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**Front Cover**  
Keramat Habib Noh located at Palmer Road is the resting place of Habib Noh bin Muhamad Al-Habshi, a highly regarded mystic. Worshippers from as far as China come here to pray to or pay their respects. COURTESY OF NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF SINGAPORE.



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**Errata**  
The article *remembermagazines: our love affair with magazines* in the previous issue of *Biblio.Asia* Oct–Dec 2012 (pp. 44–45) was wrongly attributed to Kathryn Lane. It was written by Barbara Quek. We are sorry for the error.

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## Director's Column

In Mr S Dhanabalan's speech to open the exhibition at the National Library celebrating the life and work of Professor Edwin Thumboo, he dwelt on "Exile" – a poem by Professor Thumboo about migration. He mused that its poignancy "[could] only be appreciated by those of us who know that time in our history when our sense of a nation was an embryo."

"Our sense of a nation". This is a very powerful notion and, in research, writing and in conversations, Singaporeans continue to formulate this sense of a nation. The study of things past can convey the Singapore of a certain time with a specificity that is absent in vague indulgent nostalgia. Perhaps then, a sense of a nation can emerge.

Two exhibitions by the National Library attempt a narrative of what Singapore was and could be. The latest exhibition presented by the National Library – "Campaign City" – focuses on a facet of Singapore at a unique junction of its nation-building journey. The many campaigns that have been introduced over the last five decades are memorable for their contributions to civil society and represent the national imperatives of Singapore at each stage of its development. The Singapore we live in now and the attendant pre-occupations of its citizens are reflected in the exhibition of campaign posters that have been reimagined by the creatives and artists of today. In the exhibition "Time-travelling: a Poetry Exhibition at the National Library", we take a trip through time in the poetry of poet Edwin Thumboo to rediscover Singapore then.

The acute recognition of our mortality gives rise to concerns of how we will be perceived when we are gone and leads to attempts to define our legacy. The markers of the once living are discussed in this issue of *BiblioAsia* and offer the sense of the nation that Singapore was in times past. Kartini Saparudin in her article *Digging Bidadari's Past: From Palace to First Muslim State Cemetery* addresses the dearth of literature on Muslim cemeteries. Liyana Taha studies keramats (traditionally defined as the graves of holy men) in the article *Life in Death: The Case of Keramats in Singapore*. She discovers that they are imbued

with meanings beyond just a remembrance of the past and are a source for studying local history and even instances of trans-cultural beliefs in Singapore.

Genevieve Wong in her article *Grave Matters: The Burial Registers in Singapore* then attempts to examine and derive conclusions about the lives and experiences of inhabitants of Singapore in the early twentieth century. In the lives examined through the burial registers, she forms a picture of the governance of Singapore of that time. In *Sago Lane: "Street of the Dead"*, the origins of Sago Lane and its death houses are explored by Sharon Teng. In this study of the abodes of the last stages of life, she shows us a glimpse of an eco-system built around death including a thriving economy with a cast of many for every aspect of death management. Finally, Mr Eric Chin, Director of the National Archives, delivers an opinion piece on the topic of death and its manifestations through literature and records.

In our continuing journey to define ourselves, we hope this issue in looking back can render a sense of a nation past, that might still offer some inkling of a nation now.

Gene Tan

Director, National Library

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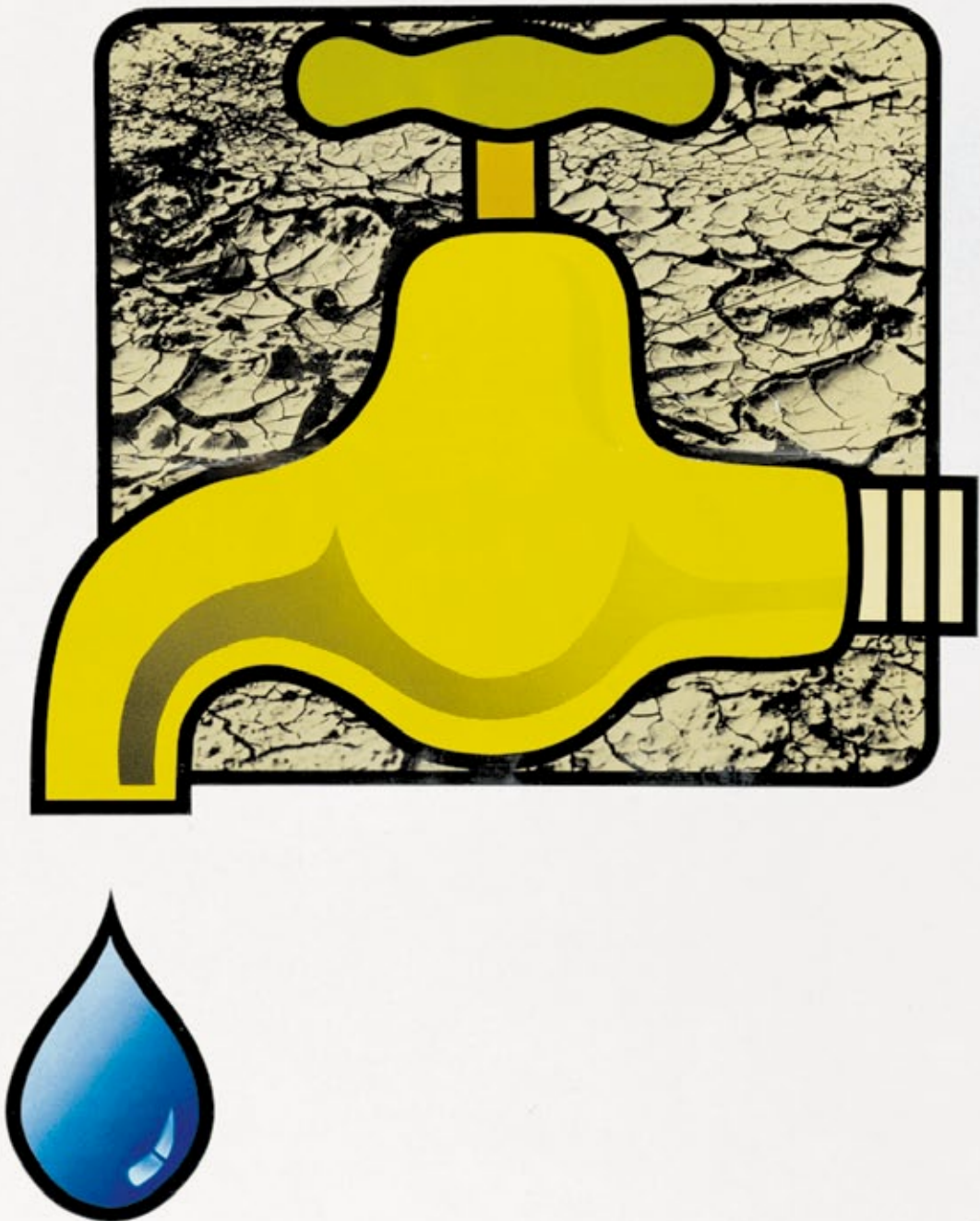
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A campaign poster produced in 1981 encouraging Singaporeans to save water. Public Utilities Board Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

# Let's Not Waste Precious Water



# Singapore: A City of Campaigns

Lim Tin Seng

Over the last five decades, Singapore has conducted many campaigns covering a wide range of topics. For instance, there have been campaigns encouraging the population to keep Singapore clean, take family planning measures, be courteous, raise productivity in the workplace and speak Mandarin as well as good English. There have also been others that remind the people not to litter, be a good neighbour, live a healthy lifestyle and even to wash their hands properly. Collectively, the purpose of these campaigns is to instill certain social behaviours and attitudes that are considered by the government to be beneficial to both the individual and the community. They are also used by the State as an instrument for policy implementation.<sup>1</sup>

Each of the campaigns that was introduced usually followed a three-stage implementation process. First, a social problem was identified by the government before a decision to rectify the problem through a nation-wide campaign was made. Second, the campaign together with its rationale and goals was revealed in a public event. Third, a media blitz was launched to raise public awareness of the campaign. At the same time, a system of incentives and disincentives was also introduced to persuade the people to adopt the attitude and behaviour recommended by the campaign.<sup>2</sup>

## Campaigns in the early years of nationhood

Most of the campaigns conducted in the early years after independence were designed to lay the foundation of a new nation.<sup>3</sup> For example, the “Keep Singapore Clean” and “Tree Planting” campaigns launched in 1968 and 1971 respectively were to establish Singapore as a country that is clean and full of greenery. In fact, the two campaigns as well as other similar campaigns were part of a larger plan that included changes in public health laws, relocation and licensing of itinerant hawkers, the development of proper sewage systems and better disease control measures, and the creation of parks and gardens. The government believed that improving the environmental conditions of Singapore would enhance the quality of life of the population and cultivate national pride. It would also paint a better image of Singapore for foreign investors and tourists.<sup>4</sup>

Family planning was another major focus for campaigns in the late 1960s and 1970s. With slogans such as “Small Family: Brighter Future” and “The Second Can Wait”, these campaigns recommended the setting up of small families.<sup>5</sup> Initially, the campaigns did not dictate the ideal family size. But with the launch of the “Two is Enough” campaigns in the early 1970s, a two-child family norm was endorsed.<sup>6</sup> The family planning campaigns came at a time when the government was faced with the formidable cost of providing education, health services, and housing to a population that was growing rapidly due to the post-war boom. Family planning was thus regarded as a necessary measure, in order for the government to slow the country’s birth rate.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the government also rationalised that smaller families helped reduce financial expenditure in households.<sup>8</sup>

## Campaigns of the 1980s and 1990s

As the Singapore society became more affluent in the 1980s and 1990s, improving the qualitative values of Singaporeans became the focal point of campaigns. Leading this was the National Courtesy Campaign. Inaugurated in 1979, the aim of the campaign was to create a pleasant social environment where people were cultured, considerate and thoughtful of each other’s needs.<sup>9</sup> The campaign was initially represented by a Smiley logo

<sup>1</sup> Sandhu, K. S. & Wheatley, P. (1989). *Management of success: The moulding of modern Singapore*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, p. 116.

<sup>2</sup> Langford, J.W. & Brownsey, K. L. (1988). *The Changing shape of government in the Asia-Pacific region*. Halifax, N.S.: Institute for Research on Public Policy, pp.134–135.

<sup>3</sup> Pan, H. (2005). National campaigns – A way of life. In *Legacy of Singapore: 40th anniversary commemorative 1965–2005*. Singapore: CR Media, p.104.

<sup>4</sup> Sam, J. (1968, October 2). ‘Big stick’ for unresponsive. *The Straits Times*. Retrieved September 4, 2012, from NewspaperSG at <http://newspapers.nl.sg/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19681002-1.2.71.aspx>.

<sup>5</sup> Ministry of Culture. (1972, July 20). Speech by Mr Chua Sian Chin Minister for Health at the opening ceremony of the Family Planning Campaign 1972 at the Singapore Conference Hall on Thursday, 20th July 1972 at 2000 hours. Retrieved September 1, 2012, from STARS database at <http://stars.nhb.gov.sg/stars/public/viewDocx.jsp?stid=27420&lochref=viewPDF-body.jsp?pdfno=PressR19720720c.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> Singapore Family Planning and Population Board. (1973). *Seventh annual report of the Singapore Family Planning and Population Board 1972*. Singapore: Singapore Family Planning & Population Board, p. 44.

<sup>7</sup> *Family planning in Singapore*. (1966). Singapore: Govt. Printer, pp.1-26.

<sup>8</sup> Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts. (2009, August 18). National Campaigns. Retrieved September 4, 2012 from <http://app.mica.gov.sg/Default.aspx?tabid=441>.

<sup>9</sup> Nirmala, M. (1999). *Courtesy – More than a smile*. Singapore: The Singapore Courtesy Council.



The face of the courtesy campaign was originally Smiley before Singa the Courtesy Lion took over in 1982. Kindness Movement Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

and had the slogan “Make Courtesy Our Way of Life”. This was subsequently replaced by Singa the Courtesy Lion mascot in 1982.<sup>10</sup>

The Speak Mandarin Campaign was another campaign introduced to develop better qualitative skills for Singaporeans, particularly the communication skills among Chinese Singaporeans.<sup>11</sup> When the campaign was launched in 1979, it was believed that the use of dialects was hampering the bilingual educational policy for the Chinese in Singapore. As a result, the government felt that there was a need to simplify the language environment of the Chinese by encouraging them to speak Mandarin in place of dialects. The government also held the view that a strong Mandarin-speaking environment would help the Chinese better appreciate their culture and heritage.

To improve the qualitative skills of Singaporeans in the workplace, the government launched the National Productivity Movement in 1982. Fronted by Teamy the Productivity Bee mascot, the campaign was aimed at raising the productivity of the labour force. The campaign was endorsed as Singapore was moving from labour-intensive activities to more highly-skilled and technology-driven work. The campaign had a positive effect on the workforce’s productivity level. Between 1981 and 1990, Singapore’s productivity growth increased by 4.8 per cent, and since then, its workforce has been assessed to be one of the best in the world.<sup>12</sup>

#### Past campaign promotion strategies

Campaigns in Singapore were promoted in many ways. The most common were posters

and brochures as well as the distribution of souvenirs like bookmarks and collar pins. An array of channels such as mass media broadcasts, forums and talks were also used to raise the public’s awareness of the campaigns.<sup>13</sup> From the 1980s onwards, some of the campaigns such as the National Courtesy Campaign began using catchy slogans and jingles to get the message out.<sup>14</sup> They also started using TV commercials, sitcoms, school activities and competitions to help raise awareness. Extra measures were also taken to ensure the campaign’s efficiency. For instance, when the Speak Mandarin Campaign was launched, dialect programmes over the radio and television were phased out gradually and Chinese civil servants were asked to set an example by refraining from using dialects during office hours.<sup>15</sup>

Using the civil service to set good examples was another strategy that was frequently used by the government in promoting campaigns.<sup>16</sup> When the National Productivity Movement was introduced, the civil service was roped in to set the standard for others to follow by launching the Civil Service Computerisation Programme. The focus of the programme was to improve the functions of public administration through the effective use of information technology (IT) products. This involved automating work functions and reducing paperwork for greater internal operational efficiency.<sup>17</sup> Other than embarking on a computerisation programme, the civil service also started adopting quality



Teamy the Productivity Bee was a familiar figure during the nation’s push to increase the productivity of the Singaporean labour force. SPRING Singapore Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

<sup>10</sup> Lee, P. (1982, May 15). Mascot for campaign. *The Straits Times*. Retrieved September 4, 2012, from NewspaperSG at <http://newspapers.nl.sg/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19820515-1.2.11.aspx>.

<sup>11</sup> Lee to launch ‘use Mandarin campaign’. (1979, September 7). *The Straits Times*. Retrieved September 4, 2012, from NewspaperSG at <http://newspapers.nl.sg/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19790907-1.2.9.aspx/>.

<sup>12</sup> Wong, May. (2010, February 2). Singapore’s productivity drive started in the 1980s. *Channel News Asia*. Retrieved September 4, 2012, from <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/singaporebusinessnews/view/1034862/1/html>.

<sup>13</sup> Pan, H. (2005), p. 104.

<sup>14</sup> Nirmala, M. (1999).

<sup>15</sup> Promote Mandarin Council. (2001). *History and background*. Retrieved September 1, 2012, from <http://mandarin.org.sg/campaign/history/default.htm>.

<sup>16</sup> National Productivity Board. (1991). *The First 10 Years of the Productivity Movement in Singapore: A Review*. Singapore: National Productivity Board.

<sup>17</sup> National Computer Board. (1986). *Civil service computerisation programme: Charting new directions*. Singapore: The Board.

control standards to improve work attitude, motivation, productivity, team spirit and service standards of civil servants.<sup>18</sup>

### Campaigns today

Throughout the rest of the 1990s and the first decade of the new millennium, the government continued to use campaigns to communicate with the population. The many campaigns that were introduced during this period included the “Great Singapore Workout” in 1993, the “Speak Good English Movement” in 2000 and the “Romancing Singapore” campaign in 2003.<sup>19</sup> As the frequency of campaigns grew, it was felt that Singaporeans were slowly becoming immune to the messages campaigns were conveying.<sup>20</sup>



The Speak Mandarin Campaign encouraged the local population to adopt the Chinese language instead of dialects. Promote Mandarin Council Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Indeed, in almost every part of the island today, be it in a park, food court, building or any other public space, there is a high chance that a person will come across posters, banners, stickers or other collaterals promoting one campaign or another. With the advent of social media tools such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and mobile apps, it is common for Singaporeans to come across campaigns on these platforms.

In order to preserve and maintain the relevance of campaigns, the government has started taking steps to revise the way campaigns are conducted.<sup>21</sup>

For instance, many of the older campaigns have been consolidated into larger ones to reduce the number of campaigns run annually. Furthermore, the private sector was encouraged to initiate and front some of the newer and existing campaigns. This was to give campaigns a less top-down approach, making them less intrusive and more judicious to the public. Even with these changes, it is certain that campaigns will continue to be an integral part of the social fabric of Singapore society, thus making campaigns truly a way of life for Singaporeans.



A poster encouraging Singaporeans to keep their surroundings clean. Ministry of Environment and Water Resources Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Looking at Singapore through its various campaigns is an interesting way to track the growth and evolution of the nation from its nation-building, post independence years to the modern society it is today. The campaigns are a way through which we can discern the concerns and responses of the government to issues facing the Singapore society at large.

Singapore's campaign and their mascots have become an idiosyncratic and often nostalgic part of our national heritage. No other country has embraced campaigning as much as we have. To highlight this slice of Singapore identity, the National Library of Singapore, in partnership with independent art curator, Alan Oei, presents the exhibition – “Campaign City: Life In Posters”, now ongoing at the National Library Building.

“Campaign City: Life in Posters” features 40 of Singapore's leading artists, architects and designers and 10 local art students. The participants, drawing inspiration and information from the Library's and National Archives' vast collection of campaign posters and campaign heritage material, created artworks reflective of their own personal memories and/or impressions of Singapore's campaigns, past and present.

These artworks are on display along with highlights from the Library's campaign poster collection. Selected spaces in the National Library Building have been used in novel ways to convey the rich histories behind Singapore's campaigns.

The exhibition runs from 9 January to 7 July 2013 at the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library, Level 11 at the National Library Building.

### About the author

Lim Tin Seng is a Librarian with the National Library Content and Services division. He has co-edited two books, *Harmony and Development: ASEAN-China Relations* (2009) and *China's New Social Policy: Initiatives for a Harmonious Society* (2010). He is currently conducting research on the Eurasian community for an upcoming National Library exhibition.

<sup>18</sup> Raj, C. (1981, July 29). The civil service may implement QC circles soon. *The Straits Times*. Retrieved September 4, 2012, from NewspaperSG at <http://newspapers.nl.sg/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19810729-1.2.105.5.aspx>.

<sup>19</sup> Pan, H. (2005), pp. 105–108.

<sup>20</sup> “Life in Campaign City”. (July 2007). *Challenge*. Retrieved September 2, 2012 from [http://www.challenge.gov.sg/magazines/archive/2007\\_07/feature.html](http://www.challenge.gov.sg/magazines/archive/2007_07/feature.html).

<sup>21</sup> Sandhu, K. S. & Wheatley, P. (1989), p. 116.

# Edwin Thumboo— Time-travelling: A Poetry Exhibition

Michelle Heng and Gwee Li Sui



“Edwin Thumboo—Time-Travelling: A Poetry Exhibition” and two accompanying publications, *Edwin Thumboo: Time-Travelling—A Select Annotated Bibliography* as well as *Singapore Word Maps: A Chapbook of Edwin Thumboo’s New and Selected Place Poems* were officially launched on 29th September by Mr S Dhanabalan, Chairman, Temasek Holdings (Pte) Ltd.

## A many-splendored life

Edwin Nadason Thumboo was born in Singapore on 22 November 1933 to a Tamil schoolteacher and a Teochew-Peranakan homemaker. His grandfather came from Madras in the 1880s but moved to Johor, retiring eventually as Superintendent of the Public Works Department in Muar.

His childhood was spent with his parents and siblings at their home in the foothills of Mandai. He began his education at Pasir Panjang Primary School where his father was a teacher. His idyllic childhood at Mandai came to a halt during the Japanese Occupation when his family moved to government quarters at No. 42, Monk’s Hill Terrace, in 1942. To supplement his family’s income during the war, Thumboo and his siblings sold cakes, and reared ducks and goats. He also worked as a salesperson at the Yarl Store on North Bridge Road.

After the Japanese Occupation, he attended Monk’s Hill Secondary School and Victoria School. It was at Victoria School that he discovered his love of literature through his English teacher, Shamus Frazer, and wrote his first poems.

In 1953, he entered the University of Malaya and majored in History and English Literature, with a minor in Philosophy. He published his first collection of verse *Rib of Earth* in 1956 and dedicated it to his “spiritual father”, Shamus Frazer.

Thumboo’s undergraduate years are notorious for yet another event, his involvement with the organ of the University Socialist Club, *Fajar*. The journal’s anti-colonial editorial “Aggression in Asia” (published in its seventh issue in May 1954) caused its nine-member team, which included Thumboo, to be arrested by the British government.

After an interrogated member resigned, the remaining eight were charged for sedition in the first of such trials conducted in Singapore. The students were later acquitted as a result of their defence by British King’s Counsel D N Pritt and his junior counsel, the young Lee Kuan Yew.

This whole experience proved so traumatic for Thumboo’s father that he asked his son to turn away from politics. After Thumboo’s graduation, he entered the civil service and worked in the Income Tax Department from 1957 to 1961 and the Central Provident Fund Board from 1961 to 1965. He then became an assistant secretary in the Singapore Telephone Board before joining the newly renamed University of Singapore as an assistant lecturer in the first months of Singapore’s independence.

Thumboo’s Masters dissertation on African poetry in English was upgraded to a doctoral submission at the university’s Department of English in 1970. The areas he taught included early English drama, Romantic poetry, new literatures in English, and creative writing.

## Spearheading Singapore’s literary arts development

While his earlier poetry reflected a deeply personal voice, Thumboo’s most significant work took root when he merged poetry and

Above:  
The Main Exhibition is a quiet induction into the creative and personal realms of our pioneer poet.



public concerns with the publication of *Gods Can Die* in 1977 and *Ulysses by the Merlion* in 1979. These two collections made clear his nationalist impulse and established his belief that Singaporean writers should work to shape and expound their nation's identity.

He also explored ways of using anthologies to raise the literary consciousness and standards in Singapore and Malaysia. His first important collection was *The Flowering Tree*, published in 1970. *Seven Poets* appeared three years later and featured Wong Phui Nam, Goh Poh Seng, Wong May, Mohammad Haji Salleh, Lee Tzu Pheng, and Thumboo as strong regional voices. In 1979, he produced *The Second Tongue*, which carried his seminal introduction to a range of emerging poets in Singapore and Malaysia.

The next decade saw Thumboo assume general editorship of two colossal multi-language anthologies: *The Poetry of Singapore*, published in 1985, and *The Fiction of Singapore*, published in 1990.

Thumboo was the first Singaporean to be conferred the SEA Write Award in 1979 and Singapore's Cultural Medallion for Literature in 1980. He was given the ASEAN Culture and Communication Award for Literature in 1987 and made a juror of the Neustadt International Prize for Literature in 1988. For his various contributions to nation-building, he was awarded a Bintang Bakti Masyarakat [Public Service Star] in 1981, with an additional Bar in 1991.

As the head of the Department of English Language and Literature at the National University of Singapore from 1977 to 1993, Thumboo introduced the study of both Commonwealth literature and the English language. He was the first dean of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences in 1980 and held this appointment until 1991, becoming the university's longest serving dean to date.

The new millennium marked the start of another chapter in Thumboo's literary career. He published *Friend* and *Bring the Sun*, released in 2003 and 2008 respectively, and *Still Travelling* – his first new collection of verse in 15 years that brought together all his poetic concerns from the public and the social to the personal and the religious.

As anthologist, Thumboo co-edited *Reflecting on the Merlion* and *Fifty on 50* in 2009, the latter commemorating Singapore's 50th year of self-rule. *& Words: Poems Singapore and Beyond*, issued in 2010, featured English-language poems from around the world. *Flow Across Our Ocean* was published in 2011 as part of a cultural-economic exchange between Singapore and Cape Town, South Africa.



Some of Thumboo's better known works focus on Singapore's multiracial culture. This installation, "Table Talk" gives insight into how Thumboo's poetry approaches the question of a common national identity.



This rolltop writing desk, a donation to the National Library in 2006 as part of the Edwin Thumboo Collection, showcases books that reveal Thumboo's early literary influences, in particular, W.B. Yeats. Thumboo saw Yeats' struggle for Irish independence as parallel to Singapore's fight against the residues of colonialism.

He remains highly prolific and his poem, "Bukit Panjang: Hill, Village, Town" is a sensitive portrayal of how the fast-changing landscapes in Singapore underpin the social, political and economic values that frame our nation-state's rapid growth during the post-independence years. This four-part poem personifies the familiar landmark as a "Time-traveller; master of winds..." in its imposing geology, its cultural significance as a village in the chaotic period during the Japanese Occupation before it finally settles comfortably into the role of an "established" new town in the current flow of Singapore's continuing progress as it gets "plump with amenities".

Set against the dramatic background of the restive pre- and post-Colonial period, and later during the “super charged” nation-building years, the poem may well be read by researchers in the near future as one of Thumboo’s most successful blend of his public and personal voice.

Thumboo has witnessed more triumphs and trials than most in his multi-faceted life as a poet, critic, scholar, public figure and private citizen. The poems in this exhibition capture modest snapshots of his verve and versatility mirrored through the experiences of the interesting times he has lived through.



A framed snapshot of the teenaged Thumboo (with spectacles) and his friend, Mr Boey Yew Hock, sit atop a cabinet of knick-knacks and other photographs from Thumboo’s youth.

### Edwin Thumboo – Time-travelling

This exhibition is part of the National Library of Singapore’s Literary Heritage Series and showcases the impressive list of contributions Thumboo has made to Singapore’s cultural landscape in his prolific career as a scholar, academic, poet and literary critic. On display are handwritten manuscripts of Thumboo’s iconic poems such as “Ulysses by the Merlion,” “The Cough of Albuquerque,” “Gods Can Die” and “The Way Ahead”. Rare photographs of the pioneer poet’s youth and family members from his private collection that give glimpses into a bygone era were also showcased.

Comprising three separate showcases at different locations within the National Library Building, the poetry exhibition teases out some of the most personal, nuanced aspects of the literary titan’s life.

The multi-dimensional exhibition includes a “teaser” display, a re-creation of our pioneer poet’s study, at the Lobby of the National Library Building and the Main Exhibition

located within the Reading Room at Level 8, National Library, which is a quiet and subtle induction of his public persona and his private realm as a poet and as a citizen. The Main Exhibition is thought-provoking and gives visitors access to Thumboo’s life and the times he has lived through, while allowing them to savour his works in a multi-sensory presentation.

The Main Exhibition will run for six months at Level 8 of the National Library Building from 29 September 2012 to 7 March 2013. The “teaser” exhibition display, (previously exhibited at the Lobby of the National Library Building) was first roved to Woodlands Regional Library, Level 1 (3 to 27 January 2013) and Clementi Public Library (28 January to 7 March 2013) as satellite showcases.



Vintage music records and retro photo albums hint at Thumboo’s carefree youth spent amongst close friends. Many of the items on display at various artistic recreations in the exhibition recapture vignettes of the poet’s life and add another dimension to his poetry.



A selection of photographs showing scenes from colonial-era Singapore brings visitors down memory lane.

Copies of the chapbook are currently available for free to members of the public who can request for a copy at the Level 8 Information Counter. They were also available free-of-charge to visitors when the satellite exhibition roved to the two public libraries. Visitors can also request at the Information Counter at Levels 8 and 11 of the National Library for copies of the select annotated bibliography.

#### Public persona, private citizen

The multi-sensory installations displayed in the Main Exhibition reveal both the trials and triumphs in Thumboo's life as a public figure and private citizen. Poems written at different stages of his life are displayed alongside the installations. The sentiments expressed in these verses mirror the turning points in Thumboo's life and significant moments in Singapore's history.

Framed by the Edwin Thumboo Collection as well as the Singapore and Southeast Asian English Literature Collections, the Main Exhibition highlights Thumboo's literary influences and the critical role he plays as a poet, critic and scholar of Singapore Literature in English, as well as promoting and developing the literary arts scene in Singapore as well as in the region.



This installation, "Double Helix", contemplates Singapore's changing landscape, identity and place in the world. Visitors can listen to poetry readings of Thumboo's poems captured on MP3 players.

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Sago Street in 1982. By the early 1960s, death houses had been banned and there is little trace of their existence today. *From the Lee Kip Lin Collection. All rights reserved. Lee Kip Lin and National Library Board, Singapore 2009.*



# Life in Death: The Case of Keramats in Singapore

Liyana Taha

*The keramat cult could be interpreted as a channel which brings together the connections and contradictions between the deeper historical structures of ethno-cultural hybridity and the nature of modern ethno-religious nationalism.*

GOH B.L., *Engaging the Spirit World*, 2011:158

Keramat Habib Noh located at Palmer Road is the resting place of Habib Noh bin Muhamad Al-Habshi, a highly regarded mystic. Worshippers from as far as China come here to pray to or pay their respects. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



Keramats (or shrines) have endured the fast-paced changes characteristic of Singapore's urban progress and development. Over the centuries, keramats have obtained a symbolic significance that transcends the vibrant social fabric of multiple religions and cultures.

It is the religious syncretism and symbolism that has been imbibed in these keramats that allow for such a relic to still remain relevant to Singaporeans in this modern era. Within the keramat are embedded the ebb and flow of Singapore's history and its continuing evolution. In essence, the keramat is not just a monument of remembrance for the dead, but also a rallying point for the living.

Despite being hidden away in the folds of Singapore's concrete jungle, keramats and keramat-worship are far from being entrenched in the forgotten annals of history. The entrances to many of these keramats are often "invisible", seemingly quiet, offering respite from the heat and throngs of people. What we mistake for wooden huts, serene and seemingly forgotten, belie the hopes, dreams and prayers of those who have taken a chance to lay their most personal needs and desperation in the forms of fragrant offerings at the foot of a grave of a person they have never met, much less a faith in which they do not believe.

### Surviving the dredges of urbanisation and commercialisation

Theoretically, keramats are supposed to be the graves of deceased holy men, the early apostles of the Muhammedan faith, the first founders of the village who cleared the primeval jungle, or other persons of local notoriety in a former age.

However, many of these keramats are not graves at all: many of them are in the jungle, on hills and groves, like the high places of the Old Testament idolatries; they contain no trace of a grave, and they appear to be ancient sites of a primitive nature worship or the adoration of the spirits of natural objects.

W.W. SKEAT, *Malay Magic*, 1984:62

Evidence of keramats have pre-dated even the arrival of colonials<sup>1</sup> and attest to Singapore's important position in the sea routes of the 18th century, by the sheer variety of existing keramats at important historical sites such as Fort Canning Hill (Keramat Iskandar Syah), close to the then-river mouth (Makam Habib Noh at Mount Palmer before reclamation)

and elsewhere inland – supporting Singapore's role in the wider maritime world that encouraged a porous and plural society. Despite their long history, keramats have managed to survive in the fast-changing urban landscape characteristic of Singapore. Keramats located in prime estates such as those belonging to Habib Noh at Mount Palmer; Keramat Iskandar Shah at Fort Canning; Keramat Dato Syed Abdul Rahman (otherwise simply known as the Malay/Kusu Keramat) and the Da Bo Gong Temple (Merchant God or God of Prosperity) at Kusu Island have managed to retain their relevance and thwarted the (often fatal) insurgence of tourism brought about by the imaginings of the tourism industry.<sup>2</sup> More often than not, these keramats and shrines are fully funded by the kind donations of devotees who come to offer their prayers and/or give thanks for a bountiful harvest believed to have been derived from their patronage of these shrines. The key to their survival despite Singapore's cut-throat urban land use policies may lie in the symbolism that has appealed to the various races, cultures and religions in Singapore.

The religious syncretism and symbolic significance that has been imbibed into these keramats, has ensured their survival throughout the years. Of interest is also local history that has seeped into the crevices of these tombs, which may provide an insight into Singaporean life from before the arrival of the British. The keramats provide a key understanding of how the different cultures and religions interacted and offered a space where all faiths could be practised and intermingle freely. The interaction of the different cultures and localisation of the various religious influences have undoubtedly helped in the socialisation of the various communities in Singapore (Choo, 2007; Goh, 2011); then,<sup>3</sup> now and possibly even the future. The trans-ethnic and trans-cultural symbolism that are prevalent in these keramats bear testament to the fluid and plural maritime world that was the bedrock of pre-modern Singapore (Goh, 2011).

We will focus on the more prominent keramats such as Keramat Iskandar Syah, Makam Habib Noh and the two keramats on Kusu Island. These keramats have been

<sup>1</sup> By the time Raffles landed in Singapore in 1819, Bukit Larangan (Forbidden Hill, now known as Fort Canning Hill) was already the ancient burial ground of the royal Sultanate. The Tomb of Iskandar Syah, said to be the fifth and last ruler of Simhapura (Sanskrit term 'सिंहपुर' from which the name Singapore was derived) still resides at the top of Fort Canning. Jalan Kubor was also another site of royal burial. Early plans of Singapore by G.D. Coleman (1836) indicate the parcel of land as 'Tombs of the Malayan Princes', quoted in Rivers (2003).

<sup>2</sup> The Singapore Tourism Promotion Board (now known as Singapore Tourism Board) did plan to market the 'largely under-utilised' [Southern] islands as resorts for the rich, as early as 1989. Kusu Island was not initially considered for these plans as it was recognised as a pilgrimage site. (*The Straits Times*, 17 September 1992)

<sup>3</sup> Early colonial surveys have indicated the existence of keramats and of their trans-ethnic worshippers. For an in-depth reading, please refer to Richard Winstedt's *The Malay Magician: Being Shaman, Saiva and Sufi* (1961) and Walter W. Skeat's *Malay Magic* (1984).

acknowledged and mentioned in the Singapore Street Directories and various other surveys of sites of interest in Singapore, such as D.S. Samuel's *Singapore's Heritage Through Places of Historical Interest* (2010) and even the National Parks Board, or NParks, Walking Trail,<sup>4</sup> so as to offer a more extensive survey and better sample of the instances of trans-cultural and trans-religious cosmologies.

The term “keramat”, derived from the Arabic term “karamah”, generally refers to the sacred nature of a person, animal, boulder, trees, etc.; but takes on different meanings when applied in different contexts (Skeat, 1984; Marsden, 1812; Wilkinson, 1959). This article specifically examines the term “keramat” as it is used on a person, to indicate and imply sacred divinity and referring to the tombs of revered and holy persons, especially the early Arabian missionaries. These keramats are not mere graves with a greater significance that applies to a wider audience beyond the individual. Whilst these sacred sites are still known as “keramat” today, the nature of keramat-worship has taken on a different facet, and will be discussed in the following sections.

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#### **Evolving definitions of keramat and keramat-worship**

The foundations of the practice of keramat- (or saint-) worship are based on early Sufi Islam and pre-Islamic animistic traditions. Worshippers believe in *semangat*<sup>5</sup> (an intangible mystical force imbibed in objects, totems or nature) and attached the Arabic-derived title of keramat to accord a certain status and venerability to superstitious sites. The term was subsequently absorbed into Bazaar Malay (Rivers, 2003), otherwise known as colloquial

Malay, or Bahasa Melayu Pasar. These sites, in particular the shrines and tombs of Sufi masters regarded as saints, are frequented as part of a pilgrimage to either beg that a wish be granted, or to pay respects and give thanks for the fulfilment of the said wish. Although this is in direct opposition to the Islamic belief of the singularity and One-ness of God, keramat-worship carries an undercurrent of Islamic reverence for saints who attain *barakah*, or semi-devine power, due to their extreme piety and devotion to God (Cheu, 1996). As such, these saints are sought after even in death, by those in need of advice and assistance.

The keramats, burial grounds of persons believed to be saints and rulers of dynasties, are revered beyond their native worshippers and even by the colonials themselves who, short of providing offerings, acknowledge and respect these sacred sites. Raffles referred to Bukit Larangan as “the tombs of the Malay Kings”<sup>6</sup> and in his letter to the Duchess of Somerset remarked that should he pass on while on duty, he “preferred ascending the Hill, where if my bones must remain in the East, they would have the honour of mixing with the ashes of the Malayan kings”.<sup>7</sup> The keramats and Bukit Larangan were regarded as the “only remains of antiquity” to Singapore’s pre-colonial history.<sup>8</sup>

Although initially regarded as a rural Malay practice by colonial scholars (Winstedt 1924, Skeat 1967), other forms of such veneration, that is, ancestral and deity worship, were already practised by Chinese religionists and Hindus in British Malaya. The central principle in such worship is the propitiation of guardian spirits, receiving protection against calamities and ensuring abundant harvest or profits (Cheu, 1996). John Crawford, on his visit to Bukit Larangan during a stopover in Singapore en route to Siam, noted that a crude shrine had been erected over the tomb of Iskandar Syah so as to allow Muslims, Hindus and Chinese (religionists) to pay homage.<sup>9</sup> Several articles in *The Straits Times*<sup>10</sup> in the early 1900s, such as “Singapore’s Keramats: Wonder-Working Shrines Sacred to Many Nationalities” (11 June, 1939), a thorough survey of the existing keramats in Singapore and its surrounding islands, also indicated that such keramats and shrines were patronised by all and was a subject of interest to the public.

This syncretism is also noted by renowned French scholar, Chambert-Loir, who observed that “mausoleums of Muslim saints were built upon Savaite temples and Buddhist stupas in Java as early as the 15th and 16th century”.<sup>11</sup> The keramat, in essence, is a prime example of a hybrid practice that is emblematic of the spread of this syncretic pseudo-Islamic custom in maritime Southeast Asia (Goh, 2011). Its spread, from its initial adaptation of Sufi

<sup>4</sup> National Parks Board. A Guide to Singapore’s Ancient History Walking Trail at Fort Canning Park.

<sup>5</sup> See Mohd Taib Osman. (1989) *Malay Folk Beliefs: An integration of disparate elements*. KL: Dewan Bahasa & Pustaka.

<sup>6</sup> C.E. Wurtzburg, *Raffles of the Eastern Isles*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1954, p. 620, quoted in P.J. Rivers (2003:105)

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, p. 621.

<sup>8</sup> John Crawford, *Journal of an Embassy to the Courts of Siam and Cochin China*, KL: Oxford University Press, 1967, p. 46, quoted in P.J. Rivers (2003:105)

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>10</sup> Various other articles were written over the years that showcased and surveyed these keramats or were queries from residents to find out more about the keramats in Singapore. Among others, were *The Straits Times*, ‘Kramats of Singapore’ (11 April 1939, p. 10) and *Berita Harian*, ‘Bendera Jepun putus dekat keramat tertua Singapura (Japanese flag rips off at the oldest keramat in Singapore)’ (3 January 1970, p. 4).

<sup>11</sup> Chambert-Loir. (2002) ‘Saints and Ancestors: The Cult of Muslim Saints in Java’ in *The Potent Dead: Ancestors, Saints and Heroes in Contemporary Indonesia*, quoted in Goh, (2011:154).

<sup>12</sup> For a better understanding of Kusu Island, please refer to Singapore Infopedia: Kusu Island. Retrieved on 6 October 2012 from: infopedia.nl.sg/articles/SIP\_233\_2005-01-20.html

<sup>13</sup> Month-long Kusu pilgrimage begins next week. *AsiaOne*, 9 Oct 2012.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>15</sup> The terms *makam* and *keramat*, although not synonymous, are used interchangeably in colloquial context. For the purposes of this paper, we will retain the interchangeable nature of these terms as the site is regarded as both a *makam* (mausoleum) and a *keramat* by different groups under different contexts.

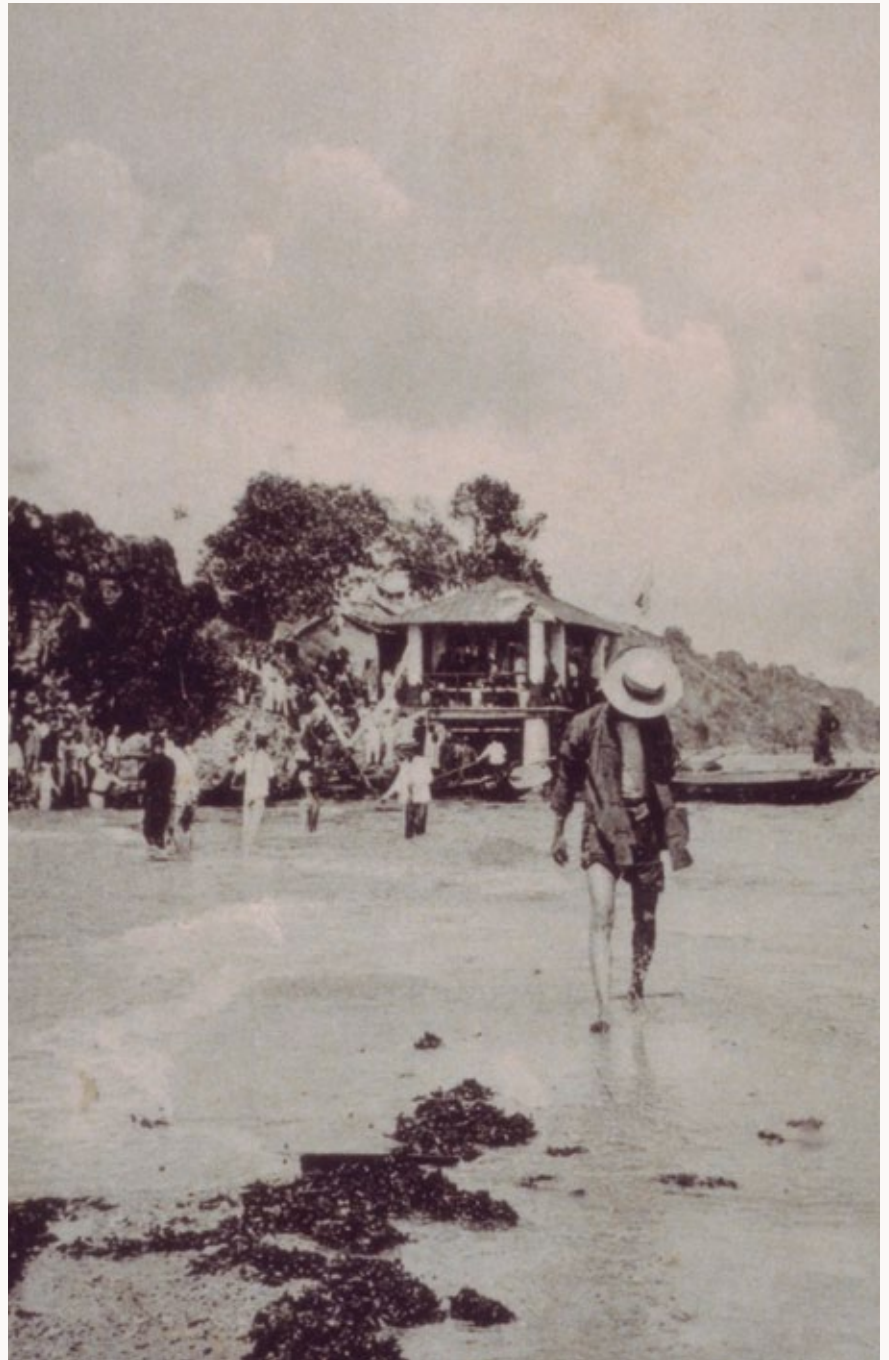


and animistic origins, began to morph in tandem with the various cultures and belief systems of arriving migrants into Singapore and the larger southeast maritime region (Rivers, 2003).

### **Keramats as spaces for trans-cultural contact and interaction**

The keramats at Kusu Island (previously known as Pulau Tembakul)<sup>12</sup> provide an interesting glimpse into the hybridity that transcends both race and religion. The annual, month-long Kusu Pilgrimage to the Da Bo Gong (Tua Pek Kong) Temple and the Malay Keramat, attracts pilgrims as far away as Hong Kong.<sup>13</sup> The latter is supposedly the tomb of Syed Abdul Rahman, an Arab traveller who, according to legend, was saved by a tortoise during a treacherous journey and brought to Kusu Island. He continued to pay respects at Kusu Island and was finally laid to rest there. The Chinese have come to worship this keramat as the native Malay equivalent of Da Bo Gong, and refer to it as Datok Kong, or Na Du Gong (Loo, 2007). The term “Datok Kong” itself is indicative of the Sino-Malay interactions entrenched in keramat-worship—“Datok” and “Kong” are both synonyms meaning “grandfather” in Malay and Chinese respectively, and is used generically for the worship of a venerated person of Malay or native origin (Cheu, 1996). Worshippers are also not limited to any specific class, and include wealthy businessmen, entrepreneurs or ordinary laymen desiring better riches and luck in life.

Sino-Malay influences can be seen in the decoration of this keramat as well, with the juxtaposition of the emblematic green-coloured Crescent and Star indicative of the Islamic faith and the yellow banner with bold red Chinese characters that read “Na Du Gong” and hangs above the keramat. Even the donation box is inscribed with “Waatlaa [sic] Heng Heng Lai” (Prosper! May good luck come!). Burning joss sticks and incense adorn the front of the keramat, left behind after worshippers have made their prayers and given their due respect. Also, as a form of respect, visitors are encouraged not to bring any food or lard to the island.<sup>14</sup> It is probably wise to note here, despite the supposed origins of this keramat, that Muslims no longer visit the Kusu Keramat. Cheu (1996) reiterates and concludes in his paper that “more and more Chinese have adopted the keramats as less and less Malays worship them in the wake of Islamic revival in the 1980s”. Kusu Keramat is relatively well-known by the generic name of “Malay Keramat” (since the supposed Syed Abdul Rahman is Arab, nothing about the shrine is Malay except its caretakers) and not tied to a known saint, indicating that this keramat has been popularised by Chinese religionists.



The temple at Kusu Island draws thousands of devotees and worshippers every year. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Although initially regarded as a rural Malay practice by colonial scholars (Winstedt 1924, Skeat 1967), other forms of such veneration, that is, ancestral and deity worship, were already practised by Chinese religionists and Hindus in British Malaya.



The Keramat Sultan Iskandar Shah on Fort Canning Hill is believed to be the burial place of one of the last kings (Iskandar Shah) to rule in Singapore in the 14th century. All Rights Reserved. National Library Board Singapore 2004.

### Keramats as repositories of history

It is perhaps this fluidity in which keramat-worship is practised that has kept the keramats in existence up until today. It offers a space where different groups can engage, influence and contribute to the significance of a physical site in their own way. This aspect of organic syncretism and mutual respect between cultures attests to the fact that keramat-worship is “as a repository of the deep structures of trans-ethnic cosmologies and shared socio-moral orders within local society despite their erasure by modern bureaucratic powers” (Goh, 2011). It has survived even without ardent state promotion, or through efforts by the Singapore Tourism Board and has been kept alive without neither re-enactments for tourists nor as an exoticisation of native practices. Loo (2007) even notes in her survey of the keramats on Kusu Island that the erected signboards indicate little of the rich history of the island. The survival of the keramats is a direct result of individuals who frequent and deem them important. Keramats have managed to remain relatively undetected and unharmed by consumerist tourism and yet relevant enough to serve the different communities. They are truly sites for the people because of their unadulterated and underrated history.

The keramats claim their significance and become ingrained into public consciousness through a larger historical framework grounded in the cultural plurality and fluidity among all races and faiths. Bukit Larangan, the site on which rests the Keramat Makam Iskandar Syah, is also rich with our ancient history. According to pottery fragments uncovered by John Miksic, the grave might have belonged to Sri Tri Buana “Lord of the Three Worlds” who lived from approximately 1299 to 1347; founder of the Singapore dynasty until Iskandar Syah fled Singapore (Rivers, 2003). This legendary ruler is recorded in the *Sejarah Melayu*, or *The Malay Annals*.

More importantly, however, these keramats exist beyond the personality that they were erected for by serving a larger audience that is not limited to any specific group. Over time, keramats absorb and incorporate the traits of the different cultures and faith that make up the social fabric of Singapore. In fact, the persona attributed to a keramat is usually that of its caretaker, who devotes his/her life in the service of the said saint or keramat.

Oral and written accounts of “miracles” borne out of worshipping the keramat, or relating to keramat itself, keep them in our conscious memory. Although research in tracing the origins and documenting such keramats are still lacking, numerous scholars and individuals have begun the arduous efforts to claim these

Makam<sup>15</sup> Habib Noh, located on Mount Palmer, is another important site to consider. Quite unlike the Kusu Keramat, the Makam Habib Noh is anchored by a definite personality, the saint Habib Noh<sup>16</sup>, who is highly revered in Muslim circles and is situated within Singapore’s Central Business District. Still, worshippers to the keramat are not unlike those at Kusu. Offerings of bananas, yellow rice, bottles of opened water (to be blessed) and burning incense are just some of the offerings found at the keramat. The variety of offerings is also denotative of the different cultures that frequent them.<sup>17</sup>

The scene that greeted me on my visit was pleasantly surprising, given the fact that this keramat is located within the compounds of the Haji Mohd Salleh Mosque: in the left corner, an elderly Chinese lady was kneeling in prayer with her hands clasped in fervent concentration. The grandchild she brought with her played by himself by the doors of the inner room. After she was done, she stood, placed her hands on a grave marker (*batu nisan*), and bowed before leaving. At the other end of the keramat were an Indian Muslim couple engrossed in reading the Quran. Shortly after, they stood and each took a grave marker, plastered their foreheads to it and bowed their heads, lips moving feverishly but silently. Around the keramat were a total of five opened bottles of water, fresh flowers and other offerings. I realised then, regardless of the purposes and forms of worship, that keramats are sacred precisely because they are tangible focal points in a community, a place to harbour intangible dreams. It was a place to ask, beg, and give thanks.

<sup>16</sup> For an in-depth history regarding Habib Noh and his shrine, please refer to: Muhammad Ghouse Khan Surattee (2008) *The Grand Saint of Singapore: The Life of Habib Nub bin Muhammad Al-Habshi*. Singapore: Masjid Al-Firdaus.

<sup>17</sup> Please refer to Cheu (1996:11) ‘Table 1: Beliefs and Practices in Malay Keramat and Datuk Kong’ for a list of the different nuances and types of offering presented by the different cultural groups.

<sup>18</sup> Refer to Singapore Infopedia: Kusu Island, or Chia, M.T. (2009) *Managing the Tortoise Island: Tua Pek Kong Temple, Pilgrimage, and Social Change in Pulau Kusu, 1965–2007*, *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies* 11, p.72–95.

It is perhaps this fluidity in which keramat-worship is practised that has kept the keramats in existence up until today. It offers a space where different groups can engage, influence and contribute to the significance of a physical site in their own way.

sites as historical and integral to Singapore's pre-colonial and ethnographic history.

Keramats are a lived reality and a window to Singapore's past. From a sociological perspective, they are an oasis for varying cultures, traditions and histories to blend together and coexist, merging into different practices that revolve in and around the same physical space. Keramats are evidence of the hybridity and syncretic culture that has been the bedrock of Singaporean society from its inception even before the colonial era and showcases ground-up efforts and an understanding of faith, popular religion and real life definition of religious and racial harmony. Its underrated and non-commercial nature has proven to be the boon of its existence, yet cannot guarantee its future. In Singapore's dense urban environment, it is difficult to justify the use of space that can neither be rationally explained nor commercially utilised. In the case of keramats, death is a starting point and a beginning of another chapter in history. It records, absorbs and bears witness to the changing practices and milieu of its surroundings. Should it finally be deemed irrelevant in the future, only then will it finally hear its death knell as the keeper of secrets to the past.

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Liyana is an Assistant Curator with the National Library, Exhibitions and Curation. She has recently concluded work on Yang Menulis (They Who Write), an inaugural collaboration between NLB and the Malay Heritage Centre, National Heritage Board. Yang Menulis will feature at the National Library Building, Level 10 from end March 2013 and will have a free companion publication of the same name. This is Liyana's first contribution to *BiblioAsia*.

# Grave Matters: The Burial Registers in Singapore

Genevieve Wong



The Bidadari Christian Cemetery. Burial registers offer a glimpse into the lives and conditions of early Singapore life. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

On 11 January 1924, amidst the pouring rain, grave diggers at Bidadari Christian Cemetery lowered the bodies of Cecilia Lee Yew Seah, Jeanne Yon Ah Soo, M. Lee Yon Rie and Jules Hoh Chin into their shared final resting place. As two nuns in their black habits from the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus (CHIJ) stood silently witnessing the burial of the four infants, the oldest of whom had only been seven months old, the gravediggers started shovelling soil back into grave number 363 of the French Roman Catholic Pauper division. This was their only burial of the day and they were eager to get out of the rain.<sup>1</sup> After all, infants from the convent orphanage seemed to die like flies. The nuns would come again tomorrow to deliver more baby corpses for burial.

<sup>1</sup> 11 January 1924 was recorded to have had one of the highest rainfalls in that month." Meteorological Observations, 1924", *Blue Book for the Year 1924* (Singapore: G.P.O., 1925), p.479.

<sup>2</sup> Val D. Greenwood, *The Researcher's Guide to American Genealogy* (Maryland: Genealogical Publishing, 2000), p.61

<sup>3</sup> James Francis Warren, *Rickshaw Coolie: A People's History of Singapore 1880–1940* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2003), p.8.

Cecilia Lee Yew Seah, Jeanne Yon Ah Soo, M. Lee Yon Rie and Jules Hoh Chin were individuals of no particular significance in Singapore's history. They were, however, four of the 584 infants buried in Bidadari Christian Cemetery in 1924, a year in which the cemetery recorded a total of 960 internments. Together with death certificates, birth certificates, grave inscriptions and obituaries, the burial registers have commonly been used in tracing genealogy.<sup>2</sup> However, the use of burial registers in writing social history has to date gone undiscovered. The astonishingly high number of infant deaths and the circumstances under which they died are but one of the fascinating stories that can be derived from the burial registers.

## The burial registers in Singapore

Among the sources that can be used in the writings of Singaporean history, the burial registers are unique. Factual by nature, morbid in character, the burial registers present seemingly dry and dusty data sets that have the potential to reveal fascinating patterns about society upon further investigation. Although the burial registers have been useful in tracing genealogical ancestry, they have been vastly overlooked resources in the construction of Singapore's social history.

The burial register, alternatively called a burial or cemetery record, comprises a list of people buried in a particular cemetery, where certain information is recorded according to state-dictated categories. These categories include the following:

- Division of cemetery that the deceased is interred
- Grave Number
- Religion
- Nationality
- Rank or Profession
- Married or Single
- Date of Death
- Date of Internment
- Name of Deceased
- Sex
- Age
- Place of Residence
- Cause of Death

Used in tandem with other "traditional" resources such as state records and newspapers, such records of deceased individuals that collectively formed society has the ability to "resurrect Singapore life as lived" while opening new areas of research.<sup>3</sup>

In the past, as in the present, the state kept the burial registers for administrative purposes to account for every burial that took place. The British government initiated this system of record-keeping with the establishment of one of the first few public cemeteries in Singapore, the Bukit Timah Road Old Christian Cemetery in 1865. Such records were part of the mechanics of colonialism, which saw the gradual extension of the British government into documentation procedures such as taking census reports, standardising languages and keeping administrative records. The right to govern was determined by the knowledge that society could be understood and represented as “a series of facts” that classified the local population.<sup>4</sup> Over time, the colonial government compiled and reproduced huge bodies of information that legitimised their right to rule and became the definitive body of knowledge upon which policies were based.

The legacy of colonialism has made historical inquiries into the lives of the early forefathers of Singapore much easier. The National Archives of Singapore (NAS) maintains burial records (see Table 1) of all public and state-governed cemeteries, the earliest from the Bukit Timah Road Old Christian Cemetery. After its closure in 1907, other municipal cemeteries such as Bukit Brown Chinese Cemetery and the Christian, Muslim and Hindu sections of Bidadari Cemetery were established. These records end in the 1970s, when all burial grounds in and around the city area were closed to conserve “scarce and valuable” land given “the needs and pace of national development”.<sup>5</sup> An alternative was offered in the state-owned cemetery at Choa Chu Kang, which was erected in 1944 and came to include Hindu, Chinese, Buddhist, Christian, and Muslim cemeteries by the 1970s. This is the sole surviving public cemetery in Singapore and is still in use today. Its records stop in 1978, given the “25-year international archival benchmark” blocking access to unclassified public archives within that timeframe.<sup>6</sup>

### Living and dying in Singapore: The convent orphanage

Early 20th century Singapore was not a pleasant place to live. In the rural plantations, there were dangerous animals, unsafe working conditions, and tropical diseases to contend with. Such diseases were exacerbated a hundred-fold within the overcrowded municipal limits, within which 83 percent of the population resided on 13 percent of the land area of Singapore. Poor sanitation, combined with overcrowded housing facilities, caused the rampant spread of diseases



Sisters and orphans at the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus.  
Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

that periodically cut huge swathes through the population.

The burial registers illuminate the state of the health in society, and are of use in recreating a more tangible lived experience of the inhabitants in Singapore. Health was recognised to be of paramount importance. For the Asian plebeian classes, health was the most important asset they possessed – “a man who sold his strength for a living ought guard his body: his physique was everything”.<sup>7</sup> To the British colonial government, healthy labourers had greater economic value and “health services were established and operated precisely to maintain health in order to meet the labour needs of the economy”.<sup>8</sup> Despite its importance, health was easily threatened by the high incidence of disease and mortality that was in many ways shaped by the “inequalities, powerlessness and poverty produced by the structures of colonialism”.<sup>9</sup> Examining colonial records such as the burial registers and exploring the stories behind some of these data sets provide great insight into understanding British attitudes towards the inhabitants of Singapore. The burial registers thus draws attention to the state policies and institutions that shaped the health environment of its colonised subjects and contributes to the construction of a social canvas of the lives and deaths of ordinary people of that time.

<sup>4</sup> Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996), p.4.

<sup>5</sup> Parliamentary Debates, 7 Apr 1978, quoted in Lily Kong and Brenda S. A. Yeoh, *The Politics of Landscape in Singapore: Constructions of “Nation”* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2003), p.57.

<sup>6</sup> Huang Jianli, “Walls, Gates and Locks: Reflections on Sources for Research on Student Political Activism”, in Loh Kah Seng and Liew Kai Khiun, eds. *The Makers and Keepers of Singapore History* (Singapore: Ethos Books: Singapore Heritage Society, 2010), p.34.

<sup>7</sup> Warren, *Ricksshaw Coolie*, p.259.

<sup>8</sup> Lenore Manderson, *Sickness and the State: Health and Illness in Colonial Malaya, 1870–1940* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp.17–18.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p.4.

Name of Cemetery		Time Period	Missing Periods
Bukit Timah Road Old Christian Cemetery		Apr 1865 – 1910	Jul 1872 – Jul 1885
Bidadari	Christian Cemetery	Dec 1907 - Nov 1972	
	Mohamedan (Muslim) Cemetery	Feb 1910 - Dec 1973	
	Hindu Cemetery	Jan 1926 - Oct 1973	
Bukit Brown Chinese Cemetery		Apr 1922 – Dec 1972	Jun 1942 – Dec 1943; 1953 – 1958
Choa Chu Kang	Hindu Cemetery	1944 – 1978	
	Chinese Cemetery	Jun 1947 – Dec 1975	
	Buddhist Cemetery	1955 – 1977	
	Christian Cemetery	Aug 1968 – Dec 1977	
	Muslim Cemetery	1973 – 1977	

Source: List of Burial Registers, National Archives of Singapore

Race\ Age	0 - 1	1-10	11-20	21-30	Total
Chinese	467	58	1	2	528
European	4	2	1	-	7
Unknown	9	1	-	1	11
<b>Total</b>	<b>480</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>546</b>

Source: Bidadari Christian Cemetery Burial Register, 1924

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p.27.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> E. Wijeyesingha in collaboration with Rev Fr. René Nicolas, *Going Forth: The Catholic Church in Singapore 1819–2004* (Singapore: Titular Roman Catholic Archbishop of Singapore, 2006), p.236.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p.261.

<sup>14</sup> “Convent takes over 50 Babies a month”, *The Straits Times*, 2 Sep 1948, p.5.

<sup>15</sup> Lily Kong and Tong Chee Kiong, “Believing and Belonging: Religion in Singapore”, in Chan Kwok Bun and Tong Chee Kiong, eds. *Past Times: A Social History of Singapore* (Singapore: Times Edition, 2003), p.200.

<sup>16</sup> “1500 babies abandoned in colony”, *The Straits Times*, 4 Jan 1950, p.5.

<sup>17</sup> Maria Jaschok and Suzanne Miers, “Women in the Chinese Patriarchal System: Submission, Servitude, Escape and Collusion” in Maria Jaschok and Suzanne Miers, eds. *Women and Chinese Patriarchy: Submission, Servitude and Escape* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1994), p.7.

<sup>18</sup> “Tragedy of Singapore’s Unwanted Babies”, *The Straits Times*, 14 Nov 1946, p.8.

<sup>19</sup> Elaine Meyers, *Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus: 150 Years in Singapore* (Penang: The Lady Superior, 2004), p.62.

At a glance, the methodical listing and statistical nature of the burial records “silence the undocumented, ordinary and unremarkable lives and deaths of the men, women and children of the colonies”.<sup>10</sup> However, through an analysis of the categories of “Age”, “Gender”, “Cause of Death” and “Residence”, patterns of morbidity and mortality begin to emerge. Health and illness are “socially embedded phenomena” within these patterns and they “reflect the singular circumstances of time and place”, which helps in understanding society at a particular point in time.<sup>11</sup> This proves particularly relevant when examining the Bidadari Christian Cemetery burial records in 1924, which reveals an astonishingly high infant mortality rate originating from the convent orphanage.

Though 1924 had the lowest infantile death rate in a decade, infant deaths still accounted for 25 percent of the total number of deaths in that year, a clear indication of the deadly effect of the external environment upon infants (defined as a baby between zero to one year old). The burial registers of the Bidadari Christian Cemetery in 1924 recorded a startlingly high number of 584 infant deaths out of 960 internments. Of these 584 infants, more than 80 percent, or 480 infants, had resided in the CHIJ convent in their tragically short lives. Only through the burial registers (see Table 2) do the shocking numbers of infant

deaths come to light, allowing for an unraveling of the mystery surrounding the huge numbers of infant deaths from the Convent.

The large numbers of infantile deaths did not originate from the convent itself, a mission school established in 1854 by the Charitable Sisters of the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus to “educate girls of all classes”.<sup>12</sup> The infant deaths came from the convent orphanage, which was established simultaneously with the school. Unwanted babies, wrapped in newspapers or rags, were usually abandoned at the side gate of the convent, known as the “The Gate of Hope”.<sup>13</sup> The Gate was ironically named—the majority of babies abandoned there perished. Prior to their deaths, the babies were baptised into the Roman Catholic faith and were given French Roman Catholic names.<sup>14</sup> This would account for the disproportionately large numbers of Christian deaths in the census report of 1921 when the Christian population of Singapore comprised only five percent of the population.<sup>15</sup>

On the assumption that names were an accurate reflection of racial identity, of the 480 infantile deaths, the majority of infants (467) were Chinese, whose race could be inferred from Chinese names such as Gabrielle Wong Quek Soo, Joseph Loh Kum Hong and Therese Koo Tiong. The large numbers of Chinese infant abandonments at the convent could be due to a variety of factors, but were in all likelihood linked to cost and cultural beliefs. Chinese families who abandoned their child were usually too poor to afford funeral expenses and it was a common belief that a death in the house would bring misfortune.<sup>16</sup> By abandoning their child at the convent, parents still had a thread of hope that their child would survive, or at the very least, be given a proper funeral. This led to the disproportionately large numbers of abandoned babies at the convent.

Within this group of 467 Chinese infants, the number of female infants doubled male infants at 311 females vis-a-vis 156 males. This was due to the Chinese cultural belief of practising preferential treatment of boys over girls.<sup>17</sup> Because boys were regarded as more valuable, they were abandoned only when on the brink of death. This meant that while fewer male infants were abandoned, practically all male infants who were abandoned at the orphanage would die. In any case, despite the nuns’ care, most abandoned babies were “so undernourished and so ill that they [had] little chance of survival”.<sup>18</sup> Though current literature records that the sisters cared for 200 children in 1892, and 400 children by 1936, the burial registers prove that the chillingly high number of 584

infant deaths in the single year of 1924 far exceeded the ones who lived.<sup>19</sup>

Such findings reveal that the convent orphanage was established within the framework of colonial structures and reflected societal conditions that had necessitated a private institution for infant welfare. The colonial government evidently provided little aid in improving the environment for infants and in providing adequate healthcare. At the Administrative Records of the Singapore Municipality, the evidence gathered by the European District Visitors over a 12-year period proved that most babies were born healthy.<sup>20</sup> However, about a quarter of them died within the first year, which meant that many of the infants had died from preventable causes.<sup>21</sup>

the spread of respiratory diseases.<sup>25</sup> With no proper town planning, these slums also grew haphazardly, with “numerous immense blocks of houses stretch[ing] from street to street, without a single lane, alley or court of any description”.<sup>26</sup> This obstructed the construction of an effective sewage disposal system and hindered the establishment of an urban water supply, contributing to the proliferation of water-borne diseases. Such conditions are reflected in the causes of death of infants, in which premature births and convulsions numbering 139 and 117 cases accounted for the largest causes of death. Premature births and convulsions were usually due to poor health conditions or poor nutrition of the mothers and infants, in which environmental factors

Examining colonial records such as the burial registers and exploring the stories behind some of these data sets provide great insight into understanding British attitudes towards the inhabitants of Singapore.



Poor and squalid living conditions of the slums resulted in the proliferation of disease. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

While infantile deaths could be ascribed to a variety of causes, such as inherited diseases, improper birth procedures, inadequate feeding and neglect, unsanitary conditions were more often than not responsible.<sup>22</sup>

Health was closely intertwined with place of residence, which could determine how one lived and died. Most of the babies abandoned at the convent came from “cursed cubicle[s]” within “slums of Chinatown, the squatter areas in Silat Road and the poor rural areas”.<sup>23</sup> Such cubicles were usually “dark and ill-ventilated” rooms that could easily be re-partitioned to accommodate more tenants.<sup>24</sup> The erection of such partitions “extended to the ceiling, cutting off even a modicum of light and air”, creating ideal conditions for

that encouraged the spread of diseases had a significant part to play. Enteritis, an infection caused by the consumption of contaminated food and water, and pneumonia, an infectious airborne disease easily spread in close living quarters, also claimed the lives of 82 and 58 infants respectively.<sup>27</sup> The environment in 1924 thus created ideal conditions for diseases to befall those with weak immune systems, making pregnant mothers and infants the most susceptible.

Colonialism lay at the root of the problem of overcrowded housing and the spread of diseases. The British had fundamentally changed the social landscape through colonialism, which had brought in an influx of migrants and accompanying new pathogens. However,

<sup>20</sup> “Clinics”, *Administration Report of the Singapore Municipality for the year 1924* (ARSM) (Singapore: Straits Printing Office, 1925).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> W.R.C. Middleton, “The Working of the Births and Deaths Registration Ordinance”, *Malaya Medical Journal*, Vol. IX, Jul 1911, Part 3 (Singapore: The Methodist Printing House, 1911), pp.45–46.

<sup>23</sup> “Child Welfare Society”, *The Straits Times*, 25 Apr 1924, p.9; “Convent takes over 50 babies a month”, *The Straits Times*, 2 Sep 1948, p.5.

<sup>24</sup> W. J. Simpson, *Report on the Sanitary Condition of Singapore* (London: Waterlow and Sons, 1907), p.13.

<sup>25</sup> Kuldeep Singh, *Municipal Sanitation in Singapore, 1887–1940* (Singapore: NUS, Department of History, BA Hons. Academic Exercise, 1989/1990), p.39.

<sup>26</sup> Brenda S. A. Yeoh, *Contesting Space in Colonial Singapore: Power Relations and the Urban Built Environment* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2003), p.141.

<sup>27</sup> Convulsions and enteritis were indefinite headings that served as umbrella terms for deaths due to dietetic errors, malaria and tetanus, in “The Straits Settlement Medical Report for the year 1926”.



The Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus was also home to an orphanage. Many parents who were unable to care for their newborns left them at the Gate of Hope to be taken in by the sisters of the orphanage. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Because the colonial government was unprepared to undertake expensive large-scale sanitary reforms to revamp the slums, they instead focused their efforts on the small-scale establishments of two infant welfare clinics in 1923 at the Registration and Vaccination depots at Prinsep Street and Kreta Ayer Street, which saw 5,338 consultations in 1924.<sup>31</sup>

they had not developed an urban infrastructure to accommodate the rapidly increasing population. Despite recognising the dire state of the housing situation in Singapore by 1910, as highlighted by Simpson's Report on the sanitary condition of Singapore in 1907, "no real attempt [was] made to grapple with the problem" by 1924.<sup>28</sup> Instead, blame was cast upon the "Asiatic ignorance and apathy" of those who were "filthy in their habits beyond all European conceptions of filthiness".<sup>29</sup> Even though overcrowding housing practices affected the health of the poor adversely, they lived in such conditions out of necessity and the lack of other affordable housing options. Since "neither the colonial government, the municipality, nor the private sector were prepared to shoulder the expense of providing housing for the Asian labouring classes", the poor had to adapt through maximising the little amount of available space in the city.<sup>30</sup>

Because the colonial government was unprepared to undertake expensive large-scale sanitary reforms to revamp the slums, they instead focused their efforts on the small-scale establishments of two infant welfare clinics in 1923 at the Registration and Vaccination depots at Prinsep Street and Kreta Ayer Street, which saw 5,338 consultations in 1924.<sup>31</sup> This was a mere third of the 14,398 babies born that year, which indicated that the majority of babies had not undergone vaccinations or treatment. In the absence of mandatory health measures, the convent orphanage was a private institution

that functioned as an alternative solution to the inadequate public healthcare system for infants.

Roland Braddell, a visitor to Singapore in the 1920s, immortalised the uplifting courage of the convent nuns in caring for abandoned infants in his writing:

A feeling of security and peace will descend upon you, with a vast respect for the courage and self-sacrifice of the quiet nuns...In the Convent unwanted babies of all races are left and are cared for...what a tremendous debt Singapore owes to the little ladies of the Convent.<sup>32</sup>

Without having examined the burial registers, one might never have had cause to question the effectiveness of the orphanage in tending to these babies or the conditions of the babies at the time they were delivered to The Gate of Hope. Upon further investigation, one discovers that the convent orphanage was situated within a larger framework of colonial healthcare, housing discourses, and Chinese belief systems. Such insights are privy to the historian who analyses the burial registers over time to uncover patterns of morbidity and mortality that are unavailable from other sources. Further investigation in conjunction with the use of other sources reveals the dynamics within this discourse of health. Such everyday experiences of sickness and death as evinced from the burial registers contribute to constructing a historically richer picture of life in 1924.

#### The burial registers as historical resource

As a historical resource, the burial registers shed light on the morbidity and mortality of the inhabitants of Singapore, which is the subject matter and *raison d'être* of the registers themselves. However, the burial registers also offer insights into the power structures, prejudices and perceptions of state authority. This information helps in the understanding of the lived experience of the inhabitants of Singapore, while acting as a social commentary on the governance of the state. In particular, the records of the early burial registers yield rich data because they reflect the worldview of the British colonial authority. The burial registers of later years follow a standardised template that, while still of use in understanding more about a certain community, are no longer as reflective of society. Ultimately, the value of the burial register lies not in what it can tell us about history, but what questions it can enable the historian to ask that will offer a richer depth to history as we know it.

<sup>28</sup> "Idleness and Scarcity", *The Straits Times*, 27 Feb 1924, p.8.

<sup>29</sup> Yeoh, *Contesting Space*, pp.142-143.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, p.137.

<sup>31</sup> "Clinics", ARSM, 1924.

<sup>32</sup> Roland Braddell, *The Lights of Singapore* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1934), pp.69-70.

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The cramped and crowded streets of Chinatown in the 1930s. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

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# Digging Bidadari's Past: From Palace to First Muslim State Cemetery

Kartini Saparudin



Sultan Abu Bakar was the Sultan of Johor. The Bidadari estate was home to his second consort, Cecelia Catherina Lange. Courtesy of Antiques of the Orient.

This article is a response to a call on the dearth of literature on Muslim cemeteries especially Bidadari.<sup>1</sup> Ironically, documentation on Bidadari is lacking compared to the contemporary Bukit Brown cemetery or even the older Fort Canning Cemetery. For the case of Fort Canning, most of the surviving headstones have been preserved, embedded in a wall that stands till today. In addition, tombstone rubbings of surviving headstones were made. For Bidadari, there was no systematic documentation, mapping or photography done of the cemetery that could at least remain a record for future reference and research.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to the general lack of documentation on the Bidadari cemetery, there are limitations to reviewing a burial community such as the Muslim and/or Malay community. First, a Muslim community in the early 20th century was diverse. Second, simpler gravestones in the Muslim cemetery are not much of a textual source. This was the case for the Muslim tombstones in Bidadari cemetery, Kampong Glam's royal cemetery and Keramat Radin Mas Ayu at Mount Faber. Most tombstones in the vicinity of the royal keramats hardly have names inscribed on them – and these were members of royalty!

Hence what is possible for the moment is a look into the history of the Bidadari estate and the history of its acquisition as the first Muslim state cemetery and first multi-religious cemetery. This article provides an introduction to the history of burials in the Muslim/Malay community in Singapore, and contextualises the claim Bidadari has as the first Muslim state cemetery.

Before Bidadari,<sup>3</sup> Muslim burials were private events. There were three types of burials:

- (i) keramats that were considered “holy grounds” by the community and lastly;
- (ii) licensed burials made up of burials on wakaf lands and state lands;
- (iii) unlicensed Muslim burials performed mostly by the poor.

## Keramats

Keramats are one of the oldest and well-known burials in Singapore. It is usually a holy place that could be an old burial ground, cemetery, graveyard, object or place. The word is derived from the Arabic *karamah*, which means holy.<sup>4</sup> Keramats are usually associated with dead persons of royal birth and sacred backgrounds. One of the oldest and most well-known keramat is Keramat Sultan Iskander Shah located at Bukit Larangan, or Forbidden Hill, at Fort Canning. Keramats are often associated with mysticism and venerated as shrines. Keramats in Singapore are mostly related to the Islamic community and popular belief, and are connected to one or more cultural groups. It is a syncretism of animism, Hinduism and Islamic beliefs.<sup>5</sup>

Some of the other well-known royal keramats are Keramat Bukit Kasita at Kampong Bahru, which was thought to have been in use for the last 400 years;<sup>6</sup> Makam di Raja at Telok Blangah, which has been in existence for more than 100 years;<sup>7</sup> the 200-year-old Kampong Glam royal cemetery<sup>8</sup> and finally, Keramat Radin Mas Ayu at Mount Faber.<sup>9</sup> Most keramats mentioned here are considered holy because of their association with dead persons of royal birth. Most of these tombstones in the vicinity of the royal keramats hardly have names inscribed on them.

### Licensed burials: Wakaf and State lands

The second category of Muslim burials is licensed burials, which can take place on either wakaf lands or state lands. A form of licensed burial takes place on wakaf lands for private or public purposes. Wakaf lands are donated to the public for charitable causes such as madrasahs (Islamic schools), mosques or Muslim burials. However, in the context of Muslim public cemeteries in Singapore, a wakaf burial plot may not be considered public cemetery land if the donor and family are buried within the same wakaf land. Many poor Muslims who were not able to reserve plots for private burials could be buried on wakaf lands. It is mentioned that “a trust of land as a wakaf for the burial of the donor or family and relatives was held not to be public charity as it was not to the benefit of the public and was therefore void”.<sup>10</sup> Hence, wakaf burials may both be public and private. The existence of such wakaf lands prove that financially able Muslims could provide burial plots for their descendants and for poorer Muslims.

The highest number of Muslim burials were found on state lands. Bidadari was the first of such a state cemetery followed by Pusara Aman, Pusara Abadi I and Pusara Abadi II. The Muslim section of Bidadari was open from 1910 to 1973.<sup>11</sup> By the time Bidadari was closed for exhumation in 1990s, there was an estimated figure of 78,800 burials for the 24-hectare Muslim section of Bidadari cemetery.<sup>12</sup> This was more than the estimated 54,000 in the Christian section of Bidadari.

The 48-ha Muslim section of Choa Chu Kang cemetery was made up of Pusara Aman I, Pusara Aman II, Pusara Abadi I and Pusara Abadi II. Pusara Aman I was a major part of the Muslim section of Choa Chu Kang. The 40-ha land was opened in 1970 and closed for burials in 1995.<sup>13</sup> There were 45,000 burial plots in Pusara Aman I. Pusara Abadi I formed part of Pusara Aman I. Exhumed bodies from other cemetery plots which unclaimed by relatives were interred in Pusara Abadi I.

The other 8-ha section of Choa Chu Kang Muslim cemetery was made up of Pusara

Aman II. It was opened in 1995, after Pusara Aman I closed. Pusara Abadi II was also located in Pusara Aman II. Exhumed bodies from Bidadari that were claimed by families were interred in Pusara Aman II.



A big Muslim tombstone in Bidadari Muslim cemetery. Courtesy of Goh Si Guim.

### Unlicensed burials

Before the opening of state lands for Muslim burials, there was a lack of organisation and coordination for burials in early colonial Singapore. The fate of the dead poor was captured vividly by the colonial surveyor, John Turnbull Thomson, during his stay in the Far East:

...a few days will suffice to convince strangers in Singapore that native burial-grounds are to be met with in all directions. These are generally much neglected, and are overgrown with weeds and scrub, and often are they desecrated by the unsympathising Christian, Mohamedan, or Pagan, as may be. Roads are recklessly carried through the bones of original native settlers, and crowded streets now traverse the sacred places where many Singapore primeval worthies are laid in their last homes. Such sights were often to be seen of fresh human bones and coffins and hums sticking out of the sand by the roadsides, warning the fair young maiden of Western birth what might be her fate, were she laid in this land of apathy and regardlessness.<sup>14</sup>

### Bidadari estate: Istana of Cecilia

#### Catherina Lange, wife of Sultan Abu Bakar

Before Bidadari was a cemetery, it was an estate owned by prominent families. Henry Minchin Simons (known as H.M. Simons or popularly nicknamed H.M.S.), co-founder of Paterson Simons & Co and a civil engineer, was the original owner. In the early colonial period, the civil engineer was also the architect. Simons exchanged the Bidadari estate for Tyersall estate with William Napier. It was not known when exactly Simons had the building constructed or when he had the building exchanged for Tyersall. Few archival materials

<sup>1</sup> Tan, Kevin. (Ed). (2011). *Spaces for the dead*, p. 5. Singapore: Ethos Books.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 23.

<sup>3</sup> The Bidadari cemetery comprises the Bidadari Christian, Muslim, Singapore and Hindu cemeteries.

<sup>4</sup> Widodo, J. (2011) Keramats (p. 206). In *Spaces for the Dead*. Singapore: Singapore Heritage Society: Ethos Books.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 209.

<sup>6</sup> Tan, K. (2011). Introduction: The death of cemeteries in Singapore (p. 8). In *Spaces for the Dead*. Singapore: Singapore Heritage Society, Ethos Books.

<sup>7</sup> Widodo, J. (2011) Keramats (p. 212). In *Spaces for the Dead*. Singapore: Singapore Heritage Society: Ethos Books.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p. 216.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p. 212-213.

<sup>10</sup> Widodo, J. (2011) Keramats (p. 212-213). In *Spaces for the Dead*. Singapore: Singapore Heritage Society: Ethos Books

<sup>11</sup> Ahmad Ibrahim. (1965). *The legal status of Muslims in Singapore*, p. 38. Singapore: Malayan Law Journal Ltd.

<sup>12</sup> Lebih 57,000 kubur di Bidadari belum dituntut. (2002, July 20). *Berita Harian*, p. 17.

<sup>13</sup> Tan, K. (2011). Introduction: The death of cemeteries in Singapore (p. 21). In *Spaces for the Dead*. Singapore: Singapore Heritage Society, Ethos Books.; Nadzri Eunus. (2007, Oktober 24). 10,000 kubur lama di Pusara Aman akan dipindah. *Berita Harian*, 24 October 2007, p. 1. Numbers given by Tan is 78,800 Muslim burials in Bidadari, whereas a *Berita Harian* article reports 77,700 exhumed graves in Bidadari that was later to be interred in Pusara Abadi.

<sup>14</sup> Suhaimi Mohsen. (1996, April 14). Meninjau persoalan kubur. *Berita Harian*, p. 4.; Hasleen Bachik. (1996, April 2). 720 famili daftar tuntutan mayat di Bidadari. *Berita Harian*, p. 3.; Lebih 57,000 kubur di Bidadari belum dituntut. (2002, July 20). *Berita Harian*, p. 17.



Sultan Abu Bakar & Che' Zubaidah Besar with their first-born.  
Courtesy of Dato' Rahim Ramli.

It remains a mystery how Bidadari obtained its name. The name was already in existence before Sultan Abu Bakar and his wife took up residence in the estate. Newspapers reported that there was a pool in Bidadari visited by beautiful nymphs.

remain to elucidate the relationship of the two previous owners of the Bidadari estate.

Sultan Abu Bakar of Johor acquired the two estates (Bidadari and Tyersall) from Napier and Simons respectively. Several newspaper reports from this period reveal that the Sultan was a personal friend of both Simons and Napier and hence, purchasing the estates was not out of the question. Tyersall became the palace of Sultana Fatimah and was Sultan Abu Bakar's official residence in Singapore, when he became Sultan of Johor in 1885.

Bidadari was the home of the Sultan's second consort Cecilia Catherina Lange (1848–1939), a half-Danish, half-Chinese woman who was the daughter of Mad Johansen Lange, a well-known Danish merchant in Bali. Her mother, Teh Sang Nio, was one of two wives Lange had during his 17 years in Bali. Teh survived Lange and inherited a comfortable home in Banuwangi, Java.<sup>16</sup>

Cecilia remained abroad after her father's death. She returned to Bali in 1859 to visit his grave. She lived with a family friend for a time in India, England, France and then back East. When she returned to Singapore, she attended school in a convent and met Abu Bakar. Upon

her conversion to Islam and marriage to Abu Bakar, she was known by the title and Muslim name Enche' Besar Zubaidah binte Abdullah. She was only 20 years at that time. She bore him two children: a daughter, Mariam, who later became the first wife of the Sultan of Pahang and a son, Ibrahim, who succeeded his father upon his death in 1895 and ruled Johor as Sultan Ibrahim.<sup>17</sup> It was established that Mariam and Ibrahim were born in the Bidadari estate in 1871 and 1873 respectively.

When Sultan Abu Bakar's title changed in 1885 from Maharaja of Johor to Sultan of Johor, Zubaidah left Singapore to stay in Johor and never left. She lived in a palace in Johor until 1930 and hardly appeared in public. Mad Lange's Danish biographer described her as an "animated little lady, with white hair, blue eyes and aristocratic feature".<sup>18</sup> Cecilia was the "bidadari" (from Persian word *widadari* or beautiful nymph) who resided in the estate for a while. The estate was then left vacant for some time. When the Municipal Commission wished to acquire the land for a Christian cemetery in 1902, no one would have imagined that it would also be the first state Muslim cemetery as well as the first multi-religious state cemetery in Singapore.

It remains a mystery how Bidadari obtained its name. The name was already in existence before Sultan Abu Bakar and his wife took up residence in the estate. Newspapers reported that there was a pool in Bidadari visited by beautiful nymphs. The pool was said to be in existence but was closed down as part of a measure to reduce mosquito breeding. Oral accounts mention a hill on the estate on which the palace of the Sultan of Johor stood. This was where the Upper Serangoon Technical School was once located.<sup>19</sup> However, images of the Bidadari palace are rare compared to Sultan Abu Bakar's other residences in Singapore such as the Tyersall or Woodneuk palaces.

#### The story of Bidadari Muslim cemetery 1910 to 1973: The first and oldest Muslim state cemetery

The creation of a multi-religious cemetery plot that began with Bidadari cemetery was incidental. In the beginning, due to a lack of space at the Bukit Timah cemetery for Christian burials, the Municipal Commissioners intended to acquire "the Bidadari estate" to address the problem of burial plot shortages at the Bukit Timah cemetery and the poor drainage there.

While enquiries were made regarding the purchase of the Bidadari estate, investigations were also carried out to ascertain if the land was suitable for the construction of a new Christian cemetery.

...enquiries [were] being made as to the state of the Christian Cemetery in Bukit

Timah Road, and a thorough examination of the Cemetery was ordered. The portion of the Christian Cemetery, fit for burials, is all but used up. The remaining portion is altogether unsuitable, being made ground; in several places, the ground water is only 1 ft 8 in to 5 ft below the surface, and after rain a considerable portion of the old cemetery is under water, in some places more than 1 ft 6 in in depth. The drainage of the graves flows along the surface of the underlying mangrove swamp direct to Rochor Canal, and practically without filtration, instead of passing through porous soil, which would tend to free the drainage from deleterious matter.

Commissioners to survey the property for acquiring it as a site for a cemetery.

Dato' Mentri was the trustee for the Sultan of Johor for the Bidadari estate. Negotiations between Dato' Mentri and the Commissioners took almost three years to complete. This was later complicated by a petition "numerously" signed by Muslims so that part of the Bidadari Estate would be set aside as a burial ground for the use of their co-religionists. The lack of Malay press at that time made it difficult to trace this interest by the Muslims to have their own cemetery. The Muslim Advisory Board was set up three years later in 1905. Hence, any record of organised attempts to create a public Muslim cemetery was noted only in passing. Perhaps, more efforts to look into the annual



The side and back of Bidadari mosque. Courtesy of Goh Si Guim.

It was decided, therefore, to abandon the present cemetery and to provide a more suitable site. The sanction of the Governor in Council was obtained to the acquisition of the land for this purpose. Provision to the extent of \$80,000 was accordingly made in the 1902 loan of \$400,000. Several sites ...[Bukit Timah Road, Thomson Road and Serangoon Road]...were inspected. The Commissioners decided that Bidadari Estate on the Serangoon Road was the most suitable, the soil there being porous and sandy and in every way adapted for the purposes of burial. A survey was made of the land.<sup>20</sup>

The earliest declaration for the acquisition of land at Bidadari was published in the Government Gazette under the Land Acquisition Ordinance in September 1902.<sup>21</sup> At that time, Dato' Mentri of Johor did not reply to a request by the Municipal

reports of the Muslim Advisory Board/Hindu Muslim Endowment Board could shed more light on documented attempts for a Muslim burial space.

The Municipal Commissioners were reluctant to accede to a request to purchase the land for other religious groups. They were clear that the motivation was for a Christian cemetery, as noted by the response of the Deputy President of the Municipal Commissioners, who passed the recommendation of the By-Law Committee,

That the obligation of the different sections of the Community must be recognised but that as the ground at Bidadari was acquired for the interment of deceased members of the Christian Community for a limited period only, it is inadvisable to set apart any portion of

<sup>15</sup> Thomson, J. T. (1865). *Some glimpses in life in the Far East* (p. 280). London: Richardson & Co.

<sup>16</sup> Author compiles table of Muslim burial places namely from the following sources: (i) *Report of the Committee Regarding Burial and Burial Grounds*. (1952). Singapore: Printed at the Govt. Print. Off; (ii) Soal tanah wakaf: MTF A rancang adakan bincangan. (1982, Oktober 24). *Berita Harian*, p. 2; Sejumlah 324.55 h kawasan kuburan akan diambil. (1978, April 8). *Berita Harian*, p. 2; URA ambil alih tanah kubur wakaf di River Valley Road. (1983, June 8). *Berita Harian*, p. 3; Hasleen Bachik. (1996, March 26). 8,000 kubur di Bidadari terjejas dengan projek LTA. *Berita Harian*, p. 3. There were notifications that appeared in *Berita Harian* in the 1980s-2000s from MUIS (Islamic Religious Council of Singapore), MTF A (Muslimin Trust Fund Association), NEA (National Environment Agency) and even private construction/ contractors who bought land and discovered that it contained Muslim burials. These notifications seek descendants to claim the deceased burial lands.

<sup>17</sup> Saga of a Danish trader in *Bali Chronicles*, p. 112. Bloch, Peter. (2007). *Mads Lange: The Bali trader and peacemaker*. [Batuan, Gianyar, Bali]: Bali Purniati Center of the Arts, p. 170-171.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, p. 113.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, p. 114.

<sup>20</sup> Khairani Ahmad. (1979, November 25). 'Bidadari' tempat puteriz bersiram?', *Berita Harian*, p. 8.

<sup>21</sup> Singapore. *Administration report of the Singapore Municipality for the year 1902*. (1902). Christian Cemetery. Singapore: Printed at Govt. Off. MFM No.: NL 3406.

<sup>22</sup> Straits Settlements. *Government Gazette. Supplement to Straits Settlements Government Gazette.* (1902, September 26). Acquisition (b) Bididari (No. 27, col. 1562). Singapore: Printed at Govt. Off. MFM No.: NL1047-1048. However, the specific intent for the acquisition of Bidadari estate for the purpose of a New Christian Cemetery was published a month later at the gazette of 24 October 1902. Straits Settlements. *Government Gazette. Supplement to Straits Settlements Government Gazette.* (1902, October 24). President Remarks. (c) New Christian Cemetery (No. 61, col. 1582). Singapore: Printed at Govt. Off. MFM No.: NL1053-1054.

<sup>23</sup> Straits Settlements. *Government Gazette. Supplement to Straits Settlements Government Gazette.* (1904, May 27). Burial ground (No. 27, col. 595). Singapore: Printed at Govt. Off. MFM No.: NL1053-1054.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 1905, June 23. Mohamedan burial ground, Seranggong Road (No. 32, col. 179). MFM No.: NL1055-1056.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, No. 32, col. 291.

<sup>26</sup> Straits Settlements. *Government Gazette. Supplement to Straits Settlements Government Gazette.* (1905, June 23). Mohamedan burial ground, Seranggong Road (No. 32, col. 291). Singapore: Printed at Govt. Off. MFM No.: NL1055-1056.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 1906, January 19. Bidadari Cemetery (No. 3, col. 179). MFM No.: NL1059-1060.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 1909, July 16. Closing Bukit Timah Road Christian Cemetery (No. 34, col. 207). MFM No.: NL1066-1067; Municipal Board. (1909, 26 June). *The Straits Times*, p. 8. ;Notices: Municipal Notice: Christian Cemetery Bukit Timah Road. (1909, July 28). *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser* (1884-1942), p. 2.

<sup>29</sup> Benediction ceremony of the opening of the Roman Catholic section of the Bidadari cemetery. (1910, January 3). *The Straits Times*, p. 6.

<sup>30</sup> Administration report of the Singapore Municipality. (1906). *New Cemeteries.* Singapore: Printed at Govt. Off. MFM No.: NL3408.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 1909, February 19. Plans for mosque for Mohamedan burial ground (No. 4, col. 22). Singapore: Printed at Govt. Off. MFM No.: NL1067-1068.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 1909, September 10. For quarters, Mohamedan Cemetery (No. 43, col. 266); 1909, August 13. Muhammadan Cemetery (No. unknown, col. 41). Singapore: Printed at Govt. Off. MFM No.: NL1069-1069.

<sup>33</sup> [Untitled]. (1910, February 25). *The Straits Times*, p. 6.

<sup>34</sup> Straits Settlements. *Government Gazette.* "Progress report and statement of the receipts and disbursements on account of the Municipal Fund of the Municipality of Singapore Town,

this land for the interment of members of other religions.<sup>22</sup>

The commissioners were firm about their plans to reserve the burial grounds at Bidadari for the Christian community only until Dato' Mentri made it a prerequisite for the Commissioners to also acquire the land for the purpose of a public Muslim burial ground as part of the offer in 1905.<sup>23</sup>

The question of providing a public Mohamedan burial ground is considered by the Board. The President addresses the Board, and moves that the Commissioners accept the offer of the Dato' Mentri of Johore to sell to the Corporation for the purpose of a Mohamedan public burial ground, at the price of \$1,056.66 per acre, a piece of land forming part of the Bidadari Estate, being a portion of Government Grant No. 9.<sup>24</sup>

Eventually, the 45-acre land was acquired at the price of \$2,500 per acre, on condition that the Commissioners made a road from MacPherson Road to the side of the cemetery. Payment for the Bidadari estate amounted to \$112,500, which was paid in two installments of \$80,000 and \$32,500.<sup>26</sup>

### Work in progress

Work on the Christian section of Bidadari cemetery began first. Within less than a year, the plans for the layout of the Christian cemetery were prepared and arrangements were made for filling up the low lying portions and for forming and metalling the roads.<sup>26</sup>

With the opening of the Bidadari Christian cemetery, the gazette as well as newspaper reports officially announced the closure of the Bukit Timah Road Christian Cemetery on the 31 December 1909.<sup>27</sup> In effect, the Catholic portion of Bidadari Cemetery was opened, except in cases where the interments in reserved plots of which leases were granted. The grounds had already been consecrated in January 1908. The benediction ceremony of the opening of the Roman Catholic section of Bidadari section was announced in January 1910.<sup>28</sup>

At that time, Bidadari was the name of the Christian cemetery. The Municipal Commissioners would often use the terms "Mohamedan burial ground" at Upper Serangoon to refer to the Muslim section of Bidadari in government reports. It is not clear when Bidadari was became synonymous with the Muslim cemetery and other religious plots later.

The Municipal Commissioners agreed that work on the Muslim cemetery would not

begin until the completion of the Christian cemetery. Financial reasons were cited for this.<sup>29</sup> Years after, the plan for the Bidadari mosque in the Muslim cemetery was approved in 1909.<sup>30</sup> Quarters for the registrar and his coolies, as well as a mortuary, were erected.<sup>31</sup>

### Opening of Bidadari Muslim cemetery

The Muslim cemetery was later opened on 14 February 1910. This brief announcement was made in a tongue-in-cheek manner, "the new Mohammedan cemetery at Bidadari, was opened on St. Valentine's Day, but yet has no tenants".<sup>32</sup> This lack of response from the Muslim community is puzzling considering that the Muslims were actively petitioning for a cemetery plot in the earlier years.

The number of Muslim burials recorded during this time was limited in contrast to the utilisation rate of the Christian cemetery. No reasons were given in the government reports for this lack of numbers. In the later part of 1910, months after the opening of the Christian and Muslim cemeteries, there were 71 burials in the Christian cemetery and one at Muslim cemetery.<sup>33</sup> Six months after, there were 50 burials in the Christian cemetery and seven in the Muslim cemetery.<sup>34</sup>

Almost 15 years afterwards in 1925, the Christian cemetery that was made up of four divisions – such as the Protestant division, French Roman Catholic division, Portuguese Roman Catholic division and Pauper Division – had recorded 15,109 burials since its opening. The Muslim section recorded 3,169 burials.<sup>35</sup>

There may be many reasons for this gap in numbers between Christian and Muslim burials. One, Muslims could have had many alternative cemetery plots unlike the Christians. Two, the plot probably served the Muslim population in the surrounding area instead of island-wide because of its inaccessibility. There were tales of tigers roaming around the jungle, beyond the confined areas of the Municipality. Three, perhaps news of the new cemetery plot took time to spread to the outlying areas. In addition, the Malay and Muslim folks were probably unaware that they could also apply for subsidies for the plots.

A fee of \$2 was normally charged for adult interment and half of that for a child under 10 years of age.<sup>36</sup> For those in the service of the British such as civil servants of the colonial government or the municipality, the interment was \$1. In cases where the relatives were certified by the chief police officer or by the president of Municipal Commissioners as "too poor to pay the fees, the fee may be reduced or remitted".<sup>37</sup>

Eventually, when the exhumation exercise commenced in 1995, the Muslim section of



A perspective of Bidadari Muslim cemetery in the 1990s before the exhumation. Courtesy of Goh Si Guim.

Bidadari consisted of 78,800 burials which was more than the estimated 54,000 in the Christian section.<sup>38</sup>

### The Chinese question

Apparently, the Muslims were not the only group who applied for cemetery sites in the Municipal areas in 1904; the Municipal also reported that they received applications from the Chinese as well.<sup>39</sup> However, applications from the Chinese at that time were rejected on the grounds that Chinese burial customs were incompatible with the ambience of the consecrated Christian site; even though land could be secured at Bidadari for a Chinese cemetery plot.<sup>40</sup> The Chinese community had been facing obstacles in acquiring land within and beyond the municipal limits for private interment for the first two decades of the 20th century.

Some years later, the acquisition of the 213-acre site at Bukit Brown, already part of an existing burial ground that belonged to the Seh Ong *kongsi* (clan association), was possible. This was so because the *kongsi* resented to the acquisition of their land under the Lands Acquisition Ordinance, and hence was able to acquire the Bukit Brown site. The Bukit Brown site was under municipal control at the end of 1919. Bukit Brown Cemetery opened for internment on 1 January 1922.

### Bidadari exhumation exercise

As one of the oldest cemeteries in Singapore, Bidadari had 147,000 graves within its Muslim, Christian and Hindu burial grounds, of which about half the numbers belonged to the Muslims.<sup>41</sup> Tan wrote that no detailed study of the Muslim section has been done and it is no wonder since the individual tombs were badly weathered.<sup>42</sup> The grounds were closed in 1972. It was in 1996 that the government announced that the area was earmarked for redevelopment.

This sparked great public debate over the loss of Bidadari's rich history, which resulted in the Bidadari Memorial Garden. It was set up by the National Heritage Board to remind present and future generations of Singapore of its history. No remains were re-interred in the memorial garden with objects and structures moved to the new site. Some of the more prominent members of the Muslim community were Ahmad Ibrahim (former Minister for Health), Captain Noor Mohamed Hashim Mohamed Dali (Singapore's first Malay/Muslim commissioned military officer and unofficial member Malay member of Straits Settlements Legislative Council), Che Zahara Noor Mohamed (founder of the Malay Women's Welfare Association) and Abdul Rahim Kajai (father of Malay journalism).<sup>43</sup>

Perhaps it was timely that the exhumation exercise happened because of the lack of effi-

for the month of December 1911" (1911, February 24). Burial grounds (No. 251, col. 36). Singapore: Printed at Govt. Off. MFM No.: NL 1073-1074.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. "Progress report and statement of the receipts and disbursements on account of the Municipal Fund of the Municipality of Singapore Town, for the month of June 1910" (1910, August 26). Burial grounds (No. 1036, col. 30). Singapore: Printed at Govt. Off. MFM No.: NL 1072.

<sup>36</sup> Singapore. *Administration report of the Singapore Municipality for the year 1925*. (1925). XVII Burial grounds. Singapore: Printed at Govt. Off. MFM No.: NL 3411.

<sup>37</sup> Straits Settlements. *Government Gazette*. (1909, October 15). Additional by-laws for the regulation of burial grounds (No. 1075, col. 34). Singapore: Printed at Govt. Off. MFM No.: NL 1069.

<sup>38</sup> Singapore. Administration report of the Singapore Municipality for the year 1904. (1904). New cemetery and sale of land at the old cemetery, Bukit Timah Road. Singapore: Printed at Govt. Off. MFM No.: NL 3406.

<sup>39</sup> Tan, *In Spaces for the Dead*, p. 21.

<sup>40</sup> Singapore. *Administration report of the Singapore Municipality for the year 1904*. (1904). New cemetery and sale of land at the old cemetery, Bukit Timah Road. Singapore: Printed at Govt. Off. MFM No.: NL 3406.



Simple tombstones lining the sidewalk of Bidadari Muslim cemetery. Courtesy of Goh Si Guim.

cient use for Muslim burials. Ahmad Ibrahim acknowledged this when he, together with representatives from other communities, thought of the burial question in their report to the Governor. The recommendation of the report was prescient in its recommendation for cremation for cultures that allow it. However, for the Malay community, this was not the case. Hence, the Modular Burial System (MBS) was introduced to the Muslim community decades later. Through MBS, land optimisation of the cemetery land in Choa Chu Kang could last until 2130.<sup>44</sup>

This article is about preserving dying legacies in cemeteries. From the lessons of Bidadari, we should attempt to actively campaign for documentation of other cemetery plots on wakaf lands slotted for exhumation exercises. Perhaps through such an exercise,

many of us would find ourselves in the past, learn to appreciate the present and salvage whatever is left of it.

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<sup>41</sup> Yeoh. (1991). The control of "sacred" space: Conflicts over the Chinese burial rounds in colonial Singapore, 1880-1930. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 22, 2, September 1991, 282-311.

<sup>42</sup> *Heritage places of Singapore*. (2009). p. 178.

<sup>43</sup> Tan. (2011). *Spaces for the dead*, p. 21

<sup>44</sup> *Heritage places of Singapore*. (2009). p. 178.

<sup>45</sup> Singapore. *Parliament. Parliamentary Debates: Official report*. (2002, May 22). Budget, Ministry of Environment. Singapore: [s. n.]. Call No.: RSING 959.57 SGG.

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## Sago Lane: “Street of the Dead”

Sharon Teng

Among the older generation of Singaporeans who have lived, grown up in or worked in Chinatown during the 1930s to 1960s, death houses bestir grim and depressing memories of the old two- to three- storey red-tiled roof houses that used to line Sago Lane, scattered intermittently among residential dwellings.

In modern hospices of today, qualified health care professionals, together with a pool of volunteers, provide palliative care and succour to the terminally ill to ease their suffering as they make the most of their last days on earth. These hospices also offer programmes that cater to the medical, psychological, social and even spiritual needs of their patients and the bereaved family members.

In stark contrast, the death houses or “Sick Receiving Houses” at Sago Lane were the abodes of last resort for the terminally ill, aged

and infirm early immigrants to spend their final days in solitude, misery and for some, in excruciating pain. “Death Houses did not assume the responsibility for the well-being of a person. They merely functioned as bed spaces for people to die”.<sup>1</sup>

### Origins of Sago Lane

Sago Lane has several colloquial variations in its name: it was known as *ho ba ni au koi* (Hokkien for “the street behind Ho Man Nin”). “Ho Man Nin was the chop of a well-known Chinese singing hall in Sago Street”.<sup>2</sup> In Cantonese, Sago Lane was also known as *Sei Yan Kai* (street of the dead), referring to the death houses that were once located along this street,<sup>3</sup> and as “Mun Chai Kai, [named] after undertaker Kwok Mun, who opened the first death house” in that street.<sup>4</sup>

In the mid-19th century, sago was a major export of Singapore. Raw sago that was imported from Sumatra and Borneo were processed in sago factories here and then exported

Above:  
A wake being held outside  
one of the death houses on  
Sago Lane. KF Wong Collection,  
courtesy of National Archives  
of Singapore.



By the 1980s, there was little trace of the death houses of Sago Lane.  
Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

to Europe and India. In 1849, there were 17 (15 Chinese and two European) sago factories in operation in Singapore,<sup>5</sup> increasing to 30 in total by 1850. Many of these factories were located at Sago Street and Sago Lane.<sup>6</sup> When jinrickshas were introduced to Singapore in 1880, a jinricksha station was set up in Sago Lane.<sup>7</sup>

Chinatown then was divided informally into distinct dialect enclaves, with the Cantonese residing in and around areas such as Smith Street, Sago Lane, Sago Street, Pagoda Lane, Trengganu Street, Temple Street, Club Street, Ann Siang Hill, Keong Saik Street and up to South Bridge Road and New Bridge Road.<sup>8</sup>

Sago Lane gained its unsavoury reputation in Singapore, when death houses began operating in the area in the mid-19th century. Death houses were also established along Spring Street, opposite the Metropole Theatre.

### Death houses

Prior to World War II, residents in Chinatown lived in very crowded, squalid and unsanitary conditions.

By the turn of the century, Chinatown occupied a spatial extent of only about 2 square km but contained one-third

of the municipal population, that is, over 66,000 people of which the overwhelming majority (91%) were Chinese.<sup>10</sup>

After 1930, there was a marked extension of squatter settlements in the City area due to an 'overflow' of population from the slums of Chinatown. Most of the household residents...lived in the kind of accommodation generally associated with urban squatting. A further 23 percent of the population lived in shop houses or row houses type accommodation. Well over half of all households in such accommodation lived within the congested central area in Singapore—a total [of] 47,000 households out of 89,800.<sup>11</sup>

Many of the poor and lower-income people resided as a family unit in monthly rented cubicles, with six to seven cubicles (averaging 2 metres by 3 metres) being partitioned and subdivided on a single storey level (24 to 30 metres in length) of a two- to four-storey shophouse.

Nearly half of all households lived in housing where a single toilet [a shared wooden latrine bucket that was emptied daily] had to serve 20 or more equivalent adults.<sup>12</sup>

The small, dingy, airless and horribly cramped quarters provided poor living conditions particularly for the elderly who had contracted terminal diseases, were bedridden and nearing death. As the able-bodied adults had to work long hours leaving no one to care for the infirmed elderly, many who were hovering on the brink of death were sent to the "Sick Receiving Houses" by their families. This was also motivated in part by a commonly held Chinese superstition that evil spirits would haunt the house where a person had died and it was very costly to

<sup>1</sup> Chan (1999), p. 61.

<sup>2</sup> Savage and Yeoh (2003), p. 337.

<sup>3</sup> Chan, K. S. (1999, March 13). No love lost for the old "street of the dead". *The Straits Times*, Life, p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> Chan, K. S. (2002, February 4). Take me to watercart street. *The Straits Times*, p.6.

<sup>5</sup> Chan (2012).

<sup>6</sup> Savage and Yeoh (2003), p. 337.

<sup>7</sup> Buddha Tooth Relic Temple and Museum (2012).

<sup>8</sup> Lee, P. (Interviewer). (2003, June 22). Oral history interview with Lo Hong Ling (Dr).

<sup>9</sup> Yeo, L. F. (Interviewer). (1999, October 18). Oral history interview with Sew Teng Kwok.

<sup>10</sup> Chan (1999), p.17.

<sup>11</sup> Chan (1999), p. 3.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> The Street of the Houses of the Dead. (1948, September 25). *The Singapore Free Press*, p.4.



Funeral rites in progress. KF Wong Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

conduct an exorcism to make the house habitable again for the living.<sup>13</sup>

A few of the critically ill who were without relatives and who had a bit of money to spare also voluntarily chose to live out their last days at the death houses instead of the clean and sanitised environs of a modern hospital, having resigned themselves to their *fook sau* (lacking long life) fate. Some were also terminally ill patients who had been discharged from the hospital and left there to pass on.

Many terminally ill or very elderly women, particularly those who were *sor hei* (*amabs* who vow not to marry), often shunned hospitals, preferring to die in Death Houses...One reason was their suspicion of Western medicine and the other was the wish to be attended to by their “sisters”; even in death, they did not want to be touched or handled by men.<sup>14</sup>

The proprietors of these death houses charged different lodging rates depending on the health of their occupants, with those

who were nearing imminent death paying less. A hundred and fifty dollars was the standard charge, including a \$10 admission fee and \$1 a day for the night and day attendants, including “the fee for laying the dead out in the funeral silken robes that every Chinese, no matter how poor, hopes to be buried in”.<sup>15</sup>

In a death house, when a resident had ceased breathing, a doctor would be called in to certify the death. The corpses of those who had just passed on would have their faces covered in red or yellow paper<sup>16</sup> and their bodies would be draped in straw mats prior to being placed in coffins, which were then sealed up and placed on the ground floor to lie in state while awaiting burial. As embalming was not a common practice then, the corpses would start to rot, giving off a stench after a day or two, particularly if there were three to four coffins placed together at a time.<sup>17</sup>

The ground floor also accommodated the critically ill and poverty-stricken residents, while those who could afford to pay more stayed on the second and third storeys. Many residents were emaciated, with some suffering vocally in pain, while others slept quietly, but all were waiting for their time to die.<sup>18</sup>

In an oral history interview from the National Archives, Dr Lo Hong Ling, who was a medical doctor practising in Smith Street during the 1960s, described many instances of how people who were on their death beds would start to see and hear strange things when they closed their eyes at night, such as the clanking of chains and the sensation of being dragged away by people wearing the faces of bulls and cows.<sup>19</sup>

At Kwok Mun, one of the oldest licensed death house establishments, wooden bunks arranged dormitory style were provided for the residents with separate male and female wards located on the upper floors. “Kwok Mun occupied two shophouses standing side-by-side at Sago Lane. The ground floor of one shophouse serve[d] as the admission room. The other was the mortuary”.<sup>20</sup>

In other smaller and less well-furnished unlicensed death houses, there was no segregation of the sexes; men and women alike slept on thin straw mats, old blankets donated by well wishers or thin mattresses provided by their relatives. These would be discarded upon the deaths of their users. Residents who could afford to pay more were given better quarters, such as a corner for more privacy.<sup>21</sup>

The caretaker of the death house provided minimal care for the residents. Meals were provided for the residents by their own relatives, who delivered them in tiffin carriers. Poorer residents had their meals served on banana or yam leaves or even wrapped in newspaper.<sup>22</sup>

Most residents would live for only a few days

<sup>14</sup> Chan (1999), p.8.

<sup>15</sup> The Street of the Houses of the Dead. (1948, September 25). *The Singapore Free Press*, p.4.

<sup>16</sup> Yeo, C. (Interviewer). (2007, August 22). Oral history interview with Ng Fook Kah.

<sup>17</sup> Lee, P. (Interviewer). (2003, June 22). Oral history interview with Lo Hong Ling (Dr).

<sup>18</sup> Yeo, L. F. (Interviewer). (1999, October 18). Oral history interview with Sew Teng Kwok.

<sup>19</sup> Lee, P. (Interviewer). (2003, June 22). Oral history interview with Lo Hong Ling (Dr).

<sup>20</sup> The Street of the Houses of the Dead. (1948, September 25). *The Singapore Free Press*, p.4.

<sup>21</sup> Chua, C. H. J. (Interviewer). (1999, May 21). Oral history interview with Chua Chye Chua.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

or up to a week after moving into the death house, although a few lingered on for one to two months before succumbing to their illnesses. A miraculous few even survived, recovered and eventually returned home.<sup>23</sup>

Relatives and friends would wait in the death house and gather near the dying person, leaving for home only on short breaks for a bath and change of clothes. They would also "entertain their friends and relatives with beer, brandy, mineral water and Chinese tit-bits".<sup>24</sup> Mahjong and card games would also be played by friends and relatives keeping vigil into the night.<sup>25</sup>

Wealthier families held dinner feasts outside the death house as a pre-departure memorial for the dying relative. Families would borrow money at up to 20 percent interest rates, incurring debts to fund such death watches.<sup>26</sup>

The landlord, caretaker, workers and cleaners of the death house also lived on the premises, in quarters behind the ground floor. Death houses were open 24 hours a day with staff working on two shifts, a day and a night shift.<sup>27</sup>

In 1948, there were seven death houses in Singapore, among which two were licensed by the municipal health authorities as "Sick Receiving Houses" while the rest were unlicensed.<sup>28</sup> Two well-known and licensed Sick Receiving Houses at Sago Lane were Fook Sau and Kwok Mun.<sup>29</sup>

Death houses thus served a practical and essential service in the densely populated and built environs of Chinatown by providing temporary housing facilities for the terminally ill on a multi-use property where funeral ceremonies could be performed and as a funeral parlour where wakes could be held.<sup>30</sup>

### Funeral rites

Simple funeral rites were performed on the ground floor, restricted to a specific area, near to the front entrance. With six deaths occurring every day on average during the late 1940s,<sup>31</sup> it was not uncommon for funeral ceremonies to be held for two to three corpses simultaneously, with different priests engaged by the different families. The ceremonies were also performed along the main road or outside death houses if there was insufficient space indoors.

The scale of the funeral ceremonies depended on the financial circumstances of the family. For simple ceremonies, relatives would say prayers, squat outside the death houses and burn joss paper in wash basins.

At around 11am daily, cacophonous music from percussion bands and wind instruments could be heard from Sago Lane, serenading the dead as they embarked on their final journeys. At night, the street became an even busier hive of activity with long-drawn chanting from priests, accompanied by the steady beating of drums and gongs, the resounding clash of cym-

bals and the mourning cries of the bereaved. Visiting mourners and wreaths contributed to the crush of human traffic.<sup>32</sup> As the frangipani blossom was commonly used in wreaths, the heavy scent of the flower frequently permeated the entire street.<sup>33</sup>



An elderly lady and Taoist priest prepare for Chinese funeral on Sago Lane. ABN AMRO Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Due to the strong clan spirit among the Chinese community, when poor immigrants were unable to afford funeral expenses, clan associations and temples would rally round and contribute the *pek kim* (Hokkien phrase meaning "white silver") to defray the funeral costs.<sup>34</sup> Coffin shop owners would also charge nominal prices for coffins that well-wishers would purchase for the impoverished. Death houses would also sometimes waive the coffin and burial costs for the poor. It was believed that it was a praiseworthy act to help the poor and manifold blessings would be bestowed on the giver in return.<sup>35</sup>

The coffins used for the poor were basic make-shift constructions—four planks of cheap wood nailed together, built to be just big enough to hold the corpse. "The cost of a cheap coffin, transport to the cemetery and other incidentals started at \$120 and went up to \$1,500 for the rich".<sup>36</sup> The rich were able to afford bigger coffins and complement it with a lavish display of "cooked food, cracker firing and scattering of paper money".<sup>37</sup>

Bodies [would be] lined up along the pavement awaiting the lorry to transport them to be buried. The bodies [were] sometimes not covered...those without families for funeral rites...[and] [b]abies or little children [would] also be laid on the pavements as they [did] not have descendents to send them off.<sup>38</sup>

Burial was the norm among the Chinese and the burial ground of choice among the Cantonese during the 1950s to 1970s was at Kampong San Teng (where Bishan housing estate is currently located).<sup>39</sup>

It was—and still is—a Chinese custom to hold a wake lasting for a duration of an odd number of days, such as three, five or seven days, partly

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> The Street of the Houses of the Dead. (1948, September 25). *The Singapore Free Press*, p.4.

<sup>25</sup> Haifeez (1978), p. 47.

<sup>26</sup> The Street of the Houses of the Dead. (1948, September 25). *The Singapore Free Press*, p.4.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Lee, P. (Interviewer). (2003, August 5). Oral history interview with Lo Hong Ling (Dr).

<sup>30</sup> Chua, C. H. J. (Interviewer). (1999, May 21). Oral history interview with Chua Chye Chua.

<sup>31</sup> The Street of the Houses of the Dead. (1948, September 25). *The Singapore Free Press*, p.4.

<sup>32</sup> Chan, K. S. (1999, March 13). No love lost for the old "street of the dead". *The Straits Times*, Life, p. 7.

<sup>33</sup> The Street of the Houses of the Dead. (1948, September 25). *The Singapore Free Press*, p.4.

<sup>34</sup> Chua, C. H. J. (Interviewer). (1999, May 21). Oral history interview with Chua Chye Chua.

<sup>35</sup> Yeo, L. F. (Interviewer). (1999, October 18). Oral history interview with Sew Teng Kwok.

<sup>36</sup> The Street of the Houses of the Dead. (1948, September 25). *The Singapore Free Press*, p.4.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Chan, (1999), pp. 52-53.

<sup>39</sup> Yeo, L. F. (Interviewer). (1999, October 18). Oral history interview with Sew Teng Kwok.



Mourners along the road during a funeral. ABN AMRO Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

out of superstition and also to allow time for far flung relatives to come and pay their respects at the wake. The Chinese believed that holding a wake for an even number of days was unlucky, as it would cause the same event, that is death, to occur again.<sup>40</sup> Prolonging the duration of the wake and hence incurring a heftier bill was also seen as an indication of one's social status.<sup>41</sup> The caretakers at the death houses would help to look after the corpses during the wake, easing the burden on family members who were expected to keep vigil 24 hours a day.

#### “Breaking of Hell” ceremony

The Chinese believe that when people die, they are transported to hell to be punished for bad deeds done when the person was alive. The Chinese also believe that hell comprises 18 levels with punishments increasing in severity as one descends from one level to the next.

The “breaking of hell” ceremony was performed by a Taoist priest after a person's death to rescue the deceased from the horrors of hell by “lead[ing] him across the bridge that forms the link with heaven (*kor tin kbeu*).<sup>42</sup> This would allow the dead to escape punishment and to be reincarnated without suffering. In Cantonese, this is called *phor tei yuk* (meaning “to conquer hell”).

This was an elaborate open-air ceremony that lasted several hours. The ceremony would begin around 7.30pm and end around 11pm. A fire would be set up in the middle of the road with 18 roof tiles placed in a circle on the ground. Each tile represented one of the 18 levels of hell. As the ceremony began, the priest would recite some Cantonese incantations, then jump over the fire and break one tile by stepping on it, repeating the entire sequence

until all 18 tiles were broken. This signified that all the 18 levels of hell had been invaded and that the rescue attempt was a success. Occasionally, during the ceremony, the priest would also take a mouthful of spirit and blow it out onto the fire to create a more dramatic spectacle.<sup>43</sup>

The priest would convey a simple message through the incantations, asking the spirits to assist the dead in his or her journey through the afterlife.

Family members would observe the ceremony and carry out various funeral rituals as directed by the priest, such as walking around the coffin in circles to seek protection for the dead in hell and burn joss papers as offerings to the dead. Wealthier families also offered burnt offerings in the form of paper mansions, servants, television sets, and cars as a show of filial piety, as they believed that these riches would follow the dead to hell and make life in the underworld more comfortable.<sup>44</sup>

As there were several death houses along Sago Lane during the 1930s, this ceremony was a commonplace sight at night and a draw for “overseas visitors with a morbid interest in the dead and dying”.<sup>45</sup>

Even during the daytime, Sago Lane would be abuzz with activity and visitors would be greeted with:

the flags of the communal laundry, the thunder of drums and cymbals, the bray of a trumpet, the screech of a clarinet, the strong odour of incense, scurrying rats and mice, and a dark and gloomy atmosphere.<sup>46</sup>

#### Auxiliary shops

Complementing these death houses, neighbouring shops at Sago Lane, Temple Street, Pagoda Street and Trengganu Street sold funerary goods such as coffins, joss paper, joss sticks, candles, and *sou yi* (lifelong clothing) for the bereaved family members to wear during the obligatory three-year mourning period. These clothes were soaked in a large earthenware jar in order to dye them black.<sup>47</sup> Other businesses provided the professional services of a funeral trope, “embalming services, sold flower wreaths, prepared the wake, and made paper effigies of houses, cars, wheelchairs, and even Malayan Airways planes”.<sup>48</sup> Late night food stalls at Sago Lane and at the intersection of Banda Street and Carpenter Street catered to the supper needs of family members and wake attendants who were supposed to keep watch over the corpse throughout the night. Several shophouses along Sago Lane also operated as brothels and restaurants.<sup>49</sup>

The synergistic co-location of funeral establishments, allied trades and death houses created a specialised hub within Chinatown

<sup>40</sup>Ibid.

<sup>41</sup>Suan, K. L. (1971, June 6). Only thing down is cost of dying...*The Straits Times*, p. 10.

<sup>42</sup>Sit (1983), p. 144.

<sup>43</sup>Yeo, L. F. (Interviewer). (1999, October 18). Oral history interview with Sew Teng Kwok.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid.

<sup>45</sup>Chan, K. S. (1999, March 13). No love lost for the old “street of the dead”. *The Straits Times*, Life, p. 7.

<sup>46</sup>Haifeez (1979), p.47.

<sup>47</sup>Lowe-Ismail (1998), p.20.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid.

<sup>49</sup>Buddha Tooth Relic Temple and Museum. (2012).

<sup>50</sup>Singapore City Council (1958), pp. 4-5.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid.

<sup>53</sup>Suan, K. L. (1971, June 6). Only thing down is cost of dying... *The Straits Times*, p. 10.

<sup>54</sup>Goh, G. (1998, June 3). Take me to The Great Horse Way. *The Straits Times*, Life, p. 7.

<sup>55</sup>“Dead quiet” business... (1975, October 23). *The Straits Times*, p.3.

<sup>56</sup>Tyers (1993), p.192.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid.

<sup>58</sup>Thulaja (2005).

<sup>59</sup>Buddha Tooth Relic Temple and Museum. (2012).

<sup>60</sup>Ibid.

where funeral activities were conveniently and expediently arranged.

### Demise of death houses

In 1958, the Singapore City Council held a debate to discuss whether the death houses at Sago Lane should be moved to rural areas for health and safety reasons due to the fire hazards posed when joss papers were burnt as offerings for the dead. Another reason was the noise and air pollution generated, and nuisance created by the death houses to residents living nearby.<sup>50</sup> The health committee had also recommended that the death houses be given a year's notice to move out of the city and to stop issuing new licenses for Sick Receiving Houses.<sup>51</sup> The health committee's recommendations were overturned after a vote was called by the City Council as members believed that "Sick Receiving Houses [were] a social necessity in the Sago Lane area".<sup>52</sup>

In the early 1960s, death houses garnered negative publicity overseas and were forbidden from renting out "bed-space to the sick and old waiting to die".<sup>53</sup> Death houses were eventually banned in 1961.<sup>54</sup> The remaining two houses at Sago Lane were converted into full-fledged funeral parlours. After the ban came into effect, the death houses-turned-funeral parlours and auxiliary shops were moved to Sin Ming Road and Geylang Bahru industrial estate, paying a concession rental of \$375 per month.<sup>55</sup>

Part of Sago Lane was demolished for the construction of Kreta Ayer Complex in 1972. Due to urban redevelopment, shophouses along one side of Sago Lane were demolished in 1975 and high-rise "apartments with shops and community centre on the lower floors"<sup>56</sup> were erected in their place. "The remaining shophouses were cleared and a 3-storey market and food centre with a residential tower block was built, leaving only a pedestrian walkway along a stretch of Sago Lane".<sup>57</sup> However, efforts to revive the old Chinatown atmosphere and spirit have led the Singapore Tourism Board to preserve the few remaining old shophouses along Sago Lane,<sup>58</sup> where they now operate as souvenir shops and eateries.<sup>59</sup>

The land in front of Sago Street and Sago Lane, bound by South Bridge Road and Banda Street was left vacant until May 2005, when construction of the Buddha Tooth Relic Temple and Museum commenced, at the invitation of the Singapore Tourism Board. The temple was officially opened two years later on 30 May 2007. The \$62 million, seven-storey temple and museum occupies an area of just under 3,000 square metres, measuring 85 metres in length and 35 metres in width.<sup>60</sup>

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### About the author

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181 (18) in 250/45.

(16)

**PARTICULARS OF DEATH OF PRISONERS.**

No.	Name	Grade No.	Date of Death	Disease.
1.	Chan See	Remand	4.7.42	Beri Beri
2.	Yap Soon Siew	R.256	-do-	General Debility
3.	Tan Chang	R.161	25.7.42	Beri Beri
4.	Low Kian Gee	S.1.56	23.9.42	Lobar Pneumonia
5.	Ong Chiang Seng	Remand	26.9.42	Malaria
6.	Heng Seah Bak	"	21.10.42	Chronic Gastric Ulcer
7.	Tan Huat	"	19.11.42	Beri Beri
8.	Yee Joon Hu	S.207	26.12.42	Lobar Pneumonia
9.	Lee Ah Kim	L.328	11.1.43	Enteritis
10.	Ahlin bin Ambuas	Remand	3.5.43	Cirrhosis of Liver
11.	Tan Ah Sui	L.302	4.3.43	Beri Beri
12.	Tan Jan	Remand	14.4.43	Chronic Nephritis
13.	Lim Mock Kin	L.245	4.5.43	Pulmonary Tuberculosis
14.	Wong Ah Tio	L.426	8.5.43	- do -
15.	Abdul Karak	Remand	17.5.43	Malaria
16.	Sonu	"	18.6.43	Pulmonary Tuberculosis
17.	Ho Fhee Lee	L.475	19.6.43	- do -
18.	Tan Ah Heng	S.1.28	4.7.43	- do -
19.	Lim Siew Jhow	R.32	16.7.43	Acute Nephritis
20.	Lim Ah Lee	L.266	4.9.43	Pulmonary Tuberculosis
21.	Kuan Hah	L.308	27.9.43	Influenza T.B.
22.	Li Hn	Remand	28.10.43	General Debility
23.	Thae Kwok Yong	L.569	26.10.43	Pulmonary Tuberculosis
24.	Lau Thai Ho	Remand	29.11.43	- do -
25.	Koh Ah Chye	S.269	7.1.44	Beri Beri
26.	Farjapan	"	15.1.44	General Debility
27.	Doral Sany	L.1.	21.2.44	Pulmonary Tuberculosis
28.	Ho Chin Yik	R.137	21.2.44	- do -
29.	Nadawan Matr	L.120	-do-	- do -
30.	Tan Lan Chang	R.291	3.4.44	Beri Beri
31.	Sheik Dawood	S.465	21.4.44	Enteritis
32.	Awang bin Hassan	Remand	26.4.44	General Debility
33.	Imail bin Awang	L.42	28.4.44	Lobar Pneumonia
34.	Chue Ah Chai	S.215	13.5.44	Pulmonary Tuberculosis
35.	Sarej bin Surat	L.141	17.5.44	- do -
36.	J. Govindasamy	S.34	-do-	Enteritis
37.	Loh Kok Leong	L.722	18.5.44	Beri Beri
38.	C.A. Armstrong	R.379	19.5.44	Enteritis
39.	Soh Chui Teng	Remand	22.5.44	- do -
40.	Ng Keng Siew	L.518	24.5.44	Beri Beri
41.	Fhua Cheng Chlong	L.663	-do-	- do -
42.	Chan Ah Kow	L.660	25.5.44	- do -
43.	Goh Moh Yu	L.113	26.5.44	- do -
44.	Lin Ah Hoi	L.121	-do-	Pulmonary Tuberculosis
45.	Tan King Kuan	L.153	27.5.44	Sepsaemia from scalds
46.	Lan Chee Yin	Remand	28.5.44	Acute Bacillary Dysentery
47.	Leong Yee Kow	L.276	30.5.44	- do -
48.	Tay Lian Teck	S.231	-do-	Beri Beri
49.	Wong Seh	L.97	-do-	- do -
50.	Yong Ahn Chang	Remand	-do-	Bacillary Dysentery
51.	Yong Kang Kit	"	-do-	Beri Beri
52.	Daibin bin Habar	L.377	31.5.44	Bacillary Dysentery
53.	Quek Ah Too	L.330	2.6.44	General Debility
54.	Chan Kang Chue	L.465	3.6.44	Beri Beri
55.	Chua Ah Tong	R.347	-do-	Pulmonary Tuberculosis
56.	Lip Foy	Remand	4.6.44	Bacillary Dysentery
57.	Lim Kau Chin	"	6.6.44	- do -
58.	Tham Fong	S.38	10.6.44	General Debility
59.	Loh Leng Eng	Remand	12.6.44	- do -
60.	Tan Hu Seng	R.333	-do-	Bacillary Dysentery
61.	Amat bin Salleh	S.327	13.6.44	- do -
62.	Jonesway	Remand	-do-	Pulmonary Tuberculosis
63.	Thau Sio Eoo	L.675	14.6.44	Bacillary Dysentery
64.	Ajis bin Daud	S.242	16.6.44	Beri Beri
65.	Lim Tang Kang	S.365	-do-	General Debility

S.I.T. 26/25

Improvement Trust, Singapore.

B.G. 815/21

Rds.

From whom	Ex M. E.	Former Papers.
Place	Spare	
Date	27th April, 1921.	
<b>SUBJECT.</b>		
New road to Bukit Brown Chinese Cemetery (Kheam Hock Road)		
To Whom Addressed.	Date.	MINUTES.
		COVER

OP-ED: ERIC CHIN

# Some Thoughts on the Theme of Death

Family and friends have long had to bear with my vocal thoughts on endless scenes of wasted death on the news. My emotive views come from what I assumed were my limitless powers of empathy. As I have read and watched the news from the comfort of a warm home in a peaceful Singapore, I thought I fully understood the pain of a husband weeping over a wife killed by cross-fire or a grieving mother whose child lay limp due to famine caused by man's disregard for fellowman. My self-delusion ended only recently.



About four months ago, my wife chanced on a book in Bishan Public Library. It was Sebastian Barry's *On Canaan's Side: A Novel* (2011). I remember it well as it helped me acknowledge my inadequate empathy. I actually wrote down parts of the first chapter called "First Day without Bill", lest I forget:

What is the sound of an eighty-nine-year-old heart breaking? It might not be much more than silence, and certainly a small slight sound...

But the feeling of it is like a landscape engulfed in flood-water in the pitch darkness, and everything, hearth and byre, animal and human, terrified and threatened...It is as if someone...knew well the little mechanism that I am...and has the booklet or manual to undo me, and cog by cog and wire by wire is doing so, with no intention of ever putting me back again, and indifferent to the fact that all my pieces are being thrown down and lost. I am so terrified by grief that there is solace in nothing.

So when asked to write on a theme of death, I found myself turning to other writings that ponder mortality and loss, remember loved ones, memorialise those who have led inspiring lives; or think of events that have moved us. I looked first to books on my own shelves at home.

Since my younger days, a favourite has been *Totto-Chan: The little girl at the window* (1981) by Tesuko Kuroyanagi (translated by Dorothy Britton, 1982). In this book brimming with enhancement, there is a moment's pause as we experience a first meeting with death for a little girl:

It was Yasuaki-Chan who told her they had something in America called television. Totto-Chan loved Yasuaki-Chan. They had lunch together, spent their breaks together, and walked to the station together after school. She would miss him so much. Totto-Chan realised that death meant that Yasuaki-Chan would never come to school any more. It was like those baby chicks. When they died, no matter how she called to them they never moved again.

Totto-Chan suffers an unexpected loss and reflects quietly in a straightforward and unencumbered way. Her loss is at once real and, in relation to so many different everyday things, final.

In *Shadowlands: The Story of CS Lewis and Joy Davidman* (1985) by Brian Shelby, we find a

fascinating perspective on the fear of death – an almost selfish but a very human one:

(H)e wasn't crying because Joy had gone somewhere else, he was crying because he didn't have her anymore...What happened to Joy was that she had been set free: free from the endless battle against an insidious disease...For [Lewis] the pain went on.

I also re-call E.B. White's *Charlotte's Web* (1952) where Charlotte summons all her strength to wave a final goodbye to her dear friend Wilbur:

She never moved again. Next day, as the Ferris wheel was being taken apart and the race horses were being loaded into vans and the entertainers were packing up their belongings and driving away in their trailers, Charlotte died...No one was with her when she died.

Charlotte's lonesome death is at once tinged with sadness. Perhaps it is offensive to some instinctive humanity that knows it is wrong for one to die so alone at the end of life's journey.

On dying alone, I have found some harrowing stories in the oral history collection of the National Archives of Singapore (the Archives). Sew Teng Kok recalls the death houses at Sago Lane:

When we talk about death houses, we think that those people found along the ground floor of the death house are all... usually dead. But not [so]...Some families would put those people who are about to die into one of these death houses just to let them pass the rest of their time over there...You can see them skinny looking, sleeping on a mat, yelling away in pain or quietly dozing away, waiting for the time to come. These people may drag for a few days, if they are lucky in the sense that their time has arrived, or they may be there for one or two months.

Some might lament that the younger generation has forgotten filial piety and community spirit of the "good old days", but this account is one reminder that there are actually many things that are best left in the past.

The collection of oral history recordings on the Japanese Occupation reveals a particularly painful chapter in our history. Three hundred and sixty one powerful interviews fill gaps left by the deliberate destruction of official records by the Japanese administration and capture the recollections of all communities and peoples caught up during this brutal period of our

Opposite (From left to right): Extract from the records of deaths and executions in Pearl's Hill Prison during the Japanese Occupation. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Extract from the records of deaths and executions in Pearl's Hill Prison during the Japanese Occupation. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

LIST OF CHINESE PUBLIC BURIAL GROUNDS WITHIN THE MUNICIPAL LIMITS OF SINGAPORE—Continued.

No. with reference to book.	Holder, Custodian, Etc.	Survey No., Etc.	Owner, Etc.	REMARKS.
55	Hidden public. For "Seh Lee" only.	Marked on plan thus @ ---	Lee Chong Guan, Trustee	Ground is situated near 41 miles Sarongkong Road. There are on this ground a beautiful brick Bengelow and another brick building; the latter is used as a school for Chinese children living near the said ground. Two graves, in a clump, occupy about 5,000 square feet near pines. One grave about 800 square feet near vegetables and fruit trees. One grave about 1,000 square feet and about 200 feet apart from the above clump, near vegetables and pines. Four graves about 1,000 square feet, in a clump, and about 300 feet away from the last group, and from 50 to 60 feet apart from each other, near vegetables; and another grave occupies about 3,000 square feet, it is also near vegetables. A greater portion of this burial ground has not been occupied by burials, but is still in use. In this burial ground I find there can hardly be one burial made in one year.
61	Trochew public	Marked on plan thus Δ ---	Seah Lzang Seah, Trustee	This burial ground is situated near 41 miles Sarongkong Road. Numerous graves made on a great portion of the said ground near Main Road. Squatters are dotted on the land with piggeries and fruit trees. About 1/3 of the area of the land, having been planted up with pines and fruit trees, etc., has not yet been used for burials.
64	Hidden public—Disused	See plan marked C. L. T. L.	See Ewe Lay, Trustee	I understand that this burial ground has been closed against burials by the Trustees (some time about 50 years ago) but not formally according to the Act or Ordinance. It is situated between Selet Road and Neil Road and is covered with innumerable graves, except only a small portion, about 1 acre, near the back of a big Chinese Temple, overgrown with small jungle, left unoccupied by graves. Nearly half of the ground is in use by Seapoy Lines Golf Club.

Extract of the Report of Burials Committee, 1905. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

history. Ng Seng Yong, who was held along with residents from Geylang, Joo Chiat and Telok Kurau, recalled the randomness with which death came to visit:

The most tragic incident was the way they screened or shift what they call the people whom the Japanese authorities presumed to be anti-Japanese. One of the simple questions was: "Those educated in Chinese, put your hands up." Quite a number in that crowd raised their hands and they were taken away. Nothing was seen of those. And later, we heard they were all sent to Siglap Hill and executed there by machine gun. They were made to dig trenches. I lost two nephews in that incident.

The *penghulu* (chief) of Punggol Village, Awang bin Osman, recalled the aftermath of one such massacre:

*Masa saya balik tu, di laut ni bergelempang Cina kena bunuh. Ditembak dek Jepun. Saya agak daripada hujung sana membawa hujung sini, barabgkali lima ratus (bingga) enam ratus orang ada. Dia cucuk sama dawai. Yang ada dia ikat, yang ada dia cucuk.*

(When I came back, I saw the corpses of the Chinese floating on the sea. Shot dead by the Japanese. From one corner of the beach to the other, I saw probably five hundred to six hundred corpses. Some were tied up, some were bayoneted.)

In my search for records on death, archivists at the Archives pointed me to one of the few written records of death during the Japanese Occupation that had been secretly kept by the chief record clerk, Benjamin Cheah Hoi, and the medical officer, Dr Lee Kek Soon. As stated by the Superintendent of Prisons in a memo dated 26 September, 1945 to the British Military Administration:

(T)wo records were kept secretly by two members of the Prison Staff. Realising the value such documents I feel quite certain that if the Japanese officials had discovered this existence, the lives of the two people concerned would have been "written off".

To the best of my knowledge, the deaths or executions of prisoners that is non-European, were withheld from the public and it appears to me that many hundreds of people in the island and possibly the Mainland, would have their fears and doubts laid aside, especially so in legal and martial (sic) obligations.

This is further enhanced by a conversation in Municipal Buildings with Sqn. Ldr. Pagden of the Chinese Protectorate, who told me that he is at times literally besieged with many Chinese people attempting to gain information as to the whereabouts of their kith and kin, etc.

I feel, therefore, that we would be doing these poor people a great service if such lists were published.

The so-called "diseases" set out in the prison records tell a horrific tale of hardship and neglect as "Beri Beri" and "Bacillary Dysentery" became the main emissaries of death for Chinese, Malays, Indians and other races in prison.

Singapore has however been blessed with more peace than many a country and we have largely been able to bury our loved ones with reasonable dignity in relatively tranquil surroundings. A number of records in the Archives dating from the time of Raffles reveals that the search for suitable burial grounds also occupied the highest offices during Singapore's the earliest days as a colony as in the case of a letter of February 1823 from William Farquhar, the first resident of Singapore. He conveyed the view of the Lieutenant-Governor that "the present European Burial Ground" was "objectionable" and there was a need to "select a more suitable spot at the back of the Government Hill" (now Fort Canning).

The image collection of the Archives contains, among many other things, pictures of stone rubbings of some of the earliest memorial plaques from that early Singapore cemetery at Fort Canning. The images from Fort Canning will, of course, be a reminder of a colonial past with names that are associated with our beginnings. There are epitaphs, among others, to Stephen Hallpike, who is said to have founded the first shipyard in Singapore, and William Clark Farquhar, the great grandson of William Farquhar. These epitaphs do not simply record the dates of deaths but attempt to give us an enduring insight into these men as individuals, lending them some humanity.

Images of such epitaphs reminded me of a very short epitaph with deep meaning that I came across when reading *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* (edited by Humphrey Carpenter with the assistance of Christopher Tolkien, 1981). Tolkien's epitaph to his wife was, in a sense, a riddle as he was so wont to write. His letters however give an insight to an undimmed and cherished memory of young love. In a letter to Christopher Tolkien on 11 July 1972:

I have at last got busy about Mummy's grave... The inscription I should like is:

EDITH MARY TOLKIEN  
1889–1971  
Lúthien

:brief and jejune, except for Lúthien, which says to me more than a multitude of words: for she was (and knew she was) my Lúthien...

I never called Edith Lúthien—but she was the source of the story that in time became the chief part of the Silmarillion. It was first conceived in a small woodland glade filled with hemlocks at Roos in Yorkshire... In those days her hair was raven, her skin clear, her eyes brighter than you have seen them, and she could sing—and dance...

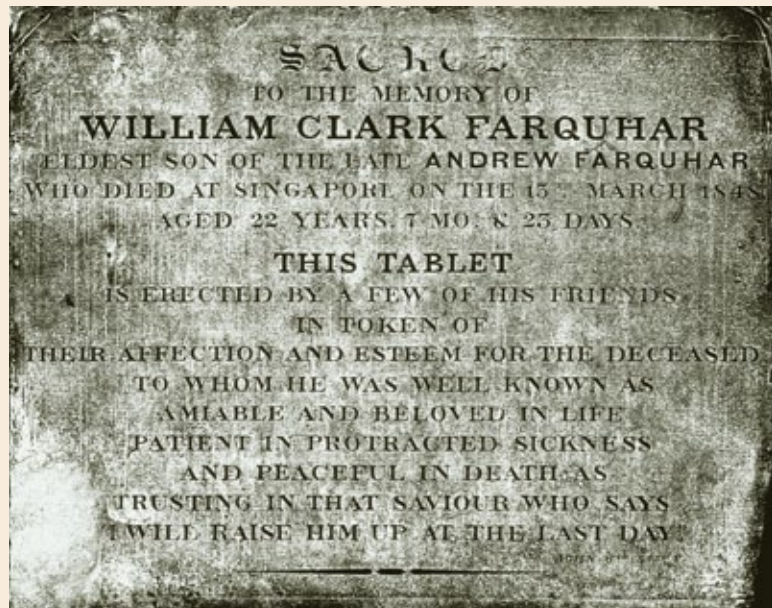
Browsing the shelves of the Singapore collection in the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library, a recent publication caught my eye—lovingly written and put together through the perseverance of the *Singapore Heritage Society—Spaces of the Dead: A Case from the Living* (edited by Kevin YL Tan, 2011). Looking through the bibliography, Chapter 8 of Brenda SA Yeoh's *Contesting Space: Power Relations and the urban environment in colonial Singapore* (1996) stood out to me and it was a fascinating read. It is superbly researched and tells the surprisingly interesting story of controls and conflicts over burial grounds in colonial Singapore. To echo *Spaces of the Dead*: there “are a surprising number of books and articles on Singapore cemeteries”—and I am especially heartened to see books lending interpretation and giving life to archival materials.

I have also had the opportunity to delve into records relating to burial registers, cemeteries, burial grounds and related rites. I read with fascination the debates of proceedings as the Legislative Council of the Straits Settlements finally managed to assuage Chinese opposition and passed a Burials Ordinance in 1896. Dr Lim Boon Keng was a local representative on the Legislative Council and two things that he said resonated with me. The first was his personal view that the Chinese select their graves through the “observations of a geomancer” according to a system that he himself candidly

regarded as “superstition”. The second was his response to the concerns of the Governor that “the most beautiful spots in the Colony might be destroyed for the whim of a Chinaman”. In an eloquent retort, Dr Lim emphasised that the “feelings of Chinese towards their deceased relatives” was a strongly held one:

I can assure your Excellency that it is not a whim at all; if the Chinese have any religious feeling it is that, and a very deep one...

Now, the custom of selecting the proper place for the burial of ancestors is intimately connected with the Confucian moral system, which though not professed here with all the completeness that obtains in higher quarters, is still the moral force which keeps the Chinese together, and if in their moral degradation, there is anything that entitles them to respect of the nations of the world, and that still keeps them in the pale of civilization, it is this reverence for their parents, which is not peculiar to them, but common to all nations.



Another excellent example of a record that sheds light on Singapore's early days is the 20 February, 1905 Report of the Burials Committee appointed by the Governor. From this one record, there are at least four diverting lines of inquiry for the intrepid researcher/historian. The first was the attempt to use access to limited cemetery plots as a reward for “services” or a potential tool of control. There was a recommendation strongly put forth and accepted by the Colonial Secretary that “the privilege of burial [within the Municipal Limits] be granted only in the case of Chinese who in the opinion of the Governor in Council have rendered eminent service to the Colony”.

Memorial plaques of William Clark Farquhar embedded into the walls at Fort Canning. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

In more recent times, the Bukit Brown cemetery has, of course, dominated the conversation on burial grounds. To me, a key legacy of Bukit Brown is that it marked one of the significant steps in the journey towards a common Singaporean outlook as it was the first Chinese municipal cemetery open to all regardless of clan associations or other affiliations.

The second was that there was a need then for cemeteries for the Chinese to have “suitable arrangements” for the separation of clans. The third was that many of the cemeteries had other uses apart from burials—perhaps early evidence of a practical side of Singapore taking shape or the inevitability of the need to balance the needs of the living and the dead within land-scarce Singapore. As reported in the case of a burial ground “situated near 4½ miles Saranggong Road”, a good many burial grounds housed not just the dead but also squatters, “piggeries” and were sites for the cultivation of fruit trees. And finally, for those who mistakenly believe that the passion for golf was a recent development and the result of country clubs sprouting in modern Singapore, it was reported that a Hokkien burial ground “situated between Selat Road and Neil Road...is covered in innumerable graves” and “[n]early half the ground is in use by Sepoy Lines Golf Club”.

Despite these valiant early attempts to control and manage the conduct of burials, there is evidence that a rather cavalier attitude continued apace for some time yet. One particular exchange recorded in Municipal Office files from 1924 on a “Hokkien Burial Ground Alexandra Road” stood out for me. With the distance of time, it now makes for somewhat amusing reading:

This B.G. (burial ground) was recently closed. This matter requires careful investigation by the police—as Heaven knows what abuses may be going on.

I do not think that it is likely that exhumations are taking place. Prior to it being closed things were loosely conducted here and it was the habit to dig all over the place till a vacant space was found, to bury another body. In the words of the caretaker if he did not find a “box” or “bones” then he allowed a burial. It was common to make three or four attempts...  
P.S.H. 25/11/24

I ask for your assistance in this matter. It is clear, I think, that Burials are being made still.  
R.J.F. 27/11

The Det. Branch have not been able to obtain any information as to recent burials.  
2. I would suggest that a few of the graves which show signs of having been opened and refilled be reopened to ascertain if they contain fresh bodies.  
C.H. 23/12

What a pleasant suggestion.  
R.J.F. 24/12

In more recent times, the Bukit Brown cemetery has, of course, dominated the conversation on burial grounds. To me, a key legacy of Bukit Brown is that it marked one of the significant steps in the journey towards a common Singaporean outlook as it was the first Chinese municipal cemetery open to all regardless of clan associations or other affiliations. There is a certain irony but an archival record uncovered from the “Improvement Trust, Singapore” files from 1921 appears to be a small microcosm of the Bukit Brown conversations of today. The file named “New Road to Bukit Brown Chinese Cemetery (Kheam Hock Road)” showed that in order for Kheam Hock Road to be built to provide better access to Bukit Brown for the common good, some forty graves had to make way for the development.

What the forty graves looked like and what stories they could have told; and who were affected (dead or living) is unknown. A major difference today is the extent of documentation that can and will be achieved. There is now a Bukit Brown cemetery documentation project that is being undertaken with great enthusiasm and passion by a highly professional team supported by the Urban Redevelopment Authority and the Land Transport Authority. The Bukit Brown cemetery documentation, including photographs and videos of graves, exhumations and related religious rites will in time become part of the public records kept by the Archives. These epitaphs and other stories of lives lived will, in time, be gently unfolded and researched as many now increasingly seek to uncover our roots in Singapore.

It can be noted that these newer records will contain a lot more in the form of born digital audio-visual records. Audio-visual records were not so readily available in the past but those that the Archives has preserved relating to death range from official footage of state funerals of past presidents to Berita Singapura broadcasts of Qing Ming festivals past. Other records include broadcast footage of disasters such as the collapse of Hotel New World. In an indication of the significance of cemeteries in our lives, the NAS has also produced its own video documentation of the Bidadari and Bukit Brown cemeteries.

In this context of our increasing ability to easily make records of ourselves and our loved ones, John Miksic’s thoughtful final reflections in his chapter on *Fort Canning: An early Singapore cemetery* from *Spaces of the dead* are apt. He reflects on how attitudes have changed such that the “need to have large monuments at which to remember the dead, to meditate on them, and to contemplate one’s own possible demise so as to be prepared both financially and emotionally, has evaporated”.

Other similar shifts in attitudes have been observed for a time. Among many insightful writings in her *Bamboo Green* (1982) series of articles, Li Lienfung wrote of the struggles faced in mourning the death of her mother, who was not religious and though “a woman born of the last century”, had left a legacy of breaking “away from...tradition”:

The old and young generations disagreed over the funeral arrangements so compromises and more compromises were repeatedly made... [W]hy cannot those of us [Chinese] Singaporeans who are not Christians, Buddhists or Taoists, and who are culturally half Western and half Oriental, do what Grandma did?—to cut us off from the inapplicable and irrelevant part of our ‘tradition’ so that we could be free to experiment and search for a ceremony in the burial of our loved ones—a ceremony of our own that could bring peace and serenity to the living members of the family who must need tranquillity and comfort...



Li’s views on long-held practices are strongly put and might bring reproach in some quarters but she captured the growing clash of wishes over religious affiliations and the relevance of traditions that I have myself witnessed between different generations.

Death has occupied man for as long as we have been aware of the inevitability of the end for ourselves and our loved ones. I have but made a short exploration in the space given to me.

I have found that the NAS has been a steadfast keeper of enduring facts, evidence and memories through its collections of documents, images, oral history recordings and audio-visual records. In the traces that death leaves behind, through headstones, burial registers and other records, we are brought on a journey that can give us context and insight into times past and how certain things came to be—with twist and turns into diverse fields including colonial politics, war and its atrocities and the land use policies of a land scarce country.

While archival materials shed light on certain conditions of the past, it is literature and other writings that bring sometimes disparate threads together and lend broader perspectives and humanity to a subject that we cannot ignore.

I give the final word to the spiritual writings of Kahlil Gibran. In *The Prophet* (1926), he speaks of Death as a glorious triumph and this resonates with those who desire a closeness with God. Yet, I believe that it has a potent universality as it is also able to stand alongside the staunchly scientific who may question the existence of God and hypothesise that humans are “starstuff” that has “grown to self-awareness” (*Cosmos* by Carl Sagan (1980)). Regardless of our belief (or not) in a God, the cosmos nevertheless reclaims us in time:

For what is it to die but to stand naked in the wind and to melt in the sun? And what is it to cease breathing but to free the breath from its restless tides, that it may rise and expand and seek God unencumbered?

Only when you drink from the river of silence shall you indeed sing. And when you have reached the mountain top, then you shall begin to climb. And when the earth shall reclaim your limbs, then shall you truly dance.

Screen capture of video on Bidadari Christian Cemetery produced by the National Archives of Singapore. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

#### About the author

Eric Chin was appointed Director of the National Archives of Singapore on 21 July 2012. He is a lawyer by training and is a National University of Singapore alumni from the class of 1992. He has served as State Counsel with the Attorney-General’s Chambers and also as General Counsel with the National Heritage Board. Apart from law, he has had a long-standing personal interest in library and archival sciences. Towards this end, he completed a Master’s in Information Studies at the Nanyang Technological University in 2010. He loves his work as well as his wife and three boisterous children. He wishes to have a new dog (or two) since Paddy and Prudence have sadly passed on.

## COLLECTION HIGHLIGHTS

# Overseas Chinese Nationalism and Relief Efforts for China in the 1930s

Jason Lim

Dr Jason Lim reviews the contents of the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce & Industry 80th Anniversary Souvenir, found in the National Library's rare books collection.



Cover of 新加坡中华总商会筹赈中国难民委员会大世界游艺会特刊 / [编者廖哲煊, 王少平]  
Published by 新加坡中华总商会, 1932

Before citizenship was offered to the Chinese in Singapore in 1957, the Chinese were considered “aliens” by the British colonial authorities. The British colonial government would not protect the Chinese and left them to manage their own affairs through clan and dialect associations, trade associations, clubs and societies. The main Chinese organisation was the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce (SCCC), founded by merchants in 1906. The SCCC, in turn, was a link between the Singapore Chinese and China. Before 1949, all overseas Chinese were citizens of the Republic of China (ROC) by *jus sanguinis* (where Chinese nationality was based on ethnicity and not on the place of birth) and the SCCC would act as the voice of the overseas Chinese to the National Government in Nanjing. As citizens of China, the overseas Chinese were concerned about the problems in China and did all they could to organise relief efforts whenever China faced natural disasters or military conflicts.

By the early 1930s, China had to defend itself and its interests against a militarily-resurgent Japan. On 18 September 1931, claiming that Chinese bandits had blown up a railway track in Mukden (now Shenyang), Japanese troops invaded Manchuria and displaced Chinese nationals in the process. The invasion created a storm of protests from the overseas Chinese and the Chinese community leaders were scathing in their criticism of Japan. As news of the Japanese invasion and the plight of Chinese refugees poured into Singapore, some community leaders began relief efforts for China. A decision was made by the council of the SCCC to establish a “Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce Committee of Relief Fund for China” (新加坡中华总商会筹赈中国难民委员会) on 23 September 1931, just five days after the Japanese invasion. In its inaugural meeting the next day, the committee of 20 members started work under the chairmanship of Lee Choon Seng (李俊承) with Yeo Chan Boon (杨缵文) as his deputy. It had seven sub-committees—Supervision, General Affairs, Finance, Publicity, Publications, Liaison and Donations. The work of the committee cut across dialect lines and many prominent merchants were

involved, including Hou Say Huan (侯西反), Lum Boon Tin (林文田), Lee Wee Nam (李伟南), Aw Boon Haw (胡文虎), Lim Kim Tian (林金殿) and Lee Kong Chian (李光前). A list of rules and regulations governing the composition and work of the committee was also drawn up, followed by appeals for funds and other donations. On 1 February 1932, Lee Choon Seng, who was also president of the SCCC, reported the formation of the committee to the council of the SCCC. The council called on every Chinese organisation in Singapore to send a representative for a general meeting on 4 February to discuss the work of this committee.<sup>1</sup>

A souvenir book was published in 1932 to commemorate the work of the committee, highlighting its efforts to raise funds for China via organising entertainment and cultural activities in a carnival held at the Great World Amusement Park from 13 to 15 May. This rare publication is an exemplary showcase of overseas Chinese nationalism and the role played by the SCCC in promoting relief efforts for China in Singapore. Like many contemporary publications of Chinese organisations, it has a portrait of the revolutionary Dr Sun Yat-sen (孙中山) and the text of his last will and testament before the contents page. The book is divided into three distinct parts: a preface by various contributors spanning the first 12 pages; 43 pages of photographs; and 63 pages of news, appeals and personal reflections.

In his preface, Deputy Chairman Yeo Chan Boon explained that the committee had to be formed because of the need to provide aid to those displaced by the Japanese invasion of Manchuria. The work of the committee was then followed by a narrative on how Great World came to be used as a venue for the carnival; the organisation of another committee to oversee the proceedings of the carnival; and a full member list of those involved with the organisation of the carnival itself. Many prominent Chinese in Singapore were involved with both the committee and the organisation of the carnival. Yet, there is the noticeable absence of Tan Kah Kee (陈嘉庚), the main overseas Chinese community leader in Singapore who headed the Hokkien Huay Kuan and a power broker in the leadership of the SCCC. The publication makes no mention on why Tan was not involved.

The rest of the publication includes appeals by members of the committee; personal aware-

<sup>1</sup> Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce & Industry, *Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce & Industry 80th Anniversary Souvenir Magazine*, (Singapore: Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce & Industry, 1986), p. 124.

ness of raising funds for China; ravages of war; advertisements; and the carnival programme at Great World. There is also the personal impression of an individual who had returned home to China for a short visit.<sup>2</sup> It is noteworthy that he used the pseudonym “*zhongli*” (中立), which means “non-partisan”, implying that his views would be independent ones. He had not been influenced by the Kuomintang (KMT) or the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as both parties had ended their United Front in 1927 and were, by 1932, openly fighting each other in the interior provinces of China. There is an article entitled “Sole Obligation” where the writer argues that there must be a balance struck between rights and obligations. He calls for a spirit of self-sacrifice—those who could donate money should do so willingly. He reminds readers that the overseas Chinese were the “mother of the revolution” and that it was time to bring forth that spirit of self-sacrifice and work hard for the survival of the Chinese. The same impassioned plea to the Chinese in Singapore to do whatever they could to save their motherland—China—is repeated throughout the book. The English manifesto of the Committee of Relief Fund for China is also included in the book and it tells readers that “although subscriptions have been pouring in daily, we feel that unless the public continuously render their support, the relief work in China cannot be carried on incessantly”. The English manifesto also makes appeals to “the Straits Chinese and sympathetic foreign communities” to make any donations (including medicine, food and clothing) to the Committee at the SCCC. The 43 pages of photographs depict mainly Japanese atrocities, Chinese refugees, members of the Committee and participants in the carnival (including students involved with Chinese opera, musical performances and games).

There are some general themes that can be gleaned from this publication. The first and most unmistakable is that of overseas Chinese nationalism, which manifests in two ways: a heavy criticism of Japan and a call for China to strengthen itself. Contributors condemned Japan for its imperial ambitions over China. In his foreword, Lü Weijue (吕伟觉), the principal of Yeung Ching School (养正学校), noted that with the end of World War I, the Treaty of Versailles was signed and the League of Nations was founded in order to end all wars. However, Lü noted that as the world was going through the Great Depression, “a certain side” decided to break world peace by invading Manchuria and attacking Shanghai. He noted with sadness the

powerlessness of the League of Nations and the endless suffering of the “peace-loving” Chinese.<sup>3</sup> There is also an article that links relief efforts with “self-strengthening”, a reference to the Self-Strengthening Movement (自强运动) that took place in the Qing Empire just a few decades earlier (1861–95). Zheng Zhaowu (郑照吾) suggests that by participating in relief efforts, the overseas Chinese would have contributed to the strengthening of China.<sup>4</sup>

The book also appeals to overseas Chinese nationalism through advertisements highlighting “national products” (国货) or goods produced and/or manufactured in China. After the National Government was formally installed in Nanjing in 1928 after 16 years of division, a sense of nationalistic pride swept China and the overseas Chinese communities. Purchasing Chinese goods was seen as a patriotic act.<sup>5</sup> Between pages 28 and 29 of the main text, for instance, there are two advertisements for liquor from Gong Yu Hang (公裕行) and Wan Xing National Products Company (万兴国货公司) companies. Gong Yu Hang reminded readers not to forget to “save the nation” (救国) by promoting “national products”. Wan Xing National Products Company had a tagline—“Love the country and fellow overseas citizens by drinking Five Star Beer (五星啤酒), a national product”.<sup>6</sup>

This book is a showpiece of overseas Chinese nationalism through the public appeal of Chinese leaders in Singapore to the sense of patriotism of the members of the community. The committee informed the Chinese in Singapore of the Japanese atrocities in Manchuria and the plight of Chinese refugees who were forced to flee the war zone. Some of the articles published in this book are cause for reflection on overseas Chinese nationalism. The detailed programme given in the publication included Chinese historical plays, Cantonese opera, performances by Chinese musical groups, and volleyball and basketball matches between several Chinese schools.<sup>7</sup> The advertisements calling on the Chinese in Singapore to consume national products followed the practice of merchants in China who called on the Chinese to buy Chinese goods in order to save Chinese businesses and contribute to the Chinese economy. The book also reveals the leadership role of the SCCC in the Chinese community when Singapore was still a British colony. The content of the publication and the tumultuous times during which it was published (when Japan was encroaching into Chinese territory) makes this book an important source for researchers on overseas Chinese nationalism.

#### About the author

Dr Jason Lim is an Asian History lecturer with the University of Wollongong’s School of History and Politics. He started off his career with the National Archives of Singapore before moving on to the Oral History Centre as a researcher and interviewer. From 2008 to 2010, he was a postdoctoral fellow at the Department of History at the National University of Singapore and joined the University of Wollongong in 2010. He is currently also serving as the China representative in the 2011–2012 Council of the Asian Studies Association of Australia (ASAA).

<sup>2</sup> Liao C Fan and Wang Siew Peng, *Xinjiapo Zhonghua Zongshanghui Chouben Zhongguo Nanmin Weiyuanhui Dashijie Youyibui Tekan* (A Special Guide to the Great World Entertainment in aid of the China Relief Fund organised by the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce), (Singapore: Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce, 1932), pp. 15–16 in the main text.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 5–6 in the preface.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 14–15 in the main text.

<sup>5</sup> Karl Gerth, *China Made: Consumer Culture and the Creation of the Nation*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, c. 2003); Jason Lim, *Linking an Asian Transregional Commerce in Tea: Overseas Chinese Merchants in the Fujian-Singapore Trade, 1920–1960*, (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2010).

<sup>6</sup> Liao and Wang, *Dashijie Youyibui Tekan*, between pages 28 and 29 in the main text.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 34–39 in the main text.

