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Vol. 21 Issue 03 OCT–DEC 2025

MAJULAH SINGAPURA
AND OTHER LOVE SONGS

— p. 04 —

Director's Note

As Singapore celebrates the 60th anniversary of its independence in 2025, we thought we would mark the occasion by taking a closer look at "Majulah Singapura". In this issue, we have not one, but two stories relating to our national anthem. Emeritus Professor Bernard Tan's piece on national anthems, "Majulah Singapura" in particular, and his deep dive into how the song has changed over time is a must-read as we mark SG60.

Accompanying this is an excerpt from a conversation that we had with music director Julian Wong, the man responsible for the critically acclaimed production, *Don't Call Him Mr Mari Kita*, which delves into the life of Zubir Said, the composer of "Majulah Singapura". After reading this excerpt, we hope you will be inspired to listen to the entire podcast.

At *BiblioAsia*, we pride ourselves on shining a spotlight on hidden stories about Singapore and this issue is particularly strong in this regard. While many people might be aware that back in the early 1980s, Singapore shifted its time zone forward by half an hour to align itself with Malaysia, reference librarian Kenneth Tay reveals a lesser-known fact: in the last hundred years or so, Singapore has adjusted its clocks no fewer than seven times.

We also have an interesting piece by former National Library Digital Fellow Zhuang Wubin about three women who made a name for themselves in the world of photography in Singapore in the 1940s and 1950s. Our story brings these women out of the darkroom and into the light.

Finally, I want to share the fascinating history of Giovanni Gaggino written by Alex Foo, a manager with NLB's partnership department. Gaggino was an Italian entrepreneur who once owned Pulau Bukom and also authored an Italian-Malay dictionary in 1884. The story of his remarkable life illustrates that in Singapore, with determination and hard work, the pasta-bilities are endless. (Sorry, I couldn't resist the pun.)

As usual, we have plenty for you to chew on in this issue so I won't keep you. Ciao!

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On the cover
A flag raising ceremony at a school, 1966. Flag raising and lowering ceremonies were introduced in schools in 1966. The national anthem was sung and the pledge recited. The practice remains until today. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

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"Majulah Singapura" AND OTHER LOVE SONGS

National anthems often start off as songs for different purposes. Singapore's "Majulah Singapura" is no different.

By Bernard T.G. Tan

Yang di-Pertuan Negara Yusof Ishak (left) and his wife Puan Noor Aishah standing at attention with officials during the playing of "Majulah Singapura" at the Inter-Ministry Athletic Meet at Farrer Park, 1961. *Yusof Ishak Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 20090000508 - 0160).*

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

Singaporeans are undoubtedly familiar with our national anthem "Majulah Singapura" (Onward Singapore). But not many are aware of the circumstances under which it was composed, and of the events which shaped it into the national anthem we know today.

"Majulah Singapura" was not originally composed with the aim of being a national anthem. It was first performed at a concert on 6 September 1958 to celebrate the opening of the newly renovated Victoria Theatre. In 1959, after Singapore had achieved internal self-government, it was chosen to be the official state anthem, though it was a shortened version of the original. It was adopted by the Legislative Assembly as the official state anthem and launched during National Loyalty Week when Yusof Ishak was sworn in as the first Malayan-born Yang di-Pertuan Negara (Head of State). "Majulah Singapura" then became the national anthem when Singapore gained independence on 9 August 1965.

Love Songs of Other Countries

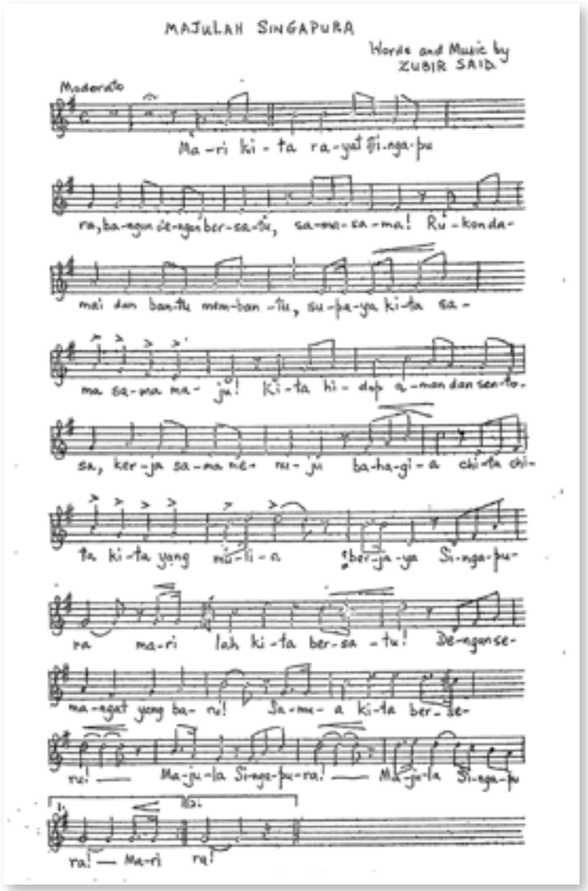
That "Majulah Singapura" did not start off as a national anthem is not as unusual as it sounds. For example, "The Star-Spangled Banner", which became the national anthem of the United States of America in 1931, was born in the heat of battle during the War of 1812 between the United States and its former coloniser, the United Kingdom.[1]

The French national anthem, "La Marseillaise", was composed by Claude-Joseph Rouget de Lisle in 1792 during the years of turmoil of the French Revolution (1787–99).[2] Popularised by patriots from Marseille, the song was adopted as the French national anthem in 1795.

The origins of the British royal anthem and national anthem of the United Kingdom, "God Save the King" (or "Queen"), are shrouded in the mists of history but the tune originates from medieval plainchant (a body of chants used in the liturgies of the Western church), with the Elizabethan John Bull as well as Henry Purcell having helped to shape the melody into its present form. The phrase "God Save the King" appears in the earliest English translations of the Bible. By the reign of James II (r. 1685–88), both the lyrics and music of "God Save the King" were well known in a form close to the present version.[3]

The words for the Japanese anthem, "Kimi Ga Yo" (君が代; His Imperial Majesty's Reign), originated from a poem written over a thousand years ago in the Heian period (794–1185) and is a passionate love song entreating a loved one to live long and forever. It became the national anthem of Japan during the Meiji period (1868–1912), when the loved one – "Kimi" or "my precious" – represented the Emperor.[4] (During the Japanese Occupation of Singapore, people here had to learn this as the new national anthem.)

Closer to home, the adoption of "Negaraku" (My Country) as Malaysia's national anthem is a fascinating story. A number of versions exist for how the song "Rosalie" became the basis for "Negaraku". One version is told by Malaysian composer Saidah Rastam in her book, *Rosalie and Other Love Songs*.[5] Sultan Abdullah Muhammad Shah II of Perak was in exile in Seychelles in 1877 when he was invited to visit Queen Victoria in London. The sultan was asked for Perak's state anthem so that it could be played when the sultan met the queen.



A copy of Zubir Said's original handwritten score of "Majulah Singapura". This was attached to Yap Yan Hong's memo, dated 30 August 1958, to participants of the opening performance for the Victoria Theatre. *Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Microfilm no. PUB 386 - 11).*

Perak did not have a state anthem at the time, but someone was quick-witted enough to claim that the popular 19th-century French love song "La Rosalie" he had heard on the streets of Seychelles was the Perak state anthem. "La Rosalie", supposedly composed by the French composer Pierre-Jean de Béranger, was indeed subsequently adopted (with appropriate lyrics) as the Perak state anthem, "Allah Lanjutkan Usia Sultan" (God Lengthen the Sultan's Age).[6]

The tune of "La Rosalie" became popular and evolved into the celebrated Malay love song, "Terang Bulan" (Bright Moon). In 1937, the Indonesian film of the same name brought the song to wider audiences. I certainly recall "Terang Bulan" as a song which was universally loved and often heard, becoming part of the soundtrack of my childhood.

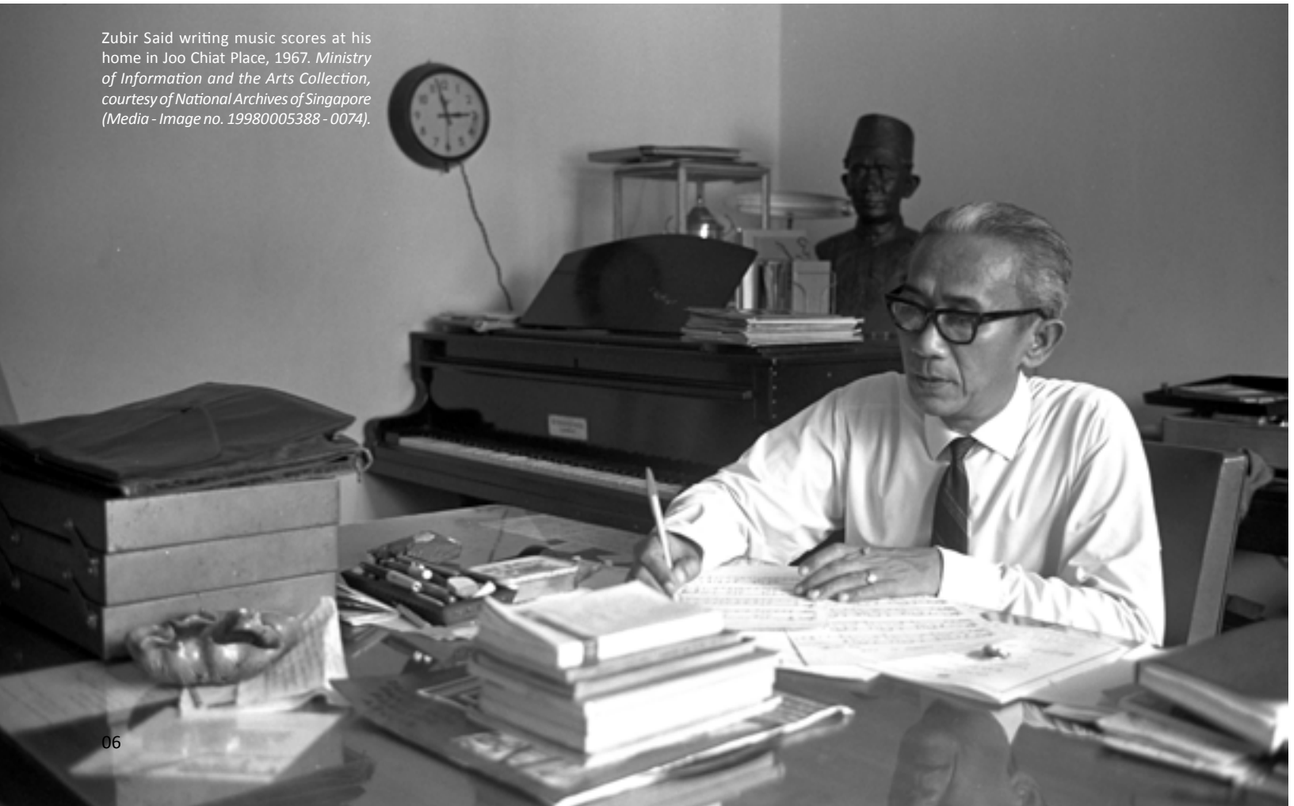
A Japanese version of "Terang Bulan" was introduced in the film *Marai No Tora*. There was even an English version known as "Mamula Moon" (1947), performed by the well-known British band, Geraldo and his Orchestra, and sung by Denny Vaughn. Chinese versions also came into circulation, with perhaps the most famous being 南海月夜 (*Nan Hai Yue Ye*; Moonlit Night in the Southern Sea), recorded in 1953 by the famed Shanghainese chanteuse Yao Li (姚莉).[7]

When the Federation of Malaya became independent from British colonial rule on 31 August 1957, a search began for a suitable national anthem. Tunku Abdul Rahman, chief minister of Malaya (later prime minister of Malaysia), convened and chaired a committee for the task. A contest was held and submissions were invited from notable composers such as Benjamin Britten, William Walton and even Zubir Said. All this came to nought, and it was then suggested by the Tunku that the Perak state anthem might be suitable. The committee wrote new lyrics for the new anthem, which was titled "Negaraku".[8] When the new Federation of Malaysia was formed on 16 September 1963, "Negaraku" became its national anthem.

Zubir Said: Composer of "Majulah Singapura"

The backstory of how Zubir Said (affectionately known as Pak Zubir; *pak* means "father" in Malay) ended up composing "Majulah Singapura" is just as fascinating.

Zubir was born in 1907 in Bukit Tinggi, Minangkabau, Sumatra, and his innate musicality manifested itself in primary school when he carved his own flute from bamboo and participated in a band with other flautists. Later, he became the leader of a roving *keroncong* (a small ukulele-like instrument and an Indonesian musical style) band, performing at weddings and fun fairs.[9]



Zubir Said writing music scores at his home in Joo Chiat Place, 1967. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 19980005388 - 0074).*

Zubir's father regarded music as *haram* (forbidden or unlawful in Islam). Seeking freedom from his family to pursue his musical dreams, Zubir left Sumatra in 1928 at the age of 21 on a cargo ship bound for Singapore where he joined City Opera, a *bangsawan* (Malay opera) troupe, as a violinist. He performed at the Happy Valley amusement park with the troupe, eventually becoming its leader. He also picked up new musical skills such as playing the piano as well as Western musical notation and music theory.[10]

During the Japanese Occupation, Zubir lived in Bukit Tinggi with his two wives and three daughters. He returned to Singapore in 1947 and joined Shaw Brothers' Malay Film Productions in 1948, writing songs for their Malay films such as *Chinta* (1948) and *Rachun Dunia* (1950).[11] He worked with resident Shaw director B.S. Rajhans and recruited the young P. Ramlee as a playback singer to voice dub on-screen songs sung by the actors. P. Ramlee, who later became an icon in the Malay film and music industry, was the playback singer for the male lead Roomai Noor in *Chinta*.

Zubir wrote many of the songs in *Rachun Dunia*, starring P. Ramlee and Siput Sarawak. One of these, "Sayang Di Sayang", is among one of his most well-known compositions. It was sung by playback singer Rubiah in the film. But perhaps the most famous recording of "Sayang Di Sayang" was by the popular singer Kartina Dahari.

Zubir found greater scope for his musical talents at Cathay-Keris Studio in 1953 and became responsible for all the musical aspects of its films, including the entire composition and scoring of all music.

Invitation from the City Council

By the 1950s, Zubir had become a household name in Malay music, and it was at this time that the Singapore City Council undertook a major renovation of the Victoria Theatre, then the premier venue for concerts and drama. As the rebuilding progressed towards completion, a grand concert was planned to mark the reopening of Victoria Theatre.[12]

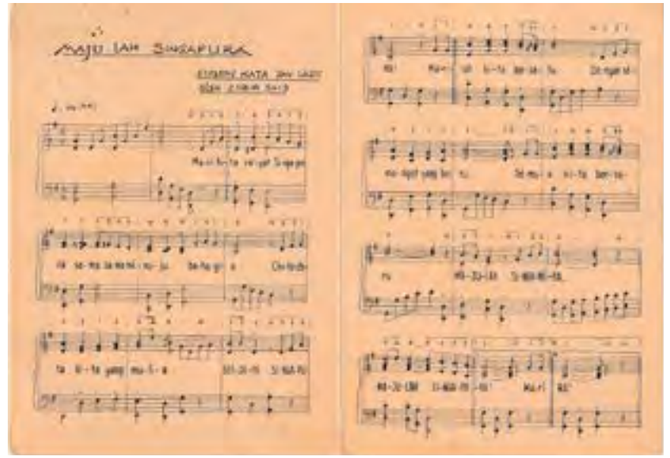
Mayor of Singapore Ong Eng Guan asked Yap Yan Hong, superintendent of the Victoria Theatre, to create a song based on the City Council's motto, "Majulah Singapura". On 10 July 1958, H.F. Sheppard of the City Council formally invited Zubir to compose a song for the opening performance.[13]

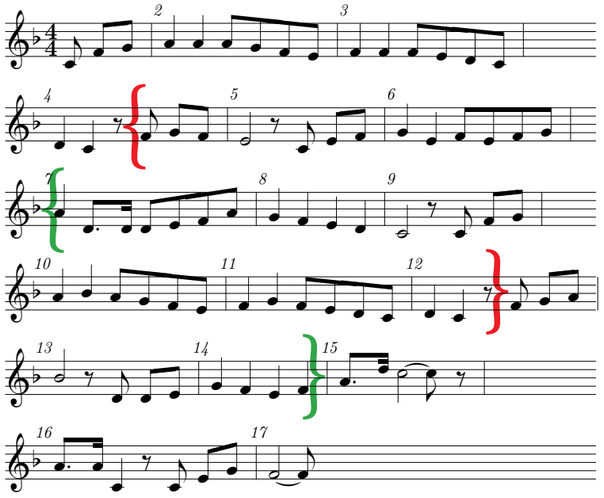
Zubir accepted the invitation five days later. He knew that it was not going to be a romantic song but a special kind of song. "So I asked one friend what I should do with the lyrics. Music is quite easy for me. But the words…," he revealed in his oral history interview in 1984. "So the friend says, 'You must study the policy of the government… and what the public wants. After that you can compose'." Zubir also realised that the words had to be simple and easily understood by both Malays and non-Malays in Singapore. "So I consult[ed] also an author in language, in Malay language so that I can do it in proper Malay language but not too deep and not too difficult."[14]

Zubir must have worked with tremendous speed as the Minutes of the City Council's Finance and General Purposes (Entertainments) Sub-Committee on 28 July 1958 reported that "A recording of the music is played for the information of the Sub-Committee".[15]

A memo dated 30 August 1958 from Yap to all participants in the opening performance came with a copy of a handwritten score of the song with just the melody and lyrics.[16] This score also lacks the familiar fanfare-like introduction, but the first couple of bars contain rests which correspond

The souvenir card issued by the Ministry of Culture to commemorate National Loyalty Week (29 November to 5 December 1959). The cover features the new state flag with the new coat-of-arms on the back. On the inside is the official shortened version of "Majulah Singapura" by Zubir Said. *Courtesy of Bernard T.G. Tan.*





Zubir Said's original version of "Majulah Singapura" consisted of a 16-bar verse and an 8-bar chorus which was repeated to make it 16 bars. In the unauthorised shortened version, eight bars were removed from the middle of bar 4 to the middle of bar 12 (marked off in red). The official shortened version by Zubir Said had bars 7 to 14 removed from the verse (marked off in green). *Courtesy of Bernard T.G. Tan.*

exactly to the introduction, so it could well have been composed at the same time but omitted from this purely vocal score. However, it is quite clearly in Zubir's own handwriting as it featured his rather unusual lowercase "p".

The National Archives of Singapore has a copy of the score, which is currently on display at the *Laws of Our Land: Foundations of a New Nation* exhibition at the National Gallery Singapore.[17] It was very likely scanned from the original handwritten manuscript of "Majulah Singapura" whose whereabouts remain unknown. It is almost certain that this is what Zubir gave to the City Council in response to the invitation of 10 July 1958.

The opening performance of the renovated Victoria Theatre took place on 6 September 1958, and the first item was "Majulah Singapura", orchestrated by Dick Abell of Radio Malaya.[18] The performance by the choir and orchestra of the Singapore Chamber Ensemble was conducted by Paul Abisheganaden, and a *Straits Times* report on the concert called it "a stirring song, Majulah Singapura (composed by Zubir Said)".[19]

"Majulah Singapura" was next heard at the massive Youth Rally convened at the Padang on 23 February 1959 for the visit of the Duke of Edinburgh, performed by the Combined Schools Choir under the baton of Abisheganaden.[20] The song quickly found favour with the public, and I was so taken with it that I made a piano arrangement of the song.

Shortening of the Verse

On 3 June 1959, Singapore attained self-government and Deputy Prime Minister Toh Chin Chye was given the task of creating its new symbols of statehood, including the state anthem. Singapore Mayor Ong Eng Guan alerted Toh to "Majulah Singapura" and Toh, on hearing the song, agreed it was highly suitable to be the state anthem. However, he requested Zubir to shorten it first.[21]

But before Zubir could finish shortening it, it appears that someone else (whose identity remains unknown) had already done so. Zubir complained in a letter to Foreign Minister S. Rajaratnam on 14 October 1959 that he had seen a copy of this shortened version in a souvenir card sent to schools (which I do recall seeing myself), and that the way it was shortened was "wrong and spoils the composition".[22] As the Singapore State Arms and Flag and National Anthem Bill to adopt the unauthorised version was due to be passed by the Legislative Assembly on the very day Zubir wrote to Rajaratnam, the bill was withdrawn, possibly as a result of Zubir's intervention.[23]

The original version of "Majulah Singapura" consisted of a 16-bar verse and an 8-bar chorus, which was repeated to make it 16 bars. The unauthorised shortening, as I recall, removed eight bars from the middle of bar 4 to the middle of bar 12. In Zubir's shortened version, he also removed eight bars, but these were bars 7 to 14 instead. His shortened version made more musical sense than the unauthorised shortening. It remains a mystery, though, why someone else was asked to do the shortening without Zubir's knowledge.

Zubir's shortened version was adopted by the Legislative Assembly as the official state anthem on 11 November 1959, along with a new state flag and coat-of-arms. The Ministry of Culture issued a new souvenir card bearing the official state anthem as shortened by Zubir, the new state flag as well as the new state arms. Most Singaporeans today are unaware that the national anthem is a shortened version of the original song.[24]

"Majulah Singapura" as the State and National Anthems

The new anthem was launched during National Loyalty Week which ran from 29 November to 5 December 1959 when Yusof Ishak was installed as the Yang di-Pertuan Negara. "Majulah Singapura", heard for the first time as the state anthem, was played alongside the British anthem "God Save the Queen".[25]

Singapore became part of the new Federation of Malaysia formed on 16 September 1963. While "Majulah Singapura" remained our state anthem, "Negaraku" was adopted as the national anthem as Singapore was now part of Malaysia.[26] When Singapore left Malaysia on 9 August 1965, "Majulah Singapura" became the national anthem of the newly independent nation.

The initial official recordings of "Majulah Singapura" were by the Radio Singapore Orchestra and the Singapore Military Forces Band.[27] When the Berlin Chamber Orchestra visited Singapore in 1960, they were asked to make a recording of "Majulah Singapura" which became the official recorded version of the anthem for many years.[28] Two further recordings were made by visiting orchestras: Japan's NHK Symphony Orchestra in 1963 and the London Symphony Orchestra in 1968.[29]

Revised Orchestrations

In 2000, the Ministry of Information and the Arts (MITA; now Ministry of Digital Development and Information) decided to have a new orchestration of the national anthem, and I chaired a committee to do this. I proposed that the key of the anthem be transposed down to the key of F major from G major which would put the highest note at D5 instead of E5, making the anthem easier to sing.[30]

The version being used then was by the British composer Michael Hurd, and a number of Singapore composers submitted new orchestral arrangements of the anthem. The committee eventually selected the version by classical composer Phoon Yew Tien, who received the Cultural Medallion in 1996. This was decided after a careful evaluation by MITA, which also sent recordings of five different arrangements to selected schools to test out reactions.[31]

The committee's decision had to be submitted to the Cabinet for approval, and my colleague at MITA, Ismail Sudderuddin, who had been steering the project, asked me to brief the Cabinet on the project, including why we wanted to change the key of the anthem.[32]

During the briefing, I was somewhat stunned by a question posed by Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew, who said something like: "Would it be possible to have the different versions for orchestra, band and choir in different keys?" Though possible, this is not really desirable. I nervously replied to say that it was not possible, and fortunately Minister Mentor seemed to accept my somewhat unsatisfactory answer.

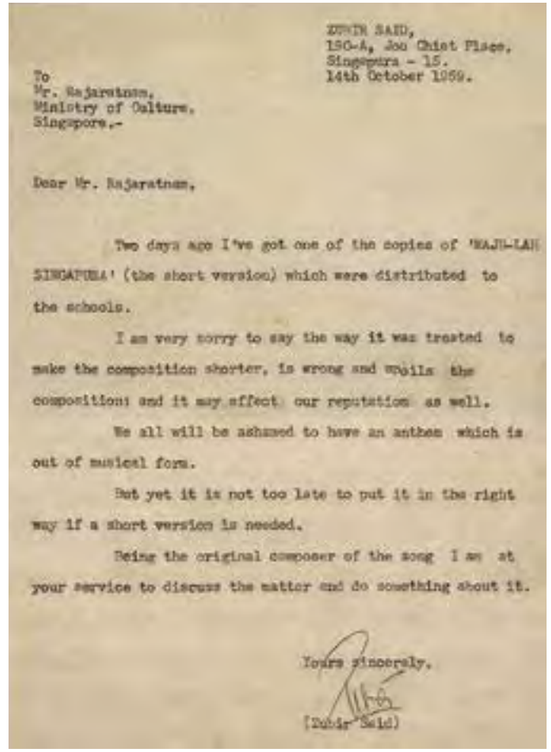
Letter from Zubir Said to Culture Minister S. Rajaratnam, dated 14 October 1959, complaining that "Majulah Singapura" was shortened without his knowledge. *Image reproduced from Rohana Zubir, Zubir Said – the Composer of Majulah Singapura (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2012), 5. (From National Library Singapore, call no. RSING 780.92 ROH).*

Phoon's version, launched on 19 January 2001, was sung by Jacintha Abisheganaden accompanied by the Singapore Youth Choir. The Singapore Symphony Orchestra recorded seven versions of the new arrangement – ranging from a version for a full orchestra to one for piano.[33]

All of these recordings were, of course, the shortened version of "Majulah Singapura", the one we are familiar with today. Few people would have known about Zubir's longer original composition and even fewer would have heard it. I believe the first time the longer version was publicly performed after 1965 was in 1979. That year, a series of inaugural concerts of the Singapore Symphony Orchestra (SSO), the brainchild of Deputy Prime Minister Goh Keng Swee, was scheduled to begin on 24 January.[34]

Some months before the concert, I casually remarked to chairman of the SSO, Tan Boon Teik (who was also the attorney-general of Singapore), that Zubir's original version of "Majulah Singapura" was actually eight bars longer than the official national anthem. He quickly responded that we should play the original version of "Majulah Singapura" at the inaugural concert.

The orchestral score of the national anthem being used at the time was by British composer Elgar Howarth. For the concert, I inserted the missing eight bars into Howarth's score purely from memory



ZUBIR SAID,
150-A, Joo Chiat Place,
Singapura - 15.
14th October 1959.

To
Mr. Rajaratnam,
Ministry of Culture,
Singapore.-

Dear Mr. Rajaratnam,

Two days ago I've got one of the copies of 'MAJU-LAH SINGAPURA' (the short version) which were distributed to the schools.

I am very sorry to say the way it was treated to make the composition shorter, is wrong and spoils the composition; and it may affect our reputation as well.

We all will be ashamed to have an anthem which is out of musical form.

But yet it is not too late to put it in the right way if a short version is needed.

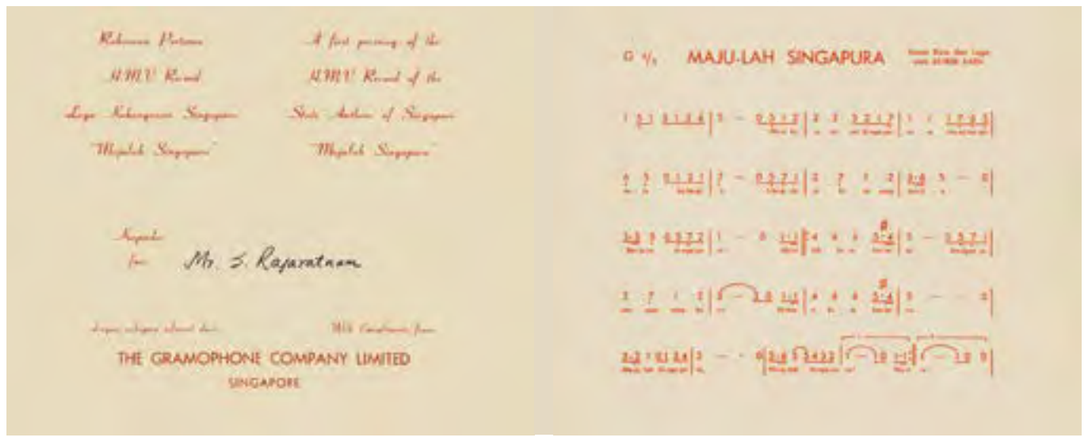
Being the original composer of the song I am at your service to discuss the matter and do something about it.

Yours sincerely,

(Zubir Said)

and then orchestrated the inserted bars in the style of Howarth's orchestration. "The 41-strong orchestra struck the right stirring note from the outset when it played a spirited version of the national anthem with a variation and in a manner few Singaporeans had heard before," reported the *Straits Times* the day after the concert.[35]

As far as I am aware, it would be more than three decades later that the longer version would next be performed in public. In 2015, when Singapore commemorated its 50th year of independence, the Orchestra of the Music Makers, or OMM (I was then chairman of the board), contributed to the celebrations by performing Mahler's Symphony No. 8 at a concert at the Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay. The OMM's music director, Chan Tze Law, wanted to conclude the concert with a performance of the original, unshortened version of "Majulah Singapura" followed by the official national anthem using the same choral and instrumental forces as Mahler 8.



A copy of the first vinyl record of "Majulah Singapura" produced by the Gramophone Company Ltd in 1959. This copy was the one presented to Minister for Culture S. Rajaratnam. Side 1 features the full and salute versions played by the Band of the Singapore Military Forces, while side 2 contains the version sung by the Ministry of Education Choir. The bottom images shows the text on the inside front cover and inside back cover. *Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

I hurriedly scored these two versions as requested by Tze Law, and at the concert, the original version of "Majulah Singapura" was performed and heard by a new generation of Singaporeans. And thanks to the internet, even more Singaporeans have heard the original version as the performance was subsequently posted on YouTube. Since it was uploaded 10 years ago, the performance has been viewed more than 177,000 times.[36]

The Original Manuscript of "Majulah Singapura"

During my research into the origins of "Majulah Singapura", I had, as mentioned earlier, come across the correspondence between the City Council and Zubir on the commission to write a song for the reopening of the Victoria Theatre. I am now convinced that the manuscript of the original music and lyrics in the City Council files (attached to the 1958 memo from Yan Yan Hong) is indeed a copy of Zubir's original manuscript of the song.

A fuller account of the search for the original manuscript has been published elsewhere,[37] but I will sketch out the main points of the account. I obtained a copy of Zubir's manuscript (dated 11 November 1959) of his official shortened "Majulah Singapura", which became the national anthem, from Rahim Jalil, a retired senior lawyer and owner of Zubir's Joo Chiat apartment, who had been introduced to me by Winnifred Wong, former principal librarian at NUS Libraries. This manuscript was the basis of the official souvenir card issued by the Ministry of Culture in 1959.[38]

Comparing the handwriting in this manuscript to the City Council's copy of the original "Majulah Singapura" manuscript,[39] there is a reasonable certainty (as attested to by the Health Sciences Authority's handwriting expert, Yap Bei Sing) that the two manuscripts were by the same person as they both featured Zubir's unusual handwritten lowercase "p".

A Love Song for Singapore

I was born in Singapore in 1943 during the Japanese Occupation, so the national anthem of my birth was the Japanese "Kimi Ga Yo". Following the return of the British in 1945, my national anthem became "God Save the King" (to become "God Save the Queen" in 1952). When Singapore became self-governing in 1959, "Majulah Singapura" became our state anthem (presumably with "God Save the Queen" remaining the national anthem).

When we became a part of the Federation of Malaysia in 1963, "Negaraku" became our national anthem and after Singapore left Malaysia on 9 August 1965, "Majulah Singapura", which had remained as our state anthem, finally became the national anthem of the sovereign Republic of Singapore.

As loyal Singaporeans, we think of "Majulah Singapura" as our national anthem, and unlike "Kimi Ga Yo" and "Negaraku", it never had an existence as a romantic love song. And yet it is indeed a love song – Zubir Said's love song for his adopted nation – affirming his loyalty and affection for the country in which he had found a meaningful and fulfilled life.

So in "Majulah Singapura", the same expression of deep affection and affirmation found in love songs is indeed embedded in its lyrics and music by a man who wanted to express his love for the nation that had embraced him so readily. It is therefore fitting that Singaporeans themselves have so readily embraced "Majulah Singapura" as an affirmative love song to our nation. ♦

A copy of Zubir Said's original handwritten score of "Majulah Singapura" is currently on display at the *Laws of Our Land: Foundations of a New Nation* exhibition at the National Gallery Singapore.

Listen to "The Making of 'Majulah Singapura' as We Know It", the BiblioAsia+ podcast by Emeritus Professor Bernard T.G. Tan where he talks about the origins of our national anthem.

My heartfelt thanks are due to Eric Chin and Wendy Ang, both former directors of the National Archives of Singapore; Winnifred Wong, former principal librarian, NUS Libraries; Rahim Jalil, retired senior lawyer and owner of Zubir Said's Joo Chiat apartment; Rohana Zubir, daughter of Zubir Said; and Yap Bei Sing, document examiner, Health Sciences Authority.

NOTES

1 "Francis Scott Key Pens 'The Star-Spangled Banner'" History.com, last updated 27 May 2025, https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/september-14/key-pens-star-spangled-banner.
2 The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, "La Marseillaise," Encyclopaedia Britannica, 6 June 2025, https://www.britannica.com/topic/La-Marseillaise.
3 Charles Dimont, "The History of 'God Save the King'," *History Today*, 3, no. 5 (May 1953), accessed 9 July 2025, https://www.historytoday.com/archive/history-matters/god-save-queen-history-national-anthem.
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Zubir Said playing the piano at his home in Joo Chiat Place, 1967. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 19980005388 - 0075).*

COMPOSER ZUBIR SAID WAS ESTRANGED FROM HIS FATHER FOR THREE DECADES.

"MAJULAH SINGAPURA" FINALLY REPAIRED THE BREACH

Musical director Julian Wong, recipient of the National Art Council's 2023 Young Artist Award, Singapore's highest award for young arts practitioners. *Photo by Jimmy Yap.*

In a BiblioAsia+ podcast, music director Julian Wong reveals little-known details about the composer of Singapore's national anthem.

Working with theatre company Wild Rice, musical director Julian Wong put together a critically acclaimed production on the life of Zubir Said (fondly known as Pak Zubir) that mixed history, music and memory in a moving show, *Don't Call Him Mr Mari Kita*. Performances were sold out in 2022 and 2024. Editor-in-chief Jimmy Yap interviews Julian Wong on his research on Pak Zubir's life and the challenges of putting up the show.

Jimmy: What's the most interesting thing you learned about Pak Zubir from your research?

Julian: I think the most interesting thing to me, and I didn't know this until I researched about him, was that he was not Singaporean. He was from Bukit Tinggi [in Sumatra]. And that he had come here to Singapore as a way of rebelling against his father, the village chief, the *penghulu*, who didn't allow him to pursue music because music was *haram* [forbidden or unlawful in Islam].

When he was 21 years old, Pak Zubir fell very ill. His father took him to the hospital and gave the doctor a shroud, and said, "If my son dies, please bury him in this. If my son lives, please tell him to come home."

So, after one-and-a-half months, miraculously Pak Zubir recovered, and then he thought life was too short to stay in Bukit Tinggi. So he walked and took a horse cart to Pekanbaru and then a ferry to Singapore because a friend told him, "You want to be a musician? Singapore might be a better place."

And he used the shroud as a towel. Just the shirt on his back and that shroud.

"Majulah Singapura" being sung for the first time as the state anthem on 3 December 1959, with the installation of Yusof Ishak as the first Malayan-born Yang di-Pertuan Negara (Head of State). *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 20090000506 - 0010).*

Yang Di-Pertuan Negara Yusof Ishak conferring the Certificate of Honour on Zubir Said, composer of Singapore's national anthem "Majulah Singapura", 1963. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 19980000462 - 0077).*

Jimmy: It's an amazing story.

Julian: When he came here, he worked as a violinist with the *bangsawan* theatre companies. Then he learned how to read Western music notation and became the arranger, the conductor and music director.

Then his father found him and wrote to him, "Please come back home. A Dutch officer's daughter wants to marry you. You can come back, marry her and lead a good life." And he wrote back to his father, used his words against him: "But marrying a non-Muslim is *haram*."

Jimmy: Oh, wow. Okay.

Julian: He made such a name for himself. Of course, he went through a terrible time in the war, but brought up his family here. And for me, the most touching thing was, how his father at the age of 101…

Jimmy: Tell us that story.

Julian: 3 December 1959 – the premiere of what we know today as the official version of "Majulah Singapura" – Pak Zubir's father, Datuk Said, travelled to Singapore and went to the Padang to look for his son. They had been estranged from 1928 to 1959 – 31 years. And after he heard "Majulah Singapura", he broke down and told his son, "You were right. I was wrong." And Pak Zubir said that day was special to him, not because it was the peak of his career, but because his father finally forgave him.

After knowing that story, when you hear "Majulah Singapura", and especially because Pak Zubir said "Majulah Singapura" is a prayer, you hear it in a totally different light. That's why there was no way I could do a version of "Majulah Singapura" and sing it during the show.

Jimmy: It would be weird to do it in the theatre.

Julian: Pak Zubir said it's a prayer. So let's do it quietly in a personal way.

Jimmy: I'm glad nobody stood up to sing. It was lovely to have the strains of "Majulah Singapura" wash over you.

Julian: Till today, I'm surprised by the reaction of the audience because we didn't know if anybody would come. It was the title *Mr Mari Kita*, Zubir Said, and then who's this guy Julian Wong? And then it was Covid, right? So when we opened, we didn't know what the reaction would be and certainly did not expect it to be this warm. ◆

Listen to the full interview with Julian Wong on the BiblioAsia+ podcast, "More Than Mr Mari Kita: The Life and Legacy of Zubir Said".

WOMEN PHOTOGRAPHERS IN SINGAPORE AND MALAYA

In the male-dominated world of 1940s and 1950s photography, three women in Singapore and Malaya found different ways to participate in photography as a studio photographer, a photojournalist and a photography enthusiast.

By Zhuang Wubin

Zhuang Wubin is a writer, curator and artist. He has a PhD from the University of Westminster (London) and is a former National Library Digital Fellow (2023). Wubin is interested in photography's entanglements with modernity, colonialism, nationalism, the Cold War and "Chineseness".

"Women don't know how to take photographs!" a customer once declared at a Singapore photo studio. Wun Chek Hoi, the apprentice at the receiving end, proved him wrong and went on to become an accomplished woman studio photographer – a rare feat in that era of Singapore.[1]

Wun, Si Jing and Chew Lan Ying[2] were three women who picked up the camera during the 1940s and 1950s for different reasons. Through their lens, they captured everything – from intimate moments of courtship to historic peace talks – discovering both pleasures and challenges while pursuing their craft and passion.

Wun Chek Hoi of Chew Photo Studio

Born in China in 1919, Wun Chek Hoi was a Cantonese practitioner of studio photography who came to Singapore with her parents when she was three and began her apprenticeship during the Japanese Occupation. Before the war, Wun's father operated a lodge and knew a few Cantonese friends in studio photography. During the Occupation, they advised him to open a studio and employ his nine children to keep them productively occupied. By having them work in the studio, he also hoped that they would not be asked to work for the Japanese authorities. With the help of his friends, Chew Photo Studio (自然影社) was established on 1 April 1942 with its main branch at 230 South Bridge Road.[3]

By September 1942, Chew Photo Studio had been appointed by the Malaya Sumatra Romu Kanri Kyokai (Labour Control Office of Malaya and Sumatra) as one of its official photographers, with branches on North Bridge Road, Serangoon Road, Joo Chiat Road and Upper Serangoon Road. There was also a branch called Smile Studio at the New World amusement park.[4]

At the time, Wun was already in her early 20s and of marriageable age. However, she was worried about her mother who had suffered much hardship when she had to look after her many siblings; now, she had to contend with bringing up her own children. Wun felt that getting married and starting her own family would add to her mother's burdens. As the eldest among nine children, Wun decided not to get married but to work in the family business and help her parents instead.[5]

At first, Chew Photo Studio hired experienced practitioners and photographers while Wun and her siblings served as apprentices. In those days, Chinese-owned photo studios operated on a strict hierarchical system that governed relationships between employees of different seniority and apprentices. Despite being the owner's children, Wun and her siblings were not given preferential treatment. They were expected to "wash the floor, clean the toilet, do everything, pour tea for the *sifu* [teacher-mentors] to drink, wait on them".[6]

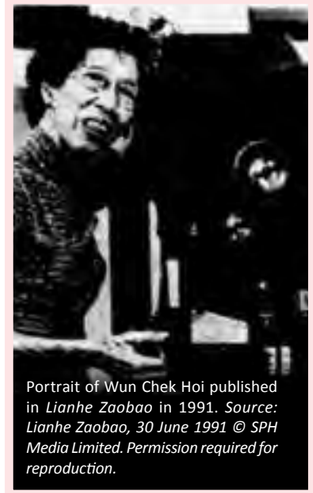
The experienced employees did not teach Wun and her siblings in a formal fashion. Instead, Wun was told to observe how they worked and pick up the skills by herself. But whenever she stood behind the photographers to see what they were doing, she would be shooed away for blocking the light. Undeterred, Wun offered to move chairs around the studio to steal glimpses of how they operated the camera. Over time, Wun acquired her knowledge of photography through these stolen moments of "tutelage".[7]

After an extended period, Wun felt reasonably confident that she could take a good photograph. One day, when the senior employees were out for lunch, a customer turned up at the studio. When she stepped forward to help, the customer was sceptical because Wun was female. But Wun assured the customer that if her work was unsatisfactory, he could come back and have the photograph retaken by the photographer of his choice. "At the time, there was no woman who worked as a photographer and, of course, the customers lacked confidence," Wun explained. Thankfully, the customer was pleased with her shot and that was when Wun realised she had acquired the basics of photography.[8]

(Facing page) This photograph of Si Jing at Peirce Reservoir was taken by her future husband Huang Da Li. Titled "A Photographer in Action", Huang submitted the image to the Singapore Art Society's Open Photographic Exhibition in 1952 but it was not selected. *Collection of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board. Gift of Wu Sijing.*

However, there were still many things to learn in studio photography. Wun added that darkroom work, especially developing negatives and printing images, was the hardest to pick up.[9] Nevertheless, Wun's diligence and perseverance ensured that she would become well versed in all aspects of studio work.

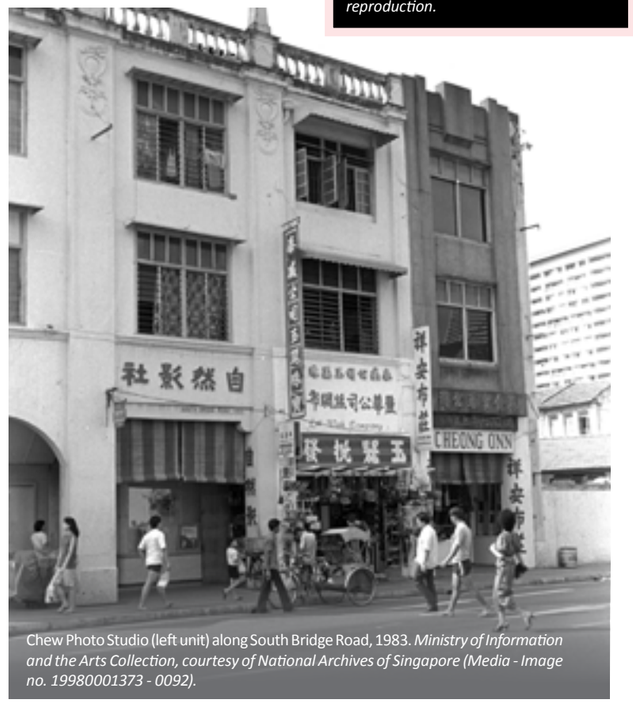
After the Japanese Occupation, the experienced operators left to start their own businesses, leaving Chew Photo Studio to be managed entirely by the Wun family. Over time, the main studio on South Bridge Road became an iconic presence in Chinatown. In the 1960s, the studio expanded into the adjacent unit to cater to increasing customer demands, and air conditioning was also introduced to provide greater comfort to customers.[10]



Portrait of Wun Chek Hoi published in *Lianhe Zaobao* in 1991. *Source: Lianhe Zaobao, 30 June 1991 © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.*

The business peaked between 1963 and 1975. During auspicious days when Chinese couples held their weddings, there would often be a long queue outside Chew Photo Studio. Their record was photographing 42 couples in a day.[11]

Wun was also very popular among Hindu customers. As the studio was located beside the historic Sri Mariamman Temple, many couples and their families and friends would visit the studio to



Chew Photo Studio (left unit) along South Bridge Road, 1983. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 19980001373 - 0092).*


A wedding photograph by Chew Photo Studio, undated. *Courtesy of Zhuang Wubin.*

have their photographs taken after their wedding ceremony at the temple, insisting that Wun helm the camera.[12]

In the business of studio photography, keeping up with the latest technology and changing customer tastes was crucial. As Wun and her siblings aged, it became harder to keep up with the relentless pace of innovation and competition. In late 1994, after more than half a century in business, Chew Photo Studio closed for good.[13]

In a 1991 interview, Wun downplayed her sacrifices for the family and her status as a pioneering studio practitioner. Her satisfaction came simply from seeing her siblings gainfully employed in proper work. "Please don't say that I am great, this is heaven's plan [for me]," she said.[14]

Si Jing and Popular Photography

In 1990, Ng Soo Lui, who was born in Singapore in 1934, started publishing a series of articles in *Lianhe Zaobao* (联合早报). These writings, under the penname Si Jing, were mainly about her coming-of-age years in Chinatown and various aspects of Cantonese culture and traditions. Her writings also made references to her involvement in popular photography during the 1940s and 1950s, offering insights from a woman's perspective.

Si Jing was born into a poor family. When she was three, Si Jing was given to Ai, a domestic servant or *majie*,[15] who worked in a leisure house as the maid of courtesans. Years later, Si Jing realised that Ai had used different ways to enslave her so that she would become her money-making tool in the future. Fortunately, as Si Jing grew older, her average looks saved her from a life of prostitution. When Singapore fell to the Japanese in February 1942, Ai sent nine-year-old Si Jing back to her birth family.[16]

After the Japanese Occupation, Si Jing's mother kept her promise to send her to school for at least two years. In 1945, Si Jing, who was already 12, enrolled for primary one at Yeung Ching School.[17]

Her mother worked as a seamstress and during the lead-up to the Lunar New Year in 1946, received many orders to tailor new clothes. On the morning of New Year's Eve, after completing her final order, Si Jing's mother waited until the reunion dinner for the customer to collect it. With that small payment, she rushed to the fabric stalls on Smith Street to buy several yards of the "cheapest and coarsest white cloth".

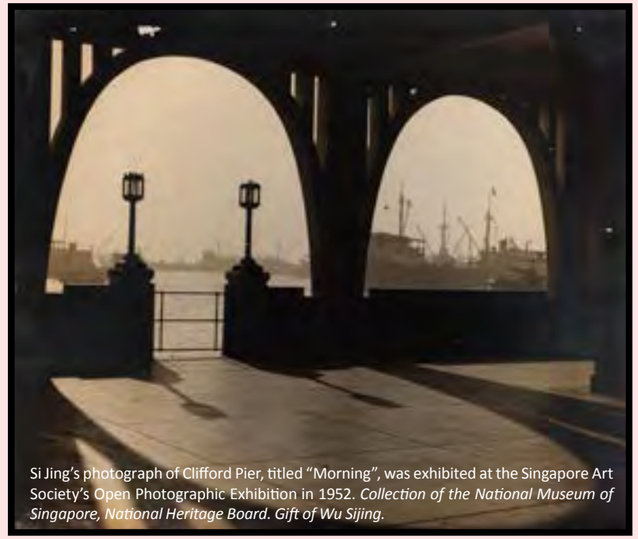
Working through the night, she sewed new clothes for her two daughters. When Si Jing wore her new *samfoo* (or *samfu*; a traditional two-piece outfit comprising a top and trousers) the next morning instead of the usual hand-me-downs, her mother's face lit up with a rare smile. To commemorate the special occasion, Si Jing and her siblings visited a photo studio to have their photograph taken – a common Lunar New Year tradition among families.[18]

By the second half of 1947, Si Jing's family finances had become so dire that her mother asked her to stop schooling. Tragedy struck later that year when her mother died in her sleep. Nonetheless, Si Jing's father allowed her to remain in school until the end of 1948.[19]

Si Jing got to know her future husband, Huang Da Li, because their fathers were old friends. By the late 1940s, Si Jing and Huang had developed feelings for each other and like many young people in Singapore and Malaya at the time, they went on outings to the countryside.


Taken at a studio during the lunar new year in 1946, the photograph shows Si Jing (right) and her brother and sister. It was the first time that Si Jing's mother had enough money to tailor clothes for her daughters and the occasion was commemorated with a studio portrait. *Collection of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board. Gift of Wu Sijing.*

Si Jing and Huang Da Li got married on 8 July 1952. Their wedding photographs were likely taken on the same day at Natural Photographic Store on North Bridge Road. *Collection of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board. Gift of Wu Sijing.*


Si Jing's photograph of Clifford Pier, titled "Morning", was exhibited at the Singapore Art Society's Open Photographic Exhibition in 1952. *Collection of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board. Gift of Wu Sijing.*

These excursions were especially popular among Chinese-educated students who often took photographs to commemorate their trips.[20]

Huang and his younger brother earned a decent income by offering photography services at these outings. Later, when Huang gave Si Jing a camera, photography became another reason for their Sunday dates. They walked "along the entire West Coast and took pictures of mangrove swamps, prawn ponds, the jetty in the evening sun, fishing boats at dusk, and huts on stilts among tall coconut trees". On Si Jing's 18th birthday, the couple visited Peirce Reservoir.[21]

Huang and Si Jing tried their hand at salon photography. With its focus on technical excellence and aesthetic beauty, salon photography (or pictorialism) was the dominant framework of art photography in Singapore and Southeast Asia in the 20th century. Huang's images were exhibited at the Singapore Art Society's Open Photographic Exhibition in 1951, 1952 and 1953, while Si Jing's submission, a photograph of Clifford Pier titled "Morning", was exhibited in 1952.[22] This exhibition marked both the highlight and her brief foray into the male-dominated world of salon photography before family responsibilities took precedence.

The people and scenery Si Jing and Huang encountered during their dates became subjects in their pursuit of salon photography. They also modelled for each other's portraits. Huang actually submitted a photograph he had taken of Si Jing at Peirce Reservoir perched on a railing snapping a picture to the Open Photographic Exhibition in 1952, but it was not selected.[23]

For Si Jing and Huang, photography served as a leisure activity, a tool of courtship, a means of income and a way to indulge in the aesthetic pleasure of salon photography. On their engagement day in either late 1951 or early 1952, they used a self-timer to take their engagement photograph at the Botanic Gardens. It shows Huang holding Si Jing's shoulders from behind, with her head tilted back in a loving gaze at her fiancé. They did not show the image to anyone at the time as the pose was considered too intimate in the 1950s.[24]

Huang and Si Jing were married on 8 July 1952 and held their wedding dinner at the Great Southern Hotel. Following the trend for Chinese weddings at the time, they likely had their wedding photograph taken at a photo studio that same day. In 1953, Si Jing and her family moved into a new Singapore Improvement Trust flat in Tiong Bahru.

In 2002, Si Jing donated her personal collection of photographs to the National Museum of Singapore. Among these are a few showing the interior of her Tiong Bahru flat. One shows the dining table with a cabinet beside it and above the cabinet on the wall is the framed photograph of Clifford Pier exhibited at the 1952 Open Photographic Exhibition.

Chew Lan Ying, the Pioneering Photojournalist

At the end of 1955, the sleepy town of Baling in Kedah was thrust into the spotlight when Tunku Abdul Rahman, first chief minister of Malaya, and Chin Peng, secretary general of the Malayan Communist Party (MCP), met for peace talks there. In the lead-up to the meeting, MCP's deputy head of propaganda, Chen Tien, and courier guide, Lee Chin Hee, turned up at

(Above) Chew Lan Ying's photographs of the newly completed Merdeka Park in Kuala Lumpur were showcased in a two-page spread in issue 10 (April 1958) of *Nanyang Monthly*. *Collection of the National Library Singapore (call no. RCLOS 059.951 NM).*

(Left) Chew Lan Ying made a name for herself taking the photographs of Chen Tien, deputy head of propaganda of the Malayan Communist Party, and his courier guide Lee Chin Hee arriving at Klian Intan on 17 November 1955 for the second round of preparatory discussions with government representatives. These images were published in *Nanyang Siang Pau* the following day. Shown here is one of the photographs. *Source: Nanyang Siang Pau, 18 November 1955 © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.*

the tin-mining village of Klian Intan in northern Malaya on 17 October 1955 to begin preparatory talks with government representatives.[25] Their sudden appearance caught newspapers in Malaya and Singapore unawares as they had not dispatched any journalists in advance.[26]

Subsequently, the newspapers stationed their photographers and journalists at Klian Intan and nearby Kroh (present-day Pengkalan Hulu), hoping to catch a glimpse of the shadowy party members. Chew Lan Ying was the only female photographer covering the peace talks. A veteran journalist remembered Chew "often wearing t-shirt and long pants, sporting a short haircut, totally in men's attire". She stood out from the rest, carrying several cameras on her.[27]

Kuala Lumpur-based Chew was a Cantonese photographer whose work first appeared in *Nanyang Siang Pau* (南洋商报) in early 1955. After the initial preparatory talks on 17 October, the newspaper felt confident enough to send Chew to remote Klian Intan. While other journalists would show up occasionally, Chew positioned herself daily at the mountain path Chen Tien had previously used to reach the village. Although her decision was a gamble as Chen could have taken other paths, her persistence paid off. On 17 November, a month after the first meeting, Chen Tien and Lee Chin Hee took the same route and appeared unannounced at Klian Intan for the second round of preparatory talks.[28]

Chew captured their approach to the village in a set of exclusive photographs published in *Nanyang Siang Pau* the following day.[29] This cemented her reputation as a tenacious photographer who could stand her ground against men in the competitive field of photojournalism. On 29 December 1955, *Nanyang Siang Pau* published a photo spread on its front page covering the Baling talks.[30] The photographs taken by Chew and two other colleagues were prominently featured.

Like her peers of that era, Chew was a versatile photographer who was assigned by *Nanyang Siang Pau* to take pictures at different events and occasions. She photographed political affairs of colonial and newly independent Malaya, as well as the cultural events and meetings of business and clan associations of the Chinese community. She did not shy away from gory crime and accident scenes. Apparently, she impressed Tunku Abdul Rahman so much that he would occasionally introduce her to foreign guests at official events.[31]

Between 1957 and 1965, the newspaper published *Nanyang Monthly* (南洋画报), a pictorial periodical that enjoyed strong readership.[32] Its inaugural issue sold over 11,000 copies, breaking sales records for pictorial periodicals in Singapore and Malaya.[33] Chew contributed to photo spreads in the periodical, including a notable two-page special in issue 10 (April 1958) featuring the newly completed Merdeka Park in Kuala Lumpur.[34] Her photographs captured iconic sights, including the Merdeka Sundial, the psychedelic mushroom-shaped bandstand, and miniature caves where children played hide-and-seek.

When Abdul Razak Hussein, prime minister of Malaya, made a diplomatic visit to Thailand in June 1959, *Nanyang Siang Pau* sent Chew to cover the event.[35] Her panoramic photographs were featured in a multi-page spread in issue 27 (September 1959) of *Nanyang Monthly*, offering readers a different visual experience of Abdul Razak's activities and reception in Bangkok while highlighting the grandeur of the city's sights.[36]

Beyond news photography, Chew participated in salon photography as a member of the Photographic Society of the Federation of Malaya. In April 1957, she joined 11 other society members on a road trip to the east coast of Malaya to photograph life in the fishing villages. They brought along prints to hold exhibitions and also interacted with photography enthusiasts from the area.[37]

Interestingly, a submission by Chew was selected for the inaugural National Photographic Art Exhibition in China at the end of 1957.[38] The selected photograph featured two fishermen from the Malayan east coast mending their net, with the sun casting long shadows in the foreground. The image might have been captured during the excursion.

In 1958, Chew married Lee Yue Loong, a fellow photojournalist at *Nanyang Siang Pau*.[39] Lee owned Dragon Photo Service on High Street, which handled photo commissions as well as developing and printing work.[40] After her marriage, Chew worked at their photo business until her husband's untimely demise in 1970.[41] Her contributions to *Nanyang Siang Pau* decreased significantly after 1960.

Forgotten Women in Photography

While all three women – Wun Chek Hoi, Si Jing and Chew Lan Ying – were drawn to photography for different reasons, their family or future husband played an important role in their foray into photography. Typically, married women had domestic responsibilities which limited their professional development. For Wun, who remained single, her family's traditional studio business struggled to adapt to Singapore's rapid modernisation, eventually becoming outdated in a country driven by urban renewal.

These female pioneers have been largely forgotten except for Si Jing, whose work has been uncovered and shown in a recent exhibition at the National Gallery Singapore. Today, there are more female photographers than in the 1940s and the 1950s. Hopefully, there will be newer connections fostered between the contributions of the three women and practitioners of our current generation.

NOTES

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2 Her name was also spelt Chiew Lian Ying in the English newspaper. See "Two Press Photographers Wed in Kuala Lumpur," *Straits Times*, 21 February 1958, 4. (From NewspaperSG)
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4 "Page 2 Miscellaneous Column 1," *Syonan Shimbun*, 22 September 1942, 2; Au, "Ziran Yingshe." [New World (opened in 1923) was the first of three amusement parks in Singapore, along with Great World (1931) and Happy World (1937).]
5 Mok Mei Ngan 莫美颜, "'Kacha' wushi nian – Yi ge sheyingshi de huiyi" "咔嚓"50年 – 一个摄影师的回忆 [A click and 50 years – Memories of a photographer], *Lianhe Zaobao* 联合早报, 30 June 1991, 40. (From NewspaperSG)
6 Wun Chek Hoi, oral history interview, 5 September 1991, Reel/Disc 1 of 3, 09:05.
7 Mok, "'Kacha' wushi nian."
8 Wun Chek Hoi, oral history interview, 5 September 1991, Reel/Disc 2 of 3, 08:26; Mok, "'Kacha' wushi nian."
9 Wun Chek Hoi, oral history interview, 5 September 1991, Reel/Disc 1 of 3, 20:03.
10 Wun Chek Hoi, oral history interview, 5 September 1991, Reel/Disc 1 of 3, 04:31; Wun Chek Hoi, oral history interview, 5 September 1991, Reel/Disc 2 of 3, 19:52.
11 Au, "Ziran yingshe."
12 Au, "Ziran yingshe."
13 Mok, "'Kacha' wushi nian."
14 Mok, "'Kacha' wushi nian."
15 *Majie* refers to female Cantonese domestic servants mainly from Shunde, Guangdong province, who took the vow of celibacy and never married. In Singapore and Malaya, they worked in affluent Chinese and European households until at least the 1970s. They typically wore their hair in a single plait down the back or in a bun.
16 Si Jing [Ng Soo Lui], *Lotus from the Mud: I Was a Majie's Foster Daughter*, trans. Geraldine Chay, Wong Hooe Wai and Wong Marn Heong (Singapore: Asiapac Books, 2002), 1–28. (From National Library Singapore, call no. RSING 895.18 SI)
17 Si Jing, *Lotus from the Mud*, 24–25.
18 Si Jing, *Down Memory Lane in Clogs: Growing Up in Chinatown*, trans. Laurel Teo (Singapore: Asiapac Books, 2002), 130–33. (From National Library Singapore, call no. RSING 920.72 SI); Mok, "'Kacha' wushi nian."
19 Si Jing, *Lotus from the Mud*, 51–52, 54–55, 58.
20 Si Jing, *Lotus from the Mud*, 168, 184; Teng Siao See, Chan Cheow Thia and Lee Huay Leng, eds., *Education at Large: Student Life and Activities in Singapore, 1945–1965* (Singapore: Tangent, 2013), xxx–xxxi, 117–18, 151, 154, 166–67, 177–78, 194–95, 204. (From National Library Singapore, call no. RSING 373.18095957 EDU)
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FROM LIGURIA TO THE LION CITY
THE LIFE AND TIMES OF GIOVANNI GAGGINO

The remarkable story of an Italian merchant who once owned Pulau Bukom and authored an Italian-Malay dictionary in colonial Singapore.

By Alex Foo

Portrait of Giovanni Gaggino in traditional Chinese attire in the frontispiece of *La Vallata del Yang-Tse-Kiang: Appunti e Ricordi di Giovanni Gaggino* (*The Yangtze Valley: Notes and Memories of Giovanni Gaggino*), 1901. Published by a fellow Ligurian, Count Edoardo del Mayno, the book gives an account of Gaggino sailing up the Yangtze River in China in 1898. *From Internet Archive.*

Long before the era of container ships and globalised trade, before the First World War and even before the full unification of Italy in 1871, an Italian mariner stepped off his boat onto the shores of Singapore, armed with little more than his wits and a sailor's instinct for opportunity. He had neither connections nor a fortune. Yet, by the time he died in 1918 at the age of 72, Giovanni Gaggino had transformed himself into a millionaire merchant, shipowner and author.

Born in 1846 in the town of Varazze, in the northwestern coastal region of Liguria, Gaggino made Singapore his home for over four decades, launching a flurry of ventures that ranged from the purchase of Pulau Bukom to a rubber plantation in Thailand. He built a thriving ship chandlery, Gaggino & Co., capitalising on the port's explosive growth to supply ships with sundry maritime necessities. He also sailed up the Yangtze River in China, ventured into Vladivostok in Russia and trekked throughout Southeast Asia in search of business opportunities. While Gaggino may not have been the first Italian to pass through Singapore, he was arguably the first to leave his mark.

The Italian Presence in the Straits

Unlike the Portuguese, British and Dutch, whose colonial ambitions led them to wage battles and establish dominions across Southeast Asia, the Italian presence in the region was more modest. However, Italian merchants and missionaries had long sailed through the Strait of Singapore.[1]

In the 1510s, the Florentine merchant Giovanni da Empoli, who accompanied the Portuguese viceroy Afonso de Albuquerque on his conquest of Melaka, recorded his last will and testament onboard a ship anchored in Singapore.[2] In 1599, another Florentine,

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Francesco Carletti, described the Old Strait of Singapore as "so narrow a channel that from the ship you could jump ashore or touch the branches of the trees on either side". A century later, in 1695, the Neapolitan traveller Francesco Gemelli Careri sailed through the same strait. He recorded the sight of islets dotting the waterway and 10 thatched houses perched on stilts in his travelogue, *Voyage Around the World*.[3]

Gaggino's first encounter with Singapore was in 1866.[4] He came from a seafaring family: his father and five brothers were all sailors who made their living at sea, trading with the Far East. The subsequent death of his father left his family in dire financial straits, which propelled Gaggino to set sail for cosmopolitan Singapore where he hoped to work as an interpreter. He was a polyglot who spoke Italian, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Malay and English. He learned the latter when his father, in what proved to be a prescient move, sent him to England at the age of 14.[5]

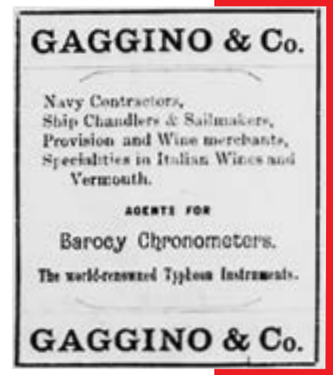
When Gaggino arrived in Singapore sometime around 1874 on the ship *Fratelli Gaggino*, the Italian population was small. Between 1883 and 1897, there were only around 290 Italians, 56 of whom had come directly from Italy while others rebounded from other regions in the east.[6] The Italian population would remain small until the end of Gaggino's life in 1918.

Tycoon of the Tropics

There is a Latin saying, *Genuensis ergo mercator*, which means "Genoese, therefore a merchant".[7] Although Gaggino was not strictly from Genoa, hailing instead from the neighbouring province of Savona, the adage nonetheless applied.

By 1876, he had founded Gaggino & Co., a ship chandlery that provided supplies and equipment to vessels passing through Singapore. The business quickly grew into a trusted name. Chandlers were judged by their speed and reliability, and Gaggino promised "water and coal supplied at the shortest notice", minimising downtime for ships and maximising efficiency. His office stood near Cavenagh Bridge, just across the river from the General Post Office (where Fullerton Hotel now stands) until 1914.

The company was eventually appointed to the Russian, French, German, Austrian, Spanish, Portuguese and Italian navies.[8] Gaggino's business venture, however, did not stop here. Interestingly, he was once the owner of Pulau Bukom.



Advertisement by Gaggino & Co., a ship chandlery that provided supplies and equipment to vessels passing through Singapore. *Image reproduced from "Page 2 Advertisements Column 3," Straits Times, 1 December 1904, 2. (From NewspaperSG).*

A small island about 5 km south of the Singapore mainland, he had purchased it for a mere $500 when it was known as Freshwater Island.[9] The island got its name because of the freshwater well on it. This well allowed Gaggino to supply passing ships with drinking water.

In 1891, M. Samuel & Co. of London, an early player that would later become Shell, sought to build a petroleum tank depot on mainland Singapore at Bukit Chermin and Pasir Panjang. The idea was met with fierce opposition. Merchants feared the danger of flammable cargo so close to the city, so much so that the press labelled it a "petroleum plot".[10]

The government swiftly rejected the plan.[11] The company thus set their sights on Pulau Bukom. The island had a sheltered harbour, a deep sea waterfront and, crucially, was beyond harbour limits, so no government inspections of steamships were required.[12] The company put it plainly: "As nearly all oil sold here has to be transshipped, [we] might as well ship [them] from Freshwater Island as from Singapore."[13] The company, through merchant and agency house Syme & Co., acquired 8 ha of the island from Gaggino in 1891, earning him a tidy sum of $3,000.

Gaggino subsequently invested some of his profits in ships. A report in the *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser* described how he acquired the Dutch steamer *Srie Banjar* in January 1899. He reflagged the vessel under Italian registry and renamed it *Libertas*. A baptism was held at the

Attap houses on Pulau Bukom, c. 1910. Giovanni Gaggino bought the island for $500 in 1884 when it was known as Freshwater Island. Until 2024, the island was home to Shell's largest wholly owned refinery. *Collection of Singapore Philatelic Museum. Donated by Prof Cheah Jin Seng.*

harbour, presided by Father Charles Bénédict Nain, vicar of the Cathedral of the Good Shepherd. Father Nain would also christen Gaggino's two other ships: the *Santa Anna* and *Santa Tarcila*. A sunken British surveying vessel, the HMS *Waterwitch*, also joined his collection in 1912. Gaggino had it refloated and then refitted as his private yacht, the *Fata Morgana*.[14]

Apart from running Gaggino & Co., Gaggino was also managing director of Soon Keck Line of Steamers, Limited. During the First World War, he convened an extraordinary general meeting to donate $6,150 to the Straits Settlements War Loan to support the British and the Allies against the Germans. He was, as noted by the papers, disappointed by the lukewarm response of local companies as he felt that it was British naval prowess that had made their wealth possible.[15]

Gaggino also looked towards the wider region, diversifying into rubber and tin. He bought 16,000 rais (approximately 256 ha) of land in 1910 for the development of rubber plantations in Trang, Thailand. In 1913, he founded Mutual Trading Limited with a capital of $200,000 to develop the shipping trade with neighbouring colonies.[16]

Giovanni Gaggino published *Dizionario Italiano e Malese: Preceduto da un Manuale Pratico di Conversazione per Servire D'interprete al Viaggiatore che Vista e Traffica con la Malesia* (15.7 cm × 10.4 cm) through the Denodaya Press in Singapore in 1884. *Collection of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.*

Giovanni Gaggino published an expanded second edition of his Italian-Malay dictionary, *Dizionario Italiano e Malese e Malese Italiano* (16.5 cm × 11.5 cm), in 1915. (From left) The cover, an inside page and the last page of the second edition which shows a mosquito. Perhaps not coincidentally, this mosquito bears a striking resemblance to the one that adorned the packaging of Esanofele, an anti-malarial pill distributed by Gaggino & Co. in Singapore. *Collection of the National Library Singapore (call no. RRARE 499.135 GAG).*

Gaggino's Italian-Malay Dictionary

In 1884, Gaggino published the *Dizionario Italiano e Malese: Preceduto da un Manuale Pratico di Conversazione per Servire d'Interprete al Viaggiatore che Vista e Traffica con la Malesia* (Italian-Malay Dictionary: Preceded by a Practical Conversational Manual to Serve as an Interpreter for the Traveller Visiting and Trading with Malaya) through Denodaya Press in Singapore. It was a 388-page publication containing a handbook of phrases for everyday conversations as well as a dictionary of Italian words in alphabetical order and their corresponding Malay equivalents in both romanised and Jawi scripts.[17]

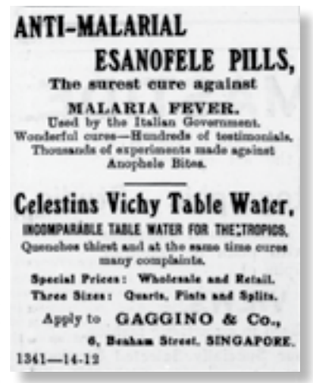
This remarkable undertaking was dedicated to Sultan Abu Bakar, the so-called Father of Modern Johor, a reformist monarch whose modernisation drive gained him seven foreign decorations including, Gaggino was careful to note in the preface, the Commander of the Order of the Crown of Italy.[18]

We have no proof that Gaggino and the Anglophile sultan ever met, but the gesture was typical of the Italian merchant. He was always attuned to the possibility of trade and mutual interest. In his humble and self-effacing dedication, he described the book as a "tiny grain (*granellino*) in the polyglotism of the century" inspired by the "ever-growing commerce between Italy and Malaya".[19] The sentiment was modest, but not unserious. Language, for the multilingual Gaggino, was a lubricant for commerce. He hoped that his compatriots would use his book and learn "to make himself understood and to understand others in the Malay language".[20]

In 1915, 31 years after the publication of the first edition which had long gone out of print, Gaggino published a new expanded edition, also through Denodaya: the *Dizionario Italiano e Malese e Malese Italiano* (Italian-Malay and Malay-Italian Dictionary). The new edition was now bidirectional and included descriptions of notable Singapore landmarks such as Cavenagh Bridge, the Singapore River and Raffles Square. Gaggino noted in the updated preface that "a large number of Malays and Javanese can now read and write using Roman characters". He further observed that

(Left) View of Cavenagh Bridge looking towards Empress Place, 1900s. Gaggino & Co. was located near the bridge, just across from the General Post Office (now the Fullerton Hotel). *Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 19980007378 - 0039).*

(Below) Advertisement by Gaggino & Co. for its anti-malarial Esanofele pills and Celestins Vichy table water. *Image reproduced from "Page 2 Advertisements Column 2," Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle, 15 December 1912, 2. (From NewspaperSG).*



parents were sending their children to school at an earlier age and that while Malay was taught using Jawi script, the "Roman script is becoming more common as it is simpler to learn".[21] His hope, with the expanded edition, was that people-to-people contact between Italy and Malaya would grow.

Gaggino had no illusions about the academic rigour of his endeavour. It would not, he admitted in both editions, "meet the needs of a scholar or, even less, a philologist". Nonetheless, it was a practical project. The Malay language was widely used in the region, spoken not just in Singapore but also in "Sumatra, Java, the Malay Peninsula, the surrounding regions, Cochin China, Siam, the Dutch East Indies, and as far as New Guinea". He found the language not only useful but beautiful. The Malay of Pahang, he wrote, was especially dulcet and "highly suitable for singing".[22]

Organised by semantic fields, the *Dizionario* transcribed Malay words in the Italian orthographic system for the ease of Italian travellers.[23] For instance, the Malay word for "far" (*jauh*) is given as *giau*, which Italians would have pronounced with a soft "j".[24] The dictionary begins with basic grammatical categories such as pronouns, prepositions and conjunctions. Thereafter, there are sections on body parts, animals, clothing and occupations, among others.[25] For the seasons, Gaggino noted that instead of the usual four, the Malays only know two: the northeast and southwest monsoon periods.[26]

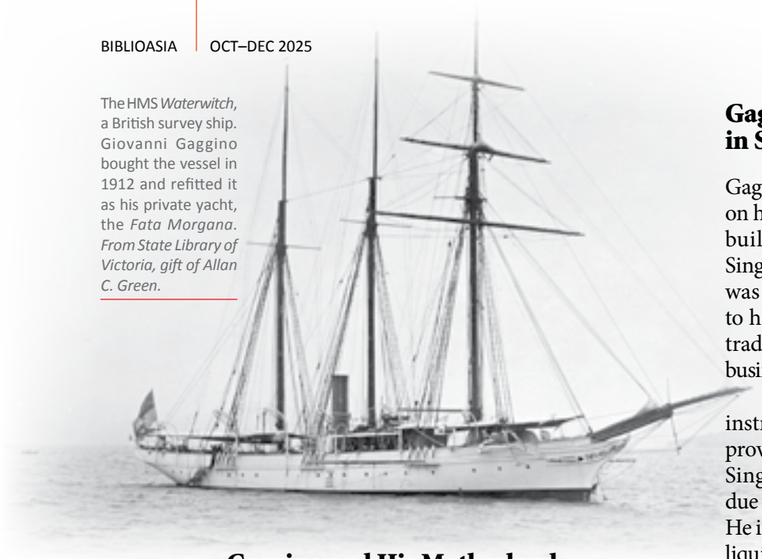
The longest section, comprising 77 entries, is devoted to maritime vocabulary, covering terminology such as hatch and bowline. Elsewhere, Gaggino offered practical dialogue scenarios. These include phrases on how to find a hotel, speak to a coachman, order at a market and comment on the weather. The *Dizionario* also contains an alphabetical section of frequently used terms – some of them less than polite, though certainly of utility. There is "shut up" (*zitto*/*diam*) and "screw him" (*fregatelo*/*sapù*, *gosò*).

The Malay in Gaggino's dictionary was colloquial Malay. The question "Boy, where is your master?" is rendered as "Boi, dimana ada lu punia tuan?"[27] Comprising a mix of colonial and local tongues, the phrase uses *boi* (a Malay loanword from English for "servant") and *lu* (a Hokkien-derived pronoun for "you" and used to address subordinates).[28] An Italian scholar identifies N.B. Dennys' *A Handbook of Malay Colloquial, As Spoken in Singapore* (1878) as one of Gaggino's sources.[29]

Gaggino's annotated copy of Dennys' handbook now resides at the Civic Library of Pontinvrea in Italy.[30] However, Gaggino did not simply reproduce from Dennys' handbook. For example, Gaggino used the English-derived *pensel* for "pencil" instead of Dennys' *kalam timah*. Gaggino also made some errors. The word for "crow" is given as the word for "elephant", and the Italian for scarlet (*scarlatto*) is translated as "ugu" which could have been a misrendering of *ungu* which actually means "purple".

One notable difference in the second edition of the *Dizionario* is the preponderance of advertisements for Gaggino's company within. Scattered throughout the book are five advertisements in English, Danish and French. Even within an introductory description of Raffles Square, Gaggino inserted a mention of his company's office and not so subtly hawked his company's wares, advertising its stock of French Vittel water, known for its curative properties, and a special type of malaria medicine. He was, after all, an inveterate merchant.

It is difficult to ascertain the reception of the second edition. The publication of two different editions, along with the presence of copies in several libraries across Italy, points to a modest but noteworthy degree of distribution. That said, by the turn of the 20th century, English had become and would remain the lingua franca of commerce in Singapore and Malaya.



The HMS *Waterwitch*, a British survey ship. Giovanni Gaggino bought the vessel in 1912 and refitted it as his private yacht, the *Fata Morgana*. *From State Library of Victoria, gift of Allan C. Green.*

Gaggino and His Motherland

In the prefaces of both editions, Gaggino described himself as a proud Italian who had "never forgotten to promote the well-intended interests of his motherland in these distant countries". Gaggino declared in the second edition: "We must emigrate if we wish to become independent and wealthy". He added: "We need people with some commercial training, who know English at least", as Italian labourers could not compete with local inhabitants who were industrious and inexpensive.[31]

Gaggino was also concerned about Italy's reliance on second-hand trade through colonial intermediaries and its commercial lag compared to other European powers. To circumvent these issues, he felt that an Italian trading presence was needed on the banks of the Yangtze in China. In 1898, Gaggino sailed up the famed river and stopped at various ports. He found English, French, German, Austrian and Belgian goods but "no matter how hard [he] searched everywhere, [he] found nothing of Italian origin".[32] Only in Yichang, Hubei province, did he come across a solitary bottle of Cinzano vermouth which he promptly purchased for five *lire*.[33]

The captain cast a critical eye on his country's inwardness, lack of initiative and petty bureaucracy. Lamenting that Italy did not know how to use credit to trade, he raised Switzerland as an example: "There are states that have no navy, yet they travel the world more than we do. Look, for example, at Switzerland and other nations that know how to lose in order to gain."[34]

Gaggino, too, condemned the "ferocious cretinism" of Ligurian customs, recounting an incident where an Italian municipal customs officer thoroughly searched and patted him down, and having found nothing to tax for their benefit, fined him for failing to declare a package of Lumière gelatin silver-bromide plates.[35]

Gaggino's Legacy (or Lack Thereof) in Singapore

Gaggino died at the age of 72 in February 1918 while on holiday in Java. At the point of his death, he had built a sprawling commercial empire spanning Singapore and mainland Southeast Asia. His estate was valued at approximately $2.5 million, owing to his success in rubber, tin mining and maritime trade. The *Straits Times* described him as a "keen businessman" and "well-liked by all who knew him".[36]

Having never married, Gaggino left detailed instructions in his will dated July 1917. While he provided inheritances for a nephew and niece in Singapore, he explicitly excluded other relatives due to what he called their "execrable conduct".[37] He instructed that all holdings of Gaggino & Co. be liquidated. Goods from his stores on Sambau Street and Malacca Street were sold off at an auction.[38] His real estate holdings, too, were put up for sale, including two 999-year leasehold seaside bungalows in Tanjong Rhu fetchingly named Villa Alba and Villa Tramonto (Dawn and Dusk respectively), and a shophouse at 131 Middle Road.[39]

Gaggino sought to create a cultural and philanthropic legacy for his hometown of Varazze. To the town, he bequeathed a trove of coins, furniture, bronzes, porcelain, trinkets, antiquities and books – all collected during his long stay in the East – 30 cases of which sat in Singapore, awaiting shipment.[40]

To display his collection, he allocated 50,000 *lire* to purchase a building for a museum to be named in his honour in Varazze. He also left directions in his will for his brother Paolo to build a hydrotherapy facility to harness a local spring's reputed medicinal waters. To support these efforts, Gaggino established a charity fund that would be managed by the municipality and upkept by his remaining assets.[41] This was to be his legacy: to bring parts of Asia to Europe and to bring prosperity to his people.

However, it was not to be. Legal disputes broke out in the Italian courts. The municipality of Varazze, fearful of litigation from disinherited relatives and unsettled by an initial unfavourable ruling, chose to settle. In doing so, they relinquished their rights to the estate in favour of Gaggino's brother Federico.[42] Neither the museum nor the charity fund materialised.

In 1922, empowered by the Italian court, Gaggino's nephew Cesare Gaggino opened a probate suit in Singapore and was granted administrative control of his uncle's remaining assets, then estimated at $400,000. Before returning to Genoa, he honoured his uncle's charitable commitments: $1,550 each to the Pauper Hospital and the General Hospital, $1,250 each to the French Convent and the Portuguese Convent, and $200 to the Masonic Lodge Zetland.[43]

Some parts of Giovanni Gaggino's wide-ranging collection survive today. The Civic Library of Pontinvrea and the Genoese Museums house several objects. Five ancient Malayan adzes – cutting tools with arched blades – found their way to Vienna's Weltmuseum Wien, a gift from Gaggino to the Austro-Hungarian naval commander Constantin Edler von Pott. Gaggino had called these adzes "the oldest monuments of the peninsula", dating to the Neolithic period and unearthed in 1894 during mineral excavations in Perak, Malaya.[44]

Gaggino's life was one of motion and reinvention – part autodidact, part entrepreneur, entirely self-made. As Singapore and Italy mark 60 years of diplomatic relations in 2025, it is worth remembering that Giovanni Gaggino was not just a merchant or adventurer, but also a self-appointed envoy of goodwill to his "beloved country" (*amato paese*), Singapore.[45] He was a pioneer who sought to build a bridge between his homeland and his adopted port – one word, one deal and one dictionary at a time. ♦

This article is dedicated to my father, no stranger to the seas.

One of the adzes (*beliung batu*) unearthed in 1894 in Perak, Malaya, is now part of the collection of Weltmuseum Wien in Vienna. *From Weltmuseum Wien.*

NOTES

1 Derek Heng, "Continuities and Changes: Singapore as a Port-City over 700 Years," *BiblioAsia* 1, no. 1 (2005): 12–16.

2 Kwa Chong Guan et al. eds., *Seven Hundred Years: A History of Singapore* (Singapore: National Library Board and Marshall Cavendish International, 2019), 81. (From National Library Singapore, call no. RSING 959.57 KWA-[HIS]); Matteo Salonia, "A Dissenting Voice: The Clash of Trade and Warfare in Giovanni da Empoli's Account of His Second Voyage to Portuguese Asia," *Itinerario* 45, no. 2 (2021): 189–207, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0165115321000176.

3 Kwa et al., *Seven Hundred Years*, 103, 158–59.

4 Francesco Surdich, "Da Varazze a Singapore: Giovanni Gaggino (1846–1913)," *Atti e Memorie della Società Savonese di Storia Patria* 26 (1990): 150, https://www.storiapatriasavona.it/archivio-pubblicazioni/atti-e-memorie-n-s-1967-2012/.

5 In 1872, Giovanni Gaggino also circumnavigated the globe and commanded the first Italian ship to arrive in New Zealand. Luigi Santa Maria, "Giovanni Gaggino e Il Suo 'Dizionario Italiano e Malese'," *Asia* no. 5 (1995): 8, http://www.cesmeo.it/public/pdf/L%20Santa%20Maria,%20Giovanni%20Gaggino%20e%20il%20suo%20Dizionario%20italiano%20e%20malese%20pt.%201.pdf.

6 Maria Clotilde Giuliani-Balestrino, "L'Italia Fuori dall'Italia. Gli Italiani a Singapore: Dai Primi Viaggiatori Agli Imprenditori Odierni" [Italy outside of Italy. Italians in Singapore from the first travellers to today's entrepreneurs], *Studi e Ricerche di Geografia* 24, no. 2 (2001): 128, https://studiericerche.org/rivista/annata-24-2001/.

7 This phrase reflects the historical reputation of Genoa as a city of traders and merchants during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. The Genoese were known for their extensive trade networks, spanning the Mediterranean and the Black Sea.

8 Giovanni Gaggino, *Dizionario Italiano e Malese e Malese Italiano* [Italian-Malay and Malay-Italian Dictionary] (Singapore: Stamperia Denodaya, 1915), 69. (From National Library Online)

9 "Death of Captain Gaggino," *Straits Times*, 14 February 1918, 7. (From NewspaperSG)

10 Yeo Ai Hoon, *Enterprise in Oil: The History of Shell in Singapore*, 1891–1960, manuscript (n.p.: n.p., 1988). 8. (From National Library Singapore, call no. RSING 338.27282095957 YEO)

11 Walter Makepeace, Gilbert E. Brooke, Roland St. J. Braddell, eds., *One Hundred Years of Singapore*, vol. 2 (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1991), 97. (From National Library Singapore, call no. RSING 959.57 ONE); *The Founding Years 1891–1991* (Kuala Lumpur: Shell Malaysia Ltd, 1991), 30–31. (From National Library Singapore, call no. RSING 338.2728095595)

12 Nicky Moey, *The Shell Endeavour: First 100 Years in Singapore* (Singapore: Times Editions Pte Ltd, 1991), 27. (From National Library Singapore, call no. RSING 338.2728 MOE).

13 Yeo, *Enterprise in Oil*, 11.

14 "Untitled," *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 12 January 1899, 10; "Death of Capt Gaggino," *Singapore Free Press*, 14 February 1918, 99; "Shipping Notes," *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 12 November 1912, 12. (From NewspaperSG)

15 "Soon Keck Ltd. Generous Contributions to War Funds," *Malaya Tribune*, 3 March 1917, 4; "Soon Keck Line of Steamers, Limited," *Straits Times*, 16 February 1918, 16. (From NewspaperSG)

16 "Rubber & Coconuts in Trang," *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle*, 7 October 1911, 4; "Untitled," *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 5 February 1913, 6. (From NewspaperSG); Surdich, "Da Varazze a Singapore," 180–83.

17 Giovanni Gaggino, *Dizionario Italiano e Malese: Preceduto da un Manuale Pratico di Conversazione per Servire d'Interprete al Viaggiatore che Vista e Traffica con la Malesia* [Italian-Malay Dictionary: Preceded by a Practical Conversational Manual to Serve as an Interpreter for the Traveller Visiting and Trading with Malaya] (Singapore: Denodaya, 1884), preface, Prometheus-Academic Collections, https://tufs.repo.nii.ac.jp/records/11300. This was not the first Italian-Malay dictionary; that distinction belongs to the Venetian chronicler Antonio Pigafetta, who compiled one during Portuguese explorer Ferdinand Magellan's circumnavigation of the globe. Pigafetta participated in the expedition, setting of from Spain in 1519, and served as Magellan's assistant.

18 Giovanni Gaggino indicated this erroneously as "Commander of the Cross of Italy (*Commendatore della croce d'Italia*)". The year 1871 marked the first official contact between a Malay ruler and an official representative of the new Kingdom of Italy, Captain Carlo Alberto Racchia, who commanded the corvette *Principessa Clotilde* to the Far East in search of a territory suitable for a new Italian penal colony. See A. Candilio and L. Bressan, "Sultan Abu Bakar of Johore's Visit to the Italian King and the Pope in 1885," *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 73, no. 1 (2000): 44. (From JSTOR via NLB's eResources website).

19 Gaggino uses the word *granellino*, a diminutive that underscores the modesty of his effort. Yet his choice also echoes the biblical Parable of the Mustard Seed (*granello di senape* in Italian), in which a tiny seed grows into a large tree. Gaggino, *Dizionario Italiano e Malese: Preceduto da un Manuale Pratico di Conversazione*, preface.

20 Gaggino, *Dizionario Italiano e Malese: Preceduto da un Manuale Pratico di Conversazione*, 388.

21 Gaggino, *Dizionario Italiano e Malese e Malese Italiano*, ii.

22 Gaggino, *Dizionario Italiano e Malese: Preceduto da un Manuale Pratico di Conversazione*, 2; Gaggino, Dizionario Italiano e Malese e Malese Italiano, iv.

23 Antonia Soriente, "Cross-Cultural Encounters of Italian Travellers in the Malay World: A Perspective on the Languages Spoken by the Local Populations," *Wacana, Journal of the Humanities of Indonesia* 25, no. 2 (2024): 170–71, https://scholarhub.ui.ac.id/wacana/vol25/iss2/2/.

24 Linguists refer to this as the voiced postalveolar affricate, the same sound found in the word "beige".

25 In the food section, for instance, he outlines rice in its full lifecycle: *padi* when unharvested in the field, *brass* (or *beras*) once threshed and *nasi* after it is cooked.

26 Gaggino, *Dizionario Italiano e Malese: Preceduto da un Manuale Pratico di Conversazione*, 89.

27 Gaggino, *Dizionario Italiano e Malese: Preceduto da un Manuale Pratico di Conversazione*, 124.

28 Soriente, "Cross-Cultural Encounters of Italian Travellers in the Malay World," 173.

29 N.B. Dennys, *A Handbook of Malay Colloquial, As Spoken in Singapore: Being a Series of Introductory Lessons for Domestic and Business Purposes* (London: Trübner & Co.; Singapore: Mission Press, 1878). (From National Library Online); Santa Maria, "Giovanni Gaggino e Il Suo 'Dizionario Italiano e Malese'," 20.

30 Santa Maria, "Giovanni Gaggino e Il Suo 'Dizionario Italiano e Malese'," 20.

31 Gaggino, *Dizionario Italiano e Malese: Preceduto da un Manuale Pratico di Conversazione*, 2; Gaggino, *Dizionario Italiano e Malese e Malese Italiano*, iii.

32 Giovanni Gaggino, *La Vallata del Yang-Tse-Kiang: Appunti e Ricordi* [The Yangtze valley: Notes and memories] (Rome: Fratelli Bocca, 1901), 86, Internet Archive, https://archive.org/details/lavallatadelyan00mayngoog.

33 Surdich, "Da Varazze a Singapore," 158.

34 Gaggino, *La Vallata del Yang-Tse-Kiang*, 165.

35 Gaggino, *La Vallata del Yang-Tse-Kiang*, 65–66.

36 "Death of Captain Gaggino," *Straits Times*, 14 February 1918, 7. (From NewspaperSG)

37 "Italian Will Suit," *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser* (Weekly), 30 March 1922, 202. (From NewspaperSG)

38 "Auction Sale of Ship Chandler's Store," *Malaya Tribune*, 18 December 1918, 7; "Important Auction Sale of Valuable Shipchandlers' Stores," *Malaya Tribune*, 17 February 1919, 5. (From NewspaperSG). The proceeds from the sale were divided as follows: 20 percent each to his brother Enrico and his nephew Paul Consigliere, with "5 percent each to the French and Portuguese Convents, the European Hospital, and the Tan Tock Seng Hospital". See "Italian Will Suit."

39 Gaggino's shophouse on Middle Road would eventually be occupied by the popular Japanese fabric store Echigoya from 1937–1945. "Preliminary Notice. Estate of Giovanni Gaggino, Deceased," *Malaya Tribune*, 14 July 1919, 2. (From NewspaperSG)

40 "Death of Captain Gaggino," *Straits Times*, 14 February 1918, 7. (From NewspaperSG)

41 Surdich, "Da Varazze a Singapore," 154.

42 Surdich, "Da Varazze a Singapore," 153–54.

43 "Untitled," *Singapore Free Press*, 8 June 1922, 7. (From NewspaperSG)

44 The Weltmuseum Wien has a letter from Giovanni Gaggino that describes this gift of adzes.

45 Gaggino, *Dizionario Italiano e Malese: Preceduto da un Manuale Pratico di Conversazione*, preface.

DAYLIGHT ROBBERY

SINGAPORE'S SHIFTING TIME ZONES

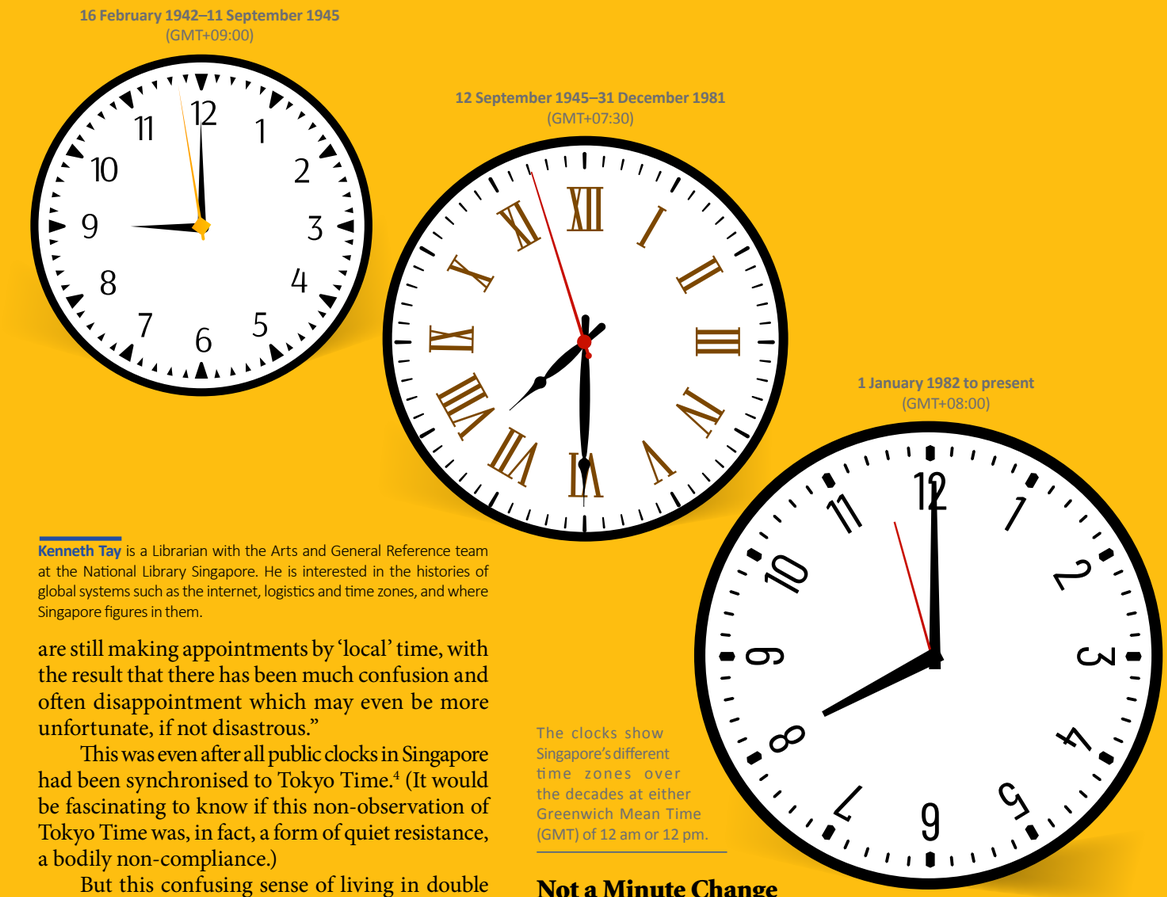
In 1982, Singapore adjusted its time zone to follow Malaysia's national synchronisation. But this was not the only instance that Singapore had undergone time zone changes.

By Kenneth Tay

In 1985, 40 years after the end of the Japanese Occupation, a reader wrote to the *Singapore Monitor* seeking advice on his or her time of birth.[1] Born during the Occupation years, the reader's birth time was registered as 5.30 pm on the birth certificate. The person wanted to know if this was Singapore time or Japan's Central Standard Time (commonly referred to as "Tokyo Time").

When Singapore came under Japanese control in February 1942, one of the first things the Japanese did was to announce that Singapore and British Malaya would fall under the same time zone as Tokyo, which was one-and-a-half hours ahead of Malayan time.[2] The occupation of Singapore was more than spatial; it became temporal as well, colonising Singapore through time. Public clocks in Singapore were adjusted from the local time zone of seven-and-a-half hours ahead of Greenwich Mean Time (GMT+07:30) to nine hours ahead (GMT+09:00).[3] The residents of Singapore had to adjust their body clocks to the rhythms of Japanese imperial time.

However, this change was not as simple or straightforward as it seemed. In February 1944, two years into the time adjustment, the *Syonan Shimbun* reported that people in Singapore were still making appointments based on the local time observed earlier rather than Tokyo Time: "There seems to be still not a few people who have not awakened to the hour, so to speak. These people



The clocks show Singapore's different time zones over the decades at either Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) of 12 am or 12 pm.

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are still making appointments by 'local' time, with the result that there has been much confusion and often disappointment which may even be more unfortunate, if not disastrous."

This was even after all public clocks in Singapore had been synchronised to Tokyo Time.[4] (It would be fascinating to know if this non-observation of Tokyo Time was, in fact, a form of quiet resistance, a bodily non-compliance.)

But this confusing sense of living in double time is precisely why our 1985 reader had questions regarding the registered birth time of 5.30 pm which, according to the reply by the *Singapore Monitor*, was Tokyo Time. If the reader wished to have the time changed, he or she could obtain a birth extract at the National Registration Department, they advised.[5]

Once the Japanese Occupation ended, Singapore reverted to its previous time zone of seven-and-a-half hours ahead of GMT (GMT+07:30).[6] This remained Singapore's official public time until the Malaysian government announced in 1981 that it would be synchronising the time between West Malaysia (GMT+07:30) and East Malaysia (GMT+08:00), moving West Malaysia half an hour forward. Singapore's government decided to follow suit and the change came into effect in Singapore on 1 January 1982.[7]

On New Year's Eve, the *Straits Times* quipped that merrymakers out on the town "will find their happy times ending a little sooner than they are used to" and "all because 1982 will leap in half-an-hour sooner, with midnight chiming at the 'old' 11.30 pm on Dec 31".[8]

Not a Minute Change

As the Japanese Occupation has shown, time zones can become a tool of political control, an extension of an empire's territory in time. Malaysia, prior to its time zone adjustment in 1982, had been operating on two different national time zones: one for the western peninsula at GMT+07:30 for cities such as Kuala Lumpur and Penang, and another for East Malaysia at GMT+08:00 for cities such as Kota Kinabalu and Kuching. This split was due to the different longitudinal positions of Peninsular Malaysia and the eastern territories of Sabah, Sarawak and Labuan.

The Malaysian government synchronised both time zones to align business hours and improve coordination between the two territories. This was also done in hopes of fostering a stronger sense of an integrated Malaysia.[9] In other words, the decision to change time zone in 1982 had both a political and economic dimension.

Meanwhile, Singapore's decision to follow Malaysia's time zone change came about largely due to the "many close ties between the peoples and governments of Singapore and Malaysia," as

This map insert presents a mapping of the various time zones around the world, with reference to 9 pm in Tokyo. It is part of a larger military map (scale 1:40,000,000) prepared and published by the Japanese Imperial Army on 15 February 1942, two weeks before Tokyo Time was implemented throughout Malaya. Image reproduced from Sekai kaishin jikyoku yōzu: Dai Tōa sensō kankei 世界改新時局要圖: 大東亜戦争関係 (Tokyo: Daido Shuppansha, 1942). *Lim Shao Bin Collection, National Library Singapore.*

noted in the press release issued by the Singapore Ministry of Culture. The sheer volume of trade and travel between the two countries, and the close commercial and financial links were also cited as factors in Singapore's decision to align its time zone with that of Malaysia's.

"The balance of advantage would be in Singapore's favour if time was changed to Malaysian time," said R.W. Lutton, the chairman of the Singapore International Chamber of Commerce and Industry. Y.M. Jumabhoy, the president of the Singapore Indian Chamber of Commerce felt that a half hour difference meant a lot of difference in business. "If Singapore does not change its time, it would mean half an hour of reduced contacts, especially since most business dealings are conducted over the telephone." There were similar sentiments across the Causeway, with Malaysian businessmen saying that it "would be 'pragmatic and logical' for Singapore to keep in time with Malaysia".[10]

Singapore's decision to move its time ahead by 30 minutes proved even more fortuitous, both politically and economically, during the 1980s. Prior to the time zone adjustment, banks on the American west coast (at GMT-08:00) would be closing just when traders in Singapore were beginning their day (GMT+07:30).[11] But with the additional half an hour at GMT+08:00, Singapore could function more effectively as a bridge between the closing hours of North American markets and the opening hours of the London and European markets. Moving to GMT+08:00 could also reap the additional benefits by being in the same time zone as Hong Kong and an emerging Chinese market.

Moreover, Singapore could also share an extra half hour of overlapping business hours with Japan's then booming economy. This strengthened existing trade relations, as Japan had become the biggest foreign investor in Singapore's economy by the end of the 1980s.[12] The adjustment of 30 minutes forward was, therefore, not by any means a minute change. It helped secure Singapore's position as a key financial hub for the global financing of the oil trade.[13]

Sleepless in Singapore

While there were obvious advantages in moving Singapore to GMT+08:00, were there unfortunate side effects? In a 2014 survey of sleep patterns, Singapore was reported to be the third most sleep-deprived city in the world, just behind Tokyo and Seoul. On average, Singaporeans were managing with just 6 hours and 32 minutes of sleep every night.[14]

In March 2015, a reader, concerned about sleeplessness in Singapore, felt compelled to write to the *Today* newspaper, arguing that the current time zone was to blame for it. "The sun rises at around 7 am, when most of the children are already headed for school or in school," G. Kavidasan wrote. "Why do our schools not open at 9 am or 10 am so the children can have a good night's sleep, wake up around 6 am or 7 am, do some studies or exercise, have a family breakfast and then go to school?" "[O]ur body clock syncs with the natural clock of the sun, and Singapore's natural time zone should be seven hours ahead of Greenwich Mean Time (GMT+07:00)."[15]

Kavidasan's argument was that Singaporeans should be waking up naturally when the sun rises at 7 am (GMT+08:00), or better still at 6 am (if the time zone is corrected to GMT+07:00 instead). Starting school or work at 9 am or 10 am would then allow people to have some hours of exposure to daylight, before getting on with the day's work.

In fact, many of the concerns shared by Kavidasan were already brought up in public discussions during the 1930s, even before the Japanese Occupation.

Standardising Time in the Malay Peninsula

Prior to the 20th century, most towns or cities in Malaya kept localised time; noon was simply when the sun was observed at its highest point. This meant that local time was dependent on one's longitudinal position on Earth. For every degree of longitude to the west, local noon would occur approximately four minutes later.[16]

In 1894, Singapore kept a local time that was computed at 6 hours, 55 minutes and 25.05 seconds ahead of time observed at the Royal Observatory Greenwich, London. This was based on Singapore's longitudinal position of 103.854375° east of the Greenwich Meridian, with reference to the observatory located then at Fort Fullerton.[17]

This, however, meant that local clocks in two nearby towns could differ by a few minutes. For much of the 19th century, these differences did not affect the daily lives of many. Farmers, for example, relied on understanding the broad seasonal changes in their work, and did not require precise timekeeping. However, this changed with the birth of the steam engine and the subsequent establishment of railway systems. This was especially so for the British Empire, including its colonies in British Malaya. Train operators had to organise train schedules across towns that had hitherto been keeping their own individual local time. This meant that commuters very often had to navigate between confusing timetables.[18]

Commuters travelling between Penang and Taiping in the year 1900 would need to know that the local time kept by the two towns differed by approximately 18 minutes and factor that into their reading of train schedules between the two towns.[19]

At GMT+06:55:25, the local time of Singapore was "natural" insofar as it was based on Singapore's longitudinal position on Earth. This meant that the time kept in Singapore was largely in sync with the sun's rhythms as observed from Singapore.

Malaya Finished With "Tokyo Time"

"Japanese time will never be used in Malaya again," declared the British Military Administration's broadcasting station, Singapore, last night, when it was announced that the time to be used in future will be the time in use in this country before February 15, 1942. This will be 7½ hours ahead of Greenwich mean time.

When the Japanese Occupation ended, Singapore reverted to its previous time zone of seven-and-a-half hours ahead of GMT (GMT+07:30). *Source: The Straits Times, 7 September 1945 © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.*

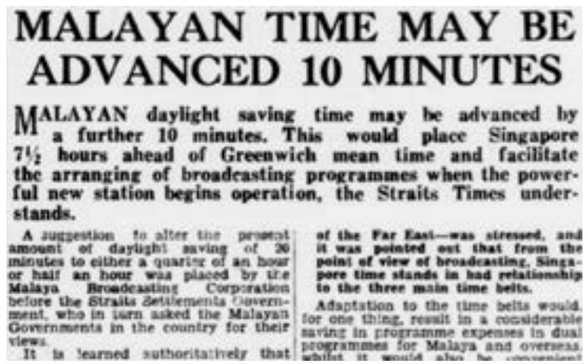
Japanese soldiers led by General Seishiro Itagaki marching towards the Municipal Building (later City Hall) to sign the surrender papers on 12 September 1945. The British Military Administration had announced on 7 September that Tokyo Time would be abolished. The clock tower of the Victoria Theatre and Concert Hall, in the background would have been showing the readjusted time zone of GMT+07:30. *Courtesy of the Army Photographic Unit. From National Library Singapore.*

This changed on 1 June 1905 when time throughout British Malaya became standardised to the mean time of the 105th meridian, at GMT+07:00. The minute differences between local times (e.g. Penang, Taiping, Singapore) were now evened out and synchronised to a uniform time zone.[20] Trains, commuters and, ultimately, much of modern life in the Malay Peninsula now ran smoothly on a single time schedule.[21]

Daylight Robbery, c.1910–52

As soon as time became standardised in Malaya, there were suggestions made in 1910 to further adjust the time in Singapore. In a letter to the *Straits Times*, a concerned citizen noted that many early risers in Singapore were wasting away their daylight through the "aimless time spent before breakfast". If business hours in Singapore (9 am to 5 pm back in 1910) could be adjusted to start at 8 am and end at 4 pm, or alternatively "putting the clock on an hour", many in Singapore would benefit from having "an extra hour of daylight after office".[22] In short, the present business hours were robbing citizens of recreational time in daylight.

Such a letter should be understood in the context of British builder William Willett's pamphlet, "The Waste of Daylight", published just three years earlier. Willett's chief concern was the varying hours of daylight experienced throughout the changing seasons in Great Britain. Willett had initially advocated to advance the clocks by 80 minutes in four 20-minute increments during April and reversing the process in September.[23] However, by 1916, this plan was eventually changed to advance the clock by "one hour at 2 am on the third Sunday in April or about April 18th" and to reverse that motion at 2 am on "the third Sunday of September or about September 19th" in each year.[24]



MALAYAN TIME MAY BE ADVANCED 10 MINUTES

MALAYAN daylight saving time may be advanced by a further 10 minutes. This would place Singapore 7½ hours ahead of Greenwich mean time and facilitate the arranging of broadcasting programmes when the powerful new station begins operation, the Straits Times understands.

A suggestion to alter the present amount of daylight saving of 20 minutes to either a quarter of an hour or half an hour was placed by the Malaya Broadcasting Corporation before the Straits Settlements Government, who in turn asked the Malayan Governments in the country for their views.

It is learned authoritatively that of the Far East—was stressed, and it was pointed out that from the point of view of broadcasting, Singapore time stands in bad relationship to the three main time belts.

Adaptation to the time belts would, for one thing, result in a considerable saving in programme expenses in dual programmes for Malaya and overseas, whilst it would also be convenient

In September 1941, time in Singapore was advanced by 10 minutes to GMT+07:30 to coincide with the programming time slots of the British Broadcasting Corporation in light of the impending war. *Source: The Straits Times, 5 May 1941 © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.*

While Singapore gets fairly consistent daylight throughout the year thanks to its latitudinal position, there were nonetheless worries that workers in Singapore were not getting enough daylight after the day's work had ended.

As early as 1920, Governor of the Straits Settlements Laurence Guillemard had introduced a bill to adjust the clocks by "half-an-hour in advance of the mean time of the 105th meridian or seven-and-a-half hours in advance of Greenwich mean time". Before moving to Singapore, Guillemard had experienced the benefits of daylight savings during the British summers.[25]

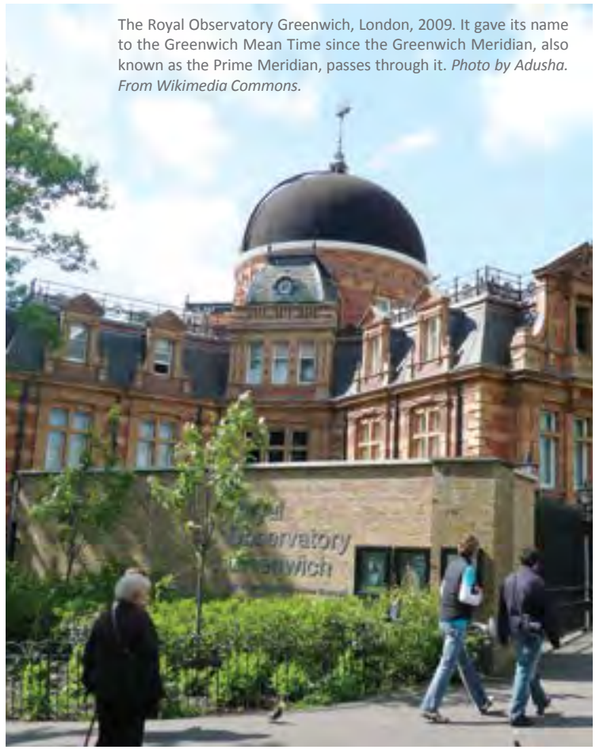
His suggestion was aimed at shortening the waking hours before work and giving workers more leisure time in the sun after work, thereby ensuring the good health of the working class without affecting existing business hours. However, this bill was ultimately withdrawn by the government due to opposition in the Legislative Council. One member, a John Mitchell, was even quoted as saying that if workers left their offices earlier in the day, "they might get sunstroke".[26]

In 1932, when Guillemard had already left Malaya, his proposal was officially brought up by Arnold Robinson, a senior unofficial member of the Straits Settlements Legislative and Executive Councils.[27] Despite some public opposition,[28] the Daylight Saving Ordinance was eventually passed. With that, time in the British colonies of the Malay Peninsula and Singapore was advanced by 20 minutes on 1 January 1933 to become GMT+07:20.[29]

Many of the motivations behind daylight saving in 1930s Singapore were not so different from the social concerns shared much later in 2015. Unfortunately, several employers in Singapore took advantage of the "delayed" sunset to make their employees work longer hours. In 1934, just two years after the passing of the Daylight Saving Ordinance, unscrupulous employers were reported to have been robbing workers of their extra time in the sun.[30]

In September 1941, time in Singapore was again tweaked, advancing another 10 minutes under the Daylight Saving (Amendment) Ordinance. This time, it had less to do with the health of the working majority, and more to do with the programming time slots of the British Empire's radio network. At GMT+07:20, Singapore's time zone presented an inconvenience as the overseas programming of the British Broadcasting Corporation began on 15-minute intervals of the hour.[31]

During this period, the strategic importance of the radio network for the British Empire could not be underestimated. Adolf Hitler, the dictator of Nazi Germany had invaded Poland on 1 September 1939, and Britain and France declared war on Germany



The Royal Observatory Greenwich, London, 2009. It gave its name to the Greenwich Mean Time since the Greenwich Meridian, also known as the Prime Meridian, passes through it. *Photo by Adusha. From Wikimedia Commons.*

two days later. Bringing Singapore's official time up to GMT+07:30 fitted nicely into the programming time slots of the British Broadcasting Corporation.[32] As with the time zone changes enacted under the Japanese Occupation later on, this was yet another example of timekeeping being used as a political tool to control and influence a territory.

Here Comes the Sun (One Hour Later)

Since 1 January 1982, Singapore's deviation from our natural solar time has become fixed at about one full hour away from the rhythms of the sun as observed locally from Singapore. While the adjusted time zone of GMT+08:00 represents a disconnect from the sun's rhythms, it is also an example where the relationship to nature is perhaps made secondary in favour of Singapore's economy and politics.

While there are those who might bemoan this present state of disconnect, there are others who argue that time is a man-made concept in the first place, or that the nature of time is fundamentally arbitrary.[33] These are, perhaps, questions that can never be definitively answered. Nonetheless, the world continues to make do with the existing global system that was first centred on the Greenwich Meridian.[34] ♦

NOTES

1 "Born During War Years," *Singapore Monitor*, 12 April 1985, 13. (From NewspaperSG)
2 "Tokyo Time All Over Malaya," *Shonan Times* (*Syonan Shimbun*), 3 March 1942, 1. (From NewspaperSG)
3 The Greenwich Meridian passes through the Royal Observatory Greenwich in London. For the longest time, throughout the 20th century, the Greenwich Meridian served as the Prime Meridian which is the internationally recognised zero-degree line of longitude dividing the Earth into its Eastern and Western hemispheres.
4 "Only One Time—T.T. (Tokyo Time)," *Shonan Times* (*Syonan Shimbun*), 18 February 1944, 1. (From NewspaperSG)
5 "Born During War Years."
6 "Malaya Finished With 'Tokyo Time'," *Straits Times*, 7 September 1945, 1. (From NewspaperSG)
7 Singapore. Ministry of Culture, "Time Zone Adjustment," press release, 20 December 1981. (From National Archives of Singapore, document no. 985-1981-12-20)
8 "Tonight's Revelry Will End Half-Hour Earlier," *Straits Times*, 31 December 1981, 1. (From NewspaperSG)
9 Hamdan Aziz, et al., "The Change of Malaysian Standard Time: A Motion and Debate in the Malaysian Parliament," *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Science* 7, no. 12 (December 2017): 962–71, https://hrmars.com/index.php/IJARBSS/article/view/3725/The-Change-of-Malaysian-Standard-Time-A-Motion-and-Debate-in-the-Malaysian-Parliament; "Other Places, Times," *New Paper*, 6 April 1993, 17. (From NewspaperSG)
10 Filomina D'Cruz, "S'pore 'Should Follow' New KL Time," *Straits Times*, 11 December 1981, 14. (From NewspaperSG); Singapore. Ministry of Culture, "Time Zone Adjustment."
11 "Longer Hours for Forex Dealers," *Straits Times*, 21 December 1981, 18. (From NewspaperSG)
12 Peter Hazelhurst, "5 PC Growth for Japan Forecast," *Straits Times*, 14 July 1984, 44; "Robust Economy Helped Fuel Current Boom," *Straits Times*, 21 September 1989, 26. (From NewspaperSG)
13 George Joseph, "Union Urges Bank to Stay Open Longer," *Straits Times*, 15 February 1978, 10; "Singapore's Round-the-Clock Advantage," *Straits Times*, 22 February 1989, 12. (From NewspaperSG); See also Woo Jun Jie, *Singapore as an International Financial Centre: History, Policies and Politics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 28. (From National Library Singapore, call no. RSING 332.095957 WOO); The story of Singapore's economic development through the global oil trade is also a fascinating one. On this, see Hoong Ng Weng, *Singapore, the Energy Economy: From the First Refinery to the End of Cheap Oil*, 1960–2010 (London: Routledge, 2012). (From National Library Singapore, call no. RSING 338.27282095957 NG)
14 Azimin Saini, "Refresh, Repeat," *Straits Times*, 15 August 2015, 1. (From NewspaperSG)
15 G. Kavidasan, "Singapore's Time Zone Biggest Contributor to Sleeplessness Problem," *Today*, 18 March 2015, 23. (From NewspaperSG)
16 Avraham Ariel and Nora Ariel Berger, *Plotting the Globe: Stories of Meridians, Parallels and the International Date Line* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger Publishers, 2006), 116. (From National Library Singapore, call no. R 526.6 ARI); David Prerau, *Saving the Daylight: Why We Put Our Clocks Forward* (London: Granta Books, 2005), 33. (From National Library Singapore, call no. R 389.17 PRE)
17 "Time, Gentlemen, Please," *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser (Weekly)*, 15 May 1894, 288. (From NewspaperSG)
18 Prerau, *Saving the Daylight*, 34–35.
19 Viator, "Taiping Time and Other Topics," *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle*, 11 September 1900, 3. (From NewspaperSG)
20 "A Matter of Time," *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 31 May 1905, 5. (From NewspaperSG)
21 Elsewhere, the territories of British North Borneo (present-day Brunei, Sabah, Sarawak and Labuan) also switched over to their "zone time" of GMT+08:00. See "The Year 1904," *Straits Budget*, 5 January 1905, 1. (From NewspaperSG)
22 "Tempus," "Daylight Saving," *Straits Times*, 26 July 1910, 8. (From NewspaperSG)
23 William Willett, "The Waste of Daylight," WebExhibits, accessed 29 June 2025, https://www.webexhibits.org/daylightsaving/willett.html.
24 "Daylight Saving," *Malaya Tribune*, 11 May 1916, 10. (From NewspaperSG)
25 "More Light," *Straits Budget*, 14 July 1932, 3. (From NewspaperSG)
26 "Daylight Saving," *Straits Times*, 3 July 1920, 9; "Daylight Saving," *Straits Times*, 13 June 1932, 10; "Legislative Council," *Straits Times*, 6 September 1920, 9. (From NewsaperSG)
27 "Twenty Minutes," *Malaya Tribune*, 4 January 1937, 10; "Sir Arnold Robinson Dies in UK," *Straits Times*, 3 March 1960, 14. (NewspaperSG)
28 See for example, Pro Veritate Semper, "One Great Big Lie!" *Straits Times*, 8 November 1932, 19. (From NewspaperSG)
29 "Clocks On," *Singapore Daily News*, 17 December 1932, 4; "Here to Stay?" *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle*, 16 March 1933, 8; "Summer Time," *Straits Times*, 31 December 1932, 11. (From NewspaperSG). It is not known exactly why Robinson had advocated for 20 minutes, instead of Guillemard's earlier proposal of 30 minutes. A possible reason, though speculative, would be to compromise between the longitudinal positions between the two Straits Settlements of Penang and Singapore. As reported earlier in 1920, those who opposed Guillemard's proposal had proposed a 15-minute advancement instead since "Penang was 14½ minutes ahead of Singapore". See "Legislative Council," *Straits Times*, 6 September 1920, 9. (From NewspaperSG). In other words, Robinson's proposal to advance the time by 20 minutes was probably an amendment of Guillemard's earlier proposal to cater for the actual difference between Singapore and Penang's local solar time. The earlier standardisation of time to GMT+07:00 in 1905 already meant that Penang was ahead of its solar time by approximately 20 minutes. The accounting of local solar time, based on longitudinal positions, is probably also one of the reasons why the far-flung islands of Labuan and Christmas Island were explicitly mentioned to be excluded from this ordinance, other than the fact that these islands were not as densely populated to begin with.
30 "Daylight Saving," *Straits Budget*, 4 November 1937, 2. (From NewspaperSG)
31 "Malayan Time May Be Advanced 10 Minutes," *Straits Times*, 5 May 1941, 8; "Colony Time May Be Advanced," *Straits Times*, 31 May 1941, 11; "Malayan Time to Be Advanced Next Week," *Straits Times*, 26 August 1941, 11; "Further 10 Mins. Daylight Saving," *Malaya Tribune*, 27 August 1941, 3. (From NewspaperSG)
32 "Daylight Saving Unsatisfactory," *Morning Tribune*, 1 September 1941, 6. (From NewspaperSG); "Malayan Time May Be Advanced 10 Minutes."
33 Wong, "Time Is Just a Man-Made Concept"; Tan Sai Siong, "Time Will Tell on You," *Straits Times*, 19 March 1999, 6. (From NewspaperSG)
34 On the question of the nature of time, see Joseph Mazur, *The Clock Mirage: The Myth of Measured Time* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020.) (From National Library Singapore, call no. R 529 MAZ); Jo Ellen Barnett, *Time's Pendulum: The Quest to Capture Time—From Sundials to Atomic Clocks* (New York: Plenum Trade, 1998). (From National Library Singapore, call no. R 529.7 BAR); David S. Landes, *Revolution in Time: Clocks and the Making of the Modern World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000). (From National Library Singapore, call no. R 681.11309 LAN); Duncan Steel, *Marking Time: The Epic Quest to Invent the Perfect Calendar* (New York: Wiley, 2000). (From National Library Singapore, call no. R 529.309 STE); Mohammad Ilyas, *Global Time System: The Natural Approach* (Kuala Lumpur: IIUM Press, Research centre, International Islamic University Malaysia, 2001). (From National Library Singapore, call no. R 529.327 MOH). There is also much to be said about the difference between Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) and Universal Coordinated Time (UTC), but that would call for another article in time.

BACALAH SINGAPURA

Reading Habits in Singapore (1960s–1990s)

Reading surveys in the nation-building years reveal what Singaporeans read and why it mattered.

By Janice Loo

You are never too young to start reading, 1959. *Carolina Ng Lee Khiam Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 19980005136 - 0052).*

In June 2025, the National Library Board released the results of the 2024 National Reading Habits Study which found that 89 percent of Singapore adults read more than once a week. News (76 percent) and online articles (65 percent) were the most popular reading materials, surpassing books (28 percent), magazines (16 percent) and reports (12 percent). While respondents acknowledged the benefits of reading, most said that they tended to spend more time on other activities (62 percent) or get bored after reading for a while (38 percent).[1]

This challenge of cultivating a reading habit is not a new one, as seen in studies from the 1960s through to the 1990s on reading levels in Singapore. Given that reading is crucial to learning, access to information, as well as social and economic participation, reading habits – how often people read, what they read and in which languages – go beyond personal leisure choices and have been seen as matters of national consequence.

Education, Bilingualism and Children's Reading Habits

Singapore gained independence amidst much uncertainty on 9 August 1965. The 1960s and 1970s were a "survival-driven" phase as the government focused on creating a literate and skilled workforce to support rapid industrialisation and secure the future of the fledgling nation. Mathematics, science and technical subjects were emphasised to prepare youth for employment and continuous upskilling.[2] At the same time, bilingual education in English and a mother tongue – Malay, Mandarin or Tamil – was implemented.[3] While English was necessary for business and for acquiring technical knowledge (where literature in vernacular languages was scarce), mother tongue languages were deemed essential for the preservation of cultural values and traditions, and were used for civic education.[4]

This educational landscape formed the backdrop for the dozen reading surveys conducted in the 1960s and 1970s – largely by education researchers – to examine the reading habits and preferences of primary and secondary school students.[5]

The earliest such study was initiated in 1966 by the Research Unit of the Teachers' Training College (TTC), which surveyed over 1,500 primary school pupils from the English, Chinese and Malay language streams. It aimed to provide insights to parents, teachers, librarians and education authorities in supporting children's reading development.[6]

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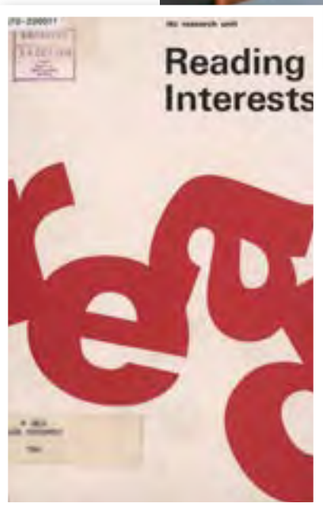
This study found that newspapers were the most popular reading material, followed by comics and magazines.[7] It also revealed low levels of reading in a second language, which was highlighted as a "grave concern" given the importance of bilingualism. Additionally, students showed a preference for fiction over nonfiction, with classroom and school libraries serving as their primary sources of reading material due to convenient access.[8]

However, there were limitations with the survey's research design. One reviewer noted that the method of administering formal questionnaires in a school setting likely skewed the results, with children giving socially desirable responses rather than their genuine preferences.[9] The questionable validity of responses was apparent in two survey items: one where a high proportion – almost 60 percent – of children claimed to prefer reading over TV, and another where a significant number improbably indicated they would rather spend their pocket money on books over toys, sweets or cinema tickets.[10]

The report's compilers themselves acknowledged that such positive responses were likely influenced by the classroom environment and the teacher's

A young reader enjoying Old Master Q (老夫子; Lao Fu Zi) comics at a neighbourhood bookstore in Tanjong Pagar, 1989. *Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 19980007362 - 0048).*

Learning to read at the National Library on Stamford Road, 1986. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 19980006082 - 0076).*



The Teachers' Training College conducted the first reading survey in 1966. It surveyed over 1,500 primary school pupils from the English, Chinese and Malay language streams. Newspapers were the most popular reading material, followed by comics and magazines. *Collection of the National Library (call no. RCLOS 028.9095957 TEA).*

presence.[11] Despite its shortcomings, the TTC study was a commendable first step in sketching a complex subject and underscored the need for more research.

Further surveys in the late 1970s, conducted mostly by staff and students at the Institute of Education (IE), were spurred by problems besetting the education system: high failure and attrition rates, low literacy levels and ineffective bilingualism.[12] One underlying cause, as identified in a landmark 1978 education review, was that 85 percent of schoolchildren did not speak the languages of instruction (primarily English and Mandarin) at home, which hampered learning both in and outside of the classroom.[13]

A 1978 survey by IE revealed poor levels of reading, especially in second languages among Primary Six pupils.[14] This was troubling as the primary school years are a critical period for developing lifelong reading habits.[15] Dismayed by the findings, Education Minister Chua Sian Chin stressed the importance of reading to national goals at the 1978 Festival of Books and Book Fair: "We will not be able to succeed in our effort of improving language learning and attain our objective of bilingualism unless we get more and more pupils to read books and magazines in their first and second languages."[16]

The IE survey approached reading as a socially embedded activity shaped by parents, teachers and peers. While newspapers were present in 89 percent of households and read by 64 percent of parents, book reading was markedly rare, with only 2 percent of parents reading books and a mere 10 percent encouraging their children to do so.[17] It was thus little wonder that children tended to gravitate towards newspaper reading rather than books. The majority of parents in the sample were Chinese-speaking, blue-collar workers, whose children consistently reported having the fewest comics, books and magazines at home. This underscored the impact of socioeconomic status on both access to varied reading materials and the development of reading habits.[18]

Concluding that little could be done about the home environment, the IE report focused on the role of schools. It emphasised that teachers needed to be readers themselves to effectively model reading habits, and recommended incorporating regular reading and book-related activities, like story dramatisations, into lessons.[19]

The IE survey also raised concerns about the time children spent watching television at the expense of reading, with 62 percent watching one to three hours daily and 21 percent exceeding three hours. Television emerged as the greatest competitor to reading because it functioned as a shared family activity that naturally drew children in and, unlike reading, could be enjoyed with little linguistic competence.[20]

Adult Readers, Lifelong Workers

While research into children's reading habits began shortly after independence, it was only in 1980 that the first national survey of adult reading habits was conducted.[21]

In 1975, S. Gopinathan, chairman of the National Book Development Council of Singapore (now the Singapore Book Council),[22] highlighted the dearth of data on what Singaporeans read. He noted: "We know we have certain advantages; very high per capita income, easy distribution because we are geographically small, literacy rates are very high. In theory, these should lead to a certain level of reading, and not only of textbooks. But there is no real documentation on what people in fact read."[23]

Consequently, the council commissioned the first National Readership Survey in 1980, aiming to gather data on adult reading habits, book-buying behaviour and library usage. It sampled around 2,000 non-schooling Singaporeans aged 15 to 49 from about 800 households.[24]

The results, published in 1981, came as no surprise. Television dominated leisure time (48.3 percent), followed by music (15 percent) and then reading (13.1 percent). While over 90 percent of respondents engaged in some form of reading weekly (with only 2.7 percent reporting no reading at all), this had to be balanced against the finding that 37.9 percent did not read books and 33.7 percent spent less than three hours weekly on them. In contrast, newspapers were widely read, with only 2.4 percent non-readers and 39.6 percent dedicating three to five hours weekly to them.[25]

The survey also found that a mere 16.1 percent of respondents were members of the National Library.[26] Most people obtained books and magazines by borrowing from friends and relatives, or purchasing them from bookshops rather than using the public libraries.[27]

The findings highlighted socioeconomic correlations with reading habits. Heavy readers (those who read more than six hours weekly) tended to have higher levels of education, worked in the professional, administrative and clerical occupations, and earned higher incomes. Conversely, non-readers generally lacked formal education or did not complete primary education, worked in production or service roles, and had lower incomes.[28]

As Singapore shifted towards capital-intensive, high-technology industries in the early 1980s, national survival again hinged on the power of reading, as Minister for Communications Yeo Ning Hong emphasised at the 1984 National Reading Month launch: "In order to keep pace and not be left behind in the backwaters, Singaporeans must therefore be agile and adapt to the rapid changes that we now see taking place in many industrialised countries… The ability to read will provide us with the key to upgrading ourselves… The person who stops reading upon leaving school or university increases his own chance of stagnation and irrelevance in future economic developments."[29]

A Cultured People

In the mid-1980s, the government launched a new vision for Singapore to become a "Nation of Excellence". This would encompass the development of a cultivated society that First Deputy Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong described as "a society of well-read, well-informed citizens, a refined and gracious people, a thoughtful people, a society of sparkling ideas, a place where art, literature and music flourish" and "not a materialistic, consumeristic society where wealth is flaunted and money spent thoughtlessly".[30]

Aside from the intrinsic value of arts and culture, the government saw its economic potential as a new growth sector following the 1985 recession.[31] To that end, the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts (ACCA) was established in 1988 to develop a long-term plan for arts and cultural development in Singapore. The Committee on Literary Arts was formed to assist the ACCA, and recognising the

The results of the first survey of adult reading habits were published in 1981 and showed that 38 percent of respondents did not read books. *G.P. Reichelt Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 20130000080 - 0055).*

importance of reading, a Sub-Committee on Reading was created to assess the reading habit in Singapore and make recommendations for its promotion.[32]

Drawing on the 1980 and 1988 national reading surveys,[33] as well as the 1987 National Survey on Arts and Culture, the Sub-Committee on Reading found that despite a high literacy rate of 94 percent in 1988, Singaporeans read a limited range of subjects, preferring popular fiction, followed by cookery and hobby books, while literary works and drama ranked last.[34] On the bright side, more were reading for pleasure as well as for information and knowledge.[35] Although the steady growth in library membership was another encouraging sign, the sub-committee noted that existing library services struggled to keep up with public demand.[36]

The sub-committee identified several crisis areas, chiefly the utilitarian view of reading as a means for academic or career advancement. Once again, the same issue was brought up: developing young readers required the involvement of both parents and teachers.

Recognising that building a reading culture required community-wide efforts, recommendations included training for parents and teachers, creating reading corners in housing estates, enhanced resourcing of libraries and the book council, as well as partnerships with media, publishers and bookshops.[37]

A poster for National Reading Month, 26 August to 23 September 1982. *National Book Development Council of Singapore Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 19990003740 - 0027).*

A Developed (Reading) Nation

In 1993, the National Library commissioned a survey which sampled some 2,000 respondents aged 13 to 69 from 1,000 households. The survey painted a mixed picture: while a small but growing segment of Singaporeans had developed a passion for reading, an increasing number of literate individuals had disengaged from books.[38] The percentage of literate persons who had read a book in the last 12 months had dropped to 50 percent from 57 percent in 1980. However, among readers, those spending three to nine hours weekly increased from 41 percent to 65 percent, and those reading 10 hours or more rose from 6 percent to 19 percent.[39]

Three years later, in 1996, Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong highlighted that while the number of computers per capita was often used to measure development, another equally important indicator to pay attention to was the number of books that the average person reads per year. He noted that the 1993 National Reading Survey reported that Singaporeans read 8.3 books annually, significantly behind Japan's 18 books and America's 25 books per person. "Becoming a developed country," Lee said, "means balancing economic growth with cultural and social achievements." He observed that "Singapore has some distance to go to catch up".[40]

The 1993 National Reading Survey coincided with the report by the Library 2000 Review Committee in 1994. The committee had been convened in 1992 to map out the transformation of library services to enhance Singapore's learning capacity and competitive edge. Among its key recommendations were establishing the National Library Board as a new statutory board and creating a tiered library network to serve diverse information needs as the country positioned itself to become a knowledge-based economy in the new millennium.[41]

Read On, Singapore

Since independence, nurturing the habit of reading has been viewed as a national priority, one whose goals have evolved in tandem with Singapore's development – from being vital to national survival in the 1960s and 1970s to enabling first-world aspirations in the 1980s and 1990s. Reading ability undergirded the ideal of the Singapore citizen-worker: a highly educated individual, fluent in both English and their mother tongue, who embraces lifelong learning to seize opportunities in a fast-changing global economy. Reading surveys played a crucial role in this journey, quantifying habits and highlighting concerns that mobilised multiple stakeholders in building a reading culture.

Today, reading competes with a dizzying array of digital distractions. However, its fundamental importance endures. As reading advocate and library pioneer Hedwig Anuar observed: "The death of reading has been forecast many a time with the advent of radio, television and the computer. But regardless of the newer forms of media, the future knowledge society or information society will ultimately depend on the ability to read, and to read with intelligence and discrimination."[42] Her remarks, written over 30 years ago, still resonate today. ♦

NOTES

1 *2024 National Reading Habits Study on Adults*, 14, 16, 64–65, 68, National Library Board Singapore, http://www.nlb.gov.sg/main/-/media/NLBMedia/Documents/About-Us/Press-Room-Publication/Research-and-Studies/NRHS-2024-Adults-20250619_full-report_for_publication.pdf.

2 Goh Chor Boon and S. Gopinathan, "The Development of Education in Singapore Since 1965," in *Toward a Better Future: Education and Training for Economic Development in Singapore Since 1965*, ed. Lee Sing Kiong et al. (Washington, DC: The World Bank, 2008), 13, 15, 18–19. (From National Library Singapore, call no. RSING 370.9595709045 TOW); Ho Wing Meng, "Education for Living or Singapore's Answer to the Problem of Technological Development Versus Cultural Heritage," in *Cultural Heritage Versus Technological Development: Challenges to Education* (Hong Kong: Maruzen Asia, 1981), 140. (From National Library Singapore, call no. RSING 370 CUL)

3 By 1966, learning a second language was made mandatory in primary and secondary schools, and by 1969, it became an examinable subject.

4 Lee Kok Cheong, "The Use of the English Language in Education in Singapore (With Special Reference to Science and Technology)," in *Cultural Heritage Versus Technological Development: Challenges to Education*, ed. Rolf E. Vente, R.S. Bhathal and Rukhyabai M. Nakhooda (Hong Kong: Maruzen Asia, 1981), 157. (From National Library Singapore, call no. RSING 370 CUL); Goh and Gopinathan, "The Development of Education in Singapore Since 1965," 14–15; Nirmala Purushotam, *Negotiating Multiculturalism: Disciplining Difference in Singapore* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2000), 67. (From National Library Singapore, call no.: RSING 306.44095957 PUR); Chia Yeow Tong, *Education, Culture and the Singapore Developmental State: "World-Soul" Lost and Regained?* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 45. (From National Library Singapore, call no. RSING 379.5957 CHI)

5 According to Lau Wai Har, there were five major studies on primary school pupils' reading habits, five for secondary school pupils, one for tertiary students and one for non-schooling adults. See Lau Wai Har, "Reading Research in Singapore: Trends & Prospects," in *The Reading Habit: Regional Seminar on the Promotion of the Reading Habit, Singapore, 7 to 10 September 1981* (Singapore: National Book Development Council of Singapore, 1983), 22–31. (From National Library Singapore, call no. RSING q028.9 REG-[LIB])

6 Teachers' Training College, *Reading Interests* (Singapore: The College, 1970), 1. (From National Library Singapore, call no. RCLOS 028.9095957 TEA)

7 Teachers' Training College, *Reading Interests*, 64. The compilers acknowledged that the popularity of newspaper reading among children should not be construed as an interest in current affairs, as "reading" in this case likely amounted to no more than a quick glance at the comics, sports and entertainment sections. See Teachers' Training College, *Reading Interests*, 16.

8 Teachers' Training College, *Reading Interests*, 63–64. At the time of the survey, public library services centred on the National Library on Stamford Road, complemented by part-time branches in Joo Chiat and Siglap, as well as a mobile library service that visited the Tanjong Pagar, West Coast, Nee Soon and Bukit Panjang community centres weekly. This limited reach, coupled with the relative inaccessibility of the National Library to those residing outside of the city, led to class and school libraries being more popular among young readers.

9 V. Perambulavil, "A Survey of Children's Reading; a Review Article," *Singapore Book World* 2, no. 1 (June 1971): 5–6. (From National Library Singapore, call no. RCLOS 070.5095957 SBW). V. Perambulavil was the coordinator of children's services at the National Library. Her review was adapted and published as "Once Upon a Time…," *New Nation*, 9 October 1971, 7. (From NewspaperSG)

10 Would rather read a book than watch television: 59.8 percent (English medium); 59.6 percent (Chinese medium); Preferred buying books to toys, sweets, or going to cinema: 66.4 percent (Malay medium), 58.8 percent (Chinese medium), 46.6 percent (English medium). See Teachers' Training College, *Reading Interests*, 22–24, 35, 54, 65.

11 The report mentioned of a "likelihood that the children might have been trying to please or impress their teachers by pretending a preference for books". See Teachers' Training College, *Reading Interests*, 24, 65.

12 The Teachers' Training College was restructured into the Institute of Education in 1973. Lau, "Reading Research in Singapore," 22–25; Goh Keng Swee and Education Study Team, *Report on the Ministry of Education 1978* (Singapore: Singapore National Printers, 1979), 4-1. (From National Library Singapore, call no. RSING 370.95957 SIN)

13 Goh and Education Study Team, *Report on the Ministry of Education 1978*, 1-1, 4-4. In August 1978, Deputy Prime Minister Goh Keng Swee was tasked to lead a study team to identify problems in Singapore's education system and propose solutions. The *Report on the Ministry of Education 1978* (also known as the Goh Report) gave rise to a system of ability-driven education based on streaming known as the New Education System.

14 The survey revealed that 33 percent of the Primary Six students sampled did not read any English books and 41 percent read only one to two books in the previous month. Even lighter reading materials like magazines and comics fared no better. Among those who took Chinese as a second language, 43 percent read no books, 39 percent no magazines, and 66 percent no comics. The situation was worst among those taking English as a second language with 67 percent reading no books, 81 percent no magazines and 81 percent no comics. See Institute of Education, *A Measure of Reading: IE Survey of Reading Interests and Habits* (Singapore: Institute of Education, 1978), 15–20, 48. (From National Library Singapore, call no. RSING 028.9095957 INS-[LIB])

15 Institute of Education, *A Measure of Reading*, Foreword.

16 Chua Sian Chin, "The Opening of the 10th Annual Festival of Books and Book Fair," speech, Hyatt Hotel Singapore, 26 August 1978, transcript, Ministry of Culture. (From National Archives of Singapore, document no. csc19780826s)

17 Institute of Education, *A Measure of Reading*, 16, 20, 34–35, 48.

18 Institute of Education, *A Measure of Reading*, 14, 42–43, 51; "Majority of Poor Pupils Read Only in One Language," *Straits Times*, 22 April 1978, 7 (From NewspaperSG)

19 Institute of Education, *A Measure of Reading*, 52–53.

20 Institute of Education, *A Measure of Reading*, 36, 50; "Up to Three Hours a Day Before the Box," *Straits Times*, 26 April 1978, 13. (From NewspaperSG)

21 Lau, "Reading Research in Singapore," 25.

22 The council was inaugurated on 13 February 1969. The idea for such an organisation was first proposed in November 1966 at a workshop on the problems of book production and distribution organised by the Library Association of Singapore. The formation of national book development councils to promote reading and development of the local book industry was encouraged by UNESCO to overcome the acute shortage of books in developing countries. See Hedwig Anuar, "Twenty-five Years of Book Development," *Singapore Book World* 23 (1993/1994): 1–8. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RSING 070.5095957 SBW)

23 Lu Lin Reutens, "Reading Habits of Singaporeans…," *New Nation*, 19 August 1975, 9. (From NewspaperSG)

24 National Book Development Council of Singapore, *First National Readership Survey* (Singapore: National Book Development Council of Singapore, 1981), v, xvii, 2, 4. (From National Library Singapore, call no. RCLOS 028.9095957 FIR-[LIB]); "Council Survey on the S'pore Reader," *Straits Times*, 13 April 1980, 11. (From NewspaperSG).

25 Gretchen Mahbubani, "Few Big Surprises," *Straits Times*, 25 July 1981, 14. (From NewspaperSG); National Book Development Council of Singapore, *First National Readership Survey*, 6, 9.

26 The proportion corresponded to some extent with the National Library's membership figures, which stood at 349,824 members by the end of FY1979, representing 14.8 percent of the population with children forming the largest group. See National Book Development Council, *First National Reading Survey*, 51; National Library Singapore, *National Library Report for the Period April 1979–March 1980* (Singapore: National Library, 1980), 10, 34. (From National Library Online)

27 National Book Development Council of Singapore, *First National Reading Survey*, 28.

28 National Book Development Council of Singapore, *First National Readership Survey*, 10–11.

29 Yeo Ning Hong, "The Launching of the Second National Reading Month," speech, DBS Auditorium, 17 August 1984, transcript, Ministry of Culture. (From National Archives of Singapore, document no. ynh19840817s)

30 "The Strategy for a Nation of Excellence," *Straits Times*, 2 December 1986, 26. (From NewspaperSG)

31 Audrey Wong, "The Report of the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts," in *The State and the Arts in Singapore*, ed. Terence Chong (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing, 2019), 111–112. (From National Library Singapore, call no. RSING 700.959570904 STA)

32 Committee on Literary Arts, *Report of the Committee on Literary Arts* (Singapore: Committee on Literary Arts, 1988), i. (From National Library Singapore, call no. RSING S820 SIN)

33 The 1980 and 1988 surveys had different sample populations. While the 1980 survey sampled 2,000 non-schooling respondents aged 15 to 49, the 1988 survey covered 1,000 respondents aged 12 and above, which included students.

34 Committee on Literary Arts, *Report of the Committee on Literary Arts*, 25–26.

35 In 1980, the main reasons for reading were general information (mentioned by 67.8 percent of respondents), pleasure (61 percent) and passing time (53.1 percent). By 1988, pleasure became the leading motivation (67 percent), followed closely by self-improvement (65 percent), passing time (64 percent) and increasing general knowledge (63 percent). The most dramatic change was in reading for information on a particular subject, which quadrupled from 11 percent in 1981 to 46 percent in 1988. See Committee on Literary Arts, *Report of the Committee on Literary Arts*, 27; Hedwig Anuar, "The Reading Habits of Singaporeans", *The Mirror: A Weekly Almanac of Current Affairs* 25, no. 19, (1 October 1989), 12. (From National Library Singapore, call no. RCLOS 320.9595 MM)

36 Committee on Literary Arts, *Report of the Committee on Literary Arts*, 27. By the end of FY1987, library membership reached 871,537 or 33 percent of the population, with adults forming the largest group. The significant increase occurred in tandem with the decentralisation of library services in the 1980s. Between the 1980 and 1988 surveys, the library network expanded with five new fulltime branches established in satellite towns outside of the city centre. This expansion, which increased the total number of fulltime branch libraries from three to eight, brought library services within easier reach of Singaporeans. See National Library Singapore, *National Library Report for the Period April 1987–March 1988* (Singapore: National Library, 1980), 6. (From National Library Online)

37 Committee on Literary Arts, *Report of the Committee on Literary Arts*, 25, 31–34, 38–50.

38 Ngian Lek Choh, "Singaporeans, Their Reading Habits and Interests," *Singapore Libraries* 24, (1995): 4–5, 8, 12; "Fewer Read, But Those Who Do, Read More," *Straits Times*, 18 May 1994, 2. (From NewspaperSG)

39 Ngian, "Singaporeans, Their Reading Habits and Interests," 4–5.

40 Lee Hsien Loong, "The Opening of the World Book Fair 1996," speech, World Trade Centre, 24 May 1996, transcript, Ministry of Information and the Arts (1985–1990). (From National Archives of Singapore, document no. lhl19960524s)

41 "Future of Public Library Services to Be Reviewed," *Straits Times*, 23 June 1992, 26. (From NewspaperSG); Library 2000 Review Committee, Singapore, *Library 2000: Investing in a Learning Nation: Report of the Library 2000 Review Committee* (Singapore: SNP Publishers, 1994), 3, 5–14. (From National Library Singapore, call no. RSING 027.05957 SIN)

42 Anuar, "Twenty-five Years of Book Development," 7.

THE HOUSE OF CHEANG

The Cheangs were once one of Singapore's most illustrious Baba-Nonya families.

By Walter Woon

The house at 233 Pasir Panjang Road, January 2024. It was built by Cheang Jim Chuan in around 1937. It was originally numbered 113 and named Palm Beach. The house has since been demolished and the Singapore Temple of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints will be built on the site. *Photo by Benjamin Teo (@thelionbricks on Instagram).*

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Until very recently, a grand house stood in the millionaires' enclave on Pasir Panjang Road. This was where rich Baba families built their seaside mansions. Named Palm Beach, the property was a reminder of the opulence that once characterised the prominent Baba-Nonya (or Peranakan) families of Singapore.[1] The house was built by Cheang Jim Chuan, a scion of the prominent Cheang family in colonial Singapore. Cheang Jim Chuan's father was the most famous of the Cheangs – Cheang Hong Lim, after whom Hong Lim Park is named. At one time, a substantial part of Chinatown was owned by Cheang Hong Lim and his relatives.

Cheang Sam Teo and the Opium Farm

According to family tradition, Cheang Hong Lim's father, Cheang Sam Teo (d. 1862), left Teang Thye Village in Fukien Province, China, around 1820. He may have first gone to Batavia (now Jakarta) in the Netherlands East Indies, where migrants from Teang Thye had established a temple.[2] Cheang Sam Teo, together with Tay Han Long (father of Tay Ho Swee), had a business at Telok Ayer Street under the chop Teang Wat.[3] Cheang Sam Teo made his fortune trading in the Nanyang and, by the 1840s, had become the Opium Farmer in Singapore.[4]

At the time, the sale of opium was both legal in the Straits Settlements and encouraged by the British East India Company. The right to distribute opium within a territory was auctioned to the highest bidder. This was the so-called opium farm. The opium farmer had an exclusive licence to distribute opium in return for a fee paid to the government. There were other types of revenue farms (such as gambier, spirits, toddy and pork), but the fees from the opium farm made up the bulk of the income of the Straits government.[5]

Although the opium farm was ostensibly awarded to a named individual, in reality he represented a syndicate, or *kongsi*.[6] No doubt the arrangements among members of the syndicate would have been governed by Chinese principles, but the commercial law of the Straits Settlements was entirely English.[7] In legal terms, this would have been a partnership. The farm would have had to have been held by a named individual as the concept of a company with a legal personality[8] was not established until the latter part of the 19th century.

The opium farm was mostly controlled by syndicates of merchants from a particular Chinese province. The different Chinese dialect groups

This photo of Cheang Hong Lim adorned the walls in the homes of many of his descendants, even two generations removed. *Image reproduced from Song Ong Siang, One Hundred Years' History of the Chinese in Singapore (London: John Murray, 1923), 168. Collection of the National Library Singapore (call no. RRARE 959.57 SON).*

formed self-help societies (such as clan associations) to aid migrants from the same province. These self-help societies, contrary to popular belief today, were neither illegal nor criminal.[9]

There was stiff competition as well as constant commercial rivalry between syndicates for the opium farm. When one syndicate obtained the farm, their rivals would try to break their monopoly by smuggling opium into the territory. This was not a crime as we know it today. Back then, there was no developed means of enforcing the monopoly against outsiders through a lawsuit for damages as one would do today. Instead, the opium farmer protected the syndicate's rights through private prosecutions; fines were levied which were shared between the prosecutor and the government. This was the way that private individuals obtained redress in contemporary England. The syndicates also employed revenue officers known as *chinteng*[10] to police their monopolies; these men were often from the same community as the leading members of the *kongsi* and did not always deal with infringements gently.

In Singapore, there was hostility between the Hokkiens and the Teochews, which resulted in riots on several occasions. Later in the 19th century,

One of Cheang Hong Lim's contributions was the construction of Giok Hong Tian temple (玉皇殿) located near the junction of Havelock and Zion roads. The temple is dedicated to the Jade Emperor (玉皇上帝; Yu Huang Shang Di) and established in 1887. *Photo by Jimmy Yap.*

Hong Lim Market, 1974. *Lim Hock Heng Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

colonial authorities designated some of the more violent elements of the clan and provincial associations as criminal "secret societies".[11] However, self-help societies remained an essential part of Chinese commercial life in the Straits Settlements, despite the abuses perpetrated by some of their members.

In the 1840s, Cheang Sam Teo and some other merchants formed a syndicate to acquire the opium farm and spirit farm (the two often were held by the same merchants). At the time of his death in 1862, Cheang Sam Teo was the spirit farmer in Singapore. His son Cheang Hong Lim became the spirit farmer the next year, presumably in partnership with others since legally his "share" in the syndicate could not be inherited. He was barely 21 at the time. Eventually, Cheang Hong Lim became a leading member of the Great Syndicate that held the opium and spirit farms for Singapore, Johor, Melaka and Riau (previously Rhio) from 1871 to 1879.[12]

Cheang Hong Lim

Cheang Hong Lim (1841–93) was one of the great philanthropists of Singapore and is commemorated by two streets in Singapore: Cheang Hong Lim Place and Cheang Wan Seng Place (Cheang Hong Lim's business was conducted under the name Chop Wan Seng).[13]

Besides being the farmer for opium and spirits, he also owned extensive tracts of land in Chinatown and was a "large house-property owner" particularly along Havelock Road. In 1876, he contributed funds to convert the empty land in front of the then Police Courts into a public garden.[14] This still bears his name today as Hong Lim Park. He also owned Hong Lim Market and would advance money liberally to stallholders. According to Song Ong Siang in *One Hundred Years' History of the Chinese in Singapore*, "[Cheang Hong Lim] was a man who trusted too readily to other people's honesty". When he died, it was discovered that the enormous sum of over $400,000 had been lent to "friends" and could not be recovered.[15]

Among his many public contributions to Singapore and the Straits Settlements was his donation to the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus (today's CHIJMES) for the construction of the long building on its southern boundary.[16] He also supported the charitable school in Penang, the Dutch elementary school and the Portuguese kindergarten. Together with his eldest son, Cheang Jim Hean, he established Yangzheng Academy, which taught Chinese and Western studies with six Chinese and six English teachers.[17]

Cheang Hong Lim's generosity extended beyond Singapore. He regularly contributed to flood and disaster relief in China, India and Egypt, raising large sums for the purpose. His philanthropy included hospitals, orphanages, homeless shelters, shelters for widows and community cemeteries.[18]

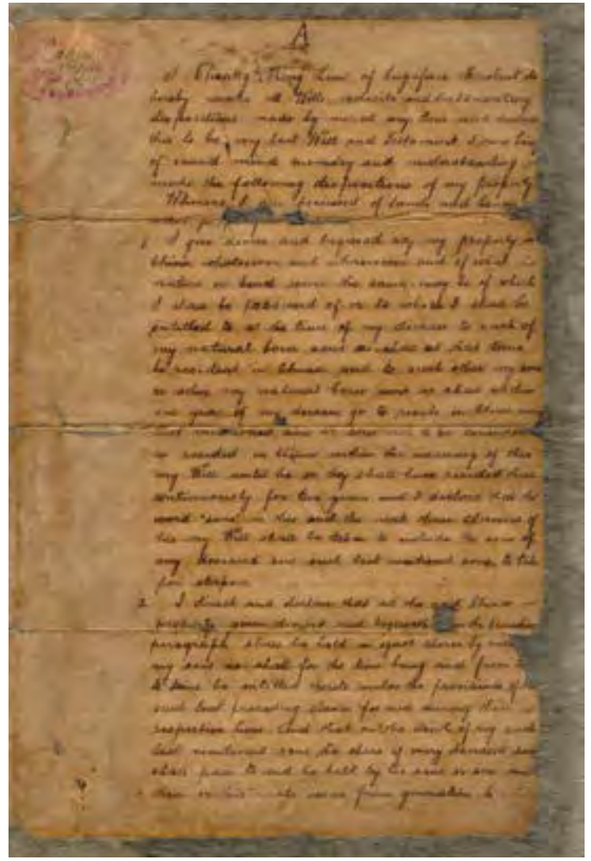
Despite being in Singapore, Cheang Hong Lim supported China's various war efforts. In 1869, he bought weapons and helped to transport provisions for troops defending Fukien against the French. In 1884, he provided intelligence on French military movements against China. For his efforts in supporting the coastal defence in Fukien, the Governor-General of the Fukien Province conferred upon him the title of Circuit Intendant.[19] Ironically, on the recommendation of Bishop Edouard Gasnier of Melaka-Singapore, he also received a medal for his acts of charity in Saigon (Vietnam) from the French government, who were presumably unaware of his support of China against French aggression.[20]

Chinese statesman Grand Mentor Li Hongzhang (1823–1901) sent a request to the Chinese Imperial Court in 1881 for the words "He takes delight in good deeds and loves to give aid to others" to be inscribed on a memorial arch in Cheang Hong Lim's ancestral village of Teang Thye (unfortunately, this arch no longer exists). In recognition of his contributions, Cheang Hong Lim was accorded Second Rank status and honours from the Ministry of Rites and was specially promoted to become a Salt Commissioner.[21]

Cheang Hong Lim was appointed a Justice of the Peace in Singapore in 1873.[22] Towards the end of his life, in 1892, he was recognised by colonial authorities (and succeeding Tan Kim Cheng) as the "head of the Hokien [sic] community, to whom disputes and misunderstandings among members of that community may properly be referred".[23] There was a grand celebration by the community on 1 October 1892 accompanied by the band of St Joseph's Institution.[24] He was also appointed to the Chinese Advisory Board, Singapore, in September 1892.[25]

However, great wealth attracts great envy. In 1872, Cheang Hong Lim was prosecuted by his younger brother, Cheang Hong Guan, for the alleged forgery of his father's will.[26] Cheang Hong Guan had won the bid for the Singapore, Johor and Melaka opium and spirit farms from 1870–71, but made a hash of it and lost a fortune.[27] Cheang Hong Lim and other merchants formed the Great Syndicate and took over the farms from 1871–79.[28] The prosecution brought by Cheang Hong Guan against his brother was presumably a form of retaliation.

The trial lasted five days. Cheang Hong Guan was the principal witness. The case collapsed ignominiously. Before the Defence Counsel had



(Above) The first page of the last will and testament of Cheang Hong Lim dated 13 December 1891. His two eldest sons Cheang Jim Hean and Cheang Jim Chuan, and eldest daughter Cheang Cheow Lean Neo were named the executors and trustees of his will. *Collection of the National Library Singapore.*

(Right) Cheang Hong Lim's ancestral tablet, with the names of his children on the left, c. 1978. *Ronni Pinsler Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

(Above) Wedding procession of Cheang Seok Cheng Neo (Cheang Jim Chuan's daughter) and Woon Chow Tat leaving Riviera at 112 Pasir Panjang Road, 27 September 1930. Riviera was acquired by the government and likely demolished in the 1970s. Pasir Panjang Road now runs through it. *Courtesy of Professor Walter Woon*.

(Right) Photo of Cheang Hong Lim's second son, Cheang Jim Chuan, taken on 23 May 1937 at his house, Palm Beach, 113 Pasir Panjang Road. *Courtesy of Professor Walter Woon.*

finished his speech, the jury stopped the trial because of the patent absurdity of the charge and the contradictions in the evidence of the witnesses. The Chief Justice of the Straits Settlements declared to Cheang Hong Lim that "you leave the Court without a stain on your honour".[29] Cheang Hong Guan, on the other hand, was jailed for his part in this farce.[30]

After 1879, the farm changed hands again. The new opium farmer alleged that the losers were smuggling opium to undermine their monopoly. Cheang Hong Lim was accused of being part of this so-called "Opium Conspiracy". In 1883, he was removed as a Justice of the Peace due to these allegations.[31] An article was published in the *Straits Intelligence* on 24 February 1883 giving vent to the allegations of conspiracy. Cheang Hong Lim responded in a very Singaporean way – he sued for defamation. Technically, he instituted a private prosecution for criminal defamation to be heard by the Police Magistrate.[32] There is no record of the result, but the *Straits Intelligence* disappears after that. Cheang Hong Lim was vindicated and reinstated as a Justice of the Peace in 1887.[33]

Cheang Hong Lim died on 11 February 1893, leaving a considerable fortune both in the Straits Settlements as well as China. The executors of his will (which is now part of the National Library's collection) were his eldest daughter, Cheang Cheow Lian Neo, and his two eldest sons, Cheang Jim Hean and Cheang Jim Chuan, who were minors at the time of his death. Unsurprisingly, there was a controversy about the administration of the estate – Lim Kwee Eng, his agent and his daughter's (Cheang Cheow Lian Neo) husband, had presumably wanted to control everything. Litigation followed in 1896. The court ordered Dr Lim Boon Keng (an eminent figure in the Straits Chinese community, who had also worked for Cheang Hong Lim) to prepare a scheme for the division of Cheang Hong Lim's estate. The scheme was duly approved by Chief Justice Cox on 4 February 1901.[34] Unfortunately, it was not wholly carried out and to this day, there remain slivers of land in Singapore still registered in the name of the Estate of Cheang Hong Lim.

End of an Era

What then became of the House of Cheang? It is said that wealth only lasts three generations and the Cheangs were no exception. The first was Cheang Sam Teo. The second was his son Cheang Hong Lim. The third was Hong Lim's second son Cheang Jim Chuan (Cheang Jim Hean, the eldest, died in 1901).[35]

Very little is recorded of Cheang Jim Chuan. He was known principally as the son of Cheang Hong Lim. His income was derived from landed property.[36] At the beginning of the 20th century, he lived at 10 Mohamed Sultan Road before moving to 6 Nassim Road. In the 1920s, the family moved again, this time to a grand house named Riviera at 112 Pasir Panjang Road owned by Cheang Jim Chuan's wife, Chan Kim Hong Neo.[37]

Chan Kim Hong Neo died on 1 March 1934. Riviera was sold by the executors of her will, Cheang Theam Chu, Cheang Theam Kee and Cheang Seok Hean Neo (who were also her children. Her husband, Cheang Jim Chuan, had renounced his appointment as executor of her will).[38] The house was purchased by Cheang Jim Chuan from the estate in April 1935 for $20,000.[39]

Upon Chan Kim Hong Neo's death, the family of Cheang Jim Chuan lived temporarily at 38, 40 and 42 Cairnhill Road. These houses were bought from the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank for $140,000 on a mortgagee's sale of the property of Tan Kah Kee.[40] In the meantime, Cheang Jim Chuan began building his new house called Palm Beach at 113 Pasir Panjang Road. The formal conveyance of the property from Hugh Zehnder (the family lawyer) to Cheang Theam Kee (presumably as trustee for his father Cheang Jim Chuan) was executed on 19 May 1937.[41] Cheang Jim Chuan moved into Palm Beach in May or June 1937 and his sons held a birthday dinner for him there on 18 June.[42]

Cheang Jim Chuan did not live in Palm Beach for very long as he died on 22 May 1940. According to his will, dated 15 April 1939, his fortune was left to his two sons, four daughters and several grandchildren. Palm Beach was left to his second wife Koh Guek Chew Neo, his son Cheang Theam Kee and daughters Cheang Seok Hean Neo and Cheang Seok Chin Neo.

Following Japan's attack on Malaya on 8 December 1941 that signalled the start of the Second World War in Singapore, the British ordered the residents of the beachfront houses in Pasir Panjang to evacuate sometime around 12 December 1941.[43] The Cheangs never returned to 113 Pasir Panjang Road. It was sold to Yap Ee Chian on 15 June 1946 and was eventually bought by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the 1980s.

The Japanese Occupation ruined many of the old Baba-Nonya families. The Japanese extorted money from the Chinese of the Straits Settlements and stole whatever valuables they could from the grand houses of the Baba-Nonya community. Many families had to sell their properties to survive. The end of the war and the return of the King in 1945 found the Baba-Nonya community much diminished in influence and affluence. After the war, rent control (the Control of Rent Ordinance was passed in 1947) also made it impossible to live off income from property. The last tangible reminder of the House of Cheang was the big house on Pasir Panjang Road. However, this house was recently demolished and the Singapore Temple of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints will be built on the site. ♦

NOTES

1 The title deeds pertaining to this property were donated to the National Library Board by Professor Walter Woon.
2 Information from a delegation of officials from Changtai District of Zhangzhou Municipality, 19 December 2024. The delegation was researching the history of people from Changtai who had emigrated to the Nanyang. Before arriving in Singapore they had visited Jakarta.
3 Song Ong Siang, *One Hundred Years' History of the Chinese in Singapore* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1984), 168–70. (From National Library Singapore, call no. RSING 959.57 SON-[HIS])
4 Carl A. Trocki, "The Rise of Singapore's Great Opium Syndicate 1840–86," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 18, no. 1 (March 1987): 65 (From JSTOR via NLB's eResources website). He held the Johor and Singapore Opium and Spirit Farms together with Lao Joon Teck from 1847–60.
5 Trocki, "The Rise of Singapore's Great Opium Syndicate 1840–86," 60–62.
6 Trocki, "The Rise of Singapore's Great Opium Syndicate 1840–86," 62. For a discussion of the nature of these business organisations see Lynn Pan, ed. *The Encyclopedia of the Chinese Overseas* (Singapore: Archipelago Press, 1998), 91–92. (From National Library Singapore, call no. RSING 304.80951 ENC)
7 This was eventually formalised in the Civil Law Ordinance 1878, which provided that English commercial law would apply in the Straits Settlements. The English Partnership Act 1890 remains law in Singapore till today.
8 Joint-stock companies as we know them today are legal entities separate from the persons who own the shares. This means that a company can hold property (e.g. a licence) in its own name. A partnership does not have a legal personality; consequently, one of the partners must be registered as licence-holder even though it is the partnership that runs the business.
9 Irene Lim, *Secret Societies in Singapore* (Singapore: National Heritage Board, Singapore History Museum, 1999), 9–10. (From National Library Singapore, call no. RSING 366.095957 LIM)
10 Trocki, "The Rise of Singapore's Great Opium Syndicate 1840–86," 69.
11 These criminal elements were banned by the Societies Ordinance 1889.
12 Trocki, "The Rise of Singapore's Great Opium Syndicate 1840–86," 65.
13 Tan Ban Huat, "Cheang Hong Lim – The Big Property Owner and Philanthropist," *Straits Times*, 14 October 1977, 8. (From NewspaperSG)
14 Song, *One Hundred Years' History of the Chinese in Singapore*, 168-170.; Tan Ban Huat, "Cheang Hong Lim – The Big Property Owner and Philanthropist."
15 Song, *One Hundred Years' History of the Chinese in Singapore*, 168–70.
16 Song, *One Hundred Years' History of the Chinese in Singapore*, 169.
17 Epitaph for Cheang Hong Lim composed by Huan Zunxian, Chinese Consul General in Singapore, in 1893. Reproduced in Kenneth Dean and Hue Guan Thye, *Chinese Epigraphy in Singapore 1819–1911* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2017), chapter 41. (From National Library Singapore, call no. RSING 495.111 DEA)
18 Dean and Hue, *Chinese Epigraphy in Singapore 1819–1911*, chapter 41.
19 Dean and Hue, *Chinese Epigraphy in Singapore 1819–1911*, chapter 41.
20 Song, *One Hundred Years' History of the Chinese in Singapore*, 169.
21 Song, *One Hundred Years' History of the Chinese in Singapore*, 169.
22 "Untitled," *Straits Times Overland Journal*, 10 April 1873, 8. (From NewspaperSG)
23 Letter from W.E. Maxwell, Colonial Secretary, dated 7 September 1892; reported in the *Daily Advertiser*, 13 September 1892. See "Local and General," *Daily Advertiser*, 13 September 1892, 3. (From NewspaperSG)
24 "Local and General," *Daily Advertiser*, 1 October 1892, 3; "Summary of the Week," *Straits Times Weekly Issue*, 5 October 1892, 1. (From NewspaperSG)
25 Straits Settlements, *Government Gazette*, 9 September 1892.
26 Song, *One Hundred Years' History of the Chinese in Singapore*, 167–68. "Fortnight's Summary" *Straits Times*, 27 April 1872, 1. (From NewspaperSG)
27 Trocki, "The Rise of Singapore's Great Opium Syndicate 1840–86," 78.
28 Trocki, "The Rise of Singapore's Great Opium Syndicate 1840–86," 65.
29 Song, *One Hundred Years' History of the Chinese in Singapore*, 168.
30 "Fortnight's Summary"; Song, *One Hundred Years' History of the Chinese in Singapore*, 168.
31 "Untitled," *Straits Times*, 24 February 1883, 2. (From NewspaperSG)
32 "Magistrate's Court," *Straits Times*, 12 March 1883, 11. (From NewspaperSG)
33 "Local and General," *Straits Times Weekly Issue*, 6 July 1887, 2. (From NewspaperSG); "The Jubilee," *Straits Times Weekly*, 6 July 1887, 7. (From NewspaperSG)
34 Recitals in the Deed of Acknowledgement between Lim Swee Neo and Cheang Jim Chuan, 29 June 1909.
35 Cheang Hong Lim's eldest daughter, Cheang Chow Lean Neo, had married Lim Kwee Eng, Cheang Hong Lim's manager and agent. A notice announcing his appointment was published in the newspapers on 13 October 1890. By custom, Cheang Chow Lian Neo became part of Lim Kwee Eng's family upon her marriage; her descendants did not bear the Cheang name.
36 Arnold Wright and H.A. Cartwright (Eds.), *Twentieth Century Impressions of British Malaya* (London: Lloyd's Greater Britain Publishing Company Ltd, 1908), 637. (From National Library Singapore, call no. RSING 959.51033 TWE)
37 Will of Chan Kim Hong Neo dated 13 January 1933. (From NL Online). Chan Kim Hong Neo was herself wealthy, owning several properties and substantial jewellery. These properties were probably inherited from her father Chan Cheng Wah.
38 Renunciation of Probate filed on 22 March 1934. Probate No. 92 of 1934.
39 "Property Sale," *Straits Times*, 18 April 1935, 9. (From NewspaperSG)
40 Conveyance, dated 17 September 1934.
41 At this point Cheang Jim Chuan returned the Cairnhill properties to the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank. 42 Cairnhill Road was subsequently purchased by Tan Chin Tuan. The house still stands today.
42 "Domestic Occurrences Announcement," *Malaya Tribune*, 16 June 1937, 12. (From NewspaperSG)
43 An application for leave by Woon Chow Tat dated 11 December 1941 listed the reason for application (somewhat blandly) as "evacuation". (From Professor Walter Woon's personal collection)

LUÍS DE CAMÕES

IN ASIA

Portugal's most important poet was once imprisoned in Goa, saw fighting in Ternate, was shipwrecked near the Mekong Delta and worked as the Superintendent for the Dead and Missing in Macau.

By Isabel Rio Novo

Isabel Rio Novo has a master's degree in History of Portuguese Culture (Modern Period) and a doctorate in Comparative Literature from the University of Porto. She teaches art history and creative writing at the University of Maia, and has written academic publications in these fields. She is also a fiction writer. Her latest books are *Fortune, Occasion, Time and Luck* (2024), a biography of Luís de Camões and *The Matter of the Stars* (2025), which won the City of Almada Literary Prize.

In April 1553, the fleet that set sail from the port of Lisbon bound for the East carried on board, among its men-at-arms, a young man in his 20s who had been released from prison just over 15 days earlier. He had been arrested in June the previous year for having slashed a servant of the king with his sword during a solemn religious procession. Using a common legal expedient of the time, the young man had begged the king's pardon in exchange for serving him in India, and the king had granted him this favour.

Like many of the men who went aboard ships to defend the military positions that the Portuguese had conquered in the East, this young man was a squire, a member of the lesser nobility without a noble title or fortune, with nothing, really, apart from some distant family ties with certain noble families and an extraordinary humanist culture, acquired in Coimbra, the university city, where he had studied thanks to an uncle. In Lisbon, he became known by his gifts of poetic improvisation, which he demonstrated in palace evenings and in some plays, but also in taverns and brothels where he lived among sailors, soldiers, slaves and prostitutes.

The young man already had his brushes with the law, caused by his tempestuous temperament and aggravated by a forbidden love affair with a lady of the queen who was well above his social position. He had even served as a soldier in North Africa, near Ceuta, where a spark from a cannon fired near him had gouged out his right eye, disfiguring him for the rest of his life.

Even if this impediment had not been a condition inherent to his release from the shackles of the Lisbon prison, leaving for India was the natural option for any member of the Portuguese lower nobility in the mid-16th century, who hoped to be enriched or become great through a career in arms. The difference is that Luís Vaz de Camões, as the young man was called, was a poet of exceptional talent.

Born in Lisbon in either 1524 or 1525, Camões is considered Portugal's greatest poet and has been compared to Shakespeare, Milton, Homer, Virgil and Dante. Camões is the author of *Os Lusíadas* (*The Lusiads*), first published in 1572, an epic poem that is regarded as the most important work of Portuguese literature (*Lusiads* means "Portuguese" and comes from Lusitania, the ancient Roman word for Portugal.) Comprising 10 cantos, 1,102 stanzas and 8,816 lines of verse, the poem celebrates Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama's discovery of a sea route to India.

What also makes *Os Lusíadas* interesting is that this epic Portuguese poem has strong links with Asia. Camões spent 17 eventful years outside Portugal, living mainly in Asia, and wrote most of *The Lusiads* during his time in the region. While he was here, he fought in wars in India and Indonesia, was imprisoned in Goa, and sailed past Singapore while heading north to Macau where he lived briefly. He was shipwrecked in the South China Sea on his way back to Goa and lived in poverty in Mozambique. Not surprisingly, parts of his epic poem draw directly from his many experiences and keen observations of people and places.

Life in Goa and Beyond

Camões arrived in Goa after six months of "bad living"[1] – the normal duration of a voyage across the Atlantic Ocean, rounding the Cape of Good Hope at the tip of Africa, and repeating the route that the navigator Vasco da Gama had first taken in 1497. The poet's journey was not one of the worst, despite the terrible storms, the illnesses on board, and the constant shortage of food and fresh water, which he would later describe in verse. Upon disembarking, India seemed to him, as it did to any European of his time, like "another world".[2]

There was the heat, the lush vegetation, the unfamiliar aromas, the people of different races – with peculiar clothing and manners – and speaking a variety of languages. Among the Indians, a keen eye like Camões' would quickly distinguish the light-skinned, mystical-looking Brahmins, who "do not kill living things", from the darker-skinned untouchables, who performed the hardest or most ignoble tasks.[3] The discovery of the caste system

(Facing page) A miniature of Luís de Camões that was allegedly painted in 1581. *From Wikimedia Commons.*

(Right) The cover (top) of the first edition of *Os Lusíadas* (*The Lusiads*), published in Lisbon in 1572, and the final canto (Canto Decimo or Canto X) of the poem. *From the Library of Congress.*

would be described in *The Lusiads*, as would other aspects of Hinduism, such as the tradition of individuals going to die in the Ganges River.

Afonso de Albuquerque, the first Portuguese viceroy of India, had conquered Goa in November 1510, after bloody battles that Camões would recall in his epic poem. Four decades later, the city that served as the Portuguese capital of the East had preserved traces of the Portuguese victories (some of them still visible today), both in its architecture and in the testimonies of the elders who had taken part in the events.

The Portuguese heroes that Camões had read about in chronicles were there, buried under the slabs of churches, remembered on tombstones and depicted in portraits displayed in the palace of the viceroys, also known as the Savoia palace. The buildings, the statues, the churches that had been built, the wall that had defended the city of Goa, which had been torn down in some places, and the red earth that Camões had walked on had been conquered at the cost of much bloodshed. His project for an epic poem that would become *The Lusiads*, which had certainly begun to germinate in his youth, was growing stronger.

The strategy of Portuguese rule in Asia was not the total conquest of the territory, but the possession of a series of trading posts on the coast – the so-called *feitorias* – which were supported by fortresses and a permanent military force. For this reason, the life of the men-at-arms in India was a continuous series of land and sea expeditions.

Each year, several fleets set out from Goa to defend the regions that were important for dominating trade. One fleet, known as the Northern Fleet, headed towards the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea, where the Portuguese captains went to the Strait of Hormuz to await Turkish ships, with the dual objective of preventing their passage and seizing their cargo. The conquest of the city of Hormuz, at the mouth of the Persian Gulf, allowed the Portuguese to control this narrow and obligatory passage between the Arabian Sea and the Persian Gulf, through which, before the route around the Cape of Good Hope was discovered, goods from the East and the West were traded.

Another fleet, known as the Southern Fleet, set out from Goa, skirted the western coast of Malabar as far as Cape Comorin (now known as Kanyakumari in Tamil Nadu) at the southern tip of the Indian subcontinent, then rounded it and continued to Ceylon (present-day Sri Lanka). In addition to these regular fleets, others set out sporadically for any point in the East where the Portuguese had economic or military interests, such as the Sunda (the term used to refer to the islands of Sumatra, Java and the Moluccan archipelago), China or Japan.

Camões had gone to India as a soldier and, less than two months after his arrival in Goa, embarked on a military expedition to intervene in a conflict between two Indian kingdoms over some islets. Now, while one of those kingdoms was a vassal of Portugal, the other was on the side of the Zamorin of Calicut (the hereditary ruler of the Kingdom of Calicut, a prominent trading centre on the Malabar Coast in southern India) and was hindering the Portuguese trade in precious pepper. The Portuguese, who were greater in number, had advanced weapons, while the subjects of the so-called King of Pepper fought with bows and arrows. The battle was devastating for the population of the islets. When narrating in verse his military debut in the East, Camões did not give in to any heroic impulses, but rather spoke of the vanity and cruelty of war: "I saw in our own people such hauteur / and in the land's owners so little, against whom / it was at once necessary to make war."[4] It seems certain that, from the beginning, the life of a soldier in the East disappointed him.

Imprisonment in Goa

After a second military campaign in the Persian Gulf, Camões returned to Goa in early 1554. The city, and in fact the entire Portuguese East, seemed to him a "Babylon, from which flows / the material for all the evil the world creates". A system of corruption, extortion, venality and despotism was rife in all strata of society. Even soldiers and sailors, as Camões had witnessed, were not exempt from unworthy acts, for during military campaigns they plundered and murdered cruelly. Giving voice to his indignation, Camões wrote satirical poems criticising the prevailing corruption and debauchery. And since satire was forbidden by law, he was incarcerated in the Goa prison by Governor Francisco Barreto.

There is a portrait of Camões by an unknown artist, dated 1556, showing him in a prison cell overlooking the Mandovi River in Goa.[5] He is sitting at a table on which rests an inkwell with two feathers and some handwritten sheets. Behind Camões, we can see part of a narrow cot, with a sea chart unfolded on it. Above the cot, there are two suspended shelves with several bound books. Camões is dressed in civilian clothes. He is imprisoned, it is true, but he seems to enjoy some privileges. His feet are not shackled, and he is seated at his worktable surrounded by the tools of his trade.

On the topmost sheet of paper on the table, we can make out "Canto X" (the last canto of *The Lusiads*). If we had any doubts about the long years of preparation, versions and successive revisions that Camões dedicated to his epic poem, this portrait dispels them. In Goa, Camões was already working on the last canto of *The Lusiads*, the one that mentions the regions of the Far East. At the time the portrait was painted, it is likely that the poet needed maps as he had not yet visited these places.

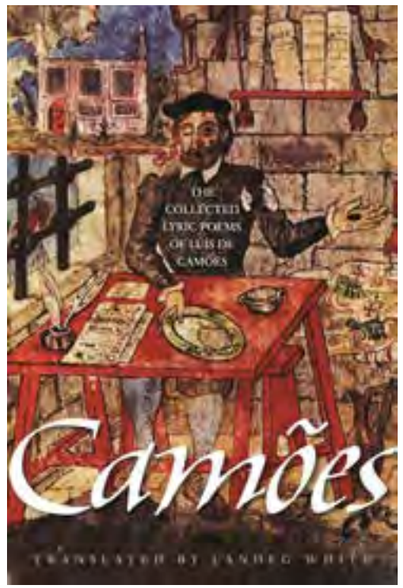
Sojourn to Southeast Asia

Prison, however, was only the first part of the punishment. After a few weeks, in 1556, Camões was exiled: he was sent on the Maluco voyage or the China voyage, the two main routes that the southern fleets followed in the 16th century, connecting Goa to the most distant regions of East Asia. The dangers of these distant seas and these regions – where Portuguese presence was still so tenuous – were extremely grave that despite economic incentives, not everyone was willing to go there. Hence, the majority of those who travelled to these lands were poor soldiers or those who had incurred disciplinary penalties, like Camões.

In April 1556, the Southern Fleet, which Camões was following, set out from Goa, sailed along the western coast of India, stopped at Cochin and rounded Cape Comorin. From there, the ships turned eastwards to avoid the dangerous southerly winds and sailed as close as possible to the eastern coast of India until they gained the necessary length to reach the channel between the Nicobar Islands and from there enter the Strait of Melaka, the richest port of call in the East.

Whoever controlled Melaka, and at the time it was the Portuguese, effectively controlled the routes through the straits that allowed them to reach the great centres of production of spices and other luxury goods, namely China, Japan and the Moluccas. Camões saw, among other things, cloves from the islands of Tidore and Ternate, cinnamon from Ceylon, nutmeg from Banda, white sandalwood from Timor, camphor from Borneo, benzoin and gold from Sumatra, silver and copper from Japan, and porcelain from China and Siam.

From Melaka, Camões set sail for Ternate in the Moluccas archipelago, the island where an active volcano, a rather unusual sight for a Portuguese from the mainland, impressed him. He described the "boiling / peak, which throws out the billowing flames" in the verse, "With Unusual Strength".[6] In Ternate, where the Portuguese had settled since the 1520s, Portuguese influence had been declining for some years, and there were frequent revolts against the captains, who were mainly interested in their personal affairs and who cruelly repressed the locals.



The cover of *The Collected Lyric Poems of Luís de Camões* (Princeton University Press, 2008), translated by Landeg White, features the painting of the poet in a prison cell in Goa (1556).

Given that Camões left Goa in 1556 and that he spent "a large part of his life" in Ternate and, no less importantly, that he refers to the orders of "fierce Mars" (the Roman god of war), it is almost

certain that the poet was involved in the serious events that took place in Ternate in 1558. Captain-General Duarte de Eça, wanting to seize the clove spice of the island of Makian which belonged to Sultan Hairun of Ternate, invented a pretext to imprison the latter and his family in inhumane conditions. Outraged, the inhabitants of Ternate reached an agreement with the neighbouring king of Tidore and attacked the Portuguese fortress. Duarte de Eça's stubbornness and relentless cruelty eventually led to a revolt by the Portuguese themselves. Soldiers and locals arrested the captain of Ternate and freed Sultan Hairun and his family.

We do not know how Camões took part in these battles, whether among the soldiers who remained loyal to Duarte de Eça or among those who rebelled against the captain of the fortress. We do know that around 1560, Camões was back in Goa, having taken from the Moluccas – in addition to the scars and memories stained with "blood and regret" – another dose of deep disillusionment. But this first trip through the most remote regions of the East would later allow him to describe them with the truthfulness of an eyewitness.

The bronze bust of Luís de Camões in the grotto at the Luís de Camões Garden in Macau. Camões is believed to have completed *The Lusiads* in the grotto. *Photo by LN9267, from Wikimedia Commons.*

Stopover in Singapore and Life in Macau

In 1562, India was governed by D. Francisco Coutinho, Count of Redondo, who favoured the poet, appointing him Superintendent for the Dead and Missing for Macau on the voyage to China, a modest administrative position. Whenever someone died, the superintendent identified the deceased, sold their assets and kept the money collected so that it could later be forwarded to the legitimate heirs.

Camões set off in 1562 with Captain Pero Barreto, to whom the voyage had been assigned. The itinerary from Melaka to Macau was recorded in Canto Decima, or Canto X, of *The Lusiads*.[7]

The Portuguese ships bound for the Chinese coast left Melaka and stopped at "the tip of the land, Singapore […], where the path for the ships narrows". Going up the coast, they touched the kingdoms of Pam and Patane, on the eastern coast of the Malay peninsula, where they made a stopover. From there, crossing the Gulf of Siam to the northeast, they saw "the length of Siam" and its river Menon, which bathes "a thousand unknown nations". They then headed for the island of Pulo Condor, located on the southeast coast of the Indochinese peninsula, bordering Cambodia and within sight of the Mekong and Champa rivers. From Pulo Condor, the route of the Portuguese ships followed northwards, along the coast, skirting the coast of "Cochinchina" (now known as Vietnam) to Pulo Catão, an island located at the southern entrance to the Gulf of Tonkin. Passing south of the large island of Hainan, the Portuguese were already skirting the "proud empire" of China. The ships then headed for the islands off the coast of the Chinese province of Guangdong. In 1562, the port they called at was Macau, where the Portuguese had recently established themselves. It was the port of departure for goods from China and the port of entry into the Middle Kingdom for products from Goa, Melaka, the Moluccas and Japan.

Although there is no documentary evidence, it is difficult to doubt that Camões spent time in Macau, as attested by ancient biographers and memorialised in the famous Camões cave in Patane (a grotto within the Luís de Camões Garden in Macau) where the poet is believed to have spent time and written his epic poem. Interestingly, a late manuscript by the Jesuits in Macau records the sale by the priests of a plot of land identified as "the ground of Campo dos Patanes next to the rocks of Camões", showing that, beneath the legend, there must be a grain of truth.[8]

In Macau, Camões was assured of his livelihood, lived with a Chinese girl and had the peace of mind to finish *The Lusiads*. However, in 1564, another captain arrived in Macau. Dismissed from his position, Camões was due to return to Goa but on that voyage, he was shipwrecked somewhere in the South China Sea, near the Mekong River Delta, managing to save himself "on a raft". He described this shipwreck in his epic poem, referring to the Mekong as the "captain of the waters" who welcomed him calmly and gently after the shipwreck. Camões had lost his Chinese companion, his personal belongings, the estate of the deceased in his care, but he managed to save the manuscript of *The Lusiads*, the "wet poem", as he calls them, alluding to the fact that they were rescued from the water.

Rescued, it is not known exactly when or how (Wilhelm Storck, a 19th-century biographer, suggests that Camões and the other survivors may have been welcomed by some Buddhist community, and, in fact, in the passage in which he recalled his shipwreck, the poet made a sympathetic reference to the Buddhist people who lived on the banks of the Mekong[9]), Camões arrived in Goa without the funds for the deceased for which he was responsible. He became the subject of an investigation and the few possessions he had managed to save from the shipwreck were confiscated as compensation. A decade and a half after disembarking at the Santa Catarina pier in Goa, Camões was still poor and had no reason to want to remain in India. His wish was to return to Lisbon and publish *The Lusiads*.

Pero Barreto, the new captain of Sofala and Mozambique, with whom he had earlier travelled to Macau, offered him passage. But the two men subsequently broke off relations and Camões was stranded on the island of Mozambique, where he remained for almost two years in extreme poverty since he had no money to pay for passage on another ship. He was helped by the future historian Diogo do Couto and some friends who paid for his trip to Lisbon.[10] Camões bade a farewell to the East, where he had lived for 17 years.

Return to Lisbon

Camões arrived in Lisbon in April 1570 and published *The Lusiads* in 1572. This modern-day epic, celebrating the voyages of the Portuguese and the glorious deeds of their recent history, was imbued with the experiences of its author. Like the poet's life, his writing was also "scattered throughout the world in pieces",[11] as described in the verse, "Next to a dry, wild and barren mountain", and much of that world was Asia.

Although his years of military service earned him a meagre pension of 15,000 reis per year and the publication of *The Lusiads* brought him some fame, Camões lived his last years destitute and ill. He had a few friends, his elderly mother who survived him and a former Jau slave (a term that, for the Portuguese of the time, included without distinction Javanese and Malays), who may have come with him from the East. This faithful friend, who begged for alms at night so that Camões' house would not run out of coal, died a few months before the poet.

Luís de Camões, the greatest Portuguese poet, died on 10 June 1580 (today celebrated as the national day of Portugal) in a hospital in Lisbon "without having a blanket to cover himself with".[12] ♦

The tomb of Luís de Camões in the Jerónimos Monastery, Lisbon, 2022. *Photo by Yair Haklai, from Wikimedia Commons.*

The statue of Luís de Camões in Luís de Camões Square, Lisbon, 2019. *Photo by Chabe01, from Wikimedia Commons.*

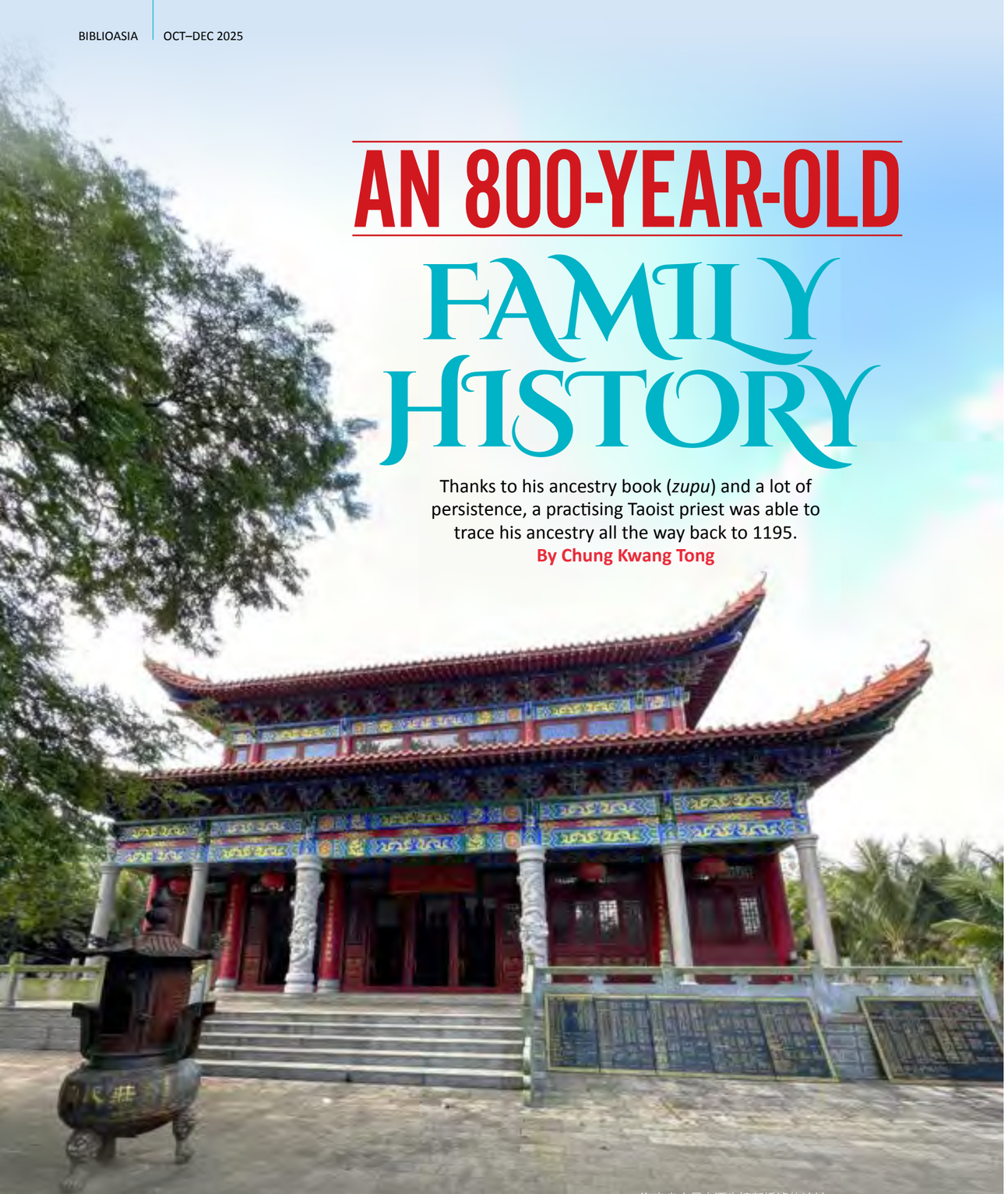
NOTES

1 Letter from Luís de Camões sent from Goa to a friend in Lisbon in 1554. The excerpts from Camões' works cited in this article were translated by Isabel Rio Novo, from the edition by Maria Vitalina Leal de Matos of the *Complete Works of Luís Vaz de Camões* (Lisbon: E-Primatur, 2019). Volume I – Epics & Letters; Volume II – Lyric; Volume III – Theatre.
2 Letter from Luís de Camões sent from Goa to a friend in Lisbon in 1554.
3 Luís de Camões, *Os Lusíadas (The Lusiads)*, canto VII, stanzas 38 to 40 (Lisboa, Portugal: Antonio Gonçalves, 1572), Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/2021666936/.
4 Luís de Camões narrated the expedition in verse in the elegy, "The Poet Simonides, speaking". Simonides of Ceos (c. 556–468/7 BCE) was a Greek poet of the Archaic to Classical period. He was known for his diverse poetic forms, including elegies, epigrams and various lyric genres.
5 The small parchment illumination was revealed by Maria Antonieta Soares de Azevedo, in an article published in 1972 in the magazine *Panorama*. The portrait was exhibited to the public in the same year at the National Library of Portugal in an exhibition to mark the fourth centenary of the publication of *The Lusiads*. The portrait now belongs to a private collector.
6 Camões' experiences on the island of Ternate were described in the verse, "With Unusual Strength".
7 Camões, Os Lusíadas (*The Lusiads*), canto X, stanzas 123 to 129.
8 The manuscript, "Title of the real estate of this College of Macau", an 18th-century copy of a 17th-century original, is held by the Biblioteca da Ajuda in Lisbon.
9 Wilhelm Storck, *Vida e Obras de Luís de Camões: Primeira Parte: Versão do Original Alemão Annotada por Carolina Michaëlis de Vasconcellos* (Lisboa: Academia Real das Ciências, 1898), Biblioteca Nacional Digital, https://purl.pt/43902.
10 Diogo do Couto described this meeting with Camões on the island of Mozambique in *Da Asia de Diogo de Couto: Dos Feitos que os Portugueses Fizeram na Conquista, e Descobrimento das Terras, e mares do Oriente: Decada Sexta, Parte Primeira* (Lisboa: Na Regia Officina Typografica, 1781), Internet Archive, https://archive.org/details/A209014/page/n5/mode/2up.
11 Luís de Camões, "Next to a dry, wild and barren mountain".
12 Note by Friar José Índio of the Discalced Carmelites of Guadalajara, Spain, on the title page of the copy of *The Lusiads*, Lisbon, Oficina de António Gonçalves, 1572, in the custody of the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center.

AN 800-YEAR-OLD FAMILY HISTORY

Thanks to his ancestry book (*zupu*) and a lot of persistence, a practising Taoist priest was able to trace his ancestry all the way back to 1195.

By Chung Kwang Tong



Exterior view of the ancestral hall dedicated to Zhuang Sizong in the village of Xianling in Tanniu town, Wenchang (海南省文昌市潭牛镇新桥墟仙岭村), 2024. It honours over 20 generations of the Zhuang lineage. On the right are stone steles inscribed with the names of contributors to the reconstruction of the hall. These stone steles have since been mounted onto the walls inside the hall. *Courtesy of Chung Kwang Tong.*

Chung Kwang Tong is an ordained Taoist priest and an active participant in Singapore's inter-faith sector. He is the president of the Quan Zhen Cultural Society and has a Masters in Malay Studies from the National University of Singapore.

One afternoon in the mid-1990s, when I was around 12, I found myself flipping through a book that my grandfather had pulled from his drawer. It was our family's *zupu* (族谱), the genealogical record that traces the Zhuang (庄) lineage through generations. My mother turned to a page and ran her finger down the rows of names. "There you are," she said, pointing at the Chinese characters of my name. I saw my father's name above mine, followed by my grandfather's… My mother moved her finger further up the page. "That's your great-grandfather… and your great-great-grandfather…" she continued.

A sense of wonder stirred within me. Who were these people? Where had they lived? What were their lives like? My family's genealogical record awakened a curiosity within me and a deep desire to understand where I came from.

Just then, something caught my eye. Above my name, there were stickers and pen markings – something wasn't right. Looking closer, I realised a glaring error: I have been mistakenly recorded as my uncle's son instead of my father's. My grandfather had manually corrected the error in his copy of the *zupu*, but the official records remained wrong. I remembered feeling a surge of frustration. What's the point of fixing our copy but not in the original record? Isn't that wrong? I was just a child in primary school then, who would even take me seriously? The desire to correct the mistake in the *zupu* never truly left me though.

Over the years, my parents would often take me to visit our ancestral village Dayou (大有村) in the town of Huiwen in Wenchang city, Hainan province (海南省文昌市会文镇), but we never managed to connect with the people in charge of the *zupu*. Our relatives there weren't sure who oversaw the updates and with each visit, the possibility of setting the record straight seemed to drift further away. Yet, deep down, I held onto the hope that one day, I would find a way to uncover and preserve the true story of my family.

Who Am I?

Even as I grew older, my curiosity about my family's past never faded. During my teenage years and early adulthood, I turned to the internet hoping to find answers about my ancestry. Who was the first Zhuang to arrive in Hainan? Where did he come from? Did he flee from war, seeking refuge on the island? Or was he an ambitious traveller in search of business opportunities? Perhaps he was just an ordinary man looking for work, never imagining that generations later, his descendants would be asking about the fateful journey that he had made so many centuries earlier.

I asked my parents, but they didn't have many answers. They had heard some stories from my grandfather – fragments of memories passed down over the years. They knew my great-grandfather had been a tall man, but no one could describe how he looked. His final resting place, they said, was on a hill behind the village. That was all we knew.

When my grandfather passed away in 2008, my father took his copy of the *zupu* as a keepsake. About a year later, I flipped through its pages, pausing at the foreword. That was when I made a discovery that left me in awe – the first Zhuang to settle in Hainan wasn't just an ordinary migrant. He was an imperial official during the Song dynasty!

His name was Zhuang Sizong (庄嗣宗), with the courtesy name of Zhuang Fang (庄方). He came from Putian, Fujian, and was a scholar who had successfully passed the imperial examinations during the Chunxi era (1174–89) of the Southern Song dynasty.

In the first year of the Qingyuan era (1195), he arrived in Hainan, not as a refugee nor a tradesman, but as a Prefect of Qiongzhou, or Qiong Prefecture (琼州知府), and Pacification Commissioner (安抚都监) – a high-ranking official

A selfie in front of the ancestral hall dedicated to Zhuang Sizong, 2024. *Courtesy of Chung Kwang Tong.*

(Above and left) The interior of the ancestral hall dedicated to Zhuang Sizong, 2024. The largest tablet in the centre bears the inscription: "Zhuang Sizong and wife, first ancestors to migrate to Hainan during the Song dynasty." His tablet is flanked by those of his sons and grandsons. *Courtesy of Chung Kwang Tong.*

tasked with governing the region and maintaining order. Qiong Prefecture, as it was called then, is what we now know as Hainan province.

Reading those words, I felt a surge of pride and amazement. The questions I had carried for years – how my ancestors ended up in Hainan and why – finally had an answer. It wasn't just a journey of survival or opportunity. It was a duty, a mission, a legacy that had unknowingly shaped the generations that followed.

According to the records, Zhuang Sizong completed his tenure as Prefect of Qiong Prefecture and chose to retire in Hainan. He had two sons: one returned to their ancestral hometown of Putian, Fujian, while the other remained in Hainan, planting the roots of our family on the island.

Generation after generation, our lineage continued. And now, 23 generations later, here I am – a descendant of Zhuang Sizong.

My grandfather was the one who left Hainan, venturing to Singapore in search of better opportunities. He worked hard, built a life here and eventually decided that this island, so different from the one our ancestors once governed, would be his home.

Compiling the Zupu

My journey to reconnect with my family's history took an unexpected turn when I became acquainted with the Zhuang Ancestral Hall in Dayou village. This connection came through Chuang Tsu Li, the president of the Singapore Chuang and Ngiam Clansmen's Association.

While Tsu Li and I came from different Zhuang lineages – his ancestors had arrived in Hainan at a later date – there was a twist of fate. Tsu Li has a cousin that he was in touch with and who lives in Dayou village. That cousin, in turn, introduced me to Zhuang Gengli in March 2022, the person in charge of compiling the Zhuang *zupu*.

It was through this introduction that I made a surprising discovery: Gengli and I were related. Gengli's wife was from my ancestral village, making him my uncle by marriage. He shared with me that they were in the midst of a major revision of the Zhuang *zupu*, a rare opportunity to set things right. Minor revisions – adding names of those born and those who passed on – are made every 10 years. Major revisions, where they conduct a comprehensive update, are done every 60 years.

The first-ever compilation of the Zhuang *zupu* was completed in 1418 during the Yongle era (1402–24) of the Ming dynasty. The last major revision was made in 1934 during the Republican era (1912–49). A separate revision for my specific lineage, the Zhihuan branch (执环公), was carried out in 1992 and that was when my grandfather added my name to the *zupu* (wrongly!)

Just in Time

By sheer luck and timing, I managed to reach the Zupu Revision Committee (族谱续修理事会) just before the publication deadline in mid-2022.

The team had begun work on the revision back in 2021, but they had struggled to contact Zhuang descendants living outside of China. They were surprised when I reached out to them via WeChat – a connection they hadn't expected. And just like that, after all these years of searching, I found myself in direct contact with the very people entrusted with preserving our family's history.

When the Zupu Revision Committee learned that I was a practising Taoist priest with a strong understanding of Chinese customs and tradition, they invited me to join the committee as a vice-chairperson. I could read and interpret Chinese local gazetteers (地方志), which are historical records compiled by local governments in imperial times.

My role is to facilitate the compilation of records for Zhuang descendants who had migrated abroad, particularly in Singapore and Malaysia,

An interactive booth at the Nanjing Imperial Examination Museum, Jiangnan Examination Hall (江南貢院), displaying the list of all *jinshi* (進士), the highest academic degree in the Civil Service Examination System, 2023. The Jiangnan Examination Hall was the largest imperial examination hall in ancient China. *Courtesy of Chung Kwang Tong.*

where many of our forefathers had settled over the generations. It was an unexpected yet deeply meaningful responsibility – one that not only allowed me to reconnect with my roots but also to ensure that future generations of our lineage would have a clearer record of where they came from.

In September 2023, I attended an international forum in Jurong, not the town in Singapore but Jurong (句容) city in Jiangsu, China. Since I was already in the region, I took the opportunity to stop over in Nanjing and Yangzhou for a couple of days.

One of the most fascinating places I visited was the Nanjing Imperial Examination Museum (南京中国科举博物馆). This museum was the former Jiangnan Examination Hall (江南贡院) – the largest Imperial Examination Hall in ancient China. Since its establishment in 1168, during the reign of Emperor Xiaozong of the Southern Song, the hall had been the place where countless scholars took their imperial examinations (科举) in the hope of securing an official post.

As I walked through the historic halls, a thought struck me – there was a high chance that my ancestors had taken their imperial examinations right here!

One of the most exciting features of the museum was an interactive digital archive where visitors could search for the names of scholars who had passed the imperial examinations – records dating all the way back to the Sui dynasty, when the Civil Service Examination System was first introduced in 605 CE. I searched for Zhuang Sizong under his courtesy name,

Zhuang Fang. His name appeared in the archive! But that wasn't all – I also found another name, Zhuang Jing (庄敬), a fifth-generation ancestor who also sat for the imperial examinations.

Excited by this discovery, I shared it with the Zupu Revision Committee. We had been regularly exchanging new findings from local gazetteers and historical records. Every piece of information brought us closer to understanding our past, and this was yet another confirmation of our lineage's deep roots in history.

Reflections

After many years, my record in the *zupu* has finally been corrected. Even more meaningful was the fact that I also managed to include my children in the family lineage.

But what truly stood out in this latest *zupu* revision was a progressive change: for the first time, daughters were included. In the past, traditional family genealogies recorded only male descendants, as lineage was strictly traced through the paternal line. This exclusion had been the norm for centuries.

Now, that tradition has evolved. This shift acknowledged the significance of daughters within the family, ensuring that their names and contributions would no longer be overlooked. It was a small yet powerful step towards a more inclusive way of honouring our ancestry – one that reflected not just where we came from, but also where we are headed.

After travel restrictions were lifted following the Covid-19 pandemic, I finally had the opportunity to visit Hainan again in January 2024. This trip was more than just a homecoming – it was a chance to reconnect with my roots in a way I had never done before.

(Left) My grandfather and his brother, after working in Singapore, remitted funds back home to rebuild this ancestral house in Dayou Village. *Courtesy of Chung Kwang Tong.*

(Below) The Zhuang Ancestral Hall in Dayou Village dedicated to the Zhihuan branch of the Zhuang lineage, 2024. A school was later built adjacent to it. Despite visiting the village several times with my parents, I was previously unable to locate it as it was "hidden" within the school compound walls. *Courtesy of Chung Kwang Tong.*

One of my first stops was the Zhuang Ancestral Hall, now located within the premises of the village school. Walking into the hall, I was filled with a sense of awe and belonging, surrounded by the generations who came before me. I met with relatives and members of the Zupu Revision Committee, who had worked tirelessly to preserve our family's lineage.

What happened next was something truly special. As we drove through the village, they stopped at various graves, pointing them out one by one.

"That's the grave of your great-grandfather."

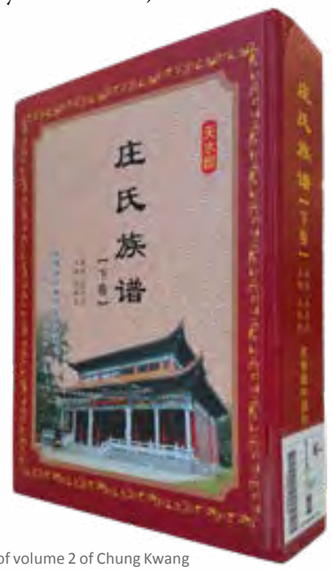
"And over there – that's your great-great-grandfather's resting place."

Each stop along the way was like turning the pages of a history book, except this time, it was real – etched in stone, standing on the very land where my ancestors had lived and had been laid to rest.

What struck me the most was how deeply intertwined everyone in the village was. In this town, everyone was connected somehow, bound together by shared ancestry, history and stories passed down through generations.

Our fifth-generation ancestor, Zhuang Jing, played a pivotal role in preserving our family's history. In the foreword of the first compilation of the *zupu*, he left behind a message that still resonates today:

"新天子登位竟欲于选举之中再精拔其有贤德者，我愈愤志读书，留心简册，適开科取士，我又复中秋闈，现补教授。则上可对诸祖宗，下可劝诸孙子。" ("I strived to study hard to become a scholar in the imperial examinations to serve the country, and in doing so, I can face my ancestors with honour and also encourage my descendants.")



The front cover of volume 2 of Chung Kwang Tong's family *zupu*, 庄氏族谱: 天水郡. *From National Library Singapore (call no. RSEA 929.20951 ZSZ).*

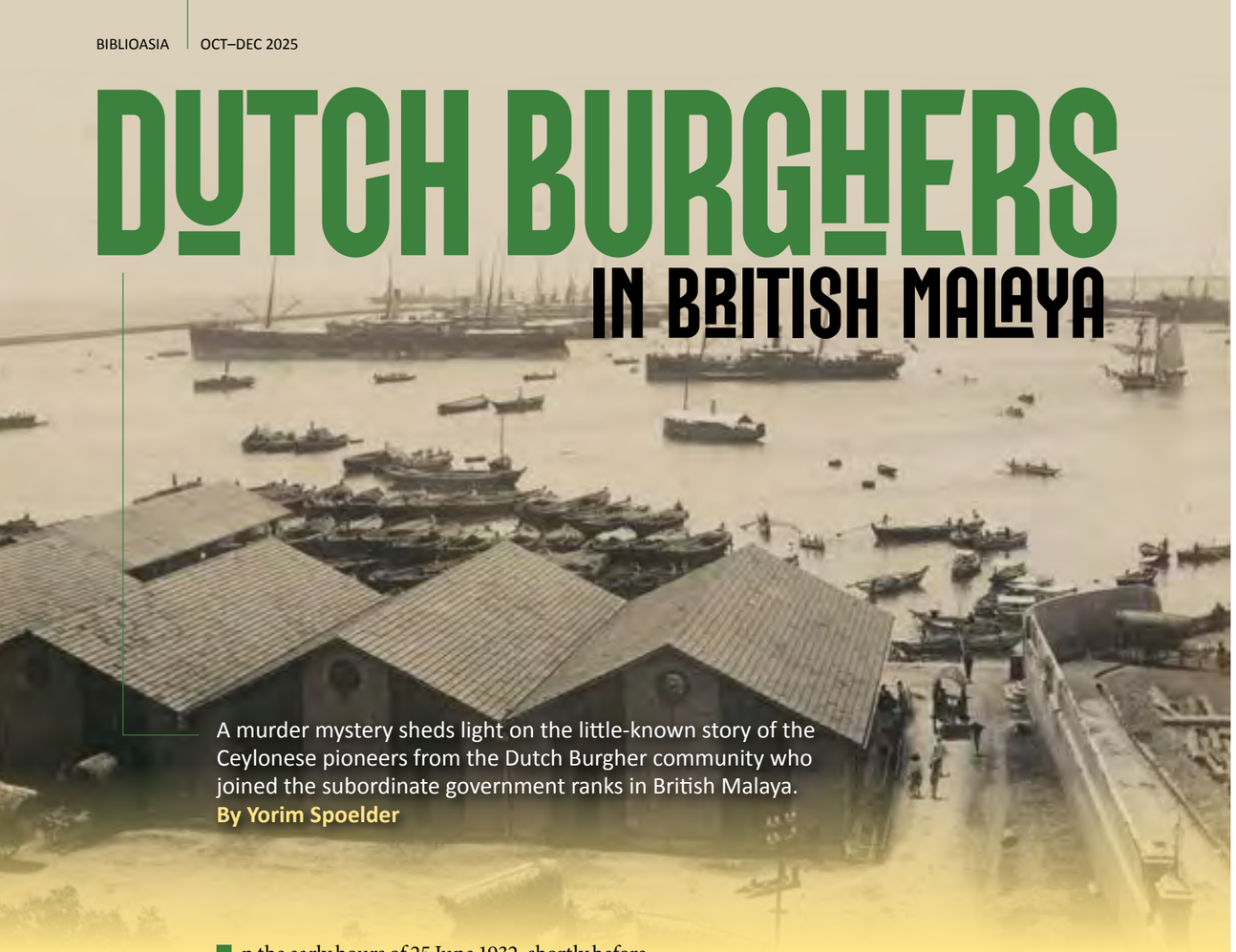
Photograph taken after a family dinner with my brother (right) and our families in Singapore, 2025. Our children represent the fourth generation of the Zhuang family in Singapore. *Courtesy of Chung Kwang Tong.*

These words reflect Zhuang Jing's unwavering dedication to education and duty. He saw the imperial examinations not just as a path to personal success, but as a means to serve the nation and uphold the family's legacy. His efforts were not only for his own achievements, but also to honour his ancestors and inspire future generations to pursue knowledge and virtue.

Reading Zhuang Jing's words centuries later, I felt a deep sense of connection. His values – hard work, scholarship and responsibility to both family and country – are the very ideals that continue to shape us today. I will be sure to pass on these values to my children and descendants. ♦

On 21 September 2024, the National Library Board (NLB) and the Genealogy Society Singapore (GSS) signed a memorandum of understanding to jointly promote interest in genealogy among Singaporeans by organising talks, workshops and exhibitions. GSS members donated seven *zupu* (族谱; genealogy books) to NLB, which included Chung Kwang Tong's *zupu*, 庄氏族谱: 天水郡 (volumes 1 and 2). Singaporeans are encouraged to donate their *zupu* to NLB for permanent preservation. By making these books publicly accessible to scholars, it will benefit researchers and anyone else interested in tracing their family history.

DUTCH BURGHERS IN BRITISH MALAYA



A murder mystery sheds light on the little-known story of the Ceylonese pioneers from the Dutch Burgher community who joined the subordinate government ranks in British Malaya.

By Yorim Spoelder

In the early hours of 25 June 1932, shortly before sunrise, a young man wearing a shirt and trousers drenched in blood calmly strolled into the police station in Johor Bahru. Eric Edwin Cecil McCarthy McHeyzer, age 22, was to all appearances composed and in full command of his senses. However, all was not well, and he reported that he had been the victim of a stabbing while trying to catch some sleep in the bandstand near the sea front. The police officers duly investigated the spot mentioned by Eric, but reported that they did not find any traces of blood.[1]

A little while later, the police were alerted to a double homicide in a house along Jalan Mustapha. The victims, it soon turned out, were Eric's father Julian McCarthy McHeyzer, a Dutch Burgher and long-time Johor resident, and his Malay wife Fatima Abdullah. Julian had been stabbed repeatedly inside the house, while Fatima was found on the neighbour's verandah where she had succumbed to similar wounds shortly after being attacked.[2]

A Sensational Murder Case

Eric was unable to provide a compelling alibi and was promptly arrested in relation to the murders. He claimed innocence but showed suspiciously little emotion. The next day, neighbours of the couple came forward with incriminating evidence. Mrs Ng Chye Hock reported how she had been woken up by unusual noises and shouts of help from Fatima who had repeatedly uttered "Nonya, Nonya, tolong" (in this instance, "nonya" is a respectful term for a married woman, and "tolong" means help) until all went eerily quiet. Furthermore, she had seen a man jumping out of the window and hastily making his way in the direction of the road before vanishing into the dark Malayan night.[3]

Another witness, the deceased couple's Javanese cook, reported how Eric had one week earlier shown up late in the evening demanding dinner. While she was preparing the food, she overheard the accused mumbling to himself, "I am going to kill

Colombo harbour, c. 1890. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Dutch Burghers leaving for British Malaya would have boarded a steamer from Colombo harbour. *From Leiden University Libraries, the Netherlands.*

Dr Yorim Spoelder is a historian affiliated with the Freie Universität Berlin and a former recipient of the Lee Kong Chian Research Fellowship (2024). He is the author of *Visions of Greater India: Transimperial Knowledge and Anti-Colonial Nationalism, c. 1800–1960* (winner of the 2024 EuroSEAS Humanities Book Prize). He is currently working on a transimperial and comparative history of the identity and politics of Eurasian communities in British India, Ceylon, the Straits Settlements and the Dutch East Indies.

my father. He will die or I will die."[4] Disturbed by these ominous words, she peeked into the room, and was shocked to find the accused fondling a kris and cutting himself in the hand.[5]

This alone might have been sufficient evidence to convince the court of Eric's guilt, but in the absence of a confession, it remained unclear what could have compelled Eric, who had visited his father numerous times over the past months, to commit such an atrocious crime. During the first phase of the trial, various fruitless speculations about Eric's mental health, including somewhat bizarrely his alleged "lack of sex-appeal", the formation of his forehead and the way his hair grew, had been brought forward to account for the crime. But medical experts found no evidence of any disordered state of mind, and Eric himself made a calm statement from the dock claiming innocence. Then another startling piece of evidence emerged which revealed a motive. It turned out that the accused had kept a diary which he had hidden in a locked suitcase bearing his initials.[6]

The diary related how Eric had been sacked from the Ceylon Government Railway in 1930, after which he failed to find gainful employment and became homeless. Eric would have been barely 20 at the time, but he found himself "totally down and out".[7] He had grown up in a broken Dutch Burgher family as the eldest son of Julian McHeyzer and Claire Pate, who had three other children. Eric belonged to the small but influential mixed-race community who claimed descent to the Dutch soldiers and clerks of the Dutch East India Company. Established in 1602, the company had ruled Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) from 1640 until the British gained control of the island in 1796.[8]

When Eric was six years old, his father abandoned his wife and family and moved to Malaya where he found work as a teacher, converted to Islam, and married a Malay wife, Fatima. Now a grown man himself and faced with limited opportunities in Ceylon, Eric remembered his father's journey of reinvention, and perhaps on a whim of inspiration and opportunism, managed to get funds from friends to travel by steamer to Singapore in April 1931.[9]

Once in Malaya, he succeeded in locating his father, but did not receive the warm welcome and support he had anticipated. Although he

The caption from the 1808 book, a Dutch travelogue about a journey through the Odisha and the Coromandel coasts, indicates the woman in the illustration is a woman of mixed descent (Mestiessche vrouw, in staatsie na de Kerk gaande). *Image reproduced from Jacob Haafner, Reize in Eenen Palanquin; of Lotgevallen En Merkwaardige Aanteekeningen Op Eene Reize Langs De Kusten Orixa En Choromandel (Amsterdam: J. Allart, 1808), after p. 392. From Internet Archive.*

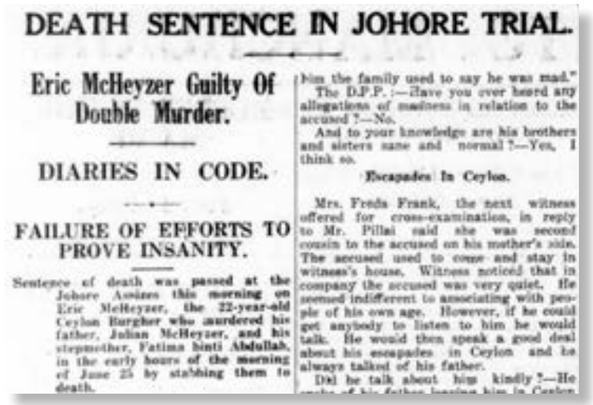
occasionally stayed with his father and Fatima, Eric became increasingly resentful of how he was being treated. He had told his father about his circumstances and sought his help to find employment but "got kicked" instead. He also did not forget how his father "had done nothing for my sisters and brothers" and had not "spent a cent on us for our education".[10] This was a striking accusation in light of the fact that education had long been the realm in which Dutch Burghers excelled, bringing forth luminaries such as the influential lawyer and journalist Charles Ambrose Lorenz (1829–71) and Sir Richard Francis Morgan (1821–76), the Chief Justice of Ceylon who famously became one of the first Asians in the British Empire to receive a knighthood.

According to various witnesses, Julian had, in turn, complained about a lack of respect from Eric who appeared out of the blue. He had planned to take out a loan of $75 to cover Eric's boat passage back to Ceylon.[11] However, before this could materialise, the resentful son's wounded pride and filial hate drove him to a desperate act of vengeance for which he would pay with his life. The *Straits Times*, which covered the progress of the trial in a series of colourful articles, soberly reported on 28 October 1932 that "the 22-year-old Ceylon Burgher, who was found guilty of the murder of his father and stepmother in Johore on June 25 was hanged".[12]

The Singapore Cricket Club, 1906. Young Burghers were well aware that "a capable cricketer could always be sure of gaining employment out here with average intelligence". *Arshak C. Galstaun Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

(Above) Pat Zilwa, the first Burgher to be made a Justice of Peace. *Image reproduced from "First Burgher J.P.," Straits Budget, 9 September 1926, 15. (From NewspaperSG).*

(Below) Eric McHeyzer was found guilty of the murder of his father and stepmother. *Source: The Straits Times, 2 August 1932 © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.*



DEATH SENTENCE IN JOHORE TRIAL.

Eric McHeyzer Guilty Of Double Murder.

DIARIES IN CODE.

FAILURE OF EFFORTS TO PROVE INSANITY.

Sentence of death was passed at the Johore Assizes this morning on Eric McHeyzer, the 22-year-old Ceylon Burgher who murdered his father, Julian McHeyzer, and his stepmother, Fatima binti Abdullah, in the early hours of the morning of June 25 by stabbing them to death.

him the family used to say he was mad."

The D.P.P.:—Have you ever heard any allegations of madness in relation to the accused?—No.

And to your knowledge are his brothers and sisters sane and normal?—Yes, I think so.

Escapades In Ceylon.

Mrs. Freda Frank, the next witness offered for cross-examination, in reply to Mr. Pillai said she was second cousin to the accused on his mother's side. The accused used to come and stay in witness's house. Witness noticed that in company the accused was very quiet. He seemed indifferent to associating with people of his own age. However, if he could get anybody to listen to him he would talk. He would then speak a good deal about his escapades in Ceylon and he always talked of his father.

Did he talk about him kindly?—He

Migration to Malaya

This tragic and gruesome story sheds light on a broader transimperial conduit of migration between Ceylon and British Malaya. The McHeyzers were not the only Dutch Burghers who crossed the Bay of Bengal in search of better employment opportunities or a new life.

Their story is, however, rarely noticed by historians for two reasons. On the one hand, the number of Dutch Burghers that settled in British Malaya was fairly small and their presence too scattered to evolve close-knit community structures. On the other hand, the few excellent studies on the Dutch Burgher community in the colonial period rarely extend their purview beyond South Asia. As a result, the transimperial lives of Dutch Burghers who left Ceylon have not been well documented. However, Dutch Burghers were well represented among the subordinate ranks of the colonial government, which actively recruited Ceylonese clerks for positions in the Federated Malay States and Straits Settlements in the late 19th century.

The first wave of Ceylonese Burghers who moved to British Malaya in the 1880s and 1890s were actively recruited by local government agencies to fill lower-level positions in the railways, Public Works Department or medical service. These posts had been hard to fill as very few Europeans could be induced to move to often isolated or malaria-infested regions to take up employment offering little financial reward. The local governments thus cast their nets wider and found that Ceylonese Burghers, who were well educated and proficient in English, were excellent candidates to plug the gaps in the subordinate ranks. The spectre of unemployment, or the offer of slightly better pay than could be obtained for equivalent jobs in Ceylon, often convinced young Burghers to board a steamer in Colombo and take up residence in British Malaya.

Another common avenue to land a comfortable clerkship was sport, particularly cricket. The Dutch Burghers of Ceylon had long excelled in this increasingly popular game. Talented batters and bowlers, who distinguished themselves during the frequent inter-colonial tournaments that pitted Ceylonese, Indian and Malayan teams against one another, could hope to be scouted by the opposing squad and offered a clerical job in Malaya.

Edward Arnold Christoffelsz, for example, scored the highest batting average for Ceylon in a match-up with Selangor in 1891 and was promptly recruited by the state's government.[13] Another Burgher, Allan

Jumeaux, freshly graduated from St Thomas College in Colombo, had similarly distinguished himself on the pitch and joined Penang's Survey Department in 1889. But when Jumeaux was fielded for the Penang team in a match against Perak, he attracted the attention of the British Resident Ernest Woodford Birch, who personally offered him an appointment in Perak that came with nearly double the salary.[14]

Young Burghers were well aware that "a capable cricketer could always be sure of gaining employment out here with average intelligence", and the *Morning Tribune* concluded in 1938 that Burghers had "made a valuable contribution to the rapid progress of cricket" in British Malaya.[15]

However, this sport-centred recruitment policy had its detractors and became a topic of debate in the *Straits Times* following the scandal that led to the arrest of Christoffelsz in 1894. He excelled on the pitch but turned out to be a dishonest employee who embezzled government funds to holiday in Japan. The brazen young man was promptly arrested while travelling from Japan to Ceylon and sentenced to three years of rigorous imprisonment in the Singapore jail.[16]

Letters published in the newspapers questioned the need to recruit clerks from Ceylon in view of the availability of local labour, and some alleged that the Christoffelsz case was representative of the state of the Selangor government.[17] One commentator even suggested that the government had become a "bloated bureaucracy of lazy pleasure-seekers" that "created lucrative sinecures for minions who minister to the idle vanity of athletics by deputy".[18]

The Christoffelsz case was, however, an isolated one and hardly representative of the trajectory of Burghers who joined the ranks of government in British Malaya on account of their sporting abilities. Allan Jumeaux, for example, steadily advanced through the ranks of the Perak Public Works Department and was awarded, upon his retirement in 1929, the Imperial Service Medal in acknowledgement of his distinguished career.[19]

Many of these young Burgher pioneers bore old Dutch surnames such as Van Cuylenburg, Koelmeyer, Ferdinands, Felsinger and Christoffelsz, which were reminiscent of the days when Ceylon was a colony governed by the Dutch East India Company. But there were also young men with a Burgher background whose names were distinctly French (Jumeaux for instance) or Portuguese, such as Pat Zilwa, who transferred from Colombo to Selangor to take up a bank clerkship in Kuala Lumpur.

In the course of a long and meritorious career, Zilwa distinguished himself as an exemplary public servant and was the first Ceylonese Burgher in Malaya to be made a Justice of Peace in 1926 and the recipient of the Malayan Certificate of Honour upon his retirement in 1935. Zilwa also left his mark on Selangor society and was an indefatigable organiser involved in various associations and charities, acting as president of the Selangor Recreation Club, vice-president of the Selangor Boy Scouts, honorary steward of the Selangor Turf Club and treasurer of the Selangor Football Association. He was also one of the founders of the Kuala Lumpur Rotary Club and the driving force behind the Imperial Indian War Relief Fund, which collected donations to alleviate the suffering of the thousands of Indian soldiers who had been maimed for life fighting under the banner of the Union Jack during the First World War.[20]

Lure of the Homeland

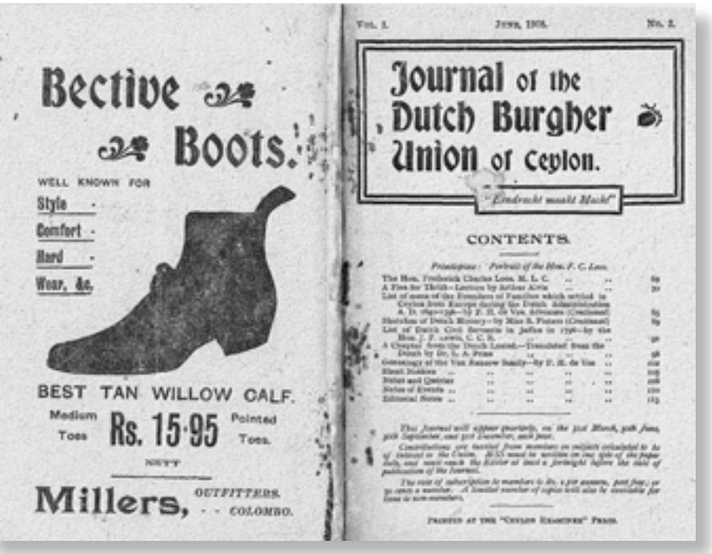
Pat Zilwa exemplified the trajectory of Ceylonese Burghers who fully integrated into Malayan society and never looked back. But there were also young men who continued to feel the pull of their homeland and wished to visit family or find a suitable marriage partner in the Burgher community. This presented a problem because subordinate government clerks were only entitled to two weeks of annual leave, which practically prevented Ceylonese and Indian employees from making the journey by steamship that alone would take a fortnight.

A photograph of government offices in Kuala Lumpur, Selangor, by G.R. Lambert, c. 1900. By the late 19th century, these government offices housed the entire administration of the Federated Malay States and the Selangor State Government. There were many Dutch Burghers working in these offices. *From Leiden University Libraries, the Netherlands.*

In the early 1890s, a group of Burgher residents in Malaya petitioned the government for more flexible leave privileges. They requested the right to accumulate their leave and be allowed to take a longer sabbatical.[21] They also made the case for a more generous exchange compensation rate for Eurasian officers on paid leave who, under prevailing conditions, saw much of their hard-earned salary evaporate when it was converted into Ceylonese rupees. At the time, the exchange compensation was only granted to European officers.[22]

Various Burgher commentators supported the petition in articles published in the leading newspapers of the day. In the British imperial edifice, rank, race and privileges were neatly interwoven, and the Burgher voices that appeared in print sought to justify their reasonable plea for more flexible leave conditions by resorting to racial arguments. They presented the Burghers as a respectable community of Dutch descent which, historically had been on a par with Europeans, and was naturally superior to other Ceylonese or Malayan Eurasians. This unique status, or so the argument went, should entitle them to more generous conditions of leave. In those days, European officers received three months of full pay and 12 months of half-pay leave after serving six years. Thus, as a letter to the *Straits Times* suggested, Burghers should be entitled to two months of full pay and six months of half-pay leave after six years of service, while Tamils and Sinhalese would deserve one and three months respectively under a similar arrangement.[23]

(Right) The Eurasian Association was formed in 1919 with the objective of promoting and protecting the interests of Eurasians in British Malaya. The first issue of its journal shown here, *The Eurasian Review*, was published in July 1934. *Collection of the National Library Singapore (call no. RRARE 305.80095951 ER).*



(Below) The Dutch Burgher Union of Ceylon was founded in January 1908 to promote the social and intellectual well-being of the Dutch Burgher community in Sri Lanka. The *Journal of the Dutch Burgher Union of Ceylon* was first published on 31 March 1908. Shown here is the June 1908 issue (vol. 1, no. 2). *From Yumpu.com*

Somewhat predictably, this did not go down well with Tamil and Sinhalese clerks recruited from Ceylon. Tamil and Sinhalese commentators joined the fray and the editors of the *Straits Times* were deluged with an incessant stream of letters. These, in no uncertain terms, dismissed the Burgher claim to special treatment. Instead, they resorted, in turn, to worn stereotypes and racial slurs which contrasted the right of the "pure sons" of the Ceylonese soil to visit their native land, with the pretensions of a hybrid, nondescript race that had sprung from the loins of European conquistadores and, it was hinted, far from respectable mothers.[24]

Before the editors shut down a debate that showed irreconcilable positions and worrying signs of escalating into a fruitless exchange of highly inflammatory rhetoric, one Burgher commentator hit back, stating that "our positions, ideas of civilisation, and social status are above theirs" and "we do not desire to be considered as being on a par with them" (referring to the Tamils and Sinhalese).[25]

A bemused European observer expressed sympathy with "the domestic affections" of the Burgher civil servants but could not resist adding that they were after all Eurasians, who have "neither the Englishman's capacity for endurance nor the philosophic indifference of the Asiatic".[26]

As these letters reveal, the Burgher petitioners did themselves a disservice by resorting to tropes of racial exceptionalism and class snobbery. Instead of finding common ground and petitioning the government on behalf of *all* Ceylonese employees, the Burghers had kicked a hornet's nest and found themselves suddenly on the defensive. Not only did other Ceylonese communities challenge and resent the Burghers' claims to special treatment and privileges, the leave controversy also begged the question to what extent the Burghers belonged to Malaya's Eurasian community.

What's in a Name: Eurasian or Burgher?

In the first decades of the 20th century, the Eurasians increasingly felt the need to form an organisation to advance their interests and unite the community. Following various initiatives, the Eurasian Association was founded in 1919 with the aim to bolster social cohesion and promote the interests of all Eurasian subjects in British Malaya. Its main branches were located in Singapore, Penang, Selangor and Negeri Sembilan, but the association had from the get-go a transimperial orientation and vowed to "afford to Eurasian British subjects, who may require it, the assistance of the Association in any other country".[27]

However, as T.C. Archer, a leading figure within the Eurasian community, pointed out in a letter published in the *Straits Times*, the Dutch Burghers had been "conspicuous by their absence" from the meeting preceding the foundation of the association and had flatly refused to be associated with the movement. Archer was genuinely puzzled by this snub, especially since the Burghers had, as he observed, also "their streak of Asiatic blood" and, moreover, shared a similar predicament because the government did not make a distinction between Malayan Eurasians or other mixed-race communities of European descent, including Burghers or Anglo-Indians domiciled in British Malaya.[28]

Archer's appeal for unity was promptly answered by a flurry of letters signed by Dutch Burghers, who made it clear that they were in sympathy with the movement but took issue with the label "Eurasian".[29] The Burgher community had long occupied a respectable and privileged position in Ceylonese society. Following the transition from Dutch to British power, the Dutch Burghers evolved into a highly educated minority group that wielded substantial power and supplied the colony with some of its leading civil servants, lawyers, judges and educators.

Dutch patrilineal lineage was a key criterion for defining whether one was Burgher, and although the reality was much more muddled, the Dutch Burgher Union of Ceylon, founded as early as 1908, actively sought to distinguish the community from the poorer and less privileged classes of Portuguese Eurasians and Anglo-Ceylonese.

This Dutch lineage claim thus became a badge of pride, but also functioned as a subtle class marker in Ceylon. While the leaders of the Eurasian community in British Malaya were taken aback by Burgher claims of exceptionalism, the Dutch Burghers, in turn, were horrified to be labelled "Eurasian", even if the question of nomenclature notwithstanding, they had everything to gain from a strong, unified front to advance common interests and fight the discrimination that mixed-race communities of European descent faced across the colonial world.

The question of the status of Dutch Burghers within the Eurasian community of British Malaya remained an open one. Since there was no Malayan equivalent of the Dutch Burgher Union, it was very much up to each individual how they navigated the subtle racial hierarchies that divided colonial society. However, in contrast to the majority of the Tamil and Sinhalese civil servants who moved back to Ceylon upon retirement, most Dutch Burghers opted to stay and married locally. Their descendants became domiciled Malayans who identified with the new nation-states that emerged from the ruins of Empire.

Today, the migration history of the Dutch Burghers is largely forgotten and only the intergenerational transmission of customs, recipes for Ceylonese delicacies, or the distinct Dutch ring of a surname serves as a reminder of the young pioneers who left their island-home to start a new life in British Malaya. ♦

NOTES

1 "Double Tragedy in Johore," *Straits Times*, 13 July 1932, 12; "Death Sentence in Johore Trial," *Straits Times*, 2 August 1932, 12. (From NewspaperSG)
2 "Murder in Johore: Man and Woman Found Stabbed," *Straits Times*, 27 June 1932, 6. (From NewspaperSG)
3 "Double Tragedy in Johore."
4 "I am Going to Kill My Father," *Straits Budget*, 21 July 1932, 14. (From NewspaperSG); "Death Sentence in Johore Trial."
5 "Double Tragedy in Johore"; "Death Sentence in Johore Trial."
6 "Death Sentence in Johore Trial"; "I am Going to Kill My Father."
7 "Death Sentence in Johore Trial."
8 "Death Sentence in Johore Trial."
9 "Double Tragedy in Johore"; "Death Sentence in Johore Trial."
10 "Death Sentence in Johore Trial."
11 "I am Going to Kill My Father."
12 "Murderer Hanged," *Straits Times*, 28 October 1932, 6. (From NewspaperSG)
13 "Ceylon Cricketers for the Straits," *Straits Budget*, 14 September 1901, 9. (From NewspaperSG)
14 "Ceylon Pioneer in Malaya," *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle*, 28 February 1940, 9. (From NewspaperSG)
15 "Ceylon Pioneer in Malaya"; "Ceylon Burghers Raise All-Malayan Cricket XI," *Morning Tribune*, 19 March 1938, 3. (From NewspaperSG)
16 "The Assizes," *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 12 September 1894, 3; "The Encouragement of Cricket," *Straits Budget*, 18 September 1894, 2. (From NewspaperSG)
17 Scrutator, "The 'Straits Times' on Cricket and Eurasians," *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle*, 11 October 1894, 3. (From NewspaperSG)
18 "The Encouragement of Cricket."
19 "Ceylon Pioneer in Malaya."
20 Pat Zilwa, "Imperial Indian War Relief Fund," *Straits Times*, 28 June 1917, 8; "First Burgher J.P.," *Straits Budget*, 9 September 1926, 15; "Eurasians in Selangor", *Straits Times*, 10 July 1932, 13; "Farewell Party: Retirement of Mr. Pat Zilwa," *Malaya Tribune*, 26 June 1935, 9; "Fine Record of Service," *Straits Times*, 2 July 1935, 5; "KL Loses Colourful Social Worker," *Sunday Standard*, 10 January 1954, 4. (From NewspaperSG)
21 "The Ceylonese in Straits," *Straits Times*, 2 July 1892, 5; "The Ceylonese Clerks of Malaya," *Straits Times*, 23 July 1892, 2; "One of Them", "Exchange Compensation," *Straits Budget*, 18 June 1895, 14. (From NewspaperSG)
22 "The Memorial of the Eurasians in Government Service," *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle*, 5 June 1894, 3; "The Eurasian Civil Servants," *Straits Budget*, 5 June 1894, 7. (From NewspaperSG)
23 A Burgher, "The Leave Question," *Straits Times*, 26 August 1895, 3. (From NewspaperSG)
24 A Singhalese, "Untitled," *Straits Times*, 2 September 1895, 3; A Singhalese, "The Leave Question," *Straits Budget*, 3 September 1895, 14; A Tamil, "The Leave Question," *Straits Budget*, 10 September 1895, 13; Ceylon Tamil, "The Leave Question," *Straits Times*, 12 September 1895, 3. (From NewspaperSG)
25 A Burgher, "The Leave Question," *Straits Budget*, 17 September 1895, 14. (From NewspaperSG)
26 "The Ceylonese Clerks of Malaya," *Straits Times*, 23 July 1892, 2. (From NewspaperSG)
27 "A Sign of Progress," *Straits Times*, 9 June 1919, 8. (From NewspaperSG)
28 T.C. Archer, "Eurasian Unity," *Straits Times*, 14 June 1919, 11. (From NewspaperSG)
29 Hollandsche Burgher, "Eurasian Unity," *Straits Times*, 17 June 1919, 8; R.V. Chapman, "Eurasian Unity," *Straits Times*, 28 June 1919, 10. (From NewspaperSG)

(Above) Meira Chand (left) with her dad Dr Harbans Lal Gulati, mum Norah Louise Knobel, elder brother Roy and younger brother Anand, 1945. *Courtesy of Meira Chand.*

(Facing Page) Meira Chand is an award-winning novelist of Swiss-Indian parentage. She is now a Singapore citizen. *Courtesy of Meira Chand.*

Excavating THE PAST

Writing a memoir involves personal experiences, digging deep into our memories and the emphasis on factual information.

By Meira Chand

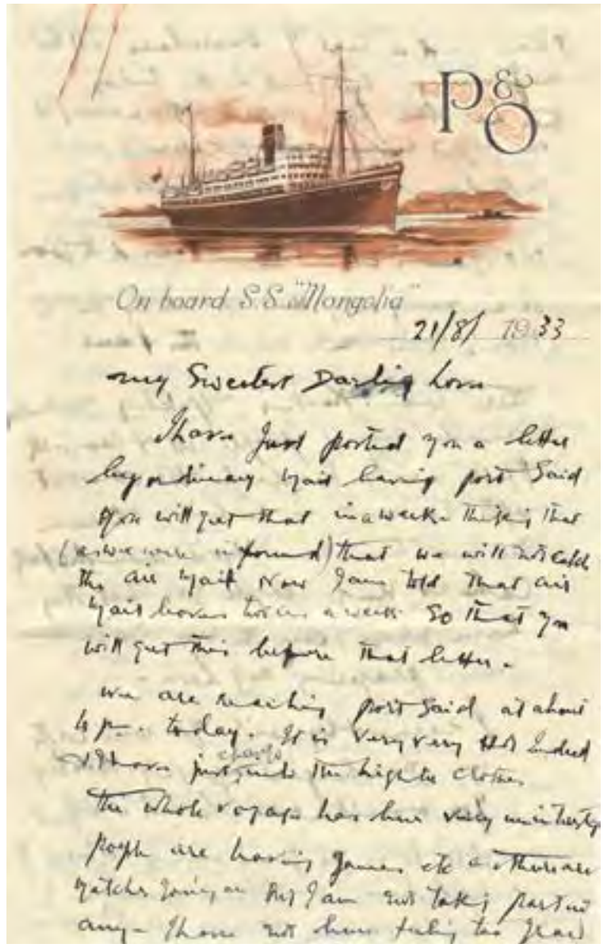
Dr Meira Chand's multicultural heritage is reflected in the nine novels she has published. *A Different Sky* (2010) made it to Oprah Winfrey's reading list for November 2011, and was long-listed for the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award in 2012. Her latest book, *Sacred Waters*, was published in 2018. She has a PhD in creative writing, and lived in Japan and India before moving to Singapore in 1997. She was awarded Singapore's Cultural Medallion in 2024.

Many people assume that a memoir is the same as a biography or an autobiography, but it is a category of writing entirely on its own. I might not have given much thought to the uniqueness of memoir as a genre, if it were not for my elder brother Roy's insistence that I write about our father's extraordinary life.

Our father, Dr Harbans Lal Gulati, went from India to London for medical studies in 1919, at the height of the colonial era. Already a qualified doctor in the British Army in India, he had been posted to the Khyber Pass, had been taken hostage by Afghan tribes and had also witnessed the Amritsar Massacre. In England, despite the formidable discrimination prevalent in that era, he requalified and established himself as a doctor, became a pioneering force in the early National Health Service (NHS) and even stood for parliament in the United Kingdom.

Roy wanted a full-scale biography but I felt it would be a difficult undertaking as so much of our father's early life was irretrievably lost to time. It was only at Roy's continued insistence that I reluctantly decided to consider writing a memoir. Unlike a biography or an autobiography, which takes in the entire chronological sweep of a life, a memoir is limited in its scope and supportive of whimsy. It focuses on a reduced canvas of emotional depth, examining from the author's point of view a particular period, person or event, experiences or themes. Rather like an archaeologist, the memoirist is expected to excavate specific recollections and reveal the hidden truth of what they find. Penning a memoir appeared a more achievable project than a full-blown biography, but I had not attempted the genre before and was wary of the perils awaiting me.

I am by trade a writer of fiction; my work depends on imaginative flights of fantasy. Memoirs have to do with personal experience and are corseted by truth and dependent on fact. However, I was beginning to see the venture as a legacy-type project that would give my children and grandchildren a better sense of



A letter written by Meira Chand's father to her mother, 21 August 1933. *Courtesy of Meira Chand.*

Meira and her brother Roy, 1944. *Courtesy of Meira Chand.*

who they are. The lives of ancestors, whether recently departed or distantly dead, are shadows stretching away around a family tree, shaping its outline, giving substance and inspiration to future generations. I am always telling people: if you do not write it down, it is gone and lost to history. Now, it seems, I would have to practise what I preached.

I thought the project would unfold without too much difficulty as I dug into memories and assembled assorted memorabilia. Instead, I quickly found that remembering incidents and assembling old photographs, letters and documents into some kind of chronological order was very different from putting down a corresponding connecting narrative in a coherent and interesting form on paper. In my novel writing life, the only way I knew of making sense of disparate scraps of knowledge and the half-formed ghostly images blowing through my mind was in the form of a story.

I was, however, quickly beginning to realise that a memoir was as much a piece of imaginative narrative as was any novel. The only clear difference seemed to be that with memoirs, unlike fiction, things could not be blatantly made up. I could not build fictional bridges to reach a solid edifice as I could in both fiction and historical fiction. When writing historical fiction, facts are inviolable and cannot be tampered with, but unending fictional licence is given to all that lies between. This is not the case with memoirs where the truth of every word is dauntingly important.

In her book, *Still Writing*, author Dani Shapiro explains, "It's a supreme act of control to understand a life as a story that resonates with others… It's taking this chaos and making a story out of it, attempting to make art out of it… It's like stitching together a quilt, creating order that isn't chronological order – it's emotional, psychological order."[1]

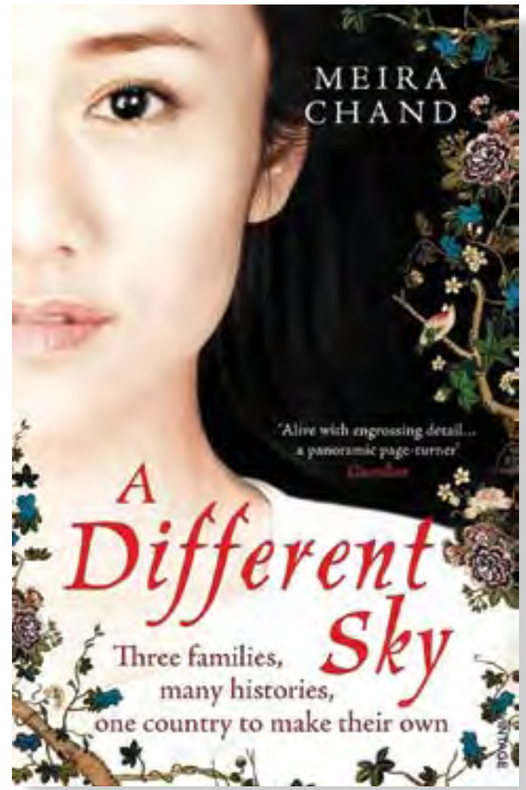
As soon as I sat down to begin the memoir, I encountered my first hurdles. The twin issues of time and memory stood before me like a closed gate. My parents had died many decades ago. My younger brother and I were born late in their marriage, a second pair of four children. Of my two much older siblings, who might have memories to share, one had died as a child and the other is now struggling to remember things. By the time my younger brother and I were born, our father was deeply involved in his medical career and a secondary life in politics. He had left the Conservative Party after the war because they did not support the creation of the NHS – which he passionately believed in – and joined the Labour Party which later, when in power, established the NHS. As a member of the Labour Party, he stood unsuccessfully for parliament in 1960, losing by only a handful of votes. He was a somewhat distant figure, always busy with work, and never spoke about his early personal history, or the country of his birth, India. Like most children, I never thought to ask my parents about their lives and they, like most parents, did not think to tell me much about their backgrounds.

I knew a few broad outlines. My father left India for London after the First World War, had met and married my mother, and had never returned to his country. I knew that my mother, Norah Louise Knobel, was Swiss but grew up in England and she was 14 years younger than my father. When I sat down to write, I realised not only how much I did not know about my parents, but that apart from my elderly brother with his fading memory, there was nobody left alive to fill in the gaps. The mists of time had swallowed everything, and I needed to begin my work.

I had encountered the problem of time before in my writing life, particularly while writing historical fiction. In that genre, I had found it possible to successfully overcome the challenge of all that was missing through archival research, and the binding gel of imagination. With enough digging around in the archives, evidence could usually be found to fill most gaps and where the gaps were too large, fiction bridged the void.

A good example of this is the research I did for my novel *A Different Sky* (2010), a story set in pre-independence Singapore, an era I knew little about, not having grown up here. The Oral History Centre at the National Archives of Singapore became for me a treasure trove of borrowed memories. I could put on headphones and be immediately surrounded by the recorded voices of numerous people of a bygone time, telling me the details of their lives. In their own voices, a legion of persons no longer living were able to recreate for me the nation's short but traumatic history.[2]

Old newspapers in NewspaperSG and the treasure trove of archival photographs and rare books held by the National Library Singapore gave me added contextual information about time, place and events. Through the laborious process of research, I realised I was building a scant Singapore

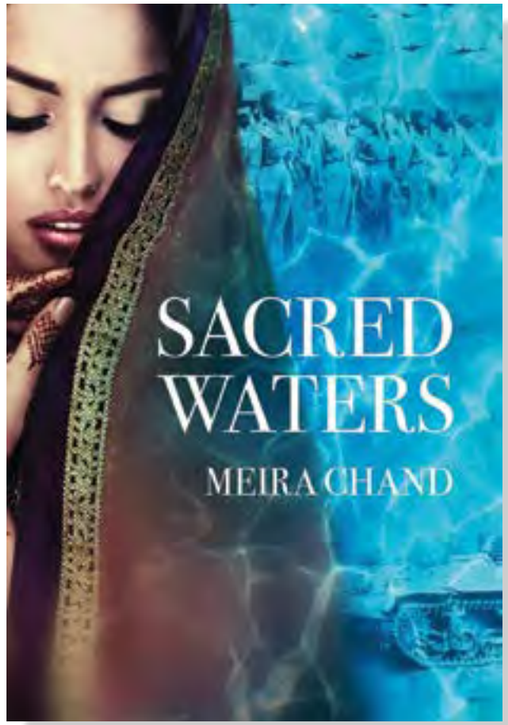


A Different Sky published by Vintage UK in 2011. First published by Harvill Secker/Random in 2010, the book made it to Oprah Winfrey's reading list for November 2011, and was long-listed for the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award in 2012.

memory of my own upon the wealth of other people's memories. The process took time, for the learnings and experiences obtained through research had to be absorbed and fully digested before they could, in some strange way, become my own limited memory for me to write successfully.

No such help was available for the personal histories of my parents. I was left with my own and my brother's meagre store of hazy memories as well as a small stash of letters, documents, photographs and diaries. Yet, as I struggled to begin my memoir, two incidents, one from my own life, and the other the experience of the writer Oliver Sacks – and both coincidentally to do with bombs – revealed to me not only the plasticity of memory, as I had learned through my absorption of the memories of others at the Oral History Centre, but also about its utter untrustworthiness.

I was born in an air-raid during the Second World War in London, and my early years were shaped by the trauma of those chilling times. In the garden of our home, my father had installed



Sacred Waters was published by Marshall Cavendish International, Singapore, in 2018.

an Anderson shelter into which we ran when the shriek of sirens was heard, not emerging until the all-clear sounded. On one such occasion, my weary mother, after spending an uncomfortable night in the cramped and ill-smelling underground refuge, could stand it no more. It was already early morning and even though there had been no all-clear siren, there had also been no air-raid and she was sure, as sometimes happened, it was all a false alarm. Seeing everyone around her asleep, she picked me up and, crossing the garden, took me back into the house. She was filling a basin with water to give me a bath when she heard the ominous sound.

The Germans had fired what was referred to as a "doodlebug", also known as the V-1 flying bomb. A precursor of the modern cruise missile, it emitted a loud and dreaded buzzing sound as it descended on its target. As the fearful sound began, my mother knew what was coming; she placed me on the floor and flung herself protectively on top of me. The missile fell one block away from our home, demolishing houses, killing families in an instant. Even though our home escaped devastation, all the doors and windows blew out. My mother and I survived with no more than cuts and bruises.

As I tried to pick Roy's mind for information about our parents, I recounted this memory to him.

"You could not have remembered any of that," my brother told me firmly. "You were only a few months old."

"But I do remember," I replied. I heard again the bomb descending, I could remember the pressure of my mother's body upon me, the blast as the windows shattered, the glass fragments raining down upon us, the cuts, and the blood.

"Before three or four years old, you don't remember much. It's called infantile amnesia," Roy replied. He is a doctor, a father of four and many years older than me.

"I however do remember that night," Roy continued. "I was already 12 years old when it happened. I remember every detail," he said, reprimanding me.

Of course he was right. I did not remember that early morning at the beginning of my life. My mother had later told me about it in much detail. My memory is her memory of a harrowing experience we both shared. She passed onto me her vision of those terrifying moments, and it is her sense of fear and panic that is so deeply and permanently imprinted on my psyche. Although I was indeed too young to form a memory, I nevertheless feel I have some valid claim to the recollection. The experience was a shared one: it happened to me just as much as it happened to my mother. Through her, I have a memory of an event I experienced but cannot remember. That proxy memory holds a certain degree of validity. Other flights of memory are more difficult to explain.

In his book *Hallucinations*, the neurologist and writer Oliver Sacks says, "We now know that memories are not fixed or frozen… but are transformed, disassembled, reassembled, and recategorized with every act of recollection."[3]

Sacks had evidence of this in his own life. In his memoir, *Uncle Tungsten*, he describes two incidents that also occurred in the war when, like my brother, he was 12 years old. He first describes the night a bomb fell into the next-door garden but failed to explode, and how everyone in the street ran out of their houses in terror. The second incident concerned a much smaller bomb that fell behind Sack's family home. That bomb, too, failed to explode and slowly incinerated, burning brightly all the while. Sacks recounts how he and his brothers carried pails of water to fill a pump from which their father doused the melting bomb. After *Uncle Tungsten* was published in 2001, Sacks spoke about these incidents to one of his older brothers.[4]

Sack's brother confirmed the first incident, saying he remembered it clearly but, regarding the second incident, what he tells Sacks comes as a great shock.

"You never saw it, you weren't there."

In the book, Sacks records his disbelief at this revelation.

"What do you mean?" I objected. "I can see the bomb in my mind's eye now, Pop with his pump, and Marcus and David with their buckets of water. How could I see it so clearly if I wasn't there?"

"You never saw it," Michael repeated.

Sacks and his brother Michael had been evacuated with their school to the countryside, but an older brother, David, had sent them a vivid letter that had enthralled the young Sacks.

"Clearly, I had not only been enthralled, but must have constructed the scene in my mind, from David's words, and then taken it over, appropriated it, and taken it for a memory of my own," Sacks writes.[5]

What are we doing when we appropriate memory in this way? According to Sacks, we are fashioning our own life narrative, our identity. This need for narrative to make sense of our lives is peculiar to our human condition. Such convoluted introspective reflection is unknown in animals. We are the only species that can reflect upon ourselves.

In his book, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat and Other Clinical Tales*, Sacks says, "To be ourselves we must have ourselves – possess, if need be, re-possess, our life-stories. We must 'recollect' ourselves, recollect the inner drama, the narrative, of ourselves. A man needs such a narrative, a continuous inner narrative, to maintain his identity, his self... Our only truth is narrative truth in the stories we tell each other and ourselves… Such subjectivity is built into the very nature of memory."[6]

Without the framework of narrative, the events in our lives would be just that, isolated events we live through, today's happenings unconnected to tomorrow or yesterday's experiences, free of meaning or the power to shape our identity. All writing, whatever the genre, is about what it means to be human, and all writing taps into universal experiences. The subjectivity that Sacks observes is built into the essential nature of memory and is the narrative thread by which we link one thing to another and make sense of our lives. Our stories mould our beliefs and make us who we are. They determine how we look at the world and how we treat others. Through narrative, we come to better understand the hand we have each been dealt in our life, and to use that insight in often transformative ways.

In writing a memoir of my father, I see that my mission is not only to understand the difficult hand fate dealt him, but to shape a narrative of his unique experiences in a way that he could not. While immersed in the day-to-day living of his life, he had no thought to share his story with the world. It is my task to do that for him.

When I sit down to write, there will be things I will not get exactly right, there will be gaps, there will even be things I miss entirely. However, it is my hope that the main arc and intent of my father's life will be visible in a way it was not before. This is all that matters. Such narrative-sharing illuminates our hidden depths and common humanity and enriches the world through new threads of connection and empathy. That is the purpose of memoir, and to my brother's delight, I push on. ♦

SEARCHING FOR FACTS

A memoir may be a historical account, or a biographical memory written from personal knowledge, but facts remain facts and cannot be moulded to the author's liking as they can in fiction. Memoirs often necessarily delve into past times or historical episodes, and getting facts right is of the utmost importance. If facts do not ring true then the finished work does not hold verity; the author will be seen as unreliable and the work will not be taken seriously.

I can give a small example of this. As a young writer, I was horrified after the publication of my first novel, *The Gossamer Fly*, in 1979 to receive an irate letter from a nature lover complaining that I had written about dragonflies emerging about two months before the correct season. This showed me forevermore how careful an author must be to get even the smallest facts right.

Anyone in Singapore thinking to research and write a memoir is fortunate. Singapore has made enormous efforts to document its short modern history. There is an abundance of material assiduously collected in a variety of archives. For the research of my novels, *A Different Sky* (2010) and *Sacred Waters* (2018), I will always be grateful to the National Library Singapore and the National Archives of Singapore for not only their wide collection of books but also for their archives of photographs and rare items. Without the indispensable material I found in the Oral History Centre, with its wealth of recordings and transcripts; the online NewspaperSG collection, with newspapers that go back as far as 1827; and the 2.3 million photographs in the National Archives of Singapore, my books could not have been written.

Such a treasure trove of research material allows an author to not only crosscheck facts but to expand and fill out a memory or historical picture that may be otherwise incomplete. Or, as was the case for me, grow a whole new virtual memory.

NOTES

1 Dani Shapiro, *Still Writing: The Perils and Pleasures of a Creative Life* (New York: Grove Atlantic, 2013), 183. (From NLB OverDrive)
2 Meira Chand, *A Different Sky* (London: Random House, 2010). (From NLB OverDrive); Meira Chand, "A Journey into Memory," *BiblioAsia* 10, no. 1 (April–June 2014): 10–11; Meira Chand, "A Different Sky: The Other Side of the Looking Glass," *BiblioAsia* 16, no. 3 (October–December 2020): 44–47.
3 Oliver Sacks, *Hallucinations* (New York, Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), 93. (From NLB OverDrive)
4 Oliver Sacks, *Uncle Tungsten: Memories of a Chemical Boyhood* (New York, Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013), 22–24. (From NLB OverDrive); Oliver Sacks, "On Memory," The Threepenny Review, Winter 2005, https://www.threepennyreview.com/on-memory-winter-2005/.
5 Sacks, *Uncle Tungsten*, 22–24.
6 Oliver Sacks, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* (New York: Picador, 2014), 101. (From NLB OverDrive)

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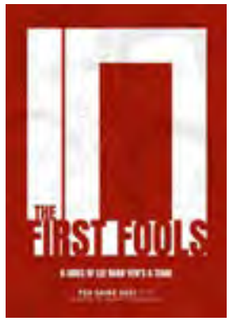

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One of the most prolific civil servants in newly independent Singapore, Lee Ek Tieng helped transform Singapore's environment, including revamping its sewage and trash disposal systems, heading the Singapore River clean-up project, and tackling pollution and other environmental issues.

My Father is Police, Lah!

By Rowena Hawkins

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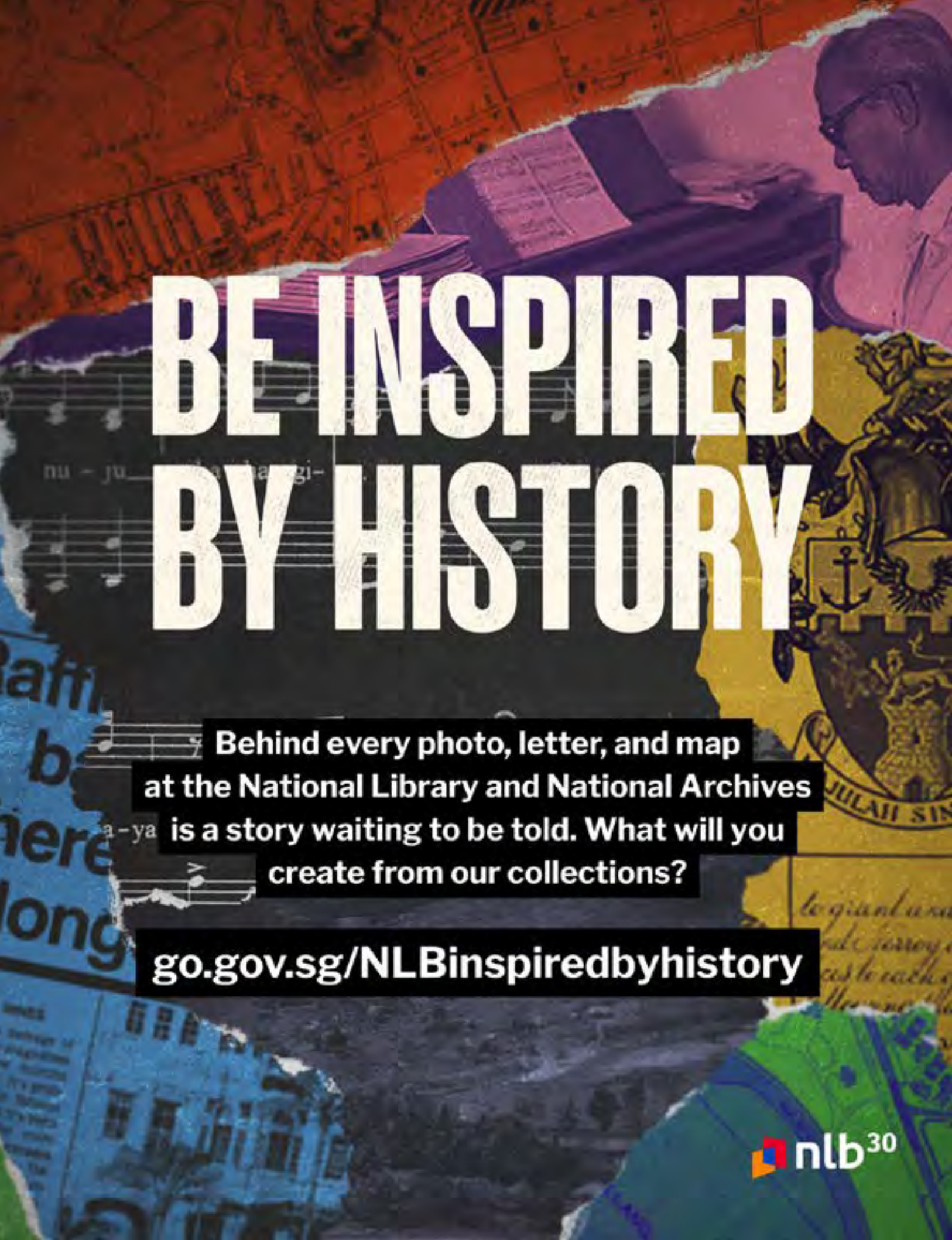
As the daughter of an immigrant family from Ceylon and whose father was a detective chief inspector in the colonial police force, Rowena Hawkins grew up in a large bungalow and enjoyed a life of privilege. In this memoir, Rowena recounts her childhood in 1960s colonial Singapore, offering a witty and humorous view of life from a bygone time.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