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EARLY PHOTOGRAPHS OF SINGAPORE 1841–1918

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Director's Note

Welcome to the final issue of *BiblioAsia* for the year.

Do make time to visit the National Library's latest exhibition, "On Paper: Singapore Before 1867", which takes place at level 10 of the National Library building until March 2020. We preview several paper-based artefacts – four paintings, two poems in Jawi script, a map and a Russian travelogue – that feature in the exhibition capturing Singapore's history from the 17th century to when it became a British Crown Colony on 1 April 1867. Many of the artefacts in the exhibition, some of which are on loan from overseas institutions, are on public display for the first time.

The first practical method of creating permanent images with a camera was unveiled to the world by Frenchman Louis Daguerre in 1839, so it is no surprise that Europeans dominated the photography business in 19th-century Singapore. Some of the earliest images of landscapes and people here were taken by the likes of Gaston Dutronquoy, John Thomson, the Sachtler brothers and G.R. Lambert. Janice Loo charts the rise and fall of Singapore's first photographic studios.

The "five-footway" is another inherited tradition from Singapore's colonial days. The sheltered walkway between shophouse and street, however, was a source of irritation for many Europeans, who objected to Asians taking over the five-footways to peddle food and all manner of goods. The squabble for space led to a three-day riot in the town centre in 1888, according to Fiona Lim.

As part of the annual Hindu festival of Navaratri, a colourful doll display called Golu takes pride of place in many homes and temples in Singapore over nine nights. Anasuya Soundararajan tells us how this time-honoured tradition, which has its roots in 14th-century India, is celebrated here.

During the Malayan Emergency, Chinese people living in Malaya's jungle fringes were resettled into heavily fortified "New Villages" so that communist insurgents would not be able to infiltrate the civilian population to enlist their help. But the communists still managed to outwit the British authorities, as Ronnie Tan reveals.

Most of the stories told about the Japanese Occupation recount the experiences of the Chinese community in Singapore. In the closing months of 1941, a 12-year-old Indian boy by the name of K. Ramakanthan fled from Perak to Johor with his family to escape the advancing Japanese troops. Aishwariyaa Ramakanthan shares her father's riveting account of his scramble to safety.

The authors of a recently published book have put together enough evidence to confirm that *Xin Ke*, or *The Immigrant*, produced in 1927, is the first full-length feature film to be made in Singapore and Malaya. Jocelyn Lau tracks the making of this milestone movie.

Last but not least, Chua Jun Yan delves into the history of Dieppe Barracks, the former home of British and New Zealand soldiers; Lim Tin Seng shares highlights of Singapore publications in the digital collection of the Biodiversity Heritage Library; and Goh Yu Mei examines the Tan Swie Hian Collection to reveal what drives the creative meanderings of Singapore's foremost multidisciplinary artist.

Ms Tan Huism
Director
National Library

Editorial & Production

Managing Editor
Francis Dorai

Editor
Veronica Chee

Editorial Support
Masamah Ahmad
Fiona Lim

Contributors
Aishwariyaa Ramakanthan
Anasuya Soundararajan
Azhar Ibrahim
Chua Jun Yan
Fiona Lim
Georgina Wong
Goh Yu Mei
Gracie Lee
Janice Loo
Jocelyn Lau
Lim Tin Seng
Peter Borschberg
Ronnie Tan

Design and Print
Oxygen Studio Designs Pte Ltd

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

On the cover
A Chinese hawker and his customer.
Note: the image has been digitally coloured and enhanced for this cover illustration.
Image reproduced from Lambert, G.R. (1890). Fotoalbum Singapur. Singapore: G.R. Lambert. Collection of the National Library, Singapore.

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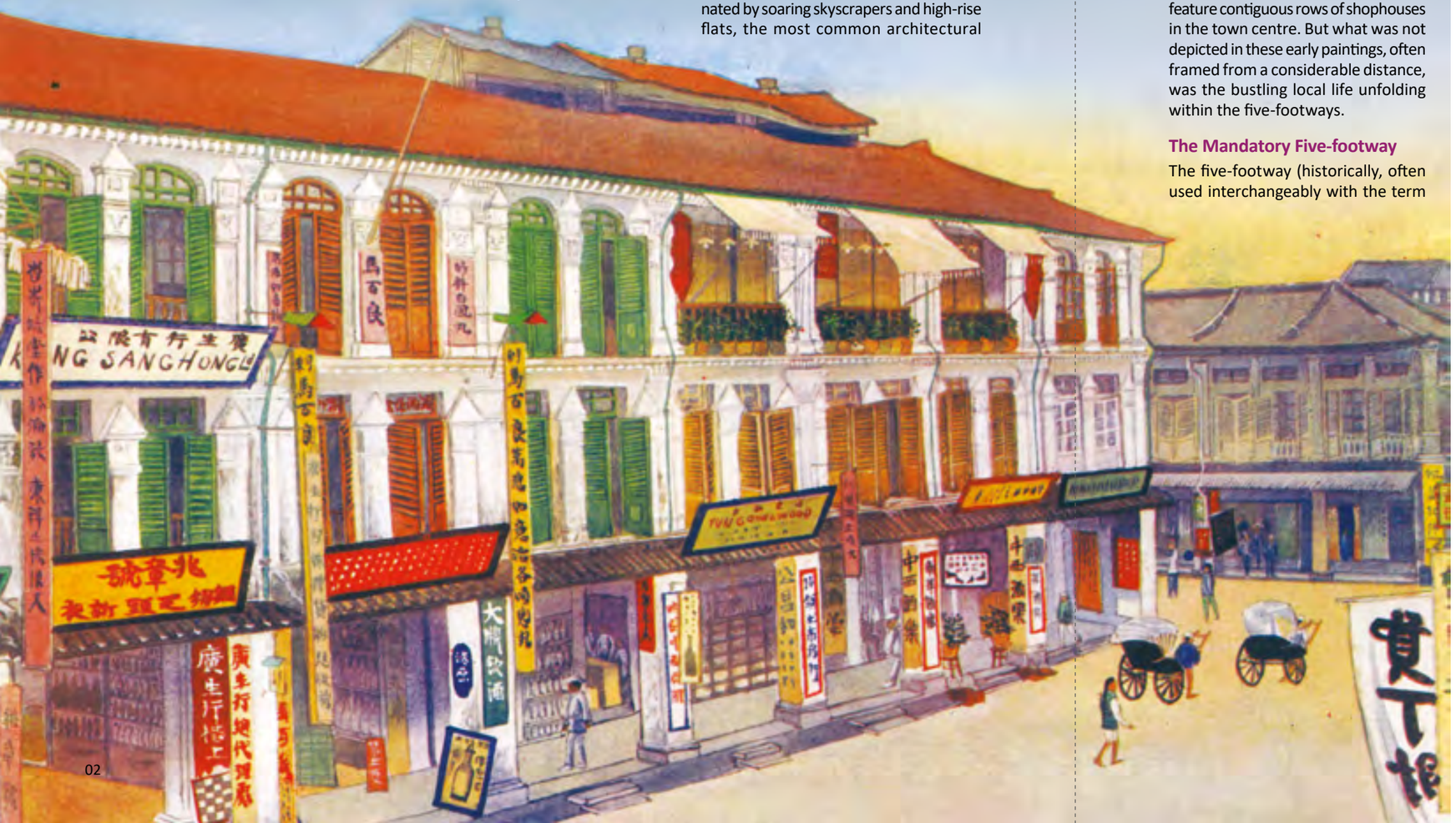
Give Me Shelter

The Five-footway Story

The five-footway – the equivalent to the modern-day pavement or sidewalk – was a hotly contested space in colonial Singapore. **Fiona Lim** relives its colourful history.



"Crowded, bustling, layered, constantly shifting, and seemingly messy, these sites and activities possess an order and hierarchy often visible and comprehensible only to their participants, thereby escaping common understanding and appreciation."[1]

– Hou & Chalana, 2016

It may seem surprising in today's context but the concept of a "messy urbanism" as defined by academics Jeffrey Hou and Manish Chalana is an apt description of Singapore in the 19th and mid-20th centuries. Such a phenomenon was played out in the five-footways of the town's dense Asian quarters, including Chinatown, Little India and Kampong Glam.

Before Singapore's skyline was dominated by soaring skyscrapers and high-rise flats, the most common architectural type was the shophouse. A typical shophouse unit comprises a ground-floor shop and a residential area above that extends outwards, thus increasing the living space above and creating a sheltered walkway below called the "five-footway", between the street and entrance to the shophouse. Today, depending on the area, shophouses are highly sought after as commercial spaces or as private residences; they rarely function as both shop and house.

Early paintings of Singapore by Government Surveyor of the Straits Settlements John Turnbull Thomson – such as "Singapore Town from the Government Hill Looking Southeast" (1846; see page 34) and "View of Chinatown from Pearl's Hill" (1847) – feature contiguous rows of shophouses in the town centre. But what was not depicted in these early paintings, often framed from a considerable distance, was the bustling local life unfolding within the five-footways.

The Mandatory Five-footway

The five-footway (historically, often used interchangeably with the term "verandah") was originally mandated by Stamford Raffles as part of his 1822 Town Plan of Singapore – also known as the Jackson Plan. Article 18 of the plan states: "Description of houses to be constructed, each house to have a verandah open at all times as a continued and covered passage on each side of the street." This was to be carried out "for the sake of uniformity" in the townscape.[2] Raffles' intention to have the verandah "open at all times" would be frequently invoked in future contentions about the use of this space.

Scholars suggest that Raffles became acquainted with this architectural feature during his time as Lieutenant-General of Java. The Dutch colonisers had earlier introduced covered walkways and implemented a regular street alignment in Batavia (present-day Jakarta), capital of the Dutch East Indies.[3]

In the late 19th and right up to the mid-20th century, an assortment of traders, from tinsmiths, barbers and cobblers to letter writers and parrot astrologers, conducted their businesses along the five-footways, while hawkers peddled food, drinks and even household sundries.

Operating in the five-footway required minimal capital, and thus it was the most viable option for those with little means. In turn, vendors could provide essential goods and services to consumers cheaply. The five-footway came to sustain the economic and social life of a working class of mainly immigrants who had come to Singapore to find work, hoping to give their families back home a better life.

Although the lives of Asian migrants in Singapore were steeped in this ecosystem, many Europeans found this vernacular environment appalling. Those who considered this social space as a novelty tended to view it as "exotic", as John Cameron, former editor of *The Straits Times*, did when he wrote: "[I]n a quiet observant walk through [the five-footways] a very great deal may be learned concerning the peculiar manners and customs of the trading inhabitants".[4]

British traveller and naturalist Isabella Bird was similarly taken by the liveliness of the five-footways when she visited Singapore in 1879:

> "… more interesting still are the bazaars or continuous rows of open shops which create for themselves a perpetual twilight by hanging tatties or other screens outside the sidewalks, forming long shady alleys, in which crowds of buyers and sellers chaffer over their goods."[5]

Fiona Lim is a freelance writer, editor and researcher who is interested in the complexities of a city and its people.

(Facing page) Painting of a row of shophouses and the five-footway running along the facade. *Image reproduced from Morton-Cameron, W.H., & Feldwick, W. (Eds.). (2012). Present Day Impressions of the Far East and Prominent & Progressive Chinese at Home and Abroad: The History, People, Commerce, Industries, and Resources of China, Hong Kong, Indo-China, Malaya, and Netherlands India (vol. 2; facing p. 810). Tokyo: Edition Synapse. (Call no.: RSING 950 PRE)*

(Below) A photo of China Street showing the rows of shophouses and their five-footways by G.R. Lambert & Co., c. 1890s. *Courtesy of Editions Didier Millet.*

THE VERANDAH RIOTS

On 21 February 1888, under orders from Municipal President T.I. Rowell, municipal inspectors began clearing away obstructions along five-footways in the Kampong Glam area. As the authorities moved towards North Bridge Road, many shopkeepers shuttered their shops in protest. Chinese secret societies also began fomenting unrest – they had a stake in the five-footway trade as they offered "protection" to vendors in their territories in return for a fee. Soon, tramcars entering the town centre became the target of people armed with stones, and had their windows smashed.

The violence escalated the following day. Secret society members hurled stones and bricks at people and vehicles in the vicinity of South Bridge Road, China Street, Canal Road, Boat Quay and North Bridge Road. Europeans who ventured into these areas were pelted with stones, with a number of them sustaining injuries. The town came to a standstill as no carriages or rickshaws dared to ply the area. The disruption continued into 23 February.

Following a deadly confrontation with the police, the riots were quelled and, on the third day, shops began reopening. In the following weeks, local newspapers became once again fixated with the "Verandah Question". Eventually, the law was amended to relax the prohibition of five-footway obstruction – as long as the five-footway could accommodate people walking two abreast, the authorities took no action.

Life in the Five-footway

Depending on which part of town a traveller was exploring, he or she might be in for a rude shock if they believe the following description of the five-footway (c. 1840) by Major James Low, a long-time employee of the Straits Civil Service:

> "A stranger may well amuse himself for a couple of hours in threading the piazas [sic] in front of the shops, which he can do unmolested by sun, at any hour of the day."[6]

In reality, the five-footways in the town's Asian quarters teemed with so much obstruction and activity that pedestrians were all too often forced onto the road.

Low's view was not a popular one. In 1843, a disgruntled individual offered a sharply contradictory experience in a letter to *The Singapore Free Press*, arguing for the public right of way:

> "[The verandah] is or was intended to provide for the accommodation of the public by furnishing them with a walk where they might be in some degree free from the sun and dust, and be in no danger of sudden death from numerous Palankeens that are always careering along the middle of the way. But this seems to have been forgotten, and the natives have very coolly appropriated the verandahs to their own special use by erecting their stalls in it and making it a place for stowing their goods."[7]

The five-footway was originally intended for the use of pedestrians. Not only would the sheltered path provide respite from the tropical heat or a sudden downpour, it also served as a safe path away from road traffic. However, over time, the Asian communities began to use the five-footway for their own purposes, according to their needs and the realities of the day.

Pragmatic shop owners often used the five-footway outside their shop to store or display goods. The more enterprising ones rented out parcels of space to other small vendors – an attractive deal considering the good flow of human traffic and low overheads. Soon, all sorts of trades and activities began occupying the five-footways.[8]

In the Kampong Glam district, designated as the Arab quarters in Raffles' 1822 Town Plan, the five-footways became thriving sites for Bugis, Arab and Javanese businesses and all manner of Islamic trade. On Arab Street, historically referred to as Kampong Java, Javanese women sold flowers along the shophouse verandahs. So famous was this street for its flower trade that it was known as *Pookadei Sadakku* (Flower Street) in Tamil.

Meanwhile, lined up along the five-footways of nearby Bussorah Street were *ambin*, or platforms, on which people could rest or have a shuteye. Rosli bin Ridzwan, who grew up on Bussorah Street, recalled that whenever an elderly person was seated on the *ambin*, younger ones would greet him or her and promptly walk on the road alongside as a show of deference.[9]

The most common occupant of the five-footway was probably the food vendor. Hawkers were either itinerant, meaning they would move around looking for customers, or they might occupy a fixed spot on the five-footway or on the kerbside, sometimes even extending their makeshift stalls onto the road with tables and chairs. All manner of food were sold, including *satay*, *laksa*, "tok-tok" noodle, *putu mayam* and *kacang puteh*. During lull periods, some hawkers laid down their wares and took a nap in the five-footways.

An itinerant satay seller on the five-footway, c. 1911. *Andrew Tan Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

Besides food, one could find tradesmen and women engaging in various occupations that supported the inhabitants of the densely populated Chinatown. Letter-writers armed with ink and brush penned letters for illiterate customers or wrote festive couplets for Chinese celebrations.[10] Barbers simply pulled out a chair and hung a mirror on the wall in front before providing haircuts and shaves for customers.[11]

Foong Lai Kum, a former resident of Chinatown, remembered a man known as *jiandao lao* (剪刀佬; colloquially "Scissors Guy" in Mandarin) plying his trade on the five-footway of Sago Lane, sharpening the scissors used by young women working at rubber factories, or the knives used by hawkers or butchers.[12] And, thanks to the itinerant pot mender, one never had to shell out money for a new pot.[13]

Five-footway traders were also found in the Serangoon Road area, today's Little India. The lady selling *thairu* (curd) would be perched on a step, with packets of the Indian staple displayed on a wooden crate. On another five-footway nearby was the *paanwalla*, who prepared the betel-leaf-wrapped snack known as *paan*. Indian parrot astrologers were also a common sight: based on the customer's name and date of birth, these fortune tellers used green parakeets to pick a numbered card inscribed with the customer's fortune from a stack.[14]

During festive occasions like Hari Raya, Deepavali and Chinese New Year, shop owners and vendors packed the five-footways, with their goods often spilling onto the streets. And whenever a *wayang* (Chinese opera) performance or other communal event was staged, the five-footway became part of the viewing arena.

At dusk, as traders wound up for the day, residents gathered at the five-footway for a conversation, to smoke opium or just enjoy the fresh air. Many shophouse residences were occupied by coolies and *samsui* women, who each rented a tiny cubicle out of the many that had been carved up for subletting in a single unit. This resulted in cramped living quarters with poor ventilation. Unsurprisingly, residents preferred to relax outdoors after a hard day's work, and often the only available space was the five-footway below. Some even opted to sleep there at night as it was airier than their dank and overcrowded cubicles.[15]

(Above) A Chinese barber at work along a five-footway at Robertson Quay, 1985. *Ronni Pinsler Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

(Left) Two Chinese calligraphers at work along a five-footway in the 1960s. Sometimes, they may also be called upon to write letters for illiterate customers. *Kouo Shang-Wei Collection 郭尚慰珍藏. All rights reserved, Family of Kouo Shang-Wei and National Library Board Singapore.*

The five-footway did not merely serve economic needs – it was also a space for social interaction. Rather than being just a "conduit for human traffic" as it had originally been intended, academic Brenda S.A. Yeoh suggests that Asians perceived the five-footway in a "more ambivalent light", such that the space was "sufficiently elastic to allow the co-existence of definitions".[16] It was precisely this flexibility of use that created the colourful multiplicity of local life found in the five-footways.

A Public Health Threat

While mundane daily life unfolded in the five-footways, the authorities were dogged by sanitary issues such as clogged drains and sometimes even abandoned corpses. A strongly worded letter published in *The Straits Times* in 1892 by the municipal health officer accused "vagrant stallholders" of dumping refuse and bodily excretions into drains, causing an "abominable stench".[17]

An exasperated member of the public echoed this sentiment in 1925, calling the obstruction by hawkers a "grave menace not only to the safety but also to the cleanliness and order of the town".[18] The congestion of the five-footways prevented the municipality from carrying out sanitation works, such as the maintenance of drains. Over the years, the campaign to remove five-footway obstruction was often couched in the interests of public health and hygiene.

Adding to the public health threat was the issue of visual disorder, which was also anathema to the government. An article published in 1879 in the *Straits Times Overland Journal* bemoaned the state of chaos along the five-footways:

> "It is not too much to say that there is no well-regulated city in this world in which such a state of affairs as can be daily seen, in say China Street, would be permitted."[19]

Some Europeans also floated orientalist – and ultimately racist – conceptions of Asians in Singapore.

An 1898 article in *The Singapore Free Press* charged that the practice of obstructing a public walkway was "essentially Eastern" and attributed this to the Asians' supposed lack of civility, "as the large majority of those… have been born and brought up in places where our more civilised views do not prevail… it is the more difficult for the authorities to secure obedience to their wishes".[20]

Whose Right of Way?

As the public and private spheres met in the liminal space of the five-footway, conflict over the right of use became inevitable. Almost from the very start, the verandah had been a thorny issue for the municipal authorities. Members of the public – mainly Europeans – expressed their frustration at having to jostle for space with vendors and their wares, along with shops whose goods occupied the entire walkway and the odd coolie having a siesta. Complaints revolved around the "risk of sunstroke or being run over" as pedestrians had to walk along the side of the road.[21] Meanwhile, the municipality faced great difficulty in regulating the verandah for pedestrian use.

Conflict over the use of the footways persisted for over a century, with the "Verandah Question" becoming a hotly debated topic in many municipal meetings. In 1863, it seemed that the municipal commissioners and frustrated pedestrians had won the battle when the court ruled that all verandahs were to be "completely cleared and made available for passenger traffic".[22]

However, as few people actually adhered to the regulation, the encumbrance of the five-footways continued, much to the chagrin of law enforcers. Finally, in July 1887, legislation was passed granting municipal officers the power to forcefully clear the five-footways and streets of any obstructions. The perceived incursion into the space used by the Asian communities resulted in a three-day strike and riot in February 1888 (see textbox on page 4).

Nonetheless, the five-footway trade and the various obstructions continued unabated – as did complaints by the Europeans – with the Asians fighting back against any threat to their livelihoods and way of life. At the end of the 19th century, the municipal authorities decided that it would be impossible to enforce a completely free passageway; instead, they sought a compromise such that vendors could carry on with their trades as long as they were itinerant and did not encroach on any particular area for prolonged periods.

By 1899, the five-footway problem was referred to as the "very old Verandah Question" in the press,[23] with the situation devolving into a game of "whack-a-mole" as officials sought out "obstructionists" and meted out fines to offenders. On 26 September 1900 alone, 70 individuals were fined $5 each for obstructing the five-footway.[24] However, as the sheltered walkway was a transient space that saw the movement of both humans and goods, the task of completely eradicating occupation of the five-footways proved rather onerous. A letter to *The Straits Times* in 1925 said as much:

> "The most insidious and worst kind of obstruction is the temporary one. It consists generally of merchandise being either despatched from or received into a godown. In reality the obstruction is permanent, because as soon as one lot is removed another takes its place."[25]

(Below) A group of men playing cards on the five-footway along Serangoon Road, c. 1970s. The five-footway is a place for social interaction and the strengthening of communal ties. *Ronni Pinsler Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

(Bottom) Children playing on the five-footway at the junction of Club Street and Gemmill Lane, 1972. *Paul Piollet Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

From 1907 onwards, night street food hawkers were subject to licensing by the authorities. After Singapore's independence in 1965, food peddlers were moved into new standalone hawker centres. Nevertheless, the occasional itinerant food vendor could still be spotted along five-footways up until the 1980s. Over time, other five-footway traders also disappeared as the rules and their enforcement were tightened. Those with the means could relocate to a permanent location, while others simply gave up their trade for good.

Resurgence of an Old Problem

In 1998, the problem resurfaced when Emerald Hill in the Orchard Road district was redeveloped into a nightlife area. To promote vibrancy in Emerald Hill, the Urban Redevelopment Authority permitted the use of the five-footway for food-and-beverage businesses. However, this drew the ire of a long-time resident, who said she was deprived of "the seamless, sheltered stroll she used to enjoy", denying her the "equal right to that public space as intended by the town planners of yore".[26]

In 2015, the popular nightlife at Circular Road near Boat Quay came under threat when the Land Transport Authority became stricter with countering pavement obstruction. Officials spotted "goods, tables and other materials" that had been "untidily" laid out on the streets, five-footways and back lanes of shophouses. This led to pedestrians having to skirt these obstructions and walk along the side of roads, causing them "inconvenience and danger"[27] – a refrain that harks back to as early as the 1840s.

But one thing has changed: the use of the five-footway for business is today framed in terms of culture and heritage as people feel that allowing a more flexible use of the five-footway would help preserve the "city's character".[28]

Goods spilling out onto the five-footway along Tanjong Pagar Road, 1982. *Lee Kip Lin Collection. All rights reserved, Lee Kip Lin and National Library Board Singapore.*

These days, albeit rarely, one may encounter a cobbler, florist or tailor on the five-footways of Little India, Chinatown or Kampong Glam, or shophouse businesses using the walkway space in front to display their goods.

Navigating Singapore's five-footways today is still a more interesting way of experiencing the city compared to the modern air-conditioned shopping complex, where homogeneity and predictability reign. ♦

THE "FIVE-FOOTWAY" MISNOMER

The five-footway was historically known as the verandah, *kaki lima*, *ghokhaki* or *wujiaoji* (五脚基) – the latter three meaning "five feet" in Malay, Hokkien and Mandarin, respectively. However, these vernacular names and the commonly used "five-footway" are in fact misnomers: few of these walkways are actually 5 feet (1.5 m) wide as the regulation for the width of the path changed over time.

While the earliest verandahs spanned 5 or 6 feet (1.5 or 1.8 m), from the 1840s onwards, the law decreed that the path should be at least 6 feet wide. In 1887, the stipulated width extended to 7 feet (2.1 m), and subsequent legislations decreed a minimum of 7 feet. A 1929 by-law declared that footways in the busy thoroughfares of Chulia Street, Raffles Place and High Street should be at least 8 feet (2.4 m) wide, with no more than two feet of space occupied.[1]

NOTE

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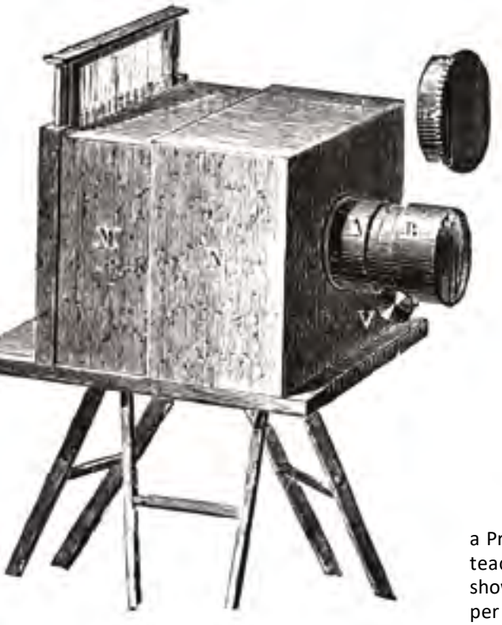


DAGUERREOTYPES TO DRY PLATES

PHOTOGRAPHY IN 19TH-CENTURY SINGAPORE

The oldest known photographs of Singapore were taken by Europeans in the early 1840s. **Janice Loo** charts the rise of commercial photography in the former British colony.

Photography is the "method of recording the image of an object through the action of light on a light-sensitive material".[1] Derived from the Greek words *photos* ("light") and *graphein* ("to draw"), photography was invented by combining the age-old principles of the camera obscura ("dark room" in Latin[2]) and the discovery in the 1700s that certain chemicals turned dark when exposed to light.

However, it was not until 1839 that the daguerreotype, the earliest practical method of making permanent images with a camera, was introduced. Named after its French inventor Louis Jacques-Mandé Daguerre, the daguerreotype spread across the world, and soon found its way to Singapore.

A Marvellous Invention

The earliest known description of photography here is found in the *Hikayat Abdullah* (Stories of Abdullah), the memoir of Malay scholar Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir (better known as Munsyi Abdullah[3]), first published in 1849 by the Mission Press in Singapore.

In the *Hikayat*, Abdullah recounted how Reverend Benjamin Keasberry, a Protestant missionary whom he was teaching the Malay language to, had shown him "an ingenious device, a copper sheet about a foot long by a little over six inches wide, on which was a picture or imprint of the whole Settlement of Singapore in detail [...] exactly reproduced".[4] What Abdullah saw was a daguerreotype, an image captured on a polished silver-coated copper plate.

"Sir, what is this marvel and who made it?", the astonished Munsyi had asked.[5]

"This is the new invention of the white man," replied the Reverend. "There is a doctor[6] on board an American warship here who has with him an apparatus for making these pictures. I cannot explain it to you for I have never seen one before. But the doctor has promised me that he will show me how it works next Monday."

Abdullah's meeting with the said doctor took place around 1841 – just two years after the daguerreotype was invented and introduced to the world.[7] Although it was Abdullah's first encounter with the technology, he was able to describe in impressive detail the equipment and the manner in which it should be used: how the doctor buffed and sensitised the plate, and then exposed it in the camera to create a latent image that subsequently emerged in a waft of mercury fumes. The resulting photograph of Singapore town taken from Government Hill (now Fort Canning) was, in Abdullah's words, "without deviation even by so much as the breadth of a hair".[8]

Indeed, the daguerreotype brought a degree of sharpness and realism to picture-making that was unparalleled in its time. However, the technology had its drawbacks: the black and white image would become laterally reversed and, as it was composed of tiny particles deposited on the plate's polished silver surface, it could be marred by the slightest touch. Due to its metal base, the daguerreotype was also highly susceptible to tarnishing. To protect the image, daguerreotypes were typically displayed under glass within a frame or case.

(Above) A daguerreotype of Louis Jacques-Mandé Daguerre by Jean-Baptiste Sabatier-Blot, 1844. Daguerre invented the daguerreotype in 1839, the earliest practical method of making permanent images with a camera. *Courtesy of the George Eastman Museum.*

(Top left) An early camera consisting of a tube holding the lens at the front and a slot at the back for the insertion of the focusing ground glass, with the dark slide containing the sensitised plate. *Image reproduced from Tissandier, G. (1877). A History and Handbook of Photography (p. 97). New York: Scovill Manufacturing Company. Retrieved from Internet Archive website.*

The Oldest View

Since the fate of the images mentioned in the *Hikayat Abdullah* remains unknown, the daguerreotypes produced in 1844 by Alphonse-Eugène-Jules Itier, a French customs inspector, are considered the oldest surviving photographic views of Singapore.

Itier travelled through this part of the world en route to China as part of a French trade mission led by French ambassador Théodose de Lagrené.[9] The delegation arrived in Singapore on 3 July 1844, staying here for two weeks before departing on 16 July. The sights and sounds of the bustling port left a deep impression on Itier, who took pictures to show the remarkable development of the port settlement within a mere two decades of its founding in 1819.

One of the four known daguerreotypes of Singapore taken by Itier currently resides in the collection of the National Museum of Singapore (see overleaf, top). It shows a panoramic view of shophouses and godowns lining the banks of the Singapore River at Boat Quay, and was likely to have been taken on 4 July when Itier visited the residence of then governor, William J. Butterworth, on Government Hill.

(Below) Self-portrait of Alphonse-Eugène-Jules Itier in Qing dynasty (Manchu) attire, 1847. He took the oldest existing photographic images (daguerreotypes) of Singapore in 1844. *Private Collection Archives Charmet, Bridgeman Images.*

(Below right) The earliest advertisement of photographic services provided by Gaston Dutronquoy at the London Hotel. *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser, 7 December 1843, p. 1.*

DAGUERRIOTYPE PORTRAITS.

MR G. DUTRONQUOY respectfully informs the Ladies and Gentlemen at Singapore, that he is complete master of the newly invented and late imported Daguerriotype.

Ladies and Gentlemen who may honor Mr DUTRONQUOY with a sitting can have their Likenesses taken in the astonishing short space of two minutes.

The Portraits are free from all blemish and are in every respect perfect likenesses.

A Lady and Gentleman can be placed together in one picture and both are taken at the same time entirely shaded from the effects of the sun.

The price of one portrait is ten dollars; both taken in one picture is fifteen dollars One day's notice will be required.

London Hotel, 4th Decr 1843.

Janice Loo is a Librarian with the National Library, Singapore. Her responsibilities include collection management and content development as well as research and reference assistance on topics relating to Singapore and Southeast Asia.

(Below) Alphonse-Eugène-Jules Itier's 1844 daguerreotype of Boat Quay and the Singapore River from Government Hill (today's Fort Canning) is considered one of the oldest surviving photographic images of Singapore. *Courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.*

(Bottom) View of the Singapore River by Sachtler & Co. from the album, *Views and Types of Singapore, 1863* (compare it with the 1844 reversed image of the same view). Landscape shots were the stock-in-trade of early photographic studios. The hills of Singapore, such as Fort Canning Hill, offered unparalleled views of the town and surroundings. The sepia tone is typical of albumen prints. *Lee Kip Lin Collection. All rights reserved, Lee Kip Lin and National Library Board, Singapore.*

Due to its age, the picture appears hazy and dull. But what might it have looked like in its time?

Held in hand and viewed up close, the townscape would have appeared ethereal as it lay suspended on a mirror-like surface, whose reflective properties lent visual depth to the scene. The image also alternated between positive and negative depending on the angle in which it was held and observed. Recalling Munsyi's reaction, one could imagine how these unique characteristics would have enthralled many a first-time viewer. The other three daguerreotypes by Itier feature the entrance to Thian Hock Keng temple on Telok Ayer Street, a horse cart on a street, and two Malay carriage handlers.[10]

Itier likely arrived in Singapore with the equipment he needed to take his daguerreotypes. In any case, whatever materials he lacked could have been procured in Singapore. The French delegation had lodged at the London Hotel, whose proprietor, a fellow Frenchman named Gaston Dutronquoy, ran a photographic studio in the same building. Dutronquoy would have been able to supply Itier with the necessary chemicals and plates to produce his images.[11]

A Hotelier's Sideline

Dutronquoy first advertised himself as a painter in March 1839. Two months later, he opened the London Hotel at Commercial Square (now Raffles Place). In 1841, the hotel shifted to the former residence of architect and Superintendent of Public Works, George D. Coleman.[12] It was here that the enterprising Dutronquoy started the town's first commercial photographic studio in 1843, offering daguerreotype portraits at $10 each, or $15 for two persons in one picture (see advertisement on page 9).

To attract prospective customers, Dutronquoy proclaimed his mastery of the daguerreotype process, asserting that his portraits would be "taken in the astonishing short space of two minutes [...] free from all blemish and [...] in every respect perfect likenesses".[13] Given that the subjects had to hold absolutely still to obtain a sharp picture, a two-minute exposure (painfully slow by today's instant imaging standards) was a selling point at the time.[14]

In the absence of surviving works, it is difficult to say how successful Dutronquoy was as a daguerreotypist. There was not enough demand to maintain a fulltime photography business, yet Dutronquoy was sufficiently motivated to keep up with advances in the technology, and made efforts to grow his clientele.

For example, an advertisement in *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser* on 16 January 1845 announced that Dutronquoy had acquired a new "D'arguerothipe Press", and portraits could be made at the studio for $6 each, or if one prefers, in the comfort of one's own home for double that price. The London Hotel, along with his photographic studio, had by then relocated to the corner of High Street and the Esplanade (Padang), with the studio open only in the mornings between 8.30 and 10 am.[15]

Another advertisement in *The Straits Times* three years later publicised the availability of "likenesses, in colours, taken in four seconds".[16] This is interesting for two reasons. First, it indicates that Dutronquoy practised hand-colouring, which involved the careful application of pigments to a monochrome portrait for aesthetic purposes and to simulate real-life colours. Like many of his counterparts in the West, Dutronquoy might have enhanced the jewellery pieces worn by the subjects with gold-coloured paint, added a touch of pink to their cheeks, or tinted the background with blue to mimic the colour of the sky.[17]

Second, the ability to make a portrait in just four seconds indicated that Dutronquoy kept abreast with advances in photographic technology that tackled the problem of lengthy exposures. Interested customers who wanted their portraits taken had to give him a day's notice and were instructed to wear dark clothing. His studio was only open for two hours in the morning: between 7.30 and 9.30 am from Monday to Saturday.

Dutronquoy's daguerreotype business was likely not a money spinner and he fared better in hospitality, opening a branch of the London Hotel at New Harbour (today's Keppel Harbour) in 1851. Alas, Singapore's first resident commercial photographer met with a mysterious, if tragic, end. During a prospecting trip to the Malay Peninsula in the mid-1850s, Dutronquoy was feared murdered after he suddenly disappeared.[18]

Scottish photographer John Thomson with two Manchu soldiers in Xiamen, Fujian province, China, 1871. Thomson worked in Singapore as a photographer in the 1860s. *Courtesy of Wellcome Collection (CCBY).*

(Below) Two Indian men at a fruit stall from the Sachtler & Co. album, *Views and Types of Singapore, 1863*, in the collection of the National Library. *Lee Kip Lin Collection. All rights reserved, Lee Kip Lin and National Library Board, Singapore.*

(Bottom) John Thomson's four-part panorama of the Singapore River, produced in the early 1860s, using the wet-plate collodion method. Each can be viewed as a separate photograph or put together to form a single panorama. The photographs do not join up seamlessly as each image was shot separately. *Courtesy of Mr and Mrs Lee Kip Lee.*

A 1858 notice in *The Straits Times* announced the insolvency of his estate.

After Dutronquoy's departure, Singapore was not to see another resident professional photographer for some time. The 1850s was a period of sporadic photographic activity owing to the fleeting presence of travelling daguerreotypists who passed through Singapore: H. Husband in 1853, C. Duban in 1854, Saurman in 1855, and J. Newman from 1856 to 1857. They stayed only as long as there were enough customers before moving on to other places.

The limited commercial success of daguerreotypes in Singapore could be attributed to several factors: the small consumer population, the relative high price of commissioning a portrait and the capital required to run a professional studio. Human vanity also came into play; for those who were used to seeing a more flattering version of themselves rendered in painting, the stark precision of the daguerreotype could be an unpleasant reality check.

A New Method

The daguerreotype was eventually superseded by the wet-plate collodion process, which produced a negative image on a glass plate. Invented in 1851 by the British amateur photographer Frederick Scott Archer, the wet-plate process was the most popular photographic method from the mid-1850s to the 1880s.

The process of creating a wet-plate negative called for ample preparation time, skill and speed. The photographer had to work swiftly to coat, expose and develop the glass plate while the light-sensitive collodion on its surface was still damp (hence the "wet-plate" process).[19] This meant that a photographer working away from the comfort of his studio would have had to carry all the materials and equipment necessary to set up a portable darkroom on location.

Although cumbersome, the wet-plate technique was inexpensive and, once mastered, could create detailed images of a consistent quality. Moreover, unlike the single irreproducible image created by the daguerreotype process, an unlimited number of positive prints could be produced from a single wet-plate negative – setting the stage for the rise of commercial photography. These prints were typically made on albumen paper.

Edward A. Edgerton, a former lawyer from America, is credited for introducing the wet-plate technique to Singapore in 1858. Edgerton first advertised his services in February that year, providing photographs on glass or paper by a process "never before introduced here, being much superior to the reversed and mirror-like metallic plates of the daguerreotype".[20]

Initially operating from his residence on Stamford Road, Edgerton entered into a partnership with a certain Alfeld, and the studio relocated across the road to 3 Armenian Street by May 1858. A year later, however, Edgerton moved on to run another studio at Commercial Square. By 1861, he was no longer in the trade and had become editor of the *Singapore Review and Monthly Magazine*. Unfortunately, as far as we know, none of Edgerton's works have survived the passage of time.

Pioneering Commercial Studios

Other photographers soon set up shop in the wake of Edgerton's short-lived venture. These include Thomas Heritage, formerly from London, who came to Singapore after completing work in Penang. He opened his studio at 3 Queen Street on 20 August 1860, and is listed in the *Straits Directory* of 1861 and 1862; French photographer O. Regnier, whose studio at Hotel l'Esperance is listed in the *Straits Directory* of 1862; and Lee Yuk at Teluk (Telok) Ayer Street, who is also listed in the 1862 *Straits Directory*. These studios operated in Singapore for a short period only.

For a brief time, Singapore was also home to John Thomson, who later gained recognition for his extensive photographic documentation of China in the 1870s, and is feted as one of the most accomplished travel photographers of the 19th century. A Scotsman, Thomson came to Singapore in June 1862 to join his older brother, William, who had arrived about two years prior and ran a ship chandlery business on Battery Road.[21]

The two formed a partnership called Thomson Brothers. With Singapore as his base, the younger Thomson spent considerable time travelling in the region, building up an impressive portfolio of images of Siam (Thailand), Cambodia and Vietnam.[22] He moved to Hong Kong in 1868 to begin the ambitious project of photographing China, while William continued the business in Singapore until 1870.[23]

One of John Thomson's significant works on Singapore is the four-part panorama of the Singapore River that he produced in the early 1860s. Using the wet-plate collodion method, Thomson created four separate exposures that could be aligned to form a single panorama, with each retaining its appeal as an individual photograph.

A contemporary of the Thomson Brothers was Sachtler & Co., which was most likely established in 1863 and came to dominate commercial photography in Singapore for a decade.[24] The identity of Sachtler & Co.'s original proprietor remains a mystery. By July 1864, however, the business had been taken over by a German, August Sachtler, in partnership with Kristen Feilberg. Sachtler was a telegrapher by profession, but his exposure to photography during an assignment to Japan in 1860 led to a change in career.[25]

Located on High Street near the Court House, Sachtler & Co. offered photography services with the images mounted on a wide variety of the latest frames and albums imported from England, as well as a ready selection of Singapore-made photographs. In 1865, a branch studio, Sachtler & Feilberg (a partnership between Hermann Sachtler, presumably August's brother, and Feilberg), opened in Penang. Feilberg went on to start his own practice in 1867, and Hermann Sachtler returned to Singapore by 1869.

An Indian man dressed in the traditional *kurta*. Image reproduced from the Sachtler & Co. album, *Views and Types of Singapore, 1863*, in the collection of the National Library. As the emulsion used was much more sensitive to blue light, cooler colours registered more quickly and appeared lighter, while warm colours took a longer time and appeared dark. This difference explains why parts of the photographs look overexposed. *Lee Kip Lin Collection.* All rights reserved, *Lee Kip Lin and National Library Board, Singapore.*

That year, it was reported that Hermann had met with a bad accident while taking photographs from the roof of the French Roman Catholic Church (present-day Cathedral of the Good Shepherd). While adjusting his camera, Hermann lost his footing and fell from a height of some 20 to 25 metres, fracturing his skull and arm, yet miraculously surviving the ordeal.

In 1871, Sachtler & Co. relocated to Battery Road before returning to High Street in 1874, reopening as Sachtler's Photographic Rooms at No. 88, opposite the Hotel d'Europe. By then, the firm was supplying an extensive range of photographs taken around the region, including "views and types of Borneo, Java, Sumatra, Saigon, Siam, Burmah, and Straits Settlements".[26] Sachtler & Co. ceased business shortly after; in June 1874, its stock of negatives and equipment was acquired by another photographic studio, Carter & Co.

Held in the National Library of Singapore is an album by Sachtler & Co. titled *Views and Types of Singapore, 1863*, containing 40 albumen prints that make up the oldest photographic material in the library's collection. As the title indicates, the album features picturesque scenes ("views") of the settlement and portraits of its diverse inhabitants (ethnographic "types").

Bearing in mind the inconvenience of the wet-plate process, it is no surprise that photographs during this period tended to be produced in the studio, or if taken outdoors, were of stationary or posed subjects. Portraiture, landscape and architectural views were the norm, as the album amply demonstrates. These were the stock-in-trade of European photographic studios, and served as a visual representation of the exotic "Far East" for a predominantly Western audience.

The Boom and Bust Years

The closure of Sachtler & Co. left a gap that another photographic studio, G.R. Lambert & Co., rose to fill and in fact surpass. G.R. Lambert & Co. was established at 1 High Street by Gustave Richard Lambert from Dresden, Germany, on 10 April 1867. The first mention of the studio was in an advertisement placed in *The Singapore Daily Times* on 11 April 1867.[27] The next reference to Lambert's presence in Singapore appeared in the 19 May 1877 edition of *The Straits Times*, announcing his return from Europe, and the opening of his new studio at 30 Orchard Road.[28]

It is difficult to assess Lambert's own photographic contributions due to the scarcity of surviving works from the

period when he managed the firm in the late 1870s until the mid-1880s, coupled with his sporadic presence in Singapore. Lambert travelled to Bangkok in late 1879 to expand the firm's photographic collection, returning in February 1880. It was during this visit that G.R. Lambert & Co. was appointed the official photographer to the King of Siam. With Lambert away for much of 1881 and 1882, the firm was overseen by its managing partner, J.C. Van Es. By 1882, G.R. Lambert & Co. had also become the appointed official photographer to the Sultan of Johor. The studio shifted to 430 Orchard Road by 1883.

Lambert returned to Europe by 1887, leaving the business in the capable hands of a fellow German, Alexander Koch, who joined the firm as an assistant in 1884, and was made partner in 1886. The studio moved to 186 Orchard Road in 1886. Koch would prove to be the man behind the stellar rise of the firm. Over the next two decades, G.R. Lambert & Co. expanded its business, opening another office at Gresham House on Battery Road in 1894, and at various times maintained overseas branches in Sumatra, Bangkok and Kuala Lumpur.

This period coincided with the widespread adoption of the gelatin dry-plate process – invented in 1871 – which enhanced photographic production. Unlike the wet-plate technique, the glass plate could now be coated, dried and stored for later use, and need not be developed immediately upon exposure. Compared to collodion, the gelatin emulsion was more sensitive, opening up the possibility of capturing motion. Such technical breakthroughs helped expand the photographer's repertoire to include fast-moving human figures and objects. Imagine a photograph of a street scene where pedestrians and traffic no longer disappear into a wispy blur, but have a distinct presence, their movements frozen in time.

The advent of mass travel at the turn of the 19th century brought new opportunities. G.R. Lambert & Co. successfully capitalised on the lucrative demand for photographs – and later on, picture postcards – as tourist souvenirs. In 1897, the firm produced the first picture postcard of Singapore, and by 1908 reportedly sold "about a quarter of a million cards a year".[29]

(Facing page) A Malay man in *baju melayu* and a Malay girl in *baju kurong*. Image reproduced from the *Sachtler & Co. album, Views and Types of Singapore, 1863*, in the collection of the National Library. *Lee Kip Lin Collection. All rights reserved, Lee Kip Lin and National Library Board, Singapore.*

(Below) Portrait of Gustave Richard Lambert, 1894. He established G.R. Lambert & Co. at 1 High Street on 10 April 1867. *Image reproduced from Cheah, J.S. (2006). Singapore: 500 Early Postcards (p. 9). Singapore: Editions Didier Millet. (Call no.: RSING 769.56609595)*

(Right) A Chinese barber. *Image reproduced from Lambert, G.R. (1890). Fotoalbum Singapur. Singapore: G.R. Lambert. Collection of the National Library, Singapore. (Accession no.: B18975148J)*

The palm-fringed beach at Tanjong Katong by G.R. Lambert & Co, 1890s. Located in the eastern part of the island, this area with its villas and holiday bungalows, was a favourite place of recreation for the residents of Singapore. *Image reproduced from Falconer, J. (1987). A Vision of the Past: A History of Early Photography in Singapore and Malaya (Plate 63; p. 91). Singapore: Times Editions. (Call no.: RSING 779.995957 FAL)*

By the early 20th century, G.R. Lambert & Co. was lauded as "the leading photographic artists of Singapore [with] a high reputation for artistic portraiture". It had "one of the finest collections [of landscapes] in the East, comprising about three thousand subjects, relating to Siam, Singapore, Borneo, Malaya, and China".[30]

Although advances in photography made G.R. Lambert & Co. the most prolific studio, technology also came to place the tools of a photographer's trade in the hands of laymen. The growth of amateur photography chipped away at the firm's revenue, and perhaps as a sign of things to come, G.R. Lambert & Co. gave up its studio at 186 Orchard Road in 1902, downsizing to smaller premises at 3A Orchard Road. Koch retired in 1905, and the firm's fortunes continued to decline in subsequent years, with its picture postcard trade disrupted by the outbreak of World War I (1914–18) in Europe. Ironically, it was the popularity of picture postcards that had cannibalised its sale of photographic prints in the first place.

Unable to keep up with the times, G.R. Lambert & Co. eventually closed in 1918. It was by no means the only one to suffer as other European firms in Singapore also succumbed to the vagaries of the changing business environment.

An Incomplete Picture

The story thus far constitutes a series of snapshots, a quick survey of the milestones and key movers in the history of photography in 19th-century Singapore. It is, unsurprisingly, a narrative dominated by European photographic studios, which left documentary evidence of their presence, and whose extensive work make up some of the most valuable early visual records of the settlement.

As these European studios faded from the scene in the early 20th century, it paved the way for Asian players to take their place in the interwar period. To give a sense of the new situation, the census of 1921 counted 171 photographers comprising 109 Chinese, 52 "others" (Japanese, Siamese, Sinhalese, Arabs or Asiatic Jews), six Malays, three Indians and only one European.

Some research has been done and continue to be carried out on Asian photographers, for example, the Lee Brothers Studio, a family-owned photographic enterprise run by Lee King Yan and Lee Poh Yan, at the corner of Hill Street and Loke Yew Street. There are many more photographers whose names await to be uncovered and their stories told. ♦

The Boustead Institute at the junction of Tanjong Pagar and Anson roads. *Image reproduced from Lambert, G.R. (1890). Fotoalbum Singapur. Singapore: G.R. Lambert. Collection of the National Library, Singapore. (Accession no.: B18975148J)*

(Left) Returning from a tiger hunt. *Image reproduced from Lambert, G.R. (1890). Fotoalbum Singapur. Singapore: G.R. Lambert. Collection of the National Library, Singapore. (Accession no.: B18975148J)*

(Below left) The interior of G.R. Lambert & Co. studio at Gresham House on Battery Road, which opened in 1894. *Image reproduced from Wright, A., & Cartwright, H.A. (Eds). (1908). 20th Century Impressions of British Malaya: Its History, People, Commerce, Industries, and Resources (p. 704). London: Lloyd's Greater Britain Publishing Company, Limited. Collection of the National Library, Singapore. (Accession no.: B29032399D)*

NOTES

1 Beaumont, N. et al. (2019, January 25). *History of photography*. Retrieved from Encyclopaedia Britannica website.

2 Refers to the natural optical phenomenon where light reflecting off an illuminated scene and passing through a tiny hole into a darkened room would form an exact, but inverted, image of that scene on the wall opposite. The phenomenon was described in as early as the 5th century BCE.

3 Munsyi Abdullah taught Malay to many British administrators, including Stamford Raffles, missionaries and European traders, hence the epithet *Munsyi* which means "teacher".

4 Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir. (2009). *The Hikayat Abdullah* (p. 295). Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: The Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society. (Call no.: RSEA 959.5 ABD)

5 Abdullah's conversation with the doctor quoted from Abdullah, 2009, pp. 295–296.

6 The doctor in question might have been Dr Wright, a junior doctor on board the American ship, USS *Constellation*, which docked in Singapore from 4 November 1841 to 5 February 1842. According to a private letter from Mrs Maria Balestier (wife of Joseph Balestier, the first American consul in Singapore) to her sister, the doctor produced a "daguerreotype drawing" of the Balestiers' home in the Rochor area. See Hale, R. (2016). *The Balestiers: The first American residents of Singapore* (p. 156). Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Editions. (Call no.: RSING 959.57030922 HAL)

7 Falconer, J. (1987). *A vision of the past: A history of early photography in Singapore and Malaya* (p. 9). Singapore: Times Editions. (Call no.: RSING 779.995957 FAL)

8 Abdullah, 2009, p. 296.

9 The Lagrené mission, as it came to be known, resulted in the Treaty of Whampoa signed on 24 October 1844, which secured for France the same privileges extended to Britain. See Massot, G. (2015, November). Jules Itier and the Lagrené Mission. *History of Photography, 39* (4), 319–347, p. 320. (Call no.: RCLOS 770.92 MAS)

10 According to Itier's published account of the trip, *Journal d'un Voyage en Chine en 1843, 1844, 1845, 1846*, the daguerreotype of Thian Hock Keng was made on 6 July 1844, which places it as the earliest dated photograph of Asia. See Massot, Nov 2015, pp. 323, 346.

11 Toh, J. (2009). *Singapore through 19th century photographs* (p. 14). Singapore: Editions Didier Millet. (Call no.: RSING 959.5703 TOH)

12 The street on which the house stood was later named after Coleman. Coleman's house was located at 3 Coleman Street where the Peninsula Shopping Centre now stands. See London Hotel. (1842, January 13). *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, p. 1. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

13 Daguerriotype portraits. (1843, December 7). *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, p. 1. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

14 Hirsch, R. (2000). *Seizing the light: A history of photography* (p. 32). Boston: McGraw-Hill. (Call no.: RART 770.9 HIR). Depending on light conditions, exposures ranged from a few minutes to as long as half an hour, which explains the often-solemn expressions and stiff postures in early portraits.

15 Notice. (1844, 22 February). *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, p. 1; Notice. (1845, January 16). *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, p. 1. Retrieved from NewspaperSG. Mornings were more conducive for taking photographs as temperatures were still cool, and daylight would be sufficient without being overpowering.

16 Daguerreotype. (1848, October 21). *The Straits Times*, p. 2. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

17 Lavédrine, B. (2009). *Photographs of the past: Process and preservation* (pp. 30–31). Los Angeles, California: The Getty Conservation Institute. (Not available in NLB holdings); See Claudet, L. (2008). Colouring by hand. In J. Hannavy (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of nineteenth-century photography Vol 1* (pp. 322–323). New York: Routledge. Retrieved from Google Books. A practical method for colour photography was not invented until the Lumiére brothers' autochrome process in 1904.

18 Buckley, C.B. (1984). *An anecdotal history of old times in Singapore 1819–1867* (p. 745). Singapore: Oxford University Press. (Call no.: RSING 959.57 BUC). However, another source suggests that Dutronquoy might have passed away sometime in January 1872 in Kobe, Japan. See Massot, Nov 2015, p. 323.

19 Hirsch, 2000, p. 72. Collodion was made by dissolving gun cotton in ether and alcohol, and then adding potassium iodide. The resultant viscous mixture is applied evenly to a glass plate, which is immersed into a bath of silver nitrate to produce light-sensitive silver iodide.

20 Portraits & views. (1858, February 13). *The Straits Times*, p. 2. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

21 Notice. (1862, June 14). *The Straits Times*, p. 3. Retrieved from NewspaperSG; White, S. (1989). *John Thomson: A window to the orient* (p. 9). Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press. (Call no.: RART 770.92 WHI). William was also a photographer in the partnership of Sack and Thomson, Beach Road (listed in the 1861 *Straits Directory*). The partnership was brief and William was listed on his own as a photographic artist in the following year's directory.

22 White, 1985, pp. 9–17. John Thomson published an account of his time in Asia. See Thomson, J. (1875). *The Straits of Malacca, Indo-China and China, or Ten years' travels, adventures and residence abroad*. London: Sampson Low, Marston, Low, & Searle. Retrieved from BookSG.

23 The firm Thomson Brothers is listed in the *Straits Directory* for the years 1863 through to 1870. Balmer, J. (1993). Introduction. In J. Thomson (1993). *The Straits of Malacca, Siam and Indo-China: Travels and adventures of a nineteenth-century photographer* (pp. xiv, xiii). Singapore: Oxford University Press. (Call no.: RSING 915.9 THO-[TRA])

24 Sachler & Co. was first listed in the *Straits Directory* for 1864, and was likely to have been founded the year before. See Falconer, 1987, p. 27.

25 Dobson, S. (2009, May). The Prussian expedition to Japan and its photographic activity in Nagasaki in 1861. *Old Photography Study, 3*, pp. 28–29. Retrieved from Nagasaki University's Academic Output website.

26 Notice. (1874, June 6). *The Straits Times*, p. 4. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

27 Bautze, J.K. (2016). *Unseen Siam: Early photography 1860–1910* (p. 183). Bangkok: River Books. (Call no.: RSEA 959.3034 BAU)

28 Notice. (1877, May 19). *The Straits Times*, p. 11. Retrieved from NewspaperSG. Lambert was first listed in the *Straits Calendar and Directory* for 1868, and was not to appear again until 1878.

29 Wright, A., & Cartwright, H.A. (Eds.). (1908). *Twentieth century impressions of British Malaya: its history, people, commerce, industries, and resources* (p. 705). London: Lloyd's Greater Britain Publishing Company. (Microfilm: NL16084); Cheah, J.S. (2006). *Singapore: 500 early postcards* (pp. 9–10, 12). Singapore: Editions Didier Millet. (Call no.: RSING 769.56609595);

30 Wright & Cartwright, 1908, pp. 702, 705.

CIVILIANS IN THE CROSSFIRE

THE MALAYAN EMERGENCY

Ronnie Tan recounts the hardship suffered by civilians as a result of the British government's fight against the communists during the Malayan Emergency.

China-Japan relations, which are marked by a long history of animosity that goes back several centuries, took a turn for the worse from the 1870s onwards. During the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–45), many overseas Chinese who were still loyal to their motherland, including those in Malaya and Singapore, supported China's war efforts against Japan. Thus, when the Japanese Imperial Army invaded Malaya in December 1941, one of the first communities they targeted was the Chinese. To escape torture and persecution, many Chinese fled to the fringes of the Malayan jungles where they set up makeshift homes.

The Malayan Communist Party (MCP) had been a formidable element even before the Japanese invasion. It had been set up a decade earlier in 1930 with the primary aim of overthrowing British colonial rule. When Malaya fell to the Japanese and the British were booted out, the MCP went underground and formed the Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA).

The MPAJA, which comprised mainly ethnic Chinese fighters, found a ready source of new recruits among the Chinese squatters in the Malayan jungles to fight the guerrilla war against the Japanese and their sympathisers. In a quid pro quo arrangement, the MPAJA turned to the British for military training and supplies, provided the communists with the resources they needed to defeat a common enemy.

Following Japan's surrender in 1945 and the return of the British in the form of the British Military Administration,[1] the MPAJA was formally dissolved in December that year. For the MCP, however, the problem had not gone away; the British had reinstated themselves as colonial rulers and the communists would once again resume its armed struggle.

As hostilities between the MCP and the British grew more intense, on 16 June 1948, three European planters in Perak were brutally murdered by communist insurgents. Two days later, on 18 June, a state of emergency was declared in Malaya and subsequently in Singapore on 24 June. The Malayan Emergency would last for the next 12 years, ending only on 31 July 1960.

One of the first things the MCP did was to revive the MPAJA, rebranding it as the Malayan People's Anti-British Army (MPABA), and subsequently renaming it the Malayan National Liberation Army (MNLA) in 1949.[2]

To secure access to supplies of ammunition and food, the communists began intimidating, torturing and even murdering civilians who refused to support their anti-colonial activities. By October 1948, the MNLA had killed 223 civilians, most of whom were Chinese, "for their reluctance to support the revolution".[3] To counter the communist threat, the British put in place the Briggs Plan, a strategy aimed at defeating the communist insurgency.[4]

The Briggs Plan

One of the chief aims of the Briggs Plan was to deprive the communist guerrillas of sources of support and sustenance. The plan was described as "a policy of starving [the communists] out, coupled with ceaseless pressure by security forces operating in small patrols... intended to deprive the MRLA [Malayan Races Liberation Army][5] everywhere in the country of every necessity of life from food to clothes, and every article for their military aims from printing materials to parts for radio receiving and transmitting sets, weapons and ammunition".[6]

Shopkeepers in operational areas for instance were not allowed to store excess quantities of canned and raw food that were designated as "restricted". In addition, they had to keep detailed records of all customers and their purchases, and not sell any kind of food item unless the customer produced an identity card. Restricted items included "all types of food, paper, printing materials and instruments, typewriters, every drug and medicine, lint bandages and other items; torch batteries, canvas cloth, and any clothing made from cloth as well as cloth itself".[7] Even cigarettes and beverages like coffee and tea were restricted. The regulations were so stringent that in some instances, people were not allowed to stock more than a week's supply of rice.

Relocation to "New Villages"

To further ensure that the communist guerrillas were isolated from the main population, the predominantly Chinese villagers living in squatters in the jungle fringes were relocated to settlements called "New Villages". These villagers were "strategically sited with an eye to defence, protected with barbed wire and guarded by a detachment of Special Constables, until they were each able to form their own Home Guard units".[8]

Each relocation was shrouded in secrecy and the villagers were not notified beforehand. According to British military historian Edgar O'Ballance, "secrecy was essential to success, otherwise the squatters would have disappeared into the jungle

(Above) A member of the Malayan Home Guard manning a checkpoint on the edge of a town during the Malayan Emergency. Such checkpoints allowed the authorities to search vehicles and intercept food and supplies being smuggled out to the communist insurgents. *© Imperial War Museum (K 14435).*

(Right) An identity card issued during the Malayan Emergency (1948–60). *Image reproduced from Yao, S. (2016). The Malayan Emergency: Essays on a Small, Distant War (p. 57). Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies. (Call no.: RSING 959.5104 YAO)*

Ronnie Tan is a Senior Manager (Research) with the National Library, Singapore, where he conducts research on public policy as well as historical, regional and library-related issues. His other research interests include Malayan history, especially the Malayan Emergency (1948–60), and military history.

in mass flight".[9] The operation usually began before dawn, with troops and police surrounding the squatter area. The villagers were then moved en masse, along with their belongings and livestock, using one truck per family to the New Villages scattered throughout Malaya.[10]

Most villagers were caught unawares and "stupefied by shock" at the sudden move, protesting that they should not be forced to relocate as they had never helped the communists. Some tried delay tactics, for example, by claiming that they had to round up their livestock in the jungle, or that they were ill.[11] Most were persuaded to move only when told that the plots of land in the New Villages would be allotted on a first-come-first-served basis.[12] By mid-1951, around 400,000 villagers had been resettled in such New Villages. The reality was, however, far from rosy for these new settlers.

Once settled in the New Villages, people who entered or left the villages were subject to stringent checks by armed security personnel guarding the gates around the clock. This was to ensure that the villagers could not secretly send supplies to the guerrilla fighters. Plantation workers, whom the communists targeted, also had to be home by 3 pm daily and were not allowed to leave the village from 5 pm until 6 am the next day.

These measures had an adverse impact on the livelihoods of the people. Apart from having to wait in long queues to be searched by security officers, those who worked outside the villages were prohibited from taking their mid-day meals with their families. In fact, all they could have on them was a bottle of water; tea or coffee was not allowed to be brought out of the villages "for these would be welcome drinks to the enemy".[13] Those in the trucking business, too, were affected as the regulations meant that lorries could only stop in certain areas, which in turn impeded the supply of food to small villages.

Despite the best efforts of the British to cut off the supply of food and other essential items, the communists still managed to infiltrate and obtain supplies from people residing in these New Villages. The presence of armed security personnel at the gates and the severe consequences that awaited those caught red-handed were not enough of a deterrence. Communist sympathisers and those coerced into aiding the communists "invested extraordinary tricks to smuggle rice, often to relations in the jungle"[14] (see text box on page 24).

Aerial view of a newly completed village where squatters would be resettled. *© Imperial War Museum (K 13796).*

There were also reported cases of crimes committed by the security forces against the villagers. Under the pretence of checking for possible smuggling attempts, some police officers were known to have outraged the modesty of young girls by strip-searching them.[15]

The forced resettlement in the New Villages also led to a sense of social dislocation among its inhabitants. Livelihoods were disrupted, and many lost lucrative sources of income and had to find alternative means of survival. In some cases, people who were separated from their families and loved ones suffered from anxiety, despair and hopelessness.

Punishment for Abetting the Communists

Severe penalties were meted out to those caught for not divulging information on communist activities to the authorities or for helping the communists, with the punishments often disproportionate to the actual crimes committed.

One particular incident stands out. Collective punishment was meted out to some 20,000 people living in Tanjung Malim, a town in Perak, which already had a reputation for being a hotbed of communist activity since the start of the Emergency. This took place after an incident on 25 March 1952 when a group of civilian officers, accompanied by security personnel, were ambushed on their way to repair a nearby waterworks that communist guerrillas had sabotaged. Twelve civilian personnel were slain and eight wounded in the ambush.

Since the villagers were not forthcoming with information about the perpetrators, General Gerald Templer, who was then General Officer Commanding and Britain's High Commissioner to Malaya, stripped the town of its status as a district capital and imposed a 22-hour curfew every day for a week. Shops were permitted to open only two hours a day, people were banned from leaving town, schools were closed, bus services were ceased and rice rations were reduced.

To provide a secure way for villagers to supply information, the authorities handed out questionnaires to the head of each household. The completed forms were then brought to Kuala Lumpur in sealed boxes and reviewed by Templer himself in the presence of the town's representatives. The exercise resulted in the ambush and killing of the communist guerrilla leader in Tanjung Malim, the detention of 30 Chinese shopkeepers and several arrests. Only then were curfew and restrictions lifted in the town.

Even harsher punishments were exercised on at least six other occasions in different parts of Malaya:

- A 70-year-old man, Chong Ngi, was given a five-year prison sentence for providing communist guerillas in an unidentified part of Malaya with food and rice.[16]
- Hee Sun, a resident of Kulai Besar New Village in southern Johor, was sentenced to three years' imprisonment for being found in possession of one *kati* and one *tahil* (478 g) of rice intended for the guerrillas.[17]
- A 44-year-old rubber tapper, Wong Pan Sing, from Gombak, Selangor, was sentenced to 10 years' jail for possessing five *gantangs* (14.7 kg) of uncooked rice, sugar, cigarettes and Chinese medicine.[18]
- Phang Seng, a farmer from Kelapa Sawit New Village in southern Johor, was jailed three years for being caught at the village gate without a valid permit for carrying six *tahils* (227 g) of rice on him. When apprehended, he could not give a satisfactory explanation as to why he had uncooked rice with him because he claimed "he could not speak a word of Malay".[19]

Coercion from Communists

Many people living in the New Villages were caught between a rock and a hard place. Apart from mounting pressure from the police, they were also not entirely safe from the clutches of the communist insurgents. As mentioned earlier, those who were either neutral or opposed the goals of the communists were coerced into aiding them or faced reprisals – even death – if they did not cooperate. For instance, a villager in the northern state of Kedah was killed by three communist guerillas for refusing to buy them food.[20]

Hee Sun of Kulai Besar New Village, for example, had the misfortune of encountering communist guerrillas while working and was warned, in no uncertain terms, that he would be killed if he did not supply them with food. He did not report this incident to the police because he feared for his life and that of his family members as the communists knew where he lived.

As for Wong Pan Sing from Gombak, Selangor, he was threatened with death if he did not use the $18 that three communist guerillas gave him to buy "uncooked rice, sugar, cigarettes and Chinese medicine".[21] Such hapless civilians had little choice in these situations because the communists usually made good their threats of reprisal.

Even children and youths were not spared. On 20 June 1951, it was reported that an 11-year-old Malay boy from Bentong in Pahang was forced off his bicycle at gunpoint, "tied and blindfolded and forced some distance into the lallang" by communist insurgents and persuaded to work for them as a courier and supplier.[22] The boy refused and managed to escape from his captors a short while later.

In another instance, on 26 October 1954, 17-year-old rubber tapper named Low Hoon "pleaded guilty to attempting to supply one tin of milk beverage, two bottles of curry powder, dried chillies and salt fish" to the communists along Cheras Road in Kuala Lumpur.[23] Low claimed that the communists had threatened to kill him if he did not comply with their demands to buy the items with the money they had forced upon him.

In order to implement an administration system in the New Villages, government officials urged the villagers to stand for election as council members. However, it was difficult to persuade the villagers to do so as they were "terrified that the communists would see their election as an anti-communist stand and would kill them the moment they left the village".[24] Even when the elections went ahead and people were voted in as council members, some were so terrified for their lives that they "bolted for Singapore and safety".[25]

(Top right) A British propaganda poster targetting residents of the "New Villages". The Chinese caption on the poster, "如果你喂那些马共恶狗, 它是会反咬你的!", is loosely translated as "If you feed the evil communist dogs, they will bite you in return". *Image reproduced from Chen, J., & Hack, K. (Eds.). (2004). Dialogues with Chin Peng: New Light on the Malayan Communist Party (p. 216). Singapore: Singapore University Press. (Call no.: RSING 959.5104 YAO)*

(Right) General Gerald Templer, General Officer Commanding and the British High Commissioner in Malaya from 1952 to 1954. **(Below)** Templer is seen here opening boxes containing completed questionnaires with information about communists, in the presence of representatives from Tanjung Malim, Perak, 6 April 1952. *Images reproduced from Cloake, J. (1985). Templer: Tiger of Malaya: The Life of Field Marshall Sir Gerald Templer (n.p.). London: Harrap Ltd. (Call no.: RSING 355.3310942 TEM.C)*

Such fears were not unfounded, for in the town of Yong Peng in central Johor, two such councillors had their arms hacked off. The murder of another village committee member in Kebun Bahru, northern Johor, also underscored the probability of severe reprisals awaiting those whom the communists deemed to be pro-British.

Lost in Translation

Language barriers between the local authorities and villagers also proved problematic, as illustrated by the aforementioned trial of Phang Seng. In court, Phang pleaded ignorance and claimed he did not know that a permit was needed to bring rice out of the village to cook in the pig sty where he worked. The rice was intended for two of his four sick, young children. He also claimed that he could not give a satisfactory answer to the Malay guard on duty because he could neither speak nor understand Malay.

The language barrier became a subject of ridicule when British officials in Malaya tried to communicate with the grassroots. After communist insurgents descended on Kulai New Village in southern Johor, taking away 20 shotguns as well as ammunition from the local guards without a fight, Templer unleashed his fury on the villagers by describing them as "just a bunch of cowards", even berating them with the use of an expletive. Unfortunately, the translator totally missed the point and reportedly said, "His Excellency says that your fathers and mothers were not married when you were born."[26]

Templer, apparently ignorant that his words were lost in translation, continued to use the same expletive to describe himself, saying that he could be even more ruthless than the communist guerrillas. Once again, the message was lost in translation when the translator announced to all present that Templer himself admitted that his parents were also not married to each other when he was born![27]

Post-Templer Era

By the time Templer left Malaya and returned to the United Kingdom in 1954, the authorities had already gained the upper hand in the fight against the communists. It was clear that the Briggs Plan had proven effective in cutting off supplies to the communists; it not only hurt them physically and militarily, but their morale was also severely affected. The dire lack of food caused some communist insurgents to surrender to the authorities, while dozens more perished in the jungles. Many guerrillas were killed while foraging for food near the New Villages. In one instance, two dead communists in their mid-30s were found with "three wild jungle yams and a green papaya – all inedible".[28] It was reported that some guerrillas even resorted to killing monkeys for meat in order to survive.

The communists' efforts to grow their own vegetables in the jungle also proved futile: the neat rows of vegetables were easily spotted from the air by British Royal Air Force (RAF) aircraft and bombed. After realising their mistake, the communists began planting vegetables in a haphazard manner like the Orang Asli, but the RAF still managed to find and destroy these agricultural plots.[29]

Chin Peng, the MCP leader during the Malayan Emergency, admitted just as much in his memoir when he said that the Briggs Plan was the MCP's Achilles heel.[30] Recovered communist documents revealed that the "shortage of food in various places prevented us [the communists] from concentrating large numbers of troops and launching large-scale operations" and that "they must guard against quarrelling over the table and stealing each other's food. People with huge appetites should be admonished and taught to develop self-restraint".[31]

Even the restriction to beverages such as coffee affected some: a note written by a communist insurgent lamented that he had not drunk coffee for over two months, and when he finally had the good fortune to find some, there was not enough sugar to sweeten the treat.

As for the civilians who suffered through it all, the psychological impact stayed with them long after the Emergency officially ended on 31 July 1960. They remained suspicious of strangers and had difficulty accepting help from outsiders. Even after the barbed wire surrounding the New Villages had been dismantled and outsiders started moving in, there were frequent altercations between former residents and the newcomers.[32]

On a positive note, the communists never regained their foothold in Malaya. They were put on the defensive and eventually retreated to the Thai-Malaysian border. On 2 December 1989, the MCP agreed to "disband and end its struggle against the Malaysian forces" by signing a peace accord with the Malaysian and Thai governments in Hat Yai, southern Thailand.[33] ♦

HOW TO OUTSMART THE AUTHORITIES

These are some of the ingenious methods that people in the New Villages used to smuggle out essentials to the insurgents:

- The bicycle frame was a favourite tool for smuggling supplies. In a village near Kluang in central Johor, two soldiers who dismantled a bicycle belonging to a nine-year-old boy found rice and antibiotic pills hidden in the bicycle frame. The boy drew suspicion because he had been learning to ride a bicycle, "or pretending to, for the past week", and was always doing so by riding beyond the security checkpoints.[1]
- In another village, an old woman walked past through the checkpoint daily, carrying two buckets of pig swill that hung from a bamboo pole balanced on her shoulders. When the suspicious police officers "put their hands daily into the filthy mess", they found nothing.[2] A month later the officers realised they had been hoodwinked when they found rice hidden in the hollow bamboo pole instead.
- Medicine and other items were concealed under raw pork as the Malay constables would not touch these receptacles.
- Night soil carriers squirrelled items out of the villages by stashing them in false bottoms of their buckets, while rubber tappers did the same by hiding rice at the bottoms of pails containing latex.
- Women pretended to be pregnant and wore big brassieres where rice could be stashed, while men strapped bags of rice to the inside of their thighs and wore loose pants.
- Those living near the fences surrounding the New Villages often placed supplies near the fences where the communist guerrillas could easily retrieve.[3] Planks were sometimes placed across the fences or holes were made in the fences so that the guerrillas could enter and leave the villages easily.

The heavily guarded entrance of a New Village near Ipoh, Perak, 1952. *Image reproduced from Yao, S. (2016). The Malayan Emergency: Essays on a Small, Distant War (p. 101). Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies. (Call no.: RSING 959.5104 YAO).*

NOTES

1 Barber, N. (1971). *The war of the running dogs: How Malaya defeated the communist guerrillas, 1948–60.* (p. 110). London: Collins. (Call no.: RDLKL 959.5 BAR)
2 Barber, 1971, p. 110.
3 'Operation Starvation' hits reds. (1951, September 23). *The Straits Times*, p. 5; Malaya's reds are still being fed. (1952, April 17). *The Straits Times*, p. 6. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

(Above) A communist insurgent being led out of the jungle with his hands tied behind his back. *Image reproduced from Barber, N. (1971). The War of the Running Dogs. London: Collins. (Call no.: RSING 959.5106 BAR)*

(Above right) The Federation Government announcing a reward of $250,000 for "bringing in alive" or giving information leading to the capture of Chin Peng, Secretary-General of the Malayan Communist Party, the man responsible for directing the armed communist revolt in Malaya. *The Straits Times, 1 May 1952, p. 1.*

NOTES

1 The British Military Administration was the interim military government established in Singapore and Malaya during the period from the Japanese surrender to the restoration of civilian rule on 1 August 1946.
2 Hack, K. (1999, March). "Iron claws on Malaya": The historiography of the Malayan Emergency. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies, 30* (1), 99–125, p. 99. Retrieved from JSTOR.
3 Paul, C., et al. (2013). Malaya, 1948–1955 case outcome: COIN win. In *Paths to victory: Detailed insurgency case studies* (p. 55). Santa Monica: RAND Corporation. Retrieved from JSTOR.
4 Named after Lieutenant-General Harold Rawdon Briggs (1894–1952), who devised the strategy. Although having retired from the British Army in 1948, he was recalled to active duty in 1950 and became Director of Operations in Malaya during the Malayan Emergency.
5 The Malayan National Liberation Army (MNLA) was often mistranslated as the Malayan Races Liberation Army (MRLA).
6 Miller, H. (1981). *Jungle war in Malaya: The campaign against communism, 1948–60* (p. 73). Singapore: Eastern University Press. (Call no.: RSING 959.5 MIL)
7 Miller, 1981, p. 77.
8 O'Ballance, E. (1966). *Malaya: The communist insurgent war, 1948–1960.* (p. 109). London: Faber and Faber Limited. (Call no.: RCLOS 959.5 OBA-[JSB]). Amenities such as water, electricity, medical facilities and schools were provided for settlers in the New Villages. The villagers were run by locally elected village councillors. See Barber, N. (1971). *The war of the running dogs: How Malaya defeated the communist guerrillas, 1948–60.* (p. 103). London: Collins. (Call no.: RDLKL 959.5 BAR)
9 O'Ballance, 1966, p. 110.
10 Barber, 1971, p. 103.
11 O'Ballance, 1966, p. 110.
12 Barber, 1971, p. 103.
13 Miller, 1981, p. 73.
14 Barber, 1971, p. 110.
15 Koya, Z. (1998, August 1). Villagers' sacrifice to beat the reds. *New Straits Times*, p. 7. Retrieved from ProQuest Central.
16 Aged man jailed for consorting. (1951, June 21). *Singapore Standard*, p. 3. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
17 Had food for bandits, gets 3 years' jail. (1952, August 21). *Singapore Standard*, p. 4. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
18 Bandit supplier gets ten years. (1952, September 12). *Singapore Standard*, p. 5. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
19 *Singapore Standard*, 12 Sep 1952, p. 5.
20 Terrorists kill man who said no. (1954, December 17). *The Straits Times*, p. 4. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
21 Bandit supplier gets ten years. (1952, September 12). *Singapore Standard*, p. 5. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
22 Youth defies bandits. (1951, June 20). *Singapore Standard*, p. 3. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
23 Gaoled when I told police my son gave food to bandits. (1954, October 27). *The Straits Times*, p. 7. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
24 Barber, 1971, p. 108.
25 Barber, 1971, p. 109.
26 Cloake, J. (1985). *Templer: Tiger of Malaya: The life of Field Marshall Sir Gerald Templer* (p. 272). London: Harrap. (Call no.: RSING 355. 3310942 TEM.C)
27 Cloake, 1985, p. 272.
28 Starving reds killed in ambush. (1958, July 1). *The Straits Times*, p. 2. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
29 The Orang Asli are the indigenous people of Peninsular Malaysia. They, too, suffered during the Emergency. Thousands were believed to have perished during this period.
30 Chin, P. (2003). *My side of history* (p. 270). Singapore: Media Masters. (Call no.: RSING 959.5104092 CHI)
31 Food: Reds squeal. (1953, July 1). *The Straits Times*, p. 1. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
32 Koya, 1 Aug 1998, p. 7.
33 Hassan Kalimullah. (1989, December 1). CPM to destroy all arms and ammunition in 7-point pact. *The Straits Times*, p. 23. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

Navaratri Golu

The Hindu Festival of Dolls

Celebrated by Hindus of South Indian origins, the Golu festival is a lively melange of colourful dolls, womenhood and spirituality. **Anasuya Soundararajan** shares with us its origins.

Anasuya Soundararajan is a researcher at the National Library, Singapore, where she provides information services to government agencies. Her research areas include culture, communications and education.

Every year, dolls in various forms and sizes take centre stage in many Hindu households for nine nights and 10 days. Known as Bommai Golu in Tamil (meaning "Court of Dolls"), this celebration is an integral part of the Navaratri festival. Navaratri, meaning "nine nights" (*nava* is "nine" and *ratri* is "nights"), honours the Hindu goddess Shakti in all her different manifestations.

Navaratri Golu is believed to have been celebrated since the existence of the Vijayanagar kingdom in 14th-century India, and was especially popular with the royal families of Thanjavur and Pudukkottai in the state of Tamil Nadu.[1] Today, Golu is mainly observed by South Indians from the states of Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana and Karnataka.

Interviews with older Singaporeans reveal that this quaint custom of displaying dolls in the home has been a tradition for a number of Indian families in Singapore since the 1940s, or perhaps even before that.[2] Over the years, there seems to be more families and even younger Singaporeans embracing the practice. Besides the homes, Golu is also observed in Hindu temples in Singapore.

(Above) A five-step Golu display at the author's home in 2006. The topmost two steps feature dolls representing Hindu deities. The *kalasam* (silver or brass pot) is placed on the second tier. Behind the *kalasam* is the pair of *marapachi* dolls. On the right-hand corner of the third step is a village scene in India. On the second step from the bottom is a pair of grandfather and grandmother dolls in the traditional Thanjavur bobble-head style. In front of them are traditional cookery toys made of wood. *Courtesy of Anasuya Soundararajan.*

(Facing page) A painting of Goddess Durga fighting the buffalo demon Mahishasura. She holds the divine weapons (trident, spear and conch, among other things) given to her by the gods to empower her to slay the demon. *Artist unknown, Kota, Rajasthan, c. 1750. Stella Kramrisch Collection, 1994, Philadelphia Museum of Art. Retrieved from Wikimedia Commons.*

The Legend of Navaratri

Golu is celebrated annually as part of the Navaratri festival. The festival begins on the day of a new moon, between September and October, in the Hindu month of Purattasi.

Shakti, one of the goddesses in the Hindu pantheon, takes many forms and names.[3] Her most important manifestation is Durga, the warrior goddess who vanquished the evil buffalo demon Mahishasura.[4]

According to the legend of Navaratri, Mahishasura waged war in heaven, imprisoned all the gods and wreaked havoc on earth. In retaliation, Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, the three gods making up the Hindu Trimurti, enlisted the help of their respective consorts, the goddesses Saraswati, Lakshmi and Parvati.[5] From the combined strength of the goddesses emerged Goddess Durga – full of voracious strength and power, and riding a tiger with a trident in her hand.[6] In the ensuing battle between Durga and Mahishasura, all the other gods and goddesses spiritually imbued Durga with their divine powers and weapons.

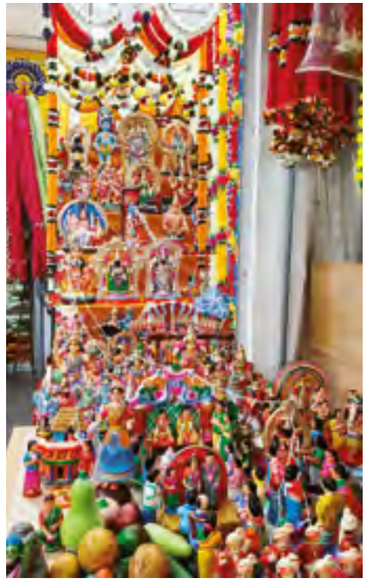
At midnight, on the 10th and final day of the ferocious battle, Durga finally managed to pierce her trident into the buffalo demon's chest and behead him. However, the gods and goddesses, whose powers were completely spent after aiding Durga, were turned into statues. Devotees honour and remember the selfless acts of these gods and goddesses, which are symbolised by the dolls displayed during Golu. Navaratri ultimately commemorates the victory of Durga over Mahishasura – the triumph of good over evil.[7]

Celebrating Golu

Mrs Lalitha Vaidyanathan, a musician and retired teacher, remembers her family's Golu celebrations in their home from the early 1940s. Neighbours and friends would visit their home at 16 Kirk Terrace during the festival, which she describes as a happy gathering of people who came to worship and enjoy the festive spirit as well as indulge in her mother's delectable home-cooked vegetarian meals. Mrs Vaidyanathan has since continued the tradition in her own home after she married in 1980.[8]

The Navaratri Golu was an integral part of the yearly festivities at my home when I was growing up. Every year during the Navaratri period, my mother would arrange the dolls and figurines on a platform, and perform a nightly *puja* (prayer). Relatives and friends would be invited to partake in the festivities, resulting in a lively confluence of colourful dolls, animated guests, devotional songs and delicious food during the nine nights. As little children, my brother and I eagerly looked forward to this celebration each year. My mother, who is 80 this year, has been putting up Golu displays since 1972 and continues to do so until today.

Families would first clear their furniture to create space in the living room for the makeshift steps, which are erected a few days before Navaratri. The dolls are



(Above) A devotee praying in front of the Golu display at the Sri Mariamman Temple during the Navaratri festival, 2019. *Courtesy of Kesavan Rajinikanth.*

(Above right) Jothi Flower Shop in Little India, Singapore, selling Golu dolls during Navaratri, 2019. On display are dolls of deities and Hindu mythological characters, as well as dolls from a wedding scene and village temple procession. *Courtesy of Kesavan Rajinikanth.*

exhibited on odd-numbered steps – three, five, seven or nine – as odd numbers are considered auspicious in Hindu custom and tradition. The steps are then covered with a white piece of cloth, usually a cotton *veshti*.[9]

Traditionally, families would create the steps from whatever furniture is found in the home, such as low tables, shelves, benches, stools, metal trunks or even empty boxes.[10] The number of steps varies in each home, depending on the available space and the number of dolls to be displayed.

The very first Golu display in our home in 1972 was a simple three-step contraption fashioned out of a coffee table and stools of varying heights. The following year, my father constructed a more elaborate nine-step platform by using metal brackets fastened with nuts and bolts and custom-made wooden planks. These days, it is much easier to set up a display as ready-made Golu steps can be bought in stores in India and Singapore. These lightweight and foldable steps are made of plastic and come in sets of three, five, seven or nine.[11]

As Golu dolls represent a divine presence in the home, great care goes into their upkeep and storage when not in use. A few days before the start of the festival, my mother would retrieve the dolls from the storeroom and begin arranging them on the steps. This is a task traditionally performed by women.

While most of the dolls represent gods and goddesses, some are based on popular saints in Hindusm while others reflect scenes from everyday life. The dolls can also depict characters in Hindu mythology, royal processions and weddings. In addition to the wide assortment of dolls, miniature kitchenware, little trinkets and anything ornamental and colourful can be part of the Golu display.[12]

Golu dolls are traditionally handed down from one generation to the next; some families may even possess dolls that are more than a hundred years old.[13] In addition, people may buy new dolls every year, thus adding to their collection over the years and passing these on to their descendants. Mrs Vaidyanathan proudly tells me that most of the dolls featured in her Golu display were given to her by her late mother. These are family heirlooms that hold precious memories for her and reflect the rich history of the Golu tradition. She has also been buying new dolls over the years, and now has an impressive collection.[14]

There is no hard and fast rule for arranging the dolls. Those that depict deities are usually placed on the topmost tiers: dolls representing Rama, Lakshmana, Sita, Krishna, Radha, Siva, Vishnu, Durga, Lakshmi and Saraswati occupy this favoured position. The middle steps are dedicated to saints and religious figures, while dolls in the lower steps portray vignettes such as a wedding scene, a religious procession or scenes of village life. Toys and miniature kitchenware are displayed on the lowest steps. These include Thanjavur dolls, which are traditional bobble-head dolls made of paper and clay or plaster of Paris.[15]

Traditionally, only dolls of Hindu deities and saints, and scenes depicting everyday life in India were featured during Golu. However, in many modern homes today, dolls from all over the world – Thailand, the Philippines and also from Britain and Europe – are sometimes included in the Golu display.

The inclusion of non-traditional dolls and themes make Golu even more interesting today. Families showcase their creativity and artistry in the display and try to come up with special themes each year.[16] Some homes prefer to stick to tradition, while others present the dolls in more elaborate and extravagant settings. Stories from Indian epics, such as the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, come alive on the steps, while more creative families may recreate a miniature park or zoo complete with trees, plants and animals.[17] The displays are often decorated with twinkling fairy lights to create a festive atmosphere.

The dolls are usually made of clay, stone or wood and mainly produced in the villages of southern Indian states such as Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Telangana and Andhra Pradesh. A smaller number of such dolls are made in the northern state of Rajasthan and the eastern state of Kolkata.[18] My parents bought our dolls during their travels to India in the 1970s and '80s, as it was difficult to find Golu dolls in Singapore at the time. Today, one can find a wide assortment of dolls in shops in Little India during the Navaratri season, with prices ranging from $20 for the simpler ones to $150 for the more elaborate creations.

Rituals and Customs

Besides commemorating the victory of good over evil, Navaratri is also a celebration of womanhood where feminity is elevated to a highly auspicious state.[19] Three forms of the Goddess Shakti are worshipped during the festival. The first three nights of Navaratri are devoted to Goddess Durga when devotees pray for the eradication of evil in thought and deed, and for the strength to overcome this struggle; the next three nights honour Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, fortune and prosperity; and the last three nights celebrate Saraswati, the goddess of knowledge, wisdom and the arts.[20] Families observing Navaratri seek the divine grace of the three goddesses, invoking their blessings for good health, happiness and prosperity.

On the new moon day of the month of Purattasi, a *kalasam* (silver or brass pot) is placed on the middle step of the tiered platform. The pot of water, which represents Goddess Shakti, has mango leaves covering its opening and is topped with a coconut and ringed by a garland of rose and jasmine blooms. Worshippers invoke Goddess Shakti with prayer offerings of flowers, oil lamps, camphor and incense.[21]

The first set of dolls to adorn the display is a pair of wooden ones symbolising a man and a woman, known as the *marapachi* dolls. Usually placed on the upper steps of the display, these dolls represent Venkateshwara, an avatar of Lord Vishnu, and his consort Mahalakshmi. Dressed in the traditional silk *veshti* and *saree*,[22] they also depict the union of a husband and wife, and symbolise prosperity and fertility.[23] If there is a girl in the family, it is customary for the mother to gift a new set of *marapachi* dolls to her daughter when she gets married so that she can start her own Golu tradition.[24]

All the dolls are ritually worshipped during the celebrations.[25] In the evenings, a lamp is lit in front of the display, and *bhajans* (devotional songs) are sung in praise of Goddess Shakti. Golu is also a social event where relatives and friends are invited to view the doll display and participate in the prayers and celebrations. Visitors are then served light refreshments and *prasadam* (offerings of food).

When the guests leave, each woman is presented with a *thamboolam* – a tray containing auspicious items like *kungumam* (red powder), turmeric, betel leaves, flowers, fruits, sweets and other gifts. The belief is that whatever you give will be returned to you by the goddesses – as represented by the dolls – that are residing in your home for the nine nights.[26] In some homes, a *kanya puja*[27] (young girls' prayer) is performed on any chosen night of Navaratri. During the prayer, nine prepubescent girls are revered and offered gifts such as clothing, fruits and sweets.[28]

On the 10th and final day, or Vijayadasami, the *marapachi* dolls are made to lie down and symbolically put to sleep, to mark the end of the year's Navaratri Golu.[29] All the dolls are then removed from the display, carefully wrapped in cloth and stored in boxes, ready to be taken out again for the following year's Golu.

Mrs Vijayam Balakrishna Sharma, a renowned Carnatic musician who has celebrated the festival for many years,

(Below) A Navaratri Golu invitation card welcoming relatives and friends to the author's home in 1976. **(Right)** A pair of *marapachi* dolls, representing Venkateshwara (an avatar of Lord Vishnu) and his consort, Mahalakshmi. The dolls are dressed in the traditional silk *veshti* and *saree*. *Courtesy of Anasuya Soundararajan.*

TEMPLE FESTIVITIES DURING NAVARATRI

Navaratri is one of many festivals observed at Hindu temples in Singapore. Devotees visit temples to get the *darshan* (blessed vision) of Goddess Shakti and participate in special prayers. Many temples – including Sri Mariamman, Sri Veeramakaliamman, Sri Vadapathrakaliamman, Sri Vairavimada Kaliamman, Sri Thendayuthapani and Sri Senpaga Vinayagar – put up a Golu display, albeit on a much larger and grander scale compared with those found in homes.

Music and dance programmes held in the evenings are also an integral component of the temple festivities. Temples organise classical dance performances as well as vocal and instrumental devotional music recitals to honour the deities.

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(Below) Relatives and friends of Usha Mohan viewing the Golu display in her home and singing devotional songs, 2019. *Courtesy of Usha Mohan.*

(Bottom) The *kalasam* (left) is a silver or brass pot containing water, and decorated with a jasmine and rose garland. Its opening is covered with mango leaves and topped with a coconut. Traditional Thanjavur dolls (right) – representing a grandmother and a grandfather – are bobble-head dolls made of paper and clay or plaster of Paris. *Courtesy of Anasuya Soundararajan.*

recalls in her oral history interview with the National Archives that a special drink made of yogurt and spices is offered to Goddess Durga on the last day to quench the deity's thirst and revive her after the tiring battle with the buffalo demon.[30]

It is believed that once you have begun the tradition of celebrating Golu, you cannot arbitrarily stop celebrating it. Unless there is an event such as a death in the family, the display must continue every year uninterrupted. Even then, the tradition cannot come to a complete stop, but takes place on a smaller scale, perhaps with just a few dolls and only a single step.[31]

Keeping the Tradition Alive

Mrs Lalitha Vaidyanathan and my mother, Mrs Komalavalee Soundararajan, who was interviewed by the National Archives in 1991, believe that the doll display, daily prayers and gathering of people usher a divine presence into the home and bring with them a sense of fulfilment and happiness. Having practised the tradition for decades in Singapore, they hope to see women of the younger generation celebrate this festival in their own homes.[32]

Darshna Mahadevan, who is in her late 20s, has been putting up a Golu display in her home since she married two years ago. She is determined to continue the tradition started by her mother and grandmother, and wishes that more young people would celebrate Golu in Singapore.[33]

Golu not only showcases the rich culture and customs of Hindus, but it is also a way for young people to be introduced to the various deities and their significance in Hinduism.[34] Navaratri is also an occasion to seek divine blessings and spiritual fulfilment. On a social level, Golu provides the chance to meet and engage in community fellowship, offering an opportunity for everyone to discover more about Hindu mythology and religious practices.[35] ♦

NOTES

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2 Author's interviews with Mrs Lalitha Vaidyanathan and Mrs Komalavalee Soundararajan and oral history interviews of Mrs Vijayam Balakrishna Sharma and Mrs Komalavalee Soundararajan.
3 Shakti is a divine cosmic energy that represents feminine energy and the dynamic forces that flow through the universe. Shakti takes many forms and names, including mother goddess, fierce warrior and the dark goddess of destruction. She is also known as Parvati, Durga and Kali.
4 Flood, G. (1996). *An introduction to Hinduism* (pp. 174–175, 177–178). New York: Cambridge University Press. (Call no.: R 294.5 FLO)
5 Brahma, who is traditionally depicted with four faces and four arms, is the creator god. Vishnu upholds and preserves creation; he is usually depicted as having blue skin and four arms. Shiva is the destroyer god as he removes all evil from the world. Their consorts are Saraswati, Lakshmi and Parvati, respectively. Saraswati is the goddess of knowledge, music, art, wisdom and learning. Lakshmi is the goddess of wealth, fortune and prosperity. Parvati is the goddess of fertility, love, beauty, marriage, children, devotion, divine strength and power.
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HINAMATSURI: JAPAN'S DOLL FESTIVAL

Interestingly, the Hindu Golu festival mirrors a tradition in Japanese society that also centres on dolls. Hinamatsuri, also known as "Dolls Day" or "Girls Day", is celebrated annually in Japan on 3 March when families pray for the happiness and wellbeing of their young daughters (usually up to age 10).

Hinamatsuri originates from an ancient custom called *hina nagashi*, in which *hina* dolls made of straw are placed in a boat and sent down a river that eventually empties into the sea. This act has become a symbolic gesture for warding off bad luck.

During the festival, the figurines of royal personages are arranged on as many as seven *hinadan*, or platforms, in Japanese households. Covered with red fabric, each step displays a set of decorative dolls called *hina ningyo*, representing members of the imperial court. The size of the dolls and the number of tiers vary, but usually there are five to seven tiers.

The topmost tier features dolls representing the two most important members of the Japanese imperial family – the emperor and the empress. The second tier carries three court ladies and the third supports five male musicians. The fourth tier features two ministers, while the fifth holds three samurais who serve as protectors of the emperor and the empress. On the sixth and seventh tiers are displayed a variety of miniature furniture, utensils and carriages.

The *hina ningyo* dolls are made of wood and decorated in traditional court dress of the Heian period (794–1185). Similar to the Hindu Golu practice, these Japanese dolls are handed down from one generation to the next, or bought by a girl's parents or grandparents for her first Hinamatsuri.

On the day of the festival, girls wake up early and put on their best kimono, eat *hishimochi* (diamond-shaped rice cakes) and drink *shirozake*, a type of sake made from fermented rice. The emphasis on girls during Hinamatsuri is similar to the Navaratri Golu's focus on women and womenhood.

Japanese families start preparing for this festival around mid-February, and put away the dolls on the day after Hinamatsuri. There is a superstitious belief that families who delay keeping away the dolls will have trouble marrying off their daughters when the time comes.

A seven-tiered Hinamatsuri doll display, 2014. Placed right at the top are the emperor and the empress dolls. On the second tier are three court ladies, and on the third, five male musicians. The fourth tier features two ministers, while the fifth holds three samurais to protect the emperor and the empress. A variety of miniature furniture, utensils and carriages is displayed on the sixth and seventh tiers. *Retrieved from Wikimedia Commons.*

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On Paper

Singapore Before 1867

Paintings by John Turnbull Thomson, poems in Jawi script, an early 19th-century map of Asia and a Russian traveller's tale of Singapore are some of the paper artefacts featured in the National Library's latest exhibition, "On Paper: Singapore Before 1867".

J.T. Thomson's Paintings

John Turnbull Thomson is best known for his role as Government Surveyor of the Straits Settlements as well as his design and engineering work on several key early buildings in Singapore. What is less well known is that Thomson, a self-trained artist, also made invaluable contributions to the pictorial documentation of Singapore through his paintings.

The four vibrant watercolour works featured here, which exemplify Thomson's unique artistic approach and style, vividly capture the state of Singapore's built landscape in the mid-1840s. They also reflect the cultural diversity of the communities and people who made their home on the island.

The 1847 painting, "Chinese Temple to the Queen of Heaven", depicts the Thian Hock Keng temple on Telok Ayer Street. The temple began as a shrine erected around 1820–21 by Chinese immigrants from Fujian province, China, and was dedicated to Mazu, Mother of the Heavenly Sages and patron goddess of sailors. The Chinese migrants would make offerings at the shrine in gratitude for their safe passages to and from China.

Between 1839 and 1842, the shrine was transformed into Thian Hock Keng temple after massive construction works. The project was spearheaded by Chinese merchant Tan Tock Seng, who also funded a large portion of the construction costs. Many of the builders and artisans were brought in directly from Fujian.

Today, Thian Hock Keng remains the most important temple of Singapore's Hokkien community. Thomson's painting shows its facade, which has largely been preserved. One feature that stands out is the seafront, which is visible in the painting's foreground. Telok Ayer Street used to run along the coast, before land reclamation pushed the road inland.

(Left) "Muslim Mosque in Campong Glam". John Turnbull Thomson, 1846. Watercolour on paper, 15.3 x 22.7 cm. This single-storey brick building with the tiered pyramidal roof shows Masjid Sultan, or Sultan Mosque, in Kampong Glam that was demolished in 1932 to make way for the present onion-domed mosque we are familiar with. *Hocken Collections, Uare Taoka O Hākena, University of Otago, New Zealand Hocken Collections, 92/1155.*

(Below) "Chinese Temple to the Queen of Heaven". John Turnbull Thomson, 1847. Watercolour on paper, 15.5 x 23 cm. This is the Thian Hock Keng temple on Telok Ayer Street. Built between 1839 and 1842, it is the oldest Hokkien temple in Singapore. *Hocken Collections, Uare Taoka O Hākena, University of Otago, New Zealand. Hocken Collections, 92/1156.*

Thomson's painting titled "Muslim Mosque in Campong Glam" (1846) is of special historical interest as it depicts the Masjid Sultan (Sultan Mosque) in Kampong Glam before it was replaced with the present structure we are familiar with. The earlier iteration of Sultan Mosque was a single-storey brick building that featured a tiered pyramidal roof commonly found in traditional Southeast Asian religious architecture.

It was built between 1824 and 1826 by Sultan Husain, whom Stamford Raffles had installed as the Sultan of Johor in order for the 1819 Treaty of Friendship and Alliance to be signed (the treaty allowed the British East India Company, or EIC, to set up a trading post on Singapore). Land for the mosque was allocated by Raffles, who also contributed 3,000 Spanish dollars on behalf of the EIC towards its construction.

This building served the Muslim community in Singapore for more than a hundred years before it was torn down in 1932 to make way for a new mosque, designed by the architectural firm Swan and Maclaren in the Indo-Saracenic style, complete with onion domes and minarets. Masjid Sultan is a well-known landmark in Kampong Glam today.

Another of Thomson's paintings (see overleaf), "Hindoo Pagoda and (Chulia) Mosque" (1846), depicts two religious buildings along South Bridge Road. On the left is Sri Mariamman Temple, the oldest Hindu temple in Singapore. The structure shown in the painting, with its three-tiered *gopuram* (pyramidal entrance tower), was constructed in 1844 – by craftsmen and former Indian convicts from Madras – replacing a wood-and-attap structure built in 1827 by the Tamil pioneer Naraina Pillai.

From its inception, the Sri Mariamman Temple has played a key role in Singapore's Hindu community, serving not only as a place of worship, but also as a refuge for newly arrived immigrants from India seeking accommodation and employment. While the temple compound has remained largely unchanged since the 1880s, the tower was replaced in 1925 with the elaborately decorated five-tiered structure that stands today.

Georgina Wong is an Assistant Curator with the National Library, Singapore, and co-curator of the exhibition, "On Paper: Singapore Before 1867"; **Dr Azhar Ibrahim** is a lecturer in the Department of Malay Studies, National University of Singapore; his research interests include religion and society; **Assoc Prof Peter Borschberg** teaches in the Department of History, National University of Singapore, specialising in Europe-Asia interaction, trade, exploration and cartography; **Gracie Lee** is a Senior Librarian with the National Library, Singapore, where she works with the Rare Materials Collection.

On the right of the painting is Jamae Mosque (Masjid Jamae), which was completed in 1833 to replace the original wood-and-attap mosque built by the Chulia (Tamil Muslim) community, led by Anser Saib, in the late 1820s. Today, the mosque's distinctive twin minarets continue to be a landmark on South Bridge Road, but the lush greenery surrounding the temple and its spacious frontage seen in Thomson's painting have given way to shophouses and a busy vehicular thoroughfare.

Thomson's works also include sweeping views of Singapore from various vantage points. In his 1846 painting, titled "Singapore Town from the Government Hill Looking Southeast", the viewer is positioned on what is now Fort Canning Hill, overlooking the Singapore River. Densely built shophouses and godowns can be seen along the river at Boat Quay, while a number of expansive bungalows, occupied mostly by Europeans, are found by the seafront north of the river.

In his first book, *Some Glimpses into Life in the Far East*, published in 1864, Thomson remarked on the stark contrast between the two areas:

> "The European part of the town was studded with handsome mansions and villas of the merchants and officials. The Chinese part of the town was compactly built upon, and resounded with busy traffic. In the Chinese quarter fires frequently broke out, spreading devastation into hundreds of families."[1]

Taken together, Thomson's sketches and paintings serve as an invaluable visual record of 19th-century Singapore. As a surveyor and engineer by training, Thomson was able to bring both a critical eye and a different perspective to his art.

– Georgina Wong

(Top) "Singapore Town from the Government Hill Looking Southeast". John Turnbull Thomson, 1846. Watercolour on paper, 61 x 81.3 x 0.6 cm. *Hocken Collections, Uare Taoka O Hākena, University of Otago, New Zealand. Hocken Collections, 92/1217.*

(Above) "Hindoo Pagoda and (Chulia) Mosque, Singapore". John Turnbull Thomson, 1846. Watercolour on paper, 15.4 x 22.8 cm. On the left is the three-tiered *gopuram* (pyramidal entrance tower) of the original Sri Mariamman Temple. It was replaced in 1925 with the temple's present five-tiered tower. Next to it is Masjid Jamae (Chulia), built in 1835 by the Tamil Muslim community. Both buildings are found on South Bridge Road. *Hocken Collections, Uare Taoka O Hākena, University of Otago, New Zealand. Hocken Collections, 92/1158.*

Syair Dagang Berjual Beli and Syair Potong Gaji

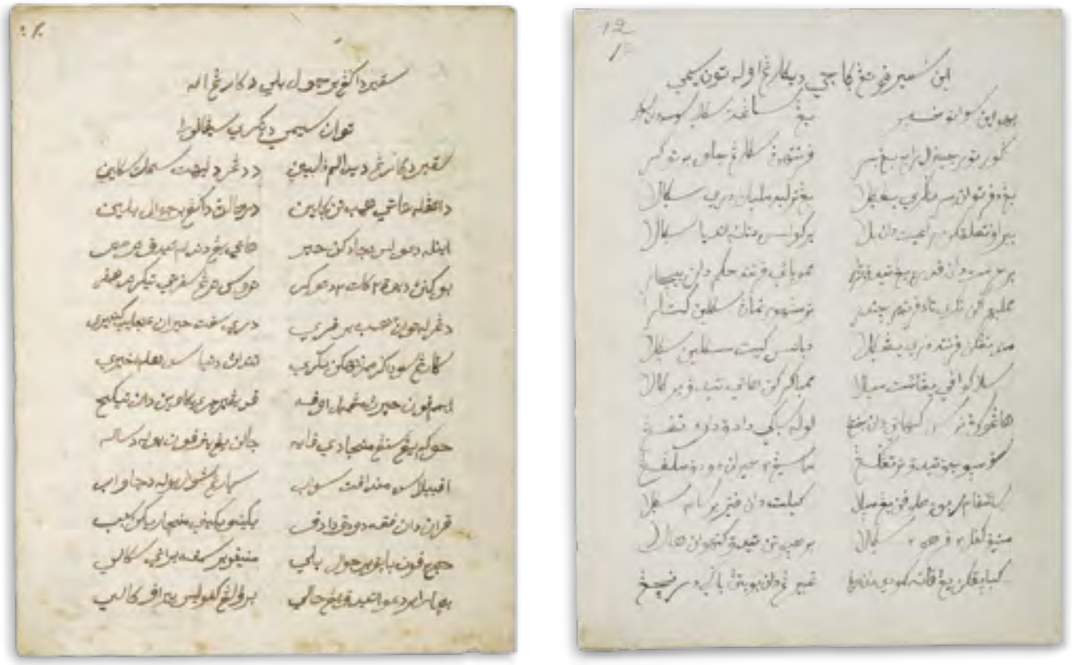
Syair Dagang Berjual Beli (On Trading and Selling) and *Syair Potong Gaji* (On Wage Cuts) are two early 19th-century Malay narratives in the form of the *syair* (rhymed poem), written by Tuan Simi in Singapore. Tuan Simi was a scribe and translator who had worked for several British personalities, including Stamford Raffles.

These two *syair* occupy a special place in the Malay literary tradition, bearing testimony to the early years of colonial Singapore, then administered by the British East India Company (EIC; sometimes referred to as the Company). Both *syair*, composed in the 1830s, may be described as poems of protest, as they give voice to the author's grievances against the EIC's practices that affected the lives and wellbeing of local traders and workers.

Syair Dagang Berjual Beli, comprising 56 stanzas, contains Tuan Simi's observations on trade practices in Singapore. The poem cautions readers to be wary of the unfair practices that were being imposed by the new "Kompeni" (Company) rulers and their network of Chinese and Indian middlemen. Tuan Simi's realistic style of narration, together with his views on the competing traders who were depriving the indigenous traders of their livelihood, offer the reader an intimate, unvarnished insight into inter-ethnic tensions in colonial society:

> *"Akan halnya kita Bugis dan Melayu Harapkan orang putih juga selalu Hukum bicaranya kelihatan terlalu Mulut disuap pantat disumbu"* [2]

The opening page of *Syair Dagang Berjual Beli* (left) and *Syair Potong Gaji* (right). Tuan Simi, Singapore, 1830s, 22.5 x 17.5 cm. *Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Malayo–polynésien 96.*



"Such is the state of us Bugis and Malays
When to the white man we surrender our fates
Of the rulings – it's true what they say
The hand that gives is that which confiscates" [3]

The second work, *Syair Potong Gaji*, comprising 38 stanzas, narrates the misery and frustrations of coolies from Bencoolen (Bengkulu) who worked for the EIC in Singapore. Tuan Simi notes that the coolies suffered economic hardship because of senior managers who neglected their welfare. Profit maximisation had become the EIC's mantra, to the extent that the work of three men often had to be carried out by one man alone:

> *"Perasaan hati sangatlah rendah*
> *Kebajikan dibuat tidak berfaedah*
> *Beberapa lamanya bekerja sudah*
> *Harganya dinilai setimbang ludah"* [4]

"We feel very much undignified
Our services rendered unrecognised
Alas a long time we had laboured
Like the weight of a spit, it was valued"

These narratives, dissenting in tone and spirit, were naturally considered subversive by the British authorities. They disappeared from local circulation and were eventually forgotten. The two *syair* were only rediscovered in 1986 by Muhammad Haji Salleh, a Malaysian scholar, when he was conducting research on Malay manuscripts at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris.

The handwritten Jawi texts of the two *syair* were discovered alongside another, titled *Syair Tenku Perabu di Negeri Singapura* (On Tenku Perabu of Singapore), which narrates a scandalous affair that allegedly took place in the house of Sultan Husain, between the Sultan's consort Tenku Perabu and his private secretary, Abdul Kadir. The three *syair* were compiled, transliterated and published in an anthology, *Syair Tantangan Singapura Abad Kesembilan Belas* (19th-century Singapore Syair of Remonstrance), by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Malaysia, in 1994.

Today, these texts are part of Singapore's history and literary heritage. They provide insights into the early days of modern Singapore, and thus deserve greater recognition and appreciation.

– Dr Azhar Ibrahim

THE FORM OF THE SYAIR

A *syair* is a narrative poem made up of quatrains, each with an end rhyme. Every line contains about 10 to 12 syllables. Although the origin of this poetic form is still debated today, it is generally attributed to Hamzah Fansuri, a 16th-century Sufi from Sumatra. While it may have been used initially for religious purposes, by the 18th century the *syair* had become a vehicle for topics as diverse as romantic stories, historical events, advice and so on.[1]

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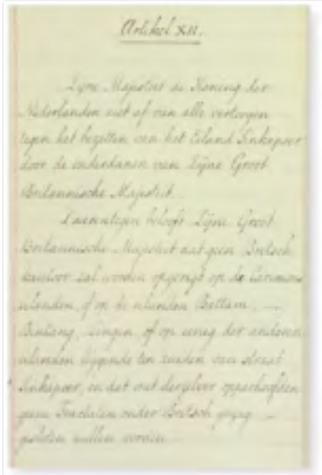
Map of Asia, Used by A.R. Falck in London in 1824

Printed by John Carey in London in the early 19th century, this map of Asia was used during the final negotiations of the Anglo-Dutch Treaty in London between

Detail from Map of Asia used by A.R Falck in London in 1824, early 19th century, John Carey, London. The faint pencil line – which begins at the northwestern coast of Sumatra and goes around the northern tip of the island, before extending down the Straits of Melaka and turning eastward between Bintan and Lingga towards Borneo – divides the region into British and Dutch spheres of influence. *Nationaal Archief, 4.AANW, 1455.*



(Above) The Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1824 was signed between the United Kingdom and the Netherlands in London on 17 March 1824. Written in both English and Dutch, the treaty settled the territorial and trade disputes between the two colonial powers in Southeast Asia. Show here is the Dutch version of Article 12 of the treaty, 38 x 26 cm. *Nationaal Archief, 2.05.02, 79.*

(Facing page top) Chinese in Singapore, Aleksei Vysheslavtsev, 1862. *National Library, Singapore, Accession no.: B34442628K.*

(Facing page bottom) Indian Jugglers, Aleksei Vysheslavtsev, 1862. *National Library, Singapore, Accession no.: B34442628K.*

December 1823 and March 1824. It was acquired in 1909 as part of the collection of Anton Reinhard Falck (1777–1843) and is preserved today in the Nationaal Archief in the Netherlands.

A pencil line can be seen running through the Singapore and Melaka straits on the map. This was drawn to illustrate a proposal made by Falck, the Dutch chief negotiator and diplomat. Falck proposed using the line to divide the region into British and Dutch spheres of influence. The story of how this pencil line came about was recounted by Otto Willem Hora Siccama, a relative of Falck's, who had accompanied the elderly Falck to London as an aide and personal assistant during these negotiations.[5]

From Falck's memoirs, as well as Dutch foreign ministry papers relating to the negotiations, it transpires that the scheme to carve up the Southeast Asian region – into a Dutch sphere of influence in the archipelago, and a British one on the Malay Peninsula and the mainland – came from Falck, who had earlier discussed the proposal with the Dutch king, William I. An experienced negotiator and diplomat, Falck hoped to resolve a package of outstanding trade and colonial issues with British Foreign Secretary Lord George Canning by streamlining their patchwork of possessions in Southeast Asia.

After the two spheres of influence were marked out, the British were persuaded to trade off their possessions and concessions on and around the island of Sumatra, namely Bencoolen (Bengkulu) and Billiton (Belitung), which were now in the Dutch sphere of influence, and exchange these for the settlements of Melaka and Singapore on the peninsula.

As a result, certain arrangements in the Lampongs (southern Sumatra) were affected, as was Stamford Raffles' treaty with Aceh, which effectively became null and void. The spheres, moreover, were to be exclusive to each party, and so the 1824 Anglo-Dutch Treaty implicitly forbade the commerce of independent polities like Aceh with traders from other states in Europe or the Americas, significantly pepper traders from the United States.

In reaching this arrangement, the Dutch would drop their objections to the British occupation of Singapore as well as the presence of the British East India Company's trading post there, a concession that was captured in Article 12 of the final Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 17 March 1824. The treaty provided the geographical framework for Anglo-Dutch relations for the remainder of the 19th century and arguably beyond, and today forms the foundation of the borders between Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia.

There are two additional observations worth mentioning in the present context. First, in using the Singapore and Melaka straits as a notional dividing line between the exclusive Dutch and British spheres of influence, the Johor-Riau Sultanate would be split in two. The possessions on the peninsula would fall into the British sphere, while the islands excluding Singapore would go to the Dutch. In this way, Sultan Abdul Rahman, who at the time was based in Daik on the island of Lingga, formally lost control of lands on the peninsula, including Singapore. Moreover, Temenggung Abdul Rahman, who resided in Singapore, lost some of the people and lands that were part of his traditional domain, which included Karimun, Batam, Bulan and other islands to the south.

The second observation concerns the course of the pencil line. This starts off at the northwestern coast of Sumatra, around the northern tip of the island, then runs down through the Straits of Melaka past Karimun through the Durian Strait. Thereafter, it turns eastward between Bintan and Lingga before heading through the Karimata Sea towards Borneo. The line makes a slight southerly bend and finally stops off the Borneo coast near Sukadana.

Therefore, according to this initial proposal captured by Falck's pencil line, Batam, Bulan (together with the islands south thereof) as well as Bintan were originally slated to fall into the British sphere. That would have included the court of the Bugis Yang di-Pertuan Muda, Raja Ja'afar, but not Sultan Abdul Rahman's court at Daik on Lingga. The termination of the line off the coast of Borneo, moreover, would assume significance in the later decades of the 19th century, when Raja James Brooke established himself on the island that is today the Malaysian state of Sarawak.

– Assoc Prof Peter Borschberg

A Russian Traveller's Tale of Singapore

Travel literature on Singapore proliferated during the 19th century in tandem with the spread of colonialism and the expansion of trade and missionary activities in the East. As Singapore was a natural transit point along the East-West route, it was a popular port-of-call for many travellers. From diplomatic and scientific expeditionary parties to sightseers lured to the Far East by the opening of the Suez Canal, visitors recorded their impressions of the island in writing, and sometimes through illustrations.

Although these travelogues were naturally coloured by the subjective views and values of their authors, they offer a wealth of information on early Singapore.[6]

A 19th-century memoir, *Ocherki Perom i Karandashom iz Krugosvetnogo Plavaniya v 1857, 1858, 1859 i 1860 godakh* (Sketches in Pen and Pencil from a Trip Around the World in the Years 1857, 1858, 1859 and 1860), describes the voyage of the Russian naval clipper *Plastun* from 1857 to 1860. It stands out among European travel narratives on Singapore as it presents a rare account of early Russia-Singapore relations. Written and illustrated by the doctor on board, Aleksei Vysheslavtsev (1831–88), the memoir also contains some of the earliest views of Singapore executed by a Russian artist.

The book traces the ship's journey from the Russian port town of Kronstadt

to the Atlantic islands, around the Cape of Good Hope, across the Indian Ocean, through the Sunda Strait to Singapore, and then on to Hong Kong, Canton, Formosa, Manchuria and the Russian Pacific Far East, where it inspected the territories that Russia had recently acquired with the signing of the Russian-Chinese Treaty of Aigun in 1858. From there, the ship sailed to Japan, where the Russians spent a year negotiating a treaty with the Japanese, before heading home. Unfortunately, the ship came to an untimely end when it was destroyed by an explosion on board. By a stroke of providence, the author lived to tell his tale as he had transferred to another vessel before disaster struck.[7]

The *Plastun* arrived in Singapore in July 1858, where it anchored for a week. In a chapter titled "The Malay Sea", the author writes a brief history of British colonisation of Singapore and a description of the settlement's economy, trade and town layout, which was characterised by separate quarters for Europeans, Chinese, Indians and Malays.

A keen observer, Vysheslavtsev detailed various aspects of life in Singapore: street peddlers, Chinese houseboats on the river, an Indian theatre performance, Indian jugglers, and the manners and appearance of the Chinese, Indian and Malay inhabitants. He took an excursion to some of Singapore's offshore islands and paid a visit to Hoo Ah Kay (1816–80; commonly known as Whampoa), who later became the first Vice Consul to Russia in 1864. Vysheslavtsev's account was accompanied by four illustrations: the Singapore harbour, Indian jugglers, Chinese inhabitants and two Chinese men beside a bridge.[8]

Parts of Vysheslavtsev's travel account first appeared in the magazine *Russky Vestnik* from 1858 to 1860 under the title "Letters from Clipper Plastun". The complete work was published by the Russian Naval Ministry in 1862 with 27 lithographed plates redrawn from the author's original sketches. In response to warm reviews by the Russian audience, who praised it for its fine drawings and literary style, a second edition was issued in 1867 by a major St Petersburg commercial publisher, Mauritius Wolf, with 23 illustrated plates.[9]

Although Vysheslavtsev's travelogue achieved critical and popular acclaim in its time, it was invariably compared to and perhaps even overshadowed by Russian novelist Ivan Goncharov's (1812–91) *The Voyage of the Frigate Pallada* (1858). Published four years earlier, Goncharov's book traces a similar journey to the East – with the Russian mission to Japan under Admiral Putyatin (1803–83) from 1852 to 1854. It includes a vivid description of his visit to Singapore in 1853, which has been studied and translated into Chinese, and partially into English. In contrast, there are no known translations in any language of the Singapore portion of Vysheslavtsev's account.[10]

By and large, Russia has occupied a marginal place in the scholarship on European expansion in Southeast Asia. However, this is by no means an indication of its lack of commercial ambitions or scientific interest.

Russia actively sought to protect its shipping routes and extend its influence in the region from the early 19th century. From the 1850s, Russian vessels started using Singapore as a provisioning and coaling station. In the 1870s, the Russian anthropologist Nikolai Miklouho-Maclay embarked on a scientific expedition to study the Orang Asli in the Malay Peninsula and his findings were published in the *Journal of the Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* in Singapore.[11] In 1881, K.A. Skalkovsky published an account of a Russian trade mission and survey of the Pacific, which included Singapore.[12]

However, there still remains a paucity of information on relations between Singapore and Russia until a Russian consulate was formally established in Singapore in 1890 and began submitting regular consular reports on bilateral affairs. Given the dearth of literature, the writings of Vysheslavtsev and Goncharov are valuable for their historical research on the interactions between Tsarist Russia and British-controlled Singapore in the *longue durée* of Russia-Singapore relations.[13] ♦

– Gracie Lee

Two Chinese Men on a Bridge, Aleksei Vysheslavtsev, 1862. *National Library, Singapore, Accession no.: B34442628K.*

ABOUT THE EXHIBITION AND BOOK

The exhibition "On Paper: Singapore Before 1867" takes place at level 10 of the National Library building on Victoria Street. On display are more than 150 paper-based artefacts – comprising official records, diaries and letters, books and manuscripts, maps, drawings and photographs – tracing Singapore's history from the 17th century to its establishment as a Crown Colony of Britain on 1 April 1867.

The exhibits, drawn from the collections of the National Library and the National Archives of Singapore, as well as from various local and international institutions – Library of Congress, The British Library, Nationaal Archief, Bibliothèque Nationale de France and the National Library of Indonesia, among others – provide a glimpse of Singapore's documentary heritage as well as the personalities, and social and political forces behind them. Many of the items are shown to the public in Singapore for the first time.

A series of programmes has been organised in conjunction with the exhibition, including guided tours by the curators and public talks. For more information, follow us on Facebook @ NationalLibrarySG.

The accompanying book, also called *On Paper: Singapore Before 1867*, features a small selection of the items being shown at the exhibition, illuminated by essays written by librarians, archivists and scholars.

The book is not for sale but is available for reference at the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library (Call no.: RSING 959.9703 ON) and for loan at selected public libraries (Call no.: SING 959.9703 ON). Borrow the ebook via the NLB Mobile app or read it online by scanning this QR code.

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The Making of XIN KE

新客

This 1927 silent Chinese movie is the first feature film to be made in Singapore and Malaya. **Jocelyn Lau** traces its genesis with researcher Toh Hun Ping and translation editor Lucien Low.

Jocelyn Lau is an editor and a writer with postgraduate qualifications in publishing. She is the co-publisher of Kucinta Books.

In the mid-1920s, Shen Huaqiang (沈华强), a poor "new immigrant" from China, arrives in Nanyang[1] to seek his fortune. He ends up in Johor, staying with his wealthy Peranakan (Straits Chinese) relatives who help him assimilate to life in Nanyang.

Compared with his impoverished counterparts in mainland China, Huaqiang has far better opportunities in his adopted country. Shortly after, Huaqiang's uncle, Zhang Tianxi (张天锡), finds him a job in Singapore, where over time Huaqiang rises up the ranks through sheer hard work and perseverance.

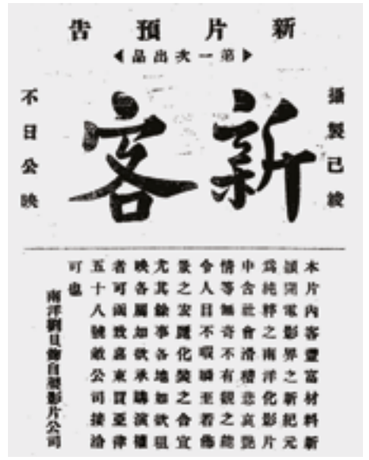
Meanwhile, Zhang's elder child, a teenage daughter named Huizhen (慧贞), becomes increasingly aware of her own identity and interests through attending school in Singapore, and grows more confident of herself, and of what she wants in life. Thus, when her father's English-speaking Peranakan clerk Gan Fusheng (甘福胜) begins to show an interest in her, she senses trouble and rejects him. Huizhen realises that Fusheng is not to be trusted as he indulges in drinking, gambling and womanising. She falls for the hardworking and honest Huaqiang instead.

Unfortunately for Huizhen, her parents think that Fusheng is a pleasant and well-educated person as he speaks and dresses well. Unbeknownst to Huizhen, her parents promise her hand to him in marriage.

(Facing page) Lead actor Zheng Chaoren (seated, wearing hat) who played the role of Shen Huaqiang, with other *Xin Ke* cast and crew members, 1926. *Courtesy of 玉山社 (1998).*

(Below) An advertisement for *Xin Ke in Sin Kuo Min Press*, 18 January 1927, p. 9 (left) and manifesto of the Nanyang Liu Beijin Independent Film Production Company reproduced in *Sin Kuo Min Press*, 20 July 1926, p. 12 (right). *Courtesy of NUS Libraries.*

(Bottom) An example of a film title card in Chinese and English from the 1920s. Illustration by Dan Wong, based on a still from Hou Yao's film, *A Poet from the Sea* (1927).


新片預告
第一出品
新客
攝製已竣
不日公映
南洋劇藝電影片公司


破天荒
商務
劉貝錦自製影片公司
宣言

The 1927 silent Chinese film *Xin Ke* (新客; *The Immigrant*) is believed to be the very first full-length feature film to have been made in Singapore and Malaya. *Xin Ke*, like most of the silent films produced globally between 1891 and the late 1920s, has likely not survived the passage of time due to the highly ephemeral nature of the material used back then.[2] The items that are still extant today are the film's Chinese intertitles (see text box overleaf), two synopses, a film still – all published in the local newspaper *Sin Kuo Min Press* (新国民日报)[3] in 1926 – and photos of the film crew and cast.

Xin Ke was produced by Liu Beijin (刘贝锦; 1902–59; also known as Low Poey Kim), a prominent Singapore-born entrepreneur. His father, Liu Zhuhou (刘筑侯), was an immigrant from Huyang, Yongchun, in Fujian province, who became one of the wealthiest rubber plantation owners in Muar, Malaya. Liu Beijin was also related to Liu Kang (刘抗; 1911–2004), the pioneer Singaporean artist (Liu Beijin and Liu Kang's father were cousins).

A Film Pioneer

Liu Beijin led a very comfortable lifestyle while growing up. He was born in Singapore, and when he was about four months old, his family moved to Muar. When he was six, his father took him back to China, where he lived until he was 16 before returning to Nanyang.[4] Back in Muar, Liu took over his father's rubber plantation business when the latter died at the relatively young age of 56.

Liu was an amiable, well-educated and socially conscious person. He was also a polyglot – fluent in six languages, including English, Mandarin and Malay – and enjoyed dabbling in both business and the arts, particularly motion pictures.

INTERTITLES FROM XIN KE

In order to reach wider audiences, many silent Chinese movies exported from Shanghai in the 1920s and early 1930s for screening in the international market contained both Chinese and English intertitles.[1]

Likewise, *Xin Ke* had both Chinese and English intertitles, although only the Chinese texts are still extant. The list of employees who worked on *Xin Ke* included one person who wrote the Chinese intertitles and another who did the English translation.

The English intertitles numbered 6 to 52, which are reproduced on the right, have been translated from the extant Chinese intertitles rendered in traditional Chinese characters.

Revised from a script originally written by Chen Xuepu (陈学溥), these title cards were published together with the film's synopsis in the local newspaper, *Sin Kuo Min Press* (新国民日报), on 26 November 1926. When the screenplay underwent a second revision and was published in 1927, the new intertitles were – as far as present research has revealed – not included alongside the synopsis.

NOTES

1 In the 1930s, the Chinese Nationalist government prohibited the addition of English intertitles to Chinese films that were intended for domestic screening. This was to promote the national language and to stop what it perceived as the excessive use of foreign languages in China. As a result, bilingual intertitles in Chinese films disappeared, and Chinese films were translated only if they were screened overseas. See Jin, H.N. (2018). Introduction: The translation and dissemination of Chinese cinemas. *Journal of Chinese Cinemas*, *12* (3), 197–202. (Not available in NLB holdings).

2 Vinegar is a diluted form of acetic acid that was added to latex so that it would coagulate.

3 The Istana Besar, also known as the Grand Palace, was the 19th- and early 20th-century residence of the Sultan of Johor. Built in 1866 by Sultan Abu Bakar (1833–95), the palace overlooks the straits of Johor and Singapore.

4 Peranakan men are known as *baba*, while the women are referred to as *nonya*. In this context, the reference is to Peranakans in general.

Zhang Tianxi, an entrepreneur who runs a rubber plantation business.
经营树胶种植之实业家，张天锡。

Zhang's daughter, Huizhen, is lively and intelligent; it's a pity she has been influenced by local habits.
张女慧贞，性活泼而聪颖，惜染土人习气。

Huizhen: Daddy, what are you looking at?
慧贞：爸爸！你看什么？

Tianxi: A letter from your cousin: he will be arriving in a few days.
天锡：你表兄寄来的信，他说这几日就要到了。

Huizhen: Which cousin?
慧贞：哪个表兄？

Tianxi: The one from China.
天锡：在中国的。

Huizhen: Oh! That new immigrant.
慧贞：哦！那个新客。

The causeway connecting Singapore and Johore.
新加坡接连柔佛之大铁桥。

Tianxi's rubber shop.
天锡树胶店。

Tianxi's English-speaking clerk, Gan Fusheng. Gan is a rogue who indulges in alcohol and women. He looks conscientious and dresses well.
天锡之英文书记甘福胜，性无赖，嗜酒色，貌似纯谨，颇善修饰。

Fusheng: Apa? (Malay: "What?")
福胜：阿把？（马来语「什么？」）

Fusheng: Tak tahu. (Malay: "Don't know.")
福胜：特兜。（马来语「不知」）

Tianxi's Chinese-speaking clerk, Kang Ziming.
天锡之中文书记，康子明。

Tianxi guides Huaqiang on a tour of the rubber plantation.
天锡导华强参观橡胶园。

Rubber trees, planted months earlier.
种后数月的橡树。

Rubber-tapping.
割胶。

Gathering latex.
收集胶液。

Adding vinegar to the latex.[2]
胶液，先注以醋。

Smoking the rubber.
继薰以烟。

Machine-rolling rubber into sheets. They are now ready to be sold.
轧以机，成胶片，即可贩卖。

Rubber is Nanyang's largest produce.
树胶，为南洋出产大宗。

Tianxi's son, Xinmin.
天锡之子，新民。

Huizhen: Little Brother, a new immigrant has arrived at our house.
慧贞：弟弟，我们家里，来了一个新客。

Xinmin: What's so special about the new immigrant?
新民：新客有什么稀罕？

Huizhen: Others have said that they are slow-witted! Stupid! They don't know anything!
慧贞：人家说，新客是呆！笨！什么都不知道！

Xinmin: Really? Let me go take a look at him!
新民：当真吗？让我看看！

Tianxi's wife, Yu.
天锡之妻余氏。

The next day.
翌日。

Nanyang's famous fruit, durian, has an odour. People who like it find it tasty. Those who dislike it are repulsed by the smell.
榴梿，南洋著名之果品，有异味，嗜者甘如饴，恶者畏其臭。

Tianxi: New immigrants don't know how to appreciate it. You have tried it. How does it taste to you?
天锡：新客，是不会吃的，你尝了，味道如何？

Xinmin: Aiyoh!
新民：啊哟！

Fusheng likes Huizhen, and arrives at the Zhang's residence.
福胜属意慧贞，时至张宅探望。

Fusheng: Sister Hui, I got permission from the Sultan of Johore yesterday to visit the palace today. Do you want to come with me?
福胜：慧妹，我昨日得马来王之许可，今天到皇宫游览，你愿意同去吗？

Huaqiang: What? They allow visits to the palace?
华强：什么！王宫也可以去得的？

Tianxi: Yes, do you want to come along?
天锡：可以的，你要去吗？

Yu: Huizhen, why don't you go with your cousin?
余氏：慧贞，你和表兄一起去罢。

The Sultan of Johore's palace.[3]
柔佛马来王之宫殿。

Returning in high spirits, and passing by Fusheng's house on the way.
乘兴而归，道经福胜之家。

Fusheng's mother, Zhao.
福胜之母赵氏。

Zhao: It's late. Come have lunch with us.
赵氏：时已不早，请吃午饭去。

Huizhen: Thank you, maybe next time.
慧贞：谢谢！下次再来。

Zhao: Miss Huizhen, lunch is already prepared. Why don't you oblige us?
赵氏：慧姑，饭已经预备好了，还不赏面吗？

The Babas[4] enter the house.
进屋时之哇哇！

Babas like sour and spicy food. Curry is a delicacy.
哇哇味嗜酸辣，加厘尤为上品。

The Babas are eating.
吃饭时之哇哇！

The Babas laugh at Huaqiang when he eats.
华强食饭，哇哇笑之。

Tianxi: Don't laugh at him. They don't eat with bare hands in China. If you go to China, they will laugh at you instead.
天锡：你莫笑他，在国内没有用手拿饭的，倘然你到国内去，人家多要笑你哩。

Zhang Tianxi telling his daughter Huizhen that her cousin Shen Huaqiang will be arriving from China in a few days' time. Illustration by Dan Wong.

THE ART OF INTERTITLING

In silent films, short lines of text are written or printed on cards, which are then filmed and inserted into the motion picture. During the silent-film era, these texts were called "subtitles". Known as "intertitles" or "title cards" today, the intermediary lines are used to convey dialogue (dialogue intertitles) or provide narration (expository intertitles) for the different scenes.

Writing intertitles was an art: they had to be concise yet eloquent. A well-worded or witty intertitle enhanced the viewing experience, as did a well-designed title card.

Despite the name, "silent" films were almost always accompanied by live background music – often by a pianist, organist or even an entire orchestra – to create the appropriate atmosphere and to provide emotional cues. This helped to enhance the viewing experience. The music accompaniment also served the practical purpose of masking the whirring drone of the film projector. Sometimes the intertitles were even read out during the film, with the narrators providing commentaries at appropriate junctures.

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Liu Beijin (standing) and a friend posing against Liu's latest car. Photo taken in or near Muar, c. 1932. *Courtesy of Liu Kang Family Collection.*

Between December 1925 and February 1926, when he was about 24 years old, Liu travelled to China to observe the educational, industrial and film industries of the country. Filmmaking was entering a golden age in Shanghai, with local filmmakers taking inspiration from their Chinese roots and the volatile social and political circumstances of the time.

The booming Shanghainese film industry encouraged Liu to establish the Anglo-Chinese Film Company (中西影片公司) in Singapore to distribute Shanghai-made films. Not content with playing a passive role in the film business, Liu co-founded Nanyang Liu Beijin Independent Film Production Company (南洋刘贝锦自制影片公司; also known as Nanyang Low Poey Kim Motion Picture Co.) at 12 Pekin Street. His intention was to produce Chinese films with a "Nanyang" flavour and showcase local talents. Liu's start-up became the first local film production company in Singapore and Malaya, and one of the earliest in Southeast Asia.[5]

Liu did not establish the film production company for profit; his intention was to use film – then a relatively new medium – as a means "to instill knowledge among the masses, improve the well being of society [and] promote the prestige of the nation and propagation of culture".[6] To him, the art form, being "the essence of all arts", had unprecedented potential to "transform" people.

Through his films, Liu wanted to showcase life as it was in Singapore and Malaya to the Chinese in China. Liu also held the view that many among his intended audience in Nanyang – the overseas Chinese – had adopted the unsavoury habits of their countrymen back home, including opium smoking, drinking, gambling and patronising prostitutes, and feudal Chinese customs such as arranged marriages for girls.

Artist's impression of Liu Beijin's film studio at 58 Meyer Road in Tanjong Katong. Illustration by Dan Wong.

A Failed First Screening

Xin Ke was produced between September 1926 and the beginning of 1927. Liu rented a bungalow at 58 Meyer Road, in the affluent beachfront neighbourhood of Tanjong Katong in the east of Singapore, to serve as a studio and film-processing base. The film was shot entirely in Singapore and Malaya, including the bungalow and locations such as the Botanic Gardens, the Causeway and the Istana Besar in Johor.

The first screening of *Xin Ke*, which was meant to be a preview but was organised more like a premiere,[7] was held at the Victoria Theatre on the evening of 4 March 1927. The highly publicised event was free.[8] To celebrate the occasion, the organisers published *Xin Ke Special Issue*, an illustrated souvenir booklet containing information about the Nanyang Liu Beijin Independent Film Production Company and the cast as well as photographs.[9]

The theatre was reportedly opened to viewers at 7.30 pm and filled to capa-city – all "500 seats upstairs and downstairs"[10] – by 8 pm, leaving "people without seats". The film started at 8.30 pm. The audience, comprising mostly women, also included cast members, the film crew and invited guests from the media.[11] One of the invited guests, a journalist with the *Nanyang Siang Pau* newspaper, reported on the event:

> "I was able to watch the preview of the first production of *Xin Ke* by Nanyang Liu Beijin Independent Film Production Company, which opened at Victoria Theatre yesterday at 8 o'clock in the evening. I was honoured to be given a ticket to the film by the company itself. I arrived at the theatre at 7 pm. The workers were still working in the theatre, but there was already a steady stream of people and vehicles at the door. More than 100 viewers had already gathered, and it was crowded. They were only allowed to enter the theatre at 7.30 pm, and by 8 pm, all the seats were already occupied. There were 500 seats upstairs and downstairs, but there were still people without seats. The Singapore General Chamber of Commerce and the various newspaper offices all sent representatives to the event."[12]

However, even before the screening began, an announcement was made, causing much confusion among the audience and throwing the evening's proceedings into disarray. Apparently, the film authorities had censored the last three reels of *Xin Ke*, leaving only the first six to be shown. An attendee recounted the incident:[13]

> "... someone from the company came announcing in Mandarin: 'There are only six reels. The government didn't pass seven, eight and nine.' The loud and hurried tone caused quite a stir among the guests, but the announcer simply stopped at that and left. Not long after that, another representative came out and explained, in Cantonese, that for some special reasons, the three reels were banned by the censorship board and thus could not be screened together with the rest. It was then that the audience understood the reason for the delay."[14]

The only extant still from *Xin Ke* showing Shen Huaqiang playing the flute while sisters Zhang Huimei and Zhang Huizhen look on admiringly, all three oblivious to the fuming Gan Fusheng (standing). *Sin Kuo Min Press, 5 February 1927, p. 15. Courtesy of NUS Libraries.*

THE CAST OF CHARACTERS

CAST	CHARACTERS
Zheng Chaoren (郑超人)	Shen Huaqiang (沈华强)
Chen Ziying (陈子缨)	Zhang Tianxi (张天锡)
Wo Ying (我影)	Yu (Zhang Tianxi's wife) (余氏; 张天锡之妻)
Lu Xiaoyu (陆肖予)	Zhang Huizhen (Zhang Tianxi's daughter) (张慧贞; 张天锡之女)
Chen Bingxun (陈炳勳)	Zhang Xinmin (Zhang Tianxi's son) (张新民; 张天锡之子)
Zhang Danxiang (张淡香)	Liu Boqi (刘伯憩)
Yun Ruinan (云瑞南)	Yan (Liu Boqi's wife) (颜氏; 刘伯憩之妻)
Wan Cheng (晚成)	Liu Jieyu (Liu Boqi's daughter) (刘洁玉; 刘伯憩之女)
Huang Mengmei (黄梦梅)	Gan Fusheng (甘福胜)
Tan Minxing (谭民兴)	Zhao (Gan Fusheng's mother) (赵氏; 甘福胜之母)
Yi Chi (一痴)	Kang Ziming (康子明)
Kang Xiaobo (康笑伯)	Yujuan (玉娟)
Xiao Qian (笑倩)	Zhao Bing (赵丙)
Fang Zhitan (方之谈)	Old farmer (老农)
Zheng Chongrong (郑崇荣)	Female student (女学生)
Chen Mengru (陈梦如)	Guest (贺客)
Zhou Zhiping (周志平)	Guest (贺客)
Zhang Qinghua (张清华)	Guest (贺客)

Artist's impression of Liu Beijin in front of his shophouse office at 12 Pekin Street. Illustration by Dan Wong.

This essay is abridged from the recently published book, *Xin Ke: The Story of Singapore and Malaya's First Feature Film* (新客: 新马首部长篇电影的故事) (2019), written by Yvonne Ng Uhde and Jan Uhde, edited by Toh Hun Ping, Lucien Low and Jocelyn Lau, and published by Kucinta Books. It retails for $28 at major bookshops and is also available for reference at the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library and for loan at selected public libraries (Call nos.: RSING 791.43095957 UHD and SING 791.43095957 UHD).

For silent films produced in the 1920s, one standard reel of 1,000 ft (305 m) of 35 mm film ran at approximately 16 frames per second, which meant that each reel was around 15 minutes long. The exclusion of three entire reels caused about 45 minutes of the film to be excised. Not surprisingly, the removal of the film's conclusion affected the storyline and cast a pall on the viewing experience.

The reasons for the censorship were not released, but it is believed that the Official Censor objected to the graphic scenes of violence and fighting in the last three reels. Unfortunately, all nine reels of film no longer exist. Liu had planned to shoot a revised conclusion but it is unclear whether this eventually materialised.

Subsequent Screenings

Shortly after that failed first screening, it is likely that *Xin Ke* continued to be shown in cinemas in Singapore, but so far there has been no documentary evidence to support this. More certain is the fact that screenings took place in Kuala Lumpur, Melaka and Hong Kong.

In Kuala Lumpur, the film was screened on 27 May 1927 at the Empire Theatre (also known as Yi Jing Garden Cinema), but attendance was dismal. The film similarly met with little enthusiasm in Melaka. Over in Hong Kong, the film was shown at Kau Yue Fong Theatre under a different title, *Tangshan Lai Ke* (唐山来客), from 29 April to 2 May 1927. It is not clear if the film was also censored or whether it garnered more favourable reviews.

In May 1927, Liu was forced by personal circumstances to close his film production company for good. He had planned to produce a second feature, *A Difficult Time* (行不得也哥哥), but shooting was never completed. Liu tried to revive his film production business in 1929, but he would not make another motion picture again. ♦

NOTES

1 Nanyang (南洋; literally "Southern Ocean") refers to Southeast Asia.

2 Films that were produced in the early 20th century were very unstable as they were made from a chemical base using cellulose nitrate. The material deteriorated steadily over time and also had the tendency to self-ignite.

3 《新国民杂志银幕特号》. (1926, November 26). *Sin Kuo Min Press*, p. 14; 《银幕世界新客特号》. (1927, February 5). *Sin Kuo Min Press*, p. 15. (Microfilm no.: NL33031)

4 Liu, B.J. (1926). 《刘贝锦归国记》[*Liu Beijin's homecoming journal*] (p. 28). Shanghai: Sanmin gongsi [三民公司]. There is conflicting information about Liu having graduated from Chung Hwa School (中华学校), a primary school in Muar, in 1916, when he was 14. From Li, Y.X. (李云溪) (Ed.). (1972). A history of the school (1). In *60th Anniversary Souvenir, Chung Hwa High School, Muar, Malaysia (1912–1972)*. Muar: Chung Hwa High School. (Call no.: RSEA Chinese 373.09595 CHU)

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6 Liu, B.J. (1926, July 20).《破天荒:南洋刘贝锦自制影片公司宣言》[Manifesto: A public notice by Nanyang Liu Beijin Independent Film Production Company]. *Sin Kuo Min Press*, p. 12. (Microfilm no.: NL33031)

7 《南洋刘贝锦自制影片公司启事》[Notice from Nanyang Liu Beijin Independent Film Production Company]. (1927, March 1). *Sin Kuo Min Press*, p. 6. (Microfilm no.: NL33031). Preview or test screenings were usually held prior to the general release of a film to gauge audience response and might lead to changes in the film, such as the title, music and scenes. However, the "preview" screening of *Xin Ke* functioned more like a premiere as it was held in a grand venue with the cast, crew and press in attendance.

8 *Sin Kuo Min Press*, 1 Mar 1927, p. 6; Extract from《显微镜》[Microscope]. (1927, March 12). The Joke of Xin Ke. *Marlborough Weekly*, 23, p. 2 (Part 1);《显微镜》[Microscope]. (1927, March 19). *Marlborough Weekly*, 24, p. 2 (Part 2). (Not available in NLB holdings)

9 *Xin Ke Special Issue* appears to be no longer extant.

10 Victoria Theatre. (1909, February 1). *The Straits Times*, p. 8. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

11 《贺嘉》[He, J.]. (1927, March 7).《银幕消息: 观「新客」试映记》[Watching a preview of Xin Ke]. *Nanyang Siang Pau*, p. 4. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

12 This is an English translation. See *Nanyang Siang Pau*, 7 Mar 1927, p. 4.

13 《显微镜》[Microscope], 12 Mar 1927, p. 2.

14 This is an English translation. See《显微镜》[Microscope], 12 Mar 1927, p. 2.

FLEEING TO UNCERTAINTY

MY FATHER'S STORY

Barely 13 years old then, K. Ramakanthan and his family escaped with their lives from Perak to Johor during the Japanese Occupation. **Aishwariyaa Ramakanthan** recounts her father's harrowing journey.

Aishwariyaa Ramakanthan is an English and Social Studies teacher. She graduated with a bachelor's degree in English from the National University of Singapore and obtained her master's in history from the University of San Diego, California. She also has a post-graduate Diploma in Education from the Institute of Education, Singapore.

My father's scramble to safety in the final days before the fall of Malaya to the Japanese in December 1941 is regular fodder for teatime conversation with my parents. I grew up listening to my father tell of his harrowing escape, but it is his ability to recount the journey in such fascinating detail that inspired me to write about it.

My father, K. Ramakanthan, was born in December 1929 in Bruas (Beruas), Pahang, and later moved to Perak with his family. His father's beginnings were quite similar to those of early migrants from South India looking for a better life in Malaya.

My grandfather had arrived in Malaya on board the Rhona *with his young wife, starry-eyed and full of hope, like many others on that ship. After early struggles to find employment, he secured a reasonably well-paying job at a rubber plantation in Perak. This enabled him to buy his family a few luxuries – like a treasured Austin 7 car for one.*

Having settled down to life in Perak, my grandfather did not imagine even for a moment – like so many others who blindly believed in the invincibility of the British – that they would have to flee for their lives one day. When the Japanese invaded Malaya during World War II, my grandfather lost everything that he had worked so hard for.

This is my father's story.

My first sense that the world I knew would collapse was when I was waiting to take the train back home from school one Friday afternoon in late 1941. People were moving hurriedly with packed bags, their faces etched with tension and worry. I was puzzled when a man walking past whispered in Malay: "*Jepun datang. Lekas balik*." ("The Japanese are coming. Go home quickly").

I hurried home only to discover that a large group of Indian soldiers from the British Army had assembled in the open space in front of our home. Why they were there we didn't quite know, but my mother was clearly disturbed at this sight. My father, however, brushed her worries aside, convinced that the whispered rumours were untrue. Above anything else, he was certain that the might of the British Empire would prevail. So we went about our usual routine that Friday, unaware that our lives were about to change in ways we could never have imagined.

I remember spending the day reading my favourite *Rainbow* comics and playing with my two baby brothers. I knew of Benito Mussolini, the fascist prime minister of Italy, from a *Beano* comic strip that caricatured him as the ridiculously pompous Musso the Wop. Adolf Hitler of Germany had been similarly portrayed as a laughable character in Charlie Chaplin's film, *The Great Dictator*. Perhaps these depictions of evil men who had been caricatured as idiotic and harmless had lulled me into a false sense of security.

Saturday dawned in a deathly silence. I peered out of my bedroom window but the soldiers in front of my house were no longer there. My father left for work as usual while my mother and I played with my brothers on the verandah. The peace was suddenly shattered by my father's return in his Austin 7. We watched aghast, completely confused as he drove up like a madman, gesticulating wildly. The car screeched to a halt and he jumped out yelling, "Pack up! Pack up! They are here! They are here!" It didn't strike us immediately that he was talking about the Japanese.

He rushed around frantically gathering what he could, telling us to do the same while trying to explain that the Japanese were gaining ground. In our shock, we grabbed whatever seemed most valuable and necessary at the time – money, jewellery and some clothes. Everything else was left behind, including a prized gramophone that had provided hours of entertainment and my Hornby clockwork train set, a gift from my uncle.

As father's little Austin 7 could only accommodate my mother, my younger brothers, a female cousin who was living with us at the time, and our belongings, I was put in the care of a trusted family friend and his family to travel by train to Kuala Lumpur, about 200 miles from our home in Perak.

As I watched my parents drive away after dropping me off at the railway station, I felt a palpable sense of excitement at the thought of being plunged into an adventure of the sort I had only read about in books. But at the same time I was fearful that I would not see my family again. At the station, I saw people with bags, children, pets and chickens in

(Facing page) Japanese troops taking cover behind steam engines at the railway station in Johor, Malaya, in the final stages of their advance down the Malay Peninsula to Singapore, January 1942. *Courtesy of Australian War Memorial.*

(Below) K. Ramakanthan when he was a teacher in Singapore, c. 1950 (left), and posing in a photo with his parents and one of his baby brothers in Changkat Salak Estate, Perak, December 1941 (right). *Courtesy of Aishwariyaa Ramakanthan.*

K. Ramakanthan, around age 11, in a photo taken at the Sungai Rinching Estate in Selangor, c. 1940. *Courtesy of Aishwariyaa Ramakanthan.*

tow rushing towards the waiting train – their ticket to safety. Men, women, children, the young and the old clambered over each other, fighting to get onto a train that was already bursting at its seams.

I fought off sleep as the overnight train chugged towards Kuala Lumpur, picking up more people along the way. The train pulled into Kuala Lumpur at about five the next morning. Staying together was a struggle as we made our way past the heaving mass of passengers. When we finally emerged from the cramped train, the fresh air that greeted us was a welcome respite, and we took deep gulps of it. For a minute, we forgot the gravity of our situation.

Acting on my father's instructions, my guardian dropped me off at Lakshmi Vilas on Ampang Street, a popular Indian vegetarian restaurant in Kuala Lumpur in those days. Alone now, I anxiously scanned the crowd in the restaurant and the street outside, hoping for a glimpse of my family. Suddenly, a piercing "Wooo-oo-oo!" sound ripped through the air, rising to a crescendo. It was the air-raid siren. Pandemonium ensued, and people started shouting and screaming as they made a mad dash for the air-raid shelters.

Paralysed with fear, I stood rooted to the ground not knowing what to do. None of the war stories I read had prepared me for this.

Suddenly, I felt a heavy hand on my shoulder. It was the restaurant manager. He grabbed my arm and we ran into the shelter just as the first bombs hit. It was a full 10 to 15 minutes before the "all clear" signal sounded. People sighed with relief, thankful that they were still standing even as their legs trembled.

A grim sight met us as we emerged into the blinding sunlight. Many buildings had been badly damaged, and several dead bodies littered the streets. The restaurant, miraculously, was still intact. Among the casualties were the wife and two sons of the family friend who had accompanied me to Kuala Lumpur – although I wasn't aware of this at the time. When my own family finally turned up at the restaurant, my relief and joy knew no bounds.

My father then drove to his office headquarters in Kuala Lumpur to inform them of his whereabouts. There, his British boss (or "Tuan")[1] pressed my father to let him borrow the Austin 7 to drive to Singapore, as he needed another car to accommodate his whole family. My father had no choice but to agree. His Tuan, like the rest of the British, believed that Singapore was a stronghold that would not fall to enemy attack – the British called the island the "Gibraltar of the East" in reference to its European bastion at the southern tip of the Iberian Peninsula.

We spent the night at the abandoned house of a family friend. The next morning, my father went to look for a taxi to take us to Muar, while the rest of us prepared to leave. Just as we finished lunch, the ominous sound of the siren tore through the air again. With pounding hearts, we took cover under a staircase, the only shelter available. This time it finally dawned on me that death was a real possibility. We covered our heads and clung tightly to each other as the ground under us shook. My mother urged us to be calm and brave, and to pray – which we did, fervently.

We didn't realise how lucky we were to be alive until we emerged and saw shrapnel embedded in the walls outside the house, deep craters in the streets and buildings ablaze. The bombings, which lasted around 30 minutes, felt like an eternity. We were relieved only when father returned, safe and sound, in a taxi. Gathering our few belongings, we made our way to Muar, arriving at my uncle's house just before nightfall. We were thankful to be with our relatives, but the respite was brief.

Tired of being cooped up all day, the following afternoon at around four, my father and I decided to take a walk. The cloudless blue sky was so beguilingly attractive that we soon let our guard down. Squinting at the sun, I spied in the distance some glinting silver objects falling from the sky. I tugged at my father and pointed upwards. He took one look at the sky before grabbing my arm and started to run. Just as we entered the house and shut the door, we heard the drone of low-flying planes.

All of us instinctively dived under a bench in the storeroom. Trembling, we could hear the bombs raining down on Muar town and the river. The assault sank a cargo vessel that had been travelling upstream with supplies for people living along the river banks. The 30-minute bombing blitz was meant as a warning to instill fear, for the Japanese could have obliterated the town if they had wanted to.

As soon as the air raids stopped, we and several other Indian families in the small town gathered for a quick meeting. We decided to leave Muar for Batu Pahat as a group – it somehow felt safer to move around in large numbers. We chose to travel inland, away from the main thoroughfares. But once again, despite the life-and-death predicament of his own family, duty called upon my father: he was instructed by his British boss to meet him in Singapore (we would lose all contact with my father for several weeks after this, but were later reunited). The rest of the family journeyed without my father to Batu Pahat as part of a convoy of cars heading south in the general direction of Johor and Singapore.

Overcome by tension and fear, the convoy soon separated. Some cars headed towards Yong Peng, while others towards Pagoh and Segamat; still others drove inland into remote villages. En route to Batu Pahat in my uncle's car, we could heard the drone of airplanes. My uncle floored the accelerator and drove towards the town, to the house of someone he knew, who very kindly agreed to accommodate us. The most wonderful thing about those troubled times was that people were willing to open their homes to those in need.

Just as we arrived, the bombings began and sent us scurrying for safety in the house. When all was quiet once again, we gingerly peered out the window. A few bodies were strewn on the street, and there was a huge crater not 50 yards from the house. One of the bombs had just missed us by a whisker.

The next day, the friend suggested that we move to Sankokoshi Estate, a Japanese-owned oil palm plantation, which he thought would be safer. We were to occupy one of the abandoned houses there, a Japanese-style house with sliding doors and tatami mats on the floor. We shared this house with a few other families.

I spent the next few days exploring the grounds of the beautiful estate, oblivious to the worries of the adults or even to my mother's fears about my father who still had not returned from Singapore. Fruit trees with low-hanging guavas and mangoes, a stream teeming with fish, and abandoned railway trolleys meant for transporting palm fruit were enough to keep me and the other children occupied. The women helped each other with the cooking, while the men fortified the place as best as they could. They gathered sticks, fashioned homemade spears and other weapons for protection, and cycled to nearby villages to buy supplies and groceries.

A few days later, a squadron of Japanese planes swooped low over the estate. We watched the planes as they headed south towards Singapore to celebrate Japan's victory. The Gibraltar of the East had evidently fallen, signalling the start of the Japanese Occupation – and the beginning of three-and-a-half-years of untold suffering and atrocities.

Several uneventful weeks had passed. One particularly warm night, the men had just finished playing cards, the only entertainment available, while the women were chatting or looking after their children. Soon, the adults began turning in for the night. The women and children slept indoors, while the men slept outside on the verandah surrounding the house.

Sometime around midnight, the dog Somu, which belonged to a Dr Sharma, one of the men in the community, let out a long, rumbling growl that suddenly erupted into ferocious barking. We were jolted out of slumber. The household stirred and concerned voices called out in the dark. Before anyone could stagger to their feet to determine the cause of Somu's barking, the clatter of heavy boots was heard, followed by harsh cursing in Japanese. We were instantly awake, attentive and frightened – very frightened.

"*Kara kura*!" snapped the man who seemed to be the sergeant. By now we knew enough Japanese to know that the phrase meant "Hurry up! Pay attention!" He was a short, squat fellow with an expression of ferocity that matched Somu's bark. Somu was barking his head off by now, and Dr Sharma was desperately holding the wriggling dog and trying to calm him, but to no avail. In a split second, we saw a glint of steel and a sword pointing at the terrified doctor.

The rest of us were paralysed with fear and at a loss as how to help the doctor. Dr Sharma immediately fell at the feet of the sergeant begging for his life. And then, the most amazing thing happened. As if on cue, Somu stopped barking and began to whine and follow his master's example. He, too, crawled up to the sergeant on his stomach, as if in total supplication, while the rest of us watched open-mouthed.

The scene was so surreally funny that even the Japanese sergeant chuckled. That was enough for the rest of us to start laughing, violent paroxysms that were induced by a combination of fear and relief, and the comic despair of it all. The pudgy soldier exclaimed, "*Yoroshi*!" ("Good!") He appeared to have softened a little. He eyed us and then reached out and ruffled my hair, saying, "*Kodomo tachi*! *Yoroshi*!" ("Young fellow! Good!"). The tension evaporated and the mood lightened. But we relaxed a little too soon. It appeared that the sergeant was a little temperamental.

"We want borrow car! You give?" asked the sergeant in broken English. When Dr Sharma responded "Sorry, no petrol", the sergeant flew into a rage. "No petrol, no petrol, all die! Boom!" he snapped, all the while gesticulating wildly. When two canisters of petrol were miraculously produced by someone in our group, he calmed down. "We borrow car and give receipt. We return car in Muar," he promised. "Ok! *Arigato gozaimasu*!" ("Ok! Thank you") he barked, and all his men piled into the car and drove off into the night.

In the weeks and months that followed, we began the long and laborious journey to rebuild our lives. Many things had changed forever and even I, a young lad, could see that. The "Tuans" were not the almighty forces they had made themselves out to be. The superiority with which they had conducted themselves now seemed laughable. Many white folks escaped violence at the hands of the Japanese by the skin of their teeth, helped by the kindness of their local staff. My father, for instance, could have refused help to his British boss, but he chose to be gracious.

K. Ramakanthan at his residence in Bishan, 2019. Now retired, he still reads voraciously and is a familiar figure at the Ang Mo Kio Public Library. *Courtesy of Aishwariyaa Ramakanthan.*

Shortly after the Japanese Occupation of Southeast Asia officially ended on 12 September 1945, my father and his family made their way back to Kuala Lumpur where he completed his education. He worked for a short while as a stenographer in the attorney-general's office there before moving to Singapore to train as a teacher, where he met and married my mother in 1958. My father turns 90 in December this year. ♦

NOTE

1 Meaning "master", the Malay term of deference locals used to address their colonial superiors).

DIEPPE BARRACKS

"OUR LITTLE KINGDOM" IN SEMBAWANG

Military camps and training areas comprise a significant portion of Singapore's land use. What can a single camp tell us about Singapore's geopolitical history? A lot, as it turns out, says **Chua Jun Yan**.

Travelling along Sembawang Road, you will pass several military installations, including Nee Soon Camp, Khatib Camp and Sembawang Camp. At the end of the road is Sembawang Shipyard, site of the former Singapore Naval Base and the cornerstone of Britain's ill-fated Far East defence strategy before World War II.[1]

This military corridor in the north of Singapore, whose roots go back to the colonial period, is historically significant. Of the various camps along this stretch, Dieppe Barracks (pronounced "dee-ap") stands out because it housed the last permanent foreign presence in Singapore until 1989, bearing witness to the geopolitical transformations of the 20th century. Today, the barracks is home to the HQ Singapore Guards and the HQ 13th Singapore Infantry Brigade of the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF).

Endings and New Beginnings

Constructed between 1965 and 1966 for British troops based in Singapore, Dieppe Barracks was originally part of the new but short-lived Far East Fleet Amphibious Forces Base.[2] Even as the Malayan Emergency (1948–60)[3] gave way to Konfrontasi[4] with Indonesia (1963–66), Britain maintained its military position on the island after Singapore became an independent sovereign nation in August 1965.

The first occupants of Dieppe Barracks was the 40 Commando unit of the British Royal Marines, which had relocated from Borneo to its new base in Singapore. Incidentally, it was the Royal Marines Commando unit's service in France during World War II that gave Dieppe Barracks its name.

In 1942, the Royal Marines Commandos had participated in the bold but disastrous Operation Jubilee, better known as the Dieppe Raid, in which some 6,000 Allied troops – comprising Canadian soldiers, British commandos and US Rangers – mounted an assault on the German-occupied port of Dieppe in France. Less than 10 hours after the first amphibious landings on 19 August took place, nearly 60 percent of the men had been killed, wounded or captured.[5]

Given the inglorious and humiliating defeat at Dieppe, why did the British choose to name its new military installation in Singapore after the raid?

Historical studies on the Dieppe Raid offer a clue. In the 1960s, military historians had vigorously debated the necessity of the Dieppe Raid. Revisionist scholars argue that the raid resulted from inexcusable shortcomings in the Allied pre-operation planning and represented an avoidable loss of human life. By contrast, orthodox historians of World War II hold the view that the Dieppe Raid was a necessary rehearsal for the D-Day landings,[6] which ultimately liberated Europe from Adolf Hitler and the tyranny of Nazi occupation.

"Honour to the brave who fell. Their sacrifice was not in vain," wrote Winston Churchill in *The Hinge of Fate*, the fourth installment in his multivolume history of World War II.[7] Seen in this light, the etymology of Dieppe Barracks might have represented an intervention in a broader debate about World War II's reputation as "the good war", at a time when the British Empire was rapidly losing its lustre and the Vietnam War was becoming a debacle for the free world.

Within this context of global strategic flux, the British did not remain at Dieppe Barracks for long. In July 1967, then British Prime Minister Harold Wilson announced plans to withdraw all British troops from Singapore by 1975. The following year, Wilson brought forward the withdrawal deadline to 1971 as his Labour government grappled with a floundering domestic economy back home. The unexpected pullout of British troops would not only create problems for Singapore's national security but would also put a huge dent in its economy: it was estimated that more than 20 percent of Singapore's gross national product came from British military bases on the island.

That Dieppe Barracks was constructed just a year before Wilson made the announcement also indicates how unexpected this move was, reflecting the wider uncertainty about Britain's role in the world at the time.[8] The decline of British preeminence in Asia might have been gradual, but the final retreat was ultimately unpredictable, as Dieppe Barracks attests.

The departure of British forces from Dieppe Barracks and the arrival of the New Zealanders embodied the wider geostrategic changes that were taking place in the 1970s. In 1971, the 1st Battalion of the Royal New Zealand Infantry Regiment (1 RNZIR) replaced the British commandos at Dieppe Barracks, marking a shift from imperial defence to regional security as the prevailing strategic paradigm. During a 1975 trip to New Zealand, then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew credited New Zealand's presence with creating "a psychological sense of stability", giving Singapore time to develop its own defence capabilities.[9]

In 1975 and again in 1978, the New Zealand government sought to withdraw its troops from Singapore. Given Singapore's growing defence capabilities and the apparent stability in the region, the Kiwi presence appeared increasingly anachronistic.[10] However, New Zealand's plans were foiled by the escalating Cold War tensions between the Soviet Union and the United States, specifically, the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in December 1978 and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979.

In 1979, Dieppe Barracks bore witness to one of the biggest humanitarian crises of the period: the exodus of Vietnamese boat people following the end of the war in Indochina. On 14 April, then New Zealand High Commissioner G.C. Hensely hosted 51 Vietnamese refugees, including 18 children – who had been granted asylum by Auckland – at Dieppe Barracks during their eight-hour transit in Singapore.[11]

The refugees had arrived in Malaysia by boat six months earlier and were housed at the refugee camp on Pulau Bedong, off the coast of Terengganu. At Dieppe Barracks, they were treated to food and drinks, and the children watched colour television for the first time. Given Singapore's limited size and resources, the government was firm in denying refuge to the Vietnamese, but had granted special permission to the High Commissioner to entertain the refugees at Dieppe Barracks, reflecting its liminal position as a foreign base on Singaporean soil.

With the end of the Cold War in the late 1980s and the growth of the SAF, the Kiwi presence at Dieppe Barracks seemed increasingly irrelevant. Towards the end of 1986, New Zealand announced it would withdraw all its infantrymen from Singapore by 1989. On 21 July that year, as the "Last Post" played in the background, the New Zealand flag was lowered over Dieppe Barracks for the last time.[12] A few months later, an auction was held at the barracks to dispose of more than 60 Kiwi vehicles.[13] For the second time in just over two decades, Dieppe Barracks had changed ownership, but this time to the SAF and not to a foreign entity.

Rugby Diplomacy and Geopolitical Golf

While Singapore enjoyed relative peace and stability from the late 1960s, the foreign military presence at Dieppe served as an important conduit for defence diplomacy and cultural exchange. Sports facilities in and around the barracks provided the troops with recreational activities, fostered informal contact between military leaders, and engendered positive civil-military relations.

(Facing page) An aerial view of Dieppe Barracks, c. 1975, which belongs to the Singapore Armed Forces today. Prior to the construction of Yishun and Sembawang new towns, the area was primarily used for military and agricultural purposes. Further down Sembawang Road were Nee Soon and Chong Pang villages. *Courtesy of Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand.*

(Below) As part of Christmas celebrations in 1970, a British commando dressed as Santa Claus parachuted from a helicopter and greeted the children of servicemen at Dieppe Barracks. *Source: The Straits Times © Singapore Press Holdings Limited. Reprinted with permission.*

Chua Jun Yan graduated from Yale University with a Bachelor of Arts in History. He enjoys researching local and community histories in Singapore, and has a particular interest in postwar urban cultures.

After Britain's Royal Marines Commandos moved into Dieppe Barracks in 1967, they built a nine-hole golf course, which would evolve into today's Sembawang Country Club – a club that is presently affiliated to the SAF. The early course was primitive: it was "short and carved out of an area of poor soil", and was so hilly that it was informally known as the "commando course".[14] However, Singaporean leaders perceived golf as an opportunity to cultivate friendly relations with foreign military officials.

During the early 1970s, then Minister for Defence Goh Keng Swee urged senior SAF officers to pick up golf in order to facilitate interactions with their foreign counterparts. In the late 1970s, the SAF redeveloped the golf club, before taking it over from the New Zealand forces.[15]

Similarly, rugby also helped to forge closer ties between Singapore and New Zealand. When the New Zealand forces occupied Dieppe Barracks in 1971, the rugby pitch along Sembawang Road became the centrepiece of public diplomacy between the two countries. From 1971 to 1989, Dieppe Barracks hosted hundreds of rugby matches, often between the Kiwis and local teams. These efforts strengthened New Zealand's soft power and enhanced people-to-people ties between the two countries.

In 1979, for instance, the Singapore Combined Schools' rugby squad described a match and training clinic with the New Zealand All Blacks as a "dream date", held in what *The Straits Times* called "a truly New Zealand atmosphere at the Dieppe Barracks".[16] In the Singaporean schoolboy's imagination, Dieppe Barracks was a portal into the distant land of New Zealand.

Aside from sport, Dieppe Barracks also boasted a Maori Cultural Group, which established its base at Marae of Tumatauenga, a sacred meeting place located within the perimeters of the camp. Apart from catering to the spiritual needs of the soldiers, the Maori group toured Southeast Asia to showcase New Zealand's heritage and culture. In 1981, for instance, it visited Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia and Brunei, performing at the Sabah Centenary Expo and appearing on Radio Television Malaysia. Similarly, the Kiwi regimental band performed at different venues around the region, enhancing New Zealand's visibility and prestige.[17]

Against this backdrop, the SAF developed strong relations with New Zealand troops at Dieppe Barracks. In 1974, the SAF's elite unit, the 1st Commando Battalion, established ties with 1 RNZIR, visiting each other's units and holding friendly sports matches. The two countries formalised this partnership in 1982 and thereafter held an Alliance Day parade at the barracks annually. At the 1986 New Zealand Day parade, then Second Minister for Defence Yeo Ning Hong told the men of 1 RNZIR that the SAF was "proud to be associated with a unit as distinguished as [theirs]", reflecting the fruit of years of defence diplomacy.[18]

As recently as May 2019, Singapore and New Zealand signed a joint declaration to deepen bilateral cooperation in four areas, including defence and security. At a press conference, Prime Minister of Singapore Lee Hsien Loong and Prime Minister of New Zealand Jacinda Ardern described the two countries as "natural partners".[19] In fact, this "natural" partnership reflected a decades-long history of mutual goodwill, some of which had been fostered at Dieppe Barracks since the 1970s.

Life in Dieppe Barracks

For the most part, a jocular mess culture prevailed at Dieppe Barracks. Archival video footage features barebodied servicemen practising drills, playing squash or basketball, lifting weights and wolfing down copious amounts of food at the cookhouse. The journal of 1 RNZIR described the camp as "our little kingdom… situated among golf courses, rugby fields, bars, messes, clubs and more bars".[20] For young Kiwi soldiers, an overseas posting also presented a chance to see the world and travel across Southeast Asia.

Christmas was always a special occasion at Dieppe Barracks, eagerly anticipated by the servicemen each year. In 1970, 160 children of the Royal Marines watched in awe as a British commando dressed as Santa Claus parachuted from a helicopter over the barracks, bearing presents for the children.[21] With the New Zealand troops, the tradition was for its senior officers to serve the junior ranks at Christmas parties held in the messes.[22]

To be sure, life in Dieppe Barracks was not always rosy, reflecting the emotional and psychological challenges of long-term overseas deployments during peacetime. Indeed, the 1 RNZIR journal introduced an "advisory service" in 1975, noting that the "pressures of modern day living in Singapore can be considerable, leading to stress, tension and worry".[23] Far away from home and without a specific mission, there was a high chance of young soldiers becoming bored and restless. Indeed, in 1972, a soldier set fire to the sacred Maori meeting place in Dieppe Barracks and was sentenced to one year's detention. During his trial, the soldier said that he had gotten up to mischief simply because he had wanted to be sent home.

At Dieppe Barracks, visitors would customarily be met by a Maori challenge party in their traditional costume and war paint. The latter would issue a warrior's challenge to ascertain if the visitor came in war or peace. In this photo, General B.M. Poananga CB, CBE, Chief of the General Staff, accepts the challenge during his visit to the barracks. *Image reproduced from 1 RNZIR Journal. (1982). Singapore: First Battalion Royal New Zealand Infantry Regiment. (Call no.: RCLOS 356.1109931 RNZIRF).*

Almost a decade later, two New Zealand soldiers were each sentenced to three years' jail and given three strokes of the cane by a Singaporean district court for selling cannabis to fellow servicemen (they had earlier pleaded to be court-martialled in order to escape caning). According to a lawyer, the drug problem at Dieppe Barracks "had reached unmanageable proportions despite efforts by military authorities", leading the New Zealand army to hand over jurisdiction of the case to Singapore.[24]

An Inherited Legacy

Why does this story of Dieppe Barracks matter? Much of Singapore's military history remains focused on World War II and the Japanese Occupation, and scholars have increasingly called for greater attention to our more recent past.[25]

Military spaces physically express the colonial, post-colonial and neo-colonial processes that have shaped Singapore's history and landscape over the decades. Given that foreign military bases in Singapore were a major driver of the economy in the late 1960s and employed some 25,000 locals,[26] it is impossible to understand the social, economic and cultural changes that had taken place here without reference to the vast numbers of soldiers and seamen who passed through this island from the 19th century to the present day.

Christmas was always a special and joyous occasion at Dieppe Barracks. For the New Zealand troops, the tradition was for senior officers to serve the junior ranks during Christmas parties held in the messes. *The Straits Times, 21 December 1986, p. 4.*

CHRISTMAS PLUS

CELEBRATIONS

One place where you can't pull rank

By DANNY TAN

Officers of the back and cull of the junior ranks during last year's Christmas bash

I myself completed national service in Dieppe Barracks from 2018 to 2019, and in some small way was part of its geostrategic history and destiny. From British commandos to New Zealand infantry soldiers and finally to me and my fellow national service mates, places like Dieppe Barracks have witnessed and stood sentinel to the transformations of Singapore we have seen over the years. ♦

NOTES

1 The British considered Singapore the most ideal location for a new naval base to house a fleet of the Royal Navy and to counter the threat posed by the Japanese military to its empire in the Far East. It was a rude shock when the supposedly impregnable fortress that was Singapore fell to the Japanese in less than two weeks, from 3–15 February 1942.

2 After the Suez Crisis, or the Second Arab-Israeli War, in 1956 exposed British military vulnerabilities, Britain developed a new expeditionary force to protect its interests "east of Suez". Originally deployed in the Persian Gulf, the force was eventually based in Singapore. The Far East Fleet Amphibious Forces Base in Singapore housed Kangaw Barracks (today's Khatib Camp) to the south, Dieppe Barracks to the northeast, and an airfield between the two facilities.

3 A state of emergency was declared in Singapore on 24 June 1948, a week after an emergency was launched in Malaya following a spate of violence by insurgents from the Malayan Communist Party. The guerrilla war to overthrow the British colonial government and install a communist regime lasted for 12 years, from 1948–60.

4 Konfrontasi, or the Indonesia-Malaysia Confrontation (1963–66), was a conflict started by Indonesia to protest against the formation of the Federation of Malaysia. It was marked by armed incursions, bomb attacks as well as acts of subversion by Indonesians on Malayan territory (including Singapore).

5 Schreiner, C.W., Jr. (1973). The Dieppe Raid: Its origins, aims, and results. *Naval War College Review*, 25 *(5)*, 83–97. Retrieved from JSTOR.

6 The Normandy landings, codenamed Operation Neptune and commonly known as D-Day, refer to the Allied invasion of Normandy on the northern coast of France on 6 June 1944. The operation liberated France and later western Europe from Nazi control.

7 Churchill, W. (1950). *The hinge of fate* (p. 459). Boston: Houghton Mifflin. (Call no.: RCLOS 940.53 CHU-[JSB]). The other titles in the six-volume series, "The Second World War", are: *The Gathering Storm* (vol. 1), *Their Finest Hour* (vol. 2), *The Grand Alliance* (vol. 3), *Closing the Ring* (vol. 5), and *Triumph and Tragedy* (vol. 6).

8 Lim, I.A.L. (Interviewer). (1990, January 16). *Oral history interview with Chris Manning-Press (Lieutenant-Colonel)* [Transcript of recording no. 001146/3/2, p. 32]. Retrieved from National Archives of Singapore website.

9 Ministry of Culture. (1975, April 7). *Transcript of question-and-answer session following the prime minister's address to the New Zealand National Press Club in Wellington on 7 April 1975*. Retrieved from National Archives of Singapore website.

10 McCraw, D. (2012). Staying in Singapore? New Zealand's Third Labour Government and the retention of military Forces in Southeast Asia. *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies*, *14* (1), 1–17. Retrieved from New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies website.

11 Kutty, N.G. (1979, April 15). Treat for 52 Viet refugees on their way to Auckland. *The Straits Times*, p. 7. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

12 Grand farewell parade by New Zealanders. (1989, July 21). *The Straits Times*, p. 19. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

13 Kiwi vehicles for auction. (1989, July 29). *The Straits Times*, p. 19. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

14 Tan, T. (2016). *Sembawang Country Club: An early history* (pp. 1–8). Retrieved from Sembawang Country Club website.

15 Grant, D. (1977, October 1). How it all came about. *The Business Times*, p. 12. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

16 Robert, G. (1979, November 30). Dream date for schoolboys. *The Straits Times*, p. 38. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

17 *1 RNZIR Journal.* (1982). Singapore: First Battalion Royal New Zealand Infantry Regiment. (Call no.: RCLOS 356.1109931 RNZIRF)

18 Ministry of Communications and Information. (1986, February 5). *Speech by Dr Yeo Ning Hong, Minister for Communications and Information and Second Minister for Defence, at the 1986 New Zealand Day Parade at Dieppe Barracks, Sembawang, on Wednesday, 5 February 1986 at 6.00 pm*. Retrieved from National Archives of Singapore website.

19 Jalelah Abu Bakar. (2019, May 17). *Singapore and New Zealand are 'natural partners,' say PMs*. Retrieved from CNA website.

20 *Journal of the First Battalion, the Royal New Zealand Infantry Regiment.* (1985). Singapore: First Battalion Royal New Zealand Infantry Regiment. (Call no.: R 356.1109931 RNZIRF)

21 160 watch Santa drop from the skies. (1970, December 18). *The Straits Times*, p. 15. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

22 Tan, D. (1986, December 21). One place where you can't pull rank. *The Straits Times*, p. 4. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

23 *1 RNZIR.* (1975). Singapore: First Battalion Royal New Zealand Infantry Regiment. (Call no.: RCLOS 356.1109931 RNZIRF).

24 Fernandez, C. (1981, November 26). Two NZ soldiers jailed for peddling drugs. *The Straits Times*, p. 1. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

25 Ong, W.C. (2019, February 13). Singapore's military history: Look beyond World War II. *RSIS Commentary*, *21*, 1–4. Retrieved from S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies website.

26 Lee begins talks to avert total British pull-out by 1975. (1967, June 27). *The Straits Times,* p. 18. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

A SLICE OF SINGAPORE IN THE BIODIVERSITY HERITAGE LIBRARY

With climate change on the rise, access to research on biodiversity and natural history is all the more important. **Lim Tin Seng** tells us about the Biodiversity Heritage Library.

The Biodiversity Heritage Library (BHL) is the world's largest open access digital library for biodiversity resources. It was created in 2006 when a group of leading natural history and botanical libraries came together to make their digitised collections available in a single online repository at www.biodiversitylibrary.org

The collections of the United States-based BLH are drawn from an international consortium of more than 120 natural history, botanical, research and national libraries, including renowned institutions such as the Smithsonian Libraries in Washington D.C., the American Museum of Natural History in New York, the Natural History Museum in London and the Royal Botanic Gardens in Kew, London.

The BHL provides free access to the world's collective knowledge on biodiversity and natural history, and has attracted more than nine million users worldwide since its inception. Such unhindered access to existing as well as new, ground-breaking research relating to the environment and ecosystem is all the more important given the quickening pace of global warming and climate change, and its catastrophic impact on future generations.

Access to Biodiversity Materials

The BHL portal, which was initially launched with just over 300 titles, has seen an impressive increase in its collection size over the last 13 years. Today, users can access over 57 million pages of biodiversity resources, comprising more than 150,000 titles and nearly 248,000 volumes, some of which date back to the 15th century. To ensure that the collection can be accessed freely, BHL has worked with the respective rights holders to make copyrighted materials openly available under Creative Commons licences.

To facilitate ease of retrieval and access, and also to encourage the use of its collections and data, the BHL has partnered with the international taxonomic community, publishers, bioinformaticians and information technology professionals to incorporate various useful tools and services on the portal.

For instance, every title in the BHL repository can be downloaded in a variety of formats, including PDF. As the scientific names of all key animals and plants that appear in BHL books have been indexed, users can also conduct comprehensive taxonomic name searches. To date, the BHL has indexed more than 191 million taxonomic names in its collections. To further aid research, these taxonomic names as well as all the bibliographic records of the books can be exported, and are compatible with existing software systems.

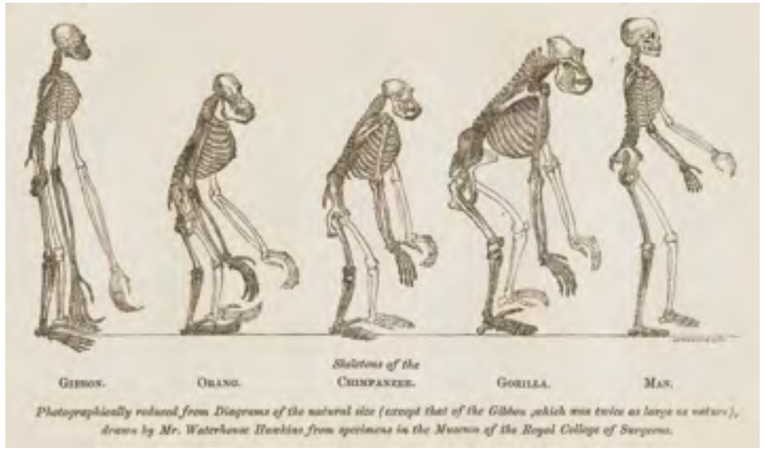
Thematic Collections

Some of the collections in the BHL are categorised into themes to help users navigate the breadth of biodiversity topics the portal contains and, in the process, discover interesting resources. Here is a preview of some of the unique collections on the BHL portal:

- The "Charles Darwin's Library" is one of BHL's key thematic collections. It comprises over 1,480 books owned by Charles Darwin, 430 of which have been digitised and uploaded onto the portal. Many of the titles contain Darwin's own handwritten annotations and markings. These notes are invaluable for the clues and insights they shed on the development of Darwin's ideas on evolution and natural selection. Lest researchers struggle to make out Darwin's notes, BHL has provided full transcriptions of his annotations and markings.
- Another thematic collection that BHL has put together are works created by women who have made significant contributions to the study of natural history and science. "Women in Natural History" and "Early Women in Science" comprise 1,121 volumes from some 500 titles at the time of writing, and are testament to the achievements of women in the areas of botany, zoology and biodiversity.
- Titles in the paleontology collection were selected from the Vertebrate Palaeontology Library in the Smithsonian Libraries. This 506-volume collection contains close to 380 book and journal titles on physical geography, stratigraphy, systematic paleontology and paleozoology.
- The "Monsters are Real" collection features the fascinating stories, people and animals that have inspired mythical

Lim Tin Seng is a Librarian with the National Library, Singapore. He is the co-editor of ***Roots: Tracing Family Histories – A Resource Guide*** (2013), ***Harmony and Development: ASEAN-China Relations*** (2009) and ***China's New Social Policy: Initiatives for a Harmonious Society*** (2010). He writes regularly for ***BiblioAsia***.

(Clockwise from facing page) The Rose of Venezuela reproduced from Dalton, H. (1880). *Curtis's Botanical Magazine* (Vol. 106). London: L. Reeve and Co.; the Tasmanian devil reproduced from Gould, J. (1863). *The Mammals of Australia* (Vol. I). London: Taylor and Francis; the Javan slow loris reproduced from Forbes, H.O. (1894). *A Hand-book to the Primates* (Vol. I). London: W.H. Allen & Co., Limited; and the Yellow Horn Poppy reproduced from Boswell, J.T. (Ed.) (1863). *English Botany, or, Coloured Figures of British Plants* (Vol. I). London: Robert Hardwicke.



(Top) The Biodiversity Heritage Library logo. BHL was set up in 2006 as a digital library to provide free access to materials on biodiversity and natural history.

(Above) In 2014, the National Library Board (NLB) became a member of the Biodiversity Heritage Library consortium as the Singapore node. The NLB works with other institutions in Singapore, including the Singapore Botanic Gardens, to select Singapore-related biodiversity materials for digitisation and uploading on the BHL portal.

(Above right) An illustration comparing the skeletons of different ape species (gibbon, orang utan, chimpanzee, gorilla) with that of man's. *Image reproduced from Huxley, T.H. (1863). Evidence as to Man's Place in Nature. London; Edinburgh: Williams and Norgate.*

beasts and creatures such as the sea serpent, kraken, hydra, mermaid and the leviathan. This small but unique collection – with just 34 volumes from 31 titles – reveals that history's most fearsome legendary monsters are actually based on real-life animals.

- Other notable BHL collections include "Rarest of the Rare", which contains some of the rarest natural history works; "Antarctic Exploration & Discovery", which comprises rare books, journals and field diaries relating to the exploration and biodiversity of the Antarctica; and the comprehensive "A History of Cats: 1858–1922" from the Library of Congress.

Singapore and the Biodiversity Heritage Library

As the National Library Board (NLB) shares BHL's vision in providing open access to biodiversity heritage materials, it became a member of the BHL consortium in 2014. As a country node, NLB works with other institutions in Singapore, including the Library of Botany and Horticulture of the Singapore Botanic Gardens (SBG), to select the rarest and the most interesting biodiversity literature for digitisation and inclusion in the BHL portal. NLB has also taken the lead in Singapore by providing expertise for the conservation and digitisation of materials as well as the cataloguing and uploading of digitised works.

Since joining the BHL, NLB has uploaded some 394 volumes of biodiversity and natural history works. These were selected from the National Library Singapore's Rare Materials Collection as well as from SBG's Library of Botany and Horticulture.

Singapore's publications in the BHL are collectively known as "BHL Singapore". The collection is broadly categorised into the following areas: 1) Institutional History, 2) Natural History of Singapore and the Region, 3) Geography and the Environment of Singapore, and 4) Ethnography and Travel Narratives.

Institutional History

Titles in this category are historical documents and administrative records of institutions that deal or have dealt with the botanical and natural aspects of Singapore. These include records of living materials and plant seeds that the SBG received and despatched during the colonial period, as well as annual reports of the SBG, the National Parks Board and the now-defunct Forest Department. Also found are correspondences and diaries of the previous directors and superintendents of the SBG, specimen catalogues and publications from the Raffles Library and Museum (the predecessor of the NLB and the National Museum of Singapore).

Natural History of Singapore and the Region

These titles showcase the flora and fauna of Singapore and Southeast Asia. Compiled by natural historians and naturalists from the colonial period – men such as Thomas Horsfield, James Motley and Arthur Gardiner Butler – many of the books contain beautiful illustrations of animals, insects and plants that are indigenous to the region.

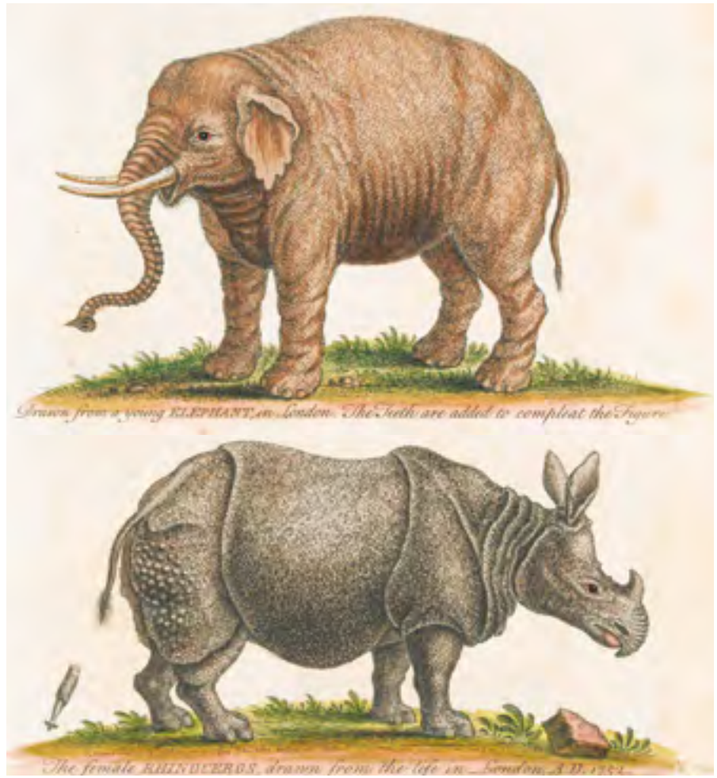
Key examples include the three-volume *Gleanings of Natural History* (1758–64),[1] which is the most downloaded book from BHL Singapore; *Zoological Researches in Java and the Neighbouring Islands* (1824);[2] *Contributions to the Natural History of Labuan, and the Adjacent Coasts of Borneo* (1855);[3] *The Birds of Singapore Island* (1927);[4] and *The Butterflies of Malacca* (1879).[5]

Geography and the Environment of Singapore

Included in this category are books on geology and environmental studies of Singapore. Interesting titles include the *Annual Report of the Meteorological Observations in the Straits Settlements for the Year 1890* (1891)[6] and *A Geography of the Malay Peninsula and Surrounding Countries* (1884),[7] from which we can piece together the historical weather patterns and geography of Singapore and the region in the 19th century.

(Below) The "BHL Singapore" collection comprises a huge variety of historical publications relating to the biodiversity of Singapore and the region. Many are beautifully illustrated with drawings of different species of plants and animals. Shown here are illustrations of the elephant and rhinoceros. *Images reproduced from Edwards, G. (1758). Gleanings of Natural History, Exhibiting Figures of Quadrupeds, Birds, Insects, Plants, &c (Part I). London: Royal College of Physicians.*

(Bottom) Some titles in the "BHL Singapore" collection contain maps. Shown here is "Map of the Island of Singapore and its Dependencies" marking out the locations of Singapore's forest reserves. *Image reproduced from Hill, H.C. (1900). Report on the Present System of Forest Conservancy in the Straits Settlements with Suggestions for Future Management. Singapore: Straits Settlements.*



Ethnography and Travel Narratives

Books in this last category focus on the different ethnicities and cultures in Singapore and the region in the 19th century. Written by naturalists, colonial administrators and travellers, these books were compiled using scientific methodology or personal observations. One key title is *The Aboriginal Tribes* (1910)[8] by the British colonial administrator Richard James Wilkinson. Produced as part of a series of papers on various Malayan topics, the publication – which describes the indigenous tribes living in different parts of the Malay Peninsula – was used as a government instruction manual to help British cadets pass the entrance exam to the Malayan Civil Service.

Another significant title is *Travels in the East Indian Archipelago* (1868)[9] by the American naturalist Albert Smith Bickmore. This voluminous 555-page book documents Bickmore's expedition to the Dutch East Indies (present-day Indonesia) between April 1865 and May 1866. It records the flora and fauna of the places he visited as well as the ethnological characteristics of the different tribes he encountered. ♦

NOTES

1 Edwards, G. (1758). *Gleanings of natural history, exhibiting figures of quadrupeds, birds, insects, plants, &c* (Part I). London: Royal College of Physicians. Retrieved from BookSG; Edwards, G. (1760). *Gleanings of natural history, exhibiting figures of quadrupeds, birds, fishes, insects, &c* (Part II). London: Royal College of Physicians. Retrieved from BookSG; Edwards, G. (1764). *Gleanings of natural history, containing figures of quadrupeds, birds, insects, plants, &c* (Part III). London: Royal College of Physicians. Retrieved from BookSG

2 Horsfield, T. (1824). *Zoological researches in Java, and the neighbouring islands.* London: Kingsbury & Allen. Retrieved from BookSG.

3 Motley, J. (1855). *Contributions to the natural history of Labuan, and the adjacent coasts of Borneo.* London: John van Voorst. Retrieved from BookSG.

4 Bucknill, J.A.S. (1927). *The birds of Singapore island.* Singapore: Government Printing Office. Retrieved from BookSG.

5 Butler, A.G. (1879). *The butterflies of Malacca.* London: The Society. Retrieved from BookSG.

6 *Annual report of the meteorological observations in the Straits Settlements for the year 1890.* (1891). Singapore: Government Printing Office. This publication is found in the collection of the Singapore Botanic Gardens.

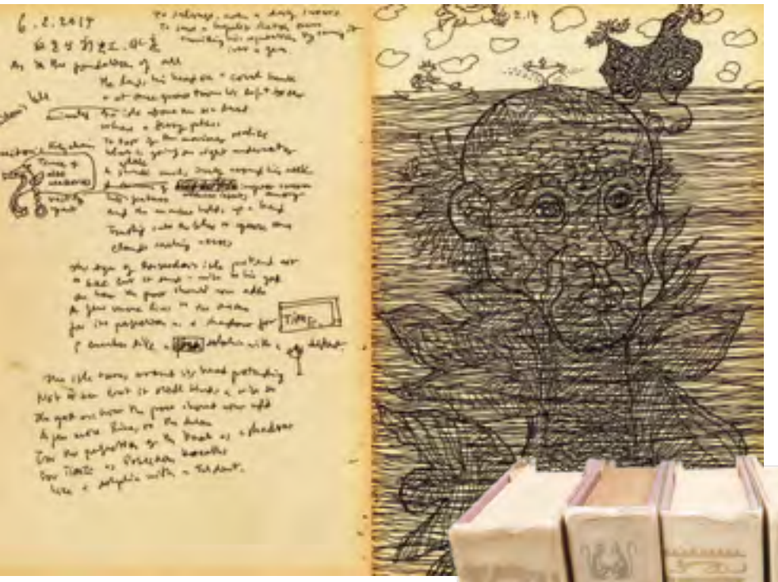
7 Skinner, A.M. (1884). *A geography of the Malay Peninsula and surrounding countries in three parts. Part 1. Malay Peninsula, Borneo.* Singapore: [s.n.]. Retrieved from BookSG.

8 Wilkinson, R.J. (1910). *The aboriginal tribes.* Kuala Lumpur: F.M.S. Government Press. Retrieved from BookSG.

9 Bickmore, A.S. (1868). *Travels in the East Indian Archipelago.* London: J. Murray. Retrieved from BookSG.

EXPLORING AN ARTIST'S MIND
THE TAN SWIE HIAN COLLECTION

What makes the difference between a good artist and a brilliant one? **Goh Yu Mei** delves into the books and artworks that have inspired a literary and artistic genius.



(Above) Tan Swie Hian jots down ideas and inspirations in his notebooks, along with preliminary sketches of his artworks. *Tan Swie Hian Collection, National Library, Singapore.*

(Right) Tan Swie Hian's interest in the Sanskrit epic *Ramayana* led to his discovery of this eight-volume Chinese translation by the renowned scholar, Professor Ji Xianlin. 蚁垤著; 季羡林译. (1980–1984).《罗摩衍那》. 北京:人民文学出版社. (Call no.: RDTSH 294.5922 VAL). *Tan Swie Hian Collection, National Library, Singapore.*

Housed within the Donors Gallery at level 10 of the National Library Building is the Tan Swie Hian Collection of over 6,600 items – comprising books, artworks, manuscripts, personal notebooks and other items – that illuminate the creative journeys of an extraordinarily gifted Singaporean artist.

The collection is important for the light it sheds on Tan Swie Hian (b. 1943), the multidisciplinary artist whose oeuvre spans several genres in the literary and visual arts. Internationally acclaimed for his painting, sculpture, calligraphy and public artworks, Tan is equally accomplished at penning poetry, essays and fables as he is with multimedia creations incorporating dance choreographies, live performances and musical compositions.

(Above) Between 1969 and 1974, Tan Swie Hian was one of the editors of *Chao Foon* (蕉风), an important Chinese literary magazine in Malaya and first published in 1955. *Image reproduced from 蕉风月刊. (1971). (Call no.: RDTSH C810.05 CFM). Tan Swie Hian Collection, National Library, Singapore.*

(Above right) The Tan Swie Hian Collection is housed at level 10 of the National Library building. Users can request to view the materials from the information counter located at level 11.

(Right) Portrait of Tan Swie Hian. *Collection of Tan Swie Hian.*

Witnessing the artworks of Tan provides at best a superficial appreciation of the artist; in order to understand his prodigious talents and make sense of the creative process behind many of his masterpieces, one should examine the Tan Swie Hian Collection that the artist has gifted to the National Library.

Inspirations and Influences

As an avid reader and bibliophile, Tan has built a vast collection of books by authors he admires and on subjects that interest him. These, in turn, have become the building blocks of his diverse literary and artistic pursuits.

Tan's personal library includes copies of all the English translations of works written by the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, whom he deeply admires, while his fascination with the Hindu epic *Ramayana* led him to acquire the Chinese translation by the renowned scholar, Professor Ji Xianlin[1] (季羡林). Other works that have had a profound impact on Tan include *La Divina Commedia* (*Divine Comedy*,《神曲》) and *Duineser Elegien* (*Duino Elegies*,《杜英诺悲歌》).[2] All these are now part of the Tan Swie Hian Collection at the National Library.

Among the collection are books autographed by renowned art and literary masters, such as Marin Sorescu, one of Romania's foremost poets, playwrights and novelists of the late 20th century. There is also a copy of French poet Charles Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* (*The Flowers of Evil*), an anthology of poetry with lithography illustrations by Arnaud d'Hauterives, a French painter and illustrator, who personally autographed and gifted the book to Tan.

Another highlight of the collection are calligraphic works and paintings by renowned Chinese artists and writers, such as Wu Guanzhong (吴冠中), Ai Qing (艾青) and Li Keran (李可染), and Japanese calligrapher, Senpo Ishida.

These landmark literary and artistic works have guided Tan's creative thought processes in his own career. In addition, they also bear witness to Tan's friendships with various luminaries in the artistic and literary circles, many of whom are still living. In his words, "a younger poet/artist is lucky to be acquainted with senior, celebrated contemporary poets and artists".[3]

An Artistic Journey

The Tan Swie Hian Collection is not just a physical manifestation of Tan's literary and artistic journeys, but it also highlights milestones of his remarkable career. The

magazines, periodicals and journals that Tan edited, including *Pattra* (贝叶), one of the earliest magazines that he worked on during his undergraduate days at Nanyang University, are part of the collection.

Tan, who had an early start in writing poems, published his first poetry collection, *The Giant* (巨人), in 1968 when he graduated from university. Between 1969 and 1974, he was one of the editors of *Chao Foon*[4] (蕉风), an important Chinese literary magazine in Malaya first published in 1955.[5] These publications in the collection, including his art catalogues, are a testament to his illustrious artistic career – showcasing the evolution from literary to multidisciplinary art, from one medium to many.

Unique to the collection are 41 notebooks that Tan used to pen his inspirations and private musings. According to Tan, these precious journals are a "constant companion in [his] life"; Tan kept a number of them in both his studio and home for "capturing visions, jotting down ideas and concepts, doing sketches and drawings, writing essays, poems and short lines, copying quotable quotes and paragraphs to memorise, [and for] recording cultural encounters, discoveries and other endeavours".[6] The

Goh Yu Mei is a Librarian with the National Library, Singapore, where she manages the Chinese arts and literature collection. She is interested in the relationship between society and literature.

(Far left) Published in 1968, *The Giant* is the first poetry collection by Tan Swie Hian. *Image reproduced from 牧羚奴. (1968). 巨人. 新加坡: 五月出版社. (Call no.: RDTSH C811.5 MLN). Tan Swie Hian Collection, National Library, Singapore.*

(Left) The Tan Swie Hian Collection includes autographed books that Tan received as gifts, one of which is *Let's Talk about the Weather... and Other Poems* by the Romanian poet, playwright and novelist Marin Sorescu. *Image reproduced from Sorescu, M. (1985). Let's Talk about the Weather... and other Poems. London; Boston: Forest Books.* (Call no.: RDTSH 859.134 SOR). *Tan Swie Hian Collection, National Library, Singapore.*

highly personalised, and often introspective, contents of the notebooks provide the reader with important insights into the artist's psyche and his thought processes.[7]

Among the noteworthy items on display in the Tan Swie Hian Collection are local and international medals and certificates that Tan has received for his artistic and literary achievements. These include the Cultural Medallion (1987) and the Meritorious Service Medal (2003) bestowed by the Singapore government, and international honours that Tan has won, such as the Romanian Marin Sorescu International Poetry Award (1999), the World Economic Forum Crystal Award (2003) and the *Officier de l'Ordre National de la Légion d'Honneur*[8] (Officer in the National Order of the Legion of Honour) in 2006.

A Quest to Inspire

When Tan visited the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris (Paris Museum of Modern Art) for the first time in 1973, he was amazed to see the exact reconstruction of the studio where Constantin Brancusi, who is regarded as one of the most important sculptors of the 20th century, practised his craft.[9] Tan found inspiration in the recreated studio, where visitors could immerse themselves in the space where the great Romanian sculptor created his artworks.

When Tan received the Marin Sorescu International Poetry Award in 1999, he made a personal promise to donate his entire collection of materials that he had painstakingly built over the years to a national institution. This would become a source that all aspiring young artists in Singapore could access and consult and, in the process, gain inspiration for their own creative works.

Thus, when the "My Library Movement" was launched in 2003, an initiative that encouraged Singaporeans to donate their valuable materials to the National Library,[10] Tan donated a selection of items from his personal collection to the National Library.

Tan's affinity with the library, however, goes back much further. As a student in the 1950s, Tan was a frequent visitor to the former National Library on Stamford Road, which he saw as a sacred place of learning – a "temple of knowledge". This relationship was further cemented in 1973 when Tan held his first solo exhibition at the National Library.

As his personal collection comprises mainly books and publications, the decision to donate these items to the National Library made perfect sense.[11] It was also Tan's way of giving back to society, to provide a platform where he can share his knowledge and experience with young Singaporeans and help nurture a new generation of homegrown talent.[12] ♦

UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL WITH TAN SWIE HIAN

In a video interview, Tan Swie Hian tells us how he gathered an impressive collection of materials – books, periodicals, journals, calligraphic works and paintings – over the decades, and his reasons for donating the collection to the National Library. He also reveals the creative process behind many of his artworks. Scan this QR code to access the video.

NOTES

1 Ji Xianlin (1911– 2009) was a Chinese linguist, paleographer, historian and writer who was proficient in many languages, including Chinese, English, German, French, Sanskrit and Pali. He was also one of China's best known scholars of ancient Indian languages and culture.

2 方桂香 [Fang, G.X.]. (2002).《巨匠陈瑞献》(p. 238). 新加坡: 创意圈工作室. (Call no.: RSING Chinese 700.92 FGX). *La Divina Commedia (Divine Comedy)* is a long narrative poem written in Italian by Dante Alighieri (1265–1321) and is widely considered as one of the greatest works of world literature. *Duineser Elegien* (*Duino Elegies*) is a collection of 10 German poems by the Austro-German poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926). The poems were written at Duino, a coastal town in northeastern Italy, over a period of 10 years. The anthology is recognised as one of Rilke's best works.

3 "Up Close and Personal with Tan Swie Hian", 13 June 2019 (video interview).

4 *Chao Foon* originally ceased publication in 1999. It was revived in 2002 by Southern College University in Johor and is still being published. The magazine started out as a bi-weekly publication but became a monthly publication in 1958 and a bi-monthly publication in 1990. Since its reissue, it has been a biannual publication.

5 陈再藩 [Chen, Z.F.]. (2006, November 7). 鼎迁于南. 成一方风气之鼎盛 '南方之鼎' 人文精神奖: 陈瑞献与马华文化的第三次拥抱.《联合早报》[*Lianhe Zaobao*]. Retrieved from Factiva.

6 Tan, S.H. (2016). Preface. In S.Y. Yap, *Anatomy of a free mind: Tan Swie Hian's notebooks and creations* (p. 13). Singapore: National Library Board and Editions Didier Millet. (Call no.: RSING 700.92 CHE)

7 Yap, S.Y. (2016). Introduction. In S.Y. Yap, *Anatomy of a free mind: Tan Swie Hian's notebooks and creations* (p.18). Singapore: National Library Board and Editions Didier Millet. (Call no.: RSING 700.92 CHE)

8 The Legion of Honour is the highest decoration conferred on anyone who has made significant contributions to France in a military or civilian capacity.

9 Chave, A.C. (1993). *Constantin Brancusi: Shifting the base of art* (p. 4). New Haven: Yale University Press. (Call no.: RART q730.92 CHA)

10 走进艺术巨匠的精神空间. (2005, November 8).《联合早报》[*Lianhe Zaobao*], p. 21. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

11 "Up Close and Personal with Tan Swie Hian", 13 June 2019 (video interview).

12 黄佩玲 [Huang, P.L.]. (2003, October 2). 6000多本书籍和艺术品陈瑞献珍藏捐图书馆.《联合早报》[*Lianhe Zaobao*], p. 6. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

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