these efforts to build what became the Thian Hock Keng temple (to replace the joss house). In 1838, he effected a series of land purchases for this purpose and donated 3,074 Spanish dollars to the building. Construction began the following year, and the temple was eventually completed in 1840 to the tune of 37,000 Spanish dollars.

All the building materials were imported from China. The following year, a Mazu statue from Meizhou island arrived in Singapore and a magnificent procession was mounted afterwards in her honour.[15]

In Thian Hock Keng, Mazu occupies the main (or central) hall. Guan Gong (关公; God of War) sits on her left and Baosheng Dadi (保生大帝; His Majesty the Protector of Life) on her right. In the rear hall sits Guanyin (观音; Goddess of Mercy). The reasons for devotion to Mazu are vividly captured in a pair of commemorative steles put up in 1850:

> We, the *tangren* (Chinese), have come from the interior by junks to engage in business here. We depended on Holy Mother of Gods to guide us across the sea safely and we were able to settle down here happily. Things are abundant and the people are healthy. We, the *tangren*, wish to return good for kindness. So we met and decided to build a temple in the south of Singapore at Telok Ayer to worship the Heavenly Consort day and night.[16]

During Mazu's birthday procession, a parasol spins continuously to provide shade and cover for Mazu. *Photo by Alvin Tan.*

Mazu Devotion in Singapore

Even as Singapore rapidly developed, Mazu devotion stayed relevant and popular. Throughout the latter half of the 20th century, the press, especially the Chinese newspapers, ran articles about Mazu and Thian Hock Keng on or around her birthday. A network of 21 Mazu temples and associations, tended to by different dialect and surname groups, still remain active in Singapore today.[17] Despite Singapore's modernisation, there remained a healthy interest in traditional religious practices, which gradually evolved to take on significance beyond the spiritual.

For instance, on Mazu's birthday on 25 April 1954, the *Nanyang Siang Pau* newspaper ran an article about Mazu-related organisations in Singapore that reflected the extent of popular devotion. At the New Era Restaurant, reportedly 180 tables (with 1,800 seats) were booked for this date. All across Singapore, Mazu societies held celebrations.[18]

Mazu worship remains common in Singapore today, for different reasons and in different forms. Nelson Lim, 60, chairman of the Culture and Heritage Committee at the Singapore Hokkien Huay Kuan, recalls visiting the temple as a child to worship Mazu. Growing up in the Kallang River area, where many depended on marine-related trades for a living, Mazu worship was common. Lim noted, however, that devotion to Mazu has evolved from asking for favours to being a form of cultural expression and perpetuation of Chinese heritage and history.[19]

To 55-year-old Dr Koh Chin Yee, vice-chair of Thian Hock Keng's temple management committee, Mazu signifies and embodies benevolence, justice, peace and valour and these values, together with Singapore's immigrant history, formed the narrative of his livestream of the Mazu birthday procession on 1 May 2024. Belief in Mazu formed an important part and played a critical role in the early migrant Chinese community, across all major dialect groups. For instance, the Singapore Hokkien Huay Kuan, established in 1840 on the grounds of Thian Hock Keng, founded schools like Tao Nan and Ai Tong which still exist today, he noted.[20]

Mazu worship provides quantity surveyor Yvinne Neo, 45, with spiritual sustenance and comfort. However, the element of giving back is also important. "By participating in volunteer activities and charity events in the temple (such as providing free Mazu noodles, mung bean soup, rice noodles to the public and charity banquets for poor elderly people), individuals can also give back to society and practise the concept of doing good in the Mazu belief," said Neo, who is also a temple volunteer.[21]

The horizontal cloth banner embroidered with Mazu's title, 天上圣母 (Holy Heavenly Mother). *Photo by Daryl Lim Wei Jie.*

Worshipping Mazu at the temple itself is an important part of the experience. When asked whether he worships Mazu at home, a 52-year-old software engineer who only wanted to be known as Mark, explained that with the rituals, observations and obligations that a home altar entails, it would be difficult for him as a working professional to keep up.[22]

Mazu's Birthday Celebrations

In 1840, Mazu's first birthday procession was held – which cost a princely 6,000 Spanish dollars – to mark her arrival in Singapore. The *Singapore Free Press* reported that the procession "dragged its length along" to the extent of nearly the third of a mile, to the usual accompaniment of delectable gongs, and with gaudy banners of every colour, form and dimension "floating the pale blue sky". The paper further noted that "the Divinity [Mazu] herself was conveyed in a very elegant canopied chair, or palaqueen [sic], of yellow silk and crape [sic], and was surrounded by a body guard of celestials, wearing tunics of the same colour". "She is supposed to be the especial protectress of those who navigate the deep – at least, it is to her shrine that Chinese sailors pay the most adoration… The procession, we are informed, is regarded as a formal announcement to the Chinese of her advent in this settlement."[23]

This event was frowned upon by Protestant missionaries, who distributed a tract to disprove why Mazu is not as powerful or superior a deity as the Chinese painted her out to be.[24] Regardless, processions took place once every three years until 1926.[25]

Almost 90 years would elapse until the procession was revived in 2016.[26] And whether it takes place or not is not decided by bureaucratic fiat. Rather, obtaining Mazu's consent first-hand is of paramount importance for the sacred to enter into the realm of the profane.[27] To do so, the temple uses divination lots, traditionally two crescent-shaped pieces of red painted wood that are flat on one side and concave on the obverse, to seek her views on the matter. With Mazu's approval, the first procession in almost a hundred years was held in 2016, and then annually until 2019. Social distancing measures during the Covid-19 pandemic meant that the procession in 2024 was the first to take place in five years.[28] (In 2025, the procession will take place on 20 April.)

Arriving at the temple at about 6:30 pm on 1 May 2024, I was greeted by the festivities, which were well underway. A week prior to her birthday, Thian Hock Keng's social media team began posting on its Facebook page, publicising details about the celebrations – devotional items, fringe events and the birthday process.

Mazu's birthday procession – dubbed the Excursion for Peace – was a meticulously planned and executed event. Unlike similar processions in Taiwan which are not tied to a fixed route – it was left to Mazu to decide where she wanted to go and

Mazu on a red, swinging sedan chair studded with red LED light strips and borne by male devotees. *Photo by Alvin Tan.*

for the statue bearers to discern – Singapore's procession was thoroughly scripted and planned from beginning to end.[29]

Around 7 pm, the elements comprising the Excursion for Peace contingent got into place. Performances by lion and dragon dances, accompanied by big-headed dolls, sent Mazu off on her tour of the realm. Leading the way, at the head of the contingent, was a horizontal cloth banner embroidered with Mazu's title, 天上圣母 (Holy Heavenly Mother), which was flanked by a pair of lanterns at both ends. Behind the lanterns, running down the flanks of the contingent, was a single row of twin phoenix flags also bearing Mazu's title – the phoenix is a symbol of the feminine – held aloft by male devotees.

Following close behind was Mazu's immediate entourage. Heavenly generals, flanked by the signs "Silence" (肃静) and "Retreat" (回避), put everyone, spirit or human, on notice. This was followed by the Lead Flag. All these made up the beginning of the sanctum, where Mazu held court. To add to the martial air, a set of 12 weapons borne by devotees escorted and protected her. This was an occasion of pomp and splendour – the Empress of Heaven was out inspecting her realm. Next up were the ritual elements made up of Taoist priests, accompanied by the principal and lead devotees.

In the inner sanctum, a parasol, kept spinning continuously by a group of male devotees, provides shade and cover for Mazu. Devotees believe that she is physically here. Accompanied by her guardian deities – Shunfeng'er and Qianliyan – Mazu sits on a red, swinging sedan chair studded with red LED light strips and borne by a party of male devotees from the Boon San Lian Ngee Association. Mounted on the sedan chair, just behind her, is a set of flags of five colours signifying the five elements of metal, wood, water, fire and earth. They are symbols of her authority over her generals and troops. These also remind devotees and wandering spirits of her high status. A pair of fans decorated with sun and moon motifs flank the sedan chair, protecting her and the throng of around one thousand devotees following closely behind.[30]

The procession route snakes its way through the Central Business District. From Thian Hock Keng on Telok Ayer Street, the contingent proceeds on foot to Siang Cho Keong Temple (仙祖宫) on Amoy Street, where it pauses to exchange incense as a mark of respect and acknowledgement of the temple's resident deity – Dabogong (大伯公; God of Prosperity). Mazu is then carefully and reverently transferred from her mount on the sedan chair to the open-air upper deck of a double-decker bus for the next leg of her excursion: to Boon San Lian Ngee Association at Hong Lim for another exchange of incense.

Then it is onwards to Marina South Pier via Pickering Street, Church Street, Collyer Quay and Marina Boulevard. Riding at the front of the bus, which is typically crowded with tourists and day trippers, Mazu surveys and blesses her realm impassively as her entourage drives past hypermodern skyscrapers that characterise Singapore's new downtown.

A lion and dragon dance greets Mazu as she arrives at Marina Bay Cruise Centre. For her, going down the narrow and curved stairs of the bus is no easy feat. She is carefully, almost gingerly, transferred from the hands of one attentive principal devotee to another.

Mazu being carried by a principal devotee during the 45-minute ferry ride out to the waters around the Southern Islands. *Photo by Alvin Tan.*

Smoke from the incense fills the stairway. There is a little pause at the ferry boarding point in Marina Bay Cruise Centre. Mazu is delayed briefly as a uniformed Immigrant and Checkpoints Authority officer unlocks and opens the access door for her. When a sacred deity enters the profane and quotidian in her material form, she finds herself subject to its rules and regulations.

From here, it is a pleasant and cool 45-minute cruise out to the waters around the Southern Islands and back. Mazu is in her element as Goddess of the Sea as she looks over the container ships, oil tankers and other marine vessels in Singapore's Eastern Anchorage from her vantage point on the open top deck of the ferry.[31]

For her devotees, it is time to unwind a little from the noise and hustle and bustle of the event. Some ask to take selfies with Mazu. Groups of devotees, with mobile phones in outstretched arm, snap happy photos with Mazu, which make their way onto social media and to friends and family on Whatsapp almost instantaneously. On the Starboard side, Dr Koh Chin Yee – who is also vice-chair of the cultural committee of the Singapore Hokkien Huay Kuan – livestreams the event, providing an engaging narrative about Singapore's skyline and history. As with so many aspects of Singaporean life, tradition and modernity appear to be totally at ease with each other here. Mazu, broken down into bits and bytes, ones and zeroes, finds herself streamed across the realms of the internet and reaching, unsurprisingly, a global audience.[32]

A throng of devotees presses up against the bus as Mazu returns to Telok Ayer. The procession makes it way down Stanley Street, passes through the Singapore Hokkien Huay Kuan building where it comes to a halt in front of the *getai* stage at the forecourt of the building. As Mazu ends her inspection tour and returns to Thian Hock Keng, her devotees cross a Bridge of Blessings in turn. A stamp is affixed on their clothing, signifying the imparting of Mazu's blessings and good wishes on them.

Mazu Worship Lives On

In 1840, Mazu's birthday procession drew (caustic) comments from the European population and even missionaries chimed in on it.[33] In 2024, the procession is no longer presented solely as a religious event but also as a cultural experience, a celebration of heritage and expression of tradition.

The birthday procession was not the only time that Mazu undertook a journey in 2024. In April, as Senoko Fishery Port wound up its operations, its tenants – mainly fish merchants and their workers – were moved to Jurong Fishery Port. An altar of Mazu moved with them. "In the past, the fishermen would come to the Mazu altar near the jetty to pray for safety in the seas and a good catch," said 72-year-old fish merchant Phillip Yap. "This is a tradition from the old Kangkar village in Punggol and then to here, so we appealed to bring it to Jurong Fishery Port," he added.[34]

So long as Singapore's economic story continues to be intertwined with the sea, Mazu worship and culture will continue to endure, whether as religious devotion, cultural expression or heritage experience. ♦

NOTES

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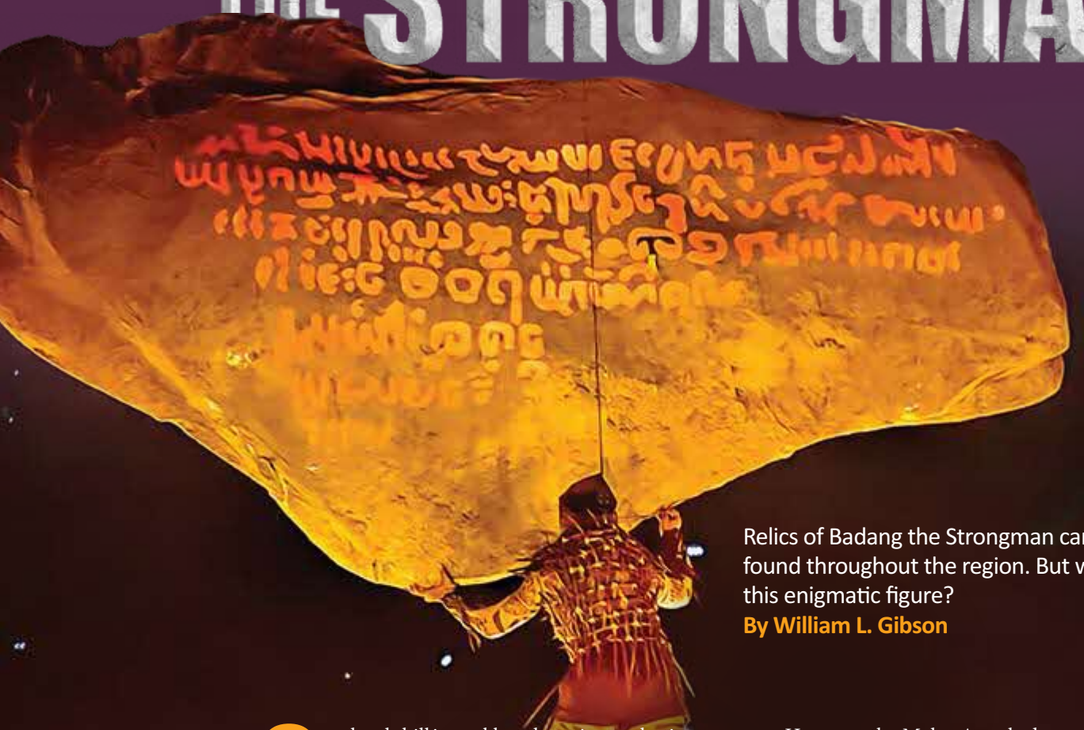
UNCOVERING THE ORIGINS OF BADANG THE STRONGMAN



Relics of Badang the Strongman can be found throughout the region. But who was this enigmatic figure?

By William L. Gibson

On a lonely hill in a rubber plantation on the tiny island of Pulau Buru in the Riau Archipelago, there is a shrine above a grave said to be that of Badang the Strongman, whose exploits are recorded in the *Sulalat al-Salatin* (Genealogy of Kings), popularly known as the *Sejarah Melayu* or Malay Annals. This is an important literary work composed around the 17th century by Tun Seri Lanang, the *bendahara* (prime minister) of the royal court of Johor, on the history and genealogy of the Malay kings of the Melaka Sultanate (1400–1511).[1]

The legendary story of Badang throwing an enigmatic engraved rock from the top of present-day Fort Canning Hill to the southeastern side of the mouth of the Singapore River has become part of the mythology of modern Singapore.[2]

However, the Malay Annals does not mention any inscriptions on the rock that Badang hurled, and colonial accounts confused this stone with Badang's gravestone, which some 19th-century accounts place in Johor. Where did the story of Badang come from? What does it have to do with the Singapore Stone? And where was the strongman buried?

A Herculean Feat

Badang's story varies across different versions of the *Sejarah Melayu* (more than 30 manuscripts are known, some fragmentary), although certain details are consistent.[3] He was an Orang Benua (an aboriginal people) and a slave of a man of Sayong, a 15th-century settlement on an upper tributary of the Johor River.

Badang the Strongman lifting a symbolically oversized "Singapore Stone" in a performance at the 2016 National Day Parade. *Photo by Choo Yut Shing. From Flickr.*

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The story goes that Badang had set fish traps in the Besisek River, but the next day all he found were bones and scales (hence the name "the river of scales"; known today as Sungai Sisek).

Eventually, Badang caught a *hantu* (a spirit or demon) stealing his fish. In exchange for not killing the spirit, Badang was granted supernatural strength by swallowing the spirit's vomit. Eventually, Badang's strength became known to Sri Rana Wikrama, the third raja (king) of the Kingdom of Singapura, who made him a military officer or *Hulubalang* (the military nobility of the classical Malay kingdoms in Southeast Asia).

In a feat of strength, Badang tossed a massive stone from the king's palace, atop what is today's Fort Canning Hill, all the way to the mouth of the Singapore River, roughly 850 m away. Known variously as Tanjong Singhapura and Rocky Point, the accomplished Malay scholar and teacher Abdullah Abdul Kadir (better known as Munsyi Abdullah) described in his autobiography, *Hikayat Abdullah* (Stories of Abdullah), the location as having "many large rocks, with little rivulets running between the fissures, moving like a snake that has been struck". He reported that one of these stones, which resembled a garfish, was worshipped by the Orang Laut, or sea people: "To this rock they all made offerings in their fear of it, placing bunting on it treating it with reverence. 'If we do not pay our respects to it,' they said, 'when we go in and out of the shallows it will send us to destruction'."[4]

The Singapore Stone

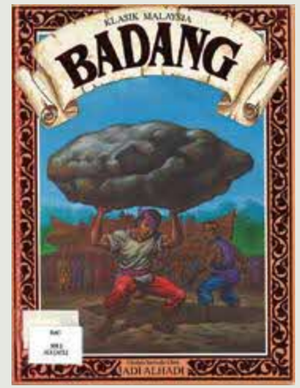
The slab of rock with the illegible text was discovered in 1819. The rock was blown up in 1843 to enlarge the mouth of the Singapore River for the construction of Fort Canning and a fragment of it (estimated to be about 3 m tall, 2.7 m wide and 60–150 cm thick), known as the Singapore Stone today, is currently on display at the National Museum of Singapore.[5]

However, in the *Sejarah Melayu*, there is no mention of writing on the rock either before or after Badang had hurled it. The Annals merely note that Badang's rock is located at the mouth of the river – but this may have been the garfish stone that Munsyi Abdullah had described in his autobiography. Nonetheless, the Singapore Stone and the story of Badang have been intertwined in the popular imagination of Singapore for almost as long as the colony itself.

In his 1834 book, *The Malayan Peninsula*, Peter James Begbie wrote that the three rocks associated with Badang – the one he hurled, the Singapore Stone and an engraved marker on his grave – were all one and the same. (Begbie was a captain with the East India Company's Madras Artillery and was serving in Melaka when the book was published.) According to Begbie, the mysterious writing inscribed on the stone is a record of the story of Badang after his death. Yet, Begbie described the legend as "fabulous and childish", indicating that it likely was something he had been told.[6] But we have no idea who told Begbie this story. Was it one of the British colonists who had read the Annals? Could the connection between Badang and the Singapore Stone be a colonial invention?

The Annals also noted that when Badang died and was buried, the king of Kalinga (present-day northern Telangana, northeastern Andhra Pradesh, most of Odisha and a portion of Madhya Pradesh states) sent a monument to be erected over Badang's grave. In the Scottish poet and Orientalist John Leyden's English translation of the *Sejarah Melayu* – published posthumously in 1821 – he said that Badang was buried at "the point of the Streights [sic] of Singhapura". The Kalinga monument was described as "two stone pillars" resembling an Islamic grave, which were visible "at the point of the bay".[7]

The *Raffles MS No. 18* or *Raffles Manuscript 18* version dated 1612 (named thus because it once belonged to Stamford Raffles and is believed to be one of the earliest recensions of the original text) of the Annals described the monument as a single stone.[8] Yet both Leyden's and Raffles' versions mention that this monument could be seen, hence the confusion with the engraved stone at the entrance to the river. So where was Badang buried?



(Right) An illustration of Badang lifting the rock by Khuzae Mohamed. *Image reproduced from Adi Alhadi, Badang (Kuala Lumpur: Edusystem, 1993). (From National Library Singapore, call no. RSING 398.2 ADI-[ACL]).*

(Below) The slab of rock with the illegible text was discovered in 1819. It was blown up in 1843 to enlarge the mouth of the Singapore River. This fragment, called the Singapore Stone, is on display at the National Museum of Singapore. *Collection of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.*

The grave believed to belong to Badang on Pulau Buru, December 2023. It is a long grave (*kubor panjang*) measuring 3.25 m, a sign of divine power. The *gaharu* tree is to the left. The grave was declared an official cultural site in 2010. *Photo by William L. Gibson.*

Badang's Grave

Most versions of the Annals mention that Badang is buried in a place called Buru (بورو). Today, on Pulau Buru, a small island south of Pulau Karimun in the Riau Archipelago, there is a shrine above a *makam*, or grave, believed to belong to Badang. Located on a remote hill in an old rubber plantation, the grave was likely the location of a nature shrine before the associations with Badang were made.

There are three large trees inside the enclosure. The middle tree, marked as sacred with a yellow cloth, is most likely a *gaharu*, or agarwood tree (*Aquilaria malaccensis*), whose fragrant wood has long been prized for making incense, prayer beads, and Hindu and Buddhist idols. When I visited the place in 2023, the locals told me that the Badang grave had been there since the 1960s. The oldest reference in print that I could locate dates to 1972.[9]

It is a long grave, measuring 3.25 m, with natural, uncarved stones for the *batu nisan* (gravestone). An engraved plaque dedicated in 2006, with a poem titled "Hikayat Datok Sibadang", is embedded in the wall of the concrete structure above the grave. A sign reminds visitors that the grave is an officially protected monument that cannot be disturbed. The site has been managed by the Tanjung Balai Karimun Tourism Office since 2010.[10]

However, the exact location of Buru in the Annals is a mystery. There are a number of possible places around the region that could be the location of Buru. Nineteenth-century British commentators took it to mean Tanjong Buru, also known as Tanjong Bulus, located at the mouth of the Selat Tebrau, or the entrance to what period maps refer to as the "Old Straits of Singapore", where Leyden said the monument could be found. This point is now known as Tanjong Piai in Johor, Malaysia. Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European maps show the name of the *tanjong* ("cape" or "promontory" in Malay) as "Buro", "Baro", "Boro", "Boulas" and "Bouro". The spelling "Buru" did not appear until the 19th century, although "Boulus" and "Peie" (modern Piai) are found in mid-19th-century maps. Some European maps from this period used all three names.

Leyden named the *tanjong* "Barus". Thomas Braddell (attorney-general of the Straits Settlements, 1867–82), in his 1851 annotated version of Leyden's translation, wrote: "The champion was buried at Tanjong Buru, the extreme south west point of the Peninsula, opposite Point Macalister, or closer, Tanjong Gool in Singapore Island, but I cannot say if any traces remain of the monument erected by the Indian King."[11]

In his 1828 travelogue, *Journal of an Embassy from the Governor-General of India to the Courts of Siam and Cochin China*, John Crawfurd (second Resident of Singapore, 1823–26) referred to the *tanjong* as "Tanjung Bulus, (correctly, Buros,) the most southern extremity of the continent, of Asia".[12]

The Methodist missionary William G. Shellabear – in his second Rumi (Romanised Malay) translation of the *Sejarah Melayu* (first edition in 1898) – called this *tanjong* "Bulus" but claimed that Badang was buried in Buru.[13]

R.O. Winstedt, the English Orientalist and colonial administrator, wrote in his 1932 paper on the history of Johor published in the *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* that Badang was buried in "Tanjong Buru (alias Bulus) under a tombstone (*nisan*) sent by a raja of Kalinga".[14] However, as there is no record of an engraved stone being found on the *tanjong*, all these attributions were seemingly based merely on textual inference.

In some versions of the Annals, reference is made to Buru as a kingdom with a formidable navy of 40 warships, each capable of carrying hundreds of men. This Buru was given as a battle prize (*di-anugerahi ia Buru*) by the sultan of Melaka to a brave captain of his fleet following a battle at Pasai in Aceh, on the island of Sumatra, which could not have been a reference to tiny Pulau Buru nor is it a reference to the *tanjong*.[15] Winstedt used "Tanjong Burus" in his 1938 Rumi translation of the *Raffles MS No. 18* recension, noting that this version "incorrectly" used "Bruas" (برواس)

The Lobu Tua Inscription on this stone (also called Barus Inscription) is in Tamil and dates to 1088. It was discovered in 1873 in North Sumatra, Indonesia. The description of Badang's gravestone in the Malay Annals closely matches this inscription and similar Tamil-engraved stones found in Sumatra. This stone can be found in the collection of the National Museum of Jakarta. *Image reproduced from Histoire de Barus, Sumatra. II, Etudes Archéologique et Documents: Le Site de Lobu Tua (Paris: Association Archipel, 2003), 299. (From National Library Singapore, call no. RSEA 959.81 HIS).*

Sites associated with Badang around the region.

for the name of a *tanjong* that was near but not part of Singapore, i.e. Buru/Bulus.[16]

Yet there exists a town called Bruas (also spelled "Beruas") in Perak today. Bruas was an ancient settlement that may have been mentioned as far back as Ptolemaic sources (305–30 BCE) and may have later been a port in the Srivijaya empire (7th–13th century CE). Bruas appears in the *Sejarah Melayu* correctly as such and, significantly, there are 15th- or 16th-century gravestones, known as *batu Aceh*, located in Kampong Kota in Bruas along Sungai Beruas at a place where the palace of the kingdom once stood. The graves are still there, known today as *Makam Raja Beruas*, or grave of the Beruas king. Winstedt believed that these were the final resting places of Indian-Muslim missionaries from Gujarat, India.[17]

Tomé Pires, a 16th-century Portuguese diplomat and writer, noted in the early 1500s that Bruas traded with Pasai, and that men from Gujarat were also found at Pasai, suggesting another mode of transmission for both the stones and stories about strongmen.[18]

Could these gravestones at Bruas have been what inspired the story of the raja of Kalinga sending a monument for Badang's grave at Buru? Or did this story come from further afield?

There are carved stone pillars inscribed in Tamil (one is dated 1088) found at Barus, on the west coast of north Sumatra, offering a different trajectory for the story. Bruas is phonemically close to both Barus (باروس) and Buru, suggesting that the Buru in the Annals presents a localisation of Hindu stories to a peninsular context (or perhaps a copyist error that was repeated in subsequent editions). The trade and royal conflicts between Aceh, on the northwest tip of Sumatra, and the Malay Peninsula account for this cross-fertilisation of folktales.

Yet another possibility is the well-known Sanskrit inscription carved into the side of a granite promontory facing the sea along the stretch of coast known as Pasir Panjang on the northwest coast of Pulau Karimun Besar, an island in the Riau Archipelago only a few kilometres from both Pulau Buru and Tanjong Buru/Bulus/Piai. The inscription, believed to date to the late Srivijaya period, describes indentations running down the sloping cliff as Buddha's footprints. But legend has it that these indentations are the footprints of Badang.[19]

Not far from the inscription is a freshwater spring that was "regarded as *keramat* (miracle-working) by local people, who would have come to take its water for ritual and medicinal purposes".[20] When I visited the site in 2023, the inscription had been converted into a shrine with Taoist and Hindu elements erected over the inscription.

Folk Hero

Badang's Orang Benua origin is a significant part of his local identity. In 1847, J.R. Logan, founder and editor of the *Journal of the Indian Archipelago and Eastern Asia*, noted that the Malays called the Orang Benua living around Sayong both *orang utan* ("men of the forest") and *orang dalat liar* ("wild men of the interior"). In the Annals, Badang's power bestowed by the river spirit is linked to this Malay interpretation of Orang Benua as being similar to orangutans (great apes native to Borneo and Sumatra).[21] However, the supernatural element of the tale was not limited to Johor.

In 1885, the British colonial administrator William Edward Maxwell recounted the story of Toh Kuala Bidor, a poor fisherman from Pasai, who relocates with his wife to the Bidor River in Perak. He catches a jinn stealing his fish – the spirit was dressed like a

haji and wore a green turban, indicating he was an Islamic spirit – who suggests that Toh Kuala Bidor swallows his spit so that he can become "the greatest chief in Perak". Indeed, he later became the *laksamana* (admiral) of Perak.[22] The *laksamana* in 1885 claimed to be a seventh-generation descendant of this semi-mythical figure.

Maxwell recalled a similar account in a Perak folktale. An old woman by the name of Nenek Kemang encounters two sisters who, upon the death of their parents, are enslaved by their uncle over a debt of five dollars, owed by their parents. The woman asks their names and one of them said: "I am called Upik and my sister's name is Dewi." Then the old woman instructs Upik to open her mouth and when she does so, the old woman spits into it and then touches Dewi in the waist. She also gives the sisters a *tuai* (a special knife for harvesting paddy) and teaches them rice cultivation – the knowledge that has been passed down to the present day.[23]

These stories have clear resonances with the Badang tale in the Annals, but there are others from further afield than Perak.

There is a version recorded in the *Folktales of Assam* (1916) by Jnanadabhiram Barooah (a variant spelling of Barua) – a notable Indian Assamese writer, dramatist and barrister – and told by the Barua (or Baru) people from Chittagong in Assam titled "The Tale of a Singara Fish". The singara or singhara (*Sperata seenghala*) is a type of large catfish commonly found in India and frequently featured in Bengali folktales (and makes for a flavourful curry dish). In this version, a poor fisherman catches the king of the singara fish, who, while riding a cow belonging to the fisherman, encounters a monster. The fish-king manages to subdue the monster who, to ensure its release, vomits a ring that becomes a house of gold for the fisherman. In the end, the fish-king reveals himself to be a human in disguise and the two agree to live together in the gold mansion.[24]

The image of a king riding a cow, a *vahana* or animal mount, indicates the Hindu origins of the tale, which suggests that it may predate the Malay versions. The names Barua/Baru may also be indicators of the links to Barus/Buru in the Badang tale in the Annals. Another tale in the Barooah collection tells of a contest arranged by a king between a strong man and a trickster, which also carries elements of the Badang tale in which the champion fights another strong man sent by the sultan of Perlak, Aceh.[25]

It seems possible that versions of the story of Badang travelled between Pasai, Chittagong and Perak and then into the *Sejarah Melayu*, a long journey that continued when the site of Badang's mystical grave was changed from Tanjong Buru in Johor to Pulau Buru in Riau, as toponyms shifted and the Annals became available to a wider audience in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Badang Venerated

The stone boulder that Badang hurled may have existed prior to the initial founding of the Kingdom of Singapura in 1299 and, if so, it was likely illegible to the people there.[26]

The Badang story presents an explanation of how the stone ended up at the mouth of the Singapore River and perhaps even what was written on it. There may have been a similar stone on the hill. Businessman William Henry Macleod Read, who first came to Singapore in 1841, recalled: "I remember a large block of the rock at the corner of Government House, where Fort Canning is now; but during the absence of the Governor at Penang on one occasion the convicts requiring stone to replace the road, chipped up the valuable relic of antiquity, and thus all trace of our past history was lost."[27] This would suggest that there were once two engraved stones, and explains the trajectory from the hill to the river mouth: they were separated when Badang tossed one of them.

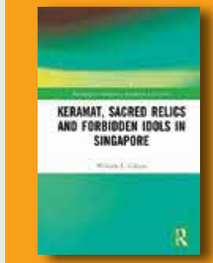
Logan reported that for the Malay people, rocks that were "in any way remarkable for size, form or position", were considered *keramat* – sacred objects associated with "some ancient worthy [person]".[28] These stones were markers upon the landscape of a living history, a connection to both ancestors and the ancestral soil.

Beyond the stone in Singapore, there were also other stones associated with Badang that are recorded in the Annals. According to Winstedt, the ruler of Singapura, Sri Rana Wikrama, sent Badang to Kuala Sayong (in Johor) to get a tree-fruit (*ulam kuras*) for the royal table. "The branch broke and Badang's head struck a rock and split it, so that to this day there is a rock at Kuala Sayong called the Split Rock (*Batu Belah*) and not far below it Badang's boat (*pelang*) and between Batu Sawar and Seluyut his punt-pole (*galah*)."[29]

In 1826, a voyager up the Johor River was told that a "a convex ripple" near a sharp bend at Tanjong Putus, near Kota Tinggi, was the "remains of the weir", or small dam, made by Badang.[30] *Putus* means to sever or break up – this *tanjong* breaks up the flow of the river – and the toponym appears in versions of the Badang story in variants of the Annals that are less well known than Leyden's translation or the *Raffles MS No. 18* recension.[31]

The singara, or catfish (*Sperata seenghala*). *Image reproduced from W.H. Syxes, "On the Fishes of the Dukhun," in Transactions of the Zoological Society of London (Vol. 2), 1841, Biodiversity Heritage Library.*

While the Batu Belah and other markers of Badang in Johor appear to be gone today, his grave remains a source of authenticity for people in the region. As Virginia Matheson (an internationally recognised authority on traditional Malay literature and historiography) pointed out the early 1980s, having the monument to such an illustrious hero on Pulau Buru created a sense of ancestral legitimacy for the ruling elite of Riau and a sense of empowerment for the residents of the islands.[32] The Singapore Stone can be seen functioning in a similar fashion, as a totem of legitimacy, for the city-state of Singapore. ♦



This is an edited version of "Legendary Figures", a chapter from *Keramat, Sacred Relics and Forbidden Idols in Singapore* by William L. Gibson (Routledge, 2024). The book is available for reference at the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library (call no. RSING 363.69095957 GIB).

NOTES

1 Nor-Afidah Abdul Rahman, "Legends of the Malay Kings," *BiblioAsia* 11, no. 4 (January–March 2016): 47–49.

2 Recent research suggests that the inscription is in the Kawi script and is probably in Sanskrit rather than Old Javanese. See Kelvin C. Yap, Tony Jiao and Francesco Perono Cacciafoco, "The Singapore Stone: Documenting the Origins, Destruction, Journey and Legacy of an Undeciphered Stone Monolith," *Histories* 3, no. 3 (2023): 271–87, https://doi.org/10.3390/histories3030019.

3 For a discussion of the variants of the *Sejarah Melayu*, see R. Roolvink, "The Variant Versions of the Malay Annals," *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 123, no. 3 (1967): 301–24. (From JSTOR via NLB's eResources website)

4 Written in Jawi between 1840 and 1843 and published in 1849, the *Hikayat Abdullah* is considered the most renowned of Munsyi Abdullah's works. A.H. Hill, trans. "The Hikayat Abdullah," *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 28, no. 3 (171) (June 1955): 130. (From JSTOR via NLB's eResources website)

5 Yap, Jiao and Cacciafoco, "The Singapore Stone," 271–87.

6 Peter James Begbie, *The Malayan Peninsula: Embracing Its History, Manners and Customs of the Inhabitants, Politics, Natural History, Etc. from Its Earliest Records* (Madras: Vepery Mission Press, 1834), 358. (From National Library Online). Yet another version that links Badang to the stone is found in John Cameron, *Our Tropical Possessions in Malayan India* (London: Smith, Elder, 1865), 49–51. (From National Library Online)

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9 Adil Buyong, *Sejarah Singapura: Rujukan Khas Mengenai Peristiwa2 Sebelum Tahun 1824* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1972), 37. (From National Library Singapore, call no. RSING 959.57 BUY-[HIS])

10 Dewi Saptiani and Amesih Amesih, "Eksistensi Makam Badang Sebagai Wisata Religi di Pulau Buru, Tanjung Balai Karimun," *Historia: Jurnal Program Studi Pendidikan Sejarah* 2, no. 1 (2017): 25–39, https://www.journal.unrika.ac.id/index.php/journalhistoria/article/view/1572. In the version related here, Badang was said to be a native of Pulau Buru.

11 Thomas Braddell, "Abstract of the Sijara Malayu or Malayan Annals with Notes," *The Journal of the Indian Archipelago and Eastern Asia* 5 (1851): 249, n. 7. (From National Library Online)

12 This is a record of John Crawfurd's commercial and diplomatic mission to the courts of Siam (now Thailand) and Cochin China (present-day South Vietnam) from 1821–22. See John Crawfurd, *Journal of an Embassy from the Governor-General of India to the Courts of Siam and Cochin China* (London: Printed by S. and R. Bentley, 1828), 41. (From National Library Online)

13 *Sejarah Melayu or The Malay Annals* (Singapura: Malaya Publishing House, 1960), 34, 44. (From National Library Singapore, call no. RCLOS 959.5 SEJ)

14 R.O. Winstedt, "A History of Johore (1365–1895 A.D.)," *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 10, no. 3 (115) (December 1932): 4. (From JSTOR via NLB's eResources website)

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16 Winstedt, "The Malay Annals or Sejarah Melayu," 65.

17 R.O. Winstedt, "The Early Muhammadan Missionaries," *Journal of the Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, no. 81 (March 1920): 5–6. (From JSTOR via NLB's eResources website)

18 Tomé Pires, *The Suma Oriental of Tomé Pires: An Account of the East, From the Red Sea to Japan, Written in Malacca and India in 1512–1515* (London: The Hakluyt Society, 1944), 144. (From National Library Singapore, call no. RRARE 910.8 HAK)

19 Ian Caldwell and Ann Appleby Hazlewood, "'The Holy Footprints of the Venerable Gautama': A New Translation of the Pasir Panjang Inscription," *Bijdragen Tot de Taal-, Land- En Volkenkunde* 150, no. 3 (1994): 457–80. (From JSTOR via NLB's eResources website). The Badang footprint story dates at least to the early 1980s and is still told today. See Virginia Matheson, "Kisah pelayaran ke Riau: Journey to Riau, 1984," *Indonesia Circle* 13, no. 36 (1985): 3–22, https://doi.org/10.1080/03062848508729602. Matheson was told of the existence of supposed Buddhist inscriptions on Pulau Buru, but our guides did not know of them in 2023. A story related to us by local guides is that in the 1990s, an "Indian" man from Malaysia read the "Hindu" inscription on the Badang tombstone then built a shelter over the *keramat* that was later replaced with the current concrete structure. A variation of this story is mentioned by Carole Faucher. In this version, the strong man is not the Badang of the Annals but a man who lived during the time of Sultan Abdul Rahman Muazzam Shah of Johor (1818–32). See Carole Faucher, "Territory, Boundaries and Ethnic Consciousness Among the Malays of the Riau Archipelago" in *Géopolitique et Mondialisation: La Relation Asie du Sud-Est – Europe*, ed. P. Lagayette (Presses de l'Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 2003), 87–106. The *batu nisan* on site today are natural rocks without any carvings or inscriptions.

20 Caldwell and Hazlewood, "'The Holy Footprints of the Venerable Gautama'," 477.

21 James Richardson Logan, "The Binua of Johore," *The Journal of the Indian Archipelago and Eastern Asia* 1 (1847): 246, https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.107692/page/n285/mode/2up.

22 W.E. Maxwell, *Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society: Notes and Queries Nos. 1–2 Edited by the Honorary Secretary* (No. 1 Issued with No. 14 of the Journal of the Society) (Singapore: Printed at the Govt. Print. Off., 1885), 47–48. (From National Library Singapore, call no. RRARE 959.5 ROY)

23 W.E. Maxwell, "The History of Perak from Native Sources," *Journal of the Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* no. 14 (December 1884): 309. (From JSTOR via NLB's eResources website)

24 Jnanadabhiram Barooah, *Folktales of Assam*, 2nd ed. (Howrah, 1954), 94–96.

25 Barooah, *Folktales of Assam*, 94–96.

26 Iain Sinclair, "Traces of the Cholas in Old Singapura," in *Sojourners to Settlers – Tamils in Southeast Asia and Singapore*, vol. 1, ed. Arun Mahizhnan and Nalina Gopal (Singapore: Indian Heritage Centre and Institute of Policy Studies, Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore, 2019), 48–58. (From National Library Singapore, call no. RSING 305.8948110959 SOJ)

27 Quoted in Charles Burton Buckley, *An Anecdotal History of Old Times Singapore*, vol. 1. (Singapore: Fraser & Neave, 1902), 94. (From National Library Online)

28 Logan, "The Binua of Johore," 279.

29 Winstedt, "A History of Johore (1365–1895 A.D.)," 4. There is a Kuala Sayong in Perak as well, yet another connection between Badang and Perak.

30 "Trip to the Johore River," *Singapore Chronicle*, August 1826, reprinted in John Henry Moor, *Notices of the Indian Archipelago and Adjacent Countries* (Singapore: Printed in Singapore by the Mission Press of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, 1837), 264–68. (From National Library Online)

31 A. Samad Ahmad, ed., *Sulatatus Salatin = Sejarah Melayu* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1979), 49. (From National Library Singapore, call no. RCLOS 959.5 SEJ)

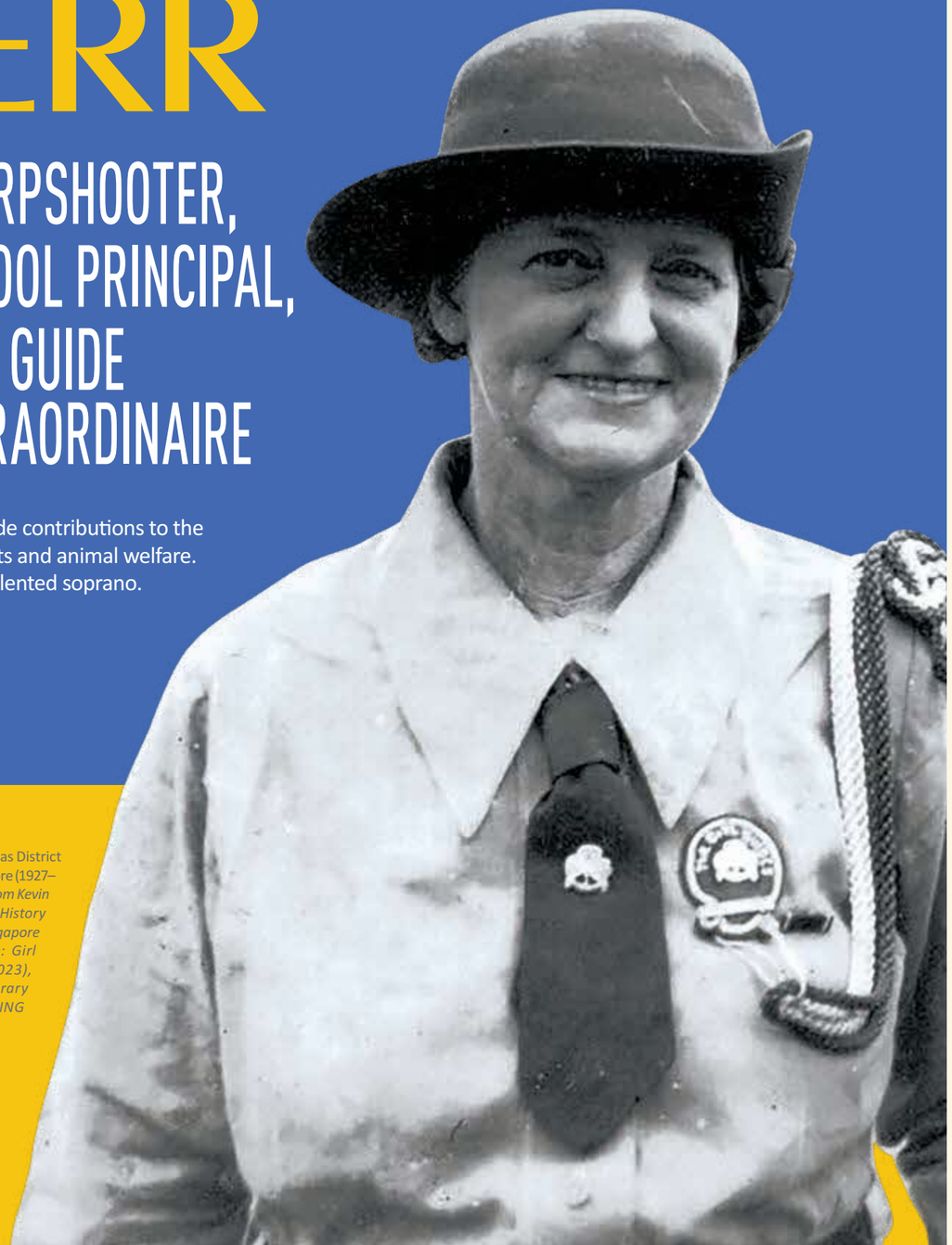
32 Virginia Matheson, "Strategies of Survival: The Malay Royal Line of Lingga-Riau," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 17, no. 1 (March 1986): 24, n. 38. (From JSTOR via NLB's eResources website)

BARBARA KERR

SHARPSHOOTER, SCHOOL PRINCIPAL, GIRL GUIDE EXTRAORDINAIRE

Barbara Kerr made contributions to the Girl Guides, sports and animal welfare. She was also a talented soprano.

By Nick Aplin



Barbara Kerr when she was District Commissioner for Singapore (1927–35). *Image reproduced from Kevin Tan, Doing Our Best: A History of the Girl Guides in Singapore 1914–2022 (Singapore: Girl Guides Singapore, 2023), 17. (From National Library Singapore, call no. RSING 369.463095957 TAN).*

Barbara Kerr (second row, second from right) represented the Kinta District team from Ipoh in the Cornwell Cup competition in December 1935. She was the only female competitor. *Image reproduced from The Straits Budget, 26 December 1935, 16. (From NewspaperSG).*

Dr Nick Aplin is the Deputy Director (Sport Heritage) at Sport Singapore. He is the author of the *Sport in Singapore* trilogy of books: *The Colonial Legacy* (2019), *The Rocky Road to Kallang Park* (2023) and *Visions for Change* (2023).

In early 20th-century Singapore, there were not many occasions when a woman was expected to stand her ground against men in a representative international sporting event. There was, however, one notable exception: when a 26-year-old school principal stunned her male rivals, not in golf or tennis, but in rifle shooting.

The school principal was none other than Barbara Kerr, principal of the Singapore Chinese Girls' School (SCGS). The occasion for her amazing display of "markswomanship" was the 25th Interport Rifle Match in 1914 between the teams from Singapore, Shanghai, Hong Kong and Penang.[1]

This was also the first time that women were allowed to participate in the match; prior to 1914, this had been an exclusively male preserve. What made the competition even more historic is that Kerr was the only woman on the Singapore team, and most likely the other teams as well.

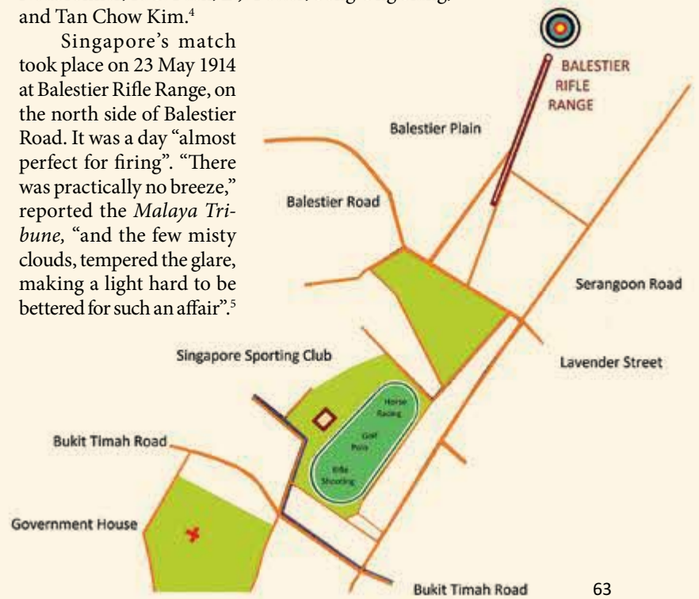
A Dramatic Win

The names of the team representing Singapore – Barbara Kerr being one of them and the sole woman – were finalised only in early May 1914. There were some ground rules for the Interport Rifle Match. The match "shall be fired on any date between 15th April and 31st May (inclusive) in each year", and "[e]ach port shall shoot on its own or any recognised range in the neighbourhood".[2]

Comprising 12 competitors per team, each person had to shoot the target from 200 yards (183 m), 500 yards (457 m) and 600 yards (549 m), and the scores added up. Each team would independently and accurately record and report its scores, and send these by telegraph to the other teams. There were officials at each venue to record and verify the scores: "three superintending officers or umpires, two of whom shall be at the butts [an earthen bank used to support a target for shooting] and one at the firing point throughout the shooting".[3]

Only the 10 best scores from each team were taken into account. The Singapore team consisted of R.W. Chater; Ferguson Davie; R.E. de Silva; J. Flanagan; W.L. Kemp; Barbara Kerr; D.W. Moss; Gunner Neubronner; R.G. Pash; E.J. Potter; Song Ong Siang; and Tan Chow Kim.[4]

Singapore's match took place on 23 May 1914 at Balestier Rifle Range, on the north side of Balestier Road. It was a day "almost perfect for firing". "There was practically no breeze," reported the *Malaya Tribune*, "and the few misty clouds, tempered the glare, making a light hard to be bettered for such an affair".[5]



Singapore's competition for the 1914 Interport Rifle Match took place at Balestier Rifle Range, on the north side of Balestier Road. *Illustration by Nick Aplin.*

Kerr had a poor start but recovered in a spectacular way to score a total of 93 points for Singapore, putting her in sixth position. The *Malaya Tribune* wrote:

> Miss Kerr was most heartily congratulated on her strong finish, and she well deserved it. Coming from the 200 yds. position a bad fire of 27, she did not become disheartened in the least, and secured 32 from the 500 distance. The last firing began at 4.35 from the 600 yards mound, and Miss Kerr rose a few minutes later after making the highest score of any of the competitors from that distance – 34, bringing her name up to 6th on the score sheet.[6]

Singapore Team	200 yards	500 yards	600 yards	Total
R.E. de Silva	31	34	33	98
Lt. W. L. Kemp	33	33	32	98
Sapper J. Flanagan	32	34	30	96
C. Sergeant-Major Chater	31	32	32	95
Gunner Neubronner	31	35	29	95
Miss Barbara Kerr	**27**	**32**	**34**	**93**
Sapper E.J. Potter	28	34	31	93
Sergeant Tan Chow Kim	32	31	30	93
Lt. Song Ong Siang	28	32	31	91
Sapper R. Pash	29	29	32	90
	302	**326**	**314**	**942**

Although the final scores of Singapore and Shanghai were tied at 942, Singapore was declared the winner of the competition because Kerr recorded the highest score in the third and final round (34 out of 35 points), which was the tie-breaker. No Shanghai shooter could match her in the final round. One of her teammates, Song Ong Siang, acknowledged her contributions to the team effort:

> The novel feature in the match was the inclusion in the Singapore team of a lady, Miss Kerr (the well-known and popular vocalist, then Principal of the Singapore Chinese Girls' School, and now Mrs Thomas). By her coolness and steady shooting at the longer ranges, she finished by taking sixth place with a score of 93.[7]

When asked by a *Malaya Tribune* reporter if nerves had affected her score after the 200 yards round, Kerr replied that she had been very nervous then. She added, "I did not care after that, as I was out of it."[8] Kerr had left her stamp on the history of rifle shooting in Singapore.

Early Life and Achievements

Barbara Hume Christie Kerr was born on 19 December 1887 near Dockhead Street, Saltcoats, Ayrshire, in Scotland. In 1898, 11-year-old Barbara moved to Singapore with her father David Kerr, a marine engineer, together with her mother, who was also known as Barbara Kerr, and her 13-year-old sister, Mary Gibson Kerr.

The two Kerr sisters began their studies at Raffles Girls' School (RGS) in 1899. Kerr was in Standard IV, while her elder sister Mary was in Standard VI. Both received a prize at the end of that school year – Kerr for Reading and her sister for English History.[9]

In 1900, David Kerr left Singapore in either October or November to take up a posting in Bangkok as engineer for the Poh Chin Soo rice mills. Tragically he died of a stroke on 21 November.[10] At the time, Barbara Kerr and her two daughters resided at 8 Devonshire Road. In 1903, the family moved to "Leonie House" (14 Grange Road), on Leonie Hill, as proprietors.[11]

Kerr continued to do well academically at RGS. In 1902, when she was in Standard VII, she won the prize for Sacred History.[12] The following year, she became head girl.[13] In February 1905, as a senior in the Special Class, Kerr collected prizes for Composition and French.[14] She was also one of three seniors at RGS who took the Cambridge Local Examinations and passed.[15] At the prizegiving ceremony in May 1905, Kerr was designated "First Girl".[16]

Beyond her academic achievements, Kerr was a soprano of considerable repute. She made public appearances in charity concerts, notably at a concert held at the Tanglin Club for the benefit of St Mary's Home for Orphans in November 1906.[17] Kerr also played tennis and was a handicap golfer. However, it was in rifle shooting that she made her mark.

On the professional front, Kerr was the principal of SCGS from 1912 to 1916, and again from 1918 to 1920 after her marriage. She also made significant contributions to the Girl Guide movement, and was District Commissioner for Singapore from 1927 to 1935. Between 1934 and 1941, she was Commissioner for Malay Guides and Brownies, Girl Guides Association, Malaya.[18]

Kerr was also known for her work as honorary secretary of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and the Child Welfare Society.[19]

In 1916, she married Leslie Arding Thomas, who would be appointed Chief Police Officer of Singapore in 1939. After her marriage, she became known as Mrs L.A. Thomas.[20]

Taking up Rifle Shooting

It is not possible to state categorically when Kerr began to take up sports as a meaningful pastime or even as a ruling passion. Tennis and golf were popular with ladies when Kerr was growing up, as there were no modesty concerns with these sports. Rifle shooting was a different story.

In 1956, the *Straits Times Annual* described the following, which was a common scenario in the Federated Malay States (FMS) in the early 20th century:

> The ladies lowered themselves decorously to the ground, lay flat on their stomachs, arranged their full ankle-length black skirts modestly to their fullest extent, and raised their rifles tentatively to their shoulders. Their white blouses were fastened up to their necks. Their hats were strange affairs, very large and of a white straw for the most part and adorned with a wealth of ribbon and bows.[21]

The first decade of the 20th century saw the rapid growth of shooting in the Malayan states, though less so in Singapore. The *Straits Budget* reported a rifle contest between men and women in Taiping, Perak, in February 1904: "The ladies were armed with the .360 rook rifle and fired from a distance of 100 yards, while the gentlemen were provided with service rifles at double the distance." The ladies managed to beat the men by 19 points.[22]

In September 1907, there were calls for a ladies' branch of the Singapore Rifle Association. By March 1909, the Singapore Ladies' Rifle Association had been formed with 28 members. The idea of regular competition was an important objective.[23]

Kerr most likely joined the association upon the introduction of the older ladies. Her name as a participant in a rifle shooting competition first appeared in newspapers in May 1908 when she was 21 years old, shooting at 100 yards (91 m), 150 yards (137 m) and 200 yards (183 m), and finished in eighth place out of 11 women.[24] By October, she had made significant improvements to her scores, notably in the two longer distances.[25]

Principal of Singapore Chinese Girls' School

In February 1912, Kerr became the principal of SCGS at the age of 25. It was a challenging job as the school suffered from a lack of funding between 1899 and 1919.[26] By 1912, the school was overcrowded with 240 students.

Amid her professional developments, Kerr retained her interest in singing. The Singapore Philharmonic Society hosted a concert at the Teutonia Club on 30 March 1912 where Kerr performed two songs.[27] In June 1914, she sang in the concert for St Mary's Home and School for Eurasian Girls.[28]

Kerr left her post in 1916, the same year she married. Two years later, as Mrs L.A. Thomas, she returned as principal of SCGS. During the next three years, she focused on playing tennis and an occasional shoot at the monthly "spoon competitions" (where spoons were awarded as prizes at these shooting competitions).[29]

By June 1920, Kerr had resigned as principal and accompanied her husband to Melaka.[30] In her last annual school prizegiving ceremony a few months earlier, Lim Boon Keng, on behalf of the trustees of the school, "expressed the gratitude of the committee to Mrs Thomas, and the staff, for the work they had already done for the pupils and, indirectly, for the Chinese community". The *Straits Times* wrote that "SCGS was an institution so ably conducted under the principalship of Mrs Thomas".[31]

Subsequent Shooting Competitions

As part of his police work, Kerr's husband was posted to different locations within the FMS and Singapore. After stints in Melaka, Penang, Ipoh and Selangor, he became Chief Police Officer of Singapore in 1939.[32]

Students of the Singapore Chinese Girls' School having lessons outside the school, c. 1900. Image is reproduced from a postcard published by G.R. Lambert & Co. *Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

Kerr accompanied him on his different postings, and had the opportunity to join various shooting and other sports clubs.

In 1932, Kerr, then 45, was living in Kuala Lumpur. At the FMS Championships in March that year, she recorded noteworthy scores in two competitions. She was the only woman competing and took second place in the championship. "The runner-up for the Championship was Mrs L.A. Thomas, the only lady to compete. Mrs Thomas was awarded a special prize, a bronze medal for her score of 350, which was only ten behind that of the champion," reported the *Straits Times*.[33]

A lasting ambition was fulfilled in 1933 when Kerr took part in rifle competitions in Bisley, in Surrey, England. (Bisley is one of the major international shooting competitions, the equivalent of Wimbledon for tennis.) A write-up in London's *Evening Standard* (which was reproduced in the *Straits Times* on 15 August 1933) noted:

> Mrs. Barbara Thomas has travelled 9,000 miles from Kuala Lumpur in the Malay States, where her husband is a police official, to shoot at Bisley this year. She is the only woman member of the Rifle Club in Kuala Lumpur, and it is only two years ago that she took up shooting with the Service rifle, although she had shot considerably with a small-bore rifle recently. Now she is an accomplished shot and already at Bisley she has won five prizes.[34]

In December 1935, Kerr represented the Kinta District team in Ipoh in the Cornwell Cup presented by the FMS Volunteer Force Rifle Association. At age 48, and the only woman in the competition, Kerr scored well over the longer distances, performing better than most of the men. She was placed eighth out of 20 competitors. The *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle* described her as "a clever shot".[35]

Contributions to the Girl Guides

Kerr was also closely involved with the Girl Guide movement in Malaya and Singapore. It is not clear when she first joined the Girl Guides, though it was likely during her time as principal of SCGS between 1918 and 1920.

She rose through the ranks. In August 1921, when Kerr was living in Penang, she was presented with a Captain's badge during an inspection of the Penang Branch of the Girl Guides by Lady Guillemard.[36] In January 1923, she was appointed Division Secretary for Penang and Province Wellesley.[37]

Just four years later, in 1927, Kerr became District Commissioner for Singapore. In May 1931, she formed the first pack of Malay Brownies in Kuala Lumpur. She recalled: "After the scheme had been carefully explained to the parents and the teachers, and with some misgivings, we chose a number of the younger pupils at the Malay Girls' School, Kampong Bahru, Kuala Lumpur, to be our first Malay Brownies. But we need have had no fears. It succeeded far beyond our expectations."[38]

The Brownie investiture ceremony on 15 May 1931 was held in the presence of the sultan of Selangor, who "pointed out that the boys had had an organisation for some time and now the Malay girls were being given their opportunity" and "hoped that other packs would be formed in Selangor".[39]

Later in the same year, there were requests to start Malay Brownie Packs in Johor and Klang. To cope with increasing demand, in February 1932, Kerr was appointed Commissioner in charge of all Malay Brownie Packs in Malaya.[40] In January 1934, she assumed the highest position in the Girl Guide movement in Malaya and Singapore – Commissioner for Malay Guides and Brownies, Girl Guides Association, Malaya.[41] For her long and outstanding service, she received the Beaver Award – the second-highest award in the Girl Guides – in 1947.[42]

It is not known when Kerr returned to the United Kingdom for good. She died in Kingston upon Thames, London, on 6 January 1973, age 86. ♦

Barbara Kerr (back row, third from right), Commissioner of Girl Guides in Malaya, with guiders at the All-Malayan guides camp held at Tanjong Bruas, Melaka, in September 1938. *Source: The Sunday Times, 4 September 1938. © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.*

The first all-Malay Brownie Pack at the Kampong Bahru Malay Girls' School in Kuala Lumpur, April 1931. The Brownie uniform was adapted from the traditional *baju* and *sarong*. *Image reproduced from Kevin Tan, Doing Our Best: A History of the Girl Guides in Singapore 1914–2022 (Singapore: Girl Guides Singapore, 2023), 21. (From National Library Singapore, RSING 369.463095957 TAN).*

NOTES

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NEW BOOKS ON SINGAPORE HISTORY

Bali 1952: Through the Lens of Liu Kang: The Trip to Java and Bali by Four Singapore Pioneering Artists

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National Library Board Singapore (2025), 298 pages
Call no. RSING 779.995986 LIU

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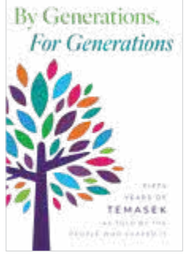

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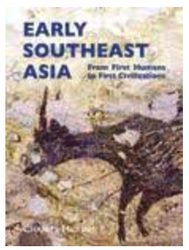

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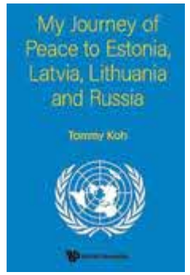

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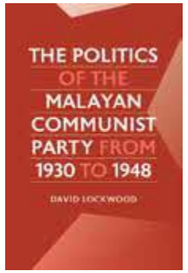

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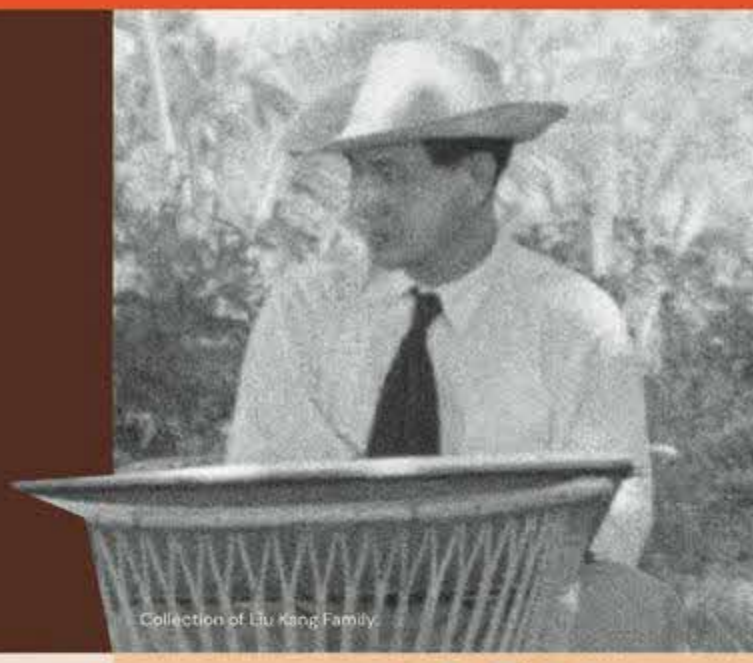

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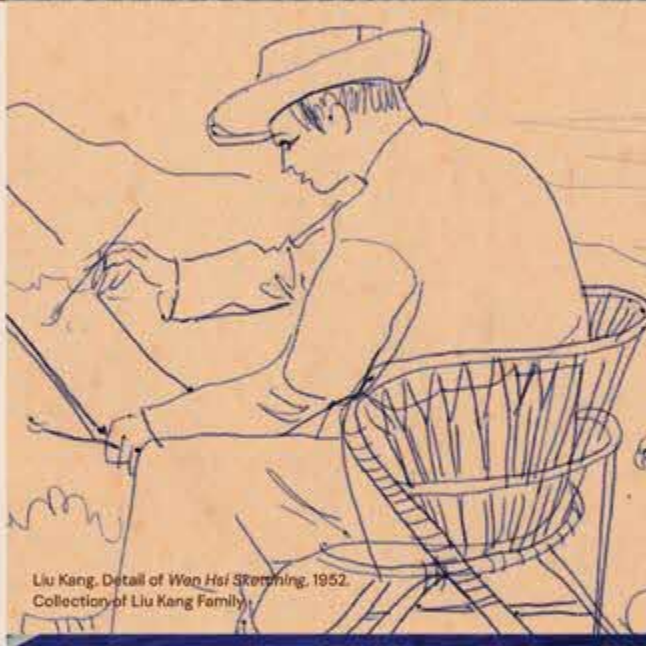

Liu Kang. Detail of *Wen Hsi Sketching*, 1952. Collection of Liu Kang Family.

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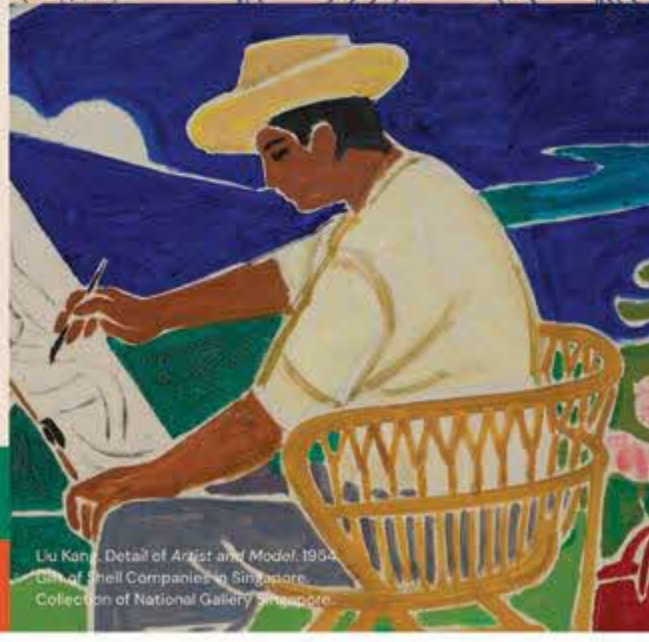

Liu Kang. Detail of *Artist and Model*, 1954. Gift of Shell Companies in Singapore. Collection of National Gallery Singapore.

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