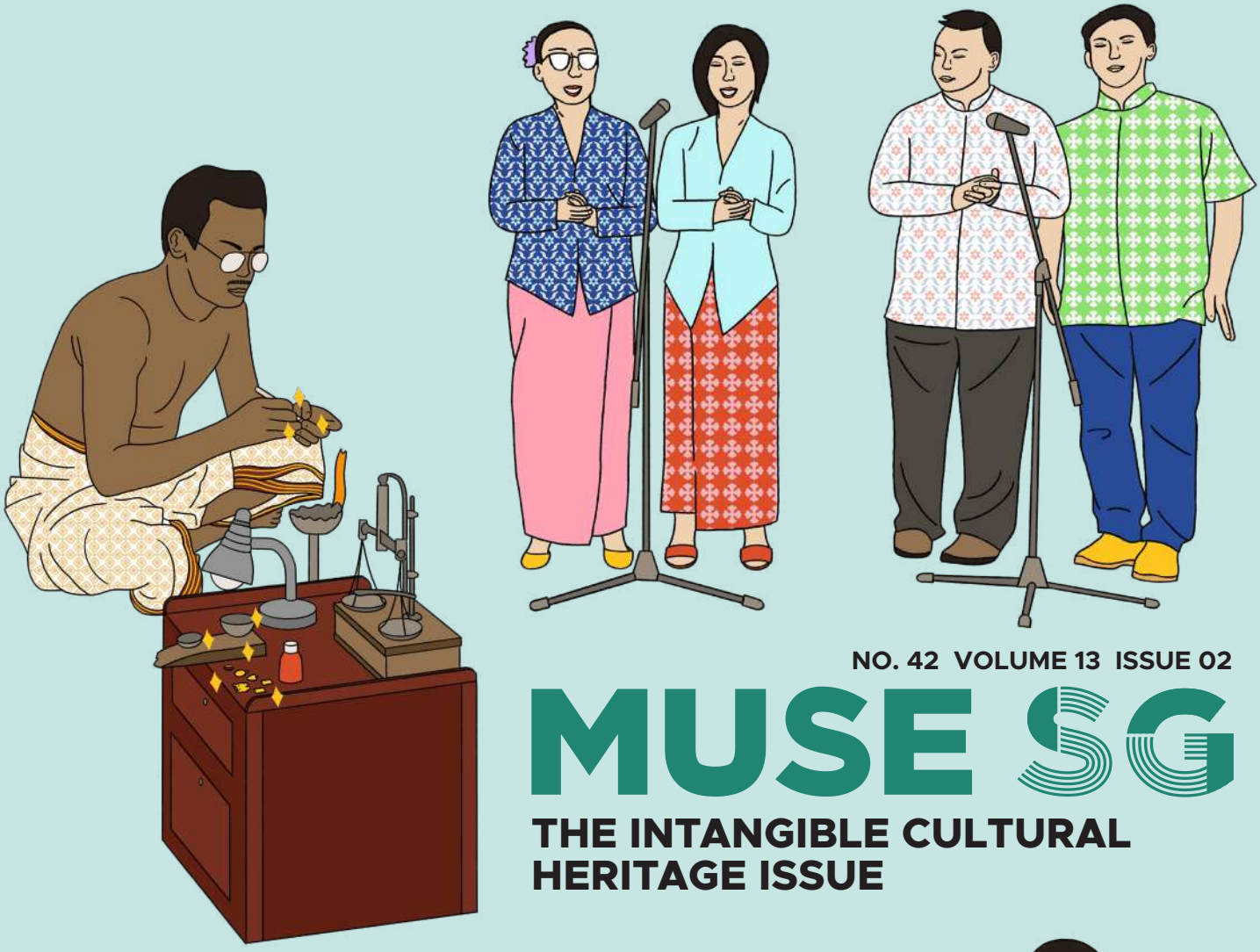
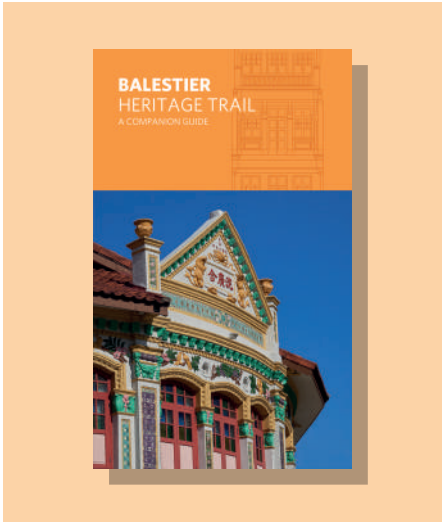


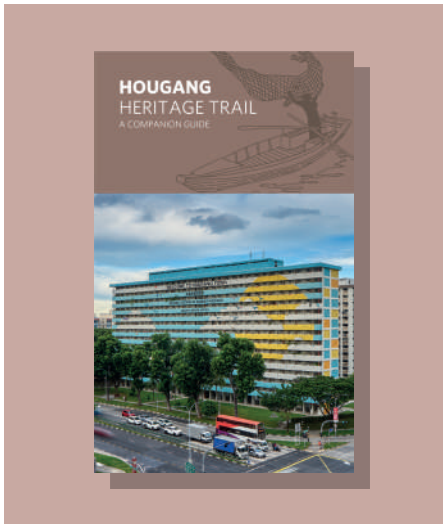
NO. 42 VOLUME 13 ISSUE 02

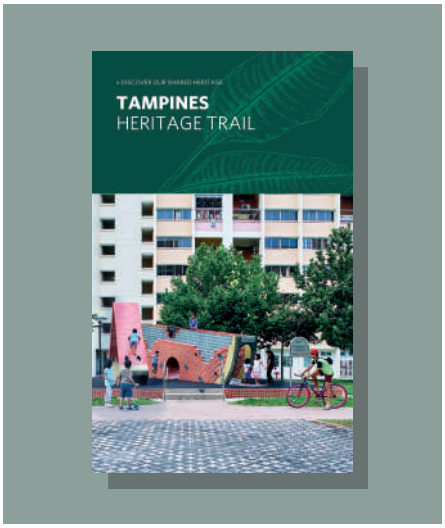
MUSE SG

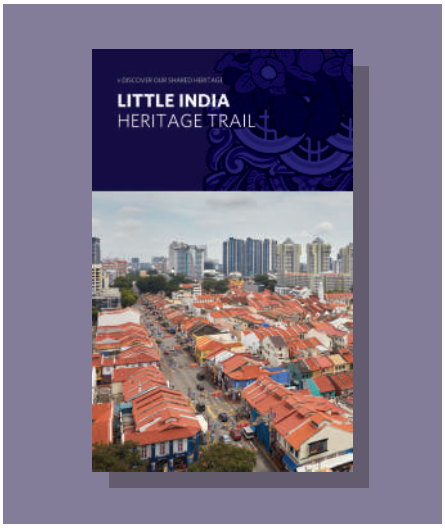
THE INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE ISSUE

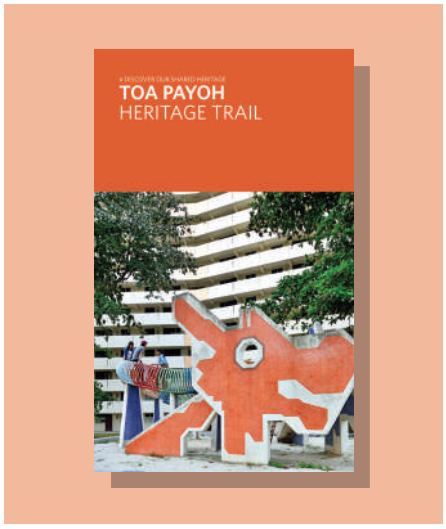
National Heritage Board

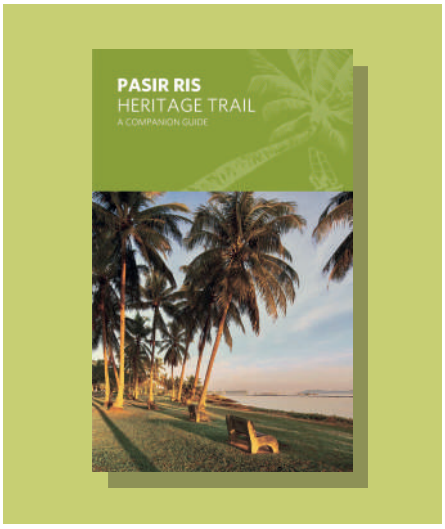


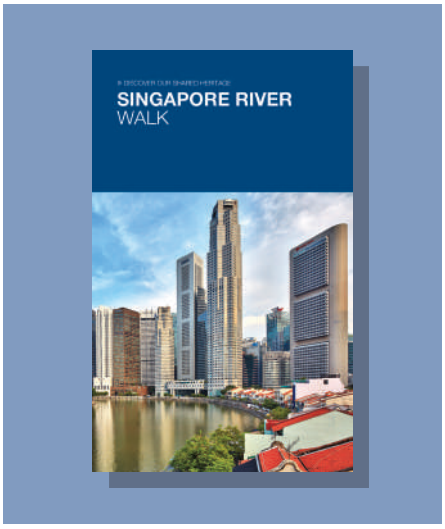


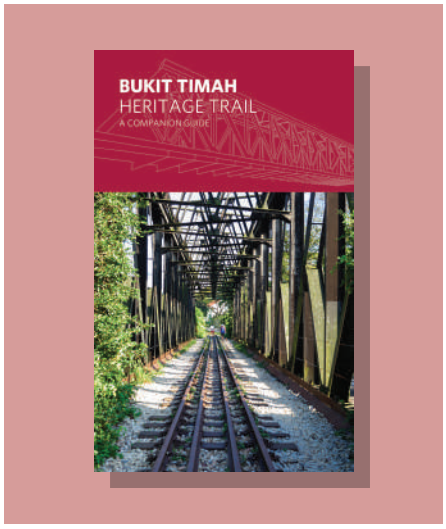


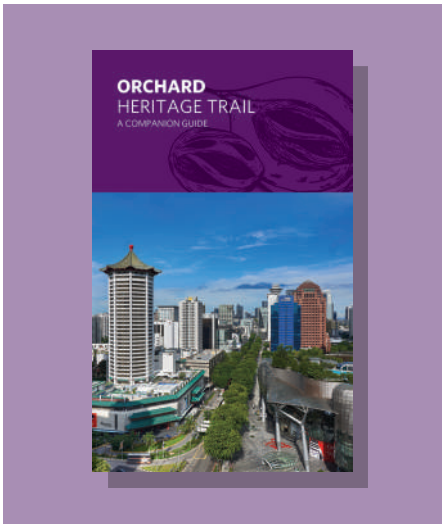












Explore Singapore through NHB's self-guided heritage trails!
Booklets and maps are downloadable at **www.roots.gov.sg/nhb/trails**.

FOREWORD

Welcome to the second and final edition of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) series of MUSE SG, which explores Singapore's multi-faceted range of ICH practices. In this issue, we continue to uncover seven more ICH practices through the efforts of students from the National University of Singapore's History Society and Nanyang Technological University.

We examine the craft of traditional Indian goldsmithing in Singapore, long associated with jewellery shops and ateliers in the Little India area. We uncover some of its many connections to religion, culture and social practices. Another link to India and its long, intersecting history with Singapore and Southeast Asia can be found in our article on Parsis and Zoroastrianism. Adherents of one of the oldest monotheistic religions in the world, the Zoroastrian Parsi community in Singapore is flourishing.

The theme of diverse cultures and their meeting points continues with articles on celebrations of the Jewish Passover in Singapore, reimagining traditional Chinese music in Singapore, and the Peranakan community's love and adoption of the Malay performing art of *dondang sayang*.

Food is never far from discussions of heritage in Singapore, and the classic Nanyang breakfast of kaya toast and kopi is well-loved by a wide cross-section of people from across multiple cultures here. Our article discusses the past, present and future of the Nanyang breakfast trade.

The long thread of history, in this case spanning centuries, is also present in our exploration of two of Singapore's mythic narratives, of Badang the strongman and Attack of the Swordfish. Beyond the deceptively simple veneer of folklore, one can delve into political and social depths, as well as find multiple connections with distant cultures and traditions that may well surprise the reader.

We conclude with a look at the traditional practice, heritage and accomplishments of the six recipients of the inaugural *Stewards of Singapore's Intangible Cultural Heritage Award*, which span well-loved performing arts, food and artisanal production. Through their shared dedication to their craft and transmission of culture, these practitioners serve as custodians of our many-faceted collective heritage. On behalf of the team at MUSE, we hope you enjoy the issue.

MUSE SG TEAM

PUBLISHER

National Heritage Board

National Heritage Board
61 Stamford Road,
#03-08, Stamford Court,
Singapore 178892

CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER
Chang Hwee Nee

DEPUTY CHIEF EXECUTIVE
Alvin Tan (Policy & Community)

MUSE SG TEAM
Director, Education & Community Outreach
Wai Yin Pryke

Editors
Norsaleen Salleh
Tan Jeng Woon
Royston Lin

DESIGN & LAYOUT
Oneplusone

PHOTOGRAPHY
Alex Heng

COPYEDITING
Alvin Chua, A Distillery

PRINTING
Hobee Print Pte Ltd

If you have any feedback, please email muse@nhb.gov.sg or go to www.nhb.gov.sg

©January 2021 NATIONAL HERITAGE BOARD
ISSN: 2424-7766

CONTENTS

An Outsider's View:

Discovering the Passover in Singapore

Text by Benedict See-Toh Kam Hung

01

02

01 Maghain Aboth Synagogue, 2019
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

02 Chesed-El Synagogue today, 2019
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

In an uninformed, off-the-cuff moment I wondered aloud: "There are synagogues in Singapore?" During my initial research into the Jewish community on our island, I had presumed that Jews here congregated in more informal settings. There are, in fact, two synagogues in Singapore, Maghain Aboth and Chesed-El. Both have long, rich histories, as does the Jewish community on our little island.

Despite their storied heritage here in addition to the many contributions of the community and prominent names such as Sir Manasseh Meyer and our first chief minister David Marshall, the average Singaporean may not know much about the Jews in Singapore and Judaism. Fortunately, after a few weeks of research and a couple of emails, I found myself in Oxley Rise, where Rabbi Asher Fettmann of Chesed-El Synagogue had kindly invited me to visit while he shared about Judaism and Jewish culture with me. In particular, we focused on Passover, a holy period of

03

03 A rabbi and his son recite prayers from the Torah, 2018
The Straits Times © Singapore Press Holdings Limited. Reprinted with permission.

04 Women and children covering their faces in concentration as they prayed to welcome Passover, 2018
The Straits Times © Singapore Press Holdings Limited. Reprinted with permission.

eight days that is of central significance to Jews in both a religious and a cultural sense.

The Exodus narrative and Passover

"*All of our History is His-story: everyone's story, our own story …*"
(Rabbi Asher Fettmann, 2020)[1]

The Passover narrative is detailed in four of the five books of the Torah, which makes up the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. These four books - Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy - are familiar to Christians, as they are also found in the Christian Bible. Much of the story, from the 10 plagues visited upon the Egyptians to the parting of the Red Sea for the fleeing Israelites, has also passed into wider culture, having been featured in films and other popular mediums.

The Exodus story tells of the freeing of the Israelite people from slavery in Egypt, and Passover is celebrated as a Jewish holiday "of birth and rebirth from slavery to freedom," as Rabbi Asher puts it. Passover and Exodus serve thus as both a religious narrative, with the liberation and salvation of the Israelites through the intervention of God, and a founding myth for the Jewish people.[2] Today, Passover continues to be a vital element of Jewish identity and culture.[3]

The term Passover is derived from the Book of Exodus, where the Israelites are instructed to mark the doors of their households with lamb blood, so that they would be passed over from the plague of first-born deaths being inflicted on the Egyptians. Evidently, the focus of Passover is on the story, in which the essence of Judaism is transmitted across countless of generations, and across the globe.

Passover: The festival of unleavened bread

"*For seven days you shall eat unleavened cakes, but on the preceding day you shall clear away all leaven from your houses, for whoever eats leaven from the first day until the*

04

seventh day that soul shall be cut off from Israel." (Exodus 12:15)[4]

The holiday of Passover, also known as Pesach, is celebrated on the 15th day of the Hebrew month of Nisan (the seventh month of the Jewish civil calendar, usually March or April on the Gregorian calendar). In Israel, the Passover period lasts for seven days, while Jews in other parts of the world observe Passover for eight days to allow for time differences and communication chains.

One of the most well-known aspects of Passover is its prohibition on the consumption or ownership of food with leavening agents, known in Hebrew as *chametz*. A verse in Exodus provides an alternative name for Passover as the Festival of Unleavened Bread, while commandments in the book proscribe the consumption of leaven and instruct its removal from Jewish households and ownership during the Passover period.[5]

Following Jewish law and tradition, Jews stop consuming leavened bread before 10am on the 14th day of Nisan and clear the households of leaven in a ritual called *bedikat chametz* the night before Passover.[6] The following morning, the leavened products are burned in a practice known as *biur chametz*.[7]

Scholars have proposed various rationale for the prohibition on leaven, including an aspiration to re-create some of the conditions faced by the Israelites in the Exodus narrative; having to flee Egypt in haste, the Israelites were said to be unable to wait for their bread to rise.[8] During the Passover period, the only bread that Jews are permitted to eat is *matzah*, unleavened bread made from flour baked within 18 minutes of coming into contact with water.

Today, the focal point of the celebration is the Passover *Seder* ("order" in Hebrew), a ritual remembrance and communal meal held on the first and second nights of Passover. The Passover *Seder* may be held at home,

The days of Passover week

14 Nisan
On the night before Passover, Jews perform what is called *bedikat chametz*, where they would formally search their house for leaven products (*chametz*) by the light of a candle.

15 – 16 Nisan
On the morning of Passover, the *chametz* is burned in a practice called *biur chametz*.

On the first and second night of Passover, Jews celebrate Passover *Seder*, where a communal meal is shared and rituals such as the reciting of the "Four Questions" are practised during the meal to retell the story of the Exodus.

17 – 20 Nisan
The intermediate days of Passover are observed with daily prayer services and work resumes.

21 – 22 Nisan
The final day of Passover is another holiday where no work should be done. Jews celebrate with special prayer services and festive meals in commemoration of the day the Children of Israel reached the Red Sea.

with relatives and friends invited, or take place as a communal gathering at the synagogue.

There are 15 parts in the Passover *Seder*, set according to a liturgical text known as the Haggadah, and these practices encourage reflection and discussion of the Exodus narrative, and a re-creation of the circumstances and tradition around the slavery and liberation of the Israelites.[9]

During the Maggid ("narrate" in Hebrew) section of the Haggadah, the youth at the table ask elders a series of four questions to perpetuate the passing on of Jewish history, faith and other aspects of identity from one generation to the next.[10] This part of the ritual is known as the Mah Nishtanah, from the first two words in a phrase asking, "Why is this night different from all other nights?".

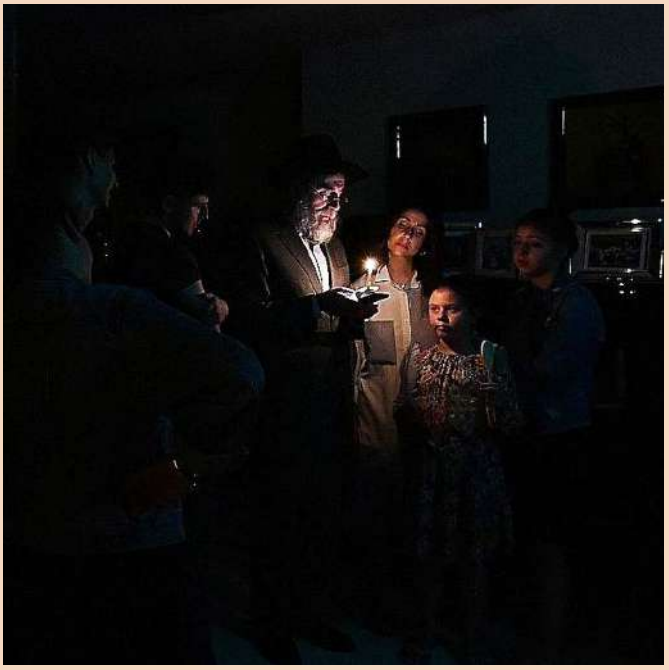
Talking me through another element of the feast, Rabbi Fettman elaborated on the significance of the *Seder* Plate. Six foods are presented on the plate - shank bone, roasted egg, *karpas* (spring vegetable), *maror* (bitter herb), *charoset* (sweet salad) and *chazeret* (second bitter herb). These items symbolise different aspects of the Exodus story, from the bitterness of life in slavery to the joy of freedom.[11]

Passover in Singapore
At its heart, Passover is a time for Jews to affirm their communal and religious identity. While the Haggadah fixes the order of rituals and practices for Passover *Seder*, the range of associated celebratory traditions also serves as a reflection of the diversity of the Jewish diaspora spread across the world. For example, while the foods on the Seder Plate are common for Jewish households worldwide, Jews in Singapore also prepare kosher versions of local cuisines for the feast. In an oral history interview from 2018, Pearl Silas recalled the delight of congregants in her synagogue when she cooked and shared kosher chicken rice and Malay *kueh* (cakes and snacks).[12]

I had the privilege of an interview with Rabbi Alfred Nathan, leader of the United Hebrew Congregation (UHC) in Singapore, and he related some of the distinctively local aspects of Passover and Jewish identity in Singapore. The UHC sustains a tradition practised by Jews in Morocco, other parts of North Africa and the Middle East, where Muslim neighbours and friends are invited for the last day of Passover,

05

05 The rabbi holds a candle, feather and spoon as girls search for the *chametz*, 2018 *The Straits Times © Singapore Press Holdings Limited. Reprinted with permission.*



06

06 A rabbi and his family gathered around him in the dark on the night before Passover as he recites prayers, 2018 *The Straits Times © Singapore Press Holdings Limited. Reprinted with permission.*

bearing cakes and leavened bread for the post-Passover period. In Singapore today, friends from various religious and ethnic communities participate in this tradition.[13]

During the Mah Nishtanah part of the Passover *Seder*, where youths ask the "Four Questions" central to Jewish identity, the congregants of the UHC take pleasure in asking the questions in the variety of languages heard in Singapore, including Singlish.[14] This relatively modern practice is an example of how the Jewish community and Passover traditions have evolved in Singapore. In an oral history interview from 1983, Albert Abraham Lelah recalled a practice from the 19th century and early 20th century which is no longer widely observed. He said: "(In) the old days… the rich people, they used to close their business all the eight days. And during this period…they used to make the accounts of their shops (or do) stock-taking."[15]

During the colonial era, a significant proportion of the Jewish community in Singapore had immigrated here from the Middle East and India, and practised Sephardic (Jews with ancestry in the Middle East, North Africa and Southern Europe) traditions. In the 21st century, the community here is of a wider range of backgrounds, but the Sephardic heritage remains alive. In a memoir, Jewish-Canadian expatriate Anthony Rebuck wrote of the cultural differences he experienced when attending Passover feasts in Singapore: "Our biggest shock came during our first *Seder* at Magen Avot in Singapore when large dishes of Persian rice were brought to the table. We ate browned eggs, leek soup, mimulim, okra, Syrian meatballs, bean salads (and) mint tea." He added that some Sephardic families in Singapore had the practice of all participants chanting the "Four Questions", instead of only the youth.[16]

Today, the UHC organises two nights of Passover *Seder*, with the first night exclusively for the congregation's youth. Rabbi Nathan considers this event an important part of the congregation's efforts to perpetuate Jewish traditions and beliefs, particularly given the Jewish community here is a "hotpot, mish-mash" group with diverse cultural backgrounds. The community also faces the challenges of sustaining tradition and identity as a minority group in cosmopolitan Singapore. In this context, Rabbi Nathan explains: "My work as the rabbi, as the leader of the community, is to help them

07

understand that their Jewish identity is something that can be held anywhere in the world." Passover, when hundreds of Jews based in Singapore visit either Maghain Aboth Synagogue or Chesed-El Synagogue on the first two nights for *Seder*,[17] remains central to the community's togetherness.

Sitting and listening to Rabbi Fetmann and Rabbi Nathan in their respective offices, surrounded by shelves of books representing millennia of Jewish scholarship and learning, I reflect on the knowledge they have shared. More clued in about the importance that Passover holds for the Jewish people, I can see how Passover and the Exodus narrative shaped and continues to shape Jewish identity. More than a remembrance of hardships past and a recounting of their triumphant liberation, Passover is central to Jewish theology as well as how the community will continue to hold together in the future.

At the same time, I think about the little things that the Jewish community here practise, such as preparing kosher Malay *kueh* and the meals shared with members of Singapore's many other communities. These may not evoke the same sense of awe that centuries-old Torah scrolls and the grand architecture of Maghain Aboth and Chesed-El do, but they make our cultural fabric much richer, and remind us that the things we have in common hold more meaning than that which divides us. Perhaps even non-Jews can find deep significance in Passover and its traditions.

Notes

[1] Rabbi Asher Fettmann, interview by Benedict See-Toh, National Heritage Board, January 3, 2020.

[2] Steven Kepnes. (2007). Jewish Liturgical Reasoning. Oxford University Press.

[3] Hayim Halevy Donin, "The Passover", in T*o be a Jew: A Guide to Jewish Observance in Contemporary Life*, (New York City: Basic Books, 1972), 218.

[4] Exo. 12:15, *The Complete Jewish Bible with Rashi commentary*, https://www.chabad.org/library/bible_cdo/aid/9873/jewish/Chapter-12.htm.

[5] Ed. Phillip Goodman. *The Passover Anthology* (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press/The Jewish Publication Society

08

of America, 2018).; C. M. Hoffman. Judaism made simple (London, Hodder Education, 2011).

[6] Sol Scharfstein, *Understanding Jewish Holidays and Customs*, (Hoboken: KTAV Publishing House, 1999), 77-78.

[7] Hayim Halevy Donin, "The Passover".

[8] Phillip Goodman, *The Passover Anthology*.; C. M. Hoffman, Judaism made simple.

[9] Sol Scharfstein, *Understanding Jewish Holidays and Customs*, 81-82.

[10] Hayim Halevy Donin, "The Passover", 229-232.

[11] Rabbi Asher Fettmann, interview.

[12] Pearl Silas, interview by Sharmini Johnson, National Heritage Board, May 3, 2018.

[13] Rabbi Alfred Nathan, interview by Benedict See-Toh, National Heritage Board, January 21, 2020.

[14] Rabbi Alfred Nathan, interview.

[15] Albert Abraham Lelah, interview by Dr. Daniel Chew, National Archives of Singapore, September 11, 1983.

[16] Shlomo ben Yitzhak HaLevi, *A doctor's Torah thoughts from Singapore* (Lulu.com), 47.

[17] Lianne Chia and Christy Yip, "From Baha'i to Zoroastrians, Jews to Jains", *CNA*, May 24, 2020. https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/cnainsider/covid19-singapore-religious-faith-ramadan-12764482

07 The Passover meal is a communal event, where everyone eats from their Seder Plates together as a family or community, 2018
The Straits Times © Singapore Press Holdings Limited. Reprinted with permission.

08 A *Seder* Plate, containing (starting anti-clockwise from the bottom) a shank bone, roasted add, *karpas* (spring vegetable), *maror* (bitter herb), *charoset* (sweet salad) and *chazeret* (second bitter herb). Next to the plate, there are *matzah* (unleavened bread) and cups of wine, 2018
The Straits Times © Singapore Press Holdings Limited. Reprinted with permission.

The Golden Touch:
Indian Goldsmithing in Singapore

Text by Katherine Tan

Gold and jewellery have long filled a cardinal space in the social, economic and religious landscape of numerous communities from the Indian subcontinent. Worn by men and women, these precious ornaments serve multiple roles as investment asset, cultural signifier and status symbol. Little surprise then, that the master artisans who work gold and jewellery are also esteemed personalities across Indian communities.

In Singapore, the figure of the Indian goldsmith has traditionally been an independent craftsman, renting and working out of a small shophouse space and hailing from the Viswakarma community. Relying on his (by tradition, Indian goldsmiths have been predominantly male) artistic creativity and expertise with hand-held tools, the artisan created new jewellery from gold brought to him by customers, repaired and altered generations-old pieces and participated in cultural and religious ceremonies. This essay examines customary narratives of the Indian goldsmith, and how he has had to evolve to meet the demands of changing eras.

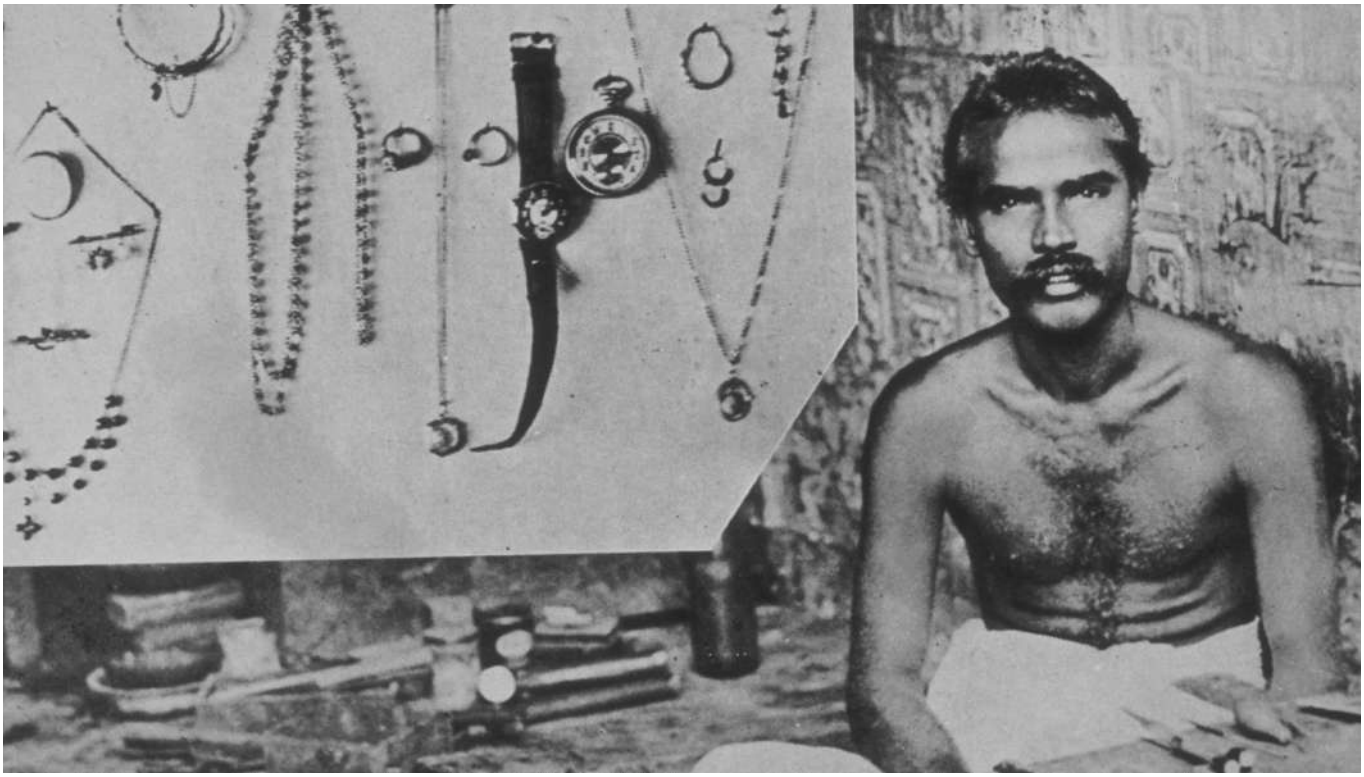
Humble hands, exalted work: Early Indian goldsmiths in Singapore

It is unclear exactly when Indian goldsmiths began establishing their trade in Singapore, although their presence here has been documented since at least the early 1900s. By the 1950s, there were said to be between 300 to 500 goldsmiths who had made the journey across the Indian Ocean to Singapore, then still a British colony.[1]

Many worked out of jewellery shops on Serangoon Road and branching roads, including Buffalo Road, Upper Dickson Road and Kinta Road, forming a commercial and residential ecosystem with textile and flower shops, restaurants and other retailers catering to the needs and desires of the Indian population.[2] Some goldsmiths were also found renting spaces in shops and homes in Tanjong Pagar and Selegie.[3]

01

01 Shanmugam Kasinathan examining a product, 2018
Courtesy of National Heritage Board



02

Among the prominent jewellery shops then were Thangoor Maka shop, said to be the largest during the 1950s, Dawood Maraikar & Sons, as well as Ani Mani Porchalai and Selvasegara Jewellers.[4] As of 2020, the latter two shops, along with RMP Jewellers and Goldsmiths and ASK Jewellery, are still operating on Serangoon Road, today widely known as Little India.

Of the migrant goldsmith population in the 1950s, as many as 80 per cent were said to have come from the Tanjore (now known as Thanjavur) district in Tamil Nadu, India. Likely drawn by the prospect of regular income and favourable exchange rates, many of the goldsmiths considered themselves part of the Viswakarma community, an artisan caste named after the Hindu deity of the same name.[5]

Those in the know could identify an Indian goldsmith through the *poonal* (a white threaded cord, "sacred threads" in Tamil) draped over his shoulder and torso, which signified his initiation into the craft. Some goldsmiths also used surnames that were common among the Viswakarma community, in particular *pathar* or *ashari*, as signifiers for their trade, and were referred to as such.[6]

In India, it had been customary for some in the middle and upper classes to hire a family goldsmith, providing them with metalworking services for festivities, religious ceremonies and varied purposes. In post-war Singapore, most of the *pathar* were freelance artisans, renting a space in and working out of a handful of jewellery shops.[7] Longtime entrepreneurs of Little India remember fewer than 10 such shops in the 1940s and 1950s. Some goldsmiths also worked out of shophouses partitioned for a variety of uses, such as flower shops.[8]

Provided with a front desk, the artisans worked on commissions from their own customers and those referred to them by the shopowner. The most successful *pathar* were able to open their own shops in time; one example is that of Rethnavelu Suppiah of Ani Mani Porchalai, who got his start working in his elder brother's small business. Chinese-owned shops, including Batu Pahat Goldsmith opened in 1969, also hired Indian goldsmiths turning out jewellery for a largely Indian clientele.[9]

With the goldsmith handling everything from sourcing commissions, designing and working on a

03

02 An Indian goldsmith and his makeshift workstation, c. 1900s *Sharon Siddique Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore*

03 A goldsmith at an ear piercing ceremony, 1962 *© Singapore Press Holdings Limited. Reprinted with permission.*

piece of jewellery to delivering it to a customer's house, the success or otherwise of his business leaned heavily on interpersonal skills and network, recognition of craftsmanship and quality service.[10] The *pathar* also needed good drawing skills to bring into existence the designs requested of him, and deft fingers to shape gold and gems into intricate jewellery.

Armed with their artisan's tools of a hammer, drill, files, screws, a stove and blowing pipe, sandpaper as well as nitric acid, sulphuric acid, salt and tamarind used in the gold refining process, the migrant goldsmiths worked long hours handcrafting a wealth of traditional and innovative designs to the tastes of customers. Outside his workspace, the *pathar* generally lived an unfussy life; residing in shophouse dormitories and saving money to send back to his family in India.[11]

By the 1980s, the traditional model and profile of the Indian goldsmith in Singapore were beginning to change. Some of those who had arrived in the 1950s sold their businesses and retired to India, with the redevelopment of the Serangoon Road area and its attendant compensation for business owners providing an additional spur. Of the artisans who had established a home and family in Singapore, their offspring often opted for more lucrative professions. Customers and shop owners also increasingly turned to machine-made jewellery, which arrived in the client's hands more quickly, while later generations mainly preferred more contemporary designs.[13]

Thaali and *ubayam*: the goldsmith's social and religious roles

The goldsmith's trade has long been intertwined with a number of religious beliefs and social traditions from the subcontinent. In Singapore, the goldsmith's role in the community has evolved from the colonial era.

Gold, and the attendant mastery of the goldsmith, continues to play a significant role in wedding and coming-of-age traditions for some groups in the Indian community. One of the most notable commissions for the goldsmith is the *thaali* (marriage pendant given to the bride) and the *kodi* (the gold chain on which the *thaali* is attached) worn by Hindus and Christians among others.[14]

Thaali are highly customisable based on the client's community traditions and religious affiliation, and

Tales of the *pathar*

In her 1985 book Can Survive, La: Cottage Industries in High-rise Singapore, author Margaret Sullivan interviewed Indian goldsmiths G. Pakkirisamy Pathar and N. Seenivasan. These excerpts provide insight into their lives and professional experiences in the 1980s, a time when the traditional model of the Indian goldsmith was changing.

Pakirisamy Pathar recalled: "I learned [the goldsmithing craft] at a small age. My father and grandfather worked at this job. I stayed with someone else and learned from them…if you stay with someone else, [that goldsmith] will be angry and the work will be better taught. We live in their house…they give us food, clothes.

"At the age of 10 or 12, we put the *poonal* on. We have a guru who does the *ubanayam* (ceremony). They tell the *mandaram* (ritual words) in Sanskrit and we have to think of it in our hearts. It is imperative for us to wear the *poonal* to be virtuous.

"I came to Singapore in 1951, December. I go and come [between Singapore and India] every two years or four years. I came to Singapore to work and earn money. I came alone…I had relatives here who gave permission…you can only come here after you get permission from them."

N. Seenivasan remembered: "I came to Singapore [from Karikal] with another boy in 1936 when I was thirteen. I [had] stayed in a place in India for one year and learned [goldsmithing, and after arriving in Singapore], I learned again from [the owner of Silva Segara Jewelers]. At the start, there were no wages. After I started working properly, they paid me six dollars a month.

"I worked [for Silva Segara] more or less twenty years [Seenivasan's salary had risen to $100 per month by then]. I had saved, I had learned the profession well and I had gotten to know more people. At thirty, I… started doing [goldsmithing] on my own.

"My customers are Indian and Chinese. I get orders from the Chinese shop [next door]. Both men and women customers come, they buy [more] female jewellery. The jewels come from India. I mainly work in 22 karat gold. I draw and cut and carve the design out. To be a good goldsmith, you need brains. You need artistic ability. If you don't have intelligence, you can't make the [jewellery]. You have to be imaginative."[12]

iconography associated with these aspects of their identity are artistically rendered on their pendant. One of the most popular styles is simply known as the 'M' *thaali*, where the 'M' motif resembles two tiger claws placed adjacent to each other with the tips facing out. The roots of this motif may be traced to the status symbols of tiger claws and teeth as markers of courage and hunt trophies.[15]

For Hindus, the making of the *thaali* includes the *ponnurukku* gold-melting ceremony. Some ceremonies involve the initial step of making a cone of turmeric and the invocation of the deity Ganesha, before the goldsmith starts the gold-melting process with the groom sitting in front of him. The melted gold and other preparations are then offered to Ganesha.[16]

Other popular motifs for the wedding necklace include palm leaves and icons of auspicious fruits and vegetables, with the emphasis on nature symbolising the union between man and woman. Symbols taken from nature also allude to fertility and procreation, and the basic need for sustenance to keep the cycle of life in constant motion.[17] Christians also favour a cross in the design of their *thaali*, notes goldsmith Shanmugam Kasinathan.[18]

The *pathar* may also work on other wedding accessories, including gold beads, *patakam* (neck pendants), earrings, bracelets and rings. Interviewed in the 1980s, Serangoon Road goldsmith N. Seenivasan noted: "Wedding times, that is when [customers] buy most

04

05

06

04 Shanmugam Kasinathan hand-crafting a 'M' *thaali* using simple tools (tweezer), 2018
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

05 A South Indian wedding necklace with a pendant on sacred threads, c. 20th century
Courtesy of the Indian Heritage Centre, National Heritage Board

06 Example of 10 *Thaali*, top row contains 'M' style *thaali*. Cross motifs suggest that this was made for a Christian client (top row, second from left), 2015
Collection of Indian Heritage Centre, courtesy of National Heritage Board

07

08

07 Shanmugam Kasinathan (extreme right, owner and goldsmith) with his employees in his shopfront of ASK Jewellery, 2018
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

08 Shanmugam Kasinathan using the blowtorch to heat the jewellery, 2018
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

of all."[19] Both the purchase and creation of wedding jewellery pieces are timed to occur during auspicious periods.[20] Beyond matrimonial celebrations, the expert crafting of the goldsmith also features in coming-of-age ceremonies such as the *karnapushanam* ceremony, which involves ear-piercing for boys and girls.[21]

As a community, the goldsmiths in Singapore maintain a longstanding tradition of participating in a *ubayam* (offering) ceremony on the first day of the Navaratri festival at the Sri Mariamman Temple, Singapore's oldest Hindu temple.[22] The nine-day Navaratri is celebrated in honour of the goddess Shakti (or Mother Goddess), with each day being dedicated to different manifestations of the goddess including Durga, Lakshmi and Saraswati.

Indian goldsmiths in the 21st century

Since the 1980s, Singapore's Indian goldsmiths have had to rely on more than their deft hands and centuries of tradition. Changing times have required them to stay nimble and adjust to social and economic shifts, with competition from machine-made jewellery and ready-made pieces a clear challenge.

In a 2015 study, academic Jayati Bhattarcharya quoted a goldsmith who gave a comparative estimation of the cost and crafting time of hand-made and machine-made pieces. While traditional goldsmiths usually took three days to finish a gold chain and charged $60 for the work, a similar piece turned out by machine could be ready in two hours with a cost price of $15. Over the last few decades, the Little India jewellery scene has also witnessed the entry of large-scale retail chain shops from India and elsewhere, providing another layer of competition to the traditional goldsmiths.[23]

The evolving tastes of customers, mainly away from the elaborate designs traditionally favoured, represent another test. Tara Mama Ebrahim, whose family has for generations patronised Indian goldsmiths, feels that for many in the younger generation, engaging the services of an Indian goldsmith is reserved mainly for important events such as weddings or commissioning one's birthstone and setting it into jewellery. "There are so many cheaper alternatives [for everyday pieces] which are more… fashionable," she says. There's a perception that most traditional designs have very particular uses or are just very flashy. She adds that younger consumers "won't be looking to buy these gold jewellery on the regular for the fact that it is expensive and [they] wouldn't wear them anywhere [beyond special occasions]".[24]

It is not all grim news and a total eclipse of *pathar* tradition however – the Indian jewellery scene on the whole continues to be profitable, and tourists, migrant workers and professionals represent fresh and growing sources of consumers. The good name that Indian goldsmiths have built up for themselves over the years remains a pillar of their business, including getting patrons beyond the Indian community; ASK Jewellery's Shanmugam Kasinathan notes that his shop attracts a multi-ethnic group of customers.[25]

For special jewellery pieces that require a bespoke touch, customers still turn to the *pathar*. Intricate designs like *naga* (serpentine entities of Indian and Nepalese legends) or *yalpanamthaali* (a complex, time-consuming *thaali* design for a specific caste in the Indian community) motifs need the skill and knowledge of a master artisan,[26] while repair, alteration and customisation services also usually need to be done by hand. Many consumers also believe that hand-made *thaali* and other jewellery pieces are of a quality that outlasts their machine-worked counterparts and have a higher chance of being passed on through the generations.[27]

Today, most goldsmiths work out of in-house ateliers within jewellery shops, which offer pieces from the factory along with the custom and repair services provided by the *pathar*, including *ponnurukku* ceremonies. The handcrafted expertise of the goldsmiths is also showcased in advertisements and catalogues from the shops, raising their profile.[28]

Crucially, Indian goldsmiths have also shown an ability to adapt. Ebrahim recalls being offered rose gold, a type of gold not often traditionally favoured but increasingly sought after in modern times, at a Little India shop. That traditional goldsmiths are "able to exercise [their] craft with different [types of gold]," she says, is "a show of talent and ability to integrate traditional designs into more modern mediums".[29]

The story of the Indian goldsmiths in Singapore will continue to evolve, as the artisans bank on their technical artistry and ability to fill time-honoured cultural niches while also adjusting to new economic realities. Using their age-old wisdom and expertise, they go on crafting a gilded world, one link at a time.

Notes

[1] Jayati Bhattacharya, "Beyond the Glitterati", in *Indian and Chinese Immigrant Communities: Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Jayati Bhattarcharya and Coonoor Kripalani (London: Anthem Press and ISEAS Publishing, 2015), 93.

[2] Jayati Bhattacharya, "Beyond the Glitterati", 93.

[3] S. Ramachandra, "Goldsmith without a shop", *The Singapore Free Press*, May 31, 1952. Retrieved from http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/freepress19520531-1.2.123.4

[4] Jayati Bhattacharya, "Beyond the Glitterati", p.93.; Jayati Bhattacharya, "Less Remembered Spaces and Interactions in a Changing Singapore: Indian Business Communities in the Post-Independence Period", in *50 Years of Indian Community in Singapore*, ed. Gopinath Pillai and K. Kesavapany (Singapore: World Scientific, 2016), 243.

[5] Jayati Bhattacharya, "Beyond the Glitterati", 93-94.

[6] Margaret Sullivan, *Can Survive, La: Cottage Industries in High-rise Singapore* (Singapore: Graham Brash, 1985), 152.

[7] Jayati Bhattacharya, "Beyond the Glitterati", 93.

[8] Margaret Sullivan, *Can Survive, La: Cottage Industries in High-rise Singapore*, 152.

[9] Jayati Bhattarcharya, *Beyond the Myth: Indian Business Communities in Singapore* (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2011), 143-144.

[10] Jayati Bhattacharya, "Beyond the Glitterati", 93.

[11] Jayati Bhattacharya, "Beyond the Glitterati", 94.

[12] Margaret Sullivan, *Can Survive, La: Cottage Industries in High-rise Singapore*, 153.

[13] Jayati Bhattacharya, "Beyond the Glitterati", p. 97-98.

[14] National Heritage Board, "Making of gold jewellery by Indian goldsmiths", *Roots*, https://www.roots.gov.sg/ich-landing/ich/making-of-gold-jewellery-by-indian-goldsmiths.

[15] Usha Ramamrutham Bala Krishnan, Meera Sushil Kumar and Bharath Ramamrutham, *Indian jewellery: Dance of the peacock*, (Bombay: India Book House, 1999), 150.

[16] Abiraame Popular Jewellers. "Services", http://www.apjsingapore.com/services.php.

[17] Usha Ramamrutham Bala Krishnan, Meera Sushil Kumar and Bharath Ramamrutham, *Indian jewellery: Dance of the peacock*, 150, 244.

[18] Shanmugam Kasinathan and Kalyana Sundaram, interview by Sangeetha Madasamy, National Heritage Board, September 6, 2018.

[19] Margaret Sullivan, *Can Survive, La: Cottage Industries in High-rise Singapore*, 153.

[20] Shanmugam Kasinathan and Kalyana Sundaram, interview.

[21] Jayati Bhattacharya, "Beyond the Glitterati", 94.

[22] Jayati Bhattacharya, "Beyond the Glitterati", 95-96.

[23] Jayati Bhattacharya, "Beyond the Glitterati", 97-98.

[24] Tara Mama Ebrahim, interview by Katherine Tan, National Heritage Board, October 6, 2020.

[25] Shanmugam Kasinathan and Kalyana Sundaram, interview.

[26] Jayati Bhattacharya, "Beyond the Glitterati", 97-98.

[27] Shanmugam Kasinathan and Kalyana Sundaram, interview.

[28] Abiraame Popular Jewellers, "Customised Gold Products", https://ajs.com.sg/customized-gold-products/.; Ishtara Jewellery, "Services", http://ishtarajewellery.com/services/.

[29] Tara Mama Ebrahim, interview.

Love, Culture and Duelling Wits:
The Art of *Dondang Sayang*

Text by Lee Kai Yi Sandy

Originating from 15th century Melaka, the performing art of *dondang sayang* has long embodied Malay culture and tradition while also being adopted by different communities, including the Chinese Peranakans, Chitty Peranakans and Portuguese Eurasians.[1] This article deals mainly with *dondang sayang* in the Peranakan context.

Dondang sayang revolves around a pair of performers reciting and singing *pantun* (quatrains or four-line verse) on a pre-determined theme and set to musical accompaniment. While the term *dondang sayang* is derived from the Malay words *dondang* ("to sing") and *sayang* ("love"), the artform also includes elements of intellectual and verbal sparring, with performers seeking to outwit each other through improvised responses.[2]

Origin and spread of *dondang sayang*

The roots of *dondang sayang* are widely believed to stem from the Melaka Sultanate in the 15th century, although an alternative origin connects the artform to 12th century Bintan, in the Riau Islands. In the

01

Hikayat Hang Tuah, a Malay literary epic set in the 15th century, the warrior Hang Jebat is credited as the inventor of *dondang sayang*.[3]

Attested as entertainment in the royal courts of Melaka, *dondang sayang* diffused throughout society and was performed during traditional festivals and at events such as weddings. After the Portuguese conquest of Melaka in 1511 and its subsequent rule by the Dutch and the British, the artform began to bear influences from European and Indian music. The Malay poetic

01 A *dondang sayang* performance, 1988
Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

02

03

02 A *rebana*, instrument used during the performance
Collection of The Peranakan Museum, gift of Mr John Koh, in memory of his grandfather Mr Koh Hoon Teck

03 A gong from G. T. Lye's father, Gwee Peng Kwee, 1962
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

pantun came to be accompanied by instruments such as the violin, gong, guitar, accordion, tambourine, tabla (a pair of small hand drums) and *rebana* (Malay hand drum), as well as different styles of dance.[4]

In the 19th century, under British colonial rule, *dondang sayang* spread and became popular in Singapore and Penang. In Singapore, *dondang sayang* was performed at weddings, after Qur'an readings and other celebrations, often beginning after evening prayers and stretching into the early hours. The artform was also worked into popular entertainment, being performed during scene changes of *bangsawan* plays and other productions.[5] Post-independence, *dondang sayang* was featured on television and radio, performed and taught at community centres, as well as captured on various recording mediums.

Structure and themes in *dondang sayang*

Dondang sayang features two performers singing *pantun* verses while accompanied by a small band of musicians. A *pantun* consists of rhyming quatrains and contains between eight to twelve syllables.[6] The consistent number of syllables sustains a rhythm, and is complemented by violins, *rebana* and the gong. Other instruments including guitars and tambourines may also be used.[7]

The rhythmic patterns of *dondang sayang* can be compared to other poetic forms such as Japanese *haiku* poetry, which features lines of five, seven and five syllables. A distinctive element of *dondang sayang* however is the use of improvised verse that responds to the challenges of the other performer, showcasing their creativity and agility of thought.[8]

A *dondang sayang* performance opens with two lines of pantun that foreshadows the final two lines. Often, the first two lines are adopted from already famous or widely-used *pantun*.[9] Subsequently, the third line is to be composed such that it rhymes with the first, and the fourth line to rhyme with the second.[10]

The opening *pantun* often comprise observations of everyday experiences, and aim to paint a vivid, relatable picture for the audience. This serves to underscore the cultural background of the performers and the audience, with those not in the know being unable to fully grasp the intricacies of language and culture.[11] The opening lines also create suspense for

An original *pantun* by G. T. Lye

A *pantun* consists of rhyming quatrains and contains between eight to twelve syllables in each line. A performance is opened with two lines of *pantun* and will be answered by the final two lines. The third line is composed such that it rhymes with the first and the fourth line to rhyme with the second.

English Translation:

A beautiful maiden [dresses]
in batik sarong and kebaya dress.
Now, be serious!
Don't kill, don't destroy the culture.

the audience as they anticipate the message of the full verse, driven home in the final two lines.[12]

Many of the themes and values in *dondang sayang* revolve around everyday issues of romantic love, family and community culture. *Dondang sayang* performed for weddings, funerals and other ceremonies may also contain messages appropriate for the occasion, from congratulations and well-wishes to reflections of shared sorrow.[13]

Dondang sayang has also served to memorialise collective experiences of the community. For example, Peranakans have portrayed scenes during the Japanese Occupation in *dondang sayang* performances, reflecting on the traumas suffered, allowing the community to mourn together and celebrating collective resilience.[14]

Dondang Sayang, Peranakan-Style

Having acquired a love of *dondang sayang* through their interactions with the Malays, Peranakan Chinese communities in Singapore also practised the art along with the related medium of *wayang peranakan* (a theatre form derived from the Malay form of *bangsawan*). The main difference between the Malay and Peranakan versions of *dondang sayang* was the use of the Peranakan *patois* (known simply as Peranakan, or Baba Malay) in the latter, which brought Hokkien and other Chinese dialect words and expressions into the *pantun*.[15]

While many of the themes explored in *dondang sayang*, including romance and social relationships, remained common across communities, the range of cultural expressions across the artform flowered as different groups brought different viewpoints of culture, religion and social values to the table.[16]

Despite these subtle variances, Peranakan *dondang sayang* has also served as a bridge between communities. As veteran performer G. T. Lye put it in 2016: "For centuries, the Malay and the Peranakan communities have been able to communicate with each other in a beautiful and harmonious way – not just through daily conversations but also through our music, poems and literary texts."[17]

From the 19th century to the 1960s, *dondang sayang* performances were a highlight of Peranakan celebrations in Singapore. These included Chap Goh

04

Meh (the 15th and final night of Lunar New Year festivities), weddings, birthdays and other parties.[18] The community also established a number of clubs and associations for *dondang sayang* aficionados including the Gunong Sayang Association in 1910, reflecting the artform's significance in communal identity.

A master's love affair with *dondang sayang*

A name synonymous with *dondang sayang* is that of G. T. Lye, the stage name of veteran actor and scriptwriter Gwee Thian Lye. Gwee grew up with the artform, as his father Peng Kwee was also a noted singer, but only picked up *dondang sayang* and *wayang peranakan* while in his 40s.

In a 2017 interview, Gwee related a very personal story about his connection with *dondang sayang*: "Every day, in the house, from morning to night, my father (would) create *pantun* and sing to the tune of *dondang sayang*. But my father never (wanted any of his children) to learn (the artform). He never encouraged any of us.

"(After I learnt *dondang sayang*), I was singing for a few occasions and in public, and when my father heard about it, he never believed (it). He came to the (Gunong Sayang) club on his wheelchair and he challenged me, because this singing of *dondang sayang* is actually a challenge of wits in the form of *pantun*."[19]

Gwee also described Singapore's *dondang sayang* scene during its halcyon days in the 1950s and 1960s, emphasising the skill of the singers in constructing verse extempore. "When they gather to sing, to challenge their wits, they never discuss what they're going to sing beforehand. Straightaway they start the session, somebody will introduce a subject, and they will do their best to outwit one another," he recalls.

"Sometimes you have very good singers and creators of *pantun*, it can go on for hours, and you see the poor violinist carrying on the music… tirelessly. When there's a singing *dondang sayang* session, people who are not able to sing but understand what's going on, they will sit from afternoon till evening, listening to others singing, because they enjoy it."[20]

During his performing career of more than four decades, Gwee has witnessed the mainstream

05

04 Portrait of the members of the Gunong Sayang Association, 1995
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

05 G. T. Lye, who is a veteran actor and scriptwriter of *dondang sayang*, 2020
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

appeal and popularity of *dondang sayang* wane. Changing cultural tastes, an ever-expanding array of entertainment options and the decline of proficiency in Baba Malay are some of the factors behind the diminishing of the artform.

"(In the past it was) a session of a few singers – four, five or six singers – challenging their wits, but later when all these people passed on, it became two or three singers, and now, it's becoming solo," says Gwee with a rueful smile.

He has also seen the artform evolve, with the number of singers able to compose verses on the fly becoming even more rare. Today, *dondang sayang* singers are more likely to recite memorised *pantun* or read them off electronic screens during televised performances. Audiences too need surtitles to appreciate the beauty of the poetry, the images and concepts alluded to in verse and the subtle interplay of duelling performers.

Gwee laments the loss of performers skilled enough to improvise but empathises with the scale of the task facing younger singers. "Creating pantun spontaneously while you're singing is not an easy job," he says. "Firstly, your command of the language – most important. Secondly, your vocabulary. And third is your wit and quick thinking. (To have all these qualities in a performer), I think it's quite difficult."

Still, he can see some hope in the efforts of associations like Gunong Sayang, and the potential for future generations to rediscover their heritage. "The Peranakan community is doing our best to upkeep this tradition. (When) you have the passion and the love, it's easy. And I have seen and encouraged many young people in Singapore. They've joined Gunong Sayang, they are able to sing in public, they have no stage fright," he says.[21]

The future of *dondang sayang* in Singapore

Today, the Gunong Sayang Association is at the forefront of promoting Peranakan performing arts, including *dondang sayang*. They offer language classes for Baba Malay, as well as music classes that may well help seed the next generation of *dondang sayang* and

06

06 Gunong Sayang Association, 2020
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

07 A performance of *dondang sayang* between members of the Gunong Sayang Association, 2020
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

wayang peranakan performers. Vitally, the association has staged a Peranakan-medium performance almost every year since 1984, providing platforms for practitioners young and old. [22]

In an innovative touch, a Singapore electronic-pop duo, Cosmic Armchair have also experimented with *dondang sayang* by infusing electronic music with traditional Baba Malay pantun. The duo's producer, Benjamin Ang, was given a folder of his great-grandfather's handwritten poems and was told that they could be sung as *dondang sayang*, inspiring him to put a modern twist to the artform. Cosmic Armchair then collaborated with the Gunong Sayang Association to hold a concert titled 'Digital *Dondang Sayang*' in 2016. Ang reflected that through this project, he was able to understand his cultural heritage and how life was like for his great-grandfather.[23]

Perhaps then, it is by using the two approaches of cultural preservation through a focus on performances and recitals accessible through a wide range of mediums, as well as innovation and evolution of the artform itself, that *dondang sayang* may stay alive through the centuries ahead.

Notes

[1] United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. "Dondang sayang", https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/dondang-sayang-01410.

[2] Stephanie Ho, "Dondang sayang: The art of duelling pantuns", *MusicSG*, https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/music/Media/PDFs/Article/816bb8c9-0ece-48a9-80f8-3e971b65a965.pdf

[3] Stephanie Ho, "Dondang sayang: The art of duelling *pantuns*".

[4] Margaret Sarkissian, *D'Albuquerque's children: performing tradition in Malaysia's Portuguese settlement* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000),160.; Stephanie Ho, "Dondang sayang: The art of duelling *pantuns*".

[5] Stephanie Ho, "Dondang sayang: The art of duelling *pantuns*".

07

[6] National Heritage Board, "Malay Poetic Forms", *Roots*, https://www.roots.sg/learn/resources/ich/malay-poetic-forms.
[7] National Heritage Board, "Dondang sayang", *Roots*, https://www.roots.sg/learn/resources/ich/dondang-sayang.
[8] National Heritage Board, "Dondang sayang", *Roots*, https://www.roots.sg/learn/resources/ich/dondang-sayang.
[9] National Heritage Board, "Dondang sayang", *Roots*, https://www.roots.sg/learn/resources/ich/dondang-sayang.
[10] Ning Juita, "Back to the days of tender tussle of the pantun", *The Straits Times*, May 25, 1988. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
[11] James M. Amend, "*Negotiation of identity as theme and variation: the musical art of dondang sayang in Melaka, Malaysia*", (PhD, diss., Florida State University, 1998), 14.
[12] Ning Juita, "Back to the days of tender tussle of the pantun", *The Straits Times*.
[13] Gwee Thian Lye, interview by Arielene Wee, National Heritage Board, May 31, 2017.
[14] Lee Liang Hye, interview by Zeleha bte Osman, National Archives of Singapore, October 18, 1999.
[15] National Heritage Board, "Dondang sayang", *Roots*, https://www.roots.sg/learn/resources/ich/dondang-sayang.
[16] Gwee Thian Lye, interview.; Lee Hiang Hye, interview.
[17] Helmi Yusof, "Mining the past to reshape the present", *The Business Times*, September 9, 2016. https://www.businesstimes.com.sg/lifestyle/arts-entertainment/mining-the-past-to-reshape-the-present.
[18] Stephanie Ho, "Dondang sayang: The art of duelling *pantuns*".
[19] Gwee Thian Lye, interview.
[20] Gwee Thian Lye, interview.
[21] Gwee Thian Lye, interview.
[22] Jose Hong, "*Keeping the Peranakan Language Alive*", *The Straits Times*, https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/keeping-the-peranakan-language-alive.
[23] Mysara Aljaru, "NUS Arts Fest 2016: *Dondang Sayang goes digital*", *TODAY*, https://www.todayonline.com/entertainment/music/nus-arts-fest-2016-dondang-sayang-goes-digital.

Is Traditional Chinese Music a Dying Art?

Text by Shi Peiyun

"Oh, East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet." Poet Rudyard Kipling's well-known line was not written with Singapore's music scene in mind, but still serves to reflect the divide between diverse musical genres during the colonial era. Cellos, violins and the Western orchestra sounded in the Victoria Concert Hall, while Chinese music forms like *nanyin* and *waijiang* (also known as *ruyue* or "scholar's music") stayed within shophouse walls and temples in the Chinatown area, the twain never to meet across the Singapore River.

Today however, it is a different story. 21st century groups such as The TENG Ensemble and SAtheCollective, as well as established assemblies including the Siong Leng Musical Association, are testing the boundaries, conceptions and repertoires of traditional Chinese music. While experimental, fusion-embracing approaches often provoke debates on authenticity, many of these innovations are being carried out in the name of ensuring the survival of traditional music in modern, multicultural Singapore.

New shoots from old roots

Founded in 2009, The TENG Ensemble features musicians on the *pipa* (pear-shaped lute) and the *sheng* (Chinese mouth organ), instruments traditionally associated with Chinese music, and the Western cello and electric guitar among others. With an ethos of bringing cultures together, bridging the traditional and contemporary as well as showcasing a Singaporean strain of heritage Chinese music,[1] the ensemble's work has often been referred to as possessing a fusion character.

The ensemble's members see their efforts as an organic integration of diverse music forms, a layered reimagining building on existing connections, with its

01 The TENG Ensemble performing Heirlooms – Reimagining the Sounds of our Chinese Forefathers at the Esplanade Concert Hall, 2019
Courtesy of The TENG Ensemble

02

own local identity rather than an unthinking fusion for novelty's sake. Dr Samuel Wong, a co-founder of the ensemble in which he plays the *pipa*, says: "In today's age of globalisation, everyone is influencing each other. It is not as straightforward to simply name claim to one culture but rather (to) multiple cultures. The music I create is a result of my cultural identity."[2]

In a 2019 interview with *The Straits Times*, Dr Wong added: "A tradition is never stagnant. It is always alive. We started asking ourselves, how can we reinvent this tradition so that it becomes more palatable for a younger audience?"[3] That year, The TENG Ensemble's concert titled *Heirlooms* presented new works inspired by music forms traditionally identified with Hokkien, Teochew and Cantonese immigrant communities, including *nanyin*.

The works at the Esplanade Concert Hall included a piece rooted in the *nanyin* classic *Lovebirds Singing in Harmony* as well as *Xin Zao Beh*, a take-off from another classic, *Eight Horses*. These and other reinventions featured the Chinese *erhu* (two-stringed fiddle), *sheng*, *pipa*, *ruan* (Chinese moon guitar), the Western cello, keyboards and electric guitar, as well as the Cantonese *gaohu* (Cantonese fiddle) and *qinqin* (Cantonese lute) and the Teochew *zheng* (zither). What resulted was a performance that showed how heritage music could be deftly used to "inform the future," according to *The Straits Times*' music critic Chang Tou Liang.[4]

For another group, SAtheCollective, deconstruction and exploration of traditional sounds can lead to new, distinctive paths of musical identity. "The underlying goal was to break the boundaries of Chinese music. But as we've progressed as musicians, we are now more focussed on exploring and creating our own sound," said the group's *guzheng* player Natalie Alexandra Tse in 2017. In their body of work, SAtheCollective has experimented with combining *guzheng* (zither) and *dizi* (flute) with drums and electronic music.[5]

02 Likie Low and her band, 2019
Courtesy of Vocalise Singapore

Beyond exercising their creativity and pushing the frontiers of imagination, groups like The TENG Ensemble are also driven by the desire to keep audiences interested in traditional music. In a 2017 newspaper interview, the ensemble's *sheng* player Yang Ji Wei noted: "People don't really feel the need to listen to traditional instruments anymore, especially in a concert hall setting. They have a stereotypical mentality that Chinese instrumental music is related to funeral or wedding processions."[6] To overcome the stereotypes and reach out to new audiences, The TENG Ensemble has also produced music videos that incorporate popular culture including Disney animated films, which have proven to been hits on social media.

Given the diversity of cultures that meet and mix in 21st century Singapore, it is not surprising that young musicians reflect a plethora of influences in their work. Likie Low picked up the *erhu* at the age of nine, and the two-stringed traditional Chinese instrument has since been a major fixture in her life.

At the School of the Arts (SOTA), where she was the only Chinese instrumentalist in her cohort, Likie delved into musical techniques, craft and perspectives from across the world, including the Western classical tradition. In her third year at SOTA, she gained a love for electronic dance music, and her work reflects the meeting of those diverse heritages. Like The TENG Ensemble and many other musicians today, Likie shares her work and passion on social media.[7]

The pioneering wave: Innovations in Singapore's post-independence era

When the boundaries of a traditional artform are experimented with, debates over authenticity and cultural fidelity are inevitable. It is interesting to note however that the reinventions of groups like The TENG Ensemble and SAtheCollective do not represent the first wave of innovation in Singapore's traditional Chinese music scene. In earlier decades, established groups like the Siong Leng Musical Association already crafted new methods of performance and composition, and taken their music beyond familiar ground.

Founded in 1941, Siong Leng has been a stalwart of the *nanyin* scene in Singapore. Performed in the Minnan language, *nanyin* traces its roots to centuries-old court music of China's dynasties, and has spread from southern China to Southeast Asian countries including Singapore, Malaysia and the Philippines. During the colonial era, immigrants from Quanzhou, Xiamen and other areas of southern China performed *nanyin* and the associated theatrical forms of *liyuanxi* and *budaixi* in temple events and in private gatherings in shophouses and clan associations.[8]

After the high point of the 1950s, when *nanyin* grew popular enough to be featured in televised performances and scored for films, the genre experienced a decline from the 1960s. Practitioners struggled to find successors from outside their immediate social circles, and Singapore's decision on the official use of Mandarin above dialects like Hokkien and Teochew affected the practice and transmission of *nanyin*.

In response, under the visionary leadership of Cultural Medallion recipient Teng Mah Seng, Siong Leng undertook a series of innovations in performance and transmission as well as institutional reform from the 1970s. These innovations, aimed at making *nanyin* more attractive to the younger generation and thus ensure its survival in Singapore, included taking *nanyin* beyond its traditional performing grounds, and focusing on recruitment, training and education to preserve *nanyin* traditions.[9]

Siong Leng not only brought *nanyin* out of the sole preserve of shophouse and temple performances to a wider Singapore audience, but also to an international stage. In 1983, the association's performance of the Teng-composed *Reminiscence* won third prize in the folk solo category at the 37th Llangollen International Musical Eisteddfod.

03

04

03 Performers from the Siong Leng Musical Association, 1947
Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

04 Members of Siong Leng Musical Association at a Chingay performance, 1953
Courtesy of Siong Leng Musical Association

05 Principal artists from Siong Leng Musical Association, undated
Courtesy of Siong Leng Musical Association

05

Teng and other Siong Leng musicians came up with new *nanyin* compositions, while not neglecting the classics. The lyrics and themes of their new works ventured beyond the traditional and into territory that the young could relate to, with Teng espousing the notion that Singapore's *nanyin* should reflect its social landscape and ideals of the era. Siong Leng also experimented with *nanyin* – *qupai* (fixed melody) pieces were rearranged and the lengths of other pieces were also readjusted.[10]

Siong Leng's innovative approach continued into the 21st century. Its productions, including *Soul Journey* (2008) and *Cicada Zen* (2012), incorporated music from other Chinese traditions, as well as other Asian heritages and the Western corpus. The *tabla* and *mridangam*, and *kompang* (hand drums from the North and South Indian and Malay cultures respectively), could be heard alongside the traditional *pipa*, *dongxiao* (vertical flute), *erxian* (two-stringed fiddle) and *sanxian* (three-stringed lute), and *paiban* clappers of *nanyin*.

Some productions also featured the use of contemporary stage design and lighting, dance and video projections, and even the inventive touch of including tea-drinking sessions and curated scents during performances. Siong Leng's Principal Artist and Arts Manager Lyn Lee explains: "Singapore audiences tend to seek to be entertained throughout the performance and would appreciate it if there was some form of audience engagement."[11] These innovations took Singapore *nanyin* beyond the borders of customary practice, even as they opened up new audiences and frontiers for the genre.

Innovation and preservation: Sides of the same coin?

Yet another thought-provoking aspect of the "authenticity" discussion is the fact that in Singapore, many of the genre-redefining groups are the same ones driven to preserve and document traditional music, to ensure that future generations may continue to experience *nanyin* and its counterparts.

During their revitalisation and reimagining of *nanyin* from the 1970s, Siong Leng also assiduously collected and published traditional songs. Its safeguarding efforts included the documentation of traditions associated with the genre, many of which had previously been passed down in oral form. Another longstanding local tradition that the association upholds today is an annual series of performances at the Thian Hock Keng Temple.[12]

In recent years, The TENG Company, the ensemble's parent group, undertook the Forefathers Project to research and interview pioneers of traditional Chinese music in Singapore. The efforts to capture in depth the experiences, perspectives and performance techniques of musicians in groups such as the Thau Yong Amateur Musical Association culminated in a documentary series and the *Heirlooms* concert, essential records for the future.[13]

During his time researching the practices of these pioneers, The TENG Ensemble's Dr Wong gained a fascinating insight into the local traditional Chinese music scene - improvisation and reinvention may in fact be a fundamental facet of its character. Playing Teochew music and *waijiang* with the masters from Thau Yong, Dr Wong noted that they did not use scores or written notes and constantly improvised, a marked contrast from his own classical conservatory training and contemporary Chinese orchestral forms.

In a newspaper interview, Dr Wong said: "What I found out was that all of them held a root melody in their heart. And then they let go of it and played everything but that root melody. I had never heard anything like it before. They were actually innovating with the music. They were finding new ways of performing and some had even invented their own instruments."[14]

Another genre that bears the hallmark of improvisation is *nanyin*, where performances are melody-driven, each instrument carries a version of the same tune[15] and performers may find new directions by 'feeling' the music. Siong Leng's Lee says: "*Nanyin* is all about interpretations - how and why did the composer write the piece and in what state of mind? We can both be very good musicians, but we may interpret the piece very differently. Most of the time, there is no right answer to our interpretations."[16]

06

07

06 *Nanyin* music performance by Siong Leng Musical Association, undated
Courtesy of Siong Leng Musical Association

07 Score books belonging to Teng Mah Seng, Which contain original compositions and over 300 contemporary pieces, 2019
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

Some may dismiss the verity of innovative and reimagined approaches to traditional Chinese music, and tensions between customary practice and fresh directions may always be present. For instance, Traditional Southern Fujian Music Society was established in 1994 solely to promote traditional *nanyin*. Perhaps it is the dynamic interplay between different approaches however, and a common ground of love for heritage music genres, that will ensure their survival and propagation.

Notes

[1] The TENG Company, "About", n.d. http://thetengcompany.com/about

[2] Dr Samuel Wong, interview by Shi Peiyun, National Heritage Board, January 15, 2019.

[3] Olivia Ho, "Keeping Singapore's Chinese music traditions alive in Heirlooms concert", The Straits Times, October 8, 2019. https://www.straitstimes.com/lifestyle/arts/keeping-singapores-chinese-music-traditions-alive-in-heirlooms-concert.

[4] Chang Tou Liang, "Chinese immigrant music given fresh take", *The Straits Times*, October 14, 2019. https://www.straitstimes.com/lifestyle/arts/chinese-immigrant-music-given-a-fresh-take.

[5] Nabilah Said, "Contemporary ethnic music groups woo young audiences", *The Straits Times*, July 4, 2017. https://www.straitstimes.com/lifestyle/arts/strength-in-fusion.

[6] Nabilah Said, "Contemporary ethnic music groups woo young audiences".

[7] Likie Low, interview by Shi Peiyun, National Heritage Board, December 17. 2019.

[8] Kaori Fushiki, "*Nanyin* and the Singaporean culture: The creation of intangible cultural heritage in Singapore and intergenerational contrasts", in Joao Sardinha and Ricardo Campos (Eds.), *Transglobal Sounds: Music, Youth and Migration* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016).

[9] Kaori Fushiki, "*Nanyin* and the Singaporean culture: The creation of intangible cultural heritage in Singapore and intergenerational contrasts"

[10] Kaori Fushiki, "*Nanyin* and the Singaporean culture: The creation of intangible cultural heritage in Singapore and intergenerational contrasts".

[11] Lyn Lee, interview by Shi Peiyun, National Heritage Board, December 13, 2019.

[12] Kaori Fushiki, "*Nanyin* and the Singaporean culture: The creation of intangible cultural heritage in Singapore and intergenerational contrasts".

[13] Olivia Ho, "Keeping Singapore's Chinese music traditions alive in Heirlooms concert".

[14] Olivia Ho, "Keeping Singapore's Chinese music traditions alive in Heirlooms concert".

[15] Tan Shrz Ee, "Nanyin: The gentle art of the south", *Offstage*, June 14, 2018. https://www.esplanade.com/offstage/arts/nanyin-the-gentle-art-of-the-south.

[16] Lee, interview.

The Descendants Of Persia:

Parsis and Zoroastrianism in Singapore

Text by Ernest K.W. Koh

02

01 Parsi Zoroastrian priest performing a ritual, 2018
Courtesy of Ernest Koh

02 Prayer altar in the Zoroastrian House, 2019
Courtesy of Ernest Koh

One of the smallest ethno-religious communities in Singapore, the Parsi Zoroastrians have an ancient cultural and religious heritage. While the terms Parsi (or Parsee) and Zoroastrian are sometimes used interchangeably, the term Zoroastrians is used to define followers of the Zoroastrian religion and its Prophet Zarathustra (or Zoroaster), whereas Parsi refers to Zoroastrians who fled Persia (present-day Iran) due to religious persecution and took refuge in India approximately between 670 and 700 CE.

In recent decades, the worldwide Parsi population has been diminishing, with the current population in India estimated at around 60,000 people. However, the Parsi Zoroastrian community in Singapore has experienced a steady increase in their numbers for the past 15 years.[1] The community in Singapore is one of the biggest in Southeast Asia, coming in at an estimated 300 to 400 strong as of 2019,[2] with about one-fifth of this number estimated to have been born in Singapore.[3]

In Singapore, the Parsis are officially recognised as a race, which is reflected on their identity cards. Zoroastrianism, the faith that most Parsis practice, is also recognised as one of the 10 major religions of Singapore and is represented in the Inter-Religious Organisation.[4]

The nation's economic and political stability has also encouraged many members of the Parsi community overseas to migrate and settle in Singapore, contributing to the growing numbers. However, one of the challenges faced by the local Parsi community is the general public's lack of awareness of their community and culture. Zubin Daruwalla, a member of the Parsi community in Singapore shared his experiences: "Growing up in Singapore, …when we were out, and people looked at me and said 'you don't look Singaporean, you don't look Indian... where are you from?'"[5]

Growing up in Singapore, many Parsis continue to find themselves in situations where they have to explain to peers about their identity and cultural heritage, as many have not heard of Parsis or Zoroastrianism.[6] Despite the support and recognition of the Singapore government, the community's coverage in newspapers, and the presentation of the Parsi and Zoroastrian culture in museums such as the Indian Heritage Centre, the public awareness and understanding of the Parsis culture and Zoroastrian faith is still woefully lacking.

03

03 A portrait of a wealthy Parsi woman in her traditional clothing, c. early 20th century
Courtesy of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board

04 Portrait painting of Navroj Mistri, undated
Courtesy of Mr Noshir Mistri

Additionally, for those aware of the Parsi community and the Zoroastrian faith, there are still many misconceptions and misunderstanding towards the group such as the idea that Parsis are not allowed to marry outside of the community due to their religious beliefs.[7] Some of these misconceptions of the community stem from rules established by other Parsi communities overseas, which follow a tradition of paternal lineage – Parsi females who marry out of the community, and their offspring, are no longer deemed part of the community and not permitted to take part in Zoroastrian religious rituals.[8]

In Singapore, there were debates within the Parsi community and the Parsi Zoroastrian Association (PZA) on the issue of paternal lineage and inclusion until 1985, when the association adopted rules allowing non-Parsi spouses to become members. Hoshi Deboo, a member of the Parsi Zoroastrian Association of Southeast Asia (PZAS) says: "[The] local Parsi Zoroastrian community are welcoming to non-Parsis who married Parsi women or their children to be inducted into their community."[9]

Part of the confusion can be attributed to the complex and interwoven relationship between Parsis and Zoroastrianism. Characterised by overlapping cultural traditions, experiences, history and heritage, this relationship necessitates the exploration and discussion of both the ancestral lineage and religious practices of the community. While small in numbers, the Parsis are invaluable components of Singapore's heritage and history. The cultivation of deeper intercultural understanding and acceptance have long been important cornerstones of maintaining our multi-ethnic and multi-religious society.

Emergence of the Parsis, their culture and presence in Singapore

The rich culture and history of the Parsis can be traced as far back as the Sasanian Empire of Persia during the 3rd to 7th centuries.[10] The 7th century saw the conquest of Persia by Muslim Arabs, and over the following centuries, some Zoroastrian groups migrated elsewhere to flee religious persecution and discrimination. Today, a significant Zoroastrian population remains in Iran. One group of refugees

The Parsis of Singapore

There were many prominent Parsis in Singapore. Cursetjee Frommurzee partnered with merchant John M. Little in 1845 to open John Little, one of Singapore's oldest department store which has since closed down. Another notable Parsi is Navroji Mistri and his well-known contributions of the Mistri Wing of the Singapore General Hospital. Mistri is also remembered for his donations to the University of Malaya medical research department and his service to the British prisoners-of-war during the Second World War. Mistri Road was named in his honour in 1955. The Dyslexia Association of Singapore was also founded by Parsi doctor Jimmy Daruwalla to create awareness and support for Singapore's dyslexic community.

04

settled in the town of Sanjan in Gujarat, India, and came to be known as Parsis. Since then, the Parsis have over generations, contributed significantly to the economy and political development, and formation of modern-day India.

Apart from assimilating into wider Indian society, the Parsi diaspora has also spread worldwide through opportunities presented by maritime trade and colonial administration. As Singapore served as a penal colony for the British, the first Parsi to arrive in Singapore was a convict named Muncherjee in 1819.[10] Since then, many prominent and celebrated Parsis such as Cursetjee Frommurzee, Navroji Mistri, Jimmy Daruwalla, and others have settled in Singapore and made substantial economic and social contributions.[11]

The ancestral experiences of the early Parsis continue to play an essential role in defining the cultural traditions and practices of the modern Parsi. The accounts of the early Parsis are recorded in the *Qissa-i Sanjan*, an indispensable text for the Parsis.[12] One narrative in the text tells of King Jadi Rana of Gujarat, who offered a full cup of milk to the Parsis seeking refuge in his realm to represent how his population was already at its brim. The Parsis Zoroastrian priests replied by adding sugar to the milk, expressing that not only was there space for them, but also that the Parsi community was willing to assimilate into the local community and also enrich the land – much like sugar dissolving in and sweetening the milk.[13] Impressed by their reply, the king accepted them on several conditions, including a prohibition on religious conversion and the absorption of some local customs.[14] As such, the Parsis adopted many local customs and practices, particularly adopting Gujarati as their language and the traditional attire of the Gujaratis.

To those unfamiliar with the Parsis, the traditional dress of the community may look similar to those donned by the Indian community. Over the years, a distinct Parsi style of dressing has emerged with several differences compared to the traditional attire of the Gujaratis. Parsi women wear a modified sari known as a *gara*. The *gara* is worn over a long blouse, where the *pallu* – the decorated border of the sari – is

05 Members of the Parsi Zoroastrian Association of Southeast Asia (PZAS) in their traditional attire with Indian influences. The women are wearing what is called a *gara*, a modified version of the sari, while the men are wearing the traditional white *dagli*, 2019
Courtesy of Ernest Koh

06 A *navjote* ceremony, where a boy is presented with the traditional *kushti* and *sudreh* when he comes of age, 2019
Courtesy of Ernest Koh

05

draped longer than usual over their right shoulder.[15] The Parsis' involvement with the India-China trade also resulted in the emergence of Chinese-style embroidery and motifs such as phoenixes and cranes on their attire.[16] Some *garas* are even adorned with the rooster motif, one of the most common folk motifs in Chinese culture. Today, these motifs have become a signature and iconic part of the *gara*.

Parsi men were traditionally dressed in a *dagla*, a Gujarati closed-neck jacket, and white trousers.[17] Through their interaction with other cultures, Parsi men have since adopted a white traditional top known as a *dagli*. The *dagli* is a white coat typically worn over white pants. The traditional attire continues to be an important part of the culture and tradition, treasured and worn on special occasions.[18]

Members of the Zoroastrian faith wear the *kushti* and *sudreh*. The *kushti* is a girdle tied three times around the waist on the *sudreh*, a vest believed to give protection to the wearer against evil. Both the *kushti* and *sudreh* are central to the practice of the Zoroastrian faith. These sacred articles of clothing are only presented to a child at the *navjote*, the Zoroastrian coming of age ceremony and initiation into the religion.[19] The child continues to wear these religious garments for the rest of their lives, only untying the *kushti* during prayer and washing-up. Parsi dress presents a culturally and visually rich representation of the ethnoreligious nature of the community.

Zoroastrianism: The faith of the Parsis

Zoroastrianism was the state religion of the Sasanian Empire and continues to be practised today by Iranian peoples in Central Asia. The faith was founded by Prophet Zarathustra (also known as Zoroaster), who preached about the struggle between good and evil. Zoroastrianism is one of the earliest monotheistic religions, with the creator-deity being Ahura Mazda ("Wise Lord" in the Avestan language), who also represents the universal and transcendent embodiment of goodness in the world. In Zoroastrian beliefs, Aura Mainyu ("Evil Spirit" in Avestan) is the personification of the destructive spirit, the incarnation of evil and the cosmic opposition to Ahura Mazda. The two exist in relative dualism and are locked in a cosmic eternal battle of good versus evil. The Avesta is a collection of the central religious texts of Zoroastrianism written in the old Iranian language of Avestan.

Central to the Zoroastrian faith is an emphasis on free will, where individuals are responsible for their fates.

06

For followers of Zoroastrianism, the struggle between good and evil occurs not only on a cosmic level but also on a moral level, existing within the minds of the people. Hence, the core maxims of Zoroastrianism include having good thoughts, speaking good words and doing good deeds.

The Zoroastrian place of worship is referred to as a Fire Temple where a consecrated fire is tended to and kept burning perpetually. In Singapore, the Zoroastrian community does not have a Fire Temple.[20] Due to the importance of fire temples and fire to the Zoroastrians, it is a common misconception that the Zoroastrians are merely fire-worshippers. However, fire is not the object of worship, but the ultimate symbol of purity, a critical concept in their belief system.[21] Fire is also considered the physical manifestation of the light and wisdom of Ahura Mazda.

Furthermore, it is also important to note that fire is not the only element essential to the Zoroastrian cosmology. Other elements in the natural world, such as water, earth, and air, are also considered sacred and pure. The importance of the elements can also be seen in other aspects of the Parsi Zoroastrian practices, such as the items in a ceremonial tray called the *ses*.

There are many Zoroastrian traditions that continue to be practised in Singapore today. Examples include the *agarni*, a ceremony for expectant mothers in the seventh month of their pregnancies to bless the coming child, as well as the *zinderavan jashan*, which is a worship ceremony to commemorate and celebrate important milestones and occasions.[22]

Of the many traditions, one of the most important rituals in the life of a Zoroastrian is the coming-of-age ceremony called the *navjote*. The ceremony is usually done between the age of seven and eleven, before the child reaches maturity.[23] The *navjote* is an intricate event where rituals and prayers are conducted by the Zoroastrian priest in the presence of a flame to induct the child into the faith. The child must be familiar with the key prayers of the faith. This is also when a Zoroastrian will don their *sudreh* and *kushti* for the first time.

Many of these Zoroastrian traditions continue to be practiced faithfully today, while others have been adapted. An example of a practice that has changed is the death ritual of a Zoroastrian. Traditionally, the bodies of the dead would be placed in the open or in raised, circular structures known as Towers of

Ses and the elements of Zoroastrianism

Zoroastrian festivals and ceremonies typically use the *ses*, a ceremonial tray that carries symbolic items core to the Zoroastrian faith. The items found on the *ses* will change slightly based on the event that it is used for and also from household to household. The *ses* usually contain yoghurt/milk, fire, metal, rose water, flowers, and fruits. Yoghurt or milk represents animal life. Fire represents the eternal flame. The metal of *ses* represents the sky, while the rose water represents water. The home, which the *ses* is placed in, represents the earth. The flowers and fruits represent the vegetation in nature, and finally, the people in the house with the *ses* represent human life. The *ses* is essentially a microcosmic representation of the seven elements of the Zoroastrian creation belief.

07

Silence, where birds would feed off the bodies. Burials and cremations were traditionally not performed as elements such as the earth, air and water are considered sacred and hence not to be tainted by the dead. However, as sky burial is not allowed in Singapore, local Zoroastrians have buried their loved ones in Parsi cemeteries (with previous locations including Mount Palmer in Tanjong Pagar, Tampines and now at Choa Chu Kang) since the 19th century.[24] Similarly, the Zoroastrians in India now also have the option to bury their dead rather than undertake the Tower of Silence ritual.[25]

Conclusion

The Singapore Parsi and Zoroastrian community has put in great efforts at cultural preservation and raising awareness through various means such as collaboration with government agencies, universities and publishing of books documenting their practices and traditions. As Noshir Mistri puts it: "…[H]opefully, the [future Parsi generations] will too be well-knit and when they grow up, and with their children, they will continue the tradition of the Parsis here in Singapore".[26] The cultural practices and traditions of the Parsi and Zoroastrian community continue to be an important part of Singapore's shared history and heritage. The responsibility of the promotion and continued transmission of Parsi living heritage lies not only with the community, but with the wider local community of Singapore to be curious and find out more about Parsi culture and Zoroastrianism.

Notes

[1] Hoshi Deboo, interview by Ernest Koh, January 12, 2018.; Noshir Mistri, interview by Ernest Koh, October 5, 2017.; Priscilla Goy, "The Parsi community is shrinking but not in Singapore", *The Straits Times*, October 1, 2015.

[2] Hoshi Deboo, interview by Ernest Koh, September 15, 2017.; Suna Kanga and Subina Khaneja, *The Parsis of Singapore: Heritage, Culture, Cuisine* (Singapore: Epigram Books, 2017); Ernest K.W. Koh and Parsi Zoroastrian Association of Southeast Asia, "Moderated Panel" (presentation, *Humata, Hukta, Huvarshta: The Parsis and Zoroastrianism in Singapore*, Nanyang Technological University, National Library Board, September 21, 2019).

[3] Priscilla Goy, "The Parsi community is shrinking but not in Singapore".

[4] Inter-Religious Organisation Singapore, "Zoroastrianism", https://iro.sg/zoroastrianism/.

[5] Zubin Daruwalla, interview by Ernest Koh, October 13, 2017.; Rusi Kanga, Personal Interview, Singapore, October 3, 2017.

[6] Danesh Dabu, interview by Ernest Koh, October 12, 2017.; Khrushrav Bhada, interview by Ernest Koh, October 12, 2017.; Marc Boocha, interview by Ernest Koh, October 12, 2017.; Daruwalla, interview.; Koh and PZAS, "Moderated Panel".

08

07 A *ses* tray, 2019
Courtesy of Ernest Koh

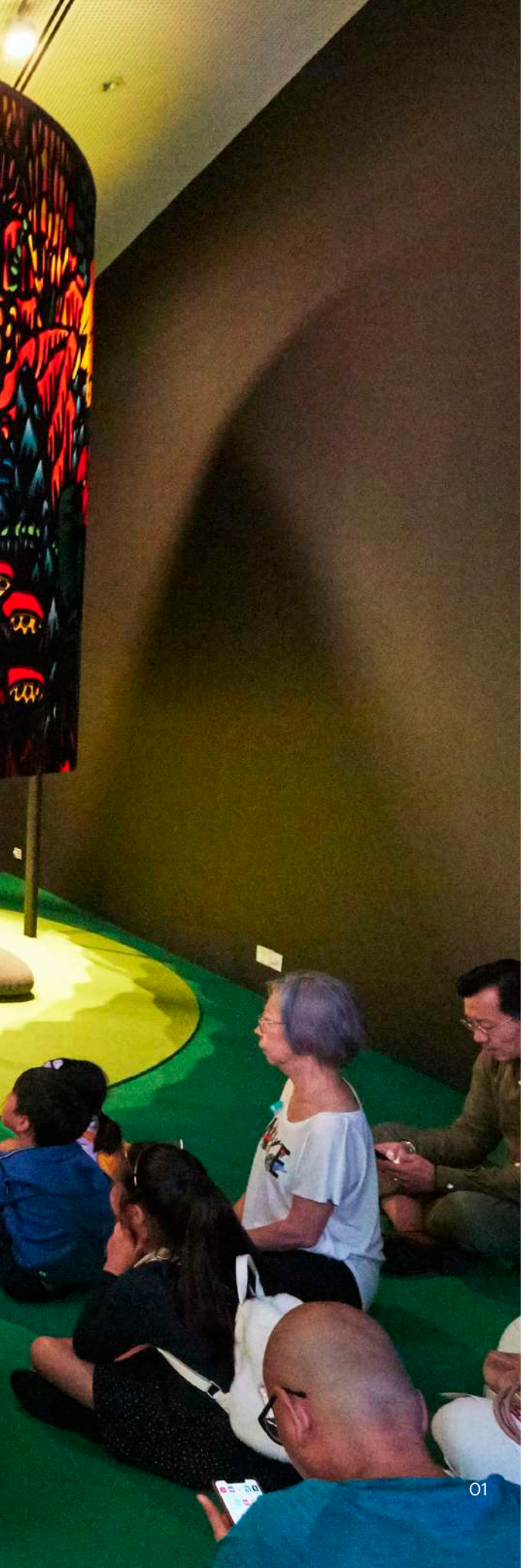
08 The Zoroastrian House at Desker Road, with the symbol for Zoroastrianism hanging above the doors, 2020
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

[7] Deboo, interview.
[8] Priscilla Goy, "The Parsi community is shrinking but not in Singapore".
[9] Deboo, interview.
[10] There are very little records of Muncherjee, apart from his death in 1829 which resulted in the establishment of the Parsi Cemetery at Mount Palmer. The cemetery was funded by a community of Parsis in China to allow Muncherjee a place to rest in Singapore. Naidu Ratnala Thulaja, "Parsi Road", *Singapore Infopedia*, 2011, https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_281_2005-01-26.html. Marsita Omar, "Parsi Cemetery", *Singapore Infopedia*, 2009, https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_1002_2009-11-02.html.
[11] Mistri, interview,; Daruwalla, interview.
[12] Shahpurshah Hormasji Hodivala, *Studies in Parsi History 1920 (Classic Reprint)*, (London: Forgotten Books, 2015), 94-117.
[13] Deboo, interview.; Mistri, interview.
[14] Mistri, interview.
[15] The *pallu* is longer for the Parsis as they traditionally used it to cover their heads. Koh and PZAS, "Our Gara and Dagli", mini-exhibition, 2019.
[16] An example of an ijar with Chinese style embroidery and carries a Chinese export stamp. National Heritage Board, "Parsi Ijar Cloth," Roots, July 4, 2018. https://www.roots.sg/learn/collections/listing/1318344.
[17] Parsi men also traditionally donned headgears called the *pheta* or *paghdi*, which are both turban-like ceremonial headdresses. Koh and PZAS, "Our Gara and Dagli", mini-exhibition, 2019.
[18] Koh and PZAS, "Moderated Panel", 2019.
[19] The navjote is one of the most important rituals that will take place in the life of a Zoroastrian. The process is usually done between the age of seven and fifteen. It is an intricate ceremony with rituals and prayers conducted in the presence of a flame. The child is required to be familiar with the key prayers of the faith.
[20] The Zoroastrian House, located at 83 Desker Road, is the only community hall in Singapore for the Parsis. The House is also home to the Parsi and Zoroastrian Association of Southeast Asia. Every Sunday, prayers and meetings are hosted in the House. Apart from the Zoroastrian Cemetery, it is one of the few Parsi Zoroastrian landmarks in Singapore.
[21] Koh and PZAS, "Moderated Panel", 2019.
[22] Suna Kanga and Subina Khaneja, *The Parsis of Singapore: Heritage, Culture, Cuisine*, 46.
[23] Suna Kanga and Subina Khaneja, *The Parsis of Singapore: Heritage, Culture, Cuisine*, 45.
[24] Nicholas Yong, "Behind the Belief: The Zoroastrians of Singapore," Yahoo News Singapore, August 30, 2017. Marsita Omar, "Parsi Cemetery".
[25] Suna Kanga and Subina Khaneja, *The Parsis of Singapore: Heritage, Culture, Cuisine* (Singapore: Epigram Books, 2017), 45.
[26] Mistri, Interview 1, 2017.

Forgotten Folklores, Spellbinding Storytellers:

Exploring the Myths of Singapore through Oral Traditions

Text by Salifian Bin Sulaiman



At first glance, traditional narratives about ingenious defences against swordfish and feats of strength may appear destined to be marginalised in the popular imagination of 21st century Singapore. After all, many Singaporeans today bear cosmopolitan tastes, and are avid consumers of cultures, artforms and mythic stories from across the globe.

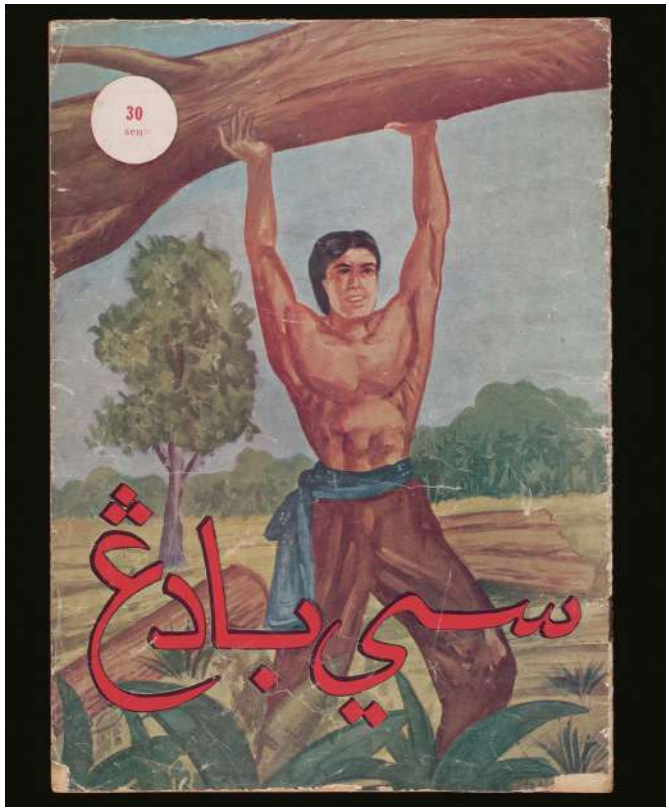
Delve a little deeper into narratives like *Attack of the Swordfish* however, and you will find that these seemingly simple tales hide a world of thought-provoking philosophical traditions, diplomacy and political dynamics, as well as values that will always be relevant to the human experience. Spend a little more time in the world of *Badang*, and you will uncover its multiple intersections and interconnections with cultures, religions and polities from far-flung lands, and all the tensions, innovations and drama that entrails. That world was diverse, multicultural and always in ferment - perhaps not all that different from ours today.

Mythic narratives in the *Sulalat al-Salatin*

The two above-mentioned narratives, and many others, appear in *Sulalat al-Salatin* (Genealogy of Kings), better known as the *Sejarah Melayu* ("Malay history" in Malay). This text compiles lineage traditions, political and diplomatic encounters, and legendary stories associated with Srivijaya, Palembang, Singapura and Melaka, up to the period after the conquest of Melaka by the Portuguese in 1511. There are more than 30 manuscript versions extant today, with the oldest dated to 1612, and there are variations in the text across different editions.[1]

01 Kamini Ramachandran, director of Moonshadow Stories, telling a story during the Children's Biennale, 2019
Courtesy of Kamini Ramanchandran

02



03

Some scholars observe that many of the narratives in the *Sulalat al-Salatin* are crafted to bolster the political legitimacy of the Johor-Riau Sultanate and its claim to be the successor state of Melaka.[2] Beyond concepts of political authority however, the text also contains accounts of the social, military and cultural customs of the era, foundational narratives of states and dynasties, as well as what we may today call social compacts. Some of these themes are reflected in legends such as those of *Badang* and the *Attack of the Swordfish* and illuminate how people in this region conceived their heritage and historical trajectory.

There are also a multitude of traditions and storytelling motifs from beyond maritime Southeast Asia contained within the *Sulalat al-Salatin*. These include intertextual connections and allusions to Islamic and Persian traditions, the Sanskrit epic Mahabharata,[3] Chinese and Tibetan accounts of Buddhist oceanic journeys as well as regional Shaivist, Vaishnavite and Buddhist traditions.[4]

One of the core concepts explored in the narratives of the *Sulalat al-Salatin* is that of the relationship between the ruler of a state and its people, encompassing ideas of duty, sovereignty, loyalty and duty. Some of these concepts were carried over from earlier Hindu-Buddhist kingdoms like Srivijaya and can be considered as social compacts of the era. In these compacts, the people are enjoined not to commit treason or disloyalty, while the ruler must extend protection and justice.[5] The consequences of breaching the compact, on either side, are played out in legends like that of the *Attack of the Swordfish*.

Here the legend reveals itself to be more than an unthinking, uncritical demand for loyalty. The ruler of Singapura, Paduka Sri Maharaja, is shown as a leader of poor judgement, heedless of the welfare of his subjects as he instructs the people to form a rampart against the killer swordfish with their own bodies. He compounds the moral failure by later executing the boy who suggests the innovative and ultimately effective solution of creating a defensive wall from the stems of banana trees.[6]

In his fear of the boy's intellectual prowess, the raja commits a gross injustice - the text underlines this

02 Pages of manuscript from the *Sejarah Melayu*, 1896 *Courtesy of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board*

03 A copy of a book with the image of Badang on the cover, c. 1950s to 1960s *Courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board*

04 A part of the "Singapore Stone" that Badang was attributed to have carried according to the mythic narrative, c. 10th to 14th century *Courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board*

04

by stating that "the guilt of his blood lay upon the country". This episode foreshadows another tale of a leader whose unjust behaviour leads Singapura into disaster: Raja Secander Shah (also known as Iskandar Shah) has one of his consorts killed solely on the evidence of ill-founded rumours, leading the consort's father to invite an invasion from the Majapahit Empire, which ends in the slaughter of Singapura's population.[7]

In the stories of Badang, the former slave who displays supernatural strength and bests a competing strongman from India among other feats, one may read themes of duty and loyalty to a sovereign or wider society, as well as the social importance and reputational value placed upon displays of prowess during that era.

When offered a choice of powers by a spirit, Badang chooses strength, reasoning that it would be of the most use to his overlord and his people, ahead of other gifts such as riches or invisibility, which might have accrued directly to his master or been more suited to personal gain. This hints at contemporaneous ideas of the role of individuals in society. Badang proceeds to clear a jungle, presumably for agricultural or urban development, and gather exotic foods from distant lands for the benefit of Paduka Sri Rana Wikrama, the Raja of Singapura and his sovereign.[8]

Badang's crucial role in the contest of champions between the Raja of Singapura and the Indian Raja of Kalinga, with seven ships filled with commodities at stake, also hints at how diplomatic relations between kingdoms were perceived and conceptualised, as well as how sovereigns derived political prestige from them. A different aspect of diplomacy arises when another contest, this time between Badang and the champion of the Raja of Perlak, is called off, allowing both rajas to preserve their honour as well as neighbourly and familial ties.[9]

In the modern era, *Attack of the Swordfish*, *Badang* and other traditional stories have been adapted into popular literature, comics and textbooks, films, television dramas and the performing arts, as well as featured in exhibitions and National Day parades.

As successive generations adapt these legends, subtle differences in focus and perspective often emerge.

While Badang's feats in the *Sulalat al-Salatin* are often read as primarily for the benefit of and at the direction the *raja*, a 26-segment illustrated adaptation of these tales published in *The Straits Times* newspaper in 1982 places the emphasis mainly on Badang and his shows of strength.

The mythic narratives have also made their way into popular etymologies of place names in Singapore, being linked to Bukit Merah and its derivative Redhill, and to the Tanjong Pagar area. Bukit Merah ("Red Hill" in Malay) is said to have been named after either a a mysterious fountain of blood that began gushing upon the *raja*'s order to kill the ingenious boy,[10] or the bloodstained landscape after the Majapahit invasion.[11] The coastal area of Tanjong Pagar ("Cape of Stakes" in Malay) meanwhile is thought by some to derive its name from the defensive wall of banana stems that quelled the swordfish attack.[12]

Both etymologies do not appear in the *Sulalat al-Salatin* however and may have been added in later popular iterations of the myths. The same goes for the large stone said to be been thrown into the Singapore River by Badang during his contest with the champion of Kalinga. While this stone has often in modern times been conflated with the Singapore Stone – a large sandstone artefact removed from the same river and inscribed in the Kawi (Old Javanese) language – there is no direct evidence for this association.

The oral tradition today – The experiences of storyteller Kamini Ramachandran

Many of the narratives of the *Sulalat al-Salatin* are likely to have circulated earlier in the form of oral storytelling traditions, and much of the text itself is composed to be told before an audience. Different editions may also be adapted to the requirements of different patrons, and to the preferences of different audiences.[13]

During the colonial era in Singapore, mythic narratives began to be published as printed texts. The increased circulation of legends and myths is likely to have complemented the oral tradition of transmission, taking it beyond the family and village network of

05

05 An aerial view of Bukit Merah, 2020
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

storytelling and bringing the tales into schools and popular culture. The popularity of local legends has since ebbed and flowed across evolving social contexts and changing cultural tastes of successive generations.

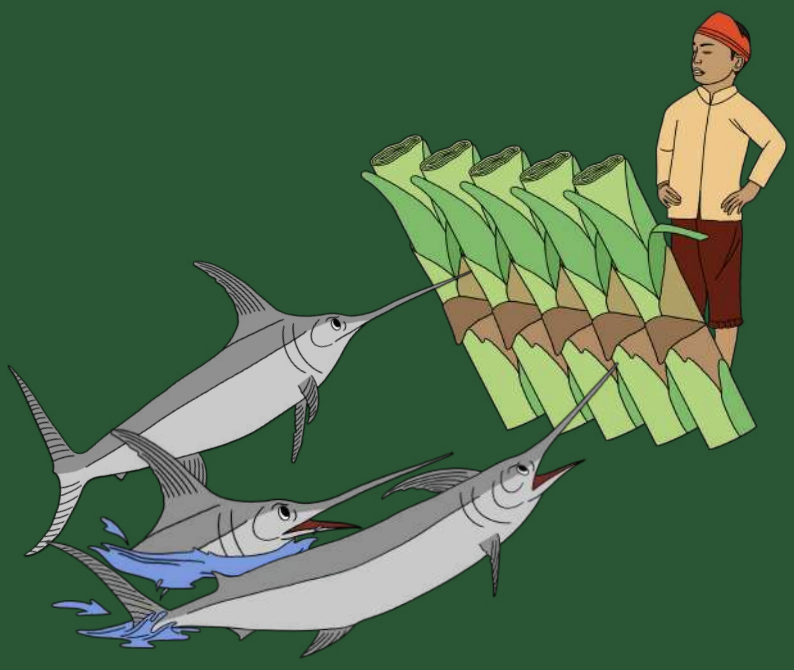
In recent decades however, the oral storytelling scene has been revitalised by a new generation of practitioners. Once widespread in Singapore in various forms, from Chinese dialect storytellers in the 19th century and early 20th century to well-known narrators during the mid-20th century golden age of radio, the storytelling scene had faded from prominence by the 1980s. Today however, storytellers mine the rich seams of myth and legend for sessions at cultural and heritage events, libraries and standalone storytelling performances.

In a 2019 interview, Kamini Ramachandran, director of MoonShadow Stories, a pioneering practitioner and mentor to young storytellers, reflected on local mythic narratives, including those of *Badang* and the *Attack of the Swordfish*. "This idea of (Badang) being a modern-day superhero resonates with me as a mother of two young boys, to show them that you can overcome adversity, and you don't have to be someone who is a slave to somebody else," she said.

Ramachandran adds that one can also relate to Badang facing the difficulties of being an orphan and a slave with the admirable qualities of hard work, a connection to nature and an openness to finding non-violent solutions.

"You can use non-violence as a means to getting what you want to accomplish – one of the integral characteristics of Badang is [that] he did not like to use his physical prowess to show off. He liked to use it to help people, [and] he found other ways around these big [contests of strength and prowess] … he would frighten his opponent into actually surrendering the night before the competition."

She also spoke about acknowledging the roots of mythic narratives, and the challenges 21st century storytellers face in showcasing different aspects of legends for different audiences. "I always say that this



A summary of the Story of Badang

Badang, a slave and an orphan from Salwang, worked for his master, setting fish traps along the river. For successive days, he found the traps empty, with the bait missing. Hiding in the forest to catch the thief, Badang chanced upon a spirit, or *jinn*. Mustering his courage, he confronted the *jinn*, grabbing his beard. In exchange for sparing his life, the *jinn* granted Badang superhuman strength, through the ingestion of the *jinn*'s vomit (in the form of *batu geliga* jewels).

Badang went on to join the court of Sri Rana Wikrama, the raja of Singapura as a war chief. After a number of feats, Badang's reputation grew and the raja of Kalinga in India sent Nadi Vijaya Vikrama, his most powerful strongman to Singapura to compete against Badang, with the wager of seven ships of commodities at stake. The competition was fierce, but Badang emerged victorious after every test. Then came the final challenge: a test of strength measured by the ability to lift a huge rock. The champion of Kalinga failed to hoist the stone, while Badang lifted it above his head and threw it to the far bank of the river. After his triumph, and a life of adventure, Badang died peacefully in Buru, and the raja of Kalinga sent a stone for his grave to honour the hero.

A summary of the Attack of the Swordfish

A long time ago, Singapura was attacked by a swarm of *ikan todak* (swordfish). Chaos was widespread as people lay dead on the beaches, pierced by the swordfishes. The king, Paduka Sri Maharaja, ordered his men to stand side by side and use their legs as barricades but it was to no avail – many still died.

Along came a young boy who suggested that banana stems would be effective as barricades. The king immediately acted on the suggestion and to his astonishment, it worked! The fishes' snouts were stuck on the stems, allowing the soldiers to kill them, and over time, the swordfish were eradicated. The area where the stems were used is now known as Tanjong Pagar or the "Cape of Stakes". However, the brilliance of the boy was noted by the king's court and he was labelled as a threat to the king's rule. He was then executed, and the guilt of his blood was placed on Singapura, flooding the hill where he lived. The hill later came to be known as Bukit Merah or Redhill.

06

06 Ramachandran telling a story to her audience in the Indian Heritage Centre, 2020
Courtesy of Kamini Ramachandran

is just one version of [a particular tale] that you're going to hear from me. That honesty and honouring your teachers or the people who you heard these stories from … the responsibility of a storyteller is very important," said Ramachandran.

"Many people in [some audiences] did not know [the full complexity of the] story of Badang, because they have heard very childish, simplified, 'superhero-fied', overly adapted versions. You manage these things according to audiences. In a span of one week, [a MoonShadow Stories practitioner would have] told Badang for adults, the *Sejarah Melayu* version, and Badang adapted for children - a highly visual and highly interactive version.

"You must have knowledge of a variety of versions so that when you address your audience, and there are questions because your audience knows something else, you don't appear as a fool and as ignorant. [For example, you'll be able to explain how the] vomit that the *jinn* made Badang eat, is a metaphor for the power he kept inside him. [That] the sound he made was like regurgitating, but what came out was *batu geliga*, or rubies or red crystals, not smelly, stinky vomit as you know it."

In-depth research is also essential for the storyteller to be able to present diverse perspectives and characters, and to help audiences better understand "different perceptions…and cultures, and building tolerance through dialogue," added Ramachandran.

Among the challenges that storytellers in Singapore face are differing levels of familiarity with local myths and reaching out to those who are not well-attuned to their own heritage. "The parents, educators [and] the cultural workers I work with, always come and tell me: 'I don't know any story. Where to find story?'," Ramachandran said.

"I ask them [about legends like *Badang* and the *Attack of the Swordfish*, and they reply:] 'I heard lah… something swordfish, but I really don't know about it'. … [They] have no repertoire and no memory of listening, because they are a generation that didn't have a grandparent [telling them of local legends] … and [they did not have] all your *cikgu* ("teacher" in

07

08

09

07 Kamini conducting a storytelling programme at the Art Science Museum, 2019 *Courtesy of Kamini Ramanchandran*

08 A storyteller from MoonShadow Stories incorporating music into her storytelling, 2019 A storyteller interacting with his audience, 2019 *Courtesy of Kamini Ramanchandran*

09 A storyteller from MoonShadow Stories interacting with his audience, 2019 *Courtesy of Kamini Ramanchandran*

Malay) and your *laoshi* ("teacher" in Mandarin) going on and on, telling you the entire epics."[14]

Why does it remain culturally and socially relevant then, to ensure that stories of Badang, the swordfish-defeating martyr boy and countless other compelling but possibly under-noticed local legends live on? Because, as Ramachandran puts it: "[Mythic narratives] unite us, through story. It reminds us that [the] colour of skin, and [differences in] language … [do] not matter because the archetypes exist in all of our narratives."[15]

In the 21st century, the stage for Singapore's mythic narratives and oral traditions has largely shifted from their former settings. The storytellers have moved from kampong homes and from the street, into museums, libraries, schools, community centres and other public forums. With their inclusion into the nation's Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) inventory, our myths and the oral transmission of stories have also been recognised as an essential component of Singapore's heritage. Through the endeavours and dedication of practitioners like Ramachandran, our Singapore stories remain alive and vital despite the passage of centuries and the changing face of society.

Notes

[1] Jan van der Putten, "Surfing the literary waves of insular Southeast Asia", in *Tales of the Malay World: Manuscripts and Early Books* (Singapore: National Library Board, 2018), 13. https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/printheritage/detail/dc0f2482-5d6d-4dcb-8bf5-7f297fc17546.aspx.

[2] Jan van der Putten, "Surfing the literary waves of insular Southeast Asia", 142.

[3] George E. Dutton (Ed.), "Sejarah Melayu", in *Voices of Southeast Asia* [New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2014], 44-45.

[4] Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, "Buddhist Accounts of Maritime Crossings in the Southern Seas", *NSC Lecture Series '1819 and Before: Singapore's Pasts*, August 14, 2018. https://www.iseas.edu.sg/media/event-highlights/buddhist-accounts-of-maritime-crossings-in-the-southern-seas-2/

[5] Liaw Yock Fang, *A History of Classical Malay Literature* (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2013), 353.

[6] *Sejarah Melayu* (The Malay Annals), trans. John Leyden (Kuala Lumpur: Silverfish Books, 2017), 92-93.

[7] *Sejarah Melayu* (The Malay Annals), 93.

[8] Alan Chong, "Premodern Southeast Asia as a Guide to International Relations between Peoples: Prowess and Prestige in "Intersocietal Relations" in the "Sejarah Melayu"", *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (May 2012), 92-93.

[9] Alan Chong, "Premodern Southeast Asia as a Guide to International Relations between Peoples: Prowess and Prestige in "Intersocietal Relations" in the "Sejarah Melayu"", 92-93.

[10] Victor R. Savage and Brenda S. A. Yeoh, *Singapore Street Names: A Study of Toponymics* (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Editions, 2013), 54.

[11] *Sejarah Melayu* (The Malay Annals), 61.

[12] Victor R. Savage and Brenda S. A. Yeoh, *Singapore Street Names: A Study of Toponymics*, 374.

[13] Jan van der Putten, "Surfing the literary waves of insular Southeast Asia", 13.

[14] Kamini Ramachandran, interview by Vivienne Wee, National Heritage Board, August 7, 2019.

[15] Kamini Ramachandran, interview by Salifian Bin Sulaiman, National Heritage Board, September 14, 2020.

Starting the Day Right :
The Nanyang Breakfast

Text by Douglas Tan

02

The typical Nanyang breakfast is a fare that is synonymous with food culture in Singapore. It usually consists of two sides of slightly charred toast, slathered with butter and a thick *kaya* spread, accompanied by two half-boiled eggs and complemented by hot *kopi* (coffee) or *teh* (tea).

There are a wide variety of ways to consume this breakfast set – some choose to drink their coffee black, others with extra milk, some dip the toast in the eggs or into coffee or tea, while others add copious amounts of soy sauce or pepper to their eggs. These variations may be taken as symbolic of Singapore's inherent diversity; yet our common delight in Nanyang breakfast reflects a much larger tradition and shared breakfast experience that connects us. In this article, I will examine what goes into the making of the familiar Nanyang breakfast, the people and issues behind the trade, as well as look into the lives of the people who define and are defined by the Nanyang breakfast.

01 A Nanyang Breakfast set including Ah Seng (Hai Nam) Coffee's signature French toast, 2020
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

02 William Wong making cups of *kopi*, 2020
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

03

04

What goes into the Nanyang breakfast?

A key component of the Nanyang breakfast is the *kaya* toast. *Kaya* is a jam made from eggs, coconut, *pandan* leaves and sugar, and eaten with toast or used in Malay desserts such as *kueh salat* (in its custard form). The origins of *kaya* (derived from a Malay word meaning rich) are obscure, with some suggesting that it is an adaptation of Portuguese egg jam, with coconut milk and *pandan* replacing the dairy milk and vanilla of the European version.[1] What is for sure is that the jam is loved across a wide variety of cultures in Southeast Asia.

In Singapore, two of the more common varieties include Hainanese *kaya* and Peranakan *kaya*. The Hainanese version has a light brown colour due to the addition of caramelised sugar, making it sweeter than the light green Peranakan variety.[2] In Nanyang breakfast sets, *kaya* is generously spread across two slices of toasted bread, usually accompanied by a thick slab of semi-solid butter.[3] This gives the toast a unique texture, alternating between the warm and crispy toast and cold butter, with sweet, coconut undertones from the *kaya*.

For practitioners of the trade, the quality of their *kaya* toast can make or break their business. In my interviews with Fang Juat Lan, proprietor of Ah Seng (Hai Nam) Coffee, I could sense her pride in how their old-school styled *kaya* toast has been able to secure a large regular following.

The bread is traditionally toasted over a charcoal grill, although most practitioners today have turned to using electric grills to toast their bread. Notably, Ah Seng (Hai Nam) Coffee and the Ya Kun chain are renowned for maintaining the practice of using charcoal to grill their bread for a more traditional

03 Fang and her son, William Wong in front of their shop, Ah Seng (Hai Nam) Coffee at Amoy Street Food Centre, 2020
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

04 Guan Lim of Queen's Coffee at BreakTalk IHQ Mall, 2020
Courtesy of Douglas Tan

taste.[4] This is despite the additional effort needed in the preparation process - at Ah Seng's, they start preparing breakfast as early as 5am, and begin serving an hour and a half later.[5] The continued use of traditional methods maintains a consistent taste and helps generates a culinary experience that is enjoyed across multiple generations.

Each practitioner has their own method for producing the half-boiled eggs; in general, the eggs are usually placed within a metal container of freshly boiled water for five to seven minutes, then served with white pepper and light soy sauce as condiments on the side.[6] The result is runny eggs with formed whites and soft yolks that break apart at the touch. There are different means by which we choose to eat the eggs, although the traditional method involves simply slurping it up from the saucer.[7]

The final component that completes the Nanyang breakfast experience is the *kopi*, or coffee. As with the toast and the eggs, every practitioner has their own methods of roasting coffee beans and brewing coffee. Before the 1980s, coffee roasting was mainly conducted in-house, and each practitioner had the freedom to experiment with their roasts. After 1980 however, coffee-roasting methods became more standardised.[8]

According to Guan Lim of Queen's Coffee, who has researched the history behind coffee roasting and brewing in Singapore, traditional coffee roasting techniques in Singapore are similar to the Torrefacto process, which is still practiced in southern Spain, Portugal and other areas in Europe. The Torrefacto process was adopted as a means of preserving roasted coffee beans from oxidising and decreasing in quality, especially in the early days when roasted coffee beans exported to Europe often took weeks to arrive at their destination.

In the Nanyang style and the Torrefacto process, coffee beans are roasted in a drum with sugar and butter or margarine added midway through the process, before a final roasting with a coating of caramelised sugar. The main difference between coffee roasted using the Torrefacto process in other regions and traditional coffee is the amount of sugar used to caramelise the beans. In Singapore, the sugar content of the traditional roasting mix is approximately is 30 per cent.[9]

The coffee is brewed in a 'coffee sock', a bag containing the coffee powder, which is then placed into a large metal pot with boiling water, and stirred with a pair of long chopsticks before being repeatedly poured between boiling pots to cool the mixture. The resulting mixture is poured into pre-warmed porcelain cups, and is usually dark black, with a strong aftertaste.[10]

Despite the standardisation of roasting methods since the 1980s, there is still a wide variety of *kopi* tastes, from the black, standalone *kopi-o kosong* to *kopi gu you*, enriched with a slab of butter.[11] Guan says: "If you ask 100 people, [including] old folks [about] what makes good coffee, you will get 100 different answers".[12]

Separately, each part of the Nanyang breakfast has their own flair and variations, but taken together as a set, they represent one of Singapore's oldest breakfast traditions. While social, economic and technological contexts have changed, the methods used today arguably still bear a clear connection to the traditions of yesteryear.[13] Second or third generation practitioners of the trade continue plying the trade, providing a sense of comfort and continuity, and acting as an anchor in cosmopolitan, fast-changing

05

06

07

08

05 Making of the toast over a traditional charcoal grill, 2020
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

06 *Kaya* toast, 2020
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

07 Soft-boiled eggs popular in a Nanyang breakfast set, 2020
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

08 *Kopi*, 2020
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

09

09 In view of changing times, Ah Seng (Hai Nam) Coffee has innovated and adopted their now signature French toast into their menu, 2020
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

modern Singapore. Their emphasis on preserving the high standards of their *kopi* and toast continues to win them the patronage of customers today.

Kopi kia: The people behind the trade, and its future

From the early 20th century, the practitioners of the Nanyang breakfast trade were predominantly Hainanese immigrants. Many Hainanese had worked as cooks in European households, and those who went on to start their own *kopitiam* (coffee shops) and food stalls are said to have come up with the concept of the Nanyang breakfast by adapting English breakfast staples to local palettes.

The imprint of the Hainanese on the breakfast trade can still be seen today - the founders of the eatery and cafe chains Ya Kun, Killiney Kopitiam and Han's are all Hainanese. In 1934, the Hainanese in the trade established the Kheng Keow (Hainanese) Coffeeshop and Eating House Owners Association to bring together business owners and provide a forum for their business interests.[14]

The majority presence of the Hainanese did not exclude other groups from entering the *kopitiam* trade, including the Foochows, who set up the Singapore Foochow Coffee Restaurant and Bar Merchants Association in the 1950s.[15] These associations demonstrate the presence of different communities within the Nanyang breakfast trade, bringing with them their own distinct practices and adding flavour to the trade itself.

The multi-generational, family-centred nature of the trade is underlined by the example of Ah Seng (Hai Nam). The stall had been established by Wong Lock Seng's father, a Hainanese immigrant, at Lau Pa Sat in 1964. After taking over the stall, Wong moved it to Amoy Street Food Centre in 1997. Wong passed away in 2019, leaving the business, and its well-loved tradition of *kaya* toast, French toast and *kopi* to his wife and son.[16]

Ya Kun, one of Singapore's most prominent food brands, also held fast to the familial route of succession. Founded in 1936, the original Telok Ayer coffee stall has now become an international coffeeshop chain, with more than 140 outlets in Singapore, South Korea, China and Japan among other countries. Adrin Loi, Ya Kun's chairman, is the son of founder Loi Ah Koon, while the latter's grandson Jesher Loi serves as the company's director of branding and market development in 2020.[17]

The flip side of the family-run *kopitiam* business is a potential lack of successors, if later generations turn towards other trades and professions. The issue of

10

11

10 A coffee shop in Chinatown, 1965
Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

11 A traditional coffee shop in Queen Street, 1962
Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

successors can be compounded by increasing costs of labour, utilities and rental. Chin Mee Chin, one of the most well-known traditional *kopitiam* having been a fixture in Katong since 1925, closed its business in 2019, likely due to the above-mentioned costs and staffing issues.[18]

There are other paths available to venerable *kopitiam* businesses, even if they do not stay within the family. Killiney Kopitiam, founded as Kheng Hoe Heng coffeeshop in 1919, was acquired by long-time patron Woon Tek Seng in 1992, established into a coffeeshop chain and given its present name.[19]

Even the equipment used in the Nanyang breakfast trade, including coffee pots and roasters, has evolved. Food consultant Guan says: "There used to be an old couple in Yio Chu Kang Road handcrafting [coffee pots], another old guy in Jalan Besar doing these things. Unfortunately they have all passed on. So [most coffee pots and equipment are now] machine-made."

Adapting to changing times and tastes was, and continues to be, a hallmark of the Nanyang breakfast trade. Twenty first century businesses such as Chiak, Kopi Alley and Good Morning Nanyang Cafe have experimented with a multiplicity of variations on toast and coffee, including coffee butter, sweet potato, chicken floss, *gula melaka kopi* and sous vide eggs.

Traditionalists may scoff at the plethora of flavours on offer but responding to consumer tastes has always been a vital part of the business. As Ah Seng (Hai Nam)'s Fang recalls: "[In the stall's early years], business was not good. My husband and I experimented with different methods of making our food, experimenting until we got the taste right. We would buy different coffee beans, which we would roast and grind, experimenting with different blends to produce the right taste."[20]

Ultimately, the culture of the Nanyang breakfast will live on, if enough of us continue to love our *kaya* toast and *kopi* the way our forebears did. As Guan adds: "As long as there is demand, there will always be supply."[21]

Notes

[1] Jean Duruz and Gaik Cheng Khoo, *Eating Together: Food, Space, and Identity in Malaysia and Singapore* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 46-47.

[2] Christopher Tan and Amy Van, *Chinese Heritage Cooking* (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish International (Asia), 2012), 92.

[3] Jaime Koh, Lee-Ling Ho and Stephanie Ho, *Culture and customs of Singapore and Malaysia* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood Press, 2009), 104.

[4] Leslie Tay, "Ya Kun Kaya Toast: The Kopi Culture Revolution", *ieatishootipost*, February 24, 2011. http://ieatishootipost.sg/ya-kun-kaya-toast-the-kopi-culture-revolution/.

[5] Fang Juat Lan, interview by Douglas Tan, National Heritage Board. September 21, 2020.

[6] Rebecca Lynne Tan, "Basic Kitchen Tips: How to make Singapore coffee shop-style soft-boiled eggs", *The Straits Times*, April 9, 2017. https://www.straitstimes.com/lifestyle/food/basic-kitchen-tips-how-to-make-singapore-coffeeshop-style-soft-boiled-eggs.

[7] Tony Boey, "Kopitiam Culture is Not Only Kopi & Kaya Toast. History of Singapore Coffee Shops", *Johor Kaki*, September 22, 2020. https://johorkaki.blogspot.com/2020/06/history-singapore-kopitiam-kaya-toast.html.

[8] Guan Lim, interview by Douglas Tan, National Heritage Board. September 27, 2020.

[9] Wyatt Cavalier, "Kopi Is Probably The Best Coffee You've Never Heard Of (Even Though It's Made In A Sock), *Huffington Post*, February 6, 2017. https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/wyatt-cavalier/kopi-is-probably-the-best_b_14590492.html.; Guan Lim, interview.

[10] Tony Boey, "Kopitiam Culture is Not Only Kopi & Kaya Toast. History of Singapore Coffee Shops".; Guan Lim, interview.

[11] Joshua Lee, "S'pore has a local version of Bulletproof Coffee. We call it Kopi Gu You", *Mothership*, https://mothership.sg/2018/07/kopi-gu-you-butter-coffee-bulletproof-singapore.

[12] Guan Lim, interview.

[13] Rod Yam Hee Lim, interview by Jesley Chua Chee Huan, National Archives of Singapore, October 28, 2009. https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral_history_interviews/record-details/cae5ddbc-1161-11e3-83d5-0050568939ad

[14] Lai Ah Eng, "The Kopitiam in Singapore: An Evolving Story about Migration and Cultural Diversity", *Asia Research Institute Working Paper Series*, 132 (January 2010), 9.

[15] Lai Ah Eng, "The Kopitiam in Singapore: An Evolving Story about Migration and Cultural Diversity", 10.

[16] Ng Kwok Hua, "Son picks up the baton from father at Ah Seng (Hai Nam) Coffee", *unscrambled.sg*, October 21, 2019. https://www.unscrambled.sg/2019/10/21/son-picks-up-the-baton-from-father-at-ah-seng-hai-nam-coffee.

[17] Karen Tee, "How Jesher Loi is taking the family's Ya Kun Kaya Toast business to the next level", *The Peak*, September 8, 2020. https://www.thepeakmagazine.com.sg/interviews/next-gen-jesher-loi-ya-kun-kaya-toast-family-business/

[18] Daniel Ang, "Chin Mee Chin – Famous Old School Confectionery Permanently Closed?", *Daniel Food Diary*, February 1, 2019. https://danielfooddiary.com/2019/02/01/chinmeechin/.

[19] Rachel Chan, "Killiney Kopitiam", *Infopedia*, n.d. https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_1620_2009-12-23.html.

[20] Fang Juat Lan, interview.

[21] Guan Lim, interview.

Stewards of Singapore's Intangible Cultural Heritage Award

Text by Arthur Tan and Alvin Chua

As part of the National Heritage Board's (NHB) efforts under Our SG Heritage Plan to safeguard and promote intangible cultural heritage (ICH) in Singapore, a recognition scheme for ICH practitioners was launched in October 2019. Six ICH practitioners were awarded the inaugural *Stewards of Singapore's Intangible Cultural Heritage Award* in 2020, in recognition of their dedication to the promotion and transmission of their respective ICH elements.

Award recipients are eligible to tap a project grant to support their efforts to transmit and promote ICH knowledge and skills. The award recipients will also have the opportunity to showcase and promote their ICH-related skills and knowledge at NHB's exhibitions, festivals or programmes.

The six Stewards Award recipients span a diverse range of ICH practices and were selected by an Evaluation Panel chaired by Ms Yeoh Chee Yan, Chair of the NHB. The panel comprises ICH practitioners, academics as well as representatives of non-government organisations.

Despite the different forms and the unique experiences and contributions of each Steward, what these Stewards have in common is their passion for their craft, and their shared commitment and dedication to passing on their respective ICH practices and skills to the wider community and to future generations.

01 Aravinth Kumarasamy (third from left), Creative Director, with some of Apsaras Arts' young Indian dance talents, 2020. *Courtesy of National Heritage Board*

02

Apsaras Arts Ltd – Indian Dance Forms
Established in 1977 by the late Neilambikai Sathyalingam and Sangita Siromani Suntharalingam Sathyalingam, Apsaras Arts has been engaging audiences through *bharatanatyam* and other classical Indian dance forms. As the company's current artistic director Aravinth Kumarasamy puts it, "Indian classical dance is a storytelling art […] you connect soul to soul with the audience".

While many of the narratives in Indian classical dance are rooted in Vedic texts, the repertoires performed by Apsaras have also add a contemporary layer to the millennia-deep weave of interconnections between the many cultures of Southeast Asia and the Indian subcontinent. In 2017's *Anjaneyam: Hanuman's Ramayana*, Apsaras brought together dancers, choreographers, musicians and other performers from Singapore, Indonesia and India, harmoniously blending *bharatanatyam* and Javanese dance forms accompanied by gamelan, Carnatic and Hindustani *raga* music.

Besides its performances, Apsaras has also been dedicated to its role as a dance academy. Apsaras' Little Angels programme, organised in collaboration with artists from the Malay and Chinese dance communities, provides training in a diverse array of dance styles for children. To provide platforms for its talents, Apsaras sustains the Darshana series showcasing young Singapore soloists, and organises the annual Dance India Asia Pacific industry development programme, which includes masterclasses, workshops, dance education classes and panel discussions.

This dedication to transmitting their craft has seen Apsaras nurture hundreds of dancers over the decades, with Apsaras-trained performers going on to found institutions of their own across the world. "[Apsaras] has been able to train many aspiring youths from our heartlands and showcase them in both local and international platforms, breaking the misconception that Indian classical arts [are] only accessible to those in elite communities," explains Kumarasamy.[1]

03

04

02 Apsaras has been committed to uplifting the standards of classical Indian dance in Singapore, through providing structured training and regular performance opportunities for its dancers.
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

03 Apsaras dancer Mohanapriyan Thavarajah showcasing the charm and elegance of classical Indian dance in his performance of Kalabhairava Ashtakam, 2020.
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

04 An Indian dance performance entitled Ardhanareeswara, by Apsaras dancers Seema Hari Kumar and Devapriya Appan, 2020.
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

05

05 G. T. Lye's mastery of the traditional art of female impersonation in *wayang peranakan* is widely recognized as unmatched and he has played multiple matriarch roles over the years. *Courtesy of National Heritage Board with the support of NUS Baba House*

06 G. T. Lye in (left) and out (right) of his matriarch persona, 2020. *Courtesy of National Heritage Board with the support of NUS Baba House*

07 G. T. Lye putting on makeup as part of his matriarch outfit, 2020. *Courtesy of National Heritage Board with the support of NUS Baba House*

08 G. T. Lye in his matriarch outfit at the NUS Baba House, 2020. *Courtesy of National Heritage Board with the support of NUS Baba House*

Gwee Thian Lye (G. T. Lye) – *Wayang Peranakan* and *Dondang Sayang*

Inspired by the popular Malay-language theatre of *bangsawan*, the Peranakan community devised *wayang peranakan*, which is performed in Baba Malay. *Dondang sayang*, the improvisational, bantering performance of pantun (quatrains in Malay or Baba Malay), is an important and facet of the art and culture of both the Malay and Peranakan communities in Singapore.

Gwee Thian Lye made his stage debut in 1984 while in his mid-40s, performing in *Pileh Menantu* ("Choosing a Daughter-In-Law"), the first *wayang peranakan* play to be staged in Singapore in 25 years and a watershed in the revival of the theatrical form.[2]

For Gwee, *Pileh Menantu* was the start of a four-decade stage career as an actor, scriptwriter, director and dialogue coach for both *wayang peranakan* and *dondang sayang*, with his first appearance as a nyonya matriarch coming in 1985's *Buang Keroh Pungot Jernih* ("Let Bygones be Bygones"). Over the next four decades, he participated in 23 *wayang peranakan* productions throughout the region, and Gwee also became a familiar face on Malay television and in *dondang sayang* acts.

To fulfil his iconic matriarch roles, Gwee drew on personal memories and observations, with his meticulous study of an earlier generation of *nyonya* matriarchs yielding invaluable insights into a vanishing way of life. As he observed: "I am delivering something that you cannot see [regardless of] how [much] money you pay ... – the genuine characters which nowadays, because of modernisation, you won't be able to see ever again."

Alvin Tan, founder and Artistic Director of the Necessary Stage, summed up Gwee's accomplishments: "G. T. Lye is undoubtedly a master of Peranakan theatre … where the actor's performance is the result of a moment's inspiration. The actors have to heighten, vary or embellish their parts to make the tears flow and the laughter ring. This is what G. T. Lye does best. It means that every G. T. Lye performance is unique because he responds to the audience different each time."

06

07

08

09

Michael Ker – Making of *Popiah*

Kway Guan Huat Joo Chiat Popiah has been based in Joo Chiat for more than eight decades, and was started by Michael Ker's grandfather as a pushcart hawker business. *Popiah* is a traditional snack believed to have originated from Fujian province in China and was brought over to Singapore by Hokkien migrants. Widely enjoyed across the country today, *popiah* is also associated with rituals, including serving as offerings for ancestral worship and eaten during the Qing Ming Festival.

At Kway Guan Huat, the *popiah* skins have been hand-made since 1938, and it is this dedication to traditional methods that have taken the shop through these decades of changing tastes and pressures for more efficient production via automation. The hand-made process renders the *popiah* skins more chewy, springy and translucent than machine-made ones, which explains why hand-made skins remain favoured by many customers.

For Ker, the process of mastering the art of hand-making *popiah* skins was the result of years of dedicated practice: "I wake up early in the morning and I do the *popiah* skins, making hundreds to thousands of pieces every day. This is like practising yoga or *tai chi* every day."[3] Ker kept polishing his techniques, eventually left a career as a pharmacist, and took over the business in 2013. "I decided to carry on our family tradition of making *popiah* because it goes back three generations. It would been a pity if I didn't do it and the heritage of this food vanished," he adds.[4]

Even as Kway Guan Huat banks on traditional methods and tastes, Ker has also innovated to sustain the business, including introducing *pandan*-flavoured *popiah* skins and roast duck fillings. Keeping *popiah* culture alive is another focus for Ker, who has obtained a Halal certification for Kway Guan Huat so that *popiah* can be enjoyed by more people from other cultures, as well as introducing heritage tours and demonstrations showcasing the cultural history of *popiah*, and its techniques and craft.

10

11

09 Michael Ker putting in the ingredients on top of his hand-made *popiah* skin, 2020. *Courtesy of National Heritage Board*

10 Michael Ker is a third-generation practitioner who has carried on with the tradition of making *popiah* skins by hand. *Courtesy of National Heritage Board*

11 Michael Ker presenting a plate of freshly made *popiah* in front of his family business shop, Kway Guan Huat Joo Chiat Popiah, 2020. *Courtesy of National Heritage Board*

12

13

12 A scene from *The Tale of Su Liu Niang*, 2020. *Courtesy of National Heritage Board*

13 A Nam Hwa Opera instructor guiding a young learner through fundamental movements in Teochew opera performances, 2020. *Courtesy of National Heritage Board*

14 A Nam Hwa Opera instructor applying the traditional Chinese opera face paint on a child performer, 2020. *Courtesy of National Heritage Board*

14

Nam Hwa Opera Ltd – Teochew Opera and Music
A dedication to the craft and cultural transmission of Teochew opera has been a vital characteristic of Nam Hwa over the past half-century. Along with other local groups, Nam Hwa has been part of the evolution of a Singaporean style of Teochew opera, which has preserved traditional Chinese values and customs while organically assimilating influences from the island's multicultural society.

In its mission to engage audiences of different generations and cultural perspectives, Nam Hwa has showcased stories with local narratives, themes and settings, including *Match-making at the Five-foot Way* and *Voyage to Nanyang*, delighting audiences.

Nam Hwa's well-regarded talent development programme includes classes of various performing techniques for young talents, introductory workshops for adults and inter-generational drama courses. Young talents are given opportunities to shine on the Nam Hwa Blazes platform, a series of free public performances. One such talent, 17-year-old Tan Wei Tian who has been training and performing with Nam Hwa for years, says: "There are many messages and stories to tell from the performances… and I think that our future generations should be able to get to know Teochew opera to have a deeper understanding of their roots and embrace their traditions."[5]

Nam Hwa has also established the Yeo Khee Lim Teochew Culture Research Centre, which supports research and documentation of the manifold aspects of Teochew opera and the cultural roots it draws upon. As Nam Hwa's President Toh Lim Mok noted: "Roots are important for building up a person's character by inculcating values, and if you want to keep these values, then the preservation of art forms is key."[6]

15

Sri Warisan Som Said Performing Arts Ltd – Malay Dance, *Dikir Barat*, *Wayang Kulit* and *Bangsawan*

Before establishing Sri Warisan in 1997, Som Said was already versed in the myriad of regional dance styles, techniques and traditions which had influenced the Malay dance scene in Singapore. But she also wondered: "What would make Malay dance in Singapore different from what we received?"[7] Determined to create a dance identity that would reflect the lifestyles, values and heritage of Malays in Singapore, Som Said synthesised regional forms with influences from Singapore's multicultural society. Today, Sri Warisan productions continue to be inspired by the heritage of Southeast Asia, such as the heroic Tun Fatimah of Malacca and Radin Mas, the Javanese princess that gave her name to the same area in Singapore.

The group has also grown into a multidisciplinary collective, sustaining the traditions of dance, *bangsawan* (Malay operatic theatre), *angklung* (a Javanese music form) and *wayang kulit* (shadow puppet plays). Each year, Sri Warisan performs at more than 200 local and international events and festivals, while also conducting more than 3,000 courses and workshops. The company also offers lessons in *wayang kulit*, *dikir barat* and learning to play the *kompang*. Since 1993, the group has also worked closely with schools through the National Arts Council Arts Education programme.

As Som Said explained, "We preserve [performing traditions] through teaching, conducting classes and workshops, and we promote them by performing, and we create [new works]. When we create, we embrace the roots, but we create with platforms where we allow the youths to hold on to their traditions [while interpreting them] in their own way."

The changing tastes of contemporary audiences have led to efforts at innovation, including the use of modern themes and elements such as animation, under the direction of Som Said's son and Sri Warisan's current managing director Adel Ahmad. "We want to make sure that [through] Malay dance, *bangsawan*, *wayang kulit*, *dikir barat*, *angklung*, [we can] reach out to everybody… [and that audiences] will be touched by and relate to these performing arts," says Adel.

16

17

18

15 Adel Ahmad and Som Said with the Sri Warisan performers of *Bangsawan In Dance*, 2020. *Courtesy of National Heritage Board*

16 A scene from the performance of *Warisan Seni*, by Sri Warisan's Unit Artiste Budaya, 2020. *Courtesy of National Heritage Board*

17 Managing Director Adel Ahmad (left), Founder and Artistic Director Som Said (centre) and Creative Director Marina Yusoff (right), 2020. *Courtesy of National Heritage Board*

18 Som Said passing on her skills and knowledge in Malay dance movements and techniques to young learners, 2020. *Courtesy of National Heritage Board*

19

Thow Kwang Pottery Jungle – Making of Wood-Fired Pottery

Built in the 1940s, the dragon kiln at Thow Kwang is the only one still operating in Singapore. A tradition brought to Singapore by Chinese migrants in the 19th century, dragon kilns used to mass produce pottery such as cups and jars, as well as latex collectors used in rubber plantations. While Thow Kwang has evolved to artisanal production today, the knowledge required to work the dragon kiln has been sustained by the Tan family, its owners since 1965.

On the two to three occasions a year the dragon kiln is fired, artisanal potters and volunteers work in shifts across two to three days, keeping its flame and the traditions of wood-fired pottery alive. "Firing a dragon kiln is [about] teamwork, and [the people of] Thow Kwang Clay Artists have been with us for many years and are experienced in the firing process," says Yulianti Tan, who is married to Tan Teck Yoke, the son of Thow Kwang's founder Tan Kin Seh.[8] "We share [knowledge and expertise] with the potters, interest groups, and also open up to the public to let them have first-hand experience of the dragon kiln firing."

Thow Kwang also runs ceramics workshops and the Thow Kwang Clay Artists group, which provide a platform for potters to practise their skills and sustain their passion. "These workshops bring [people] closer to the dragon kiln, and also show

20

21

19 Thow Kwang Pottery Jungle, under the leadership of Tan Teck Yoke, Yulianti Tan and Stella Tan, continues to produce a wide variety of artisanal and wood-fired pottery pieces. *Courtesy of National Heritage Board*

20 Tan Teck Yoke, second generation practitioner and co-owner of Thow Kwang Pottery Jungle, putting his extensive knowledge and skills of pottery making to use, 2020. *Courtesy of National Heritage Board*

21 Stella Tan (left), third generation practitioner and Studio Director of Thow Kwang Pottery Jungle, conducting one of Thow Kwang's pottery classes, 2020. *Courtesy of National Heritage Board*

them the beauty of the pottery fired in the dragon kiln,"[9] says Stella Tan, Thow Kwang's studio director and a third-generation practitioner.

Engaging existing and new pottery connoisseurs through social media, as well as running an online store, also comes under the purview of Stella. "I feel it's important to carry on the legacy passed down to me from my grandfather, and to share the knowledge and skills of the dragon kiln and wood-fired pottery to [future] generations," she adds.[10]

What's Next

NHB is committed to supporting the Stewards in their own endeavours to ensure the long-term continuity and sustainability of the ICH practices, through the Stewards Project Grant available to all Award recipients. For instance, supported by the Stewards Project Grant, Sri Warisan recently staged a dance production entitled *Semarak Warisan* in December 2020, where three generations of Malay dancers participated in the same production to showcase the history and evolution of Malay dance in Singapore.

In addition, NHB will partner with the Stewards to identify opportunities and platforms to showcase their ICH practices, further promoting public awareness and appreciation for the Stewards and their excellent work in their respective ICH fields. For instance, Apsaras Arts was recently featured as

the opening act for the Indian Heritage Centre's virtual CultureFest 2020.

Going forward, NHB will continue to identify and recognise other experienced and dedicated ICH practitioners who have also made outstanding contributions to the transmission of their ICH elements. In this spirit, NHB has launched the open call for nominations for the 2021 cycle of the Stewards of ICH Award, and we encourage anyone who takes pride in safeguarding the intangible cultural heritage of Singapore to apply for or to nominate practitioners for the award – more information can be found on https://www.nhb.gov.sg.

Safeguarding ICH as our legacy for the future

The Stewards, and the numerous other ICH practices and practitioners featured across this two-part MUSE SG series on ICH practices in Singapore, exemplify the richness and diversity of the cultural heritage we have in Singapore. The contributions of individuals, groups, and communities safeguard our heritage and traditions, for us and for future generations.

Our four traditional performing arts Stewards, with artforms originating from diverse cultural communities in Singapore, collectively showcase how a plurality of cultural traditions and values can co-exist, intersect and thrive within our multicultural society. In their practice and in their commitment to share the beauty of their art, these Stewards also demonstrate how we can remain connected to our roots and cultural inheritance while adapting our traditions to the present.

Many of the Stewards and their ICH practices have borne witness to and evolved along with Singapore's development as a nation, whether that is the evolution of the dragon kiln at Thow Kwang from mass industrial production to its role as a hub of artisanal pottery, or how Michael Ker introduced new elements to make the traditional dish of *popiah* more inclusive. They remind us that intangible cultural heritage is both a reflection of our nation's history and all around us today in our everyday lives, including the food we enjoy.

Unquestionably, the ICH landscape in Singapore still faces many challenges today – ranging from economic and technological disruptions, to changes in our society and in our cultural preferences. In safeguarding our ICH, we acknowledge that our traditions and cultural heritage will evolve over time, and that practices and practitioners will have to adapt to new influences, perspectives and ways of life.

Nevertheless, the recognition which the Stewards have received is testament to and a reflection of their resilience and their ability to respond dynamically to such challenges, ensuring that their ICH practices remain relevant and thriving amidst ever-changing conditions. Agencies such as NHB will also continue to do our part, working in collaboration and partnership with the community and especially the practitioners, to promote and transmit ICH as part of our mission to preserve our nation's legacy for the future.

Above all, we hope that by showcasing the wide variety of existing ICH practices and the passion and dedication of Singapore's ICH practitioners, you have been inspired by the ICH issues of MUSE SG to explore, discover and appreciate more of our ICH, to actively participate in and be a part of safeguarding the heritage we all share.

Notes

[1] https://indiasemedia.com/2020/06/17/apsara-arts-leads-the-way-in-singapores-indian-dance-scene/

[2] https://www.esplanade.com/offstage/arts/g-t-lye

[3] https://www.heritagefestival.sg/programmes/kway-guan-huats-live-popiah-making-demonstration

[4] Keeping alive family's popiah tradition. (2018, August 20). *The Straits Times*.

[5] https://vimeo.com/453532852/8d0e05aae4

[6] https://www.straitstimes.com/lifestyle/arts/popiah-pottery-and-peranakan-plays-6-win-inaugural-award-for-intangible-cultural

[7] https://www.esplanade.com/offstage/arts/som-said

[8] https://www.roots.sg/learn/resources/ich/making-of-wood-fired-pottery

[9] https://vimeo.com/450039402/338ebc7b9a

[10] https://vimeo.com/450039402/338ebc7b9a

WRITERS FOR MUSE SG

In collaboration with:

History
NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE HISTORY SOCIETY

Katherine Tan is a Year 4 European Studies major with an Art History Minor at the National University of Singapore. Her academic interests revolve around Modern and Contemporary art. Coffee, tea and a good almond croissant can make up any meal of her day. If not on Netflix in her free time, she is probably at one of the museums.

Salifian bin Sulaiman is a Year 2 History major at the National University of Singapore. His research interest revolves around social history, particularly in popular culture. He also has a deep love for anything nostalgic and a peculiar obsession with NDP songs, where he enjoys listening to them on repeat for days.

Douglas Tan is a Year 2 History major with a Philosophy minor at the National University of Singapore. His research interest revolves around the development of religion, and issues of morality. He can be found wherever there is good (black) coffee and enjoys engaging in meaningful conversations about faith or good books.

Sandy Lee is a penultimate Sociology major at the National University of Singapore. She's a caffeine-powered nerd who enjoys relating what she learns in sociology to everyday life.

Shi Peiyun is a Year 2 History major at the National University of Singapore. Her life revolves around things she is passionate about. She enjoys performing and attending Chinese Orchestra concerts with her friends and hopes that more people would grow to appreciate the beauty of CO music.

Benedict See-Toh is a Year 2 History Major at the National University of Singapore. He wishes that university would be chill under a huge tree, but in reality, he wouldn't survive the humidity. One of his life "goals" is to run a bunny and dog farm even though he never had a pet - for the sake of those animals let's hope he doesn't succeed.

Ernest Koh is pursuing a Master's in History at Nanyang Technological University. He received his BA (Hons) in NTU, majoring in History and Linguistics and Multilingual Studies. His research interests include the development of maritime economic structures, business networks, and comparative diasporas and religion in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Arthur Tan is Assistant Manager (Intangible Cultural Heritage) at the Heritage Research and Assessment Division of the National Heritage Board. He is involved in initiatives to promote and safeguard Singapore's intangible cultural heritage and ICH practitioners, and one of his key projects is the Stewards of Intangible Cultural Heritage Award.

Alvin Chua is an independent writer and researcher who has worked on numerous publications in heritage, urban systems and sustainability.