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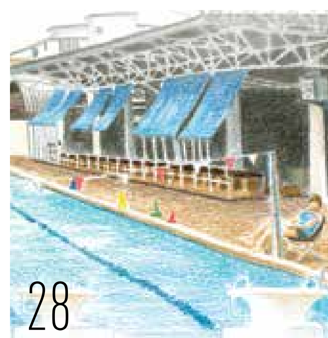

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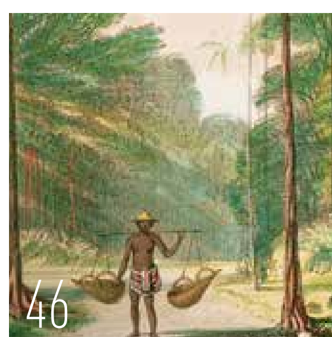

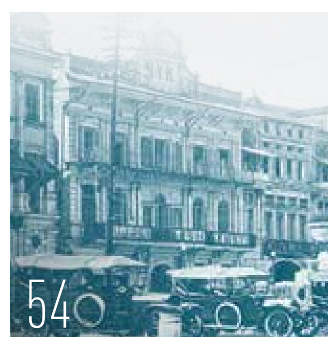

Director's Note

Inscriptions of history – whether physically inscribed on a surface or mentally etched in one's memory – have a shelf life beyond the lifespan of their makers.

This issue of *BiblioAsia* on "Immortality & Inscription" pays tribute to the legacy of our forefathers as memorialised in oral history interviews as well as manuscripts, war documents, postage stamps, letters, books, and even an elaborate coat of arms.

Essays by Farish Noor and Yu-Mei Balasingamchow remind us that the knowledge inscribed in old documents can reveal valuable insights into our history. Southeast Asia, as Farish Noor tells us, was once a hub of intellectual activity, as evidenced by the large numbers of Malay manuscripts produced in the region. Yu-Mei Balasingamchow's study of World War II memorabilia at the National Archives tells us why we should be receptive towards discovering new, and often unexpected, ways of viewing our past.

In similar vein, Dong Hui Ying examines remittance letters sent by Chinese migrants in Singapore to their families in China during the Cold War, and discovers how family relationships were maintained across the miles. Justin Zhuang documents how tiny postage stamps of Singapore paint a much larger story of our history over the last 50 years. Capitol Theatre, the grand dame of Singapore cinema, is seen in new light by Bonny Tan, who sieves through oral history interviews to piece together vignettes of its pre-war history.

The first foreign women who braved the high seas – and society's expectations – to Singapore were Christian missionaries who established some of our earliest schools for girls in the 19th century. Several, including St Margaret's School, Methodist Girls' School and Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus, still exist, as Jaime Koh reveals. Still on the subject of women, Sheere Ng casts a critical eye on the home economics syllabus of the past and examines how it tried to pigeonhole women into gender-type roles.

What do swimming pools and tigers have in common? Nothing, except that tigers have been wiped out in Singapore, but swimming pools still thrive. Jocelyn Lau documents four of the island's first public swimming pools – three of which have gone the way of the tiger – and talks to people who remember them. Goh Lee Kim takes us back to a time when tigers (and other animals) roamed the island in her essay on Singapore's nature and environment.

As a library, we love our books. Gracie Lee remembers the halcyon days of Kelly & Walsh, a bookshop that published some of the finest works on Malayan topics by Malayan authors. Shereen Tay turns the spotlight on the English primary school textbooks we grew up with, and discovers some classics in the process.

Finally, in a fitting ode to the theme "Immortality & Inscription" we feature the Municipal Coat of Arms that was issued by royal warrant in April 1948. Mark Wong explains the significance of this historic document displayed at the exhibition, "Law of the Land: Highlights of Singapore's Constitutional Documents", at the National Gallery Singapore.

We hope you enjoy reading this edition of *BiblioAsia*.

Mrs Wai Yin Pryke
Director
National Library

BiblioAsia is a free quarterly publication produced by the National Library Board. It features articles on the history, culture and heritage of Singapore within the larger Asian context, and has a strong focus on the collections and services of the National Library. *BiblioAsia* is distributed to local and international libraries, academic institutions, government ministries and agencies, as well as members of the public. The online edition of *BiblioAsia* is available at: www.nlb.gov.sg/biblioasia/

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On the cover:
An illustration inspired by a photo of a letter writer and his customer along a "five-foot way" in Chinatown. At a time when people couldn't read and write, professional letter writers were engaged by migrants to write remittance letters to their families in China. Original photo from the Kouo Shang-Wei Collection. *All rights reserved, Kouo Shang-Wei Collection, National Library Board, Singapore.*

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Manuscripts from our Global Past

An exhibition of old Southeast Asian writings showcases the region as a major centre of learning. **Farish A. Noor** explains why we should reclaim our heritage.

When does a piece of writing become "global literature" or "world literature"? The question may seem to be as old as writing itself, but it is in fact historical. And it has as much to do with the manner in which the English language has become globalised as a result of Britain's colonial past as it does with the way in which the literature of other parts of the non-English-speaking world has been relegated to the margins of the exotic and foreign.

In the course of this long historical process, the literature of many societies has been deemed as parochial or "local" by comparison. This has been to our own detriment as we have overlooked many important works of literature that have emerged in other non-Western societies.

The Importance of Libraries

This is why the current exhibition held at the National Library of Singapore is so important. Entitled "Tales of the Malay World: Manuscripts and Early Books", the library's spectacular exhibition has brought together a large number of beautifully illuminated manuscripts from its own collection as well as the collections of major libraries of Europe. The value of this rare exhibition is that it reminds us that Southeast Asia was a major centre of learning and writing, and that the region was home to its own community of intellectuals, philosophers, historians and writers of note.

The works on display at the National Library show that Southeast Asian writers busied themselves with the task of writing about many different topics and themes. Though an overwhelming majority of the works written in the past were related to religion and scriptural studies, the exhibition also includes important works that point to the wide range of concerns that drove Southeast Asian writers in former times.

Ahmad Rijaluddin's *Hikayat Perintah Negeri Benggala* (*An Account of Bengal*), written in 1811, for instance, is a rare work among the few studies of other non-Southeast Asian polities written by an itinerant Southeast Asian traveller, making it one of the most important Southeast Asian travelogues ever written.

The legal compendium *Undang-Undang Melaka* (*Laws of Malacca*) – codified during the reign of Sultan Muhammad Shah of Melaka (1424–1444) – on the other hand was an important work on law, and written in Southeast Asia at a time when Southeast Asian states had yet to come under colonial rule. Put together, this impressive collection of works – both handwritten and later printed – points to an active writing and reading culture that thrived in our region long before the coming of Google or Wikipedia.

The Global Stature of Southeast Asian Writing

The question, however, remains: If Southeast Asia (like South Asia and East Asia) was a region where writing and intellectual activity was commonplace, why is it that Southeast Asian literature is seen as "unworthy" of global recognition? Until today, our region's novelists are sometimes referred to as "Asian writers", while the same might not be said of an American or British novelist. Where lies the bias that continues to frame Southeast Asian writing as marginal?

In this respect, two works that are now on display at the exhibition are particularly important: the first is *Taj al-Salatin* (*The Crown of Kings*) by Bukhari al-Johori, which was written in 1603. Bukhari's work was, and remains, one of the most important political texts to have emerged in the 17th century, and deals with a range of issues from the authority of government to the duties and responsibilities of rulers. It lays out, in clear terms, the political-social contract between subjects and rulers and constantly reminds the reader of the need for a system of checks and balances so that political authority is not compromised.

Again and again, Bukhari reminds the ruler that his authority is based on the support he receives from his subjects, and that support cannot be coerced or taken for granted. In so many ways, this was a modern work of political theory and governance, and a noteworthy observation to be made here is the fact that *Taj al-Salatin* was written in 1603, decades before Thomas Hobbes' works *De Cive* (1642) and *Leviathan* (1651).

Yet, while the works of English political theorists like Hobbes and John Locke have been elevated to the status of "global" political theory, Bukhari's *Taj al-Salatin* remains confined to the domain of Asian literature and area studies. The same can be said of the political writings of countless other scholars from China to India to Africa, whose works have likewise been slotted into the marginal categories of "East Asian studies", "South Asian studies" or "African studies".

Another important work on display is a handsome copy of the famous *Hikayat Hang Tuah*. The tale of the hero Hang Tuah is known to many by now, thanks in part to the manner in which it has been rendered in popular films and even comics. But few realise that the text is much more complex than it first appears, and this becomes evident when we read it to the very end – following Hang Tuah's journey as he becomes a diplomat-emissary who travels beyond Southeast Asia and ventures to South Asia, East Asia and beyond. It is in the latter half of *Hikayat Hang Tuah* that we come to see that the work is not only a heroic epic, but also an account of travel and diplomacy, giving us an idea of how Southeast Asians related to the wider world in our pre-colonial past.

Perhaps the most outstanding aspect of Hang Tuah is how he seeks difference in his travels and longs to encounter the new, but at the same time reconciles all forms of difference according to the register of the familiar. Throughout his journeys across Greater Asia, Hang Tuah seeks to understand the communities and cultures he encounters with an open mind, guided by the spirit of a shared humanity. Not once does he frame the Other in negative terms, choosing instead to try to understand other societies and cultures as human constructs made by fellow human beings. There is a great universal spirit that permeates this work, and it tells us a lot about how Southeast Asians were capable of meeting the wider world without fear.

Southeast Asia as a Globalised World

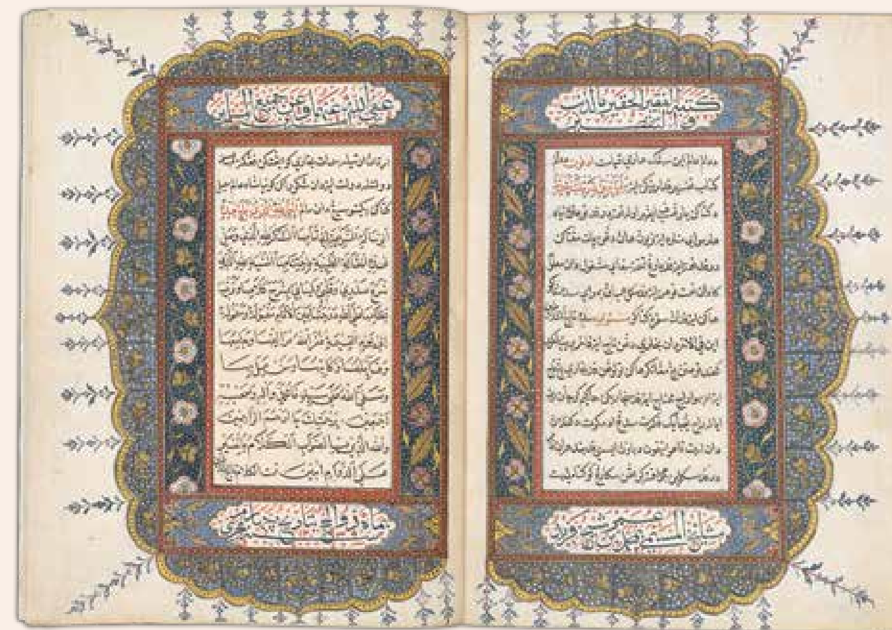
Living as we do in the globalised world today, we can see how different societies have coped with the new realities of increased movement and contact. What is sometimes forgotten is the fact that Southeast Asia has always been part of a globalised Asia, and Southeast Asian writers and thinkers have always regarded themselves as part of a wider global current of ideas and beliefs.

This becomes evident in the exhibition where we see the result of several centuries of cross-border contact and the cross-fertilisation of ideas, as Southeast Asian writers wrote about the concerns that were prevalent across the whole of Asia then. The fertile imagination of Southeast Asian writers of the past suggests that they were confident of their own beliefs and world view, and saw themselves as part of a broader global intellectual space that extended from Turkey to China.

Perhaps the most significant takeaway from this remarkable exhibition is that the outdated Orientalist view that Southeast Asians were passive witnesses to global history can be debunked once and for all. This vast collection of Southeast Asian works – primarily from the Malay Archipelago – brought together in this exhibition shows how the people of this region produced writings on religion, philosophy, politics, law, history and geography, and were not merely interested in fairy tales or fables.

It is high time that Southeast Asians have a sense of their own place in global history, and see themselves as part of a globalised world rather than as inhabitants of some remote corner of the globe that time forgot. And it should remind us of the fact that globalisation has never been a new phenomenon to those of us who live in Southeast Asia; these manuscripts serve to remind us of our global past, as well as our status as world citizens. ♦

This rare and highly decorated manuscript titled *Taj al-Salatin* (*The Crown of Kings*) is considered one of the most beautiful by experts. The opening and closing pages are elaborately adorned with blue, red, yellow and gold patterns. The decorative style of the closing pages as seen here is reminiscent of Indo-Persian and Ottoman manuscripts. Believed to have been composed in Aceh in 1603 by Bukhari al-Johori (the "jewel merchant"), the work is one of the most important texts about political theory and governance from the 17th century. *Collection of The British Library, Or. MS. 13295.*



"Tales of the Malay World: Manuscripts and Early Books" takes place on Level 10 of the National Library Building until 25 February 2018. This article was first published in *The Straits Times* on 5 September 2017. © Farish A. Noor and Singapore Press Holdings. Reprinted with permission.

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THE STORIES THEY COULD TELL

Old photographs and documents can reveal new things about our history, as **Yu-Mei Balasingamchow** discovered when she sieved through the National Archives' war collections.

Yu-Mei Balasingamchow is the co-author of *Singapore: A Biography* (2009) and works on history, art and culture projects. She has curated exhibitions for the National Museum of Singapore and the National Archives of Singapore. She also writes fiction and her website is www.toomanythoughts.org

One aspect of growing up in Singapore is that the more you encounter the Japanese Occupation through lessons in school and as ham-handed narratives on television, the more unreal it becomes.

No one doubts the veracity of the Occupation period as historical fact, but the events that took place over seven decades ago can seem emotionally distant. While the stories recounted by my late grandmother[1] and in oral history recordings from the National Archives of Singapore (NAS) are empirically true, to me – and to many others, I suspect – they seem locked up in a past that seems far removed from our lives in the present century.

So when I was engaged by NAS in 2016 as curatorial consultant for an exhibition on the Occupation, I thought I'd be operating in familiar, perhaps even predictable, territory. Even so, I found that taking a closer look at archival materials can sometimes yield surprising or intriguing results – even the odd flash of terror.

A Jolt of Reality

I remember the precise moment when the Occupation became real in a visceral and unexpected way. Together with Fiona Tan, an assistant archivist at NAS, I was looking at photographs that Lim Shao Bin, a collector of wartime memorabilia, had recently donated to the National Library. Taken by a Japanese source, the photographs captured scenes of the Japanese attacks on Pearl Harbor and the imperial war in Asia, and were distributed as propaganda to celebrate Japanese military victories.

One photograph in this collection stopped me in my tracks. It showed Japanese soldiers standing victoriously on tanks bearing the Hinomaru flag and rolling down St Andrew's Road in front of the Supreme Court and Municipal Building[2] (later renamed City Hall, which together with Supreme Court is today the National Gallery Singapore).

The photograph is black and white, and the soldiers' faces aren't clearly visible – but the architecture is unmistakable. You've seen the same buildings in countless photographs of National Day celebrations, or as a backdrop for wedding and graduation photos and, more recently, the annual Formula One race. If you're a history buff, you've also seen the same vista in photographs of the Japanese surrender ceremony in 1945, the swearing-in of Singapore's first self-governing Legislative Assembly in 1959, and celebrations for the first Malaysia Day in 1963.

I always feel a sense of unease when I look at this photo. The iconic dome of the Supreme Court and the Corinthian columns of City Hall look much as they do today – but what are the soldiers and tanks doing there? Then, reality sinks in. A perceptible shiver runs down my spine as I think about the moment the image was taken: the sounds of Japanese troops entering Singapore, the harsh racket of tank treads on the road, the aggressive stomp of booted feet.

The photograph elicits a reaction – at least for me – because the architecture in the background is still so recognisable. There are precious few photographs of Singapore during the Occupation period, and many of them were taken in unnamed streets and places, their locations impossible to pinpoint. So when I stumble across an image that matches the present-day view of Singapore, it can provide a jolt of reality, more convincing than what statistics and historical documents could ever achieve. It is also a reminder that we should not neglect the changing emotive possibilities of an image over time and history.

(Facing page) Japanese soldiers standing victoriously on tanks bearing the Hinomaru flag and rolling down St Andrew's Road in front of the Supreme Court and Municipal Building, 1942. *All rights reserved, Lim Shao Bin Collection, National Library Board, Singapore.*

(Below and right) Newspaper articles from the Japanese wartime newspaper *Syonan Shimbun* on Singapore students studying Japanese. The article below praises the inaugural batch of students graduating from the Japanese-language institute Syonan Nippon Gakuen. *Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

(Bottom) David Chelliah's student pass at a Japanese-language school and his salary envelopes when he worked at the Japanese broadcasting department in Cathay Building. *David Chelliah Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

Schools Re-Open In Syonan City

NIPPON-GO TAUGHT

Syonan, City, Apr. 16, (Domei) WITH peace and order completely restored in Syonan City, most of the schools in the city and its vicinity have commenced classes.

Twenty schools for Malays opened on April 12th and ten Indian schools began classes yesterday. The Chinese schools are scheduled to open shortly.

There were originally 19 Malay schools in Syonan city and 8 others in the neighbouring islands, but since several were demolished by fire during the siege of Singapore. 4,000 pupils are being taught in alternative morning and afternoon shifts in 21 buildings which have been opened.

Graduation Of First Batch Of Nippon- Go Students

IMPRESSIVE CEREMONY AT DAI TOA GEKIZYO

Piecing the Details

Historical documents tell their own stories too, although one challenge is that they may have been deposited in the NAS without their complete context. One of the most evocative wartime collections at NAS is from David Ernest Srinivasagam Chelliah who, in 1990, donated 82 personal items relating to the war and Occupation.

The collection is almost scrapbook-like in its diversity and messiness: a motley assortment of Japanese-language school materials, newspaper clippings, work passes and badges, mundane circulars and booklets. The items are all the more intriguing because Chelliah did not leave an oral history interview, diary or formal account of his life during the Occupation.

This is what we've been able to piece together from the objects: In 1941, Chelliah, at age 15, was a member of the wartime Medical Auxiliary Services (civilian volunteers who provided first aid). During the Occupation, he learned Japanese and was employed at the Japanese broadcasting department in Cathay

Building. From his salary envelopes, we know that his pay was raised from 3,800 yen in 1943 to 13,000 yen, reflecting the runaway inflation of the time. His list of broadcasting department colleagues provides a glimpse of its multiracial and multilingual profile (including Thai and Vietnamese names).

The messiest pile we had to sort out was English newspaper clippings. Some clearly recorded landmark historical moments, but also tucked away in the stash were longish newspaper articles about the Japanese language institute Syonan Nippon Gakuen. The articles were mainly mundane reports – reproduced speeches by a military representative and the head of the school, Professor Kotaro Jimbo (sometimes spelled Zimbo), repeating imperial propaganda about the need to "master Nippon-Go" (the Japanese language) and the self-styled superiority of the "Nippon Race", and about Japanese history and culture.[3] Interestingly, Jimbo was a prominent poet who, like other intellectuals in Japan, threw his support behind the imperial state's Nipponisation project.[4]

It was only when we scrutinised the list of graduates – there were several hundred names – that we learned two things. Chelliah had been in the second and final batch of graduates in October 1942, which perhaps explained why he had saved the articles about the first batch; he might have been trying to learn about the school before he enrolled. Also, the student profile of the language school ran the gamut of the Singapore civilian population at the time, with Chinese, Eurasian, Indian and Malay names. Whatever happened to them afterwards, here was some mention of what they were doing in the first year of the Occupation.

The fragmentary nature of Chelliah's collection – and indeed, of many personal items that now reside with NAS – means this is all we can muster: fleeting glimpses of the little things people did for a few days, weeks or months, a snapshot of activity that may or may not have significantly changed their lives, but when put into the right context, can give us a clue to understand something of that period.

Imagine how it must have felt to be one of 250 students (out of 2,500 applicants) at Syonan Nippon Gakuen, sitting in a multiracial class of people who, until half a year ago, had only known British colonial rule. Imagine them desperately wrapping their tongues around new sounds and phrases that Professor Jimbo and his colleagues scribbled on the blackboard, wondering if they needed to know this language only for a short time – or if their new rulers were here to stay.[5]

After the Event, Before History

While personal collections can be fascinating, the mainstay of any national archive, including NAS, are usually government records – not usually the most inspiring materials to work with. In the course of our research, we reviewed numerous files from the British Military Administration (BMA), which took over the running of Malaya and Singapore after the Japanese surrendered on 5 September 1945. The files at NAS contain only documents that the colonial government left behind after Singapore became independent (other files are held at the National Archives in the UK), and thus yield an incomplete and subjective narrative of Singapore during the period of BMA rule.

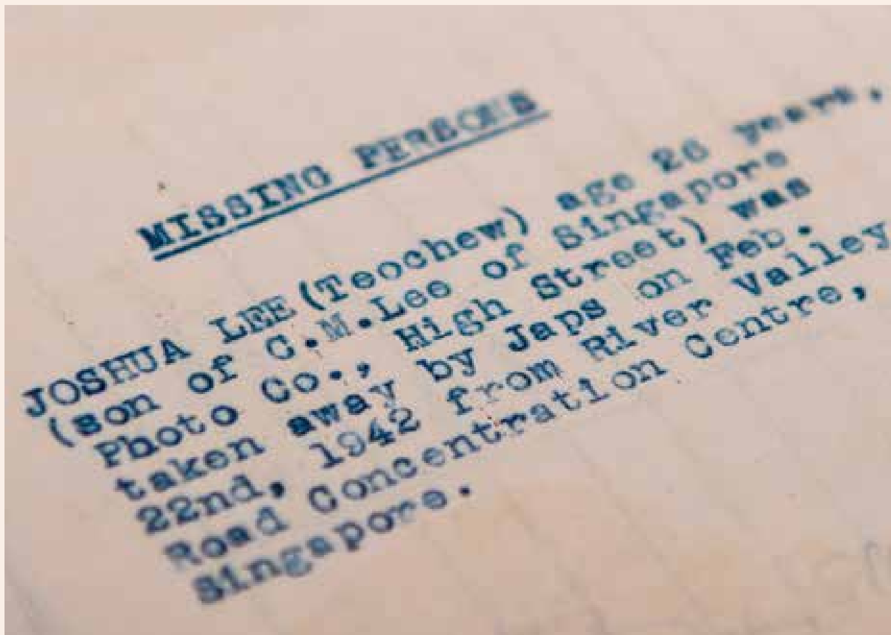
Even so, there were rediscoveries to be made. Flipping through the dog-eared files of seemingly miscellaneous documents, some of them as fragile as onion-skin paper, we noticed a pattern emerge in typewritten sheets that bore the names and personal details of missing persons: they were all Chinese and last seen in February 1942 at "concentration centres" in River Valley Road or Arab Street.[6]

However little Singaporeans might know about the Occupation, they would have heard about the Sook Ching, the Chinese term now used for the military operation that took place at the start of the Occupation – specifically in the last two weeks of February 1942. Chinese men (and some women and children) were detained and arbitrarily screened, and thousands were taken away to be massacred. Some of the known screening centres were at Arab Street, Hong Lim Park, Tanjong Pagar Police Station, Jalan Besar, Telok Kurau School and River Valley Road.

Looking at the missing person reports, it's easy to dismiss them as just pieces of paper from another place and time. Then I think about the family members who thronged the BMA offices at the Municipal Building – the same building described in the photograph earlier – to report their missing husbands, sons, fathers, brothers, uncles, nephews and neighbours, who spent three-and-a-half years not knowing the fate of their loved ones, and who faced the British man with the typewriter. I think about the BMA official, typing one report after another, day after day, perhaps feeling harried or bored or simply overwhelmed by his work.

(Left) A propaganda flyer distributed in Singapore celebrating the *Tencho setsu* (birthday of the Meiji emperor). *David Chelliah Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

(Below) A missing person report on one Joshua Lee that was filed with the British Military Administration in Singapore in the days following the end of the Japanese Occupation. *Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*



MISSING PERSONS

JOSHUA LEE (Teochew) age 26 years,
(son of C.M.Lee of Singapore
Photo Co., High Street) was
taken away by Japs on Feb.
22nd, 1942 from River Valley
Road Concentration Centre,
Singapore.

The Sook Ching massacre that took place in the two weeks after the fall of Singapore to the Japanese on 15 February 1942 saw thousands of Chinese men singled out for mass executions. This sketch is from *Chop Suey*, a four-volume book of illustrations by the artist Liu Kang on the atrocities committed by the Japanese military. *All rights reserved, Liu K. (1946). Chop Suey (Vol.III). Singapore: Eastern Art Co. Collection of the National Library, Singapore (Accession no.: B02901747H)*

Amid the deluge of requests for help that the BMA received, did someone at the BMA suddenly realise that an awful lot of missing persons were Chinese men who had not been seen since February 1942? At what point did the missing person reports, the ones I had held in my hands at NAS, start to sound eerily the same to officials working at the BMA?

The only clue in the BMA files is a copy of a letter from BMA official Mervyn Sheppard to the BMA Adviser for Chinese Affairs, Hugh Pagden. Sheppard wrote, "The whole question of the murder of hundreds of innocent Chinese soon after the fall of Singapore should, I think, be the subject of early enquiry."[7] Indeed, within the first month of the British return, *The Straits Times* had published several letters from Chinese members of the public, urging the BMA to investigate the missing Chinese persons.[8]

The patchy documents in the BMA files, however, offer a different angle to the now well-worn narrative of the Sook Ching. They transport us back to a time in late 1945 when the full scale of the atrocities was not yet understood and assembled into a coherent historical event. Both the BMA and civilian Chinese population were still trying to figure out what had happened in those anguished weeks from three-and-a-half years ago. There were only missing people, and no immediate answers.

Soon, the events would become known as the "Chinese massacres"; and decades later, as the Sook Ching. Today, we have documented knowledge that allows us to regard these scraps of paper with greater immediacy. We know how the story unfolds and how it ends – and what a harrowing story it was.[9] I think these plain slips of bureaucracy mean more now, not less, because we can understand, even more fully than their creators, what they convey beyond the knowledge that was available at the time.

For any historical event, meanings change as time passes. To me, archives are closed, inert boxes filled with things to be sorted and stored – yet they contain the possibility of re-evaluation and rediscovery. Every time I go ferreting in the archives, I remind myself that while we are used to thinking of artefacts and documents as bearers of literal meaning, they can also be read at other levels, and for other meanings. They bear revisiting, even when on the surface nothing has changed. ♦

The objects and materials described in this essay can be seen in the permanent exhibition, "Surviving the Japanese Occupation: War and Its Legacies", at the Former Ford Factory and on microfilm at NAS's Archives Reading Room (temporarily located at the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library on Level 11 of the National Library Building).

Notes

1 Balasingamchow, Y. M. (2016, Jul–Sep). My grandmother's story. *BiblioAsia, 12* (2), pp.2–5. Retrieved from BiblioAsia website.

2 The image is reproduced as a large wall graphic in the permanent exhibition *Surviving the Japanese Occupation: War and Its Legacies* at the Former Ford Factory. It is several metres in width, and is found at the start of the gallery on the history of the Occupation.

3 Graduation of first batch of Nippon-go students (1942, August 4). *The Syonan Times,* p. 4. Retrieved from NewspaperSG or NAS accession number 4/1990.

4 Matsuoka, M. (2017). Media and cultural policy and Japanese language education in Japanese-occupied Singapore, 1942–1945 (pp. 83–102). In K. Hashimoto (ed.), *Japanese language and soft power in Asia.* Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan.

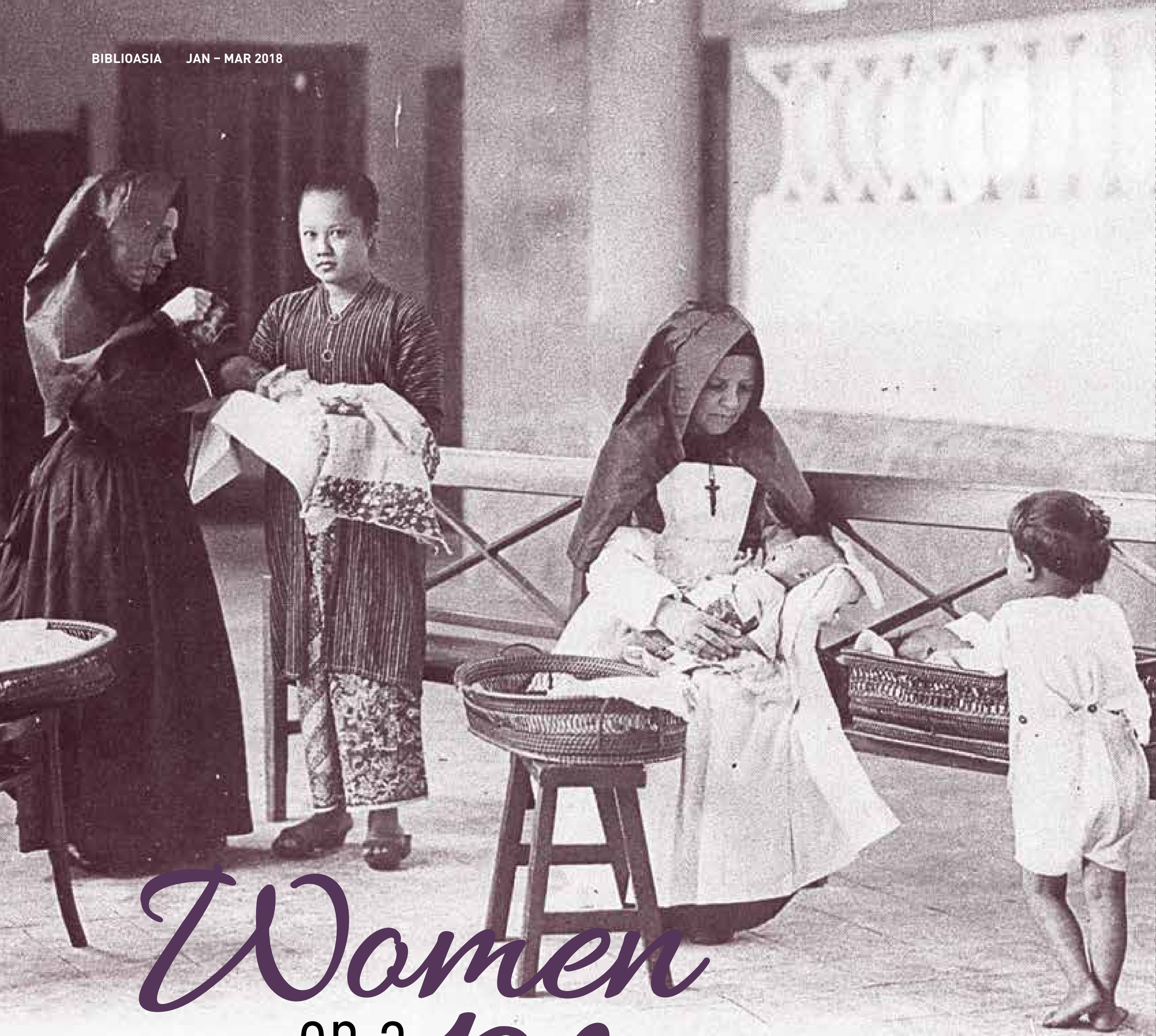
5 Syonan Nippon Gakuen has fulfilled its mission – principal's reflections. (1942, October 30), *The Syonan Times,* p. 2; Graduates of Nippon Gakuen. (1942, October 31). *The Syonan Times,* p. 2. Retrieved from NewspaperSG or NAS accession number 4/1990.

6 NAS accession number 24/45 (4, 12, 21, 22 and 23).

7 Copy of letter from Sd. M.C.ff. Sheepard [sic] to S/Ldr H.T. Pagden, 6 November 1945, NAS accession number 24/45(26a). Sheppard later rejoined the Malayan Civil Service (where he had been employed before the war) and, from 1958 to 1963, served as the founding director of the National Archives in Malaysia. He was also concurrently the first director of the National Museum of Malaysia. See Hack, K., & Blackburn, K. (2012). *War memory and the making of modern Malaysia and Singapore* (p. 217). Singapore: NUS Press. (Call no.: RSING 940.53595 BLA-[WAR])

8 See for instance Fang Wee Lim, Missing Chinese appeal to military administration. (1945, September 22). *The Straits Times,* p. 2, and Wong, T. F. (1945, September 22). Yamashita's act. *The Straits Times,* p. 2. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

9 For historical accounts of the Sook Ching operation and how it became memorialised, see Lee, G. B. (2005). *The Syonan years: Singapore under Japanese Rule, 1942–1945.* Singapore: National Archives of Singapore and Epigram. (Call no.: RSING q940.53957 LEE-[WAR]) and Blackburn & Hack, 2012.



Women on a Mission

Female missionaries in colonial Singapore have made their mark in areas such as education, welfare and health services. **Jaime Koh** looks at some of these intrepid trailblazers.

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Nineteenth-century Singapore was a thriving centre of commerce that held much promise. Soon after the British established a trading post in 1819, Singapore's status as a free port and great emporium grew, attracting many who were drawn to the economic opportunities the island offered. Besides workers and merchants, the settlement also attracted Christian missionaries from the West who saw an opportunity to spread their message "among heathen and other unenlightened nations"[1] in Asia.

As early as 1820, missionary societies of various denominations began to dispatch their representatives to sow the seeds of the Christian faith in Singapore. The Protestants were among the earliest to arrive, establishing churches and printing presses, and evangelising through preaching on the streets and home visits. Over time, the Protestant missionaries started schools and provided medical and social services for the poor and the displaced. Catholic missionaries followed, and similarly established churches and schools in Singapore.

Most of the early missionaries who came were men. In the early 19th century, the few women who ventured to Asia were the wives, sisters or relatives of Protestant missionaries who supported the men in their work abroad.[2]

Male missionaries were encouraged to bring their wives with them for several reasons. The first was the perception that missionaries who came with their families were better received in foreign lands as they gave the impression of coming with "peaceful intent". The second was that missionary wives were seen as models of solicitous female behavior, thus demonstrating the virtues of good Christian families.[3]

Conversely, mission groups were initially reluctant to send unmarried female missionaries abroad. It was feared that they would either get married, or, being of weaker disposition, would not be able to cope with the rigours of living in a strange land and liable to suffer a nervous breakdown. The belief at the time was that women were "more emotional and less controlled, more anxious minded, more easily 'worried', more given to overtax their strength… more depressed by heathenism".[4]

Things began to change from the 1850s onwards when missionary societies started to actively recruit and send unmarried female missionaries overseas. This was a result of a growing need for specialised services in education and medical work as well as increasing calls in Western society and within the church there to give women a more prominent role in mission work.[5]

(Facing page) The Catholic sisters of the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus with some orphans and their Malay nanny in 1924. In addition to a school, the convent also ran an orphanage that accepted and cared for orphans and abandoned babies. *Sisters of the Infant Jesus Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

(Above) Bessie Osborne, wife of a London Missionary Society (LMS) missionary William D. Osborne, who worked with the Indian leper community in Trivandrum, India, c.1900–1910. LMS, founded in 1795 in London, is one of the earliest Christian missionary groups that went out to Asia to proselytise. *Image source: Wikimedia Commons.*

Singapore in the 19th century was clearly a male-dominated society, with men outnumbering women by as many as four to one.[6] There is no known data on the number of children before 1871 when the first of a series of regular census was taken. The population censuses of 1871, 1881 and 1891 put the number of children (under the age of 15) as 18.1 percent, 16.4 percent and 14.3 percent of the total population respectively.[7]

There was little public demand for education and the Bengal government in Calcutta – the capital of British territory in India until 1911 – was unwilling or unable to channel any money into developing education, much less education for girls, in Singapore. Most people in Singapore at the time did not even think that girls needed to be educated. Likewise, social welfare services were very basic. In fact, social welfare and education provisions in 19th century Singapore were considered "below even the rudimentary standards" expected of governments at the time.[8]

The first female missionaries sent to Singapore from the West were well positioned to fill these gaps, and many went on to make tremendous contributions to society. In several cases, their legacies persist to the present day in the form of schools and institutions they founded.

The London Missionary Society

The earliest female missionaries in Singapore were the wives of missionaries from the London Missionary Society (LMS), a Protestant society founded in London in 1795. One of the LMS's most important contributions in Singapore, apart from the introduction of the printing press, was setting up schools.

Mrs Claudius Henry Thomsen, who accompanied her LMS missionary husband, Claudius Henry Thomsen, to Singapore, is credited for starting the first school for girls in 1822. Known as Malay Female School, it was designed chiefly as a day school for girls "of any class or denomination" where they were taught needlework, catechism, hymns and prayers, reading and writing in Malay, and arithmetic. Although the school had only six students, its establishment marked the beginning of formal education for girls in Singapore.[9]

The LMS missionaries went on to start several other schools here. In 1830, there was reportedly a school for Chinese girls under the care of a Miss Martin. Nine

years later, in 1839, a boarding school for "girls of European fathers and Malay mothers" was established. It was run by Mrs A. Stronach and Mrs J. Stronach, wives of the Stronach brothers, Alexander and John, who were both LMS missionaries. The subjects taught included English and Malay languages, and hygiene. There are few surviving records of these schools beyond the dates when they were established. They were likely short-lived too and closed down when the LMS withdrew from Singapore in 1847.[10]

But one school started by the wife of an LMS missionary has survived until today. This was the Chinese Female Boarding School, established in 1842 by Mrs Maria Dyer (nee Tarn), wife of LMS missionary Reverend Samuel Dyer. Mrs Dyer had been in charge of several girls' schools in Penang and Melaka in the 1820s and 1830s when the Dyers were posted there for missionary work. Mrs Dyer was prompted to start the school in Singapore when she moved here and encountered young girls being sold as slaves on the streets.[11] The Chinese Female Boarding School began with 19 girls in a rented house in North Bridge Road, where they were given a basic education in English and homemaking skills.

Mrs Dyer's association with the school ended in 1844 when she left Singapore after the death of her husband. The school was placed in the care of Miss A. Grant, a missionary from the Society for the Promotion of Female Education in the East (SPFEE; see text box opposite) who took over the running of the school.

Under Miss Grant, the school, which had been renamed Chinese Girls' School, operated as an orphanage for unwanted girls as well as a boarding school.[12] One of Miss Grant's students was Yeo Choon Neo, the first wife of Song Hoot Kiam, the noted Peranakan community leader after whom Hoot Kiam Road is named.[13]

Sophia Cooke

After Miss Grant left Singapore in 1853, the SPFEE sent another missionary, Sophia Cooke, to run the school. Miss Cooke would manage the school for the next 42 years, and her name became synonymous with the institution – "Miss Cooke's School", as people would come to call it.[14] By this time, the school had moved several times, from North Bridge Road to Beach Road, before settling down at 134 Sophia Road in 1861.

In addition to running the girls' school, Miss Cooke also started a Chinese "ragged school"[15] – a charitable establishment providing free education for poor children – that took in children as well as their mothers. Inspired by similar schools in London, the ragged school opened on 6 March 1865.[16] Buoyed by its success, Miss Cook started a second such school but there are no records of what happened to these two ragged schools.

In 1900, the SPFEE was dissolved and the Chinese Girls' School was taken over by the Church of England Zenana Missionary Society (CEZMS) and became known as the CEZMS School. In 1949, the school was renamed St Margaret's School (after Queen Margaret of Scotland), and is today the oldest girls' school in Singapore in existence.[17]

Besides education, the indefatigable Miss Cooke also helped improve the welfare of women, sailors, policemen, soldiers and the sick. She visited women in their homes and hosted regular meetings for young girls and mothers as part of a social support group. During these meetings, the girls would pray and listen to Christian messages from young women missionaries, whom locals called the Bible women. In turn, the local women were taught English and skills such as sewing and cooking.[18] By 1897, these meetings developed into a formal organisation that became known as the Singapore branch of the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA).

Another group Miss Cooke worked with were police, sailors and soldiers. She held Bible classes for them as well as attended to the needs of destitute and sick sailors. In 1882, together with a Brethren missionary Mr Hocquard, Miss Cooke started the Sailors' Rest to provide shelter and food for homeless sailors. The Sailors' Rest became the Boustead Institute in 1892 – named after the English businessman and philanthropist Edward Boustead – and continued to look after the welfare of destitute sailors in Singapore.[19]

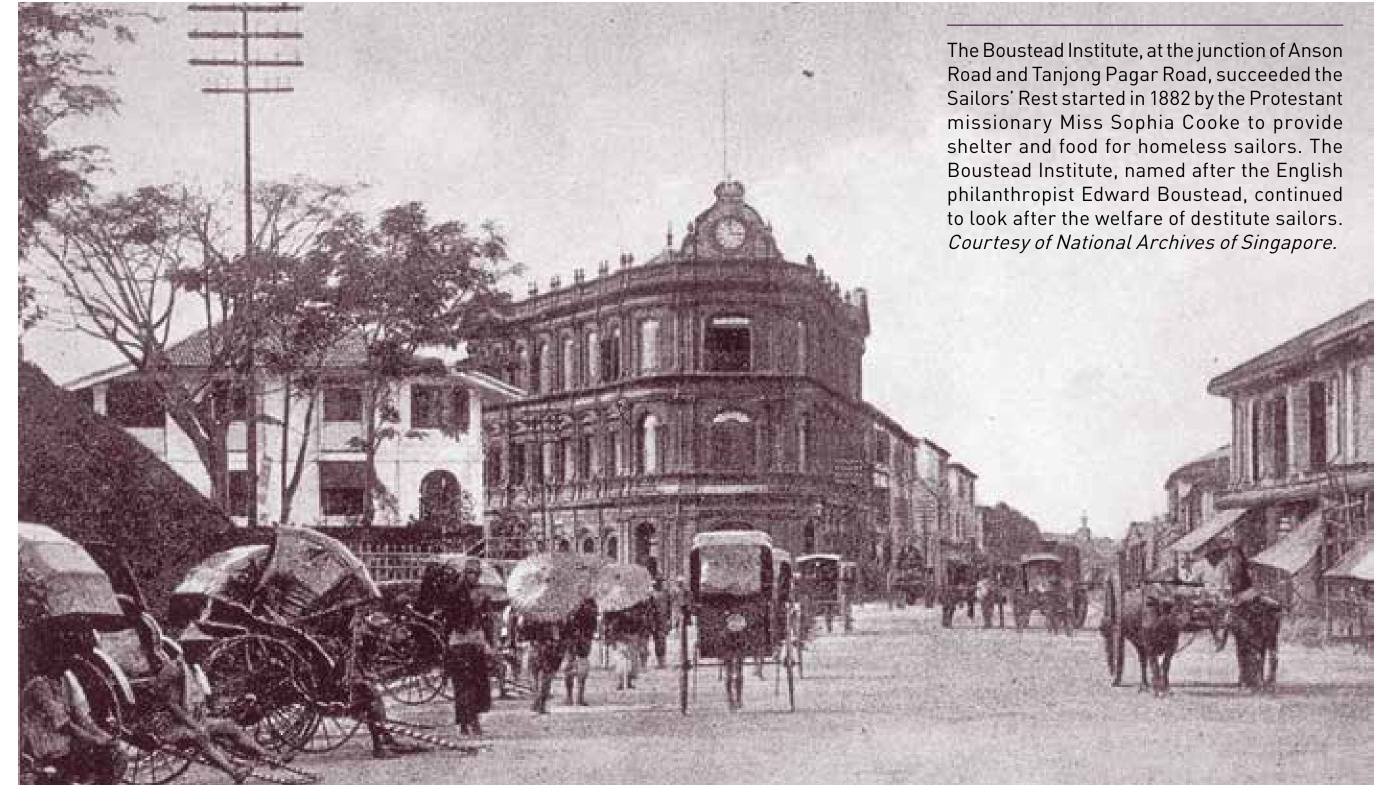
Sophia Blackmore

Another missionary society that left a deep impact on Singapore was the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society (WFMS; see text box on page 13) of the Methodist Episcopal Church of America. More familiar is the name Sophia Blackmore, its most well-known missionary in Singapore.

In 1887, the Minneapolis branch of the WFMS sent Miss Blackmore, who was Australian by birth, to Singapore. This was in response to a call from Reverend William Oldham for a woman missionary to work with the mothers

(Right) An undated portrait of Miss Sophia Cooke, a missionary from the Society for the Promotion of Female Education in the East. (SPFEE) In 1853, Miss Cooke took over the management of Chinese Girls' School – initially established as the Chinese Female Boarding School in 1842 – and would run it for the next 42 years. Her name became synonymous with the institution and came to be called "Miss Cooke's School". *Image source: Walker, E. A. (1899). Sophia Cooke, or, Forty-Two Years' Work in Singapore (frontispiece). London: E. Stock. Collection of the National Library, Singapore. (Accession no.: B29032405C; Microfilm no.: NL 11273)*

(Below) Students from the Church of England Zenana Missionary Society School or the CEZMS School playing netball at its premises in Sophia Road, c. early 1900. The school has changed names and moved locations several times since its founding in 1842 as the Chinese Female Boarding School. In 1949 it was renamed St Margaret's School, after Queen Margaret of Scotland. *Courtesy of St Margaret's Secondary School.*



The Boustead Institute, at the junction of Anson Road and Tanjong Pagar Road, succeeded the Sailors' Rest started in 1882 by the Protestant missionary Miss Sophia Cooke to provide shelter and food for homeless sailors. The Boustead Institute, named after the English philanthropist Edward Boustead, continued to look after the welfare of destitute sailors. *Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

A MATCH MADE IN SCHOOL

Over time, the Chinese Girls' School gained a reputation for cultivating good Christian wives with practical domestic skills. Chinese men from China, Malaya and the Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia) who converted to Christianity would approach the school in search of a suitable bride. The girls were married off from as early as 13 or 14 years old; most of these arranged marriages were said to be successful as the suitors were carefully screened by the school. The arranged marriages took place so frequently that its founder Sophia Cooke was said to have bought a wedding dress to be kept as school property for loan to girls who were getting married. The school continued to play the role of matchmaker right up to the 1930s.[1]

Notes

1 National Library Board (2014, December 16). *St Margaret's School* written by Fiona Tan. Retrieved from Singapore Infopedia.

SOCIETY FOR THE PROMOTION OF FEMALE EDUCATION IN THE EAST

The Society for the Promotion of Female Education in the East (SPFEE) was founded in 1834 in London in response to an appeal by Reverend David Abeel for female missionaries to work among women in India and China. Also known as "the Society for Promoting Female Education in China, India and the East" and "the Female Education Society", it was the first women's missionary society ever to be formed.[1]

As an interdenominational society, the primary objective of the SPFEE was to establish schools in China, India and elsewhere in the East. Between 1834 and 1899, the SPFEE sent missionaries to Melaka, Singapore, India, China and Japan, as well as to the Middle East – specifically Palestine and Syria – for this purpose. In 1899, the society was dissolved following the death of its secretary and its work was taken over by other missionary societies.

Besides Miss A. Grant and Miss Sophia Cooke, other SPFEE missionaries sent to Singapore included Miss Gage-Brown, who took over the Chinese Girls' School following the death of Miss Cooke, and Miss Elizabeth Ryan, who worked with Miss Cooke at the Chinese Girls' School and the Young Women's Christian Association.[2]

Notes

1 Seton, R. E. (2013). *Western daughters in Eastern lands: British missionary women in Asia* (pp. 13–14). Santa Barbara, California: Praeger. (Call no.: R 266.0234105082 SET); University College London. (2011, April 13). *UCL Bloomsbury Project: Society for Promoting Female Education in China, India, and the East.* Retrieved from UCL Bloomsbury Project website.

2 Untitled. (1897, November 16). *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser (Weekly)*, p. 312; Death of Miss E. Ryan. (1923, December 17). *The Straits Times*, p. 8; C. E. Z. M. S. work. (1928, July 10). *The Straits Times*, p. 2. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

and sisters of boys studying at the Anglo-Chinese School (ACS) that he had started in 1886. Miss Blackmore was a true pioneer in that she was the first unmarried female Methodist missionary sent to Singapore.[20]

In August 1887, Miss Blackmore started the Tamil Girls' School in a shophouse at 33 Short Street.[21] Over time, the school took in girls of other nationalities. It relocated several times, first to the Christian Institute on Middle Road, then back to a purpose-built building in Short Street. By the 1890s, the school had been renamed Methodist Girls' School.[22] In the 1920s, the school relocated to Mount Sophia and remained there for the next seven decades.[23]

(Below) Miss Sophia Blackmore (seated, middle), a missionary of the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society (WFMS) of the Methodist Episcopal Church of America, posing with students of Methodist Girls' School in this photo taken in 1915. She started the Tamil Girls' School in 1887, which later accepted girls of other nationalities. By the 1890s, the school had been renamed the Methodist Girls' School. *Lee Brothers Studio Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

(Bottom) Fairfield Girls' School at its Neil Road premises. c.1920. Miss Sophia Blackmore started the school in 1888 for Chinese girls and called it Telok Ayer Chinese Girls' School. When the school moved from Cross Street to Neil Road in 1912, it was renamed Fairfield Girls' School. The school was renamed Fairfield Methodist Girls' School in 1958. *Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

Not one to rest on her laurels, just a year later, in August 1888, Miss Blackmore started a school for Chinese girls in the home of businessman Tan Keong Siak – known as Telok Ayer Chinese Girls' School. In 1912, the school moved from Cross Street to Neil Road and was renamed Fairfield Girls' School in honour of a donor named Mr Fairfield.[24]

It was one thing to set up schools, but it was another to convince parents to send their girls to be educated. At the time many parents thought it was pointless for girls to go to school. Not to be defeated, Miss Blackmore went from house to house (particularly in the Telok Ayer and Neil Road areas) both to proselytise and to convince parents of the value of education and to send their daughters to school.[25]

The work was exhausting, but the women were motivated by a higher calling. One of the teachers in the school, a WFMS missionary, wrote:

> "It was not easy work. It has meant patient working and praying. It has meant going to the homes and bringing them to school by love and sometimes almost by force. Day after day we have had to go to each home for the girls. It has meant outside work and assistance in trying to keep dull ones up to the level of the others. Many times I have left my classroom alone and gone to a home to get back a girl. Sometimes, after getting her part of the way, she would run home again and leave me, but I have never gone back to school under such circumstances without taking her back in a gentle, loving way."[26]

Between 1887 and 1892, Miss Blackmore was the sole representative of the WFMS in Singapore although she was helped by local Eurasian ladies. In 1892, the WFMS sent out two more female missionaries – Miss Emma Ferris and Miss Sue Harrington – to Singapore to assist Miss Blackmore.[27]

In 1890, Miss Blackmore established the Deaconess Home as a base for WFMS work in Singapore. The home served as a residence for female missionaries (known as deaconesses) and also took in abandoned babies, orphans and young girls sold into slavery (known as *mui tsai* in Cantonese). In 1912, the home was renamed Nind Home after Mrs Mary C. Nind, the secretary of the Minneapolis branch of the WFMS.[28]

Orphans having a meal at the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus in 1924. In addition to a school, the convent also ran an orphanage that accepted and cared for orphans and abandoned babies. *Sisters of the Infant Jesus Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

Sisters of the Holy Infant Jesus (IJ)

Besides the Protestant missionaries, Catholic nuns were also among the pioneers who provided education for girls. In February 1854, four nuns from the Institute of the Charitable Schools of the Holy Infant Jesus of St Maur in France arrived in Singapore. Reverend Mother St Mathilde, Sister St Appollinaire, Sister St Gaetan and Sister St Gregoire formed the core team that ran the school that came to be known as the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus. The convent was the idea of Reverend Father Jean-Marie Beurel of the Missions Étrangères de Paris, who

WOMAN'S FOREIGN MISSIONARY SOCIETY

The Woman's Foreign Missionary Society (WFMS) of the Methodist Episcopal Church of America was founded in Boston by Mrs William Butler and Mrs Edwin Parker, both wives of missionaries, in 1869. Both saw the need for female missionaries to work with women in India as teachers, doctors and even preachers. Thus, they established the WFMS with the aim of "engaging and uniting the efforts of the women of the church in sending out and supporting female missionaries, native Christian teachers and Bible women in foreign lands".[1]

The WFMS was critical to the success of Methodist Girls' School (MGS) and Fairfield Methodist School, especially in the period before World War II. The society provided both the funds and personnel to keep the schools running. All the principals of MGS and Fairfield in the pre-war period were WFMS missionaries, and most of them were unmarried. Several of its principals and teachers worked at both schools, either concurrently or at different points in time.[2] Besides the school in Singapore, WFMS missionaries also managed Methodist schools in Malaya, such as those in Taiping (Perak), Ipoh (Perak) and Kuala Lumpur.[3]

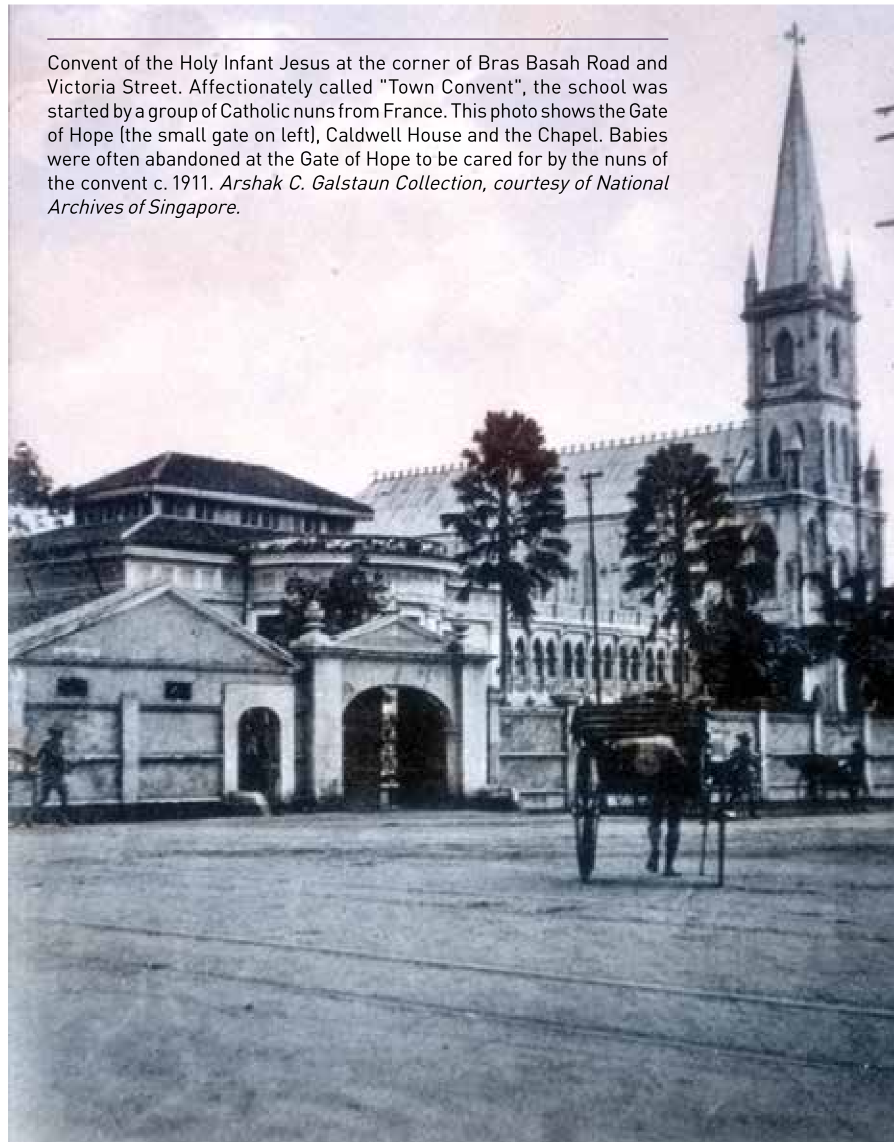
In addition to their work in schools, WFMS missionaries were active evangelists.[4] Miss Sophia Blackmore, for instance, helped Methodist pastor Reverend William Shellabear set up the Baba Church (later known as Middle Road Church) in Middle Road.

Miss Sophia Blackmore (back row, middle) with fellow missionaries from the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society (WFMS) of the Methodist Episcopal Church of America and charges at the Deaconess Home, 1890s. She had established Deaconess Home as a base for WFMS work in Singapore in 1890. *Morgan Betty Bassett Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

One little known accomplishment of the WFMS was the establishment of the Rescue Home for "fallen" women in 1894. Two years earlier, WFMS missionary Miss Josephine Hebinger had been sent to Singapore to rescue Chinese and Japanese girls sold into prostitution. Miss Hebinger was released from her work in 1894 when she announced her plans to get married.[5] It is not known what happened to the rescue home.

Notes

1. Lau, E. (2008). *From mission to church: The evolution of the Methodist Church in Singapore and Malaysia: 1885–1976* (p. 7). Singapore: Genesis Books. (Call no: RSING 287.095957 LAU)
2. Doraisamy, T. R. (Ed.). (1987). *Sophia Blackmore in Singapore: Educational and missionary pioneer 1887–1927* (pp. 24–26). Singapore: General Conference Women's Society of Christian Service, Methodist Church of Singapore. (Call no.: RSING 266.70924 SOP)
3. Blackmore, S. (n.d.). *A record of 40 years of woman's work in Malaya 1887–1927.* Singapore: The Methodist Archives; see various issues of *The Malaysia Message* from 1890 to 1941. Singapore: The Methodist Church Archives. (Both not available in NLB holdings)
4. See for example the report on WFMS evangelistic work in *Minutes of the Malaysia Mission Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church.* (1895, February 14–20) (pp. 32–35). Retrieved from Images library website; Lau, 2008, pp. 27, 46.
5. Doraisamy, 1987, p. 56; Lau, 2008, p. 16; *The Malaysia Message*, Jun 1894, p. 88; *Minutes of the Malaysia Mission Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, 14–20 Feb 1895, pp. 15,17.


Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus at the corner of Bras Basah Road and Victoria Street. Affectionately called "Town Convent", the school was started by a group of Catholic nuns from France. This photo shows the Gate of Hope (the small gate on left), Caldwell House and the Chapel. Babies were often abandoned at the Gate of Hope to be cared for by the nuns of the convent c. 1911. *Arshak C. Galstaun Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

had started St Joseph's Institution for the education of boys in 1852. He wanted the convent to be a safe place that would house a school for girls, an orphanage and an asylum for destitute widows.[29]

Established in 1854, the convent, known as Town Convent due to its location on Victoria Street in the city area, was the first Catholic mission school for girls in Singapore. In addition to running a day school, it also had an orphanage that accepted and cared for orphans and unwanted babies. Many of these babies were found on the doorsteps of the convent wrapped in rags or newspapers, abandoned by their mothers who could not care for them. The babies were often disabled, deformed or weak, and were usually girls.[30]

The IJ Sisters, as they came to be known, provided moral and domestic education for their charges, including classes in sewing, knitting and cooking as well as simple reading, writing and arithmetic. Gradually, the Sisters went on to establish several more convent schools throughout Singapore.[31]

The IJ Sisters were also actively involved in medical work. In his 1885 report, the Resident Surgeon of the General Hospital outlined in his report the Sisters' work as nurses in the hospital:

> "I am glad to report that, during this year, the introduction of Female Nurses has become an accomplished fact. The Nurses are Sisters from the Convent in Singapore, and they entered on their duties on August 1st. They have shewn [sic], and are shewing [sic], great interest in their work, and are very careful, and quick to learn. The improvement in the appearance of the hospital wards since the Nurses came is very marked, and the relief given to the Surgeon, and the Apothecaries in their attendance on bad cases is already great, and will in time be greater."[32]

Up to that point, nursing work at the General Hospital was mainly carried out by apothecaries, dressers, ward stewards, servants and even convicts.[33] The Sisters, although not professionally trained, became the first group of dedicated nurses in Singapore, and their services helped ease much of the staff's workload. As part of their duties, the IJ Sisters attended to the patients, received hospital rations and looked after the servants.[34]

Nonetheless, the IJ Sisters' involvement in nursing was short-lived. In May 1900, the Convent withdrew the Sisters' services following a disagreement with the government. Trained nurses from the Colonial Institute in England replaced the Sisters.[35] ♦

CATHOLIC SCHOOLS FOR GIRLS

Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus (CHIJ) on Victoria Street – also known as Town Convent – founded in 1854 was the first of the CHIJ schools to be established in Singapore for girls.

In the 20th century, the Catholic order of the Holy Infant Jesus Sisters from France established eight more CHIJ schools: CHIJ Katong Convent (1930), CHIJ St Nicholas Girls' School (1933), CHIJ St Theresa's Convent (1933), CHIJ St Joseph's Convent (1938), CHIJ (Bukit Timah) (1955), CHIJ Our Lady of the Nativity (1957), CHIJ Our Lady of Good Counsel (1960) and CHIJ Kellock (Primary) (1964).[1]

In 1964, the Town Convent was separated into primary and secondary schools and, in 1983, moved from its Victoria Street premises to Toa Payoh, where it remains today.

Notes

1 CHIJ Secondary. (2017). *IJ communities and schools. Retrieved from CHIJ Secondary website.*

A music class in session at the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus in 1924. *Sisters of the Infant Jesus Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

Notes

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2 Kirkwood, D. (1993). Protestant missionary women: Wives and spinsters (pp. 23–42). In F. Bowie, D. Kirkwood & S. Ardener (Eds.), *Women and missions: Past and present: Anthropological and historical perceptions* (p. 25). Oxford: Berg Publishers. (Not available in NLB holdings).
3 Kirkwood, 1993, p. 26.
4 Kirkwood, 1993, p. 34.
5 Kirkwood, 1993, p. 32; Williams, P. (1993). The missing link: The recruitment of women missionaries in some English evangelical missionary societies in the nineteenth century (pp. 43–69). In F. Bowie, D. Kirkwood & S. Ardener (Eds.), Women and missions: Past and present: Anthropological and historical perceptions (p. 56). Oxford: Berg Publishers. (Not available in NLB holdings).
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11 Lee, Y.M. (2002). *Great is thy faithfulness: The story of St Margaret's School in Singapore* (pp. 27, 28, 30). Singapore: St Margaret's School. (Call no.: RSING q373.5957 SAI)
12 Lee, 2002, pp. 30–31; O'Sullivan, 1986, p. 134; Sng, B.E.K. (2003). *In His good time: The story of the church in Singapore, 1819–2002* (p. 62, 63, 78, 86). Singapore: Bible Society of Singapore: Graduates' Christian Fellowship. (Call no.: RSING 280.4095957 SNG)
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15 Ragged schools referred to the independently run charity schools the United Kingdom in the 19th century. These provided free education, food and lodging for the destitute. See Ragged University. (n. d.). *Education history: A brief history of Ragged Schools.* Retrieved from Ragged University website.
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22 The Malaysia Message, Jan 1893, p. 38.
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25 Lau, 2008, p. 15; Blackmore, n.d.
26 Miss Hemingway writing in 1899. Quoted in Sng, 2003, pp. 114–115.
27 Blackmore, n.d.
28 Lau, 2008, p. 16; Blackmore, S. (1928). *A record of forty years of women's work in Malaya, 1885–1925* (p. 1). (Unpublished manuscript); Lim, L.U.W. (1987). *Memories, gems and sentiments: 100 years of Methodist Girls' School* (p. 5). Singapore: Methodist Girls School. Retrieved from BookSG.
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LIVING IT UP AT THE CAPITOL

Capitol Theatre was the premier venue for film and stage when it opened in 1930. **Bonny Tan** uses oral history recordings to piece together pre-war narratives of the theatre.

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Capitol Theatre opened to much fanfare on 22 May 1930, marking the dawn of a new era in entertainment and lifestyle in Singapore. Although there were several existing cinemas, such as the Alhambra and Marlborough, the Capitol sought to be the epitome of the high life in the city by showcasing the best in both film and live performances. Completed at the outset of the Great Depression, the Capitol was instrumental in transforming Singapore's entertainment landscape in more ways than one.

Dressed to the Nines

The idea of building a high-end theatre for both stage and screen was conceived by S.A.H. Shirazee, an Indian-Muslim merchant and community leader. The Capitol boasted the largest seating capacity for a theatre in the Far East at the time – with 1,100 seated on the ground floor and another 500 upstairs – and the very latest in technology and comfort. Adjoining it was a complex with high-end shops on the ground floor and 48 apartments occupying two upper floors.

The Capitol was commissioned and financed by Mirza Mohammed Ali Namazie, a well-known Persian businessman. Besides managing various business ventures, Namazie was himself a film buff, having been the distributor of UFA, a German film agency, since 1919.[1]

Many people have mistaken the distinctive street-facing façade as the theatre, a perception created by the gigantic movie billboard hanging over the entrance to the building. In actual fact, what is visible at the corner of Stamford and North Bridge roads is the four-storey complex of apartments and shops known as Namazie Mansions. Early photos of the building show "Capitol Theatre" emblazoned above the billboard with "Namazie Mansions" in smaller typeface above it. The actual theatre, a rather nondescript-looking structure from the outside, is found at the rear of the building.

Namazie Mansions was built in November 1929, a few months before the theatre behind it was completed in February 1930. The total construction cost of the theatre and apartment complex amounted to 1.25 million Straits dollars. The theatre took up two-thirds of the cost as it incorporated the latest innovations in cinema and theatre technology.

Designed by British architects P.H. Keys and F. Dowdeswell and constructed by Messrs Brossard and Mopin, the architects drew inspiration from Roxy Theatre in New York. Capitol had the largest projection room in the world when it opened, extending the length of the building and housing the latest Simplex deluxe projectors. Located below the balcony was the projection room, built entirely of reinforced concrete, a newly introduced construction material.

The theatre also featured an innovative ventilation system in which purified, cooled air was blown into the auditorium without the aid of fans, while its domed roof could be opened to let in fresh air, except on rainy days. Most importantly, Capitol was the first cinema in Singapore to be purpose-built for talkies. It was installed with state-of-the-art soundproofing, acoustics and sound systems – constructed just as this new genre of film was becoming popular.[2]

The Capitol was dressed to the nines – as was expected of its patrons – with wider and more luxuriously upholstered seats, multi-hued lights that cast a magical glow on the silk drapings on stage, and even the latest in wall paint to allow easy cleaning. Changing rooms and organ chambers were also built into the theatre to facilitate stage productions.

Much of the external and interior design was influenced by Joe Fisher (see text box overleaf), a South African who had been in the film industry for more than two decades. Fisher was instrumental in bringing in the latest Hollywood films and theatrical performances that helped cement Capitol as Singapore's premier entertainment venue. Namazie, Shirazee and Fisher formed Capitol Theatres Ltd, which ran the business, with Namazie as the company chairman, Shirazee as director, and Fisher as managing director.

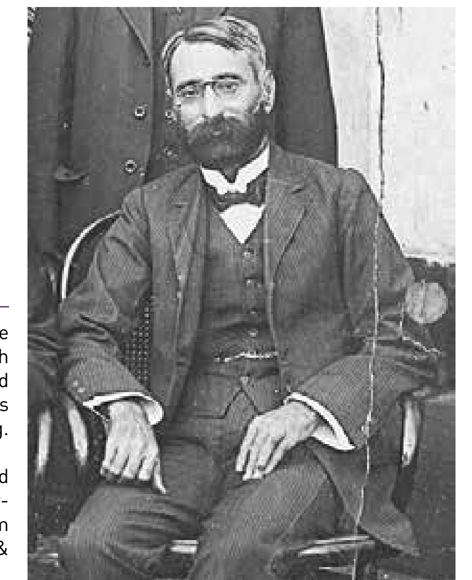
Crowds thronged to watch the musical comedy *Rio Rita* on opening night on 22 May 1930. The 1929 film, which starred American artistes Bebe Daniels and John Boles, was RKO Radio Pictures' top-grossing box office hit of the time, featuring the latest in technicolour and sound. A journalist was so thrilled by the magnificence of the Capitol that he reported it as "almost too elaborate for a mere cinema" in the newspaper the next day.[3]

Ticket bookings at the Capitol could be made by telephone. Subsequently, reservations for permanent seats each week for future screenings could also be booked in advance if requests were made in writing to the manager. Tickets were priced at $2 for circle seats and $1 for stalls; children were charged half price.

The European patrons, decked out in hats and jackets, would book the more expensive circle seats upstairs, while locals, who tended to dress less formally, would occupy the cheaper stalls.[4] The theatre was touted by some as a place that allowed for the mingling of people, regardless of class and race, but in actual fact the haves and have-nots were separated physically by the price of a ticket.

Memories of the Capitol

Behind the grandeur and opulence, however, was back-breaking work. Wee Teck Guan, a former employee of Capitol Theatre, supplied cleaning services during the opening period. Supervising between 10 and 50 people on the job at any one time, Wee was responsible for making sure that the labour force was on site 24 hours a day.[5]



(Left) Capitol Theatre and the adjoining Namazie Mansions at the junction of Stamford Road and North Bridge Road, c.1950. By 1946, the new owners had replaced the sign "Namazie Mansions" with "Shaws Building". In 1992, it was renamed Capitol Building. *Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

(Right) Capitol Theatre was commissioned and financed by Mirza Mohammed Ali Namazie, a well-known Persian businessman. He had moved to Singapore from Madras, India, in the 1910s to set up M.A. Namazie & Co. *Courtesy of Mirza Mohammed Ali Namazie.*

Wee continued working for the Capitol until the Japanese Occupation, when his job evolved into advertising. He employed rather unique approaches to publicise the screenings; for example, for the film *The Jungle Princess,* shown at the theatre in April 1937, Wee used a live model wearing a *sarong* in his publicity stunt.

Myra Cresson, a Singaporean of French-Portuguese descent who was a regular patron of the cinema in those early years, recalled that hats and tuxedos were the norm for the European community at Saturday evening shows, even with no air-conditioning in the theatre. After the show, the Europeans would invariably proceed to the original Satay Club at Hoi How Road, a narrow street just off Beach Road where the Alhambra cinema was located.[6] According to *Willis's Singapore Guide*, "After the cinema or when hotels are closed, it [was] not an uncommon sight to see European ladies and gentlemen in evening dress sitting around these 'Satai' stalls on the open road".[7]

The theatre was such an attraction that people from the Malay Peninsula travelled south to see this marvel in engineering. Dr Maurice Baker, one of Singapore's first-generation diplomats, was a student in Standard Seven in Ipoh when he was taken on his first visit to Singapore by his geography teacher. One of the highlights of his trip was to see the magnificent dome of the Capitol Theatre.[8]

Unfortunately, Capitol Theatres Ltd suffered a double whammy when Namazie died of a sudden heart attack at the age of 67 in July 1931, and the Great Depression and subsequent rubber slump of the 1930s took a toll on its business. The company underwent voluntary liquidation, and the management companies of the Capitol, Alhambra, Marlborough and Royal theatres merged to form Amalgamated Theatres by late 1939 with previous directors of the Capitol, including Joe Fisher, still part of the Board of Directors in the new company.[9] Thankfully, Singapore was not completely devastated by the economic downturn[10] and, defying all logic, saw a boom in the entertainment industry during this period.[11]

THE FILM-MAD FISHER BROTHERS

The South African brothers Joe and Julius Fisher were responsible for steering Capitol Theatre through its initial growth years. They had been mentored by their father, A.M. Fisher, a pioneer of early cinema in South Africa. The senior Fisher is credited for screening South Africa's first film in 1898 (a feature of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee procession). He also made an early attempt at "air-conditioning" in 1906 by using a large fan blowing across ice in the show tent, and presenting South Africa's first talkie by playing records simultaneously on a gramophone that was synchronised with the action on screen.[1]

The Fisher brothers first came to Singapore in 1918 as representatives of I.W. Schlesinger, an American immigrant to South Africa who became a prolific film producer as well as film distributor. The Fishers were not only involved in film but also handled "theatrical troupes for tours through Malaya and the Far East."[2] Joe Fisher later became general manager of Middle East Films before establishing Singapore First National Pictures Ltd in 1926.[3]

The Fishers were experienced in the film industry and well-connected with Hollywood producers by the time Capitol Theatre opened in 1930. They set up the Mickey Mouse Club and brought in the famed Marcus show to pull in the crowds to the Capitol. By 1940, after a decade with Capitol, the Fisher brothers finally took sole control of the theatre under their own company, Fishers Ltd.

The brothers financed a massive renovation programme of the Capitol in January 1940. This included installing air-conditioning as well as an electric substation to serve the needs of both theatre patrons and residents of Namazie Mansions, along with reupholstered seats that were laid in a staggered fashion, "thus obviating irritating head and body manoeuvres which were formerly necessary in order to gain a clear view of the screen".[4] The renovations were carried out by some 200 men who worked non-stop even when performances were underway.[5]

Notes

1. Joe & Julius Fisher – Pioneers of Singapore entertainment. (1940, January 31). *The Straits Times*, p. 15; Streeter, L. (1940, January 28). From eye-killing flickers to modern marvels. *The Sunday Tribune*, p. 3. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
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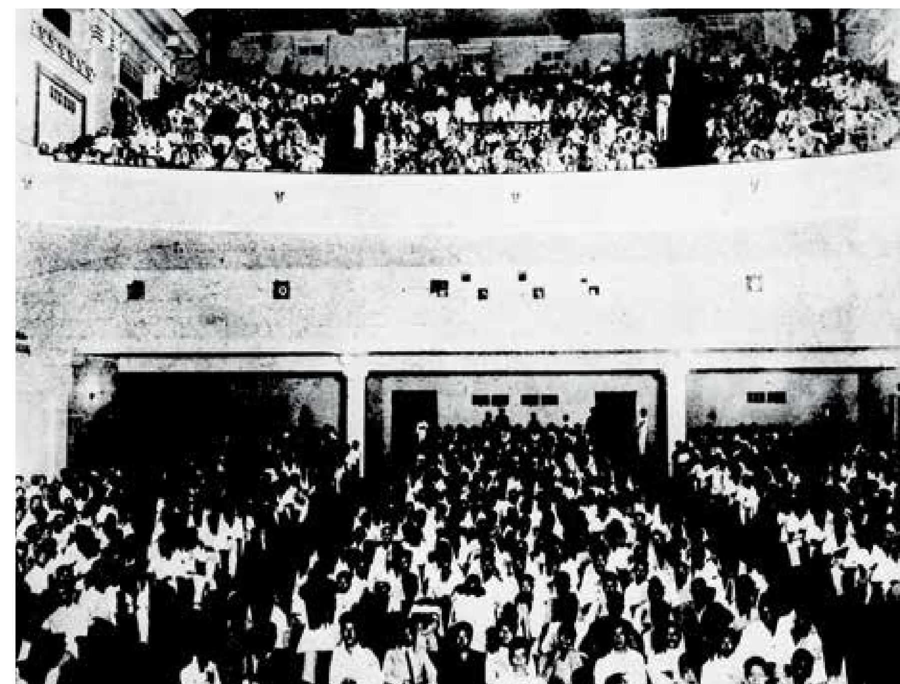
5. Under your very nose a new theatre is built. (1940, January 21). *The Sunday Tribune*, p. 2; Capitol theatre to be air-conditioned. (1940, January 11). *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile* Advertiser, p. 5. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.



(Below) The crowd at the Capitol Theatre on opening night on 22 May 1930. The Europeans were formally dressed and seated on the balcony, while the locals mostly occupied the stalls. The photo also shows the projection room below the balcony. *Malayan Saturday Post, 31 May 1930, p. 38.*

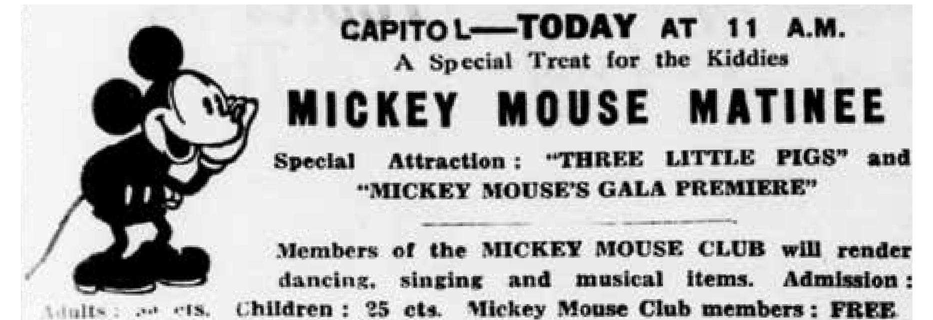
(Below right) Crowds thronged to watch the musical comedy, *Rio Rita*, at Capitol Theatre's opening night on 22 May 1930. The 1929 film starred American artistes Bebe Daniels and John Boles, and was RKO Radio Pictures' top-grossing box office hit featuring the latest in technicolour and sound. The film was based on the 1927 stage musical produced by Florenz Ziegfeld. *Image source: Wikipedia Commons.*

Live Performances at the Capitol

In the era of silent movies, music was key in creating atmosphere and portraying the emotions of the characters. The screening of a movie would be accompanied by a band playing live music. Even after talkies came on the scene, music was still integral to the storytelling.

Musician Paul Abisheganaden was entralled by the musical interludes played between the screening of movies. He quipped, "You went to the cinema not only to see the films but also to enjoy the music that took place at interval. And you would cut short your refreshments quickly to get back to your seat in order to be able to listen to... the musicians... ."[12] Before the days of jazz and pop, bands would play light orchestral pieces or salon music such as Albert W. Ketelbey's *In a Monastery Garden* and *In a Persian Market*. The wages were so lucrative that many musicians from Goa and Manila came to Singapore to work.

Teo Moh Tet, whose father Teo Eng Hock was a well-known rubber planter, lived in a five-storey building beside Capitol's huge carpark. She had the privilege of catching the A.B. Marcus Show when it was first staged at the Capitol Theatre in August 1934. The vaudeville production, which featured 45 skimpily clad girls on stage, had gained worldwide popularity when it first premiered in 1918. Although entertaining, it must not have been an appropriate show for a young girl.



(Top) Members of the Mickey Mouse Cub would meet on Saturday mornings before heading to the Capitol Theatre for the matinee screening of Mickey Mouse cartoons. *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser, 21 Oct 1933, p. 7.*

(Above) Scenes from Universal's *The King of Jazz* production which was staged at Capitol Theatre. *Malayan Saturday Post, 18 October 1930, p. 16.*

Growing Up with the Capitol

Parents in the 1930s did not usually indulge their young children by taking them out to the cinema, especially if they were girls. A visit to the theatre was therefore an extraordinary affair to be remembered. Teo Moh Tet, who was about 10 or 11 in the 1930s, remembered being accompanied by her mother to the first colour film at the Capitol, likely *Rio Rita*, which was the opening night film when the theatre was launched on 22 May 1930.[13] Interestingly, such early films were often productions of live stage performances.

As a girl growing up in Johor in the early 1930s, Hedwig Anuar, who became director of the National Library in 1965, recalled outings to cinemas as boisterous affairs: "There would be boys sitting in the row behind us kicking our seats... And all of us would be eating *kachang puteh*."[14] The atmosphere may have been more sedate at the glamorous Capitol but the film genres were the same. It was a time when musicals and dance were popular. Children learnt to sing the songs of the adorable child star Shirley Temple and were fascinated with the nimble dance moves of Hollywood greats like Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers.

To attract the younger generation to the Capitol, Amalgamated Theatres established a branch of the Mickey Mouse Club in December 1932. The inaugural meeting attracted 200 members. The club, for children under 14, soon developed its own suite of programmes that included sports events, performances and charity work. The club elected its own Mickey Mouse and Minnie Mouse chiefs and by March 1933, had its own newspaper column, the Mickey Mouse Club Corner, in *The Malaya Tribune*.

A monthly membership fee of 25 cents allowed two free shows a month at the Capitol, Alhambra or Pavilion cinemas[15]. Club members would meet on Saturday

mornings before heading to the Capitol for the matinee screening of Mickey Mouse cartoons. Chan Keong Poh, who was about 14 years old then, recalled that Saturday morning meetings were held in the homes of the club organisers living at Namazie Mansions.[16] Khatijun Nissa Siraj, who later became a women's rights activist, noted that club members" all had Mickey Mouse badge[s]… Sometimes there were children's functions after the movies… [which included] a mix of Europeans, Chinese, Indians who [belonged] to the club".[17]

The area around the Capitol Theatre was home to more than a handful of English schools with teenagers hungry for new entertainment. Raffles Institution, Raffles Girls' School, St Joseph's Institution and Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus were just a few within a stone's throw away.

The Capitol also appealed to the younger set as it featured more current, action-packed films. The 3.15pm matinee at the Capitol was especially popular with students as these afternoon screenings were cheaper than evening shows. Long queues for the matinees were an uncommon sight. Lines would also form for the *kachang puteh* man hawking a variety of flavoured nuts along with vendors selling various snacks and candies, both before screenings and during interval time.[18]

In some schools, teachers occasionally rewarded students with cash for achieving good grades, and this was often used to purchase theatre tickets. Dr Tham Cheok Fai, later known as the father of neurosurgery in Singapore, recalled his math teacher challenging students with difficult arithmetic problems. Often, he would be the first to solve a question, and would use the 50-cent reward to catch a film at the Capitol. Tham said that 50 cents could purchase "two cinema shows in those days…[as] the seat in front… cost only 25 cents…". This was normally a month's worth of pocket money that would otherwise have been used for meals and transport.[19]

Blind activist and advocate for the disabled Ronald Chandran-Dudley recalled indulging in movie marathon weekends when he still had his sight as a teenager. He skipped Latin classes for the early morning show at the Alhambra, continued with the 11am show at Capitol, followed by the 1.30pm screening at Cathay and ended the marathon with the 4pm show before reaching home at 6pm.[20]

Residents of the Capitol

The apartments of Namazie Mansions fronting North Bridge Road commanded a panoramic view of St Andrew's Cathedral and the Esplanade area. The residents included teachers of nearby schools as well as distinguished and well-heeled members of society.

Hilary Vivian Hogan, who was recognised for his contributions to Singapore's cooperative movement, lived at the apartments when his family moved to Singapore around 1932, after his father had retired from working at Shell Petroleum in Samboe, Indonesia. As the Capitol was so ideally located, Hogan remembered walking everywhere: to his school, St Joseph's Institution, to church, and in the evenings to the Esplanade to enjoy the breeze.[21]

Kartar Singh too had first-hand experience of growing up at the Capitol although he lived at the other end of the economic spectrum. His father had supplied girders for the construction of the theatre. When Kartar's mother died suddenly, his father was unable to juggle work with the needs of his young family. Fortunately, his father found employment at the Capitol as the resident *jaga*, or night watchman, and moved the family into the theatre grounds.

Kartar's father was given a small room and a storage larder, but it was not a home by any means. The room could not accommodate the entire family of several siblings so once patrons cleared out of the theatre after the last show, they would pull out their *charpoy* (Indian roped beds) into the lobby to sleep. By 6 the next morning, these had to be packed away.

Kartar's father set himself a strict timetable. He would wake up at 5am, get the cooking fire going, run to Hock Lam Street to buy groceries, then cook breakfast and pack lunch for the children as they got ready for school. He would then send them to school just before his work started at 9am. Kartar was then a student at nearby Raffles Institution. Due to his circumstances, he led an austere life at the Capitol, cooking by the roadside and studying under the street lamp.[22]

(Below) The ticketing counter in the lobby of Capitol Theatre, 1982. *Lee Kip Lin Collection. All rights reserved, Lee Kip Lin and National Library Board, Singapore.*

(Bottom) In 2007, Capitol Theatre, Capitol Building, Capitol Centre and Stamford House were gazetted for conservation. Following redevelopment and refurbishment, Capitol Theatre officially reopened on 22 May 2015, exactly 85 years to the day when it first opened. *Image source: VisitSingapore.com.*

Occupied Capitol

During the Japanese Occupation, the building's residents included Japanese military officers as well as Japanese proprietors of businesses that operated on the ground floor.

Kartar's family continued to live at the Capitol during the Japanese invasion in February 1942. Films were still screened in the months before the fall of Singapore to raise the morale of the people, but eventually the British requisitioned the theatre and turned it into a food depot. The last film prior to Singapore's fall was screened at 11pm on 19 December 1941.[23] Kartar remembered that some seats were removed as sacks of flour were hauled in while the in-house restaurant, Blue Room, was converted into a canteen for the Air Raid Precaution Defence Forces.[24]

Maurice Baker recalled that when the Japanese invaded Singapore and took over the theatre, he and some friends had sneaked in knowing that it was stocked with food. "… [w]e just picked up a whole case of sardines. I carried it and we walked past the sentry. Normally, looters were shot and executed. We didn't know we were looting. We just carried it past, grinned and bowed to the sentry and took it home… We lived on those sardines for quite a while".[25]

During the Japanese Occupation, Capitol Theatre was renamed Kyoei Gekijo. Only films that had been vetted by the Japanese could be screened, along with theatrical performances. Patrick Hardie, a Eurasian interviewee, remembered that such performances included Japanese classical music performed by a Japanese orchestra as well as Japanese folk dances.[26]

In December 1944, towards the end of the Occupation, a loud explosion rocked the theatre. Kartar, who had by then married and moved to Henderson Road, heard the explosion as it resonated across town. Cycling to the Capitol as fast as he could, he witnessed the devastation: the theatre frontage had collapsed at the spot where his father would have been sleeping. He found his younger brother, his head in a pool of blood. His father and another brother had been taken to Raffles Girls' school along with some others who were also injured.

Kartar ran to the nearby Indian Tamil League Headquarters at Waterloo Street where his cousin was the secretary and one of the privileged few given a car by the Japanese. Using the borrowed vehicle, Kartar drove his family to the Kandang Kerbau Hospital which then served as a civil hospital. His father was later detained by the Japanese, who suspected him of being involved in the sabotage and interrogated him for two hours. His father was eventually released as apparently some old films stored in an underground room had caught fire and ignited the gas tanks nearby, causing the explosion.[27]

When World War II ended in 1945, Shaw Organisation purchased Capitol Theatre and Namazie Mansions for $3.8 million, and renamed the latter Shaws Building, ushering in a new era for theatre and cinema in Singapore. After several decades as an iconic cinema in post-colonial Singapore, the theatre reopened in 2015, fully refurbished to reflect its former glory. It remains the only pre-war cinema in Singapore still in operation today.[28] ♦

The author would like to thank Raphaël Millet who reviewed this article before publication.

Notes

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2 The Alhambra and Tivoli screened talkies prior to the Capitol but had to undergo some renovations to incorporate sound technology. See Talkie invasion. (1929, December 17). *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, p. 1. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

3 Capitol Theatre – New amusement centre opened. (1930, May 23). *The Straits Times*, p. 14. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

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14 Chua, C. H. J. (Interviewer). (1998, July 21). *Oral history interview with Hedwig Anuar Aroozo* [Transcript of cassette recording no. 002036/44/2, p. 24]. Retrieved from National Archives of Singapore website.

15 "Shanghai Lass". (1934, September 29). Mickey Mouse Club. *The Malaya Tribune*, p. 2

16 Yeo, G. L. (Interviewer). (1987, July 27). *Oral history interview with Chan Keong Poh* [Cassette recording no. 000802/9/2]. Retrieved from National Archives of Singapore website.

17 Ruzita Zaki. (Interviewer). (1995, August 24). *Oral history interview with Khatijun Nissan Siraj* [Transcript of cassette recording no. 001663/36/5, p. 70]. Retrieved from National Archives of Singapore website.

18 Sng, S. (Interviewer). (2005, March 28). *Oral history interview with Benjamin Khoo Beng Chuan* [Transcript of cassette recording no. 002911/26/6, p. 127]. Retrieved from National Archives of Singapore website.

19 Lee, L. C. (Interviewer). (1996, July 30). *Oral history interview with Tham Cheok Fai* [Transcript of cassette recording no. 001751/19/19, p. 2]. Retrieved from National Archives of Singapore website; Sng, S. (Interviewer). (2005, March 28). *Oral history interview with Benjamin Khoo Beng Chuan* [Transcript of cassette recording no. 002911/26/6, p. 126]. Retrieved from National Archives of Singapore website.

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24 Lim, J. (Interviewer). (2002, July 19). *Oral history interview with Kartar Singh* [Cassette recording no. 002335/34/13]. Retrieved from National Archives of Singapore website.

25 Chew, D. (Interviewer). (1993, April 14). *Oral history interview with Maurice Baker* [Transcript of cassette recording no. 000095/6/2, p. 19]. Retrieved from National Archives of Singapore website.

26 Tan, B. L. (Interviewer). (1985, April 17). *Oral history interview with Patrick Hardie* [Transcript of cassette recording no. 000545/9/5, p. 63]. Retrieved from National Archives of Singapore website.

27 Lim, J. (Interviewer). (2002, July 26). *Oral history interview with Kartar Singh* [Cassette recording no. 002335/34/6 & 7]. Retrieved from National Archives of Singapore website.

28 Tan, C. (2015, February 11). Singapura: The Musical to open at newly-refurbished Capitol Theatre in May. *The Straits Times.* Retrieved from The Straits Times website; Back in the spotlight. (2015, May 23). *The Straits Times*; Khew, C., & Zaccheus, M. (2015, May 23). Nostalgia takes centre stage at iconic theatre. *The Straits Times.* Retrieved from AsiaOne website.

Warm Tidings in a Cold War

Remittance letters between Singapore and China during the height of the Cold War from the 1950s–70s recount both the joy and angst of relationships across the miles. **Dong Hui Ying** delves deeper.

The establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the onset of the Cold War,[1] and revolution, decolonisation and war in Southeast Asia between the 1940s and 1970s ushered a period of uncertainty in Chinese and Southeast Asian interactions. The Cold War did not bring migration and communication between China and Southeast Asia to a grinding halt as expected, and the movement of people, goods and, not least, remittances and letters, continued at a steady pace.

The last was due, in no small part, to attempts by the PRC government to protect a major source of foreign exchange. In 1955, it issued decrees declaring the protection of remittances to China from abroad, guaranteeing remittances as the "legitimate income"[2] of the families of overseas Chinese (华侨) living in China.

To encourage the flow of remittances from abroad, such families were given preferential treatment from the late 1950s to the mid-1960s. This took the form of extra allotments of grain as well as permission to use remittances for the upkeep of ancestral graves and to continue with geomancy and other feudal superstitious practices. These incentives in turn encouraged the Chinese diasporic community in Southeast Asia to send money home.

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The Value of Remittance Letters

Letters accompanying these remittances, namely *qiaopi* (侨批), continued to actively circulate between Southeast Asia and China during the Cold War. "According to Liu Haiming, letter writing served several functions in traditional Chinese families: "as an important communication channel, a vehicle of moral education… and… as a composition writing exercise for children."[3]

Remittance letters are important primary sources in the study of Chinese migrant experiences during this important period in Asian and global history as they provide a glimpse into the experiences, world views, values and expectations of migrants. Important matters were discussed and settled in the letters, from ancestor worship, marriage and child-bearing to health education and migration.

In this context, the remittance letters in the National Library's Koh Seow Chuan Collection take on special importance. These letters were written mainly by male emigrants to Singapore from the Chaozhou (Teochew) area in China between the 1950s and the 1970s (with letters from the 1960s largely absent). Most were written by a few men, with a small number penned by women who were, presumably, wives or relatives of the letter writers.

A major challenge facing any historian using these letters is their fragmented nature, both chronologically, and in terms of the individuals and families involved. To overcome this, remittance letters compiled in the *Chaoshan Qiaopi Jicheng* (《潮汕侨批集成》) were examined to supplement those in the Koh Seow Chuan Collection.

In addition, articles on overseas Chinese in the newspaper *People's Daily* (《人民日报》) were studied to examine how official policies of the PRC and the rise of nation-states during the Cold War affected migrants and their families between the 1950s and 1970s.

The core themes that emerge, as explored in this essay, are family and kinship ties, socio-religious practices, customs, health, education, migrational processes, material aspects of migration and socio-economic concerns.

Religious Practices

Besides food, clothing and shelter, religious practices constituted a large part of household expenditure, according to Chen Da's study, *Emigrant Communities in South China*.[4] The Chaozhou people placed great importance on the worship of ancestors and deities. Deities like Shen and Tien were worshipped in temples or shrines for the safety, health and prosperity of the migrants in Southeast Asia, as well as those of the supplicants, on the first and 15th day of each lunar month.

Remittances were regularly sent back with instructions to put aside the money for religious observances such as sacrifices and prayer (祭祀之需). Some migrants even returned to China to worship their ancestors personally. The more affluent migrants – as a display of having achieved worldly success abroad – would send money to help construct ancestral halls that housed the patrilineal group's ancestral tablets.

In his letter in 1949, Xu Mingqin pledged to "add grandparents' and granduncles' and grandaunts' tablets in the ancestral hall".[5] Such contributions allowed migrants to be active participants in family affairs back in China and also strengthened family ties across the miles.

Marital Unions

Marriage was an important union in which kinship ties were forged and maintained. In an emigrant family of middle or lower economic status, a portion of the remittances received was put aside for the sender's marriage expenses. The migrant would return home to marry when sufficient money had been saved and a suitable girl found.

Sometimes, additional contributions were called for. In Yang Ruixiong's case, he explained that he was hard-pressed to contribute towards his younger brother's marriage expenses:

> "I have received the letter about my brother Ruihan's marriage. I am supposed to help with all the marriage expenses. However, I am earning very little and cannot help. Please notify me three months before the day of marriage. If I can, I will try to send more, at least 100 RMB to help."[6]

Many migrants whose sons were also in Southeast Asia asked their wives or mothers back home to look for suitable brides for their sons. Wu Juanzhuan, for example, sent several letters asking his wife to find a worthy match for their son, Xilie.[7] Another migrant, Xu Mingqin, asked his mother to find an ideal girl for his son Huizhuan.[8] Daughters' marriages were similarly arranged long-distance. Xu Mingqin and his wife (who had moved to Singapore to be with her husband) sought a good husband for their daughter Huizhuang, with Xu's mother's help.[9]

In arranging marriages, parents generally wanted to know the background of the prospective in-laws. Ideally, they wanted their sons to marry a submissive girl from their own area who held the same traditional values. In Zeng Hequan's letter to his wife, he asked about the background of his prospective daughter-in-law and the occupation of her parents.[10]

The same concern applied to prospective sons-in-law, as seen from Yaliu's letter to her mother-in-law in China on her daughter Meixiang's marriage. Yaliu was perturbed that no one could ascertain which village her future son-in-law came from or what his family circumstances were like.[11]

Chinese migrants in Southeast Asia, although young and exposed to foreign influences, generally accepted arranged marriages in an effort to remain filial to their parents. By accepting arranged marriages, migrant sons would have a wife in their hometowns to fulfil traditional responsibilities, such as serving their parents and maintaining the family shrine when they went abroad again for work after the wedding.

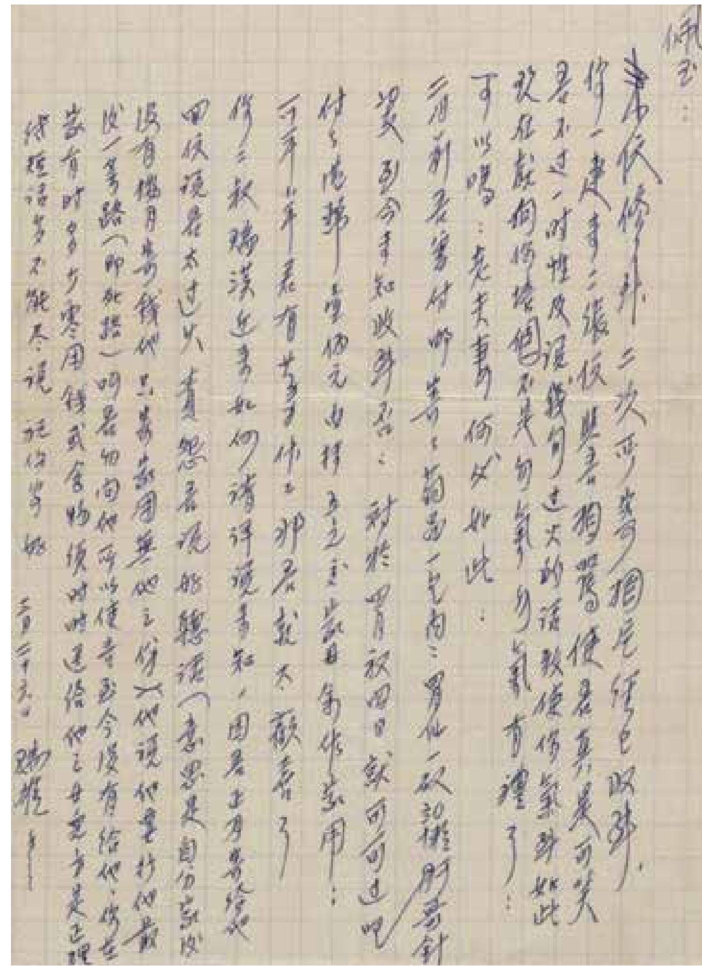
Parent-Son Relationships

For migrant sons and their families, remittance letters served as a vital channel of communication. In particular, parent-son

(Facing page) A Chinese worker in Singapore hoisting bales of rubber, late 1960s. The majority of such men who left China to find employment in Singapore between the 1820s and 1950s were engaged in manual labour. Letters were the only means of communication with their families back in China. *George W. Porter Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

(Below) Chinese men gathered around a storyteller along Singapore River, c. 1960s. With barely enough to make ends meet after sending money home to China, entertainment for most migrants took on very simple forms. *Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

(Right) Figure 1: Letter from Yang Ruixiong to his wife Xu Peiyu, 26 March 1965. *All rights reserved, Koh Seow Chuan Collection, National Library Board, Singapore.*
(Below) A Cantonese letter writer-calligrapher with his customers in this photo taken on 24 October 1979. As most Chinese migrants in Singapore were illiterate, they engaged professional letter writers to pen remittance notes to their families back home in China. Often, these writers were also asked to read letters aloud to the recipients. *All rights reserved, Kouo Shang-Wei Collection, National Library Board, Singapore.*
(Facing page) Figure 2: Letter from Liu Shizhao to his mother, date and year unknown. *All rights reserved, Koh Seow Chuan Collection, National Library Board, Singapore.*



relationships were traditionally "central to family life and superior to other family relations, including conjugal ties".[12] Migrant sons were expected to "send money to their rural homes, leave their wives and children with their old folks, and regard their sojourn in the city as temporary, even when they spend their entire lives there". Success was typically defined by the "onset of remittances".[13]

In times of financial difficulty, when no remittance could be enclosed, a letter of reassurance about the migrant's health and safety (平安信) was still expected. Most letters usually consisted of one to two lines in addition to the usual greetings and mention of remittances sent back. However, on special occasions, they could stretch into hundreds of words. The emotional dimension of these correspondences is often neglected in the study of remittance letters.

The expression of concern and longing was evident in Liu Shizhao's note to his mother, who had been injured during a flood in his hometown:

> "I am extremely pained to hear about your injury. I wish from afar that you recover quickly after seeing a doctor and taking medication. I am well overseas. Please do not worry about me."[14]

Husband-Wife Relationships

Remittance letters between migrant couples hold "powerful cultural and emotional value".[15] Under normal circumstances, even when their husbands sent back remittances or returned home regularly, the women had to bear greater family responsibilities during their husbands' absence.

The situation worsened during the Cold War when migration regulations made return trips difficult and rare, and remittance letters indicated a sharp decrease in movement between China and Singapore.[16] Thus, such letters were immensely reassuring and key to maintaining husband-wife relationships across the seas. In a letter to his wife in 1965 (Fig. 1), Yang Ruixiong wrote:

> "You sent two letters in a row to quarrel with me, it really amuses me. I was just being hot-tempered and as a result, said a few words that crossed the line. Do you have to be this angry? I will apologise to you now. Sorry, sorry, for my bad manners. Is this satisfactory? We are already an old married couple, does it have to be like this?"[17]

Migrant-Child Relationships

Migrants also expressed concern towards their children at home. In a letter to his mother in 1956, Liu Yongyu referred to the news that Lianxiang, his daughter back home in China, was feeling neglected by her mother, who had moved to Singapore with Lianxiang's younger sisters. He explained that the younger girls were living very ordinary lives in Singapore and there was no reason for Lianxiang to feel disadvantaged.[18]

Zheng Youchu was another concerned parent. In 1952, he wrote expressing worry about his daughter Xianqing's complaints of frequent abdominal pains after childbirth and suggested that she consult a physician immediately.[19] In 1954, he was concerned that Xianqing was becoming too thin and advised her to avoid sour foods.[20]

Sibling Relationships

Care and concern were also extended to younger siblings at home. For example, Liu Shizhao's letter in August 1955 expressed sympathy for his younger sister Bixia and offered to help her:

> "After learning about your plight in the letter, I sympathise with your situation. If Mother comes to Singapore in the future, and you have decided not to marry, and will work to support yourself, I will let you look after all my housing and other properties in China. You can also work on the fields in Liu Hu Tou Shan. I will send you allowance each month."[21]

Not all sibling relationships were amicable, however. A letter from Yang Ruixiong to his wife in 1965 points to the souring of the relationship between him and his younger brother because the former had not sent the latter a monthly allowance since the family property was divided up. As a result, the younger brother threatened to commit suicide.[22]

Reiteration of Values

The remittance letters in the Koh Seow Chuan Collection reflect how value systems relating to education, gender roles and modern lifestyles were reiterated, negotiated and challenged in migrant families during the Cold War.

The education of their sons back home was a frequent concern for migrants in Southeast Asia. Yang Ruixiong asked how his son was doing in school and requested that the latter write a few characters to show him.[23] Lin Zhaolie similarly advised that his son should continue with his studies.[24]

As for female family members, attitudes were mixed. Xu Mingqin advised his daughter not to go to school, and complained bitterly when she did not heed his advice.[25] In contrast, Zheng Buchang was insistent on his sister having an education, as seen in his heartfelt letter in 1950:

> "You should not be wasting your time while you are young. You won't have time for your studies later. Don't let our parents down. If you have time, write me some letters. You must work hard so you are not left out of society. Please bear this in mind. I am not educated enough, so I have always been oppressed by society, and there's nothing I can do about it."[26]

Emphasis on education and filial piety is similarly evident in Lin Zhaolie's letter, asking his son to be filial to his grandmother, on top of concentrating on his studies.[27] In a letter dated 1954, Xu Mingqin was pleased that his son Huisong showed filial piety by devoting himself to taking care of the family business.[28]

Migrants continued with the practice of forming kinship-based clans overseas. Yang Ruixiong, who came to Singapore from Shantou, was a founder and volunteer staff at Xian Le Tong Xiang Hui. The association of some 200 members assisted people from the same clan in matters such as marriages and funerals.

Writing home in 1957, Yang emphasised the importance of family harmony: "My younger brother and wife, please work together for the good of the family, and try not to quarrel so much." Reflecting an attitude typical of male migrants, who put great emphasis on family reputation, Yang also stressed the need for the preservation of "face", as he now had a new position and status among the association members.[29]

On a subsequent occasion, Yang wrote to his wife and reminded her to be independent:

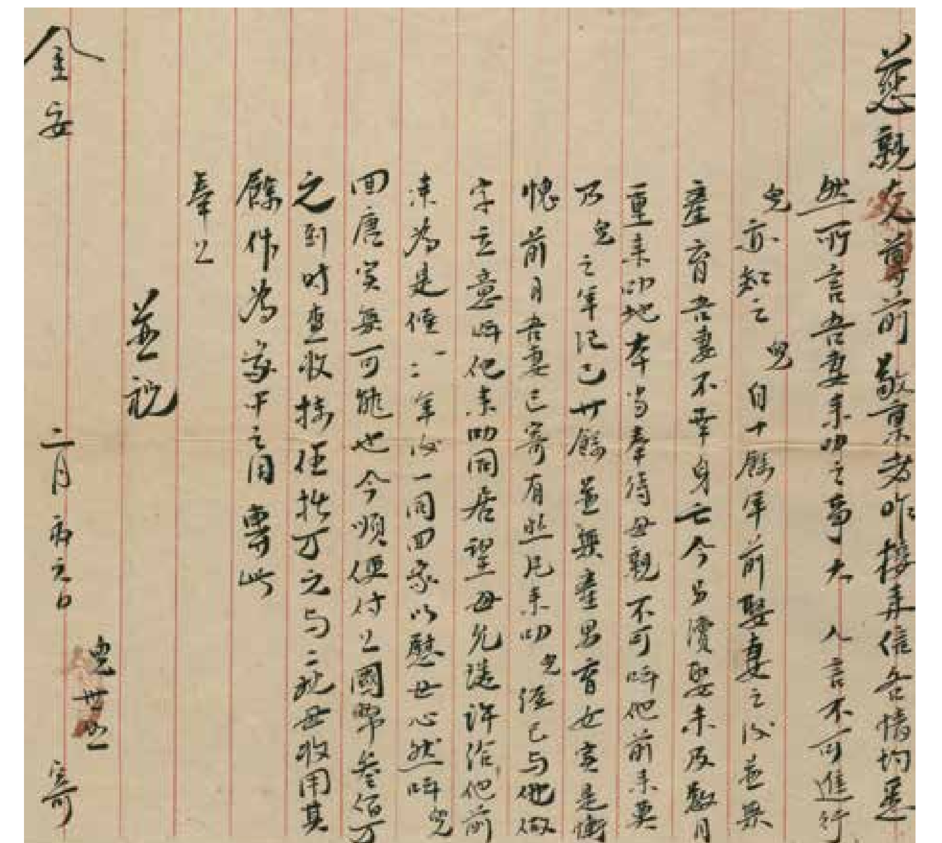
> "I am in Singapore and have only depended on myself. I have dignity as a man and have not asked for anything from relatives. We are husband and wife, you can ask me for anything. However, if you ask other people, you will lose face. I am teaching you how to conduct yourself, not criticising you, please understand."[30]

Negotiation of Values

The Immigration Ordinance No. 5 of 1952, implemented in Singapore on 1 August 1953, allowed overseas family members of local residents to travel to Singapore.[31] This move challenged the entrenched Confucian tenet of a "male handling affairs outside of the home, females handling those inside it". A wife was expected to live in her husband's home and fulfil her duties as a mother and daughter-in-law while the husband provided economic support, seeking opportunities abroad, if necessary. Hence, "wives could not be expected to accompany their husbands overseas if the latter had aged parents left behind".[32]

Thus, even though the new residents were no longer constrained by migration restrictions, they were met with considerable resistance from families back home when asking for their wives to join them in Singapore. The frustration in seeking parental approval was expressed in Liu Shizhao's remittance letter (Fig. 2):

> "Mother, you did not allow my wife to come to Singapore. Ever since I married 10-plus years ago, I have had no children. My wife unfortunately died. I married another woman, but



> a few months later I had to return to Singapore. My wife is supposed to serve you, and should not come to Singapore. But I am already 30-plus, yet I have no children, I feel really ashamed. Last month, my wife sent me a photograph, and I have applied for an entry number and intend for her to come to Singapore to live with me. I hope, Mother, that you will allow it. One, two years later, we will return home together. It is impossible to return to China right now."[33]

Liu Shizhao's experience mirrors the plight of many migrants who toiled in Southeast Asia, torn between being a filial but lonely son and a loving but guilt-ridden husband – a dilemma brought into painfully sharp focus by the new migration policy.

Challenging Traditional Values

Living overseas and being exposed to new cultural practices caused some migrants to challenge certain practices back home. Previously confined to the customs and mores of their kinsmen and their home community, the migrants now interacted with people from other regions in China and even foreigners of other races in Singapore, each with their own cultural practices, traditions, beliefs and values.

In a letter to his wife in 1965, Yang Ruixiong rebuked her for wanting to give up their son for adoption (likely to a childless relative):

> "Singapore has not had such practices for a long time. Please do not think of such things again. The Chinese Communist Party has brainwashed the people in China these 10-plus years."[34]

This cultural practice, called *guofang* (过房), entailed "the adoption of sons in homeland conditions, embodying the classical notion of a boy being passed from one agnatic line to another within the same lineage".[35]

Material Circulation

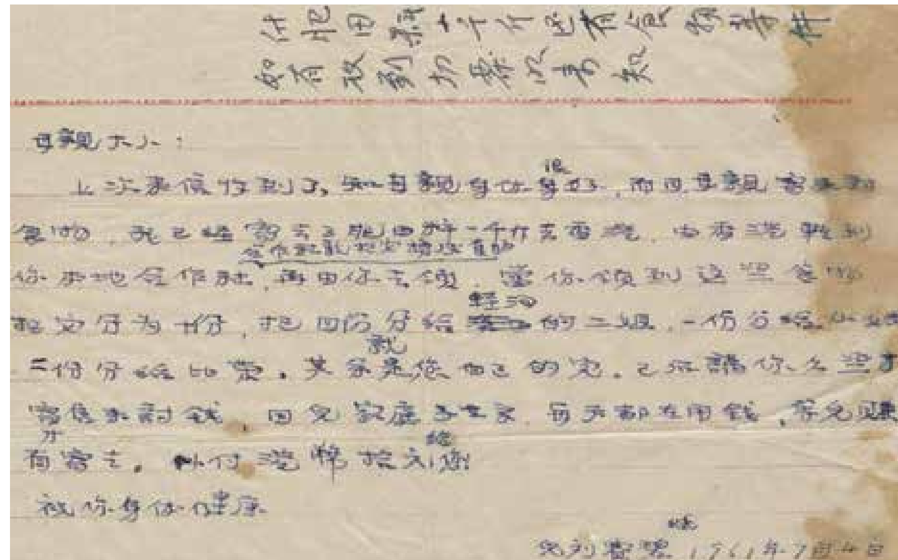
Remittance letters also recorded the movement of goods between China and Southeast Asia. There was some transfer of luxury goods such as woollen sweaters, fountain pens, watches, jewellery and jade, but most of the items were daily necessities such as textiles, oils and medicine.

For example, migrants sent medicines and supplements back home, such as medicated oils like Tiger Balm ointment (万金油) and Axe Brand Universal Oil (驱风油). On one occasion in 1965, Yang Ruixiong sent his wife a bag of medication containing a bottle of Weisen-U pills (胃仙一罐).[36] Weisen-U, a popular gastrointestinal remedy, was not available in China at the time.

When Liu Shizhao's wife in Singapore was about to give birth in 1955, he asked his mother to buy three to four boxes of Daniangjin (大娘巾), a pharmacy brand with 300 years of heritage in Chaozhou and famous for its gynaecological pills. In the same letter, he asked his mother to purchase two many-banded kraits, and gave directions for soaking the dried snakes in wine and medicine to prepare a remedy that would dispel wind, among other beneficial health effects.[37]

A man's virility was also a matter of great concern, as siring heirs and continuing the family line were held in high regard. Xu Mingqin's letter in 1954

Figure 3: Letter from Liu Saibi to her mother, 4 July 1961. *All rights reserved, Koh Seow Chuan Collection, National Library Board, Singapore.*



母親大人：

祝你身体健康

Notes

1 The Cold War, which took place approximately between 1945 and 1990, refers to the period of geopolitical tension between the capitalist US and the communist Soviet Union, and their respective allies.

2 Zhou, E. (1955, March 3). Guanyu guanche baohu qiaohui zhengce de mingling (关于贯彻保护侨汇政策的命令). *Renmin Ribao.* (Not available in NLB holdings.)

3 Liu, H. (2005). *The transnational history of a Chinese family: Immigrant letters, family business, and reverse migration* (p. 135). New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005. (Call no.: R304.8730510922 LIU)

4 Chen, D. (1940). *Emigrant communities in South China: A study of overseas migration and its influence on standards of living and social change* (p. 155). New York: Institute of Pacific Relations. (Call no.: RCLOS 309.151 CHE-[RFL])

5 Letter 2558, Xu Mingqin to his mother and aunt-in-law, May 20 (旧历四月廿叁日), 1949, Koh Seow Chuan Collection, National Library Board, Singapore. (Call no.: RRARE C816.3 KOH)

6 Letter 2199, Yang Ruixiong to his mother and wife Peiyu, November 14, 1956, Koh Seow Chuan Collection, National Library Board, Singapore. (Call no.: RRARE C816.3 KOH)

7 Letter 2168, Wu Juanzhuan to his wife, date unknown (丁弍月初九日), year unknown, Koh Seow Chuan Collection, National Library Board, Singapore. (Call no.: RRARE C816.3 KOH); Letter 2205, Wu Juanzhuan to his wife, date unknown (弍月初伍日), year unknown, Koh Seow Chuan Collection, National Library Board, Singapore. (Call no.: RRARE C816.3 KOH)

8 Letter 2876, Xu Mingqin to his mother, January 5 (十二月初一日), 1954, Koh Seow Chuan Collection, National Library Board, Singapore. (Call no.: RRARE C816.3 KOH)

9 Letter 2552, Xu Mingqin and his wife to their daughter Huizhuang, January 9 (元月九日即完月初九日), 1957, Koh Seow Chuan Collection, National Library Board, Singapore. (Call no.: RRARE C816.3 KOH)

10 Letter 2710, Zeng Hequan to his wife, November 30, 1952, Koh Seow Chuan Collection, National Library Board, Singapore. (Call no.: RRARE C816.3 KOH)

11 Letter 2600, Yaliu to her mother-in-law, date unknown (元月初十), year unknown, Koh Seow Chuan Collection, National Library Board, Singapore. (Call no.: RRARE C816.3 KOH)

12 Qi, X. (2015, March). Filial obligation in contemporary China: Evolution of the culture-system. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour, 45*(1), 141–161, p. 149. Retrieved from Wiley Online Library website.

13 Freedman, M. (Ed.). (1970). *Family and kinship in Chinese society* (pp. 26, 33). Stanford: Stanford University Press. (Call no.: RCLOS 301.42 FRE-[GH])

14 Letter 2194, Liu Shizhao to his mother, November 3 (十月初五日), 1970, Koh Seow Chuan Collection, National Library Board, Singapore. (Call no.: RRARE C816.3 KOH)

15 Shen, H. (2012). *China's left-behind wives: Families of migrants from Fujian to Southeast Asia, 1930s–1950s* (p. 93). Singapore: NUS Press. (Call no.: RSEA 306.87230951245 SHE)

16 Barnett, A.D. (1955). *Self-rule and unrest: Overseas Chinese in Singapore: Disturbing trends in an overseas Chinese city which is moving from colonialism toward self-rule* (p. 9). New York: American Universities Field Staff. (Call no.: RCLOS 959 AUFSR)

17 Letter 2214, Yang Ruixiong to his wife Xu Peiyu, March 26, 1965, Koh Seow Chuan Collection, National Library Board, Singapore. (Call no.: RRARE C816.3 KOH)

asked his mother if his friend Zhaochao had produced an heir (世子) and how many grandsons he had.[38] On separate occasions, two male migrants requested for the dried penis of a black dog (乌狗性), believed to be efficacious in boosting male sexual potency.[39]

The circulation of goods reflecting the cultural beliefs of migrants was also evident in Lin Xiquan's request to Xu Mingqin to bring him an Eight Immortals altar cloth (八仙床裙), an indication of Daoist belief. Lu Mutang also sent back a funeral shroud (福寿衣) for his mother.[40]

The goods that crossed borders also reflected the political, economic and social transformations of the migrants and their family members back in China. For example, a state procurement programme (统购统销) implemented by the Chinese government in 1953 resulted in the shortage of everyday supplies such as cotton, shoes, pots and oil.[41] Overseas Chinese who returned to China reportedly complained about not having enough cotton for clothes.[42] As a result, migrants frequently sent home old clothes and textiles, one example being Lu Mutang, who sent back three pieces of cloth in 1953 and some coarse cloth (粗纹布) in 1954.[43] Some of the goods circulated were a reflection of China's Great Leap Forward, the economic and social campaign that the government launched between 1958 and 1962. For example, the national "iron and steel" movement of 1958 saw items such as cooking pots, pans and farming tools being melted in backyard steel furnaces to increase steel production. According to Frank Dikötter, in the summer of 1961, reportedly "140,000 tonnes of farming tools had been thrown into the fires in the model province of Henan" alone.[44]

Writing in January 1959 in response to his mother's request for a sewing machine, Xiaosheng expressed exasperation:

> "If I buy you a sewing machine, and it is later offered up to be melted down for steel, wouldn't that be doing injustice to my hard-earned money? This so-called socialism – the Chinese people in Nanyang are all unhappy with it."[45]

One letter dated 4 July 1961 (Fig. 3) records a migrant, Liu Saibi (one of the few letters written by women migrants in the collection), sending back 1,000 grams of fertiliser to Hong Kong.[46] This fertiliser was to be transferred to the local commune and exchanged for food, which would be collected by Liu's mother.

The remittance letters in the Koh Seow Chuan Collection demonstrate how family relations were kept alive across long distances. The money sent home was put to use for the family's benefit, while the accompanying letters reinforced the primacy of familial bonds and responsibilities. Through correspondence over matters such as marriage, child-rearing and religious practices, and through expressions of longing and concern in the letters, relationships between the migrants in Southeast Asia and family members back home were strengthened. Despite the physical divide, these letters helped to keep a sense of culture and tradition alive for migrant sons and daughters in faraway lands. ♦

This is an abridged version of "Warm Tidings in a Cold War: Remittance Letters and Family Ties in the Chinese Diaspora, 1950s–1970s, taken from the recently published book *Singapore's Social & Business History Through Paper Ephemera in the Koh Seow Chuan Collection.* Published by the National Library Singapore, the book is available for reference and loan at the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library and selected public libraries (Call nos.: RSING 338.7095957 SIN and SING 338.7095957 SIN).

18 Letter 2153, Liu Yongyu to his mother, December 11, 1956, Koh Seow Chuan Collection, National Library Board, Singapore. (Call no.: RRARE C816.3 KOH)

19 Letter 2633, Zheng Youchu and his wife to their daughter Xianqing and son-in-law Zhuoren, November 20, 1952, Koh Seow Chuan Collection, National Library Board, Singapore. (Call no.: RRARE C816.3 KOH)

20 Letter 2906, Zheng Youchu and his wife to their daughter Xianqing and son-in-law Zhuoren, January 12 (农历腊月初八日), 1954, Koh Seow Chuan Collection, National Library Board, Singapore. (Call no.: RRARE C816.3 KOH)

21 Letter 2594, Liu Shizhao to his mother and sister Bixia, August 24 (旧历七月初七日), 1955, Koh Seow Chuan Collection, National Library Board, Singapore. (Call no.: RRARE C816.3 KOH)

22 Letter 2214, Yang Ruixiong to his wife Xu Peiyu, March 26, 1965, Koh Seow Chuan Collection, National Library Board, Singapore. (Call no.: RRARE C816.3 KOH)

23 Letter 2210, Yang Ruixiong to his mother, September 7, 1955, Koh Seow Chuan Collection, National Library Board, Singapore. (Call no.: RRARE C816.3 KOH)

24 Letter 2863, Lin Zhaolie to his mother, December 4 (十一月初十日), 1954, Koh Seow Chuan Collection, National Library Board, Singapore. (Call no.: RRARE C816.3 KOH)

25 Letter 2558, Xu Mingqin to his mother and aunt, May 20 (旧历四月廿叁日), 1949, Koh Seow Chuan Collection, National Library Board, Singapore. (Call no.: RRARE C816.3 KOH)

26 Letter 2639, Zheng Buchang to his sister, February 27, 1950, Koh Seow Chuan Collection, National Library Board, Singapore. (Call no.: RRARE C816.3 KOH)

27 Letter 2863, Lin Zhaolie to his mother, December 4 (十一月初十日), 1954, Koh Seow Chuan Collection, National Library Board, Singapore. (Call no.: RRARE C816.3 KOH)

28 Letter 2553, Xu Mingqin to his mother, June 11 (阴历五月十一日), 1954, Koh Seow Chuan Collection, National Library Board, Singapore. (Call no.: RRARE C816.3 KOH)

29 Letter 2179, Yang Ruixiong to his mother, second brother and wife Peiyu, February 28 (正月廿九日), 1957, Koh Seow Chuan Collection, National Library Board, Singapore. (Call no.: RRARE C816.3 KOH)

30 Letter 2211, Yang Ruixiong to his wife Xu Peiyu, April 7, 1965, Koh Seow Chuan Collection, National Library Board, Singapore. (Call no.: RRARE C816.3 KOH)

31 Saw, S.-H. (2012). *The population of Singapore* (p. 31). Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. (Call no.: RSING 304.6095957 SAW)

32 Shen, 2012, p. 34.

33 Letter 2232, Liu Shizhao to his mother, date unknown (二月初六), year unknown, Koh Seow Chuan Collection, National Library Board, Singapore. (Call no.: RRARE C816.3 KOH)

34 Letter 2211, Yang Ruixiong to his wife Xu Peiyu, April 7, 1965, Koh Seow Chuan Collection, National Library Board, Singapore. (Call no.: RRARE C816.3 KOH)

35 Freedman, M. (1957). *Chinese family and marriage in Singapore* (p. 67). London: H.M. Stationery Off. (Call no.: RSING 301.42 FRE-[GH])

36 Letter 2214, Yang Ruixiong to his wife Xu Peiyu, March 26, 1965, Koh Seow Chuan Collection, National Library Board, Singapore (Call no.: RRARE C816.3 KOH).

37 Letter 2596, Liu Shizhao to his mother, November 16 (十月初三日), 1955, Koh Seow Chuan Collection, National Library Board, Singapore. (Call no.: RRARE C816.3 KOH)

38 Letter 2543, Xu Mingqin to his mother, May 5 (四月初三日), 1954, Koh Seow Chuan Collection, National Library Board, Singapore. (Call no.: RRARE C816.3 KOH)

39 Letter 2564, Xu Mingqin to his mother, May 4, 1955, Koh Seow Chuan Collection, National Library Board, Singapore. (Call no.: RRARE C816.3 KOH); Letter 2589, Liu Shizhao to his wife Ding Shuduan, October 13, 1954, Koh Seow Chuan Collection, National Library Board, Singapore. (Call no.: RRARE C816.3 KOH)

40 Letter 2236, Lu Mutang to his mother, date unknown (丁柒月初一日), year unknown, Koh Seow Chuan Collection, National Library Board, Singapore. (Call no.: RRARE C816.3 KOH)

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45 "如果缝衣车买过手便要献去炼成钢铁，不是冤枉我之血汗钱耶。所谓今社制度，南洋侨眾，均不滿意". Chaoshan Lishi Wenhua Yanjiu Zhongxin (Ed). (2007). *Chaoshan qiaopi jicheng* (潮汕侨批集成), *di yi ji*, 12 (p. 267). Guilin: Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe. (Call no.: RSEA Chinese 383.495127 CSQ)

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MEMORY LAPS

POOL-TIME RECOLLECTIONS

Between the mid-1930s and 1960, only four swimming pool complexes in Singapore were open for public use. **Jocelyn Lau** speaks to people who remember these pools.

Jocelyn Lau is a freelance editor and writer with postgraduate qualifications in publishing. She is the co-editor of *Great Lengths: Singapore's Swimming Pools*.

The first public swimming complexes in Singapore – the four earliest in operation before 1960 – consistently drew capacity crowds from the time they were opened. In the mid-1930s, the number of bathers (as they were called then) at Mount Emily Swimming Complex reached a peak of 8,000 a month.

It was common to see standing-room-only space in the first swimming pools and, outside the complexes, people queuing patiently under the sun for hours in long, snaking lines. In the 1990s, however, the use of these pools declined sharply as residents moved to new neighbourhoods outside the city centre.

Singaporeans who are old enough to remember these pools continue to feel nostalgic about them and many were sad when they eventually closed. Of the four pools from this "pioneering" period, only Farrer Park Swimming Complex still stands today.

(Above) Children waiting for their swimming lesson to begin at Mount Emily Swimming Complex – Singapore's first public pool – in the mid-1970s. The pool was converted from a service reservoir in 1931 and survived for just over five decades until it was closed down for good in 1981. *Courtesy of Ng Yong Chiang.*
(Below) A drawing of the main pool at APS Swim School, managed by the former Olympian Ang Peng Siong. This was the former Farrer Park Swimming Complex until it closed in 2003. Farrer Park was the training ground for several of Singapore's early swimming champions. *Illustration by Favian Ee.*

Mount Emily Swimming Complex

Location: Upper Wilkie Road
Open from: 10 Jan 1931 to 15 Dec 1981 (intermittently closed in the 1940s)

Singapore's very first public swimming pool, Mount Emily Swimming Complex, was also the first public pool to use fresh water instead of seawater. At its peak in the mid-1930s, the pool saw some 8,000 visitors a month. After World War II, the pool underwent major repair works before it was reopened to the public. Mount Emily Swimming Complex was finally closed in 1981 and demolished the following year.

In the late 1880s, two service reservoirs, each with a holding capacity of one million gallons, were constructed on Mount Emily to supply the city with fresh water. One of these reservoirs was

converted into a public swimming pool in 1931 when a 3-million-gallon storage reservoir at Fort Canning was opened in 1929. The other tank was used to store water for flushing drains and general cleansing of the town.

Converting Mount Emily's former service reservoir into a swimming pool meant reducing its depth from the original 15 feet to a maximum of 8 feet, and grading its floor. Earth was filled in to the required depth and concrete was then poured over it to form the floor. A vertical wall, built around the sloping sides of the tank, was perforated so that the weight of the water could also be supported by the original walls. The swimming pool consisted of a deep section for good swimmers and a shallow portion for beginners.

In the 1930s, the pool water was purified using chlorination, and water samples from the pool were tested weekly. About three years after World War II, before re-opening the pool for public use, the Singapore Municipal Commission installed a filtration system to keep the water clear and continued using chlorination to keep it clean for swimmers.

"I have fond memories of the Mount Emily pool. Between 1966 and 1969, I was a national swimmer and represented both the country and the Ministry of Home Affairs, where I first worked. For the former, our team trained six evenings a week at a private pool. I also trained at Mount Emily with the police swim team during the day, three times a week.

"At the 1967 Southeast Asian Peninsular Games (SEAP) in Bangkok, my team took home two silver medals, one in the 4x200-metre freestyle relay, and the other in the 4x100-metre freestyle relay. Those were the years when Singapore's first golden girl, Patricia Chan, was winning gold medals in every swimming event she entered in the SEAP Games, so it was great to be a part of the history-making."

– Chan Kee Cheng, 73, former national swimmer

"When Singapore gained independence, one of the most pressing matters was to build a substantial military force for self-defence. The National Service (NS) Amendment Act passed on 14 March 1967 made it compulsory for male citizens to register for NS. Together with the late pool superintendant Lee Hon Ming and a few other instructors, I helped to train about 600 recruits from the Singapore Police Force in lifesaving skills.

"The course consisted of 12 sessions and was held three mornings each week, before the pool was opened for public use at 9am. It culminated in a qualifying test for the Bronze Medallion award from the Royal Life Saving Society UK. In addition to lifesaving training, Mount Emily was also the place where many potential national swimmers were trained for international competitions under the famous national swimming coach Kee Soon Bee."

– Ong Poh Soon, 73, retired pool manager

Yan Kit Swimming Complex

Location: Yan Kit Road
Open from: 29 December 1952 to March 2001

Named after Look Yan Kit, a wealthy Canton-born dentist, Yan Kit Swimming Complex was originally a water tank built on an old railway site off Cantonment Road. Popular in the 1950s and 60s, the complex was closed in 2001 and the pools levelled over.

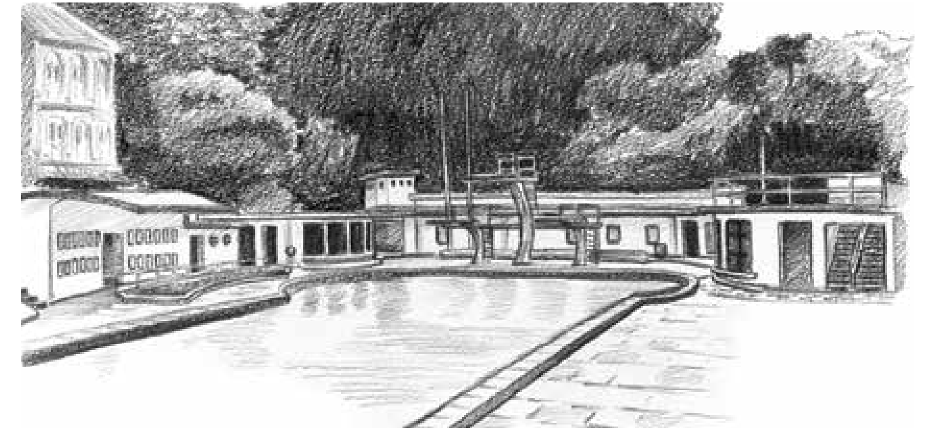
Today, the site is being redeveloped as a community sports facility, which will include a multi-purpose playing court, a children's playground and fitness zones.

"The Yan Kit Swimming Complex, tucked away in a leafy fold in the foothills of Tanjong Pagar, was the nicest, and most unusual swimming pool I have ever swum in. It started life in the pre-war era as a water filtration tank for the municipal water supply, but was reconstituted, postwar, as a public swimming pool.

"Architecturally, it was a superb piece of tropical Art Deco, all curved walls and portholes, flat roofs and ship's railings, situated halfway between an ocean liner and a machine-gun emplacement. In England it would have been called The Lido. At one end there was a pavilion with a charming 'marine mural', featuring jellyfish and octopuses, while at the other end there were Deco-style diving boards, free-standing sculptures in reinforced concrete, looking for all the world like the rib-cage of a whale.

"When it opened in the early 1950s, the Yan Kit pool was so popular that crowd controls had to be imposed, with a two-hour limit for each swimmer, and even then it was standing-room only. I used to go there for a lunch-time swim in the 1990s, when it was an all-but-forgotten oasis of calm and tranquillity, just a stone's throw from the city. The pool attendants had the cushiest job ever, which is perhaps why they were also the friendliest of people, who used to amuse themselves by raising goldfish and water lilies in the footbaths."

– Dr Julian Davison, architectural historian



(Below left) A panoramic view of the main pool at Yan Kit Swimming Complex, which opened in 1952 after an old water tank was renovated and converted into a swimming pool. Singapore's second public pool was named after Look Yan Kit, a wealthy Canton-born dentist. The three springboards at the far end had heights of 1, 3 and 5 metres. *Courtesy of Julian Davison.*
(Top) Floodlights were first introduced at Yan Kit Swimming Complex in 1954 to see if night-time swimming would prove popular – and it did. Entrance fees when the pool first opened cost 15 cents and users were restricted to a two-hour limit due to its popularity. *Illustration by Favian Ee.*
(Above) A long queue snaking outside Farrer Park Swimming Complex in the 1960s. The pool would become so crowded that on weekends, there was hardly space to swim a decent lap. Push-cart hawkers peddling food and drinks made a roaring business from users waiting to get in. *Courtesy of SportSG.*

Farrer Park Swimming Complex

Location: 2 Rutland Road
Open from: 22 February 1957 to 1 June 2003 (privatised in 2004)

The Farrer Park Swimming Complex was part of the Farrer Park Athletic Centre, which is significant for its association with high-profile regional sporting events in the 1960s and 70s, including the Southeast Asian Peninsular (SEAP) Games and Pesta Sukan. Closed in 2003, the complex is now managed privately by the APS Swim School, founded in 1995 by former Olympian Ang Peng Siong.

It was at this pool that the legendary coach Ang Teck Bee groomed his son Ang Peng Siong into one of the country's best swimmers. The latter bagged 20 gold medals in eight Southeast Asian Games and was the record holder of the fastest 50-metre freestyle time in Asia between 1982 and 1996.

"As a schoolgirl, I loved going to the swimming pool. The moment I got home from school, I'd drop my bag and then rush out again to Farrer Park to join my friends. I enjoyed stretching out my arms in front of me and doing simple flutter kicks. It was very relaxing. At one point, I went so often that my mum complained to my dad about it, and then he forbade me to go. I disobeyed, so I got into very big trouble when I finally went home again that evening! I dearly miss those carefree days."

– Nellie Lee, 71, retired technician

"In the late 1960s, there were only a few public pools, so it was not surprising to find each one filled to, or beyond, capacity. In those days, one could hardly actually swim, as the pools were just too crowded.

Students from Dorset School taking the leap at Farrer Park Swimming Complex in 1971. The pool complex opened in 1957 as part of Farrer Park Athletic Centre, which hosted regional sporting events such as the Southeast Asian Peninsular Games and Pesta Sukan in the 1960s and 70s. *Dorset School Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

When I was about 10, I visited Farrer Park on weekends with my father and some neighbours. We usually had to queue for one or two hours, and even then we might not be allowed entry. Sometimes, we'd see people scaling the walls to try to get in, even though there were glass bits embedded in the tops of the walls. Some of them were caught, and the lifeguards would walk the culprits around the pool before sending them out. In those days, it was also common to lose one's belongings, and a friend once lost even his clothes. Fortunately, my father was able to give him a ride home in his car!"

– Donald Goh, 59,
pharmaceutical executive

River Valley Swimming Complex

Location: 74 River Valley Road
Open from: 29 August 1959 to 15 April 2003

Located at the former King George V Park, the River Valley Swimming Complex was designed by M.E. Crocker, the same British architect for Farrer Park. The swimming pool was extremely popular until the 1970s, when new estates were built away from the city centre and visitorship dwindled. It eventually closed in 2003. The site, renamed The Foothills Fort Canning Park, is currently home to art spaces and cafes.

"The foot of the southern slope of the 'forbidden hill' – Fort Canning Hill – seemed an unlikely location for a public swimming pool, even back in the 1970s when I first used it for physical education (PE) lessons. Getting to the River Valley pool from my secondary school, St Joseph's Institution on Bras Basah Road, was always an adventure: the long walk required the better part of a double period (about an hour-long) PE lesson. However, we looked forward to it not just as an escape from classroom boredom, but also for the reward that came at the end of it: a dip in the pool. During the walks, we often chanced upon clandestine acts taking place in quiet corners and we found fun in making catcalls at the couples.

"There was a diving platform at one end of the deep pool, and a smaller pool at the far end. The changing rooms were located on a terraced upslope. The exit from the pool was through an old turnstile typical of the older pools. Other than our class of boys, there would hardly be a soul on the premises, especially in mid-afternoon... It was with more than a tinge of sadness that I read about the demolishment of not only the pool complex, but also the adjacent landmarks of my teenage years – the National Theatre in 1986 and Van Kleef Aquarium in 1998."

– Jerome Lim,
52, naval architect

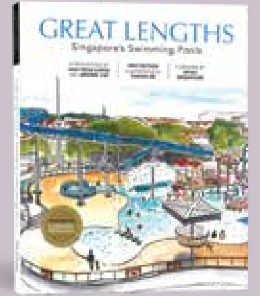
"I worked at River Valley in the years when Singapore was still a part of Malaysia. The father of the late Lee Kuan Yew used to come to the pool in the evenings, alone, to swim. He didn't tell anyone he was the prime minister's father. Some people said he would park his car in front of the Beach Road police station and walk to the pool. Sometimes, after my late colleague Lee Sim Cheng and I closed the pool for the day, we would accompany the senior Mr Lee to have supper at the famous Hong Lim open-air hawker centre nearby, next to the old Tongji hospital. Those were the good old days... When Singapore became independent, I was transferred to Mount Emily Swimming Complex to help train recruits from the Singapore Police Force in lifesaving skills."

– Ong Poh Soon,
73, retired pool manager

"My mother told me that her dad used to take her to the River Valley pool when she was small. My mother wanted to learn how to swim, but her father told her to watch the other children. My mother said she was really afraid that the crocodiles from the [Van Kleef] aquarium next door would escape and enter the pool. After my mother's brother was born, my grandfather took him to swim too. One time, Mingming Jiujiu [uncle] walked, walked and walked down the pool steps and did not stop even when his head went underwater, and my grandfather had to pull him out."

– Giam Kia Woon,
7, student

This is an extract from *Great Lengths: Singapore's Swimming Pools* (2017) published by Kucinta Books. It retails for S$28 at major bookshops and is also available for reference and loan at the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library and selected public libraries (Call nos.: RSING 797.20095957 GRE and SING 797.20095957 GRE).



The swimming pool at River Valley Swimming Complex in 1963. In the first few weeks of the pool's opening in 1959, it was reported that "tens of thousands of children" visited. The pool was extremely popular until the 1970s, when new estates were built away from the city centre and visitorship dwindled. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

RECIPES FOR THE Ideal Singaporean Female

From cooking, cleaning and becoming a good mother to outsourcing housework as careers for women took off. **Sheere Ng** charts how home economics lessons have evolved over the years.

Sheere Ng is a food writer and researcher with an interest in the intersections of food, immigration and identity. She has an MLA in Gastronomy from Boston University and runs a writing studio called In Plain Words.

Someone once asked me, "What did you learn to cook at home economics classes?"

In reply I proudly rattled off: fried rice with hotdog cubes, minced chicken on egg tofu, and spaghetti swimming in sauce made with tomato ketchup. Imagine my embarrassment when a fellow (and older) food writer said that she had learned to make meat pies, *mee siam* and all sorts of *kueh-kueh*.

How did a 13-year-old get to make all these complex adult dishes at school while I was entrusted to cook with only processed and ready-to-eat ingredients? One crucial factor set us apart: time, or rather different periods of time.

I studied home economics in 1999, while she took the course back in the 1970s when it was known as domestic science, a name that was eventually replaced because it suggested a narrow focus on nutrition and sanitation.

Between the 1930s and 1997, home economics was taught in Singapore schools to train girls to be good homemakers. Depending on the era and the nation's immediate needs, a "good homemaker" could mean different things – as defined by the prevailing syllabus set by the education authorities.

In the 1970s, for instance, being a good homemaker meant having the skills to just cook and clean. In the 1980s, it expanded to include being a good mother and raising a child. Then, in the 1990s, as more women joined the workforce, good homemakers became prudent consumers of outsourced and commercialised housework.

In "studying" home economics a second time around as research for this essay – reviewing textbooks, ministerial speeches, newspaper reports and oral histories – what became apparent was not just changes in cookery styles and ingredients over the years, but also official definitions of the "ideal" Singaporean woman.

(Facing page) A sewing class in progress at one of the convent schools, c.1950s. *Diana Koh Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*
(Above) Women working in the factory of Roxy Electric Company at Tanglin Halt, 1966. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

Pre-independence: The Purpose of Home Economics

Home economics began in the United States in the late 19th century as domestic science. It was part of a larger movement to modernise the American diet through scientific cookery. The early champions of domestic science could be categorised into two camps: those who wanted to give women access to careers that had traditionally been dominated by men, and those who wanted to upgrade women's status within its traditional realm by recasting domestic work as rational and efficient, and based on science and technology.[1] Singapore clearly belonged in the latter category.

Domestic science, as it was referred to here before 1970, was first taught in English and mission girls' schools in colonial Singapore. Students learnt practical domestic tasks such as laundry and needlework as well as European and Asian cookery. There was no standardised textbook, as Marie Ethel Bong, a former Katong Convent student remembered. Instead, the girls learnt the general principles of cookery from a foreign cookbook, and then copied the recipes from a blackboard before watching the nuns demonstrate them.[2]

Although many of the girls came from well-to-do families with servants, schools still insisted that their female students pick up domestic skills. "Even if you had servants at home, they felt that you should know how to do it yourself before you could instruct your *amah* [servant] in those days", recalled Bong, who later became the principal of Katong Convent.[3]

There was no indication that the subject was taught to help the girls prepare for employment. Some, like the principal of CEZMS School, managed by the Church of England Zenana Missionary Society (renamed St Margaret's Secondary School in 1949), even considered domestic science a non-academic subject. She said to the press in 1949, "Domestic science is perhaps more important than academic work where girls are concerned."[4]

The opportunity to pursue a career in domestic science came from overseas in the 1950s. The United Kingdom and Australia offered overseas teaching scholarships to girls in Singapore, with the recipients returning just when government schools were allocating special rooms to teach domestic science.[5] Ironically, these women professionals would play a role in furthering the government's home economics agenda that sought to confine women to their traditional roles.

1970s: Training Girls to Cook, Clean – and Saw

The government began to see the value of home economics when women started to work outside the home. Singapore had been attracting foreign investments for labour-intensive industries since the 1960s. By 1970, the government had created more blue-collar jobs than men alone could fill, so it encouraged women to take up careers in traditionally male-dominated fields.[6]

The call for women to contribute to the nation's industrialisation was a success – between 1957 and 1980, the number of women in the manufacturing sector increased nearly 10 times[7] – but it created a dilemma: working mothers were not passing on homemaking skills to their daughters who, upon reaching adulthood, were more likely to work than stay at home. Girls in traditional households had been taught how to cook and clean by their mothers, but the rise of working women meant that this transfer of homemaking skills was interrupted. The government saw this as a threat to the stability of the family unit – the basic building block of society.

The solution was to let home economics pick up where mothers had left off. Since 1968, the subject had been compulsory for secondary school girls, reinforcing the domestic role of women in society. But when blue-collar jobs became

abundant with few takers, the Ministry of Education exhorted girls to pursue technical studies such as woodwork and metalwork so that they could pursue work that men did. The contradiction in these messages was stark: girls were told their place was in the home, but they were also required in the workforce.[8]

Despite the economic reality, the government still held archaic views of women's roles. This is evident in the speeches of several ministers who espoused traditional gender roles during what was probably a very confusing time for Singaporean girls.

Speaking at a home economics exhibition in 1970, Minister for Education Ong Pang Boon made it very clear that homemaking was the responsibility of women:

> "Home economics today cover a large and vital field. Our girls are taught to cook appetising, economical and well-balanced meals, to make clothes suitable for every occasion, to manage the home, and to look after the welfare of the family generally. These are skills which every girl should acquire. In the old days, they would have been taught by mother at home, but with the increasing tempo of urbanisation and industrialisation in Singapore, this basic training is often neglected at home."[9]

Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Rahim Ishak did not single girls out explicitly, but left no doubt that the government believed that home economics was good for Singapore because "happy homes make a happy nation". Against the backdrop of Singapore's rising cost of living, he said that knowing how to cook, clothe and live well cheaply was essential. Speaking at the opening of a home economics facility at Anglican High School in 1973, he said "... the introduction of home economics in school is vital if our future generations are going to run their homes properly."[10]

Despite the emphasis on home economics, the government reversed its policy in 1977. To help students cope with the transition from primary to secondary school, the number of class periods in Secondary One was reduced. With less time to teach both home economics and technical studies, but still believing in their relevance to girls, the government allowed female students to choose either subject, rather than study both. Throughout these changes, male students were trained only in technical studies.[11]

However, home economics grew to be unpopular among girls because it became associated with the less academically inclined. In the 1970s and 80s, primary school pupils who consistently failed their exams from Primary One to Three were transferred to the "monolingual stream" for slow learners where they would later study home economics or technical studies before moving into vocational training.[12] Meanwhile, elite schools like Chinese High School and Nanyang High School removed the subject from their curriculum to make way for art lessons.[13] These led some to believe that home economics was not for the intelligent, and that people who became homemakers were "dullards".[14]

In 1983, Minister for Education Tay Eng Soon revealed that only half of the girls in lower secondary classes studied home economics, and only 12 percent took it as an "O" Level subject.[15] Alarmed by the sharp drop, the ministry would again make home economics a compulsory subject for all girls in 1987.[16]

(Top) Home economics has been compulsory for secondary school girls since 1968. But when blue-collar jobs became abundant with few takers, the education ministry exhorted girls to pursue technical studies such as woodwork and metalwork so that they could pursue the same jobs as men. This 1986 photo shows a class of girls at a woodwork lesson at Dunearn Secondary School. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*
(Above) Member of Parliament for Jalan Kayu Hwang Soo Jin (front) viewing a home economics cookery class during the official opening of Hwi Yoh Secondary School in 1969. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

1980s: Homemakers are Mothers Too

Meanwhile, the hugely successful post-independence government policy of slowing down population growth by advocating two-children families gave way to the much maligned Graduate Mothers' Scheme in 1984. The scheme essentially dangled tax benefits to encourage mothers with university degrees to have more children.[17]

This move stemmed from two pressing national issues of the day. First, population growth rates had slowed down over the years, and realisation set in that declining birth rates would have a severe impact on labour supply and, ultimately, economic growth. Second, there was a high ratio of unmarried graduate women in the population. Census figures in 1980 showed that two-thirds of graduate women were unmarried because men preferred less-educated wives. Graduate women were also having fewer children compared with their less-educated counterparts due to changing aspirations and lifestyles.[18]

Then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew held the eugenicist view that smarter women were more likely to have intelligent children. Fearing that the lower birth rates among educated women would shrink the nation's talent pool, he introduced the Graduate Mother's Scheme to entice better-educated women to procreate, but not before he lectured Singaporeans at the 1983 National Day Rally. In typically forthright fashion he said:

> "If you don't include your women graduates in your breeding pool and leave them on the shelf, you would end up a more stupid society... So what happens? There will be less bright people to support dumb people in the next generation. That's a problem."[19]

To the dismay of women's rights advocates, traditional views of the man as the head of the household and women's role as wives and mothers were reinforced by the government. Speaking at the 50th anniversary of St Nicholas Girls' School in 1983, Minister for Education Tay Eng Soon said:

> "I want now to speak on a subject which is overlooked because of our emphasis on academic excellence. This is particularly pertinent to a girls' school. I refer to the fact that most of your students will one day marry and become mothers regardless of their academic achievements or career. This is their natural and proper role in life."[20]

The following year, the ministry announced that home economics would become a compulsory core subject by 1987 for all girls in lower secondary classes. They would not be able to opt out or elect to study a technical course. A revised syllabus would also be introduced to help girls see "the importance of nurturing and strengthening a family" and to "enable them to have a sensible outlook on social and national problems", according to one newspaper report.[21]

Home economics textbooks had all the while focused on cleaning, cooking and sewing. But this changed with the introduction of the 1987 *Home Economics Today* textbook for Secondary Two students, which pared down these topics to make way for nine chapters on child-rearing – significantly more than an earlier textbook that taught "mothercraft" in just nine pages.[22]

The syllabus corresponded with the government's agenda for women to be mothers. It was clear that apart from being a source of much needed talent, women were also encouraged to produce more children to augment the talent pool.

To prepare the students for motherhood, the 1987 textbook taught everything from breastfeeding to how to deal with childhood ailments, and was more comprehensive in content than a typical handbook for expectant mothers. This was a huge difference from previous home economics textbooks that advocated family planning between the 1970s and mid-1980s when there was a national effort to keep a lid on a population boom that was threatening to overwhelm the public infrastructure.[23] Naturally, the new home economics policy did not sit well with women's rights advocates, who charged that it was sexist and unfavourable towards girls who had career plans.

In 1984, the government announced that home economics would become a compulsory subject by 1987 for all girls in lower secondary. Although the government supported the idea of boys learning home economics, there were insufficient teachers; boys were therefore encouraged to learn home economics at extra-curricular clubs in schools. *The Straits Times, 27 November 1984, p. 1.*

Boys should also do home econs: Ministry

Present policy caused by shortage of teachers

By JUNE TAN

NO, the Education Ministry is not sexist. It does not insist that boys must be boys and shun home economics.

Why Only Women Homemakers?

Voices of opposition rippled in the press. Many were upset that the new home economics policy was saddling girls with homemaking responsibilities. Instead of excusing boys from learning how to do household chores or raising a child, schools should be re-educating the young "to look upon marriage and homemaking and childcare as a shared responsibility", wrote Lena Lim, founding president of

(Left) An illustration of a woman washing up in the kitchen in a 1983 textbook was indicative of societal norms at the time – the books seldom featured men doing housework. *All rights reserved, Hamidah Khalid & Siti Majhar. (Eds.). (1983). New Home Economics (Book 1) (p. 29) Singapore: Longman Singapore. (Call no.: RSING 640.7 NEW)*
(Right) Unlike earlier home economics textbooks that seldom showed men playing a part in household chores, a textbook from the 1987 syllabus, however, showed a father bathing his baby. *All rights reserved, Viswalingam, P. (1987). Home Economics Today 2E (p. 24) Singapore: Curriculum Development Institute of Singapore. (Call no.: YR 640.76 HOM)*

the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE).[24]

Re-education could mean offering home economics to anyone interested regardless of gender, proposed a forum writer in *The Straits Times*, so that girls who wanted to pursue other interests could opt out, as should unwilling boys if they would only become grudging helpers at home.[25] Whichever form re-education might take, the dissenters agreed that young people must be persuaded to accept a change in gender roles. If Singapore was serious about alleviating the unmarried graduate women problem, it had to "take a fresh view of marriage and the ideal wife" wrote *Singapore Monitor* editor Margaret Thomas in September 1984.[26]

The following month, some 428 people, including engineers, lawyers, and teachers signed a petition to urge the education ministry to rethink the policy of making home economics compulsory for girls. The petition argued that it would deny girls the chance to study technical subjects in secondary school, and eventually hamper their chances of enrolling for technical courses in polytechnics.[27]

Although the government would not be persuaded, and all girls would go on to study home economics in lower secondary from 1987 onwards, there appeared to be some effort to present a fairer distribution of housework in at least two of the textbooks under the new syllabus.

In the 1986 *Home Economics Today* for Secondary One students, one chapter titled "Happy Family Life" showed a picture of a father preparing food in the kitchen with his family, and accompanying text that read, "If members of a family help one another to get the work done, the home will certainly be a happier place to live."[28]

This was a stark difference from *New Home Economics*, a 1983 textbook that portrayed only women cleaning or cooking, completely leaving out their husbands from the responsibility of homemaking.

However, this attempt to present a fairer distribution of housework should not be seen as a sign that the government was serious in tackling gender inequality. After all, the home economics textbooks had an insignificant male audience and were unlikely to persuade many future husbands to chip in at home.

Although the education ministry said that boys would learn home economics when there were adequate teaching resources, this would not happen until 1997 – more than 10 years after it was first announced.[29]

What was far more effective in giving women respite from the chores of homemaking, and perhaps even salvaging some marriages, was the advent of modern home appliances. The sale of rice cookers, microwave ovens and washing machines took off and became increasingly affordable for the new dual-income households. Home economic textbooks in the late 1980s also began to explain the use of electrical appliances. Some of these appliances were as basic as an oven toaster, suggesting their novelty at the time.[30]

Working women became enthused by these "electric servants", and home economics teachers began attending workshops that demonstrated the use of home appliances. Teachers also started exploring the use of factory-processed frozen, canned and bottled foods during home economic classes, and waxed lyrical about their visits to Sunshine Bakery and Kikkoman soya sauce factory in the Home Economics Teachers' Association (HETA) quarterly.[31]

Home economics textbooks published in the 1980s tried to correct traditional gender roles by including images of families spending time together cooking and eating. *All rights reserved, Viswalingam, P. (1986). Home Economics Today 1E (p. 14) Singapore: Curriculum Development Institute of Singapore. (Call no.: YR 640.76 HOM)*

Their readiness to embrace labour-saving products foreshadowed yet another syllabus revamp in the coming decade.

Post-1990s: From Home Producers to Consumers

Home economics textbooks in the late 1990s conveyed a different notion of homemaking. Not only were cooking and sewing simplified, but the childcare chapters that had been added in 1987 to prepare girls for motherhood were also removed. These changes were introduced after home economics became a compulsory subject for both boys and girls in 1997, and the syllabus was tweaked to complement the new policy.[32] What brought about this sea change 10 years later?

Since the 1980s, housework was becoming increasingly commercialised and commoditised, available for purchase as products or services. More families were eating out instead of cooking, shopping for clothes rather than sewing them, and buying washing machines to do their laundry. By the time home economics was offered to both boys and girls in 1997, the definitions of homemaking had changed. Wives (and husbands) were not expected to be skilful homemakers like their mothers were, since they could just "buy their way" out of household chores.

The 1997 edition of *Home Economics Today* acknowledged these modern trends as it discussed the options of eating out and convenience foods, and teaching students how to feed themselves without having to actually cook their own meals. It also explained clothing care labels and advertising techniques, instead of the finer points of fabric weaves and brooms.[33] Compared with its predecessors, the 1997 textbook showed a more balanced portrayal of male and female in relation to domestic work, likely in deference to Singapore's pledge at the 1995 United Nations World Conference on Women to not gender-type roles in school instructional materials.[34]

2 How to use convenience food

Some convenience food may not be as nutritious as fresh food. Sometimes, in the process of bottling, canning and drying, there may be some loss of nutrients and flavours. Convenience food is therefore best used with fresh food to make a dish or meal more nutritious.

Below are examples of how convenience food can be used with fresh food.

Canned peas can be fried together with fresh vegetables to make up for any loss of vitamins and minerals during production. Meat may be added to the variety of vegetables.

In the 1990s, home economics textbooks took into consideration busy lifestyles by offering tips on how to use modern convenience foods in home-cooked dishes and suggested dining out occasionally. *All rights reserved, Chong, E.S.H., et al. (1997). Home Economics Today Secondary 2 (p. 19) Singapore: Curriculum Planning & Development Division, Ministry of Education. (Call no.: RSING 640.76 HOM)*

Another new development was the proliferation of foreign domestic workers. The government first introduced foreign maids as a childcare solution in the 1970s so that mothers would go to work, but the move gathered steam only from the 1990s. The 1987 *Home Economics Today* textbook included advice for working parents on using the services of childcare centres, caregivers – and maids. The last option proved to be so popular that the number of foreign domestic workers in Singapore ballooned from just 5,000 in 1978 to 100,000 in 1997.[35]

This transfer of caregiver roles from mothers to others, and the transformation from household production to consumption, rendered many homemaking instructions from the old syllabus excessive and even irrelevant for 21st-century families. Taking the cue from new consumer lifestyles, home economics was renamed Food and Consumer Education in 2014 (while still remaining a compulsory subject for boys and girls in lower secondary), with its syllabus focusing mainly on good consumer decisions and money management.

I am a product of the 1997 syllabus, designed with the expectation that I could one day opt out of gender-typed work as my mother did, and outsource homemaking to processed foods, appliances or to other women with lesser means. Indeed, I never pursued cooking outside the classroom as our Filipino helper at home knew better than to add tomato ketchup to spaghetti.

It was only as an adult that I reacquainted myself with the kitchen when food took on an important dimension in my work and at home. I had only been as "ideal" as the government's recipe for a Singaporean woman until I created my own. ♦

Notes

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31 Electrolux. (1984, March). *HETA news, 10.* Singapore: The Association. (Call no.: RSING q640.7 HETAN); Visit to the Kikkoman factory. (1986, September). *HETA news, 2, 9.* Singapore: The Association. (Call no.: RSING q640.7 HETAN); Trip to "rise and shine". (1988, June). *HETA news, 1, 9.* Singapore: The Association. (Call no.: RSING q640.7 HETAN)

32 Boys-, girls-only courses open to all. (1996, March 30). *The Straits Times*, p. 25. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

33 Chong, E. S. H., & Kee, M. H., et al. (1996). *Home economics today. Secondary 1 Special/Express/Normal (Academic)* (p. 57). Singapore: Curriculum Development Institute of Singapore. (Call no.: RSING q640.76 HOM); Chong, E.S.H., et al. (1997). *Home economics today. Secondary 2 special/express/normal, academic* (pp. 16, 119, 140). Singapore: Curriculum Planning & Development, Ministry of Education. (Call no.: RSING 640.76 HOM); Viswalingam, 1987, pp. 135–137, 199; Hamidah & Siti, 1983, pp. 13, 102.

34 Ministry of Information and the Arts. (1995, September 6). *Statement by Mr Abdullah Tarmugi, Acting Minister for Community Development at the Fourth United Nations World Conference on Women, Beijing, People's Republic of China, 4–15 September 1995, delivered at the plenary session at 8.00 p.m. on 6 September 1995* (p. 4). Retrieved from National Archives of Singapore website.

35 Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, 2016, pp. 4–5, 21; Viswalingam, 1987, p. 41.

Stamping History

Postage stamps are more than little squares of paper to be stuck on envelopes. **Justin Zhuang** discovers how stamps have helped forge Singapore's identity over the past five decades.

There was precious little to celebrate when the Singapore Stamp Club commemorated 100 years of postage stamps in Singapore in 1967. The club's exhibition booklet was very blunt in describing the dismal state of Singapore's philatelic scene:

> "Against the increasing tendency of practically every other country in the world to issue more and more commemorative stamps each year, the conservative policy of Singapore must be almost without an equal."[1]

Between self-government in 1959 and merger with Malaysia in 1963, and independence in 1965, Singapore issued only eight commemorative stamp series to mark these historic occasions. Unlike definitive stamps that are meant for everyday use, commemorative stamps are issued to record national milestones and showcase Singapore's culture, customs and identity to the world. This was a lost opportunity according to the booklet: "What other country can claim to have issued a total of only 21 commemorative stamps in the past 8 years!"[2]

The paucity of such stamps was not the only issue plaguing the Singapore stamp scene at the time. Almost a year after the exhibition at the National Library at Stamford Road, then Minister for Communications Yong Nyuk Lin noted that local stamps were generally "dull" and suffered from "disappointingly low" sales.

To fix the situation, the government set up the Stamp Advisory Committee (SAC) in 1968. "This situation certainly calls for immediate remedial action and in line with present Government policy of increasing productivity and to raise additional revenue, wherever possible," said Minister Yong at the inaugural meeting of the SAC, adding, "...there is no reason why we cannot use more imagination and drive in the creation of attractive designs for our postage stamps... ."[3]

This "new liberal policy"[4] marked a turning point in the history of Singapore stamps. Over the next 50 years, stamps evolved from being mere accessories of a young state to a revenue-generating platform that spoke of the achievements of the nation to its people and the world.

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Raising Standards and Revenue

As one of SAC's primary tasks was to attract more people to buy local stamps, it became less concerned with artistic considerations than the previous committee, which had been set up after Singapore became self-governing in 1959.[5] Reflecting the state's greater interest in stamps and a market-oriented outlook, the nine-man SAC was staffed with five civil servants from the ministries for culture and communications, three philatelists and one arts lecturer.[6] The committee advised the minister for communications on philatelic policy, including stamp themes, designs, and ways to increase sales locally and abroad. The committee also proposed ways to grow interest in philately, particularly among young Singaporeans.

One of SAC's earliest initiatives was to triple Singapore's commemorative stamp issues. From an average of just one a year, the country issued three stamp series in 1969: to mark the 25th Plenary Session of Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East (ECAFE) held in Singapore; the completion of 100,000 homes by the Housing and Development Board; and the 150th anniversary of the founding of Singapore. These stamps scored several firsts for local postal history.

The ECAFE issue of three stamps designed by local graphic artist Eng Siak Loy were the first square-shaped ones, each depicting the organisation's emblem in red, blue and purple backgrounds respectively to denote the different face values.

The 150th anniversary of the founding of Singapore series in 1969 was the first time that stamps were issued in 12-by-12 centimetre miniature sheets, and featured different designs for each of the six values. To commemorate the milestones in Singapore's modern history, Eng and Han Kuan Cheng, who were colleagues at Radio Television Singapura, used a semi-abstract graphic style to depict the country's industrialisation (15 cents), entry into the United Nations (30 cents), merger with Malaysia (75 cents), self-government in 1959 ($1), the Japanese Occupation ($5) and the landing of Sir Stamford Raffles ($10).

Despite the stamps' high face value – a total of $17.20 compared with just under a dollar for previous issues – these first-day covers were reportedly sold out within the first two hours.[7] By the 1980s, a first-day cover[8] of this series was worth around $700. Today, the price for a mint condition cover and accompanying miniature sheet is $900, according to the *Singapore Postage Stamp Catalogue*.[9]

The successful sales of the 1969 commemorative stamps led the SAC to increase the number of new issues the following year to five, a figure that has steadily increased over the decades along with sales. Only four years after the policy shift, revenue from Singapore stamp sales jumped by tenfold to a million dollars.[10]

Realising the lucrative income to be reaped from the sales of commemorative stamps, the government issued an average of six stamp series a year in the mid-1970s, and then increased it to eight by the mid-1990s. Today, some 10 to 12 stamp issues are released a year.[11]

How Stamps Tell a Story

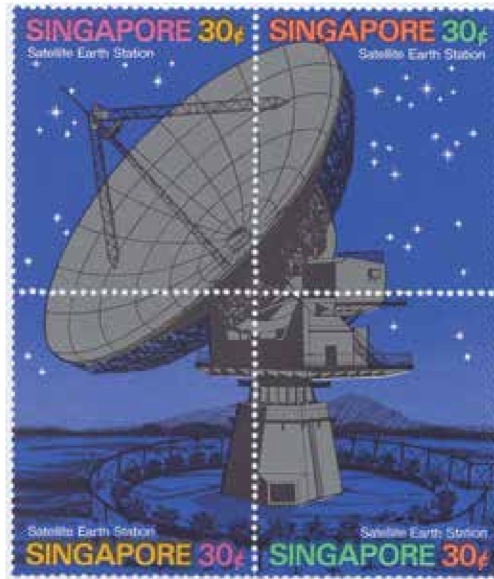
As Singapore liberalised the issue of commemorative stamps, the production process too became less arbitrary under the SAC. In the past, public competitions were organised to determine stamp designs, but the outcomes were not always desirable. For instance, while some 115 submissions were received in the 1962 National Day competition for commemorative stamps – eventually won by Kuala Lumpur resident Loo Shen Yuen – a dearth of entries almost held up the earlier competition in 1959 to design stamps marking Singapore's attainment of self-governance.[12] Eventually, the situation was resolved by Raffles Museum director (and Stamp Design Committee member) Dr Carl Alexander Gibson-Hill, who suggested using the "Singha", the gold lion symbol of Singapore's first settlement in the 13th century.[13]

Within the SAC, all decisions regarding stamp themes and designs were made by a group of individuals selected by the government. The committee was guided by an annual circular sent to various ministries to solicit for ideas. A selection of themes would then be put forward to the minister for communications to approve, after which two to three graphic artists would be invited to submit proposals for the competition.

This rigorous process reflected the increasing importance of stamps as a means of representing the nation on the global stage. As the first SAC chairman, Phua Bah Lee, noted in 1978:

> "In a world where communications play an important role in forging links between nations..., the postage stamp

(Facing page) Two stamp series issued in 1969 under a "new liberal policy", following the formation of the Stamp Advisory Committee in 1968: "25th Plenary Session of ECAFE" by graphic artist Eng Siak Loy (left) and "10,000 Homes for the People" by Tay Siew Chiah (right). *Courtesy of Singapore Philatelic Museum.* **(Below)** First-day cover of "150th Anniversary of Founding of Singapore" addressed to then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew and dated 9 August 1969. The stamps were designed by Eng Siak Loy and Han Kuan Cheng. *Courtesy of Singapore Philatelic Museum.*



(Above) "Satellite Earth Station" (1971) stamps by graphic designer William Lee to commemorate the launch of Singapore's first satellite earth station. Lee superimposed a drawing of a satellite dish over a block of four conjoined 30-cent stamps, creating Singapore's first se-tenant series. *Courtesy of Singapore Philatelic Museum.*

(Above right) Graphic and stamp designer William Lee at work at his River Valley flat-cum-studio in 1971. *Source: The Straits Times © Singapore Press Holdings Limited. Reprinted with permission.*

as a medium of communication has assumed increasing importance today. From a humble origin as a means of enabling the postal services to collect postage, stamps have become a powerful means of communicating an idea or of projecting a country's national image overseas."[14]

And the image that Singapore wanted to project to the world during the early nation-building decades was its effort to industrialise the economy, modernise the city and mould its people.

Thus, stamps were issued to mark the anniversaries of government agencies such as the People's Association (1970) and the Economic and Development Board (1986) as well as the 10th anniversary of the national shipping company, Neptune Orient Lines (1978), and the completion of Changi Airport (1981). There were also stamp issues that coincided with national campaigns to raise quality in industrial production (1973), convert from the imperial to the metric system (1979) and increase productivity (1982).

One series that reflected the progressive spirit of the times was the 1975 "Science and Industry" set of three stamps by art lecturer and graphic artist Sim Tong Khern. Sim departed from the traditional hand-illustrated stamps of the time by manipulating photographs of an oil refinery, a medical surgery and the two satellite earth stations in Sentosa to create a technicolour depiction of Singapore's industrialisation efforts.

Besides such nationalistic stamps, there were also designs that spoke of Singapore's place in the world. The 1971 stamp series commemorating the launch of Singapore's first satellite earth station made a grand statement of how the country could now communicate with two-thirds of the world. Graphic designer William Lee superimposed a drawing of a satellite dish over a block of four conjoined 30-cent stamps, creating Singapore's first se-tenant series. Much less dramatic in design were stamps commemorating international and regional events such as International Women's Year (1975), the 75th anniversary of the world scout movement (1982) and the 20th anniversary of ASEAN (1987).

In the 1990s, stamp issues kept pace with an increasingly outward-looking Singapore. This took the form of more tourist-centric issues, first seen in the 1990 "Tourism" definitive stamps designed by graphic designers Ng Keng Seng and Lim Ching San. Their stamps depicting Singapore landmarks and its four ethnic groups were followed by other series on national monuments, costumes, art, architectural heritage and museums as well as stamps featuring local flora and fauna such as birds, butterflies, marine life, corals and orchids, including the national flower *Vanda* Miss Joaquim.

This new and softer image of Singapore replaced the practice of trumpeting the achievements of the nation. Stamp issues became less overt. For instance, the 2010 "Anniversary" series bundled together the milestones of the Housing and Development Board, People's Association, Singapore Customs and Singapore Scout Association.

One exception, however, is the military, which has consistently had a series or two in every decade, starting with the 1970 "National Servicemen" series designed by art lecturer Choy Weng Yang. His stamps depicting various silhouettes of soldiers defending Singapore in strikingly aggressive poses has evolved over the years to showcase the country's latest military weapons and technology, sending the message perhaps that Singapore, although small, is not to be messed with.

The receding of the state in stamp imagery also mirrored the softening of top-down rule. Newly installed Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong mapped out a vision of the government serving as facilitator and giving the private sector more room to shape the country. This is best summed up in the "Singapore, A Global City" three-part series released between 2002 and 2004, which commemorated Singapore's hosting of the World Stamp Championship and the 150th anniversary since stamps were first used here. Created by local design studio Design Objectives, the series showcased industrial products and landmarks, and were released as miniature sheets complete with images of 15 global companies such as Creative Technology, McDonald's and Shell.

A Canvas for Singapore Designers

Beyond showcasing Singapore to the world, stamps also provided a canvas for the creative output of Singaporean artists and designers. Although this was not explicitly stated as a goal, Singapore's most prolific stamp designer Eng Siak Loy remembers how SAC committee member Choy Weng Yang created this opportunity.

"In the past, stamps were not designed by artists but advertising agencies. But the standards were not great, so Choy suggested stamps should be designed by local artists and recommended me," he recalled.[15] Eng submitted his very first stamp designs for the ECAFE theme, and has since designed over 50 stamps – roughly 14 percent of Singapore's philatelic output – all the while working as a graphic artist at Radio Television Singapura, Housing and Development Board and National Parks Board, before retiring in 2010.[16]

Today, Eng continues to be a prolific designer of stamps, adding to the output of his closest competitors, Chua Ban Har and Leo Teck Chong, both of whom started designing stamps in the 1980s. Stamp design has even become a family tradition with Eng's son, Tze Ngan (also known as Weng Ziyan), designing several

STAMPS THAT BRIDGE TWO COUNTRIES

The 1990s also saw Singapore releasing stamps together with other countries, known in philatelic circles as joint issues. The earliest recorded was with China in 1996, when a stamp by graphic designer Sylvia Tan depicting Singapore's waterfront was released together with Chinese artist Jiang Zhi Nan's depiction of Suzhou's iconic Panmen (Pan Gate). Over the last two decades, other joint issues have been released with regional neighbours (Malaysia, Vietnam, the Philippines and Indonesia), Australia, South Korea and Japan, European countries (Belgium, Sweden, France and Liechtenstein), and even Egypt and the Vatican.

"Tourism Low Value Definitives" (1990) by graphic designer Ng Keng Seng. The stamps reflect an increasingly outward-looking Singapore. *Courtesy of Singapore Philatelic Museum.*

series, including the 2015 "Singapore: 50 Years of Independence (1965–2015)" set.[17]

Another graphic designer who made his name with stamps is William Lee. He rose to fame when his 1971 "Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting" stamps – only the second series he had ever worked on then – was included in the world's leading philatelic publication, *Gibbons Stamp Monthly*.[18] Lee used his stamps as a springboard to grow his creative agency Central Design. He went on to design 15 more stamp sets until 1986, and built a reputation as Singapore's leading graphic designer. He has designed logos for government agencies and local corporations, including Post Office Savings Bank, Singapore Armed Forces Reservists' Association (SAFRA), Shangri-La Hotel and the Citizen Consultative Committee – all of which still remain in use.[19]

Commemorative to Commercial

Despite the changing face of Singapore stamps over the last five decades, SAC's criteria for themes and designs has largely remained the same since it was first drawn up in 1968. Today, a theme qualifies to be issued if it fits any one of six criteria identified by the committee.[20] This includes the commemoration of a national achievement, a local pioneer, and the 25th, 75th, 100th, 150th or 200th anniversary of a public organisation; depiction of unique lifestyles and values; recognition of regional and global events of importance to Singapore; and stamp themes that spark interest among children. Apart from this, SAC also considers if stamp themes and designs are sensitive to Singapore's multicultural society and appeal stamp collectors and the public.

"Singapore Festivals" (1971) by graphic designer William Lee. The stamps, which depicted children celebrating Chinese New Year, Hari Raya Puasa, Deepavali and Christmas, were criticised for their racist undertones and inaccurate portrayal of ethnic cultures. *Courtesy of Singapore Philatelic Museum.*

This set of criteria has held up well except on two occasions. The 1971 "Singapore Festivals" series of four stamps by William Lee, each depicting children celebrating Chinese New Year, Hari Raya Puasa, Deepavali and Christmas respectively, was roundly criticised for the racist undertones and inaccurate portrayal of ethnic cultures. A Chinese newspaper pointed out that the Chinese child's traditional costume was already obsolete in Singapore, while a Malay cultural organisation took issue with the illustration of Malays flying a kite on Hari Raya Puasa, a deeply religious event. According to a *New Nation* editorial, Malays were depicted as "a happy-go-lucky community" compared with the other racial groups.[21] In its defence, the SAC said the designs had expressly avoided religious imagery because of perceived sensitivities.

More recently, in 2010, a group of philatelists led by Lim Chong Teck criticised Singapore stamp issues as becoming "commercialised at the expense of marking significant national occasions". Lim wrote in a letter to *The Straits Times* complaining that local stamps were becoming devalued because of the "frivolous, irrelevant or poorly designed" stamp issues in recent times, including the ones on toys, playgrounds and local food. "[F]ar too many stamps are issued, cementing Singapore's growing and unwelcome reputation of abusing stamp issues for commercial gain in the philatelic arena," he added.[22]

Then SAC chairman, Professor Lily Kong, refuted Lim's remarks, citing a list of awards Singapore stamps had won over the years. Eng's 2002 "Heritage Trees" series was rated the second most beautiful stamps in the world by Timbropresse Group, the Paris-based publisher of philatelic magazine *Timbres,* while Design Objective's series for the 2004 Olympic games was named the most original stamp by the International Olympic Committee. While Lim disagreed with recent stamp themes, Professor Kong said they were

Notes

1 Singapore Stamp Club. (1967). Singapore Independence stamps. In *1867–1967 Centennial Stamp Exhibition commemorating one hundred years of postage stamps in Singapore… at the National Library: [Souvenir programme]* (p. 2). Singapore: Singapore Stamp Club. (Call no.: RCLOS 769.5695957 SIN)
2 Singapore Stamp Club, 1967, p. 2.
3 Ministry of Culture. (1968, August 27). *Speech of Mr Yong Nyuk Lin, Minister for Communications at the inaugural meeting of the Stamp Advisory Committee held at the conference room of the Malayan Rubber Export Registration Board, 3rd Floor, Fullerton Building on Tuesday, 27th August, 1968 at 1500 Hours.* Retrieved from National Archives of Singapore website.
4 5 stamp issues for next year. (1969, August 8). *The Straits Times,* p. 6. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
5 Loh, P. Y. (2013–2014). *Stamp up for Singapore: Commemoration in National Day Stamps, 1960–1984* (p. 15) (Unpublished thesis). Retrieved from Academia website.
6 The inaugural Stamp Advisory Committee was chaired by Phua Bah Lee (Parliamentary Secretary, Ministry of Communications) and comprised M. Bala Subramanion (Postmaster General), Roy Daniel (Head, Publicity Division, Ministry of Culture), Koh Seow Chuan (Ag. President, Singapore Stamp Club), Choy Weng Yang (Lecturer, Arts & Crafts, Teachers' Training College), Lian Hock Lian (Assistant Secretary, Ministry of Communications), W. Maxwell (Philatelist), Eric Khoo Cheng Lock (Philatelist) and Patrick Lee Boon Guan (Assistant Controller of Posts).
7 '150' stamps a big hit. (1969, September 10). *The Straits Times,* p. 4. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
8 A first-day cover consists of the stamp on a cover, post card or envelope, and postmarked with the date that the stamp is first authorised for use.
9 Lim, T. (1986, November 10). Stamps can bring big returns over time. *The Straits Times,* p. 20. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
10 Chia, P. (1972, December 18). $1million S'pore stamps sold in a year. *The Straits Times,* p. 9. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

(Left) Issued on 26 September 2002, graphic artist Eng Siak Loy's "Heritage Trees" series was rated the second most beautiful stamps in the world in 2003 by Paris-based Timbropresse Group, the publisher of the philatelic magazine *Timbres*. The trees featured were Flame of the Forest (22 cents), Rain Tree (60 cents), Kapok ($1) and Tembusu ($1). *Courtesy of Singapore Philatelic Museum.*

(Above) Issued on 12 November 2007, this set of four stamps commemorates the new knowledge framework proposed by the National Library Board's vision and strategy: to ensure that Singapore's "published heritage is preserved" and "knowledge remains readily accessible to all Singaporeans for their lifelong learning". *Courtesy of Singapore Philatelic Museum.*

issued "to provide variety and to sustain the public interest".[23]

This tension between commemoration and commercial gain has been inherent in the issuing of stamps since the SAC was founded in 1968. As Minister Yong said in 1972, SAC had to be careful with what it issued lest it affected the value and reputation of Singapore stamps. "We shall not indulge in gimmicks nor issue philatelic frivolities," he said.[24] Lim's criticism that stamps had veered away from nationalistic imagery had some truth.

The Future of Stamps

While early Singapore stamps captured a young nation's transition into a global city, the themes have since shifted towards more popular subjects both from within Singapore and inspired from abroad. Since 1996, an annual Chinese zodiac calendar series commemorating the Lunar New Year has been issued – first designed by freelance illustrator Nicodemus Loh, and more recently, Leo Chong Teck. In 2005, a stamp was issued to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the birth of Danish fairytale author Hans Christian Andersen. Even when Singapore is the theme, such stamps have depicted typically Singaporean subjects, including vanishing trades, old cinemas and, of course, local food.

Ironically, this turn towards the everyday and the popular comes at a time when the rise of electronic mail has rendered stamps becoming less relevant in our daily lives. This is especially pertinent since postal services became corporatised in 1992. Today, stamps are issued by the government agency turned corporation, SingPost. The latter has been granted a license by the Infocomm Media Development Authority (which in turn continues to be advised on philately matters by the SAC).

Facing a decline in postal volume, SingPost's head of postal services recently acknowledged that stamps have become more an object for the serious collector than for everyday use.[25] This declining mass appeal has diminished the value of stamps as a platform for showcasing the achievements of the nation and as a revenue stream.

Ironically, postage stamps have today come full circle to when they were first created in the middle of the 19th century by Englishman Sir Rowland Hill: simply as proof of advance payment for delivery. ♦

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WHEN TIGERS USED TO ROAM

NATURE & ENVIRONMENT IN SINGAPORE

Urban development has destroyed much of the original landscape, as **Goh Lee Kim** tells us. But Singapore has taken great strides in conserving its natural heritage.

Singapore was blanketed in lush green vegetation for centuries before Stamford Raffles arrived on the island in 1819. Primary tropical forest grew abundantly, interspersed with pockets of mangrove and freshwater swamps.[1] The forest contained "an immense number" of species of trees, many of them scaling great heights.

The tropical vegetation enveloping the island likely supported a rich plethora of fauna, including tigers, although larger mammals commonly found in neighbouring lands, such as the elephant, rhinoceros and tapir, were not native to Singapore. A few hills dotted the island, with the highest, Bukit Timah, at the centre.[2]

Relatively untouched for centuries, the island's landscape began to transform dramatically only after Singapore's founding by Raffles. The Singapore River became the economic lifeline of the settlement following the establishment of the port and commercial centre along its banks. Development took place rapidly, and the population grew as it attracted immigrants from the Malay Archipelago, China, India, the Middle East, and even further afield from Europe and the Americas.

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Destruction and Deforestation

Along with the boom in trade, cultivation of cash crops for export also took off, spurred by the British who saw it as a means of raising capital. Gambier and pepper, which were usually planted together, proved to be the most economically viable crops in early 19th-century Singapore. Although gambier and pepper plantations had existed before the British arrived, their cultivation flourished only after 1836 due to an increasing demand for gambier by the dyeing and tanning industries. By the late 1840s, there were some 400 gambier and pepper plantations in Singapore.

Unfortunately, gambier cultivation had a detrimental effect on the primary forest. To obtain land for the plantations, the farmers, who were mostly Chinese, cleared large swathes of forest. To make matters worse, gambier plantations could only survive for 20 years at most as gambier rapidly exhausted the soil and rendered the land infertile for further cultivation. This resulted in further deforestation when the farmers abandoned the plantations and cleared new land to grow the crop.

The farmers also cut down large numbers of trees and used the wood as fuel to boil and process the harvested gambier. It was estimated that for every plot of land taken up by gambier plants, an equal area was logged for its processing.

At the same time, forests were cleared to make way for development and trees felled to provide residents with timber, fuel and charcoal. By the late 19th century, much of the primary forest was lost to indiscriminate deforestation. Once removed, primary vegetation is lost forever as it cannot regenerate on cleared land. Over time, much of the cleared land became overgrown with lalang, a weed that was very difficult to get rid of. Already by 1859, it was reported that some 45,000 acres of land in Singapore had been abandoned.[3]

There was no attempt to control the rate of deforestation until the late 1870s, when the Colonial Secretary, Cecil Clementi Smith, tasked the Colonial Engineer and Surveyor-General, John F.A. McNair, to conduct a survey on the state of the timber forests in the Straits Settlements. McNair's 1879 report described the dismal scene in Singapore: diminishing timber trees, indiscriminate deforestation and an absence of legislation for forest protection.[4] Despite McNair's report, the colonial government did not take any action to protect the forest from further encroachment.

This situation remained until 1883 when a forest report commissioned by Governor Frederick A. Weld and put together by Nathaniel Cantley, Superintendent of the Botanic Gardens, again reported the "extensive deforestation" in Singapore and pointed out that "no sufficient attempts have been made to conserve the Government forest lands".[5] This time the government paid heed: based on Cantley's recommendations, eight forest reserves, totalling about 8,000 acres, were carved up.

By 1886, most of Cantley's recommendations had been implemented. A total of 12 reserves, comprising 11,554 acres, were demarcated: Blukang, Murai, Kranji, Selitar, Ang Mo Kio, Changi, Bukit Panjang, Military, Chan Chu Kang, Mandai, Sambawang, Bukit Timah, Pandan and Jurong.[6] A Forest Department, managed by the Botanic Gardens, was established to take charge of the reserves and a Forest Police Force was hired. In a bid to reforest the reserves with economically valuable trees, nurseries were set up to grow saplings.

By the 1890s, however, the government decided to scale back its support for the forest reserves. The budget for the maintenance of forest reserves was trimmed as timber growth in the reserves was slow and failed to generate any substantial revenue. In January 1895, the control of the reserves was transferred from the Botanic Gardens to the Land Office, which neglected the reserves even further as they were deemed unprofitable.

(Left) "View in the jungle, Singapore", c.1845. A lithograph print showing a recently cleared stretch of jungle with a wide path cut through it. By the late 19th century, much of the primary forest in Singapore had been cleared for plantations and a growing migrant population. This print was originally published in Charles Ramsey Drinkwater Bethune's *View in the Eastern Archipelago: Borneo, Sarawak, Labuan, &c. &c. &c. Courtesy of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.*

(Below) Gambier (*Nauclea gambir, Uncaria gambir*) from the William Farquhar Collection of Natural History Drawings at the National Museum of Singapore. This is one of the paintings that William Farquhar commissioned Chinese artists to do between 1803 and 1818 when he was Resident and Commandant of Melaka. *Courtesy of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.*

(Bottom) Three European men on a hunting trip in the jungle posing with an object that could possibly be tiger skin, 1890s. *Lee Kip Lin Collection. All rights reserved, Lee Kip Lin and National Library Board, Singapore.*

Even with their protected status, the reserves suffered from further deforestation in the following decades. In 1901, for instance, part of the Bukit Timah reserve was cleared for water catchment, granite quarries and railway lines. The Forest Ordinance enacted in 1909, which made it an offence to "trespass, pasture cattle and cut, collect or remove any forest produce" from a reserve, was not effective in preventing further exploitation.[7]

In 1914, land was cleared from Sembawang and Mandai reserves for military purposes, and in 1927, land from the Seletar, Changi, Pandan and Bukit Timah reserves was used for the cultivation of vegetables. Part of the Changi reserve was also sacrificed for the construction of a naval base.

The majority of the reserves did not survive this onslaught. The status of Bukit Timah as a forest reserve was revoked and reconstituted in 1930 so that it comprised only about 70 hectares of forested land for the purposes of "scenic beauty and botanical interests". By 1936, Bukit Timah had become Singapore's only forest reserve when the government decided to revoke all the other forest reserves, citing the afforestation efforts as "unjustifiable".[8]

The outlook of forest reserves in Singapore improved in 1938 when control of the Bukit Timah reserve was given back to the Botanic Gardens to ensure its conservation. In the following year, mangrove forests at Kranji and Pandan were gazetted as forest reserves. All three were placed under the charge of the Director of the Botanic Gardens, who was designated as Conservator of Forests.

Unfortunately, Bukit Timah reserve suffered severe damage during the Japanese invasion of Singapore in February 1942. After landing in Singapore, the Japanese targeted the Bukit Timah area. The ensuing battle between invading Japanese forces and Allied troops left its toll on the reserve: trenches and caves were excavated, trees were felled and mortar shells were strewn all over.

When the Japanese Occupation ended in 1945, Bukit Timah reserve became a concern once again as granite quarries in the area began encroaching on the reserve. In April 1950, the government appointed a Select Committee on Granite Quarries and Nature Reserves to study the impact that the quarries had on the reserve. Following the recommendations of the committee, the Nature Reserves Ordinance was passed by the Singapore Legislative Council in January 1951, gazetting Bukit Timah, Kranji, Pandan, Labrador and the Central Catchment area as nature reserves as well as prohibiting activities such as quarrying and the destruction of flora and fauna.[9] Today, all national parks and nature reserves in Singapore are protected under the Parks and Trees Act.

The Protection of Fauna

Generations of human activity on the island have also wreaked disastrous consequences on the fauna. Continued deforestation ravaged the natural habitats of native fauna and threatened their survival. Hunting, both for sport and consumption, as well as the rampant animal trade in Singapore exacerbated the situation. As a result, species such as the tiger and clouded leopard vanished from Singapore, while others, such as the sambar deer and barking deer, dwindled in numbers.

Wildlife protection gained a foothold in Singapore with the enactment of the first legislation for the protection of wild fauna in 1884 – the Wild Birds Protection Ordinance – which prohibited the unlawful killing and capture of selected species of wild birds as well as the possession and sale of their skins and plumage.[10] This ordinance was enacted to curb the excessive hunting and capture of wild birds for sport and the bird trade.

(Top) Hunters posing with their catch during an elephant hunt in Singapore in the 1900s. Sport hunting and the wildlife trade were factors that caused the rapid depletion of fauna in Singapore. *Lim Kheng Chye Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*
(Below) An ink and sepia drawing titled "The River from Monkey Bridge" (1842–43) by Scotsman Charles Andrew Dyce who lived in Singapore in the 1840s. This is a scene of the Singapore River at Boat Quay from Monkey Bridge (where Elgin Bridge stands today). It shows the godowns along the river, and coolies loading and unloading goods from the clipper ships. *National University of Singapore Museum Collection, courtesy of NUS Museum.*

TIGER HUNTS

Members of the Straits hunting party with the tiger they shot at Choa Chu Kang Village in October 1930. From left: Tan Tian Quee, Ong Kim Hong (the shooter) and Low Peng Hoe. *Tan Tuan Khoon Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

The proliferation of gambier and pepper plantations in the 1830s was linked to a rise in tiger sightings and attacks. Having lost their natural source of prey and the protection of thick forest cover, tigers ventured into the plantations and attacked workers. The earliest mention of a tiger attack in local news appeared in the 8 September 1831 edition of the *Singapore Chronicle*, which reported that "tigers are beginning to infest the vicinity of the town, to such a degree as to require serious attention on the part of the local authorities".[1]

The remains of a Chinese woodcutter, who had been missing for days, were discovered near the town centre by his friends. The tiger's paw prints were still clearly visible around the area. Another person had been killed since the report, but in a different location.

Tiger attacks became more rampant in the mid-19th century, when gambier plantations, followed by rubber, rapidly expanded in Singapore. In response, the government offered rewards for the capture of tigers, which encouraged many to attempt to hunt and trap the predator. Tiger sightings had dropped drastically by the time the last wild tiger was shot in Singapore in 1930 in Choa Chu Kang Village; besides the success of hunts, the tiger population had shrunk because much of the land had become deforested and overgrown with lalang.[2]

Notes

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In 1904, the Wild Birds Protection Ordinance was repealed and replaced by the Wild Animals and Birds Protection Ordinance. Apart from the continued protection of birds, the new legislation prohibited the killing and capture of wild animals.[11] The legislation continued to be amended and updated with revised editions, and is known at present as the Wild Animals and Birds Act.

Water and Public Health

The Singapore River was critical to the growth and development of the island as a centre of trade and commerce for more than 150 years. From the onset of Singapore's founding, the river bustled with activity as vessels transported cargo and goods to and from the docks. Godowns, shipyards, factories and living quarters occupied the banks of the river and its environs. The combination of heavy water traffic and rapid urban development along its banks soon led to pollution of the river.

As early as 1822, a committee established by Raffles reported that a large amount of silt had built up around the mouth of the Singapore River due to the construction of jetties. This had caused navigation in the already shallow channel to become more difficult. When John Crawfurd was appointed as Resident in 1823, he highlighted the river's significance to Singapore but pointed out that some form of dredging was "indispensable".[12]

Several attempts were made by the government to dredge the river, but none succeeded in thoroughly clearing the sedimentation that continued to accumulate as development continued. The situation was not unique to the Singapore River; there were also reports of blockages at other waterways on the island, such as the Brass Bassa (Bras Basah) Canal.

By the 1840s, there was rising concern that the increasingly obstructed mouth of the Singapore River might cause disruptions to trade. The issue was highlighted by the Grand Jury to the Court in May 1848, recommending the removal

of the obstruction because it threatened to become "seriously detrimental to the trade of the Port".[13] In April 1849, the Grand Jury revisited the issue once again, and pointed out that no action had been taken by the government. Although a dredge was eventually built in the mid-1850s, it could not function properly and was decommissioned in 1861.

Silt was not the only pollutant in the Singapore River. Garbage, industrial waste and sewage ended up in the river along with oil from the vessels plying the waters. The river swiftly deteriorated into a cesspool and constantly emitted a foul stench.

Interestingly, the waterways were so contaminated that they became a natural deterrant against malaria, a common disease in Singapore back then. The surgeon Dr Robert Little noticed that people living along Rochor Canal did not contract malaria despite the unhygienic living conditions. After examining the canal's waters in 1847, he concluded that the sulphuretted hydrogen gas, from which the foul smell of the polluted waters originated, was responsible for killing malarial germs in the area.[14]

Notwithstanding Dr Little's theory, the polluted waters of Singapore River and other waterways became a source of infectious diseases and a threat to public health. In his 1886 report, Dr Gilmore Ellis, the Acting Health Officer, linked the prevalence of diarrhoea and cholera to "excremental filth poisoning"[15] arising from the lack of a catchment system in the settlement and the ensuing accumulation and putrefaction of sewage in the river. He stressed the importance of having a sewerage system to properly dispose of waste matter. In 1892, the Municipal Health Officer, Dr C.E. Dumbleton, recommended that strong measures be taken to curb the pollution of the river.

Over the next decades, various committees, such as the Singapore River Commission in 1898 and the Singapore River Working Party in 1954, were formed to look into the pollution of the Singapore River, and each made recommendations on how the river could be cleaned up. However, most of the recommendations were never implemented due to the high costs of the work required. Dredging continued and was done regularly, but it was not effective since it could not prevent silting nor act as a deterrent to the dumping of waste into the water. Pollution continued to plague the river right up to the mid-20th century.

Post-independence Initiatives

Between the 1960s and 80s, Singapore became rapidly industrialised, with numerous factories and manufacturing plants opening across the island. This gave rise to another environmental challenge: air pollution. The situation was especially dire in Jurong where the large concentration of factories there emitted pollutants such as dust, soot, carbon monoxide and sulphur dioxide into the air.

To tackle the problem, the government formed the Anti-Pollution Unit in 1970. Tracking centres were set up across the island to monitor the amount of pollutants in the air, and efforts were made to relocate pollutive industries, such as sawmills and plywood factories, away from residential areas. New industries also needed permission from the Anti-Pollution Unit before they could open factories in Singapore. In 1971, the Clean Air Act came into force to control and regulate emissions from trade and industrial premises.

The government also implemented various initiatives and programmes to improve the environment and the standard of living. One of the first was the Garden City plan in 1967, which aimed to transform Singapore into a clean and green city. In subsequent years, thousands of trees and shrubs were planted throughout the island, including in built-up areas and along roads. In 1972, the Ministry of Environment was formed for the express task of creating a clean environment for the people. Singapore was one of the few countries at the time with a ministry dedicated to environmental matters.

In 1977, then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew ordered a clean-up of all rivers in Singapore. It was a massive programme, beginning with the removal of sources of pollution from the Singapore River and Kallang Basin. Squatters were resettled, industries, businesses and street hawkers were relocated, and pig and duck farms were phased out. Within 10 years, the Singapore River was transformed from a toxic river devoid of marine life to a clean body of water that was capable of supporting fish and prawns.

In subsequent decades, the government continued with its efforts to ensure the protection and sustainability of Singapore's environment and biodiversity. On the environmental front, the Singapore Green Plan – a blueprint to turn Singapore into a green city by 2000 – was presented at the Earth Summit in Brazil in 1992. It was updated in 2002 with the Singapore Green Plan 2012 and eventually replaced by the Sustainable Singapore Blueprint 2015, which mapped out future plans and strategies to create a more sustainable environment.

To conserve biodiversity, Singapore became a signatory of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) treaty in 1986, pledging to regulate the trade in endangered wildlife and wildlife products. In 1992, Singapore signed the Convention on Biological Diversity along with 152 other countries to reaffirm its stand on the protection of animal and plant life.

Biodiversity conservation was strengthened in 2009 with the National Park Board's Conserving our Biodiversity strategy and action plan. In 2015, the Nature Conservation Masterplan was launched, charting the course of Singapore's biodiversity conservation plans for the next five years.

These moves may seem a little too late given that Singapore has already lost nearly 73 percent of its plant and animal species over the last 200 years. Being an island with precious few resources, Singapore has always struggled to balance the need for development with conservation. What is lost forever in terms of biodiversity cannot be replaced, but Singapore has at least taken concrete steps towards the creation of a sustainable natural environment for its future generations. Hopefully, more will be done in the years ahead. ♦

A relatively pristine Singapore River in 1983 with shophouses in the distance and the odd sampan traversing its length. Unbridled boat traffic and squatter colonies along its banks had led to heavy pollution of the river until 1977 when then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew ordered a major clean-up of all rivers in Singapore. *All rights reserved, Kouo Shang-Wei Collection, National Library Board, Singapore.*

Pulau Ubin, with the clouds reflected in its abandoned quarry, is a scene that is rare in urban Singapore today. *Photo by Richard W.J. Koh.*

Notes

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A 1968 photo of a Meyer Road bungalow among a grove of coconut trees, taken by the architect Lee Kip Lin (1925–2011). Sprawling houses such as these in the east coast and elsewhere have given way to land reclamation and redevelopment. Meyer Road is today a prime residential district of mainly condos and private residences. This photo was first featured in *Through the Lens of Lee Kip Lin: Photographs of Singapore 1965–1995* (2015), published by National Library Board. Written by architectural historian, Dr Lai Chee Kien, the book contains nearly 500 photographs of architectural forms that were prevalent between 1965 and 1995 – many of which have since disappeared from our landscape. The book is on sale at major bookshops for S$42 and is also available for reference and loan at Lee Kong Chian Reference Library and selected public libraries (Call nos.: RSING 779.45957 LAI and SING 779.45957 LAI).

Kelly & Walsh

PURVEYOR, PUBLISHER AND PRINTER

Established in the 1880s, Kelly & Walsh was an iconic name in the Singapore book trade until its closure in 1956. **Gracie Lee** traces its history as bookseller, publisher and printer.

It was the year 1896. Singapore was abuzz with news that King Chulalongkorn of Siam was in town for a private visit. Although the royal party was travelling incognito, their activities were closely followed and reported by the press. According to one newspaper report,[1] the Siamese king, who was accompanied by three princes and the Siamese Consul, dropped in at the Kelly & Walsh bookshop at Battery Road during their tour of business establishments in town.

Kelly & Walsh was one of Singapore's oldest and finest English bookshops. Set up in the 1880s as the local branch of the Shanghai-based book retailer and publisher Kelly & Walsh, the firm was a barometer of public reading tastes in Singapore for close to 80 years until it bowed out from the local book scene in 1956.

The bookshop was an iconic landmark in Raffles Place, delighting generations of bibliophiles and keen readers with the latest highbrowed literature and exciting potboilers from Europe, erudite volumes on Asia, and a wide variety of stationery and novelty items. The local branch also left an enduring legacy on the publishing and printing history of Singapore. For many years, Kelly & Walsh was a major producer of Malayan works and a supplier of educational materials to government schools in Singapore and Malaya.

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Kelly & Walsh Ltd is Founded

Kelly & Walsh Limited was a Shanghai-based European firm formed in 1876 as a result of a merger of two booksellers, Kelly and Company and F.C. Walsh. Incorporated in Hong Kong on 1 July 1885 with the head office in Shanghai, it subsequently opened branches in Asian cities such as Tokyo, Yokohama, Hong Kong and Singapore.

The company's business activities were diverse, and it took on roles such as bookseller, stationer, publisher, printer, lithographer, book binder, die engraver, colour stamper, India rubber stamp manufacturer, news agent, music seller, commission agent, and even tobacconist. The publishing arm had built up a strong reputation as a producer of quality books on East Asian subjects, especially on sinology, and was regarded as a forerunner in bringing knowledge about Asia to Western audiences.

Kelly & Walsh in Singapore

In the 1880s, Kelly & Walsh expanded its business to Singapore. There are differing accounts about when it started operations here.

According to some sources, the Singapore branch made its debut as early as 1881 at Raffles Place. In yet other accounts, the firm supposedly commenced business here in 1889, the same year that the bookshop was first listed in commercial directories. However, the earliest newspaper advertisements of the Singapore branch date from 1887 onwards, coinciding with the first gazetted titles published by Kelly & Walsh in Singapore.

What is certain, however, is that the bookshop operated from Battery Road[2] during its pioneering years before relocating to No. 32 Raffles Place in October 1898. It moved to more commodious quarters at Nos. 30–31 Raffles Place in 1916, but returned to its former premises at No. 32 in 1935, having acquired the property two years earlier.[3]

Its homecoming to No. 32 ushered in a new chapter. The firm appointed architectural firm Swan & Maclaren and contractor Nanyang Structural Co. to rejuvenate the three-storey property. Under the guiding hand of Swan & Maclaren's architect Doucham Petrovitch,[4] the building was refurbished and modernised. The faded yellow façade gave way to grey granite plaster designs by Singapore's resident Italian sculptor, Rodolfo Nolli,[5] and the old sloping roof was replaced with a new flat roof. The building was fitted throughout with Crittall[6] windows and the archways widened to allow more light to stream in.

The ground floor occupied by the bookshop was re-laid with rubber tiles, and the interior furnished with woodwork and steel shelving. Modern amenities such as a lift and solo-air, a system of ventilation that replaced fans, were also installed. In 1950, the bookshop made history when it became the first shop in Raffles Place to install air-conditioning. For customers, this was a welcome respite from the tropical heat and humidity.

Unfortunately, the halcyon days of Kelly & Walsh came to an abrupt halt with the onset of the Japanese Occupation on 15 February 1942. In September that year, its Raffles Place premises were taken over and re-opened as Seibudo Syoten, a Japanese bookshop selling mainly Japanese classics, novels and military books.

After the war, Kelly & Walsh resumed business on 1 March 1946. The bookshop, along with many others, enjoyed brisk sales as people tried to replace books that they had lost during the Japanese Occupation. But a decade later, Kelly & Walsh decided to pull out from Singapore and the bookshop closed its doors permanently on 30 May 1956. In a move to liquidate its assets in Singapore, the Raffles Place property was sold to the adjoining Federal Dispensary for $1.5 million. Today, Kelly & Walsh Limited is survived only through two bookshops in Hong Kong that specialise in art books.

Purveyor of Good Books

As the leading bookshop in colonial Singapore, Kelly & Walsh was unrivalled in terms of its array of English books. It stocked a wide selection of reading materials, ranging from economically priced colonial editions,[7] magazines, children's picture books, practical books on housekeeping, cooking, self-improvement and commerce to serious literature on politics, economics and philosophy. Kelly & Walsh also carried a sensible collection of reference books to meet the thirst for knowledge in Malaya. These included handbooks on vernacular languages as well as technical works on marine engineering and metallurgy relating to shipping and tin mining – two key industries in Malaya at the time.

While the bookshop did not shy away from importing controversial titles such as Alfred Kinsey's *Sexual Behaviour in the Human Female* (1953), it took pains not to display such books at

MODERN ARCHITECTURE COMES TO RAFFLES PLACE

UNIQUE FEATURES IN DESIGN, VENTILATION AND FITTING OF NEW KELLY & WALSH BUILDING.

Triumph For Local Contractors.

• MALTHOID
• CANEC
• ATLAS

SIME, DARBY & CO., LTD.

'CRESSONITE' TILES

SOLO—AIR IS INSTALLED IN KELLY & WALSH NEW PREMISES IF IT SATISFIES THEM AND PLEASES THEIR CUSTOMERS THEN WHY NOT YOU

ENQUIRE FOR SCHEMES & ESTIMATES FROM THE SOLO-AIR ENGINEERING COY.

SANITARY FITTINGS AND FIRE APPLIANCES SUPPLIED AND INSTALLED BY WATTS & BAKER SINGAPORE

(Facing page) The Kelly & Walsh building (third from the left) at Raffles Place, 1920s. *Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

(Above) A news article on the refurbished Kelly & Walsh building at 32 Raffles Place. It was designed by Doucham Petrovitch of the architectural firm Swan & Maclaren. *The Straits Times, 5 September 1935, p. 21.*

(Right) Logo of Kelly & Walsh Limited. *All rights reserved, Reid, T.H. (1908). Across the Equator: A Holiday Trip in Java. Singapore: Kelly & Walsh. (Call no.: RCLOS 992.2 REI)*

its store windows nor on the shelves for fear of offending the social mores of the time.

The store's other main attraction was its display of luxury stationery items and charming art prints. From writing cases, blotters, fountain pens, diaries, bookends and picture frames to illustrated prints and artwork, the extensive assortment of accessories made Kelly & Walsh a popular stop for gifts on special and festive occasions. Its annual display of Christmas and New Year greeting cards was also a highlight during the Yuletide season: the store displayed imported cards adorned with floral and other artistic motifs, as well as a bestselling "local" series produced in-house by Kelly & Walsh.

The latter were collotype reproductions of Singapore scenes printed in various tints. The cards captured a motley assortment of images, such as Malay sailing crafts, views of the New Harbour (present-day Keppel Harbour), Malay kampongs, busy thoroughfares such as Battery Road and Collyer Quay, and even Malay schoolchildren and satay sellers. Printed on the cards was the greeting in Malay "Selamat Tahun Bahru" or "Happy New Year". These cards were choice souvenirs that residents would purchase to send to family and friends abroad.

In addition to its principal business as a bookseller and stationer, the bookshop also functioned as the town's ticketing agent for events such as music and theatrical performances, dances and balls, and flower and animal shows.

Publisher of Good Books

Perhaps the firm's most lasting legacy in Singapore was in publishing and printing. The Singapore branch of Kelly & Walsh was a prodigious publisher and printer of works on Malayan

topics and by Malayan authors. There are approximately 200 recorded titles (excluding new editions and reprints) of publications produced by the company between 1887 and the mid-1950s.[8] The majority were in English, followed by Malay (both Romanised Malay and Jawi) and bilingual works in English and Malay. Only a very small number of bilingual English-Chinese and English-Tamil titles were produced, and as far as can be ascertained, none published entirely in Chinese or Tamil.

The earliest recorded work published in Singapore by Kelly & Walsh was a six-page music score titled *The Jubilee Waltz*. It was composed by Nathan Berhardy Ruchwaldy,[9] the long-time manager of the Robinson Piano Company in Singapore. The piece was performed at Government House on the occasion of Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee celebration in 1887. One hundred copies of the score were printed by the commercial printer, Singapore & Straits Publishing Office, and sold for 75 cents each.

(Below left) Kelly & Walsh advertising its collection of Christmas and New Year greeting cards that were "suitable for sending to home friends". *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser (Weekly), 1 December 1896, p. 352.*

(Below right) Although the majority of the publications by Kelly & Walsh were in English, the firm also produced works in Romanised Malay and Jawi. *Hikayat Maharaja Puspa Wiraja di Negeri Istana Pura Negara* is a Malay reader published in Jawi by Kelly & Walsh in 1900. *Collection of the National Library, Singapore. (Accession no.: B18153103K; Microfilm no.: NL2554)*

Kelly & Walsh, Ltd,
BEG TO CALL ATTENTION TO THEIR STOCK OF
Christmas and
New Year's Cards,
SUITABLE FOR SENDING TO HOME FRIENDS.
Japanese-Hand painted Cards.
English Cards in Great Variety
and of the latest designs (including a choice selection of Hand-painted ones.)
G. R. LAMBERT & Co.'s
Photographic Series.
&c., &c., &c.
Kelly & Walsh, Ltd.

SOME WORKS BY KELLY & WALSH

1900: *Friend Tommy and other Topics*
1906: *Freemasonry in Singapore*
1908: *Across the Equator: A Holiday Trip in Java*
1912: *A Christmas Number*
1913: *Gula Malaka*
1916: *Mutiny Musings and Volunteer Sketches*
1919: *Long-chair Malay*
1926: *Blonds Prefer Tuans: The Intimate Diary of a Lady of Travel*
1928: *Malayan Turnovers*
1934: *A Herd of Wild Bungalows*
1938: *Suleiman Goes to London*
1949: *Mural Ditties and Sime Road Soliloquies*

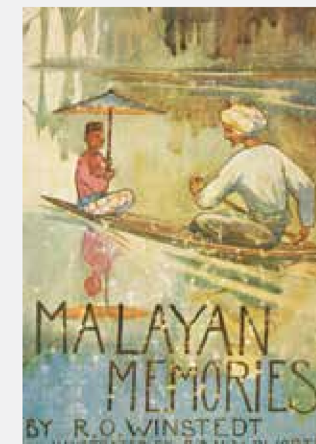
The firm's most notable publications are arguably R.J. Wilkinson's *A Malay-English Dictionary* (1901–1902), which was the standard dictionary used by generations of learners of Malay, and R.O. Winstedt's *An English-Malay Dictionary (Roman Spelling) in Four Parts* (1914–1917), which expanded on Wilkinson's lexicon.

The recognition of Malay as the lingua franca in Singapore is seen in Kelly & Walsh's publishing efforts, and evidenced by the plethora of books it published on this subject. These include *Malay Orthography* (1892); *Kelly and Walsh's Handbook of the Malay Language* (1900); *A Guide to Malay Conversations* (1946); *Malay for Beginners* (1947); *A Handbook of Spoken "Bazaar" Malay* (1948); *A Practical Modern Malay-English Dictionary* (1952); and R.O. Winstedt's *Colloquial Malay: A Simple Grammar with Conversation* (1916) and its companion volume *Dictionary of Colloquial Malay* (1920). There were even self-learning guides for specific uses and contexts such as *A Vocabulary of Malay Medical Terms* (1905), *Malay Handbook for Miners* (1906), *Malay for Mems* (1929) and *A Pocket Guide to Practical Military Malay* (1951). Some of these titles were so popular that they remained in print through new editions and reprints.

Kelly & Walsh was also a major publisher and supplier of educational materials for government schools in Singapore and Malaya. Many of these titles were used in elementary schools for the teaching of English and Malay languages although titles on other subjects, such as arithmetic and geography, were also published in very small quantities. These educational materials comprised textbooks, readers and teachers' guides. According to Ian Proudfoot,[10] a scholar on early Malay printed works, Kelly & Walsh and Methodist Publishing House together accounted for some 90 percent of the entire European publishing output of Malay books between 1887 and 1920. About three quarters of Kelly & Walsh's Malay-language printing took the form of school textbooks.

Possibly the earliest educational material published by Kelly & Walsh in Singapore was *English and Malay Vocabulary for Use in Schools in the Straits Settlements* (1895) compiled by A.E. Pringle, the Sub-Inspector of Schools.[11] The book is essentially an A-Z glossary of English words with their corresponding translations in Malay. The Singapore & Straits Publishing Office printed 2,500 copies and sold each for 20 cents. The publication went through several editions and reprints, and entered into its ninth edition in 1918.

Kelly & Walsh's publishing interests extended beyond educational books and self-learning guides on the Malay language. It also published a number of scholarly journals and monographic series



A trio of books published by Kelly & Walsh. **(Far left)** *The Gate of the Far East* (1908); **(Above)** *Sunny Singapore (192–?)*; **(Left)** *Malayan Memories* (1916). *All rights reserved, The Gate of the Far East: A Series of Views Illustrating the Chief Places of Interest in Singapore. Singapore: Kelly & Walsh (Accession no.: B02461496J, Microfilm no.: NL19878); Sunny Singapore: A Series of 38 Photogravure Views in Sepia Tone (192–?). Singapore: Kelly & Walsh (Accession no: B03061823A; Microfilm no: NL10188); Winstedt, R. (1916). Malayan Memories. Singapore: Kelly & Walsh (Accession no.: B02975273B; Microfilm no.: NL5876). Collection of the National Library, Singapore.*

such as *Studies from the Institute for Medical Research* (1901–?) and the *Journal of the Federated Malay States Museums* (1906–41).

Several titles published by Kelly & Walsh also reflect the commercial interests of Malaya at the time. Some of these were: *Gold and Silver Assaying with Appendix of Blowpipe Tests for the Identification of Common Minerals* (1904), written by the Inspector of Mines of the Federated Malay States; *Planter's Medical Guide* (1913); *The Valuation of Rubber Estates for Valuers, Investors and Planters* (1914); and *The Improvement of Yield in Hevea Brasiliensis* (1930), among others.

In addition, Kelly & Walsh released lifestyle and self-improvement books – both for light and serious reading on various genres and topics – ranging from law, sports and hobbies to cooking, literature and pictorial works that appealed to a wide variety of tastes and preferences. Examples include *Cycling in Malaya* (1899); *Rules of Golf* (1899); *Amateur Gardening* (1931); *The Law of the Straits Settlements – A Commentary* (1915); The second edition of *The "Mems" Own Cookery Book* (1922); and even a how-to book on that bane of anyone who loves good food – *Slimming Diets for the Tropics* (1936).

After World War II, Kelly & Walsh's publishing output declined, and was confined mainly to reprints of older works. Very few new titles were released. Among its last publications was a Malayan landscape calendar published in 1953.

Printer of Good Books

Although Kelly & Walsh began publishing in Singapore as early as 1887, it did not print its own books until the firm set up a printing and book-binding department in January 1899. Prior to that, all of its printing work was contracted to commercial printers such as the Singapore and Straits Printing Office, Koh Yew Hean Press and Fraser & Neave. The firm's printing business expanded in 1904[12] when it established a facility at 194 Orchard Road (where Paragon shopping centre stands today) to print its own publications as well as external jobs such as government orders.

Unfortunately, Kelly & Walsh's printing business suffered: intense market competition and depressed prices compelled the firm to sell off its printing plant to competitor Fraser & Neave in 1924. Kelly & Walsh returned to outsourcing its printing jobs to commercial printers like Malayan Publishing House, Liang Brothers and Jitts & Co. ♦

Notes

1 The King of Siam. (1896, May 19). *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, p. 3. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
2 The firm was first located at No. 5 Battery before it moved to No. 6.
3 The property was acquired for $345,000 and comprised the unit numbers 32, 32-1, 32-2, 32-3, 32-4 and 33 Raffles Place, as well as Nos. 1, 1-1, 3, 3-1, 5, 5A, 5B, 5C, 7, 7A, 7B, 9, 9-1, 9A, 9B, 11, 11A, 11B, 13, 13A, and 13B Change Alley.
4 Petrovitch also designed the Tanjong Pagar Railway Station.
5 Best known for his work at the Old Supreme Court (present day National Gallery Singapore).
6 Crittall is an iconic brand of windows that was founded in the UK in 1884.
7 Colonial editions are editions of books sold at lower prices for distribution in colonial markets.
8 This figure was derived through a count of the titles listed in the *Memoranda of Books Registered in the Catalogue of Books Printed in the Straits Settlements* and in WorldCat (www.worldcat.org).
9 A copy of this title is held by The British Library.
10 Proudfoot, I. (1986). A formative period in Malay book publishing. *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, 59*(2 (251)), 101–132, p. 114. Retrieved from JSTOR via NLB's eResources website.
11 A copy of this edition is held in the Emil Lüring collection of the Goethe University Library in Frankfurt.
12 Construction of the printing plant began in 1903.

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Page 1 Advertisements Column 6: Kelly & Walsh Ltd. (1898, September 30). *The Straits Times*, p. 1. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
Page 2 Advertisements Column 2: Kelly & Walsh, Limited. (1899, January 30). *The Straits Times*, p. 2. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
Page 2 Advertisements Column 4: Seibudo Syoten. (1943, December 14). *The Syonan Shimbun*, p. 2. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
Page 21 Advertisements Column 1: Modern architecture comes to Raffles Place: Kelly & Walsh. (1935, September 5). *The Straits Times*, p. 21. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
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Raffles Place developments. (1935, April 3). *The Straits Times*, p. 13. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
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May Singapore Flourish! Revisiting the Municipal Coat of Arms

In April 1948, the municipality of Singapore received a coat of arms by royal warrant. **Mark Wong** highlights the significance of this document.

Mark Wong is an Oral History Specialist at the Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, where he conducts oral history interviews in areas such as education, the performing arts, public service and the Japanese Occupation. He is co-curator of the exhibition, "Law of the Land: Highlights of Singapore's Constitutional Documents", at the National Gallery Singapore.

If you've ever been to Mount Emily Park[1] and wondered about the colourful coat of arms mounted on the wall at its entrance, the answer to its identity lies in one of the documents on display at the exhibition, "Law of the Land: Highlights of Singapore's Constitutional Documents".

Among the colonial-era documents at the exhibition held at the National Gallery Singapore is the *Royal Warrant Assigning Armorial Ensigns for the City of Singapore* – easily one of the most ornate of the items on display.

Seen from the present perspective, the royal warrant – dated 9 April 1948 and almost 70 years old today – marks a transitional but significant period in Singapore's history. A celebrated document in its day, the royal warrant represented a proud moment for a town that was still steeped in the hallowed symbols and practices of British colonial tradition, just three years after the end of the Japanese Occupation and resumption of British rule. But more importantly, the issue of the warrant also marked a watershed moment in Singapore's eventful journey towards self-government and eventual independence.

The Royal Warrant

The royal warrant arrived in Singapore by ship in August 1948 "in a long red box, with G.R. VI embossed on it in gold"[2], a reference to King George VI, the British monarch who reigned from 1936 to 1952. The warrant was the result of an application made in July 1947 by the Singapore Municipal Commissioners to the College of Arms (College of Heralds), England, to register a coat of arms (armorial ensigns) for the Singapore Municipal Commission.[3] The College of Arms and its functions still exist in the present day, and registering the design ensures that no other entity can use a similar design.

The warrant is written in fine copperplate calligraphy on parchment and measures 45 by 62 cm, inclusive of three elaborate seals attached at the base. The seals represent the three kings of arms, who are the senior officers of the College of Arms: specifically, the Garter King of Arms, Clarenceux King of Arms, and Norroy and Ulster King of Arms.

What is most visually striking about the warrant are the four coats of arms found on the top and left of the document. The three arms at the top represent the authorities granting the arms: in the centre lies the royal arms of the United Kingdom, flanked by the arms of the Earl Marshal of England (the Duke of Norfolk) on the left, and the arms of the College of Arms on the right.

The Municipal Coat of Arms

On the left of the document, significantly larger than the arms above it, is the new municipal coat of arms. A description of the arms can be found in the warrant, in the form of the official blazon:

> "Gules a Tower issuant from the base proper on the battlements thereof a Lion passant guardant Or on a Chief embattled of the last a pair of Wings conjoined in base between two Anchors Azure And for the Crest On a Wreath Argent and Azure In front of a Palm tree fructed proper issuant from a Mount Vert a Lion passant Or."

Written in the language of heraldry – an Anglicised version of Norman French – this translates into modern English as:

> "A red shield, with a tower at the bottom. On the top of the tower, a golden lion walking, with one paw raised, looking to its left. Above the shield, with battlement effect, another panel of gold, with a pair of wings flanked by two blue anchors. The crest is a wreath of blue and silver leaves with another golden lion in front of a palm tree with coconuts on it, growing out of a green mound."[4]

The images in the coat of arms are rich in symbolic meaning, some having been in public circulation for decades. The golden lion atop the tower previously represented Singapore on the coat of arms of the recently dissolved Straits Settlements.[5] The pairs of wings and anchors highlight Singapore's twin roles in international communications as seaport (since its founding in 1819) and as air hub (with the 1937 opening of Kallang Airport, one of the most modern in the world) at the time.

The Royal Warrant Assigning Armorial Ensigns for the City of Singapore, 9 April 1948. *Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

The crest of the Singapore municipality, consisting of a lion with a coconut palm behind it, appears at the top of the coat of arms. The municipal crest was well known to the people of Singapore as it was displayed in various locations around the town, including the pair of bronze plaques at Elgin Bridge, engraved by the Italian sculptor Rodolfo Nolli.

The Municipal Motto

What may surprise people are the words "Majulah Singapura" inscribed just below the shield. The Malay phrase is well known today as the title of Singapore's national anthem and translates as "Onward Singapore". The anthem was officially unveiled in December 1959 as one of three new state symbols in a newly self-governing Singapore. However, the appearance of the phrase on the 1948 royal warrant indicates a much longer history.

In fact, "Majulah Singapura" was the municipal motto of Singapore before World War II. According to an article in the 28 January 1940 edition of *The Straits Times*, the motto was originally written in English as "May Singapore Flourish".

A HERALDIC GLOSSARY

Argent: Silver
Azure: Blue
Chief: Referring to the upper part of a heraldic device
Embattled: Having battlements
Fructed proper: Bearing correct fruit
Guardant: On guard
Gules: Red
Issuant: Coming from
Or: Gold
Passant: Passing or in motion
Mount vert: A green mount

The English motto was translated into Malay as "Biar-lah Singapura Untong", with the Malay version featuring on the official Municipal common seal. However, the words "biar-lah" (to let/allow) and "untong" (profit) were subsequently changed following a suggestion by the President of the Singapore Municipal Commissioners Lazarus Rayman, a Malay scholar. He felt that the word "untong" conveyed "mere commercial profit", whereas "maju" expressed "the higher ideal of a continuous advancement commercially". Besides, "maju" was "commonly used by Malay royalty whenever they pray for the prosperity of their country."[6]

After World War II, "Majulah Singapura" grew in use and popularity. For example, the phrase was widely used in speeches and printed on decorative arches on City Day on 22 September 1951, in celebration of Singapore's new status as a city of the British Commonwealth instead of a town. "Majulah Singapura" became a locus of budding patriotism amid a population that was becoming more politically conscious and emotionally attached to Singapore.

In 1952, Singapore City Councillor M.P.D. Nair even suggested that "instead of greeting each other with 'hello,' 'good morning' or 'good evening,' people should say 'Majulah Singapura'" instead. He felt that this would deepen their attachment to the city and "foster a new spirit".[7]

Singapore's use of a Malay motto provided inspiration to Penang, which similarly adopted an official motto in 1950. When the Penang Settlement Council had to decide between a Malay or English motto, council member K. Mohd. Ariff pointed to Singapore's choice of a Malay motto to sway the council, "It is Singapore's motto that stimulated your committee to think, I hope, on right lines and at the same time pay a tribute to those far-sighted pioneers who coined 'Majulah Singapura' as the slogan for Singapore." [8] Penang eventually adopted the Malay motto "Bersatu dan Setia" (United and Loyal).

The Singapore Municipal Commission

The royal warrant acknowledges the role of the Singapore Municipal Commission in applying for the new municipal coat of arms. The role and evolution of the Municipal Commission – created in 1887 to oversee local urban affairs such as water supply, electricity, gas, drains, roads and street lighting – was emblematic of Singapore's journey towards self-governance. According to geographer Brenda Yeoh:

> "The municipal authority was an integral part of the colonial power structure and served as an institution of control over the built environment of the colonial city. [The creation of the Municipal Commission] was both a response to the growing need for a more sophisticated machinery to run a burgeoning city as well as 'a sort of compromise' to satisfy local demands, largely articulated by the resident European population, for more control over local affairs."[9]

While the composition and concerns of the Municipal Commission from the late 19th century tended to be European-centric and "hardly addressed the needs and aspirations of the Asian plebeian classes on their own terms",[10] this changed after World War II. "The British attached great importance on local government as a training ground for democracy and extended its scope in the post-war years."[11]

In 1949, the Municipal Commission became the first public institution to be installed with a popularly elected majority when 18 out of the 27 commissioners were elected.[12] This expanded local political participation in preparation for Singapore's self-governance and subsequent independence. The Municipal Commission was renamed City Council in 1951 when Singapore attained city status.[13]

Reflecting on an Unfamiliar Past

What is the significance of an obscure coat of arms from a bygone era in contemporary Singapore? *The Royal Warrant Assigning Armorial Ensigns for the City of Singapore* – with its archaic language, colonial symbols of authority and references to obsolete institutions such as the Singapore Municipal Commission – seems so distant from our lives today. By understanding its context and unpacking its meaning, however, we find in the royal warrant a record of a turning point in Singapore's history.

Singapore in 1948 was poised to build its own self-determined future. But even as the first signs of political consciousness took root among the local populace, many of the foundations developed over a century of British rule remained – the rule of law, principles of urban planning, and the installation of certain forms of government and political institutions, among others. The social and political changes of the postwar years are best illustrated by the evolution in the meaning of the phrase Majulah Singapura – from the aspirational "May Singapore Flourish" of the municipal motto to the self-assured "Onward Singapore" of Singapore's national anthem.

The royal warrant thus reveals Singapore in 1948 to be in a liminal zone, caught between the weight of colonial history and the promise of a new world. ♦

Coronation of King George VI and Queen Elizabeth as King and Queen of the United Kingdom, 12 May 1937. The royal warrant reached Singapore in August 1948 in a long red box bearing the initials of King George VI, the reigning British monarch. *Sng Chong Hui Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

A COLONIAL TRADITION

Heraldry, which refers to the "system by which coats of arms and other armorial bearings are devised, described, and regulated",[1] has its origins in 12th-century Europe when designs on shields became a way by which medieval armies differentiated between friend and foe from a distance. Today, individuals, families, organisations, corporations and states can all apply for their own coat of arms. With its elaborate designs, symbols and meanings, the coat of arms is essentially a unique visual representation of one's identity. Although a predominantly European practice, heraldic traditions are also found in Japan, where emblems or crests known as *mon* are used.[2]

Notes

1 Oxford University Press. (2017). *Heraldry.* Retrieved from Oxford Dictionaries website.
2 Slater, S. (2002). *The complete book of heraldry: An international history of heraldry and its contemporary uses* (p. 232). London: Lorenz. (Call no.: q929.6 SLA)

(Far left) Portrait of Lazarus Rayman by William Haxworth. Rayman, as president of the Singapore Municipal Commission, was mentioned by name in the royal warrant. *WRM Haxworth Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*
(Left) The 1948 municipal coat of arms still features prominently today at the entrance of Mount Emily Park. *Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

The Royal Warrant Assigning Armorial Ensigns for the City of Singapore, along with other rare materials from the National Archives of Singapore and National Library, are on display at the permanent exhibition "Law of the Land: Highlights of Singapore's Constitutional Documents". The exhibition takes place at the Chief Justice's Chamber & Office, National Gallery Singapore.

Notes

1 The park is the site of the former Mount Emily Swimming Complex, Singapore's first public pool, which was converted from a service reservoir and opened in 1931. The reservoir was built in 1878 to supply the town with fresh water.
2 The "R" in G.R. VI is an abbreviation of Rex (King). See New coat of arms arrives. (1948, August 15). *The Straits Times*, p. 5. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
3 S'pore seeks coat of arms. (1947, July 30). *The Singapore Free Press*, p. 5. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
4 *The Straits Times*, 15 Aug 1947, p. 5.
5 The crest of the Straits Settlements arms came in four quadrants, each representing a constituent settlement – Singapore, Melaka, Penang and Labuan. The British dissolved the Straits Settlements on 1 April 1946, with Melaka and Penang joining the Malayan Union, and Singapore becoming a crown colony of its own. Labuan was incorporated into the crown colony of North Borneo on 15 July 1946.
6 Word changed on Singapore's common seal. (1940, January 28). *The Straits Times*, p. 9. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
7 Say 'Majulah Singapura' he suggests. (1952, July 15). *The Straits Times*, p. 4. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
8 Official motto for Penang adopted: 'United and Loyal'. (1950, November 7). *Singapore Standard*, p. 4. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
9 Yeoh, B. S. A. (2003). *Contesting space in colonial Singapore: Power relations and the urban built environment* (p. 28). Singapore: University Press. (Call no.: RSING 307.76095957 YEO)
10 Yeoh, 2003, p. 30.
11 Turnbull, C. M. (2009). *A history of modern Singapore, 1819–2005* (p. 269). Singapore: NUS Press. (Call no.: RSING 959.57 TUR-[HIS])
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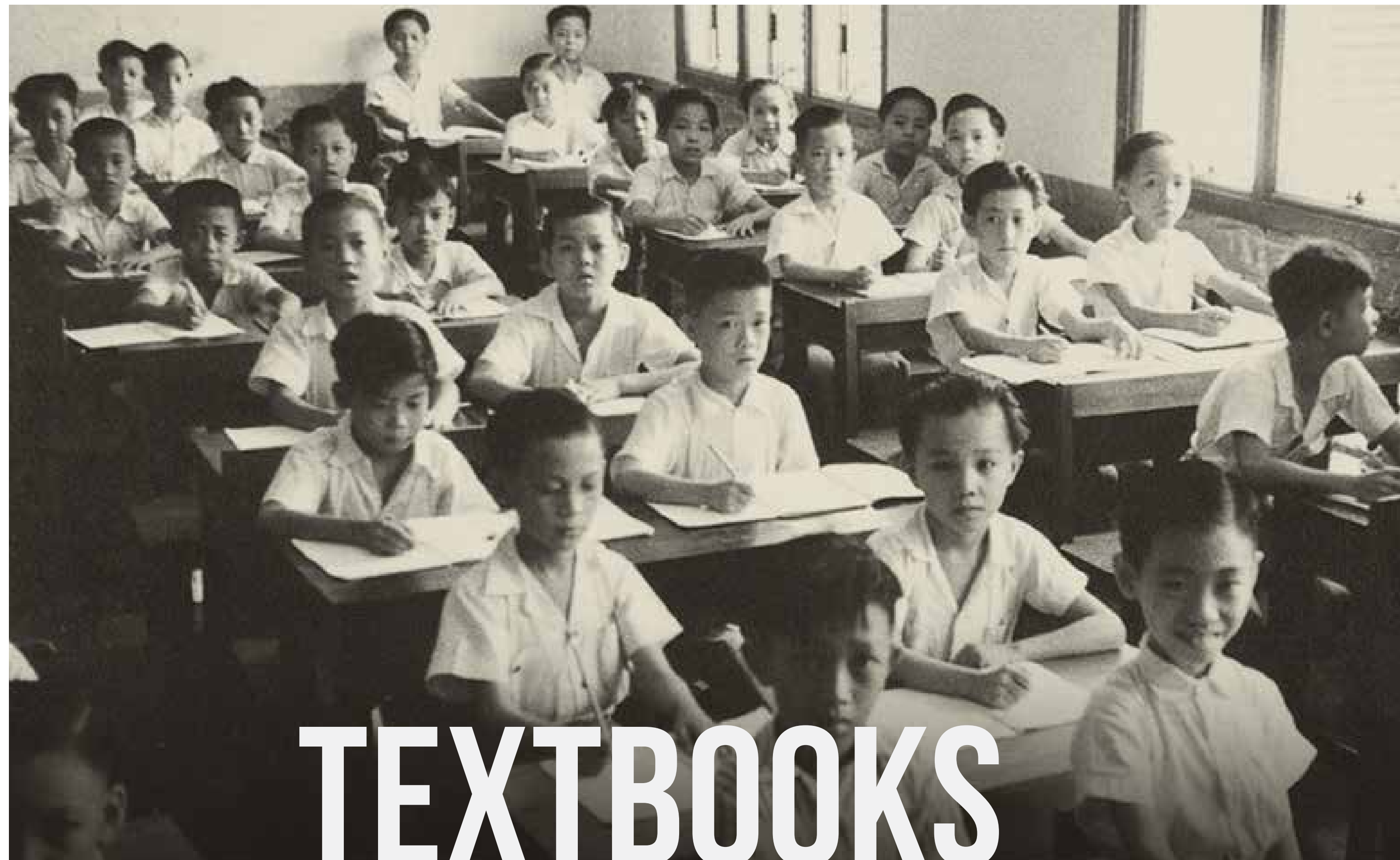

(Facing page) A typical classroom scene in 1950s Singapore. *Courtesty of National Archives of Singapore.*

TEXTBOOKS WE REMEMBER

Shereen Tay pores through the National Library's collection of old primary school English textbooks, and uncovers some classics in the process.

"PETS!" exclaimed my friend in glee as she was combing through the National Library Board's online catalogue. No, she was not referring to adorable cats or dogs but *PETS* (*Primary English Thematic Series*), the English textbooks used by primary school students in Singapore between 1991 and 1995.

The *PETS* textbooks were considered ahead of their time, a period that saw a considerable shift in the design and approach to teaching English in Singapore. What was so innovative about these textbooks? Was it the colourful pictorials, the lessons that revolved around themes or the iconic animal mascot found in each series?

Sifting through the National Library's Legal Deposit Collection of primary school English textbooks gives one a sense of how the English curriculum and textbooks have evolved over the years. As I belong to the generation that grew up with *PETS*, I couldn't help but feel a twinge of nostalgia when I stumbled upon these familiar textbooks of my formative years.

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The Early English Textbooks

Until the 1950s, English textbooks used in primary schools in Singapore were imported mainly from the United Kingdom. Among these were *The Beacon Readers*, *Janet and John Basic Readers* and *First Aid in English*. The British firmly believed that Malayan students in local schools should be taught English exactly the same way as students back home in England.

While such imported textbooks were helpful tools – given the absence of viable alternatives – in teaching English to Asian students, they also suffered from serious shortcomings. Not only were foreign books unsuitable for the local population who had little or no knowledge of the English language, but they also imparted ideas and values that were incompatible with life in Singapore.

There were efforts, albeit sporadic, in the post-war years to design teaching and reading materials that specifically catered to students in Singapore, such as the *Malayan Children's Bookshelf* series published by Donald Moore, and *MPH Dramatic Readers* for Standard One to Seven students, produced by the Singapore and Johor Teachers' Associations.[1]

The first formal attempt to develop a new English syllabus for Malayan students took place in 1959 by the Committee of Syllabus and Textbooks from the Ministry of Education (MOE). The committee revised the curriculum of all subjects in primary and secondary schools, and encouraged writers and publishers to produce textbooks with strong Malayan content.[2] *English Today* (South East Asian Edition), used in primary schools in the 1960s, was one of the first English textbooks produced as part of this effort.

Textbooks for Teachers, by Teachers

In the early years of its formation, MOE concentrated on planning the school syllabus and left the development of English textbooks to commercial publishers. However, when the ministry realised that the output of Singapore publishers was not up to scratch, it decided to publish its own textbooks. A study commissioned in 1979 concluded that high-quality textbooks were necessary to complement teaching in the classroom, and recommended that MOE take charge of developing the full suite of learning materials for both teachers and students.

This led to the formation of the Curriculum Development Institute of Singapore (CDIS) in 1980. CDIS, which comprised experienced teachers, subject specialists and writers, developed a comprehensive set of teaching materials – the 1984 *New English Series for Primary Education* and the *Primary English Programme*, each with its own set of course books, phonics books, practice books and audiovisual materials. The effort paid off as the textbooks produced by CDIS were of considerably higher quality than that of commercial publishers.[3]

In 1987, English became the medium of instruction in all schools. This period also saw a change in the pedagogy of English. Textbooks, which had long focused on accuracy in pronunciation, spelling, grammar and teaching through sentence pattern drills and repeated exercises, changed to a hands-on learning experience. MOE realised that language learning was no longer habitual but organic, and language competency grew when students were immersed in a language-rich environment that allowed them to use the language in everyday life.

The adoption of new teaching methodology produced the innovative *PETS* textbook in 1991. Unlike its predecessors, lessons were built around themes such as personal relationships, science and nature. Thematic teaching provided the context through which students could learn English through meaningful practice exercises and activities. Conversely, the syllabus moved away from phonetics and the study of grammar.[4]

Return to Former Pedagogy

The CDIS closed in 1996 and the production of textbooks returned to commercial publishers. MOE felt that with proper guidance, publishing companies were now capable of producing high-quality textbooks that were aligned with the official curriculum.

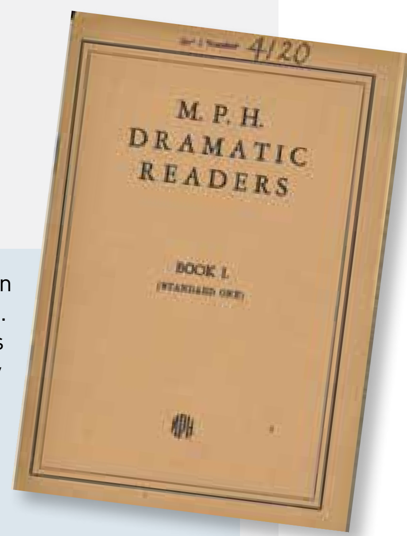
The syllabus, too, had come full circle. While textbooks produced under the 2001 English syllabus, such as *Treks*, *Pals*, *Celebrate and Insteps*, continued to emphasise integration of skills, contextual teaching and group work, MOE recognised the need to study formal grammar in order to arrest falling standards of English-language competency.[5]

Textbooks will continue to evolve as they keep pace with the changing needs of society and new pedagogical approaches, but for students who study whatever textbooks they are told to, it is the memories they evoke of school days that are likely to be remembered the most. ♦

HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE LEGAL DEPOSIT COLLECTION

Over the years, the National Library has built up – via Legal Deposit – a collection of works published in Singapore. These include school textbooks and reading materials on the study of the English language. Here are some highlights of primary school English textbooks from the collection:

M.P.H. Dramatic Readers: A Series of Dramatic Readers for English Schools in Malaya (3rd edition,1953)
Published by Malaya Publishing House and produced by the Singapore and Johor Teachers' Associations, this series was used by Standard One to Seven students as supplementary material. Comprising more than 80 plays across seven books, the series was specially developed for Malayan students to help them learn English through the use of contextual information. For example, familiar terms such as "towkay" and "sultan" were included, and characters who belonged to local ethnic groups were given local names. The National Library has the first four books of the third edition.



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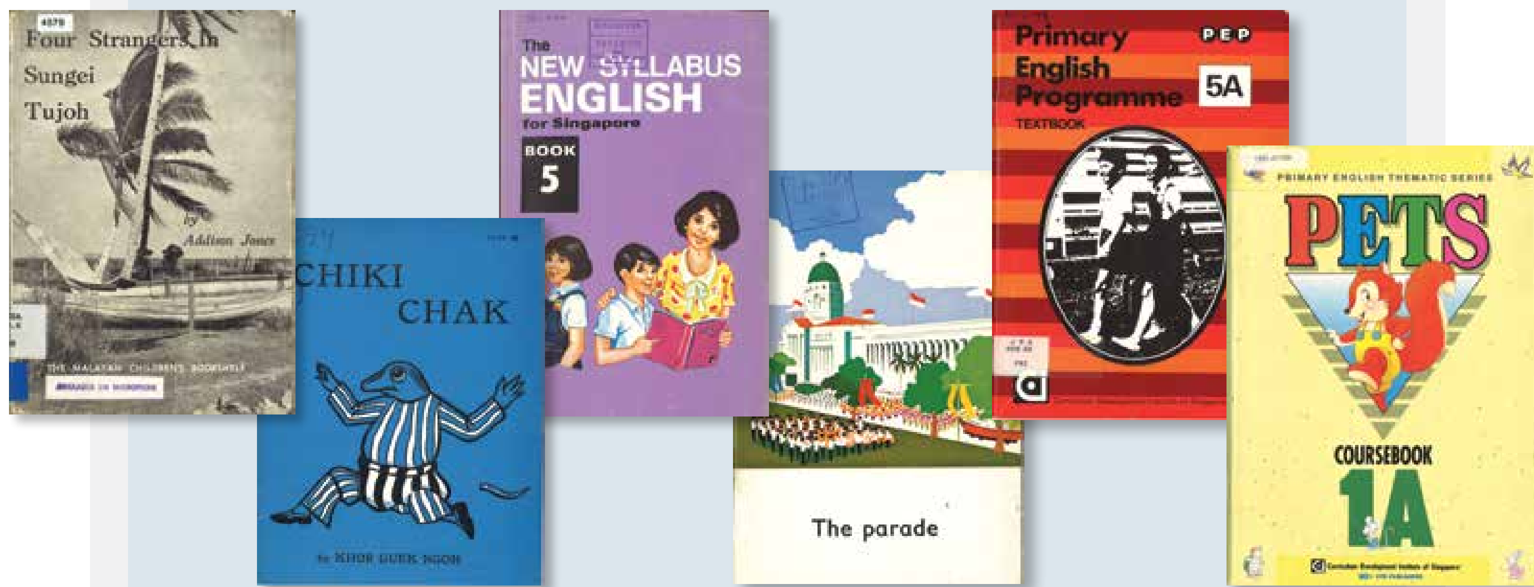

Ahmad, Shaida and Meng on Casuarina Island (1955); **Four Strangers in Sungei Tujoh** (1957); **Ahmad, Shaida and Meng on Green River** (1957)
Inspired by the 1883 classic *Treasure Island* by Robert Louis Stevenson, the adventures of Ahmad, Shaida and Meng were a series of stories written specially for Malayan children. Part of the *Malayan Children's Bookshelf* series published by Donald Moore, the books aimed to help inculcate the love of reading in English.

English Today (1961–1965)
Published by Federal Publications, this series was adapted from the United Kingdom's textbook of the same name for the English language syllabus of Singapore and the Federation of Malaya. The textbooks were organised by chapters comprising short stories or essays and accompanied by practice exercises.

Chiki Chak (1962)
An English storybook published by Donald Moore for Malayan children that imparted moral values. The protagonist, Chiki Chak, was a young lizard who learnt a valuable lesson on disobedience. For a local flavour, Chiki Chak and his parents were dressed in traditional Malay attire.

New Syllabus English for Singapore (1971–1973)
Both a textbook and workbook, the *New Syllabus English for Singapore* was published by Preston Corporation and based on the Ministry of Education's official syllabus. Revision exercises and language drills were greatly emphasised, a typical pedagogy of this period in the 1970s.

Minah and Her House; The Monkey, the Elephant, the Tiger and the Mouse-deer; The Parade (1974)
Part of the 24 readers developed and published under the Ministry of Education's Primary Pilot Project, the books were designed to integrate the learning of English with mathematics and science. For example, children learnt to count and studied science concepts such as reflection.

Primary English Programme (1982–1984)
This was one of two series of English textbooks developed by the Curriculum Development Institute of Singapore in the 1980s and published by Educational Publications Bureau. Lessons were presented in the form of interesting and humorous stories to engage and appeal to students. Each story was accompanied by exercises on grammar, vocabulary and self-expression.

PETS (Primary English Thematic Series) (1991–1995)
PETS were the only English textbooks used in primary schools in the 1990s. Markedly different from its predecessors in its use of thematic lessons, each textbook also injected an element of fun by featuring an animal mascot hidden among its pages for students to find. The series was published by Educational Publications Bureau.

WHAT IS THE LEGAL DEPOSIT?

One of the statutory functions of the National Library Board Act is Legal Deposit. Under the act, all publishers, commercial or otherwise, are required by law to deposit two copies of every work published in Singapore with the National Library within four weeks of its publication. The Legal Deposit function ensures that Singapore's published heritage is preserved for future generations. Legal Deposit also acts as a repository for published materials, providing exposure via the online catalogue, PublicationSG: catalogue.nlb.gov.sg/publicationsg. For more information, please visit www.nlb.gov.sg/Deposit.

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