

Three Decades of Celebrating Heritage



Share Your Story, Shape Our Memorial

Our National Anthem, which represents our enduring spirit and values we stand for as a nation, is stored in this vinyl. The National Anthem was also once transmitted to our young nation over radios like this one.



1960s vinyl record titled Majulah Singapura

1970s made-in-Singapore Setron radio

Collection of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board

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Montage of various National Heritage Board events and programmes over the three decades.

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NATIONAL HERITAGE BOARD

A note from the MUSE SG team

In this special issue, we celebrate the 30th anniversary of the National Heritage Board (NHB), which was established on 1 August 1993 under the former Ministry of Information and the Arts. As the official custodian of Singapore's heritage now under the Ministry of Community, Culture and Youth, NHB safeguards and promotes the shared heritage of the nation's diverse communities.

We open with a stirring opinion piece by staunch supporter of the arts and heritage Professor Tommy Koh, who ruminates on what heritage means to him. We also trace the milestones of one of NHB's longest-running events, the Singapore HeritageFest, now into its 20th edition. Known for its rich and diverse programming focused on multiculturalism, the festival has become a much-anticipated annual event for both the young and old.

Speaking of the young, our children now have a special space of their own with the recent opening of the Children's Museum Singapore, the country's first public museum dedicated to kids aged 12 and below. We take a look at the museum's offerings and tell you how the curators have conceptualised the space to nurture the boundless curiosity of children.

Our linguistic roots are closely tied to our multicultural heritage, as the Promote Mandarin Council's Singaporean Mandarin Database reveals. The database is a treasure trove for those seeking to understand more about the origins of 'Singaporean Mandarin'—unique Mandarin terms used by Singaporeans. We delve into some choice terms and phrases in this illustrated piece.

This is followed by four research articles, three of which are adapted from NHB's Research Grant projects. All of them shed light on hidden or little-known facets of our island. We take a close look at Shanghai plaster, an elegant stone-like finish that was widely used until the 1960s and can be found on 14 of our national monuments. We also chart the evolution of some iconic local dishes, unearth the histories of four forgotten multiethnic neighbourhoods that used to be in the heart of the city, and explore informal wayside shrines in Singapore.

What would we be as a society without our collective memories? We take an in-depth look at our National Collection, which consists of significant objects and artworks that remind present and future generations of our roots and shared cultural heritage, as well as how Singapore society has evolved over time.

This issue rounds off with an interview with Chung May Khuen, Director of the National Museum of Singapore, who shares with us her vision for the grande dame whose history dates back to 1849.

We hope you enjoy this issue of *MUSE SG* as much as we did putting it together.

We welcome your feedback. Scan the QR code to let us know what you think of MUSE SG.

You can also get in touch with us at muse@nhb.gov.sg



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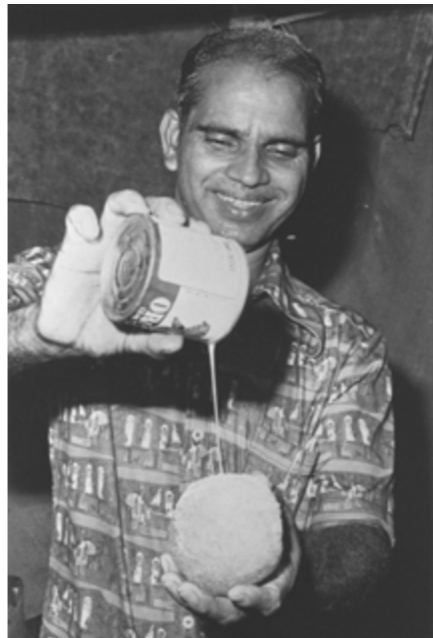
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Foreword

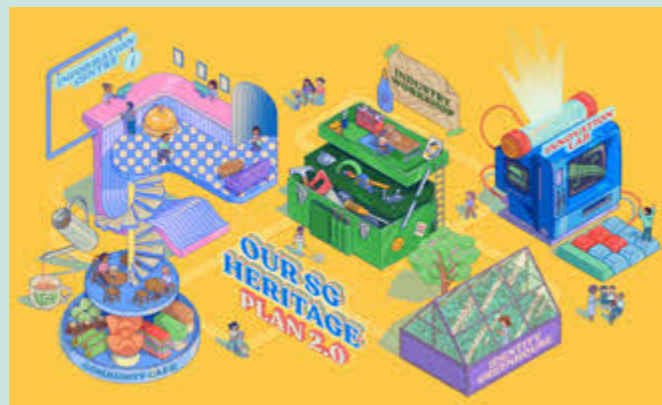


Singapore's heritage is a tale of constant evolution. It is a story of how myriad and diverse influences are absorbed and adapted to forge a unique sense of rootedness in Singapore, while retaining the distinctive cultures and traditions of its various constituent communities.

For 30 years now, the National Heritage Board (NHB) has been documenting and sharing these stories. And like Singapore's heritage, NHB too has been continually evolving, while remaining steadfast in our mission of preserving and celebrating Singapore's shared heritage, and our vision of engendering pride in our past and building a legacy for our future.

NHB has witnessed great changes since it was founded in 1993, from opening new museums and heritage institutions and contributing to the burgeoning development of the heritage and museum scene in Singapore, to pivoting to the digital realm and confronting the challenges posed by COVID-19 and an increasingly volatile and polarised global environment. We will be commemorating this year's milestone by looking back at our 30-year journey and celebrating NHB's very own heritage as an organisation. However, we will also be looking forward, not only at the role of NHB in Singapore's heritage landscape, but also at the role of heritage itself.

In a world where our differences frequently cause divisions and tensions, heritage is crucial in developing understanding and forging unity. By promoting the appreciation of different cultures and traditions, we not only safeguard these practices and expressions, but also reinforce pride in our identities and instil greater intercultural understanding and harmony. By appreciating the beauty and richness of each other's cultures, we deepen our sense of understanding of each other, and of people around the world.



↑ The new five-year masterplan for Singapore's heritage, *Our SG Heritage Plan 2.0*, will be launched later this year.

In a multicultural, cosmopolitan country like Singapore, a big challenge is to encourage people to appreciate other communities that co-exist alongside our own, while also building a unifying, core 'Singaporean' identity that transcends, but does not subsume, our differences. In dynamic and uncertain times, it is confidence in our identity, and having a solid reference point anchored in our rich and unique heritage that gives us a strong ballast to navigate our way through the future.

It is fitting then that as we celebrate NHB's 30th anniversary, we will be embarking on *Our SG Heritage Plan 2.0*, which will build on the achievements of *Our SG Heritage Plan*, the first five-year masterplan for Singapore's heritage that was launched in 2018. Work on *Our SG Heritage Plan 2.0* has been underway for some time, and we have been gathering feedback from partners, stakeholders and the community in preparation for its launch later this year. It is important that all Singaporeans have an opportunity to air their views because heritage belongs to all of us.

At NHB, we emphasise that heritage must adapt with the times to thrive and remain relevant. Heritage must avoid fossilisation, where it becomes a relic of the past and not a part of daily life. This is a principle that we apply to our own development as an organisation as well. As NHB marks its 30th birthday by opening a new chapter on Singapore's heritage with *Our SG Heritage Plan 2.0*, I am confident that we are well placed to further secure our nation's legacy for decades to come.

Chang Hwee Nee

Chief Executive Officer
National Heritage Board



↑ The Museum Roundtable Management and Pow Wow meetings where the Museum Roundtable, a community of over 60 public and private museums and heritage galleries, contribute to discussions on plans and initiatives for the museum sector in Singapore, 2022.

Heritage and What It Means to Me

What aspects of Singapore's multicultural heritage are worth saving? Who can speak up for our past and present generations? Professor Tommy Koh ponders on these questions and more.



↑ Professor Tommy Koh, then chairman of the National Arts Council, with former Minister for Information and the Arts George Yeo at the Festival of Asian Performing Arts, 1995.
Courtesy of author

The United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) defines heritage as the “cultural legacy which we receive from the past, which we live in the present and which we will pass on to future generations”.¹ In short, heritage refers to the full range of our inherited traditions, monuments, objects and cultures.

What Is Singapore's Heritage?

But what is heritage in the context of Singapore? Ours is a multicultural society with roots that go back to the end of the 13th century. Being a port city, it attracted people from all over the region as well as places further away. As a result, Singapore's heritage consists of the rich confluence of our ancestral cultures—from the Malay World, China and India—as well as the products that arose from that confluence.

Singapore's model of multiculturalism is quite different from those of some other countries, where minority communities are pressured to assimilate into the culture of the majority race. On the contrary, we promote and celebrate the

cultural diversity of the various ethnic groups that make up Singapore.

We therefore have the Malay Heritage Centre, Indian Heritage Centre, Baba House and Eurasian Heritage Gallery. We also celebrate the heritage of even smaller minorities who have had a long history in Singapore, such as the Arabs, Jews, Armenians and Parsis.

Any community, no matter its size, will feel included in our cosmopolitan city-state and feel a sense of belonging. When we empower our minority communities, we also empower Singapore as a whole by building an inclusive society—a country where, hopefully, no community feels left out.

I will never forget the occasion some years ago when the Asian Civilisations Museum held an event to celebrate Zarathustra, founder of the Zoroastrian religion. Singapore's tiny but close-knit Parsi community was overjoyed and many Parsi friends from India, Hong Kong and other parts of Asia joined in the celebration.

When I chaired the first Asia-Middle East Dialogue in 2005, I asked the Arab community in Singapore for help. Most Singaporeans are not aware that many Arabs in Singapore trace their lineage to the Hadrami community who hail from the province of Hadramawt in southern Yemen. Through my contacts in the local Arab community, I was able to hire an Arab/Yemini band to perform for us at a dinner.

Years ago, I also helped Singapore's small Armenian community, numbering fewer than 100 today, organise a major celebration of the Armenian Apostolic Church of St Gregory the Illuminator on Hill Street. Better known simply as the Armenian Church, this is the oldest Christian church standing in Singapore.

Our Tangible Heritage

UNESCO's definition of heritage is divided into two categories: tangible



↑ **TOP**
Palm Valley at the Singapore Botanic Gardens—a popular picnic spot. The Gardens was inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2015.
Retrieved from Wikimedia Commons

ABOVE
The traditional Indian dance, *kathakali*, is part of Singapore's intangible cultural heritage.

and intangible. Singapore's tangible heritage includes the many monuments and historic buildings that stand proudly today as physical markers of our history.

The National Heritage Board (NHB) and the Urban Redevelopment Authority have done an excellent job in preserving our national monuments and historic buildings. Although some buildings of heritage value were demolished in the push to modernise Singapore in the post-war period, I am glad that our town planners had the foresight to begin conservation efforts early enough and preserve some of our finest architectural icons.

I would further broaden tangible heritage to include Singapore's natural heritage—our native species of flora and fauna. Singapore is today known as a 'City in Nature', thanks to the

efforts of its urban planners. I salute the National Parks Board and the Nature Society (Singapore) for their good work in protecting nature and our biodiversity for future generations.

In 2015, our beloved Botanic Gardens was inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the world's first and only tropical botanic garden to make the list. Founded in 1859, this tranquil haven is the only heritage site in Singapore that has been recognised by UNESCO. Over the years, the gardens have outgrown its original 23-hectare site, including precious primary and secondary forest, to 82 hectares today—a vast green lung in the heart of the city.

Our Intangible Heritage

UNESCO describes intangible cultural heritage as comprising “the traditions or living expressions inherited from our ancestors and passed on to our descendants”. There are five broad categories: social practices, rituals and festive events; knowledge and practices concerning nature and universe; oral traditions and expressions; traditional craftsmanship; and the performing arts. In 2018, NHB added a sixth category—Singapore's food heritage.²

Two years later, Singapore's hawker culture was inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. This was in recognition of our affordably priced and unique multicultural street food served in 'community dining rooms' where CEOs as well as cleaners gather to eat.

Food is just one aspect of Singapore's intangible culture. We do not live by rice and roti alone; we also need nourishment for our hearts. Time-honoured performing arts like Chinese opera and puppetry, Indian *bharatanatyam* dance and Carnatic music, Malay *wayang kulit* theatre and *keronchong* music, *wayang peranakan* and the Portuguese-inspired Eurasian communal dance known as *branyo* are all part of our multicultural

Professor Tommy Koh is Singapore's Ambassador-at-Large; Emeritus Professor, Faculty of Law, National University of Singapore; Honorary Chair, National Heritage Board; and advocate of the arts, heritage and environment.

**ABOVE**

Professor Tommy Koh with the late Brother Joseph McNally, who founded the Lasalle College of the Arts—an important centre for contemporary arts and design education in Southeast Asia.

Courtesy of author

ABOVE RIGHT

Professor Tommy Koh sees sporting achievements as a form of intangible heritage as they have the effect of unifying a country. Pictured here is badminton champion Ong Poh Lim demonstrating his trademark 'crocodile' serve, 1970s. Ong brought fame to Singapore when he won the Thomas Cup thrice between 1949 and 1955.

Courtesy of Sport Singapore

fabric. But I also find inspiration in more contemporary expressions of the arts: our theatre, film, music, painting, sculpture, pottery, literature and poetry.

Take music for instance. Some of our more memorable National Day songs have the ability to evoke feelings of patriotism and pride, and can help unite a nation. In my view, Dick Lee's song, 'Home', has become the unofficial second national anthem of Singapore. It may not fall under the official definition of intangible heritage, but who is to say that what we regard as contemporary today may not be celebrated as our cultural heritage in the future. I am sure the young Singaporeans who composed *xinyao* songs in the late 1970s had little inkling that this genre of Mandarin music would one day be officially recognised as part of our local Chinese heritage.

In my view, outstanding achievements in sports can also be seen as a form of intangible heritage because they forge closer ties among people and help unite a nation. Remember the Malaysia Cup fever in the 1970s among football fans? It reached a crescendo when Singapore brought the Malaysia Cup home to cheering crowds in 1977—its first win in 12 years—and 1980. Somehow, the local football scene has never been able to replicate the success the sport enjoyed in the late 1970s.

I remember when a Singaporean, Wong Peng Soon, reigned as the world

badminton champion in the early 1950s, clinching the title in the All-England Championships in 1950—the first Asian to do so—and again in 1951, 1952 and 1955. I also remember when the Malayan team, which included Wong and another Singaporean, Ong Poh Lim, won the coveted Thomas Cup on three occasions between 1949 and 1955.

More recently, in 2016, the whole nation rejoiced when Joseph Schooling won the gold medal in the 100-metre butterfly at the Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro. This record stands as Singapore's first and only gold triumph at the Olympics.

The Value of Singlish

I know I am venturing into controversial territory, but I firmly believe that Singlish is part of our cultural heritage. It is our very own local patois that combines influences from the four major languages spoken by Singaporeans. Singlish is a living language, with new words and expressions added to the vocabulary all the time—it is adaptable and dynamic. It is the private language of Singaporeans, used in casual settings. I believe there is a place for proper English and a place for Singlish. Most Singaporeans know when to code switch from one to the other, depending on the situation.

I suspect the Speak Good English Movement was introduced in 2000 partly to discourage Singaporeans from speaking

Singlish. But my view is that Singlish is a unique, important aspect of our cultural identity as Singaporeans. Eradicating or discouraging the use of Singlish is akin to losing an intrinsic part of our culture.

Heritage of Our Families

Visit the Asian Civilisations Museum and you will see an impressive collection of Asian antiquities and decorative objects that give you a sense of the richness of our material and cultural legacies. But heritage goes beyond the physical objects, and the inherited culture and traditions of our forefathers.

Every family has its own heritage. This heritage includes the history of a person's parents and their ancestors. It includes the language or languages they speak at home, the food they eat, the customs and rituals they observe, the religious faiths they keep, the schools and universities they attend, the sports they play or watch, and the values they practise and uphold in daily life.

I encourage every family to trace its genealogy. Knowing your ancestry gives you a better sense of your identity, which may be a source of both humility and pride. It can also help strengthen families and communities.

When I was chairman of NHB, I visited the National Genealogy Centre at the Hague in the Netherlands. I was extremely impressed by what I saw, and I hope that Singapore, too, will have a national genealogy centre one day.

A School's Heritage

Every school, junior college, polytechnic, institute of technical education and university in Singapore should be proud of its heritage. The secondary school I attended, Raffles Institution, is very proud of its long history, of the leaders it has produced and of its record of excellence in education, sports and other student activities.



Our neighbourhood schools must also celebrate their history and heritage. To date, NHB has provided funding for 133 schools to set up their own School Heritage Corners so that their accomplishments may be appreciated by present and past generations of students. For example, Tanjong Katong Secondary School (formerly Tanjong Katong Technical Secondary School) counts among its alumni Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong.

Similarly, I am proud of the heritage of the National University of Singapore (NUS) and the NUS Faculty of Law—the first law school in Singapore. Established as the Department of Law at the former University of Malaya, it took in its first batch of students in 1957. I was a member of that class. My classmates included former Chief Justice Chan Sek Keong, former Police Commissioner Goh Yong Hong and former President of Law Society TPB Menon. I feel loyal to my secondary school and university and continue to support them in various ways.

Tracing Your Personal Roots

While there are various government initiatives to promote and protect Singapore's tangible and intangible heritage, we should take ownership of our own family's heritage. How can we do this?

For a start, we can start researching our personal roots. Where did my forebears come from? What challenges and difficulties did they overcome? What did they accomplish in life? This knowledge will help us connect with the past and understand ourselves better. Only when we realise that we have been shaped by larger forces beyond our individual selves—including the traditions, social practices and values inherited from our ancestors—will we have a deeper appreciation of our place in this world. 🍀

**FACING PAGE**

Professor Tommy Koh (back row, fifth from left) with his graduating class of the then University of Malaya's Department of Law, 1961. He believes that schools ought to celebrate their heritage.

Courtesy of author

NOTES

- 1 UNESCO. Cultural heritage. Retrieved 22 August 2022 from <https://en.unesco.org/fieldoffice/santiago/cultura/patrimonio>.
- 2 National Heritage Board. Intangible cultural heritage. Last updated 18 August 2021 from <https://www.roots.gov.sg/ich-landing>.

By the Community, for the Community

20 Years of Singapore HeritageFest

As the Singapore HeritageFest celebrates its 20th anniversary this year, we look back at how this beloved festival has evolved.

Qazim Karim
Senior Manager, Festivals & Precinct Development,
National Heritage Board



The Singapore HeritageFest (SHF) was inaugurated in 2004, with the aim of bringing interesting and engaging content from the portals of our national museums to where the people are. The festival has since grown from strength to strength, both in scale and in reach, and evolved into a much-anticipated annual celebration of Singapore's rich and diverse multicultural heritage. It has also become a platform where people can relive personal stories as well as share collective memories of their heritage. By doing so, they also add to the fabric of the larger Singapore story.

SHF has always been a community-driven initiative: events and programmes are co-

curated and presented jointly with public and private agencies, clan and heritage associations, educational institutions as well as passionate individuals working on heritage projects. As a result, the festival has become a rich repository of heritage-related stories, some of which might not have been unearthed if our national cultural institutions had not engaged and worked with the community.

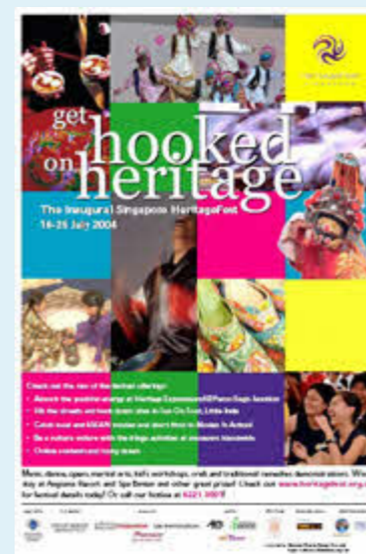
As SHF celebrates its 20th anniversary this year, we remember some of its major milestones over the last two decades.

↑ Performance of *Fat Kids Are Harder to Kidnap* at the Caldecott Broadcast Centre. This performance was part of Singapore HeritageFest Takes Over Caldecott Broadcast Centre! in 2017.

2004

Singapore HeritageFest Is Launched

The inaugural Singapore HeritageFest, which took place over 10 days, showcased Singapore's rich cultural heritage as well as that of some of its ASEAN neighbours.



↑ Poster for the first edition of Singapore HeritageFest in 2004.

↗ Poster for Singapore HeritageFest 2008, which celebrated local heroes—ordinary people who embody the Singapore spirit.

→ What are our shared memories? In 2013, festival goers were invited to come together and delve into the memory banks of yesteryear as well as deposit new ones for the future.

2006–2016

Reaching Out to the Communities

During this decade, SHF celebrated the diversity of the various ethnic communities that make up Singapore. The festival also expanded its footprint into the heartlands, extending the reach of our local heritage and culture, creating museums without walls.



2008

The Festival Marks Its Fifth Year

To celebrate its fifth edition, the festival celebrated extraordinary heroes—ordinary personalities who embody the Singapore spirit—and unearthed stories to bond Singaporeans. The festival saw over 200 groups from public and private sectors come together to bring heritage to the heartlands for the first time. It also published its first children's book on 10 Singaporean pioneers.

2013

The Festival Enters Its 10th Year

On its 10th anniversary, SHF featured 10 festival hubs across the island over 10 days of exhibitions and more than 20 programmes, working together with community and corporate partners. Themed 'Memories of Tomorrow', the festival spotlighted collective memories that brought Singaporeans together by connecting people through various community platforms.

2015**Celebrating Singapore's 50th Birthday**

As part of the nation's jubilee celebrations, SHF upped its ante with offerings spread across five weekends from April to May—the longest-running festival yet. Thanks to an unprecedented level of community participation, the festival featured over 150 programmes produced with some 80 partners. This marked an almost three-fold increase from the previous year, which saw over 60 programmes by 40 partners.



Musical on Singapore's hawker culture, *Makan Dreaming*, held at Bedok Town Square, Singapore HeritageFest 2019.



Heritage enthusiast Jerome Lim conducting a guided tour in the Bras Basah, Bugis precinct for Singapore HeritageFest 2019. The group is pictured in front of the Sri Krishnan Temple on Waterloo Street.

**2017****Uncovering Lesser-known Stories**

The festival focused on lesser-known and obscure places in Singapore to reveal hidden stories and memories. Festival visitors had the opportunity to explore spaces such as the oldest parts of the former Caldecott Broadcast Centre on Andrew Road, which housed Radio Television Singapore, the nation's first broadcast station. This would set the direction for subsequent years as SHF continued to showcase heritage precincts.

2019**Celebrating Our Bicentennial**

The 16th edition of the festival rode on the waves of Singapore's bicentennial celebrations, tracing the island's history 500 years before the arrival of Stamford Raffles in 1819, and exploring the pivotal events as well as individuals and communities who contributed to the Singapore story. The programming was spread across four festival hubs: Bras Basah, Bugis, Bedok, Kranji and Telok Blangah.

2020**Pivoting to the Digital**

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak, the festival launched its first-ever digital edition. One of the first festivals in Singapore to go completely digital, it featured online content such as photo essays, self-led audio tours and mini documentaries. Despite the challenges, the festival organisers collaborated with more than 60 partners and rolled out over 80 programmes, reaching out to international audiences beyond Singapore.

2021-2022**Charting a New Identity**

The festival showcased a new identity in 2021. As a platform for positive social experiences, the festival uncovered stories that connect us, inspiring Singaporeans to keep heritage alive. The festival also shifted its focus to celebrate key milestones in Singapore's history. Held physically and online, SHF2021 was a hybrid event that featured the well-loved topic of food, in celebration of UNESCO's inscription of Singapore's hawker culture, as well as the nation's medical history, with Singapore General Hospital commemorating its 200th anniversary.

The festival continued its thematic focus in 2022 with the exploration of travel and tourism as Singapore emerged from the worst of the pandemic. Given rising concerns over the environment and climate change, Singapore's natural heritage was another festival focus.



In 2021, the festival underwent a brand refresh to cater to wider audiences. The new Singapore HeritageFest brand is driven by the belief that heritage holds the timeless power to connect us all. With this new direction, the festival hopes to play an active role in inspiring everyone to keep heritage alive.

2023**What to Expect This Year**

As SHF celebrates its 20th anniversary in 2023, it continues its mission to make heritage both relatable and relevant to Singaporeans from all walks of life. Guided by national milestones, the latest edition of SHF will commemorate Singapore's rich sporting history and delve into the evolution of its public transportation.

Festival goers can expect a mix of hybrid and physical experiences, greater collaboration with heritage organisations and educational institutions, and an immersive heritage experience at the National Museum of Singapore. Join us as we continue to explore our nation's rich heritage and relive the stories that connect us! 🍵



The theme for Singapore HeritageFest 2022 was travel, tourism and natural heritage. Reflecting on the simple joys of travelling, the installation titled 'Homeground' featured a life-sized train inspired by the Keretapi Tanah Melayu train that used to run from Tanjong Pagar Railway Station.



Starting Them Young

Children's Museum Singapore

MUSE SG takes a trip to the country's first public museum dedicated to children which opened recently, much to the delight of kids—and their parents.

↑ Children's Museum Singapore is the nation's first public museum dedicated to children. The building previously housed the Singapore Philatelic Museum.

With their boundless curiosity and sense of wonder, children are intrinsic learners. Children are shaped by values transmitted through the home, school, media or other means during their formative years as they begin to develop a sense of identity. To nurture young minds, however, it is important to expose them to positive educational environments. Although museums, with their artefacts, interactive displays and immersive exhibitions are especially conducive for learning and sparking imaginations, most museums in Singapore cater to adults and do not actively engage children, especially those below the age of 12.

With this in mind, the Children's Museum Singapore opened its doors in December 2022, much to the delight of both parents and children. Occupying the premises of the former Singapore Philatelic Museum on Coleman Street, this is the first public museum in Singapore dedicated to children aged 12 and below. This highly anticipated addition to the country's network of museums aims to instil a love of learning and help children develop foundational skills such as literacy, numeracy and motor skills.

By featuring artefacts, interactive displays and immersive exhibitions that celebrate Singapore's cultural diversity, the Children's Museum also inspires kids to be curious and engaged as they grow up, helping to connect them with the larger community. It seeks to deliver an early positive educational experience for kids: 'Start with Wonder', as its tagline says, and embark on a lifelong journey of learning through museums.

The First Children's Museum

A dedicated children's museum had long been a gap in the local museum landscape. However, children's programmes and exhibitions—such as the National Heritage Board's Children's Season and the National Gallery Singapore's Children's Biennale—have always been popular with families. Some institutions

also have a dedicated kids' zone on their premises. The National Gallery Singapore, for example, has its Keppel Centre for Art Education, and there is KidsSTOP at the Science Centre Singapore. However, the content of these spaces is closely tied to the themes of their respective permanent galleries.

Noting the appeal of informal learning and the demand in children's programming among young families, the Children's Museum was first conceptualised in 2019. Curator Mishelle Lim shared how the Children's Museum sets itself apart from existing museum spaces and programmes:

The Children's Museum is special as it is the first museum in Singapore with a child-centred approach. In our exhibitions and programming, we removed familiar museum barriers such as enforcing a silent environment and a no-touch policy; instead, we encourage exploration and questions, including interaction with objects and exhibits.

The museum also consulted early-childhood educators and found out first-hand from children what exactly interested them before conceptualising and planning the exhibition space.

Play and Learn

The primary objective of the Children's Museum is to engage its audience through play and learning—recognising that dispensing factual (and often dry) information without the fun factor is not an effective way to engage young minds. Thus, there are plenty of immersive, multi-sensory, hands-on and exploratory museum displays with role-playing opportunities for kids to have fun with, but all designed with their development and learning needs in mind.

For instance, the museum emphasises hands-on learning, which means many exhibits can be handled by kids, contrary to what one expects in

a typical museum setting. The ability to touch and handle exhibits makes learning fun for children as they are encouraged to explore and discover. At the same time, the immersive nature of the displays allows kids to experience real-world situations in a controlled and safe environment, rather than just reading about them or being taught.

Lim explained the museum's curatorial strategy:

We've enabled self-directed learning for the children so that they can have multiple entry points to engage with the displays. Unlike adults who are used to a chronological and linear way of viewing an exhibition, children are naturally inclined to explore on their own terms, going to what attracts them first.

The museum has a permanent exhibition that spans four galleries on the ground floor and three special galleries on the second level that will be refreshed every year. There are open-ended interactive displays, meaning that kids bring their own creativity to what they experience, with each new engagement hopefully producing a different experience and encouraging repeat visits. Exhibitions and programmes are designed to cultivate the joy of learning, to encourage kids to embrace diversity and widen their horizons.

Level 1: A Voyage Back in Time

The permanent exhibition, A Voyage Back in Time, showcases a mix of old and contemporary Singapore. Visitors are led by a 'Captain' to embark on a time-travelling journey to different points in Singapore's history. Its first gallery, Hidden Chamber, welcomes children with a short immersive theatre show. Objects from the Captain's secret stash—Chinese porcelain, batik fabric, ship models—come alive as animation and share stories of where they come from. In the second gallery, Ahoy Singapore!, visitors step into the Captain's time-travelling ship laden with treasures. Kids

will enjoy completing tasks set out by the Captain, such as tying a sailor's knot and 'fishing' to feed the crew. For an authentic and multi-sensorial experience, the ship's cargo hold, which many migrant passengers and livestock would have been crammed in, was built to be dark, dank and even foul-smelling.

In the Captain's cabin, however, visitors will be greeted by the aroma of spices from the region. For hundreds of years, spices such as cinnamon, nutmeg and cloves grown in Southeast Asia were valuable commodities, with European imperial powers fighting to control the spice trade.



Children embark on a time-travelling journey through Singapore's history by encountering objects of old and contemporary Singapore in the gallery, A Voyage Back in Time.



The second half of the gallery provides young visitors with hands-on experiences. Disembarking at a port in Singapore, they get to role-play as coolies by moving 'cargo' from ship to land. Manual labourers undertook backbreaking work that sustained Singapore's early economy centred on entrepot trade. Flotillas of boats plied the Singapore River as goods were continually shipped in and out of the colony.

In the multimedia game, Clean the Dirty Singapore River, visitors relive a time when its fetid waters were polluted by trade activities taking place around the river. It was only in the 1970s and 1980s that the country embarked on the mammoth task of cleaning up the Singapore River and Kallang Basin.

The third gallery, The Marketplace, allows children to explore bustling shops of yore and be entranced by stories told by shopkeepers. Transported to an era before airconditioned supermarkets, children will encounter street stalls selling fruit and vegetables, meat, seafood and even satay. The interactive games, Match the Herbs and Identify the Herbs, introduce children to the world of herbs and spices used in the cooking of familiar regional dishes and the brewing of traditional medicine.

The shophouse setting also spotlights the iconic five-footway and its vendors, including street barbers and traditional letter writers—trades that no longer exist in Singapore. Here, children can enjoy a letter-writing game. Seated behind a simple wooden desk along five-footways, letter writers of different ethnicities penned letters for illiterate customers, most of them migrants, to be mailed home to family and friends. During festive occasions such as the Lunar New Year, Chinese letter writers would also provide calligraphy services for auspicious couplets and banners.

After encountering Singapore's past, the final gallery, Our Neighbourhood, brings visitors back to the present. The modern neighbourhood setting introduces



children to friendly service providers and everyday amenities. The post office has a stamp station where kids can design their own postal stamps and an interactive postcard station with video stories.



TOP
In the Ahoy Singapore! gallery, children role-play as coolies by moving 'cargo' from boat to land.

ABOVE
The Marketplace gallery introduces children to shophouses and street stalls selling an assortment of food, textiles and even services such as letter-writing.



↑ ABOVE
In the Imagine a Garden special gallery, children navigate a maze filled with paper sculptures of local birds.

ABOVE RIGHT
A station at the Happy Birthday! special gallery with a display of objects relating to how births are celebrated across different cultures in Singapore.

Level 2: Special Exhibitions

Upstairs, visitors continue their journey to three special galleries that will be refreshed every year. In the first thematic gallery, Imagine a Garden, children get to be little naturalists discovering ecological marvels. Filled with the chirping of birds and the intoxicating scent of flowers, the gallery's centrepiece is a maze featuring over 30 lifelike bird and flower paper sculptures by Colombian artist Diana Beltrán Herrera.

Other interactives include investigative activity stations featuring natural specimens as well as the multimedia game How Fast Can You Fly?, which was developed in collaboration with students from Nanyang Polytechnic. In the game, kids adopt the persona of a spotted wood owl on the hunt for its favourite prey—the rat.

The second gallery, Happy Birthday!, explores the myriad ways that different communities in Singapore celebrate birthdays. Birth rituals of various ethnic groups are presented using objects to tell stories. Through fun and games, the exhibition teaches children to embrace diversity and to cherish their loved ones. They can also listen to 90-year-old Grandma Sumitra's memories of her birthday and view a wall of birthday portraits contributed by Singaporeans from different time periods.



↓ BELOW
The Play Pod is a safe space for toddlers aged 2–4 with the theme of fruit and vegetables.

BOTTOM
The masak-masak ('to cook' in Malay) corner at the Play Pod where children can entertain themselves with toy kitchen implements and toy food.

Finally, the Play Pod is a safe space for toddlers aged 2–4 to play and learn. Based on the theme of fruit and vegetables, the shoes-off gallery has a roadside stall where kids can pretend to be a seller or customer of fruit fritters or fruit juice in a game of *masak-masak*.¹ The room also features fruit trees, a small garden bed and a shed with toy gardening tools and vegetables, as well as a calamansi-shaped boat that children can clamber into.

Innovative Children's Programming

The empowering of children through active physical involvement—the act of *doing* instead of mere didactic instructional learning—is a cornerstone of the Children's Museum. One of the ways this is realised is through the Little Ambassadors programme. Kids between ages 8–11 are roped in as Little Ambassadors to introduce the museum and its galleries to other children. They may also be assigned responsibilities such as assisting adult facilitators during activities like craft sessions.

As the museum is located next to Fort Canning Park, it will partner the National Parks Board to conduct activities and tours for children amid the leafy environs of the park. These eco-centric programmes aim to connect children to the natural world and nurture a new generation who are responsible stewards

of the environment. Preschool and primary school children can also look forward to school programmes, with museum-based learning increasingly gaining traction among schools as a complement to the regular curriculum.

Being the first of its kind in Singapore, the Children's Museum will hopefully help drive innovation in children's exhibitions and programming among local museums and heritage institutions. More importantly, the Children's Museum is the perfect platform to introduce and experiment with new engagement and educational strategies that will interest and enthrall children in a museum setting. Lim described the role of the Children's Museum within the larger ecosystem of

children's development in Singapore. She sees the museum as an important part of the community:

We aim to work closely with stakeholders in the early-childhood sector and play a pivotal role in the development of children's programming and learning in museums.

There are also plans to collaborate with leading children's museums in other countries to seek fresh ideas and deliver a broad range of programmes and exhibitions for children here. With this, Singapore's network of children's programming will be enriched with a greater, more innovative variety of offerings. At the same time, such international collaborations will enhance existing research and curatorial methodologies, improving the overall quality of museum content for children.

Start with Wonder

Although actual work on the Children's Museum only began in 2019, the idea of such a space had been a long time in the making. It builds on 25 years of the Singapore Philatelic Museum's experience and legacy of family-friendly programming. Its kids-centric events like sleepover camps and birthday parties delighted countless children who passed through its doors.

With the opening of the Children's Museum, a new generation of kids can look forward to the joy and excitement of learning as well as discovering Singapore's heritage, while parents (and the young at heart), too, can reacquaint themselves with aspects of the past they may have forgotten. 🍌

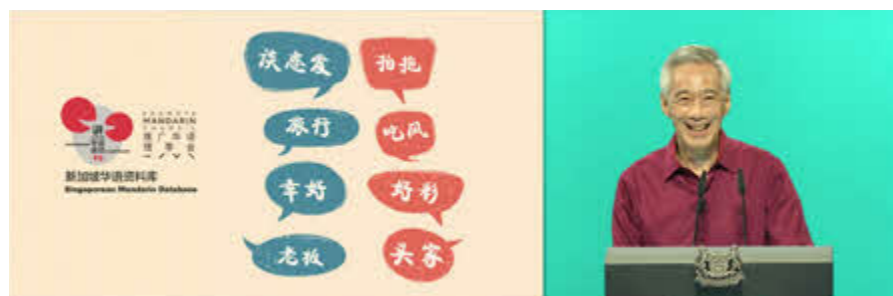
NOTE

¹ *Masak* means 'to cook' in Malay, and *masak-masak* refers to the children's game of playing with toy kitchen implements and toy food.



Mandarin— Singapore Style

Familiar yet different, recognisable but also befuddling at the same time. This is Mandarin as spoken in Singapore.



↑ Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong sharing about the Singaporean Mandarin Database at the National Day Rally in 2022.
Courtesy of Prime Minister's Office

Mandarin speakers from overseas may do a double take when they hear someone in Singapore speak what is, supposedly, the same language. Some words may sound familiar but others may confound. Take for instance the following sentence:

Wǒzài qītiáoshí bāshā hē
kāfēiwū hé chī lèshā. [我在七条
石巴刹喝咖啡乌和吃叻沙。]

[I am drinking kopi-o and eating
laksa at Bukit Timah Food Centre.]

For some, the sentence conjures a cup of steaming black coffee (咖啡乌; kopi-o) along with a bowl of rice noodles swimming in a spicy coconut-rich gravy (叻沙; laksa) in the communal setting of a hawker centre. But those who are not clued into the parlance of Singaporean Mandarin may struggle to make sense of some parts of the sentence: what on earth is *qītiáoshí* (七条石), *bāshā* (巴刹), *kāfēiwū* (咖啡乌) or *lèshā* (叻沙)?

Language is more than just words: it is an identity marker that reflects our culture and traditions, and it represents

a slice of our social history. By using a common language, we create kinship in the community and foster an appreciation of our shared cultural heritage. At the same time, tracing the meaning of now-familiar, everyday terms in our vocabulary—whether Mandarin, Malay or Tamil, or any other language—may also reveal their historical roots.

Our social and cultural backgrounds shape the language we use. For instance, a term that Mandarin speakers in Singapore take for granted, like *bāshā* (巴刹; wet market)—a loanword from the Malay *pasar*—may sound alien to Mandarin speakers from other parts of the world. But it is not uncommon to find words and phrases drawn from Malay or Tamil because Singaporean Mandarin is a product of the nation's multicultural heritage.

The diversity of Singaporean heritage is reflected even within its Chinese population, which is made up of different dialect groups. The Chinese in Singapore are mostly descended from migrants hailing from southern China, who spoke mainly dialects such as Hokkien, Cantonese or Teochew. Many of the Mandarin terms used in Singapore today are borrowed from these dialects, such as *pāituō* (拍拖; commonly referred to in Cantonese as *pak tor*).

To celebrate the heritage of the localised version of Mandarin used by the Chinese community here, the Singaporean Mandarin Database was launched in 2019 to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the Speak Mandarin Campaign. The database comprises a growing collection of Mandarin terms that have cultural, historical or sentimental value and are unique to Singapore.

The database features nine categories: communities and organisations; culture; education; food and plants; legal and politics; places; social; speech; and transport. We have selected 15 terms from three categories—food, places and speech—to highlight their origins and multicultural contexts. 🍴

Associate Professor Tan Chee Lay, Deputy Head Asian Languages and Cultures Academic Group, National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University; Dean Wang, Manager, Language, National Heritage Board; Li Jingxin, Manager, Language, National Heritage Board

Illustrations by:
Sim Xiangli, Manager, Language,
National Heritage Board



Language is akin to food—it is an assembly of ingredients that bonds communities together.



红龟粿

hóngguīguō (colloquial: *ang ku kueh*)

This traditional red tortoise-shaped snack symbolises auspiciousness and longevity.



黄梨

huánglí | pineapple

Did you know this is also known as *bōluó* (菠萝) in China and *fènglí* (凤梨) in Taiwan?



叻沙

lèshā | laksa

Some believe this word may have originated from *lakhsha*, the Sanskrit word for 'ten thousand', referring to the numerous ingredients used in this dish.



新加坡司令

xīnjiāpō sīling | Singapore Sling

A cocktail created in 1915 by Ngiam Tong Boon, a Hainanese bartender who worked at the Raffles Hotel's Long Bar.



沙爹

shādiē | satay

Satay (grilled marinated meat) is said to be derived from the Tamil word *catai*, which means 'meat'.



PLACES

Place names evoke memories of locations or landmarks in Singapore's rapidly changing urban landscape.



红灯码头

hóngdēng mǎtóu | Clifford Pier

Clifford Pier used to be a landing point for early immigrants and visitors to Singapore. A red oil lamp was installed here to guide ships towards the pier.



四排埔

sìpáipǔ | Outram Road (colloquial: *see pai por*)

Commonly used to refer to Singapore General Hospital, the site where the Sepoy Lines was located. Sepoy Lines refers to the barracks built to house sepoys, who were Indian soldiers recruited by the British for the defence of Singapore.



皇家山

huángjiāshān | Fort Canning Hill

Fort Canning Park was home to the Malay royal palace in the 14th century before the British built a fort here in 1861.



大坡/小坡

dàpō/xiǎopō | areas around South Bridge Road and North Bridge Road (colloquial: *tua por, sio por*)

The bridge referred to is Elgin Bridge. *Pō* (坡) does not refer to a slope but is the mistaken transliteration of the Hokkien *pu* (埗), which means 'coastal city'.



七条石

qītiáoshí | area around Bukit Timah Food Centre (colloquial: *qit kok jio*)

The seventh milestone from the Fullerton Building. Milestones were one-mile interval distance markers across Singapore's main roads, with Fullerton Building as the 'zero point'.



SPEECH

Many Mandarin terms used in daily conversations are influenced by Chinese dialects or other languages—a legacy of Singapore's multicultural identity.



鸡婆

jīpó | busybody (colloquial: *kay poh*)

Originated from the Hokkien *gay po* (牙婆), which refers to women who were responsible for helping court officials find concubines or servants.



饮胜

yǐnshèng | cheers (colloquial: *yum seng*)

Originated from the Cantonese term *yam sai* (饮尽). But the word *sai* was considered inauspicious since it also meant 'the end of everything'. Therefore, people began using *yum seng* instead, as the word *seng* indicates victory.



怕输

pàshū | afraid of losing to others (colloquial: *kia su*)

Used to describe someone who is afraid of competing with others or craves small gains.



吃风

chīfēng | to travel or have a vacation overseas (colloquial: *jiak hong*)

Believed to have originated from the Malay phrase *makan angin*, which literally means 'to eat wind'.



拍拖

pāituō | to date somebody (colloquial: *pak tor*)

Pak tor is Cantonese for *paituo*. *Pak* is used to describe two parties being close to each other, side by side, while *tor* refers to the holding of hands.

Discover more words and phrases found in the Singaporean Mandarin Database



An Imitation of Grandeur

The Shanghai Plaster Story

Shanghai plaster is a stone-like facade finish highly popular in building construction from the 1920s–'60s. Rarely seen on structures today, this plasterwork is a vestige of a bygone era.

Wan Pow Chween
Architectural Consultant, Preservation of Sites
and Monuments, National Heritage Board



The once-iconic skyline of Collyer Quay viewed from approaching steamships, 1969. Several of the commercial buildings along this stretch were embellished with Shanghai plaster on their exteriors to give them the look of expensive stone—at a fraction of the cost—and to evoke a sense of grandeur.

Courtesy of Krystyn Olszewski

Natural stone is among the oldest and most durable materials used in building construction. Take for instance Rome’s majestic Pantheon, built in 25–27 BCE in granite as a temple for the gods—and still standing today in its full glory. Stone’s enduring aesthetic appeal lies in its stately grandeur derived from its properties of stability and solidity. Due to the prohibitive cost and labour it entailed, natural stone was mostly used in Europe for commercial and public edifices that represented political and economic power.

Today, there are no buildings in Singapore made fully of natural stone. However, it is easy to mistake several national monuments in the civic and financial district, such as the Former City Hall and Supreme Court as well as the Fullerton Hotel, as stone structures. These majestic neoclassical buildings are in fact made of reinforced concrete, though clad in a finish that gives them the appearance of expensive stone.

This stone-like finish is known as ‘Shanghai plaster’. Fourteen out of Singapore’s 75 national monuments feature extensive use of Shanghai plaster—a widely popular choice in local construction from the 1920s to ’60s. Rarely seen in new buildings today, Shanghai plaster represents the legacy of a material culture from a bygone era.

What Is Shanghai Plaster?

Shanghai plaster is a type of cement-based finish developed in the late 19th century. Its innovation was facilitated by the widespread availability of modern Portland cement, a material patented in the UK in 1824. Prior to that, facades were mostly finished with a lime-based mortar mixed with other materials, such as sand and vegetable fibres like straw. With the advent of construction technology and the mass production of Portland cement in the late 19th century, new forms of cement-based plaster were popularised, including Shanghai plaster.

Also known as ‘granolithic finish’, Shanghai plaster is made of exposed finely crushed stone aggregates held together in a cement-based binder. The result is a textured or honed finish like masonry or faux stone. Indeed, by varying the aggregate mixture, Shanghai plaster can simulate the appearance of natural stone.

Since ancient times, facades and finishing materials have been manipulated to create the illusion of a ‘perfect’ appearance. The Romans, for example, decorated their buildings with a lime render that contained stone dust and pozzolana (a volcanic material) to replicate the texture of expensive marble. As the search for aesthetic perfection continued through the times, the idea of using granolithic stone proliferated across borders with architects drawing inspiration from Renaissance-era Italian and French architecture, and employing these styles in their buildings.

The main motivation for developing cement-based granolithic stone plastering was to embellish grey concrete, which was deemed unsightly, dull and lacking in character. At the same time,



↓ A close-up of Shanghai plaster, which typically employs an aggregate–cement ratio of 2:1. Commonly used aggregates are granite gravel and fine sands. After cladding a building’s facade, water is used to wash the cement binder in order to expose the aggregates.



Why Shanghai?

Shanghai plaster did not originate from Shanghai, but was developed in Japan. The material is known by different names throughout the world, the most common being ‘granolithic finish’. But in Singapore, Malaya and Hong Kong, it was colloquially known as ‘Shanghai plaster’—a term that, interestingly, was never used in Shanghai itself.

One of the earliest mentions of ‘Shanghai plaster’ is found in the 1924 annual report of Hong Kong’s Public Works Department. In Singapore, however, there is no record of the term up until 1963, when a *Straits Times* article mentioned it. Prior to that, the finish was referred to by different names, such as ‘artificial sino-plastering’,¹ ‘granolithic facing’² and ‘special plastering imitating stone’.³

It has been suggested that the ‘Shanghai’ label was derived from the Shanghainese craftsmen specialising in plasterwork who came to Southeast Asia to escape the Second Sino-Japanese War.⁴ Prior to the war, Shanghai had been a Foreign Concession split between Britain and the United States, where many European construction skills, including the use of granolithic finish, flourished. There are also claims that migrant workers from Shanghai first introduced the technique to Hong Kong, from where it was later exported to construction sectors in various Southeast Asian countries.⁵

In colonial Singapore, it was common for European architects to engage local contractors for construction work, who in turn hired migrant Chinese craftsmen. The latter included Shanghainese plasterers who were highly skilled in granolithic plastering, having learnt the technique in their home city. The spread of Shanghai plaster therefore represents not only the migration patterns of the Chinese diaspora, but also the concomitant transfer of skills and material culture.

As to why the term ‘Shanghai plaster’ gained traction in Singapore, it is likely that the label embodied certain positive connotations, such as the sense of cosmopolitanism that Shanghai represented, particularly during the interwar period from 1918 to 1939. The association of Shanghai plaster with modern, Western-influenced buildings along the city’s waterfront stretch known as the Bund and in other foreign concession zones or colonial territories was obvious: ‘Shanghai’ buildings were a symbol of the best of the West and the East. At the same time, goods that were not made in Shanghai were often passed off as such in order to give Asian consumers the impression that these goods were of superior quality.⁶

↑ Many of the waterfront Western neoclassical structures along Shanghai’s Bund are clad in Shanghai plaster. From left: Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank; Customs House; and China Bank of Communications (shown partially). Retrieved from Wikimedia Commons

the unavailability of a suitable paint for covering concrete also drove the innovation of this material. But the key reason for the popularity of granolithic finish in the late 19th and early 20th centuries was simply because it was more economical in terms of both material and labour costs compared to traditional stone masonry. In addition, granolithic finish was just as hardy compared to softer stones such as sandstone, limestone and some types of marble.

The ease of working with cement-based plasters also allowed for a variety of shapes and textures. When used together with steel reinforcement, granolithic plaster could be cast for architectural features such as cornices with wide overhangs, which was not possible with natural stone. This meant that granolithic finish became a choice material to accommodate rounded facades or more complicated architectural features more often seen in Western classical, neoclassical and Art Deco styles. With the large-scale commercial production of white Portland cement,

Shanghai plaster became identified exclusively as an ornamental finish from the turn of the 20th century. Whereas the colour of Portland cement previously ranged from dark greenish grey to brown, the availability of white Portland cement now meant that Shanghai plaster could imitate almost any colour and hue of natural stone by the simple addition of mineral pigments.⁷ But due to the higher cost of white Portland cement, the use of Shanghai plaster as a finish was limited to external architectural ornamentation facings, particularly for civic and mercantile buildings of significance.

East Meets West: The Spread of Granolithic Finish in Asia

Following the Meiji Restoration (1868–89), Japan saw a revolution of building styles: pseudo-Western classical architecture was now deemed highly desirable for institutional buildings, signalling Japan's desire to project its emerging imperialist agenda. This was a hybrid style combining the

↓ The former Dai-Ichi Ginko (today's central branch of Mizuho Bank) in Kyoto features a combination of red brick and Shanghai plaster on its pseudo-Western classical facade. Retrieved from Wikimedia Commons



Japanese tradition of post-and-beam structures with facades that imitated Western classical architecture.

To achieve this, Japan sought to develop a purely decorative finish based on a cement-based granolithic plaster. As Japan is situated in an earthquake-prone region that is unsuitable for heavy masonry structures, a granolithic stone research institution was established in 1880 to develop artificial stone that would simulate the stone appearance of Western classical architecture. In the 1890s, the institute successfully developed its own granolithic finish known as *jinzōishi nuri* (人造石塗).

Soon, granolithic finish began to be used on major financial buildings in Japan, such as the Dai-Ichi Ginko (1906) in Kyoto, today's central branch of Mizuho Bank, which combines stone-like cladding with red-brick pseudo-Western architecture. As Japan developed economically, the use of granolithic finish also gained popularity. Though originally seen as a cheaper substitute for granite stone, granolithic plastering gradually came to be appreciated for its own unique aesthetic form.

After the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–95), young Japanese architects were sent to Japanese colonial territories such as Taiwan and northeastern China to erect institutional buildings. In these places, granolithic finish was often the material of choice. It was used on buildings such as the distinctive Taipei Water Processing Plant (1908), known as Taipei City Water Museum today.

In 1916, Shanghai saw its first building with granolithic finish: the Union Building, which served Western financial institutions. In Shanghai, the material is referred to as *shui shua shi* (水刷石; literally 'water-brushed stone') or *tai shi zi* (汰石子). It was not long before other buildings along the Bund were also given the granolithic plaster treatment, such as the Glen Line Building and the Shanghai Club Building.



↑ Kau Yan Church (1932) in Hong Kong with its Shanghai plaster finish. Retrieved from Wikimedia Commons

In Shanghai, however, not all buildings dressed in granolithic finish were built in the Western neoclassical style. Several privately owned buildings in Longmen Village, for instance, broke away from the Western form and adopted different architectural styles. One house in the village features dragon figurines made of granolithic finish, which signified a departure from Western tradition and the adoption of local influences. Granolithic plaster thus began to be integrated into local cultural contexts.

From Shanghai, the technique soon spread to British Hong Kong during the interwar years.⁸ Hybridised construction technology emerged as imported Western techniques were adapted to suit local purposes. For example, the Tang Chi Ngong Building (1931) in the University of Hong Kong features a Chinese traditional entrance arch finished with Shanghai plaster. Kau Yan Church (1932), on the other hand, wears a gothic revival style in granolithic finish. With the expanded use of Shanghai plaster in Hong Kong, the material transcended the imitation of Western neoclassical forms by acquiring its own modern aesthetic.

Collyer Quay: Where Shanghai Plaster Reigned Supreme



Collyer Quay is a street and seawall in Singapore's city centre, stretching from the junction of Fullerton Road and Battery Road to D'Almeida Street. For over a century, the waterfront was an important landing point for the unloading and storage of goods transported along the Singapore River, and grew to become a vital link to the commercial centre.

Before its development, the Collyer Quay area was a beach. The seawall from Johnston's Pier to the old Telok Ayer fish market was conceived of in 1858 by Captain George Chancellor Collyer, Chief Engineer of the Straits Settlements, while the land seaward of Commercial Square (later renamed Raffles Place) was reclaimed. Earth from nearby Mount Wallich was excavated to build the roadway behind the wall, and the road was named Collyer Quay upon its completion in 1864.

By 1866, a row of buildings had been erected along Collyer Quay. Due to its attractive seafront location and proximity to the commercial centre, the area saw rapid development in the 20th century with new structures built in quick succession. Many of these buildings were constructed with reinforced concrete and their facades clad in Shanghai plaster. The architecture at Collyer Quay

came to define the skyline and image of Singapore until the 1980s.

Collyer Quay's skyline in the 1960s and early '70s was once dominated by the towering 15-storey Shell House (1959), Union Building (1924) and the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank (1924), all of which were designed by Swan & Maclaren. Other buildings embellished with Shanghai plaster along the waterfront included the Overseas Union Centre (1921) and Clifford Pier (1933).

As commercial buildings that served financial interests, these edifices wore a classical style made possible by the use of Shanghai plaster, which gave them an appearance of solidity and strength. Reflecting grandeur and prestige, the iconic skyline of Collyer Quay was a potent representation of the colony's economic progress at the time.

↑ Skyline of Collyer Quay, 1969. Many of the waterfront buildings were clad in Shanghai plaster, including the Union Building, Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank, Bank of China, Malayan Bank Chambers and Fullerton Building. RAfSA Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

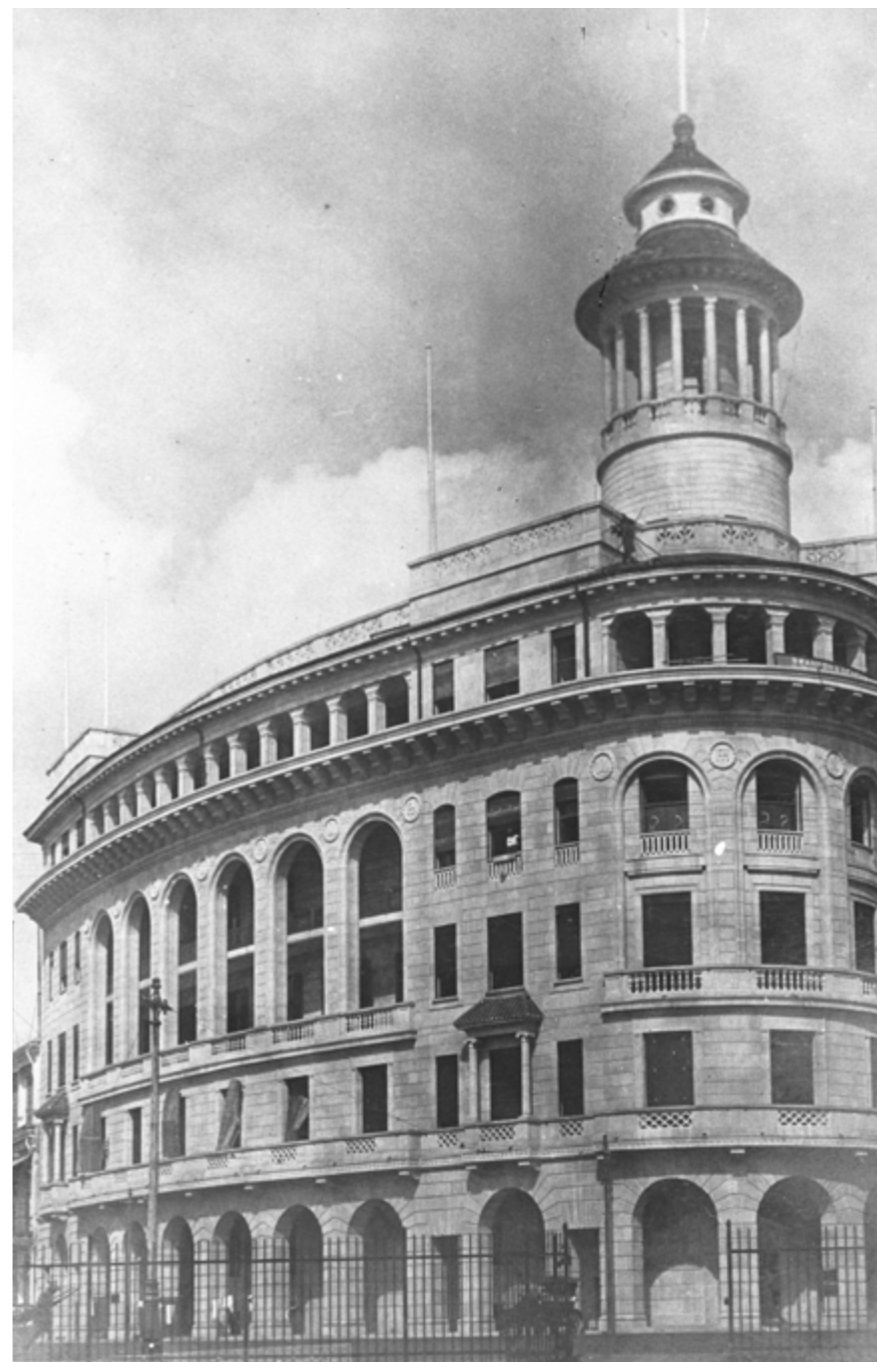
The Use of Shanghai Plaster in Singapore

As Shanghai plaster gained widespread popularity across colonial cities from the start of the 20th century, it made its way to British Malaya, which had flourishing commercial centres such as Singapore and Melaka. Naturally, the Western neoclassical architecture style was adopted for many important commercial and civic buildings in these towns to project the might of the British Empire.

After the First World War, downtown Singapore saw a major rebuilding. A dozen or more new office blocks, corporate headquarters and bank buildings were erected, while the British government also invested heavily in the construction of new public buildings. Shanghai plaster was the finishing of choice for these new structures as it offered the grandeur and prestige of granite at a fraction of the cost. Its appeal was also boosted by its qualities of durability and weather-resistance, and the flexibility of in-situ rendering and off-site precasting. Unsurprisingly, with all these advantages, the trend of using Shanghai plaster in architecture took off shortly after its introduction in Singapore in the early 1920s.

One of the earliest structures to feature Shanghai plaster was Ocean Building (1921–22) along Collyer Quay, commissioned by the Tanjong Pagar Dock Company. Its plasterwork was carried out by renowned Italian sculptor Rudolfo Nolli. The rooftop of Ocean Building featured a free-standing pavilion cast in Shanghai plaster which highlighted the building's corner with a striking silhouette. Ocean Building also marked the start of the new Singapore skyline, with a series of prominent structures erected in quick succession over the coming years along the waterfront of Collyer Quay.

With ornamental works adorned with granolithic finish in high demand, Nolli was commissioned for the plasterwork for a number of other seafront buildings, such as the Union Building (1924), Hong



↑ Ocean Building, 1941. It was one of the earliest buildings in Singapore with a Shanghai plaster facade. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Kong and Shanghai Bank (1924) and the Fullerton Building (1928). Together, these edifices came to define the new monumental character of Singapore's skyline, particularly when viewed from ocean steamers approaching the harbour. Nolli's most remarkable work, however, was the Fullerton Building (today's Fullerton Hotel), which features an impressive row of free-standing fluted columns with Doric capitals precast in Shanghai plaster (see page 32).

In the following decade, Nolli would achieve another two feats with Shanghai plaster: the Municipal Building (1929; renamed City Hall in 1951) and the Supreme Court (1939). These two imposing, magnificent civic buildings, which once symbolised British colonial might, remain as icons today and currently house the National Gallery Singapore (see page 32).

Many of the Shanghai plaster-clad buildings were designed by architectural firm Swan & Maclaren, which was known for creating structures with a massive base and gigantic colonnades whose columns rose through two or more storeys, with equally large cornices and parapets—the Municipal Building (City Hall) being a prime example. Other works included the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank, Union Building, Shell House, Overseas Union Centre and Clifford Pier—all of which were finished in Shanghai plaster.

Like many expatriate architects, Nolli employed a team of Chinese artisans in his workshop. He had arrived in Singapore from Bangkok in the early 1920s, bringing with him a number of skilled Chinese craftsmen (see page 27). Nolli and his team used moulds to form granolithic tiles—a method that was not only economical but also offered the repeatability and consistency necessary for mass production.

By the 1930s, granolithic finish had clearly taken the local construction sector by storm. A 1937 *Straits Times* report described it thus:

The increasing popularity of bush hammered granolithic facings for buildings in Singapore is an indication of the extreme durability of this material under tropical conditions. The material has the advantage of not discolouring as it is composed of natural colours—local granite and white cement.⁹

As the Art Deco style became highly favoured between the 1930s and '50s due to its modernist appeal, Shanghai plaster was even more sought after for its ability

Four National Monuments with Shanghai Plaster Finish



Former Ministry of Labour Building BUILT: 1930

Originally home to the Chinese Protectorate, which oversaw the needs of the Chinese community in Singapore, the building features neoclassical and Art Deco elements such as circular and rectangular motifs on the column capitals and facade. Its Shanghai plaster finish was a mix of crushed granite, sand and coloured glass chips in a yellow-green concrete substrate. Restored in 2014, the building presently houses the Family Justice Courts.



Former City Hall BUILT: 1929

First opened as the Municipal Building and later renamed as City Hall in 1951, this imposing building is defined by its row of gigantic Corinthian columns. It combines neoclassical and modernist elements, using Shanghai plaster to replicate the stately granite look. Beneath the Shanghai plaster is reinforced concrete. The plasterwork was expertly executed by Rudolfo Nolli and his team of Chinese artisans by in-situ rendering and off-site precasting. Today, the building is part of the National Gallery Singapore.



Former Fullerton Building BUILT: 1928

The former Fullerton Building (today's Fullerton Hotel) is a major landmark along Collyer Quay. Its past tenants have included the General Post Office, the Singapore Club and various government departments. The edifice has five frontages with enormous two-storey Doric colonnades, which together form a stunning facade. Italian sculptor Rudolfo Nolli was responsible for cladding the building and its ornate mouldings with Shanghai plaster.



Former Supreme Court BUILT: 1939

Next to the Former City Hall is the former Supreme Court, the last major neoclassical structure built in colonial Singapore. Cutting an impressive silhouette with its copper-green dome, its Shanghai plaster finish was carried out by Rudolfo Nolli. Interestingly, despite its majestic facade, the interior is much more modest: to save costs, Art Deco rubber tiles resembling marble were used for the flooring. Today, it is part of the National Gallery Singapore.



BELOW

Precast Shanghai plaster decorative elements at sculptor Rudolfo Nolli's work premises on Scotts Road, 1923.

Lina Brunner Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

BOTTOM

An Art Deco-style shophouse along Syed Alwi Road featuring yellow-tinted Shanghai plaster, 2022. Constructed in 1950, the building is presently home to The Vagabond Club, a boutique hotel.

to add artistic touches to these buildings that typically featured sharp or rounded edges. Iconic Art Deco-style structures with granolithic finish include the Former Tanjong Pagar Railway Station (1932) and the Cathay Building (1939).

By then, the popularity of Shanghai plaster was no longer limited to spectacular financial and civic buildings in the town centre, but also used for shophouses and smaller mercantile buildings. Shophouses built in the 1940s and '50s, for example, mostly wore the Art Deco style with Shanghai plasterwork as ornamentation. Some surviving examples include boutique hotel The Vagabond Club, a shophouse



on Syed Alwi Road with yellow-tinted granolithic finish (1950); the former Dried Goods Guild building (1940) on Ann Siang Road; and various shophouses on Teo Hong Road. All of these are located in conservation areas.

The Decline of Shanghai Plaster

Granolithic finishing continued to be used in Singapore up until the 1960s when it fell out of favour. Modernity was now no longer signified by the gravitas of stone buildings but by the sheen of soaring glass-and-steel structures. Additionally, the labour-intensive craft of producing Shanghai plaster became a deterrent for contractors who wanted to build quickly and cheaply as Singapore's economy boomed in the 1980s.

Tracing the history of Shanghai plaster reveals the extent of skill transfer that came with migration flows as well as the prevailing architectural trends of the early decades of the 20th century influenced by the British Empire. While many Shanghai plaster-clad buildings have been lost to redevelopment over the years, thankfully some still stand today as vestiges of a bygone era. ●

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Fire, Ice and Social Change

The Evolution of Singapore's Food Culture

What were the circumstances that shaped our eating habits and taste preferences in the 20th century? We trace the rise in popularity of laksa, ice kacang and Milo in Singapore's food culture.

—
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Ice blocks for keeping fish fresh being loaded onto lorries, 1960s.
Primary Production Department Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



↑ Straits Ice Company, 1900s. It was among the first manufacturers of ice in Singapore. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Although Singapore's known past goes back to the late 1200s, it is arguably the 20th century that stands out as the most significant in the history of its food culture.¹ Many, if not most, of Singapore's old cuisines declined or vanished during this period.²

But why have some dishes survived and grown into icons today? And why have others, once obscure, become ubiquitous? There are no definitive answers to these complex questions. Much depends on the nature of the food item in question, and its social and historical context.

The Advent of Artificial Refrigeration

What we eat and cook is deeply influenced by the technologies available to us. Often what comes to mind first is the use of the stove and the application of fire and heat in one form or another. While the shift from wood and charcoal-based fuels to stoves using electricity and natural gas was an important factor driving culinary change in Singapore during

the 20th century, it was access to ice, rather than fire, that was probably more critical in shifting the playing field. Artificial refrigeration had an outsized impact on how food in a tropical environment like Singapore was produced, transported, stored and even conceived. In less than a century, refrigeration made it possible for an unprecedented range of food items to be consumed by an increasingly broad swathe of Singapore's population.

Singapore was home to a permanent ice manufacturing presence as early as 1861. Early players included Singapore Ice Works, Pioneer Steam Works and Straits Ice Company. Some wealthy households also had small-scale ice-making machines. Ice was initially used for medicinal purposes, chilling drinks and desserts consumed by the well-to-do, and, most significantly, to preserve fish caught and transported to Singapore from distant waters. Portable and relatively cheap, locally made ice in Singapore was the main form of refrigeration in markets, retail spaces and homes before the 1960s.

By the mid-1930s, Singapore was producing an estimated 300–600 tons of ice daily. Much of this ice was channelled into the expanding Singapore-based fishing industry. A 1948 survey of Singapore's ice industry found that roughly half of all ice produced was used to chill freshly caught fish, with the remainder purchased by retailers for food preservation, the chilling of drinks and ice-cream manufacture.³



↑ As artificial refrigeration became more affordable over time, more households could enjoy fresh seafood like Spanish mackerel (*tenggiri*). Retrieved from Wikimedia Commons

As in the rest of the region, only subsistence fishermen and the richest strata of society could afford to eat a wide variety of seafood, served as fresh as possible. An 1895 report asserted that only Europeans and wealthier Asians in Singapore could enjoy fresh meat or fish on their tables twice a day, including Spanish mackerel (*tenggiri*), pomfret (*bawal*), mullet (*jempul*) or some other similarly tasty fish found in local markets. In contrast, Singapore's urban working classes were believed to eat two meals a day, mostly comprising boiled rice and a "small morsel of dried fish".⁴

It was only after the Second World War, as the proportion of Singapore's salaried middle-class Asian residents grew, that more households could enjoy fresh seafood as well as pork,

chicken, beef or mutton. Dried, salted fish correspondingly became less of a low-cost protein staple for the masses and was used more as a condiment.

The growth of the fishing industry and its demand for ice had knock-on effects in other culinary areas. Iced confections were already being sold in Singapore by the 1880s, though primarily for the affluent. By the 1920s, however, the greater affordability and accessibility of ice meant that local desserts such as ice kacang (see page 40) were becoming more widely consumed.

The Rise of Culinary Nationalism

As cuisines began to be perceived as familiar to residents in a given territory, and even eaten by many of them on occasion, the notion that certain dishes were more representative of a common territorial identity began to take hold.⁶ The development of popular food culture thus added texture to the tentative, messy nature of early nationalism in Singapore.

Perhaps because it was already seen as a staple food consumed by Asians of all economic classes in Singapore by the beginning of the 20th century, laksa became a particularly potent dish for expressing a Malayan-Singaporean identity. At a lecture on how local Straits Asians could maintain and even improve their social status in the 1920s, Lim Boon Keng, a prominent member of the community, highlighted the importance for young Singaporeans to understand the cultural environment they had been raised in:

*The next problem you have to think of is the influence of our entire environment, that is, the social life in Singapore. The social life in Singapore is a complete mixture. In Scotland, you say, Scotch broth; in Singapore, the nearest thing is Laksa—everything mixed up. And if you are a student of psychology or sociology or humanity it will take you many years really to study the effects of Malaya, of all the customs, bad habits and good habits.*⁷

Laksa became a staple menu item at pre-independence fundraising events in Singapore, including efforts to provide relief for the unemployed in the 1930s. When Japan went to war with China in 1937, homemade laksa even became a means through which local Chinese upper and middle classes expressed solidarity against Japanese imperialism:

Shocked by harrowing stories of human suffering caused by ruthless bombarding of their countrymen... by tales of hungry, crying children robbed of their parents and left to perish, the Chinese women of Singapore have hit on a novel way of raising funds for the upkeep of these destitute war orphans. Their enterprise consists of a café at the Great World... where delicious Chinese and local dishes may be obtained every Saturday night. This food is all homemade and is contributed... by members of the China Relief Fund Committee (Woman's Section) who also take it in turns to serve behind the counter... Local dishes, such as Laksa and [Popiah] are sometimes served while even delicacies like sharks fin, bird's nest and cooked rice wrapped up in lotus leaves are obtainable here if sufficient orders are received.⁸

The irony of serving a 'local' dish like laksa to support a 'Chinese' cause gave way to further social transformations. After the end of the Japanese Occupation in 1945, growing numbers of young Malaysians went abroad for their university education; in the process, they inadvertently learned more about what it meant to be 'Malayan', not least through food:

Today's [Malayan] students [in London] queue for the bus, share 'digs', swot hard for the examinations, buy a cheap seat at the cinema and occasionally cook their own meals... A great deal of ingenuity is practised by students in 'digs' in cooking their own Malayan food. There is the Chinese student who claims that he has found the best available ingredients for cooking kai cheok (chicken broth)—Bachelor's chicken noodle, dehydrated chicken and rice. Laksa is produced by

another out of vermicelli, roti babi out of bread, eggs, mackerel and tamarind and minced beef, onions and garlic.⁹

Long before Singapore's independence in 1965, food fights were already brewing between proponents from either side of the Causeway about which version of Malayan laksa was superior, provoked by remarks made by well-meaning Western outsiders:

America's food expert, Mr. C. A. Rietz, thinks Singapore's food is 'wonderful' but up-country folks and even many Singaporeans maintain that the home of good Malayan food is Penang... Mr Jimmy Tan, an airline clerk: 'Although a Singaporean, I have to give the credit to Penang for food. She has Siamese laksa of the sweet and sour type, Chee Yok Chok (pork broth), and delicious Hockien Mee... Singapore perhaps can only boast of its Chicken Rice.'¹⁰



↓ Today's laksa typically comprises thick rice noodles in a spicy coconut milk broth with fish cake slices, fried beancurd and cockles. There are several regional variations of this dish. Retrieved from Shutterstock

an expanding population, which in turn led to rapid urban development. Urban renewal had a mixed impact on local food culture as a food reviewer recounted:

I remember Hong Chew Kee [stall] from old People's Park... After the famous fire and resettlement, business deteriorated... Dish by dish the traditional desserts went. Up to the beginning of this year the sponge cakes were still available, but now no longer because of poor sales.¹¹

Redevelopment was also driven by long-standing public and privately aired concerns about cleanliness, hygiene, and outbreaks of contagious diseases, such as tuberculosis, in a crowded city. By the 1930s, there was a growing stigma in Singapore against everyday behaviour and habits that could spread diseases through bodily fluids and even touch, especially in public. Spitting became increasingly politicised and an area of concern for public health. Such developments helped drive the decline of betel chewing, though it fell out of favour over the space of a generation, rather than within a few years. Thus in 1949, betel chewing and public spitting were still widely seen as habits that would be impossible to eradicate, as a bus passenger reportedly said:

Why don't you know? The Government has passed a new law forbidding spitting. What are we supposed to do with betel spit? Swallow it. What if a fly got in your mouth? Likewise, swallow it.¹²

Some 70 years later, among its few surviving Singaporean practitioners, betel chewing had been relegated to the margins of respectability:

The first important thing is that, it's very messy and untidy. Dirty, lah! Dirty and scary, so dirty... I am very careful. I cannot swallow the red thing, but I choose where I spit. I always spit in the dustbin. I cannot throw, the thing is too dirty! [Laughs].¹³

Anxieties about public order and hygiene since the 1920s also affected many other



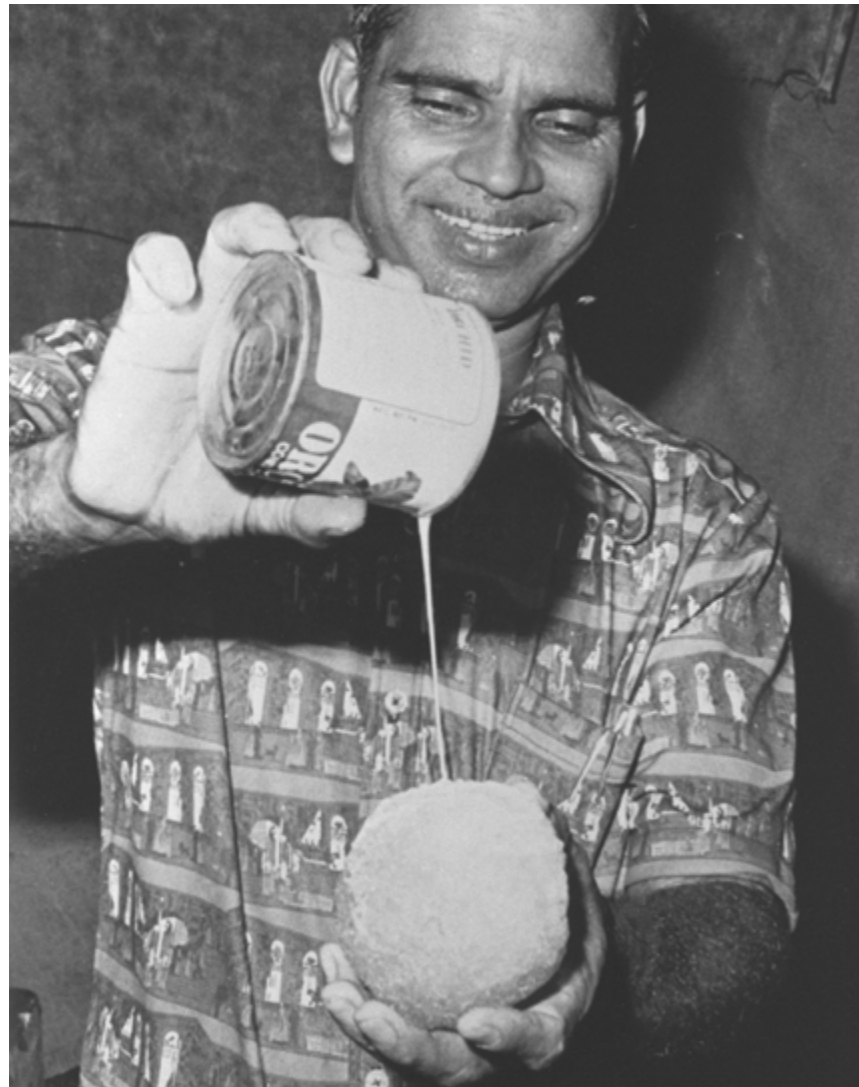
→ A woman chewing betel nut, 1955. Donald Moore Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



↑ A ubiquitous sight in Singapore until the 1980s, the betel quid fell out of favour due to health concerns associated with the habit, shifting social and cultural attitudes, and stricter laws on public spitting. Retrieved from Shutterstock

Urbanisation and Hygiene Challenges

The unfolding of Singaporean nationalism was also tied to basic questions of development and economic growth—in essence, what modernisation in Singapore was largely about during the 20th century. Much of Singapore's old infrastructure did not mesh well with the growth of mass industrialisation and



local foods, some for the better, others for worse. In Singapore, repeated outbreaks of typhoid and cholera, spurred by the sale of uncooked dishes such as iced desserts and ice balls, led to a groundswell of interest in finding ways to 'clean up' food businesses. Concerns fuelled attention to the steps being taken elsewhere in urban Southeast Asia to manage the sale of uncooked street food. A newspaper report decried the unsanitary practice of making ice balls:

Everybody in Singapore must have seen the man with a bucket not too clean, a few bottles of brightly coloured syrups, an inverted plane and a block of ice, with which he makes a handful of ice scrapings, moulds it with his hands into a ball, pours a spoonful of sweet water over it, and hands it to the expectant youngster, doubtless to the greater satisfaction of the mouth of the consumer than his stomach. Dirty, incredibly dirty, no doubt, to the minds of Europeans.¹⁴

With increasing numbers of vendors using hand-cranked machines rather than bare hands to shave their ice blocks during the first half of the 20th century, ice balls began to decline in popularity, and had become largely the stuff of memories by the late 1970s.¹⁵ Ice kacang, on the other hand, which had become a mainstay of Singapore's streets by the late 1940s, if not earlier, was nominated as a 'national treasure' in the mid-1980s.¹⁶

Food Standardisation and Branding

The increase of industrially manufactured ingredients and food items, the rise of 'middling cuisines',¹⁷ hygiene pressures, and the growth of families and family life in Singapore in the 20th century, all helped spur the expansion of a corporate-influenced local food culture.

As in much of the rest of the world, processed foods for the masses were originally a middle-class novelty in Singapore. Milo, for instance, was promoted in Singapore since the 1930s as a hygienic, nourishing, sweet, delicious, well-packaged and relatively



↑ Milo Dinosaur is an iced variant of the Milo beverage topped with a heap of the malt powder. It made its appearance in Singapore sometime in the 1990s. Retrieved from Flickr

← **FACING PAGE**
A hawker making a syrup-coated ice ball, 1978. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

← Ice kacang is a shaved-ice dessert. Today's versions come with red beans, attap seeds, red agar-agar, black grass jelly and sweet corn, drizzled with colourful sweet syrup and evaporated milk. It is commonly found in hawker centres. Retrieved from Shutterstock

affordable food item to both European and Asian professionals. These households had both the purchasing power and kitchen facilities to make their own cups of drinking chocolate.¹⁸

By the 1950s and 1960s, however, brewing Milo with cow's milk was fast becoming a habit for growing numbers of households trying to raise healthy children. Children who disliked the taste of milk often found it easier to consume it when it was flavoured with the sweetened chocolatey taste of Milo, Ovaltine and other instant malted powders.

With more women entering the formal workforce in the 1960s, many aspirational families also faced the paradox of growing incomes but shrinking time at home. Easy to store and prepare, Milo entrenched itself into breakfast and night-time routines for time-scarce families. As its popularity increased with successive

generations, Milo became a ubiquitous product in Singapore households. An aggressively marketed brand that adapted well to local cultures, Milo took on multiple meanings associated with sports, freedom, health, modernity and even fun, ultimately paving the way for the marketing of the Milo Dinosaur—an iced variant of the Milo beverage topped with a heap of Milo powder—in the 1990s.

By this point, the habit of eating sweetened foods every day had become more or less normalised in Singapore's popular food culture, even as people became increasingly aware of the health risks associated with excessive sugar consumption.¹⁹

Changing Tastes

Much of tropical Southeast Asia, as any local aficionado of *kueh* will confirm, is no stranger to sugar and sweetened foods. Many local fruits are sweet, sugarcane is indigenous to the region, and sugar could also be obtained from the sap of many varieties of local palms, including the nipah palm, sugar palm, palmyra palm and coconut palm. South Asia has a similarly long history of sugar cultivation, extraction and consumption.²⁰

East Asia, however, is a different story. For most of China's long history, for instance, the only source of local sugar came from malt syrup, extracted from sprouted and dried grains with water.²¹ Sugarcane was known mostly as an exotic plant from the far south, whose products were destined for the relatively few urban rich. Even at the end of the 19th century, most Chinese used very modest amounts of sugar in their cuisines.²²

Many of Singapore's food offerings with mainland Chinese origins before the 1950s did not contain much sugar or sweetness, even in desserts. However, as incomes rose, and industrially manufactured foods become more widespread and affordable, older food items began to fall by the wayside:

One [food item] that is fast losing popularity is mee teh or flour drink. It is made from flour which is first fried and then steamed. Sugar, lard, fried spring onions and sesame are added to give the drink a spicy taste. Hot water is then poured to the mixture to obtain either a paste or a liquid. Stall owner Madam Ong Bee Hoa comes from China. She claims that the recipe originated from her late husband's forefathers who owned a confectionery shop in China. Her decrepit stall in China Street now sells assorted Chinese food. A few years ago, it was the congregating place of old-timers for a bowl of steaming mee teh.



Fish head curry was purportedly invented by Indian chef M.J. Gomez in 1949. He is said to have created this dish chiefly to attract Chinese customers who regarded fish heads as a delicacy. Retrieved from Wikimedia Commons



Why the switch in line? 'Mee teh is not popular with the younger generation—only with the China-born folks, and how many of them are still around?'²³

Singapore's own betel chewing culture was gradually impacted by sweeter versions of the concoction from South Asia, though the preference for sweetness was by no means straightforward. G.T. Lye, a long-time Chinese Peranakan theatre practitioner fond of betel chewing, said:

The Indian preparation of betel nut, I prefer [to the plain Peranakan version], because it's sweet and has a lot of spices... I enjoy it.²⁴

Among the younger generations who still chew betel very occasionally (or remember doing so), taste preferences may be complicated by concerns over personal health. Radhika Narayanan, for instance, prefers the sweeter North Indian version because the southern type "burns the mouth" due to the use of *chunam* [slaked lime]. The burning sensation was linked to her worries about tongue cancer.²⁵

Intergenerational differences in taste preferences are generally tricky to document, and even harder to rationalise. But perhaps it is worth considering how exposure to new forms of cuisines during one's formative years in Singapore, such as restaurant-style fish-head curry which was introduced here in the 1950s, may have the power to change and broaden palates over time. Fish heads, for instance, are not traditionally used as the main ingredient when Indians cook curry at home. Syamala Senan, a Kerala-born Indian, was described thus:

Syamala doesn't cook fish head curry. She laughs, calling it a dish only found in Singapore. Yet after buying a big fish from the wet market, she cooks the head separately, cuts it into small pieces, adds curry, and serves it with tapioca. She says it is eaten like this across Kerala. Consumed within the kitchen only, not served to visitors. Syamala doesn't like to eat fish head—

she finds it very difficult. Her children are better at eating fish head.²⁶

An Ever-evolving Food Culture

Like all cultural forms, Singapore's 20th-century food culture was not static but dynamic and constantly evolving. It was a product of technological change, social and economic forces, and government policies. The introduction and increasing accessibility of refrigeration expanded the variety of ingredients locally available, giving birth to new dishes.

Meanwhile, a growing salaried middle class faced ever-greater choices about what to eat, even as many households and cooks came under pressure to depend heavily on convenience foods. Other developments like the rise of nationalism, hygiene pressures and changing tastes also contributed to the rise and fall of various foods in popular culture. From this historical perspective, a dish deemed progressive or marginal today may, generations later, be celebrated as an iconic offering that is representative of local culture. ●

This article is adapted from 'Culinary Biographies: Charting Singapore's History through Cooking and Consumption', a project supported by the National Heritage Board Research Grant.

NOTES

- 1 This analysis is based on the seven case studies of food items in the research project: betel quid, biryani, fish head curry, ice kacang, laksa, Milo Dinosaur and home cooking.
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- 5 Geoffrey K. Pakiam, 'A Fresh Look at Fish Through a Brief History of Fish Head Curry', *Berita Newsletter* (Winter 2019/2020), 5–10.
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- 11 Margaret Chan, 'Melts in the Mouth, Slides Down the Throat', *New Nation*, 21 September 1979, 10–11.
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- 13 Interview with G.T. Lye, 13 June 2020.
- 14 'Feeding the Poor', *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 17 May 1924, 8.
- 15 Liew Soon Chin, 'Falling Out of Flavour', *New Nation*, 8 June 1978, 10–11.
- 16 Ivan Fernandez, 'Top of Your List', *The Straits Times*, 9 August 1985, 4.
- 17 Middling cuisines bridged high and humble cuisines, following the rise of modern nation-states, industrialisation and rapid urbanisation. High cuisines were enjoyed by the elite of society, while humble cuisine comprised dishes of the rural and urban poor. See Laudan, 2013, 37–41, 208–209.
- 18 Sucheta Mazumdar, *Sugar and Society in China: Peasants, Technology, and the World Market* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Asia Center, 1998); Laudan, 2013.
- 19 Geoffrey K. Pakiam, Gayathri Nathan and Toffa Abdul Wahed, 'Milo Dinosaur: When Southeast Asia's Cultural Heritage Meets Nestlé', *ISEAS Perspective*, no. 89, 24 October 2019.
- 20 Laudan, 2013; Ulbe Bosma, *The Asian Sugar Plantation in India and Indonesia: Industrial Production, 1770–2010* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).
- 21 Laudan, 2013, 19, 34.
- 22 Mazumdar, 1998.
- 23 Liew, 8 Jun 1978, 10–11.
- 24 Interview with G.T. Lye, 13 June 2020.
- 25 Notes from interview with Radhika Narayanan, 7 October 2019.
- 26 Notes from interview with Syamala Senan, 25 September 2019.

Forgotten Histories

A Look at Four Lost Kampongs

A close examination of four historical neighbourhoods in the city centre reveals multiethnic demographics that defy Singapore's official racial classification.

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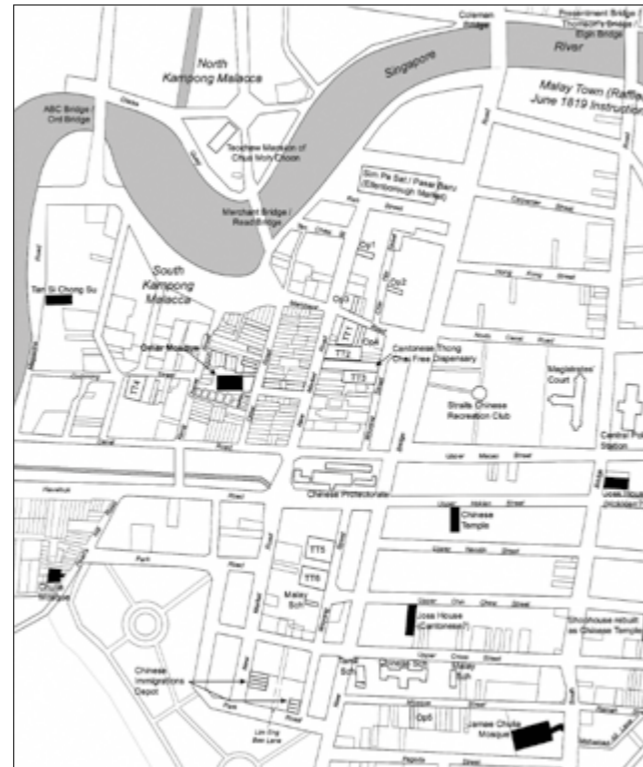


Shophouses along Lorong Sakai, an expunged street that once branched out from Bencoolen Street, near Middle Road, in Kampong Bengkulu. The *lorong*, or alley, was developed by a Malay merchant named Hadjee Mohamed Bin Abdul Rahim.

Retrieved from PictureSG

It is commonly assumed that the ethnic compositions of the historic conservation areas of Chinatown, Kampong Glam, Little India and Emerald Hill conform to Singapore's official classification of 'races'—'Chinese, Malay, Indian and Others'. But looking back at history, we now know that, in reality, these neighbourhoods were multiethnic in character. Similarly, there were other neighbourhoods whose compositions also defied this commonly used framing, one that ignores many erstwhile places and communities that thrived in colonial Singapore.

Kampong Melaka, Kampong Bengkulu, Kampong Serani and Kampong Dhoby were four such neighbourhoods that used to be located in the city centre, but few traces of them remain today. Here we unearth stories of the social fabric and built environment of these old kampongs.



↑ The former Kampong Melaka occupied the area bounded by today's Angus, Cumming, Fisher, Kerr, Keng Cheow and Solomon streets, near the present-day Clarke Quay train station.
Courtesy of Imran bin Tajudeen

1

Kampong Melaka

The former Kampong Melaka comprised northern and southern sections separated by the Singapore River (see map above). North Kampong Melaka was located in what is now the historic district of Clarke Quay, while South Kampong Melaka encompassed today's Angus, Cumming, Fisher, Kerr, Keng Cheow and Solomon streets, near the Clarke Quay train station. However, the original Kampong Melaka was in fact situated further downstream, at the northern bank of the Singapore River where the Parliament House currently stands.

With the East India Company's establishment of a trading settlement in Singapore in 1819, the Melakans, whom the British Resident and Commandant Major William Farquhar had encouraged

to relocate to Singapore, settled upriver from Kampong Temenggong (roughly the site of today's Asian Civilisations Museum). They formed the first Melakan settlement in Singapore, which was mentioned in an autobiographical account of the early years of Singapore after the British arrival, the *Hikayat Abdullah* (1849). But besides the Melakans and the Temenggong settlement, the Chinese—mainly Teochews—also lived among them.

However, Raffles had other plans for the northern bank of the river: he wanted to reserve it for official or civic uses. In June 1819, he issued instructions for all the Chinese and Malays to move to the southern bank of the river. The Chinese would form the enclave known as 'Chinese Town', stretching from the mouth of the river to Presentment Bridge (also known as Jackson Bridge; later

replaced by Elgin Bridge), and a 'Malay Town' for the Malay community that would be sited upstream of the bridge.

However, Raffles's instructions for a Malay Town to be set up just inland from the Chinese Town was subsequently amended in two ways. First, his second set of instructions resulted in the area just slightly upriver being designated as 'Chulia Campong' in the 1822 plan of Singapore town, popularly known as the Jackson Plan. Second, what in fact formed organically on the site was a settlement called Kampong Melaka, comprising a mixed community of Malays and Jawi Peranakans from Melaka, as well as Teochews and other groups.

Kampong Melaka's composition demonstrates a common theme in Singapore's colonial history: areas demarcated for specific 'races' or



↑ The gateway of Omar Kampong Melaka Mosque with its original entrance at Mosque Street, 1969. Mosque Street has since been expunged; today, the entrance of the mosque is located at Keng Cheow Street.
Courtesy of Urban Redevelopment Authority

ethnic groups quickly morphed into diverse, mixed neighbourhoods even as early as the first two decades of British arrival in Singapore.

A Multiethnic Settlement

Kampong Melaka was home to a diverse, multiethnic community. Many of its residents came from Melaka and comprised Malays, Chinese and Jawi Peranakans. The latter group included the author of the *Hikayat Abdullah*, Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir, better known as Munshi Abdullah. A resident of Kampong Melaka in the 1840s, Abdullah was hired by Raffles as his Tamil-Arab Malay language teacher and clerk.¹

The Jawi Peranakans, who were Muslims of Indian and Malay extraction, were particularly prominent as property owners in the area. They included Hajee Saiboo (who owned a shophouse within the grounds of Omar Mosque), Hadjee

Mahamad Arip² (four shophouses on Omar Road), Mona Kadei Mydin³ (four shophouses on Keng Cheow Street) and Sultan Meydin (a shed on Wayang Street). Arab, Bugis, Malay and Chinese families also owned properties in the vicinity of Omar Mosque, attesting to the heterogenous character of the kampong.

The Chinese in Kampong Melaka

Kampong Melaka was an important neighbourhood for the Chinese community, particularly the Teochews. The concentration of prominent Teochews in this area was largely due to Temenggong Abdul Rahman's efforts to cultivate plantations in pre-colonial Singapore. The Teochews, Bugis and Malays had been operating gambier plantations across Singapore at the behest of the Temenggong, the island's Malay chief and de facto ruler before British colonial rule. At least 20 plantations existed in the immediate vicinity of the

town when Raffles arrived in Singapore.⁴ Several mansions owned by eminent Teochew merchants were sited along the river and nearby at Hill Street and High Street, including that of Seah Eu Chin,⁵ who along with other family members were highly influential merchants. Near the Teochew market in Kampong Melaka was Chin Hin Street, named after Seah's business in 1870.⁶

Places of Worship

Being a predominantly Muslim settlement, Kampong Melaka's focal point was Masjid Omar Kampong Melaka (Omar Kampong Melaka Mosque) built in 1820, originally a simple wooden structure with an attap roof. Originally located off Mosque Square, accessed from Omar Road (both expunged) off Havelock Road, the mosque compound featured several *rumah limas* (hip-roof houses) and two rows of shophouses. Masjid Omar Kampong Melaka bears

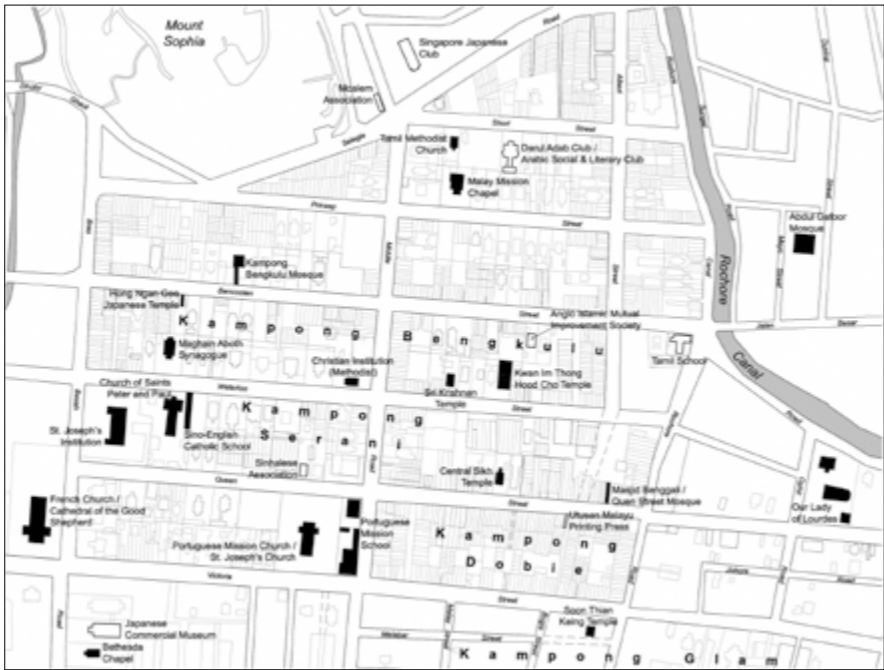
the name of its benefactor: Pangeran Syarif Syed Omar bin Ali Aljunied, one of Singapore’s pioneers and a Hadhrami Arab who arrived here from Palembang in southeastern Sumatra. His son Syed Abdullah rebuilt the mosque in brick in 1855, which later underwent several major reconstructions.

As there was also a significant Chinese population residing in the neighbourhood, in 1826 the Teochews established their main temple, Wak Hai Cheng Bio, close to the south bank of the Singapore River opposite the former Kampong Temenggong. Five decades later in 1876, Tan Seng Haw/Po Chek Kio⁷ was built on Magazine Road as the assembly hall and temple of the Tan family from Melaka. The temple was noted for its role in mitigating disputes and providing protection for newly arrived Chinese immigrants. In 1885, the temple was rebuilt and named Tan Si Chong Su, which was gazetted as a national monument in 1974.

Chinese Wayang Houses and Opium Shops in Kampong Melaka

Six Chinese theatre halls were known to exist in Kampong Melaka, three of which were located along the now-expunged Wayang Street. *Wayang* is the Malay and Javanese term for ‘theatre’, which, interestingly, has become part of the vocabulary for describing traditional Chinese opera. Heng Wai Sun (Qing Wei Xin; 庆维新) and Heng Seng Peng (Qing Sheng Ping; 庆升平) were two theatre halls on Wayang Street.⁸ Both were venues for Cantonese opera, but the latter also hosted Beijing and Hokkien operas.⁹

In addition to theatre halls, two opium shops were constructed in 1910 at 14 Merchant Road and 44 Merchant Road, operated by members of the Seah clan, Seah Liang Seah and Seah Eng Kiat respectively. Another opium shop opened two years later at 71 New Market Road, run by one Tan Jui Eng.



Map indicating Kampongs Bengkulu, Serani and Dobie.
Courtesy of Imran bin Tajudeen

2

Kampong Bengkulu

Kampong Bengkulu (Bencoolen) encompassed the properties at present-day Albert Street, Prinsep Street, Bencoolen Street, Short Street, Middle Road and Waterloo Street. This was where a group of Malays from Bencoolen (Bengkulu in Indonesia today), whom Raffles had brought to Singapore, made their home.

Newspaper notices from early as 1844 indicate that addresses at Queen Street and Church Street (later renamed Waterloo Street) were usually accompanied by the words ‘Campong Bencoolen’. For instance, a forum letter contributor to the local newspaper in 1846 wrote “Queen Street, Campong Bencoolen” and signed off as “A Resident in Church Street, Campong Bencoolen”.

Interestingly, although the area was designated as the ‘European Town’, this label was never used by the locals, who instead named the area according to how they perceived it. In Hokkien, Albert Street was known as Kam Kong Mang Ku

Lu (Kampong Bengkulu), ‘Mang Ku Lu’ being the transliteration of ‘Bengkulu’.

Diverse Places of Worship

At the centre of Kampong Bengkulu was a mosque of the same name, built in 1845. Like the mosque in Kampong Melaka, Masjid Kampong Bengkulu was a recipient of Syed Omar bin Ali Aljunied’s *wakaf* (a permanent endowment for charity). Pre-dating the mosque, however, were two churches: the Catholic Chapel (1833) and the Malay Chapel (1843; also known as Greja Keasberry¹⁰), which in 1885 became the Prinsep Street Presbyterian Church. The existence of these early churches in Kampong Bengkulu can be traced to its earlier demarcation as the European quarter before the kampong took shape. Records indicate that by the mid-19th century, Malays and other groups were present in the area alongside Europeans and Eurasians as both residents and building owners.



TOP
The *thirumanjanam* (dressing of the gods) ceremony at Sri Krishnan Temple on Waterloo Street, 1993.
Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

ABOVE
Buddhist devotees at the Kwan Im Thong temple on Waterloo Street, located right next to Sri Krishnan Temple, 1990.
Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

In 19th-century Singapore, the colourful, multiethnic composition of the area was apparent with the diversity of its religious landmarks. The latter half of the century saw the establishment of St Joseph’s Church (1853) on Victoria Street by the Portuguese Mission; Bethesda Chapel (1866) on Bras Basah Road; Sri Krishnan Temple (1870), Maghain Aboth Synagogue (1878) and Kwan Im Thong Temple (1884) on Waterloo Street; Our Lady of Lourdes Church (1886) on Queen Street catering to Tamils from Pondicherry, India; and the Tamil Methodist Church on Short Street (1887).

Forgotten Lorongs

A unique feature of Kampong Bengkulu was its relatively large building plots. These were originally intended for the substantial mansions or compound houses used by the European community. While some of these plots were used for large houses, others were subdivided for the building of shophouses. Because the shophouses occupied only a third of the large plot sizes, property developers created alleys or lanes (*lorong* in Malay) to access the

interior of the plots and built micro-tenements there. The only surviving example of such a land division in the area is Prinsep Place, formerly known as Cheang Jim Chuan (Chwan) Place.

The developers of four *lorongs* in Kampong Bengkulu have been identified as Hadjee Mohamed Bin Abdul Rahim (Lorong Sakai), Hussensah Marican (Lorong Serai), Haji Kader (Lorong Sepang) and S. Kassim (Lorong Kassim). It is significant that these four personalities were either Malay or Indian; Haji Kader and S. Kassim were Tamil Muslim merchants from Bombay who were part of the Jawi Peranakan community.

Indeed, there was an exceptionally large number of Arabs and Tamil Muslims who owned properties or lived in Kampong Bengkulu. A search of land records from the 1840s shows that more than half of the total number of plots at lower Prinsep Street, lower Bencoolen Street and lower Waterloo Street, as well as the northwestern corner of Bras Basah and North Bridge roads, were owned by Arabs or Indian Muslims.



↑ The Catholic Portuguese Mission built the original St Joseph's Church in 1853 on Victoria Street. This image of the church dates to the 1900s.

Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

3

Kampong Serani

Within Kampong Bengkulu was Kampong Serani in the vicinity of Queen Street and Manila Street. 'Serani' is the Malay equivalent of the Arabic 'Nasrani' (Nazarene), which refers to Christians. Among Malay speakers of the past, Portuguese Eurasians, who were typically Catholic, were known as *Serani*.

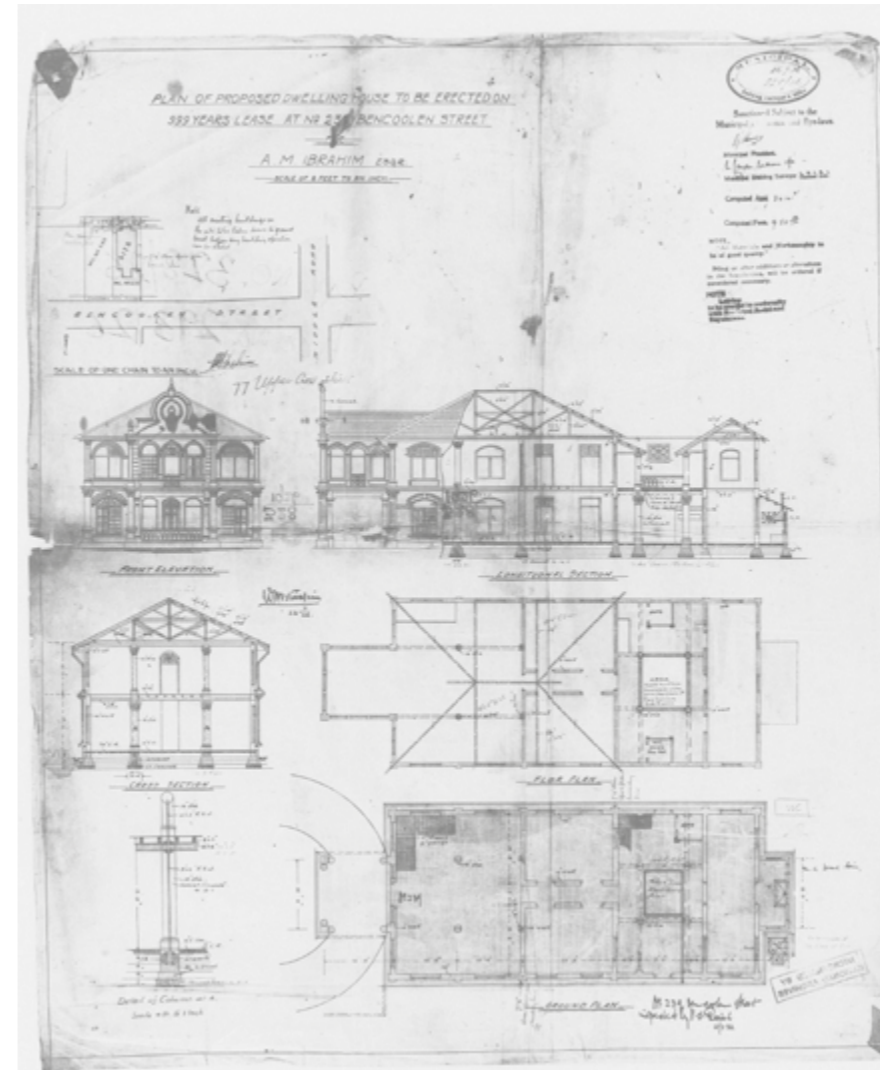
Kampong Serani, which was bounded by Hokkien, Manila and Queen streets, was called Sek-kia-ni Koi (Serani Street; a transliteration of 'Serani') in Hokkien.¹¹ Kampong Serani was known for its Eurasian community, the offspring of intermarriages between local women and early European settlers.

Burgeoning Catholic and Christian Populations

A Eurasian neighbourhood was clustered around the Portuguese Mission, which later built St Joseph's Church in 1953. Prior to this, members of the Portuguese Mission community used to gather at the house of Jose d'Almeida, a Portuguese surgeon who came to Singapore to start a dispensary and subsequently became a successful merchant. D'Almeida's residence was a mansion along the seafront Beach Road before the coastline was pushed out by reclamation.

Although predominantly Catholic and Christian, the resident makeup of Kampong Serani was far from homogeneous. Besides the community of Catholic Eurasians, there were many other groups affiliated to various Catholic missions and Christian denominations, whose churches and communities were embedded in the area. These communities were in fact multiethnic and multilingual.

Initially, most Catholics worshipped at Singapore's only Catholic chapel on Bras Basah Road, built in 1833 at the site that was later occupied by St Joseph's Institution, and today the Singapore



Art Museum. As the congregation grew, however, another larger place of worship was completed in 1847—the Church of the Good Shepherd located at the corner of Bras Basah Road and Queen Street. Subsequently, more churches in the surrounding area sprang up catering to specific ethnic groups and Christian denominations as the various communities expanded.

The first Catholic community to establish its own church was the Portuguese Mission, who built the original St Joseph's Church in 1853 on Victoria Street (the building we see today is a newer construction dating to 1912). Chinese- and Tamil-speaking Catholics were served by the Church of Saints Peter and Paul on Queen Street that was built in 1870. As the Tamil congregation

expanded, however, they moved to the Church of Our Lady of Lourdes on nearby Ophir Road, founded by the French mission from Pondicherry in 1888. A short distance away at Short Street, the Tamil Methodist Church was built here in 1887, signalling the burgeoning Methodist community in the area.

Meanwhile, the Baba Malay-speaking Chinese Peranakan community from Melaka formed the Straits Chinese Church, also referred to as the Malay Chapel, in 1843. This later became Prinsep Street Presbyterian Church, which was also known as the Prinsep Street Baba Church. Besides locally born Straits Chinese, the Chinese Peranakan community from Bencoolen and some Teochew-speaking Christians also joined this congregation. Another



Building plan of a compound shophouse at 23 Bencoolen Street, owned by A.M. Ibrahim. Today, Space Asia Hub occupies the conserved shophouse.

Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Baba Malay-speaking church, Straits Chinese Methodist Church, at the intersection of Middle Road and Waterloo Street was inaugurated in 1894.

Compound Shophouses

Many Eurasians lived in compound shophouses—a dwelling formed by setting back a row of shophouses or terrace townhouses and enclosing the front yard with a low brick wall, thus creating a small front compound. The houses were also raised from the ground with a short flight of steps leading from the front yard to the terrace. At one point, there were 15 rows of such compound shophouses in the vicinity of Kampong Serani.

Zena Tessensohn née Clarke recalled living in a bungalow on a lane opposite the Church of Saints Peter and Paul:

Many Eurasian families lived in Queen Street... We used to visit each other's compounds or gardens and play hide-and-seek and catching. The boys used to fly kites and play marbles... [The] younger members mixed and played together a great deal, especially as the open compound of the older row of houses allowed for participation by large numbers in games such as hantu galah, rounders, etc.



A compound shophouse on Bencoolen Street that was later converted into Kian Hua Hotel.

Lee Kip Lin Collection, courtesy of National Library Board

However, this architectural typology did not extend to the newer style of shophouses, as Marie Cockburn née de Souza remembered:

The newer second row of shophouses had no common compound. Rather, each house had an enclosed concrete area leading from a gate to the front verandah of the house. This area could be used for parking a car or for lining potted plants.

As the Eurasian community flourished in Kampong Serani, so did institutions and businesses owned by Eurasians that supported their social and economic lives. There was a Eurasian-run pineapple factory on Bencoolen Street as well as an Italian bakery and the Mercantile Institution on Queen Street, the latter founded by P.E. Pereira, who also served as its principal. One of the compound houses on the same street was converted into the Mercantile Hostel.

4

Kampong Dhoby

Within the vicinity of Kampong Bengkulu, near Kampong Serani was Kampong Dhoby (also spelt ‘Dobie’ and ‘Dobi’) at the upper end of Queen Street. This was a neighbourhood inhabited by a North Indian community. In Tamil, this area was known as Dobi Kampam, *kampam* being a transliteration of the Malay ‘kampong’. Maps from 1842–45 indicate that Kampong Dhoby had existed by then, while a newspaper notice from 19 May 1842 mentions a “Campong Dhoby”.¹²

Kampong Dhoby owes its origins to the location of the Indian military cantonment here in the 1820s as well as the section of the Rochor River where Indian washermen, or dhobies, washed and dried their laundry. The soldiers at the cantonment were recruited from Bengal and brought to Singapore to maintain law and order. The cantonment in the vicinity of Short Street existed for about six years before it shifted to Outram

Road. It was described as a “large exercising ground... roughly bounded by Prinsep St., Albert St., Queen St., and Bras Basah”.¹³ However, even after the relocation of the cantonment, the Indian presence remained, leading to the formation of Kampong Dhoby.

In 1906, Masjid Kampong Bengkulu became known as Masjid Hanafi, following a change in the mosque’s trusteeship to Hanafi adherents of the Muslim faith. Just two years later, another Hanafi mosque was established in 1908—Queen Street Hanafi Mosque, which was commonly known as Masjid Benggali. These developments attest to the shifting demographics of Kampong Bengkulu and its growing number of Indian Muslims, many of whom subscribed to the Hanafi school.

Besides the two mosques, the kampong was also home to one of the earliest Sikh temples in Singapore, the predecessor of today’s Central Sikh Temple on Towner



The Central Sikh Temple that used to occupy 175 Queen Street in Kampong Dhoby, 1965.

Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



This article is adapted from ‘A Fine-grain History of Singapore Town: The Architecture and Socio-morphology of Four Forgotten Neighbourhoods’, a research project supported by the National Heritage Board Research Grant.

NOTES

- 1 C. Skinner, ‘Shaer Kampong Gelam Terbakar oleh Abdullah b Abdul-Kadir’. *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, vol. 45, iss. 1 (1972): 26–27.
- 2 ‘Mahamad’ may be spelt as ‘Muhamad’ or ‘Mamad’.
- 3 ‘Kadei’ may be spelt as ‘Kader’.
- 4 W. Bartley, ‘The Population of Singapore in 1819’. *Journal of the Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, vol. 11, iss. 2 (1993): 177.
- 5 Song Ong Siang, *One Hundred Years’ History of the Chinese in Singapore* (Singapore: National Library Board, Singapore: World Scientific, 2020 [1923]) 62, n.55.
- 6 Ng Yew Peng, *What’s in the Name? How the Streets and Villages in Singapore Got Their Names* (Singapore: World Scientific, 2018).
- 7 The temple was known by many different names including Bo Chiak Kung, Po Chek Kiong, Po Chiak Keng and Bao Chi Gong.
- 8 Paul van der Veer, *Da Xi: Chinese Street Opera in Singapore* (Netherlands: The Author, 2008), 22.
- 9 F.H. Lew, ‘Park Road School. Part 8’. *Singapore Memory Project*, 2017.
- 10 *Greja* is Malay for ‘church’. It was called the ‘Malay Chapel’ because of its Baba Malay-speaking congregation. The chapel was also known as *Greja Keasberry*, named after its founder Reverend B.P. Keasberry of the London Missionary Society.
- 11 H.T. Haughton, ‘Native Names of Streets in Singapore’. *Journal of the Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, vol. 23 (1891): 51, 58.
- 12 [Untitled], *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 19 May 1842, 3.
- 13 Murfett et al, 2011, 57.

Road. This Sikh temple (gurdwara) was first set up in 1912 in a house at 175 Queen Street, which had been acquired by a group of Sikhs led by a Sindhi merchant named Wassiamull. The gurdwara represented the Sikh community’s early attempt at self-organisation, and the site soon became a centre for Sikh social life. The confluence of activities at the temple earned it the name Wadda Gurdwara, or Big Temple. In 1920–21, the building was converted into the Central Sikh Temple, and remained here until 1977 when the land it sat on was acquired by the government.

Another major landmark in this area was the first office and printing press of the *Utusan Melayu* newspaper, which published its maiden issue in 1939. The pioneer Malay-language press occupied a three-storey shophouse on Queen Street. However, the premises were destroyed during the Japanese Occupation, and the press subsequently reopened on Cecil Street. 🍌

Small Sacred Spaces

Hidden Shrines in Singapore

Often tucked away from sight, informal shrines, sometimes honouring deities from multiple religions in a single altar, lend colour—and spirituality—to the island's urban environs.

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The Sree Eranchery Bhagavathi Temple in Kranji,
next to the former Malayan railway tracks, 2021.

Courtesy of Sujatha Meegama



↑ A roadside shrine that used to be at the junction of Clive Street and Dickson Road in the dense urban district of Little India, 2018.
Courtesy of Sujatha Meegama

It is not unusual to come across diverse places of worship in multiethnic and multireligious Singapore. Some are humble, like Masjid Hang Jebat, tucked away in leafy suburban surroundings, while others, such as Sultan Mosque and Central Sikh Temple, are majestic structures that occupy sprawling grounds. These places of worship sit on land plots that the government has designated for religious purposes. In a land-scarce country like Singapore, the use of public space is highly regulated.¹

But hidden in the nooks and crannies of public and secular spaces are some small but important shrines that have mushroomed, and sometimes been forgotten, over time. These 'wayside shrines' are usually makeshift altars that occupy unofficial spaces in the urban environment. They may be found practically anywhere—along roadsides and railway tracks, at bus stops, carparks, loading docks, construction sites, factories, under expressways, in shopping centres, hawker centres, wet markets, public housing void decks, cemeteries, and even in secluded forested areas.

These shrines infuse sacrality into Singapore's urban landscape, defying the neat binaries of what is regarded as sacred

and secular, as well as legal and illegal in the city-state. Created and sustained by different communities, these public shrines are incredibly diverse. Their scale ranges from a modest altar set up at the foot of a banyan tree (regarded as sacred in several religions practised in the region) to more extensive standalone constructions with shelters. These shrines can serve a variety of deities, such as Sufi and Malay saints, South Asian gods and Taoist deities, but more interestingly, a single shrine may feature deities from multiple religions. Though marginal and easily overlooked due to their inconspicuous nature, these 'hidden' shrines reveal significant narratives that complement and extend those of larger, more established official places of worship.

Different Deities under One Roof

One of the most remarkable features of these wayside shrines is that many of them house deities from different religions under the same roof. A common deity worshipped at these shrines is Datuk Kong, who has Chinese and Malay origins. The deity is also known as Na Du Gong and Na Tuk Gong in Mandarin or Datuk Keramat in Malay. *Datuk* and *kong* means 'grandfather' in Malay and Mandarin respectively—a reflection of the guardian spirit's Sino-Malay roots.

Worshipped in Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia, Datuk Kong's power of protection is limited to the area where he resides, and his shrines are typically small. Besides general safeguarding, devotees may also ask for lucky numbers to buy lottery tickets. A researcher of Datuk Kong shrines in Penang writes of the deity's functions:

[Datuk Kong] guard[s] worshippers against evil spirits and keep them from physical harm and injuries including traffic accidents, infestations by snakes and rats, termites, hornets, centipedes, scorpions, infliction of wounds from nails and broken glass and falling from trees and buildings and so forth. [Datuk Kong] safeguard[s] residents



↑ Two shrines dedicated to the Sino-Malay deity Datuk Kong located at a carpark on Dickson Road, 2021.
Courtesy of Sujatha Meegama

↗ Outside the Thai enclave of Golden Mile Complex is a large Thai Buddhist shrine dedicated to the four-faced Phra Phrom, also known as the Hindu god Brahma.
Courtesy of Choo Yut Shing



*from natural disasters such as fire, lightning, floods, storms, landslides, epidemics and other catastrophes. In other words, Datuk Kongs safeguard life and property, and ensure the general well-being of the community.*²

Datuk Kong figurines can be identified by some form of Malay dress, most commonly the songkok or haji cap. This anthropomorphised representation of Datuk Kong is believed to have originated in Malaysia in the 1980s.³ Other versions of the deity are dressed in a baju panjang (long, loose-fitting tunic) and a sarong. He is usually depicted as seated, with legs apart, in a projection of authority. Despite his majestic aura, the deity wears a kindly demeanour and is said to exude a 'grandfatherly' presence with his beard, smile and portly belly. Occasionally, Datuk Kong is accompanied by a pet tiger.

Located in a carpark near Dickson Road in Little India is a collection of shrines, two of which worship Datuk Kong. They are placed on either side of a bamboo clump. The Taoist Tua Pek Kong, commonly known as the God of Prosperity, can also be found at one of the shrines, along with several Thai Buddha heads sitting atop a metal filing cabinet. The pink-coloured altar with its sculptures of Buddhist and Taoist deities were apparently donated by a grateful devotee who had won the lottery.

Other deities commonly found in wayside shrines are the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara, or Guanyin, who represents compassion and mercy, worshipped by Buddhists and some Hindus; and the Hindu elephant-headed Ganesha, whom devotees pray to for help in eradicating obstacles in their lives. Both deities attract worshippers from different religious faiths.

The prevalence of these shrines reflects the multireligious social fabric of Singapore, made up of immigrants and transient workers who brought along their respective religious beliefs and gods. For instance, outside the well-known Thai enclave of Golden Mile Complex is a large Thai Buddhist shrine dedicated to the four-faced Phra Phrom, also known as the Hindu god Brahma. Phra Phrom has a popular following in Singapore and statues of the deity are found in various informal shrines across the main island as well as on Pulau Ubin.

Ephemerality

As these shrines are informal in nature and not officially recognised by the authorities, their existence becomes very precarious in fast-changing Singapore. Many of such shrines have disappeared over time—removed due to their illegal status or to make way for urban renewal.



↑ ABOVE
A Google Street View Image from 2009 of the Keramat Siti Maryam shows the shrine and some chairs for the caretakers and devotees to rest.

ABOVE RIGHT
A roadside shrine at Niven Road, 2021. Over a decade, it relocated three times, and transformed from a tree shrine to a roadside shrine. The pantheon of gods it honoured also expanded.
Courtesy of Sujatha Meegama

In a few instances, they have been relocated by their caretakers if new homes could be found. Such wayside shrines are thus marked by a sense of ephemerality. This uncertainty creates an urgency to document these sites and their stories, including those of their communities, before they vanish from the landscape.

The vulnerability of these informal sacred spaces is highlighted in the 2010 destruction of the *keramat* (shrine) dedicated to the Sufi saint Siti Maryam (1830s–54). The term *keramat* can refer to several things, one of which is the sacred burial site of a Muslim saint. For decades, worshippers would visit the tomb of Siti Maryam in the Kallang area to pay their respects and seek her blessings. She was believed to be a miracle healer who could bring about clement weather, ensure employment and protect seafaring groups, including fishermen, sailors and coastal communities, by interceding with God on their behalf. Despite protests by the followers of Siti Maryam, her *keramat* was exhumed and demolished in April 2010 to make way for a new development. Such stories are not uncommon across different religious communities in Singapore.

More fortunate was a shrine along Niven Road that had been relocated multiple times between 2009 and 2020. Not only was it physically moved, its form, gods and



identity also underwent transformation over the years. In 2016, it was located on the public pavement adjacent to a private property. Four years later, the shrine's caretakers received a notice from a government agency ordering the shrine to be moved to a private space. As a compromise, the caretakers who worked nearby came up with an ingenious idea: they relocated the shrine, embedding it within a wall enclosing their private compound, with one side of the shrine jutting out just enough for the public to access it from the outside for worship.

In fact, the research team later discovered that the shrine was once located under a gigantic banyan tree on Niven Road. It is notable that over the span of a decade, through the three relocations of the shrine, its identity transformed from a tree shrine to a roadside shrine. Along the way, the pantheon of gods worshipped at the shrine also expanded: the original Taoist deities were subsequently joined by gods from other religions, including Hinduism and Buddhism.

Given the temporal nature of these wayside shrines, the Hidden Shrines database was developed to document their origins and history (see facing page).

The Hidden Shrines Database

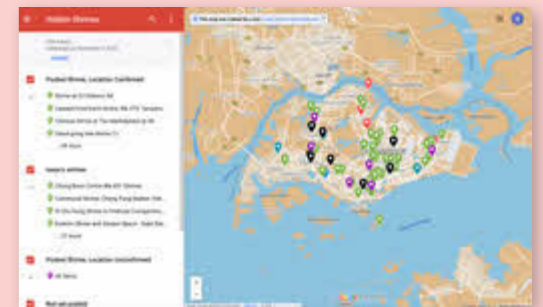
To be launched by the first quarter of 2023, the Hidden Shrines database is an online crowdsourcing initiative that documents small, informal but no less important shrines in Singapore. The digital humanities project was conceived by a team comprising members from Nanyang Technological University's School of Computer Science and Engineering, and the School of Art, Design and Media. Computer scientist Dr Owen Noel Newton Fernando and a team of students led the development of the website.

Taking cues from the key characteristics of the shrines—primarily their intimate connection with their respective locations—the project fuses traditional art historical methods with a geographic information system, or GIS. The former includes fieldwork, photography and archival research, while the latter refers to the use of geospatial data as well as tools for recording, organising, analysing, manipulating and displaying that data.

Based on the shrines' geospatial information, the website visualises their locations all over Singapore. The site features photographs of the shrines, either taken by the research team or contributed by the public. Besides providing a visual record of the shrines, the time stamps of the photographs become crucial research data as the shrines are highly vulnerable to destruction and relocation.

Additionally, the database includes information such as the date the shrines were established, the deities worshipped, patterns of patronage, ritual activities, architectural features and audio stories. This allows researchers and the public to study the shrines and discover narratives that may otherwise remain hidden.

The online platform aims to encourage physical encounters with the shrines. Users such as researchers, heritage enthusiasts and devotees can locate shrines using the website and then visit the actual sites. There, they may interact with caretakers, make offerings or participate in religious rituals on auspicious days. The database seeks to promote awareness of these small sacred spaces that have become invaluable repositories of tangible and intangible cultural heritage in Singapore. Apart from functioning as an archive, the website is also a means of sustaining the city's hidden and less familiar cultural practices.



↑ TOP
Screenshot of the Hidden Shrines database, 2021. The map shows where some of the informal shrines are located. The website is currently undergoing a revamp and is expected to be relaunched later this year.

ABOVE
A public tour to some of the shrines featured in the database, June 2022.
Courtesy of Try Sutrisno Foo

Caretakers and Devotees

Informal shrines are built and maintained by a communal network comprising caretakers and devotees, with many of the shrines sharing a common characteristic: the role of the elderly in their care and maintenance.⁴ King-Chung Siu and Thomas Kong, who conducted a study of such shrines in Hong Kong and Singapore, noted that “these shrines occupy the margins of the urban fabric, but serve unintended social and religious functions, primarily for the community of elders”.⁵

Mohamed Hassan, fondly known as Wak Ali Janggut⁶ (Bearded Ali) for his trademark long white beard, was the de facto custodian of Keramat Siti

Maryam for a quarter of a century. Now in his 80s, Wak Ali used to live on the premises of the shrine, in a simple makeshift room with nothing more than a mattress and a small cupboard, and a mosquito net for protection.

Even though Wak Ali had a flat to live in, he preferred to live near the shrine so that he could care for it. While the shrine still existed, his daily chores included sweeping up dead leaves in the compound and replacing old flower offerings with fresh ones. He was known for his fervent prayers and used to worship with the devotees.⁷

Wak Ali was not just a caretaker who maintained the cleanliness of the sacred

space; he was also a living repository of stories about the *keramat* and the unofficial custodian of its history. He shared his knowledge about the shrine's secret spiritual passageway:

The tree at the eastern end of the keramat contains a passageway that is the point of entry for spirits—this is the entry into the cave, [and the] cave is like a palace.⁸

The narratives surrounding these shrines range from personal histories tied to the sites to supernatural incidents that may seem spurious and therefore incredulous to a nonbeliever. However, it is precisely such narratives that impart social significance to these sites. Regardless of their credibility, these anecdotes, which are transmitted first-hand or retold through other sources, give life and character to the shrines. Another caretaker of Keramat Siti Maryam, Wak Aiyim, had been visiting the shrine since he was a child. Recalling his supernatural encounters, he spoke of a vision he once saw of Malay folk heroes:

After I had finished work—I used to be a barber at a tree behind [the northeastern side of the] shrine—I fell asleep only to be woken up by a vision. I was shocked when I saw the faces of Hang Tuah, Hang Kasturi, Hang Jebat, Hang Lekir and Hang Lekiu on the five trunks of the tree. I then wrapped five pieces of yellow cloth⁹ around the trunks of a tree with five stems... Other spirits are at the shrine always to watch over people and reveal their powers whenever there is misconduct.¹⁰

There are also female caretakers who help establish and maintain informal shrines in Singapore. For instance, Madam Quek was the informal caretaker of the Monkey God Tree Shrine that appeared in Jurong West Street 42 in 2007. The shrine was erected after some people observed an outline on a tree bark bearing resemblance to the Chinese monkey god Sun Wukong and the Hindu monkey god Hanuman.

The phenomenon drew large crowds of devotees who presented offerings and

asked for blessings. Subsequently, calluses of two nearby trees were also ascribed sacred significance as representations of Guanyin and Ganesha. Although the initial enthusiasm shown by both Taoist and Hindu devotees faded, Madam Quek, who lives in the vicinity, continued to visit the shrines often, offering incense and tidying up the shrines. Sadly, these shrines have since been removed by the authorities for encroaching on state land.

Another female caretaker is Madam Veni, a priestess at the Sree Eranchery Bhagavathi Temple, which began as a family tree shrine in the 1940s devoted to the Hindu goddess Kali. Situated close to the former Keretapi Tanah Melayu railway tracks in Kranji, the shrine was located on a plot of state land that the family believed to be theirs. Over time, the shrine evolved into a larger temple with spaces to worship multiple Hindu gods and goddesses: Vishnu, Lakshmi, Mariamman, Ganesh, Shiva and Muneeswaran.

Madam Veni's relationship with Kali goes back to her childhood days when the goddess revealed herself to her. She would occasionally go into a trance, during which Kali would communicate through her. For many years, Madam Veni conducted prayers and maintained the temple.¹¹ In September 2020, the temple was demolished after the Singapore Land Authority delivered a notice for its removal.



BELOW

A tree shrine in Jurong West with statues of various gods and goddesses, including Guanyin and Ganesha, 2013. Courtesy of Sujatha Meegama

BOTTOM

Madam Quek, the informal caretaker of the Monkey God Tree Shrine, offering incense at the shrine, 2013. Courtesy of Sujatha Meegama



All that remains of the Sree Eranchery Bhagavathi Temple in Kranji after its demolition, 2020. Courtesy of Sujatha Meegama

Typically, many of such shines have self-appointed caretakers who preserve the sanctity of these places so that worshippers can continue to pray and pay their respects. Over time, communities also form organically around these sacred spaces. At some shrines, you may see devotees and caretakers socialising at times, sitting on plastic chairs and chatting.

Re-enchanting the Everyday

For sociologist Terence Heng, temporary roadside altars and shrines function as “transient aesthetic markers” that reify the imaginary spiritual realm, allowing individuals to temporarily overlay spiritual and sacred space onto the physical and material space.¹² Indeed, wayside shrines produce and expand sacred space in response to the

spatial constraints imposed by the state. Strict zoning laws, the prohibitive cost of land and high-density living make these informal shrines an appealing option for devotees.

Above all, the shrines are repositories of religious practices that are rooted in everyday life. Although much more modest compared to official religious establishments, these sacred spaces nonetheless represent aspects of ordinary lives, their individual and neighbourhood histories intersecting with national narratives. By paying closer attention to our surroundings, we may yet realise how much sacrality and religious heritage are infused into our everyday environments. ♦

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The National Collection

A Window into Singapore's History

The National Collection is not just a random assortment of objects and artworks. It is a lens through which Singaporeans can better understand our shared cultural heritage.



2



5

Selina Chong
Assistant Director, National Collection,
National Heritage Board



1



3



6



4

- 1 **Bridal bed**
National Museum of Singapore
- 2 **Housing and Development Board invitation card for balloting of flat in Bedok New Town**
National Museum of Singapore
- 3 **Glass painting featuring Guan Yu and his attendants**
Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall
- 4 **She and Her Dishcover**
by Amanda Heng
Singapore Art Museum
- 5 **Elephant-shaped huqqa base**
Asian Civilisations Museum
- 6 **Rohani** by Georgette Chen
National Gallery Singapore

Objects and artworks can hold the collective memories of a nation. These material and cultural legacies in turn provide a window into the 'soul' of a nation, revealing the origins and identities of its people, and the nature of its society at any given point in time. This is why the National Collection exists: to connect both present and future generations of Singaporeans to their past. It is both a reminder of our roots and shared heritage, as well as how society in Singapore has evolved over time.

The National Heritage Board (NHB) is the custodian of this sizable public collection, which today comprises over 250,000 objects and artworks. At any one time, thousands of pieces are on public display at various museums and heritage institutions, with many more being studied and cared for at the Heritage Conservation Centre. As the steward of Singapore's heritage and culture, NHB works closely with various entities in the local arts and culture ecosystem to develop, interpret and care for the National Collection.

Why a National Collection?

The genesis of the National Collection can be traced to the early 19th century when Stamford Raffles established the Raffles Library and Museum. The eponymous Raffles Collection comprised books and manuscripts; natural history specimens and a zoological collection; as well as ethnological and cultural materials. After the formation of NHB in 1993, the ethnological and cultural materials in this collection were transferred to NHB, while the first two categories of objects were transferred to the National Library Board and the National University of Singapore respectively.

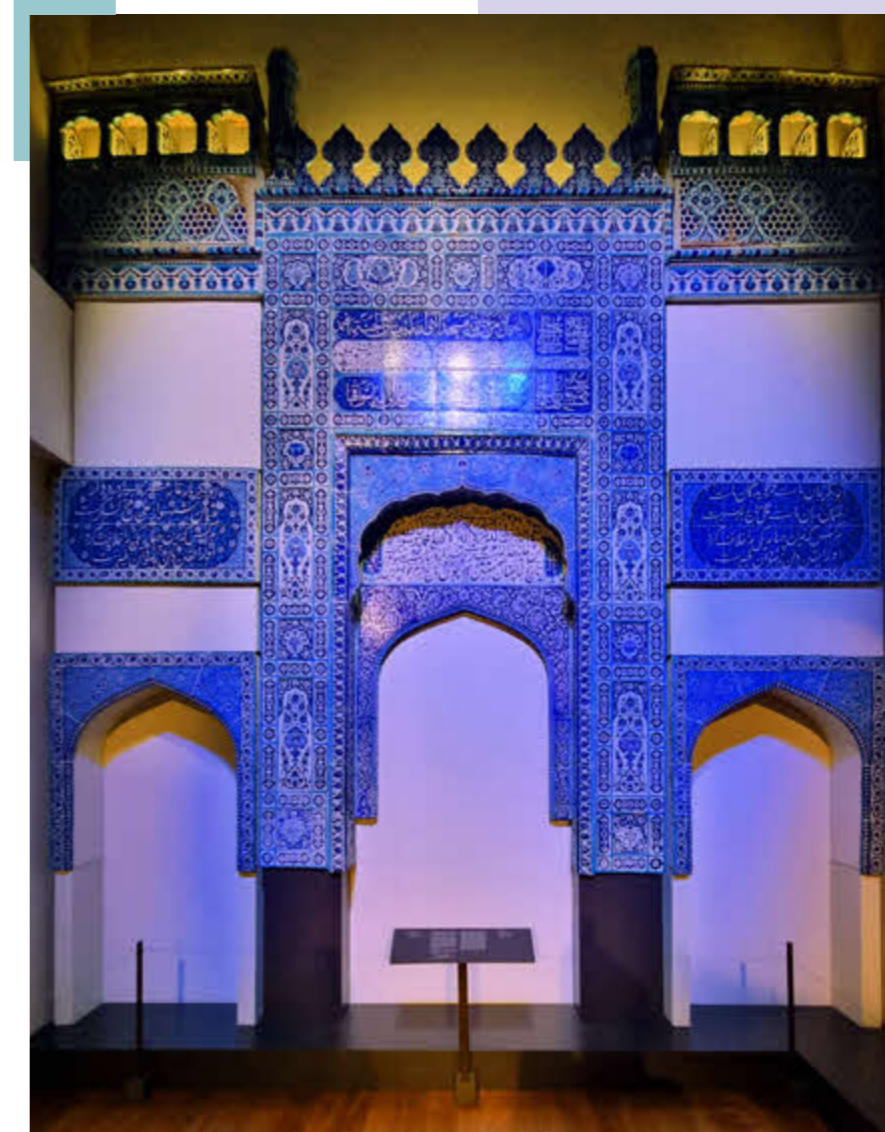
In a 1988 report by the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts—which proposed the establishment of a National Heritage Trust (the precursor of today's NHB)—several recommendations were made with respect to a national collection.

First, at least five national museums as well as better storage and conservation facilities would be established. Second, the government would strengthen heritage collection at a national level, whether by acquisition through public funds or by encouraging private collectors and corporations to donate. Third, the government would maintain an updated inventory of heritage resources. These functions were included in the National Heritage Board Act 1993, which lays out the board's statutory duties in relation to the acquisition, safeguarding and disposal of Singapore's National Collection.

Overseas institutions adopt different approaches towards collecting objects and artworks of historical, cultural and

↓ Tiled Islamic facade

Creator: unknown
Date: 1897–98
Region: Multan, Pakistan
Dimensions: 5 x 4.8 m
Accession no.: 2013-00916
Collection of: Indian Heritage Centre
Image courtesy of Muhd Noor Aliff





Muhammad Noor Aliff Bin Ghani, Assistant Director (Collections & Exhibitions), Heritage Institutions, and his team look after the collections and exhibitions at the three heritage institutions: Indian Heritage Centre, Malay Heritage Centre and Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall. The physical care of artefacts through regular gallery maintenance works is paramount in ensuring their longevity. A visitor walking through the Indian Heritage Centre's permanent galleries will be greeted by an elaborate 19th-century tiled facade from Multan in Pakistan. Composed of 160 tiles, each of which is unique in shape and design, erecting the monumental facade was a laborious process that required precise mounting work.

As the facade is on open display, it is subject to dust and deterioration over time. Conservators and art handlers have to meticulously dust and clean each tile regularly to prevent the accumulation of dirt.

In-gallery maintenance of the National Collection is crucial as preventive care is always better than interventive conservation. Regular inspections of the artefacts allow for any issues to be addressed immediately.

artistic merit. The privately owned and operated Metropolitan Museum of Art and Museum of Modern Art in New York, for instance, acquire and care for their own collections.

Singapore, on the other hand, has acquired and consolidated the National Collection through NHB's network of eight national museums and heritage institutions, also referred to as the Collecting Institutions. These institutions actively collaborate with 63 private and public museums that are part of the Museum Roundtable.¹ This approach ensures that Singapore's material heritage is both protected and developed without imposing unnecessary restrictions on the private art market or being subject to the changing tastes and expectations of the public.

Today, the eight Collecting Institutions—Asian Civilisations Museum, Peranakan Museum, National Museum of Singapore, National Gallery Singapore, Singapore Art Museum, Indian Heritage Centre, Malay Heritage Centre and Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall—continue to build the National Collection by identifying and acquiring objects and artworks that bear significance to Singapore's history and the identity of its people.

The National Collection Strategy

Six broad principles underpin the development of the National Collection. Fundamentally, the collection reflects and represents the cultural history of Singapore. It also locates and explains Singapore's place in Southeast Asia, Asia and globally. Moreover, every object and artwork that enters the National Collection must possess artistic, social, cultural, political, historiographical and/or geographical significance. At the same time, the collection supports the study and research of subjects relating to Singapore's heritage.

The collection is coordinated across the Collecting Institutions, and it is

accessible to all Singapore museums for display, research and programmes. Finally, the National Collection aims to not just resonate locally, but also be recognised globally.

As multiculturalism is a core tenet of Singapore society, the Collecting Institutions identify and acquire objects and artworks that reflect Singapore's rich material heritage. While each institution has its own focus areas, they also collectively contribute to a comprehensive and diverse National Collection.

The Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM) is a good example of this. As the only museum in Asia with a pan-Asian scope, it is devoted to exploring the many historical connections and intersections between cultures and civilisations in Asia, and between Asia and the world. A visit to ACM can provide encounters ranging from the ritual objects of early Arab civilisations to Chinese ceramics exported to European markets, and even contemporary objects inspired by heritage crafts and practices.

The histories of the movement of people, ideas and objects through and to Singapore are also explored at our heritage institutions, which dive deep into various diasporas in the country. Through close engagement with community stakeholders, heritage institutions tell the multifarious stories of Singapore's many ethnic sub-communities, adding nuance and texture to the Chinese-Malay-Indian-and-Others administrative framework.

As the nation's oldest museum, the National Museum of Singapore traces the country's history from the 13th century to the present. Beyond collecting and displaying archaeological and historical artefacts, it focuses on presenting narratives of life in contemporary Singapore. In 2020, the museum launched the Collecting Contemporary Singapore initiative, which seeks to document contemporary events and developments in Singapore by broadening its collecting efforts to include artefacts from recent history and

even the present-day. As this initiative is largely based on public engagement, the museum is better able to strengthen its position as a 'people's museum'.

The nation's foremost visual arts museums, the National Gallery Singapore and the Singapore Art Museum, collect works that highlight Singapore's art historical development. These include pioneer and practising Singaporean visual artists, as well as art historical periods from the pre-colonial to the contemporary. Particularly in the visual arts, both museums have a role to play in promoting emerging artists and experimental artistic practices, even if their artistic value may be uncertain in the early stages. Collecting Institutions thus invest in the future by creating space for exploration and experimentation so that young artists can test their ideas as they develop their oeuvre.

While artworks in the National Collection are predominantly of Singaporean and Southeast Asian origins, it does not preclude the museums from showcasing international artists. In fact, international exhibitions featuring high-profile names and collections often enable deeper curatorial and research explorations of objects in the National



Ewer with dragon-head stopper

Creator: unknown
Date: Tang Dynasty, c. 830s
Region: probably Gongxian, China
Material: stoneware
Dimensions: various; 10.2 cm (mouth diameter)
Accession no.: 2005.1-00900
Collection of: Asian Civilisations Museum
Image courtesy of Asia Society



Collection, strengthening the subject of art history as a whole, and decentring it from Euro-American-centrism.

Over the years, NHB has amassed several significant collections, including the William Farquhar Collection of Natural History Drawings, the Tang Shipwreck Collection, and numerous ink paintings by artist Wu Guanzhong—displayed at the National Museum, ACM, and the National Gallery Singapore respectively. The National Collection’s diversity enables museums to continually present new curatorial perspectives, create new knowledge, and connect with audiences both old and new.

The National Collection as a Public Good

The National Collection, which is held in public trust, forms the foundation of Singapore’s material heritage and showcases the evolution of the nation’s cultural and social practices as well as its national identity. The national museums are not mere receptacles of objects and artworks; in consultation with the public, the museums seek to make and remake narratives that define the Singaporean identity through thematic displays and special exhibitions.

NHB’s partnership with schools has also led to the incorporation of the National Collection in the curriculum. Through a structured museum-based learning programme, lessons now extend beyond the classroom. The value of actually seeing a physical object or artwork that is first encountered within the pages of a textbook cannot be overstated. Indeed, history comes alive when viewing historical artefacts and imagining how they may have been used by our forebears.

This is why NHB maintains an extensive digital database of the collection. Today, everyone can visit NHB’s heritage resource portal, Roots.gov.sg, to discover and learn about the National Collection and even request in-person viewings if necessary.



For **Ng Wan Gui**, Senior Assistant Director (Collections, Exhibitions & Estates), Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM), being able to bring Singapore’s National Collection to overseas audiences brings her tremendous joy and a great sense of pride. In 2017, ACM co-organised *Secrets of the Sea: A Tang Shipwreck and Early Trade in Asia* with Asia Society, New York. This marked the first time objects from the Tang Shipwreck Collection were presented to an American audience. The Tang Shipwreck Collection,² which is one of the highlights of Singapore’s National Collection, demonstrates the dynamic economic activities along the Maritime Silk Route in the ninth century. While the collection occupies permanent pride of place at the ground-floor galleries of ACM, the shipwreck artefacts have also travelled around the world for various exhibitions, most recently the ACM and Shanghai Museum’s collaboration on *The Baoli Era: Treasures from the Tang Shipwreck* in September 2020.

The National Collection presents many opportunities for partnership with international organisations to further study and research. Conservation scientist **Lynn Chua** at the Heritage Conservation Centre, for instance, is presently involved in a research project involving ancient craftsmanship of Changsha kiln painted porcelain bowls. Using microscopy and elemental analysis, Lynn and her collaborators discovered that the coloured decorations on the Changsha kiln bowls were in fact created using an overglaze technique (ie, colour painted over a transparent glaze before firing), countering the long-held view that the Changsha kiln had pioneered the underglaze technique. Such scientific research on the National Collection complements and deepens curatorial interpretation and knowledge of Singapore’s cultural heritage.

Changsha kiln coloured porcelains with brown and green painting

Creator: unknown
Date: Tang Dynasty, mid-ninth century
Region: Changsha kilns, Hunan province, China
Material: ceramic
Dimensions: 5.5 × 15.7 × 12.9 cm
Accession no.: 2005.1-39838
Collection of: Asian Civilisations Museum



Buddhist artists' manual

Creator: unknown
Date: 19th century
Region: Nepal
Material: ink on paper
Dimensions: 9.0 × 25.5 × 0.5 cm
Accession no.: 2017-00060
Collection of: Asian Civilisations Museum
Images courtesy of Conan Cheong

This 19th-century Nepalese manual for iconometry (the measurement of religious icons and their proportions) was one of the first objects that Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM) curator **Conan Cheong** acquired in his work for the National Collection in December 2016. It is believed that metal craftsmen from the Buddhist Newari ethnic group of Nepal’s Kathmandu Valley consulted the manual to make images of Buddha. Annotated diagrams indicate the standard proportions that large, multipart figures from Buddhist iconography must adhere to for ritual efficacy.

Just before the outbreak of COVID-19 in 2019, Conan began collaborating with a scholar of the Newari language to translate the manual’s Newari inscriptions into English. Newari is an endangered language used by the indigenous people of Kathmandu Valley. Translation of the manual will grant insights into how artisans interpreted and used the manual to create these images.

Currently displayed in ACM’s Ancient Religions Gallery, the manual is a fascinating piece that provides insight into the practice of Buddhism in Nepal.





↑ Painted Chinese silk robe for the European market

Creator: unknown
Date: 1770s
Region: China and Europe
Material: Painted silk
Dimensions: 164.0 × 151.5 cm
Accession no.: 2017-00938
Collection of: Asian Civilisations Museum

Chuanice Chen, Conservator (Textiles), Heritage Conservation Centre, fondly refers to this painted silk dress as 'Cordelia'. Chuanice's interest in this garment was first piqued when he was completing his master's degree in textile conservation, which happened to coincide with the Asian Civilisations Museum's acquisition of Cordelia.

Even though Chuanice's postgraduate research sent him on a deep dive into the study of painted textiles, the actual work of conserving Cordelia turned out to be a huge challenge for him. There are no textbook answers when it comes to conserving textiles because every treatment has to be specifically formulated for the specific piece being restored.

While working on the conservation of Cordelia, Chuanice realised the creativity and immense historic value of the garment. At times, he felt as if the weight of the material legacy of humanity was literally in his hands.

Caring for the National Collection

Everything that we know of—the National Collection included—is subject to the natural process of decay and degeneration. The management and care of the collection is, unsurprisingly, a significant undertaking.

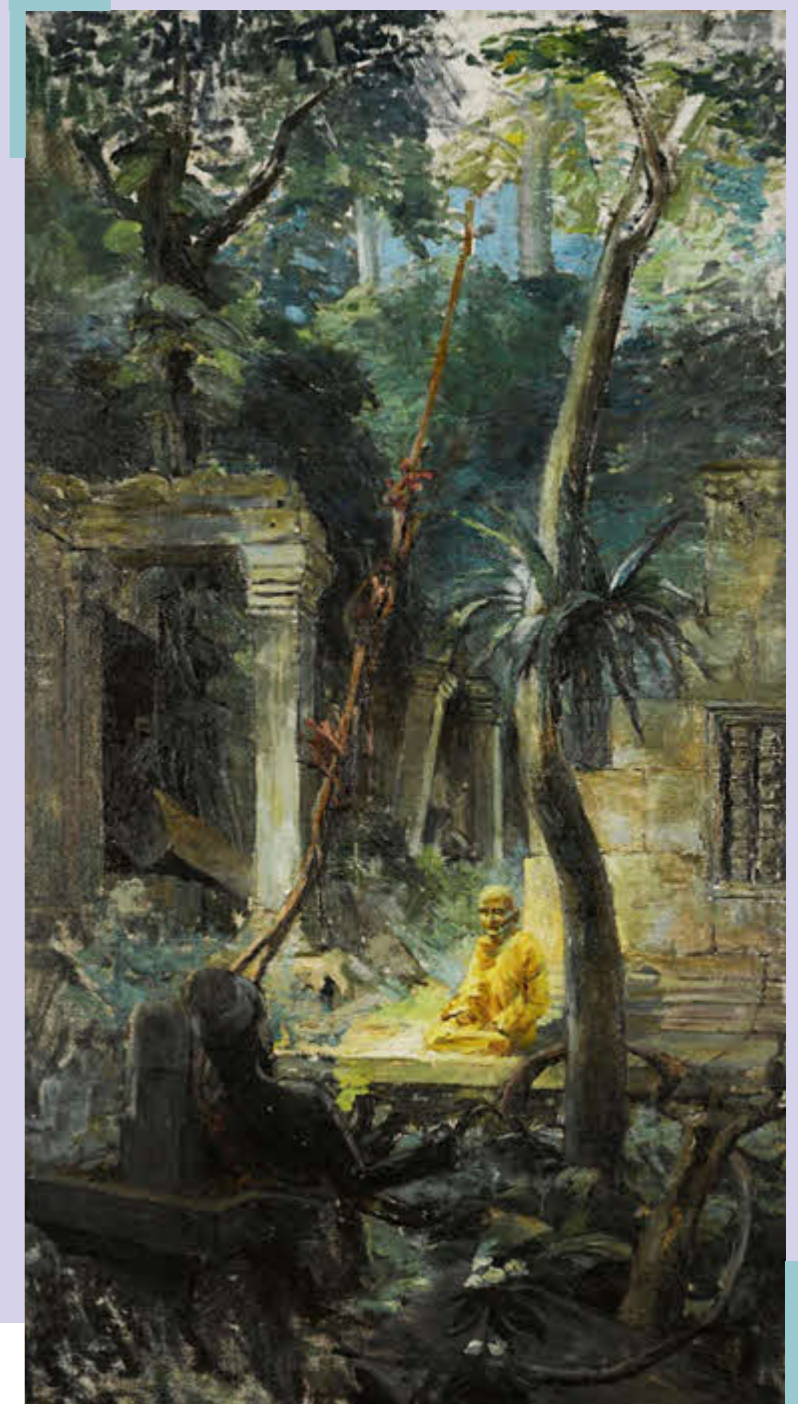
Much of the work is carried out at the Heritage Conservation Centre (HCC), established in 2000 as a purpose-built facility for the storage and conservation of the National Collection. Besides maintaining an optimal environment for the long-term storage of objects and artworks, HCC also houses conservation laboratories for the treatment of object, painting and textile artefacts; a laboratory that supports scientific analysis, material testing and research; and a photography studio to digitise artefacts.

Every conservator undergoes rigorous training and often specialises in treating a particular material—objects, paintings, textiles, paper. Within each domain, there may also be further division. For example, object conservation refers to a wide range of organic and inorganic materials, including stone, wood, metal, plastics, glass, ceramics and animal products such as feathers and leather. Increasingly, as museums explore new collection areas and materials, for example, time-based media, conservators may face different challenges and have to continually reskill themselves with the latest conservation techniques to care for the growing National Collection.

Conservators generally do not strive to return the objects they work on to their original states which are often unknown; instead, they seek to present objects in ways that are best representative of their biography, function and intent. Objects are always treated with posterity in mind to safeguard the National Collection as a legacy for future generations of Singaporeans. One can consider the National Collection as a material bridge across generations: evidence that our existence can be traced through time.

↓ Le Brahmanisme, ermite forestier en méditation devant un linga (Brahminism, meditating forest hermit in front of a linga)

Creator: George Groslier (1887–1945)
Date: 1914
Region: Cambodia
Material: oil on canvas
Dimensions: 175 × 96 cm
Accession no.: 2018-01259
Collection of: National Gallery of Singapore





↑ Close-up view of a detail of *Le Brahmanisme* (see page 69) before and after conservation treatment.

For **Regina Liew**, Assistant Conservator (Paintings), Heritage Conservation Centre, every project presents new challenges and new opportunities for learning. When formulating the most appropriate conservation treatments, she considers not just the paint media or the condition of the artwork, but also the artist's intent and the artwork's biography.

Regina recalled an occasion when she met with the grandchildren of Malaysian artist Yong Mun Sen. They shared that, during the Second World War, their grandfather had to fold and bury his unmounted paintings in a hill to keep them safe from Japanese soldiers. For Regina, this was an illuminating moment: here was a plausible reason for the fold lines she had observed on the works and what would otherwise have been classified as 'damage' took on new meaning. Details such as these could potentially inform the decisions she makes as a conservator and the interpretation of the work that curators present to visitors.

When Regina first encountered George Groslier's *Le Brahmanisme* (previous page), she noticed the flaking paint and some material losses across the canvas because the painting had been rolled up and stored for a long time. Together with her team, Regina spent countless hours studying the painting and related information on the artist and his work. She consolidated the flaking paint layer and stretched the painting out on a new stretcher, cleaning and flattening fold lines before in-filling areas of loss.

Conservators navigate a fine balance between principles of conservation—any conservation work done has to be visible and also reversible—and the aesthetic. More importantly, any treatment done to artworks must not be out of place or jarring in the eyes of the viewer.

Find out more about
what conservators and
collection managers do in
this behind-the-scenes peek
at Groslier's painting



↑ Conservator Regina Liew working on Filipino artist Pacita Abad's painting, *Flight to Freedom* (1979).

In addition to keeping abreast of the latest research, materials and practices in conservation, NHB's conservators seek to make new breakthroughs in the field of conservation science. For example, Esther Ng, Senior Paper Conservator at HCC, was the first person in Singapore (and possibly the region) to explore microfading—a method of assessing the vulnerability of objects to light-fading. The feat unlocked new knowledge in terms of environmental display requirements to slow down deterioration, particularly for light-sensitive materials such as textile, paper and photographs. While nothing can last forever, cutting-edge conservation practices can help slow down the ageing process to ensure that the National Collection can be enjoyed and appreciated for just a bit longer.

Alongside conservators who safeguard the physical condition of the National Collection, museum curators assess the cultural and art historical significance of objects as well as flesh out accompanying narratives that might otherwise remain

hidden. Meanwhile, collection managers are responsible for the physical care of artefacts, including storage, packing, transport, mounting and display. By working together, each specialist provides additional dimensions for interpreting and understanding artefacts, translating them into richer, more dynamic experiences for audiences.

The National Collection is not an inanimate repository of heritage materials. Instead, it is a nuanced and diverse repertoire of objects and artworks enlivened by interpretation and the daily contact of many hands involved in its care and display. But even so, the story does not end there: each individual item in the National Collection will go on to take new life and meaning through the pleasure and enjoyment it induces in its viewers. 🍷

The author would like to thank the many colleagues who have generously shared their time and experience and inspired her to look at the National Collection with fresh eyes: Aliff, Christel, Chuance, Esther, Heng Noi, Lynn, Regina, Sophia and Wan Gui.

NOTES

- 1 Museum Roundtable is a membership-based collective of museums in Singapore that aims to promote museum collaboration and a museum-going culture here.
- 2 The Tang Shipwreck Collection was acquired through a generous donation from the Estate of Khoo Teck Puat in honour of the late Khoo Teck Puat.

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View the
National Collection
at [Roots.gov.sg](https://roots.gov.sg)



Meet the Expert

Chung May Khuen

Director, National Museum of Singapore,
National Heritage Board

Presently director of the National Museum of Singapore (NMS), Chung May Khuen began her career as an assistant curator at the Asian Civilisations Museum in 1997 before joining NMS as a curator in 2003. After a stint at the Heritage Conservation Centre, she rejoined NMS in 2019. Among the exhibitions she has curated are *In the Mood for Cheongsam: Modernity and Singapore Women* (2012) and *The Wedding Dress: 200 Years of Wedding Fashion from the Victoria and Albert Museum, London* (2012).

She shares with *MUSE SG* the impetus for the museum's shift in focus to include the present with the Collecting Contemporary Singapore initiative, the change in her perception of the role of technology in museums, and her hopes for the future of NMS.

01.

HI, MAY KHUEN! PLEASE TELL US WHAT LED YOU TO JOIN THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF SINGAPORE.

I studied history at the National University of Singapore. However, I never did a module on Singapore history as I resisted studying a subject I felt was too close to home; you know, how the grass is usually greener on the other side? I was more interested in learning about other peoples' cultures. I joined the Asian Civilisations Museum as an assistant curator in 1994. There, I looked after the South Asia collection and was involved in the exhibition *Krishna: The Blue God*, as well as international travelling exhibitions such as *Eternal Egypt: Treasures from the British Museum*. I also curated the permanent South Asia galleries which opened in 2003.

That same year, an opportunity came up to join the Singapore History Museum [predecessor of today's National Museum

of Singapore]. I jumped at the chance because I was attracted by the museum's plans to open a new fashion gallery. I've always loved fabrics as they are a key component of material culture. I find fashion to be a very underrated aspect of Singapore culture, even though much can be said about the identity of a people through the lens of what they wear. I am particularly interested in the independence of women expressed through clothing in the 1950s and '60s.

02.

HOW HAS THE NATIONAL MUSEUM CHANGED OVER THE YEARS SINCE YOU JOINED?

I joined the museum in 2003 when it was undergoing a major shift—we spent a lot of time thinking about what the museum should be. A survey conducted earlier revealed that a significant number of people in Singapore thought of museums as generally dull and did not enjoy visiting them. In response, Lee Chor Lin, the museum director at the time, charted an





entirely new direction: she was convinced that the museum should no longer be a traditional space focusing merely on the historical development of Singapore, but move towards themes exploring social history and popular culture. The museum would also become a lifestyle destination for all segments of society.

Thereafter, the museum began delving into more relatable topics like fashion, food, film and photography, with galleries dedicated to these themes set up in the former Singapore History Gallery. In doing so, the museum expanded its reach to different demographics. We wanted people to visit the museum not just for its exhibitions, but also for other activities. In line with this, the museum launched the Cinémathèque film programmes and a restaurant opened on the premises in 2004.

After Chor Lin, my predecessor Angelita [Teo] took over as director. Angelita was fascinated by tech and how it could be used to enhance the museum experience. At first, I was rather resistant to this idea as my curatorial training taught me to firstly showcase the object. I felt that new technologies would be a distraction. But over time I began to understand how tech could add value to the work of museums. Thus, when the museum

underwent another revamp to prepare for Singapore's golden jubilee celebrations in 2015, we employed the use of multimedia to complement the narratives.

Angelita also introduced contemporary art to the museum by partnering cutting-edge artists such as [Japanese digital art collective] teamLab to offer fresh ways of presenting local narratives. Besides that, we also launched Digimuse, an initiative to engage the tech sector to encourage creative experimentation in cultural spaces. Digimuse has since supported a wide range of prototype projects including new experiences in immersive reality and dynamic conversations enabled by artificial intelligence.

03.

WHAT IS YOUR TAKE ON THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY IN MUSEUMS TODAY?

Tech is a fact of modern life, particularly with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. It has opened new doors and changed the way we present content in our museums. The visitor experience begins online even before one steps into the actual exhibition space. This prelude may even take the form of an online game to pique the visitor's interest first.



ABOVE LEFT

In the postwar section of the Singapore History Gallery, visitors step into a model kitchen typically found in an early Housing and Development Board flat built in the 1960s.

ABOVE

The Story of the Forest, an immersive multimedia experience produced by teamLab, is a key attraction at the National Museum's Glass Rotunda. It is also a good example of how the museum has harnessed technology to enhance the visitor's experience.

With technology, we can also solve the issue of showcasing collections that cannot be presented permanently. Take, for instance, the William Farquhar Collection of Natural History Drawings: only 40–50 illustrations from the collection's over 400 drawings can be displayed at any one time, and only for two years at most due to the fragile condition of the artefacts. What about the rest? To get around the problem, the museum commissioned teamLab to create a multimedia experience based on the collection. Visitors can now enjoy *The Story of the Forest*, which features almost 70 digitally rendered works from the Farquhar collection, at the museum's Glass Rotunda.

04.

COLLECTING CONTEMPORARY SINGAPORE IS A RELATIVELY NEW INITIATIVE WHERE THE MUSEUM'S COLLECTION HAS EXPANDED TO INCLUDE CONTEMPORARY ARTEFACTS THAT REFLECT OUR CURRENT TIMES. WHY DID NMS ADOPT THIS NEW COLLECTING STRATEGY?

This strategy is inspired by the 'rapid response collecting' concept where museums expand their collections to include artefacts relating to major moments in recent history or are relevant to contemporary events. For us, the COVID-19 pandemic was the most recent catalyst. The last time we faced a similar situation was the SARS outbreak in Singapore that occurred in March 2003, not long after I started work as a curator at NMS. I remember Chor Lin quickly getting into action, working with Singapore Press Holdings to commission photography at Tan Tock Seng Hospital—the epicentre of the outbreak.

With that experience, I knew we had to act swiftly when the COVID-19 pandemic broke out. At the same time, we realised that the initiative must not be just a one-off response but should continue even after—and so Collecting Contemporary Singapore began.

This represents a broadening of our focus from the past towards the present. For instance, the exhibition, *Off/On: Everyday Technology that Changed Our Lives, 1970s–2000s*, which ended its run in October 2022, continued the principle of featuring a topic that's important to us in daily life. There was also some continuity from *Picturing the Pandemic: A Visual Record of Covid-19 in Singapore* held in 2021 in terms of our reliance on technology. The latter was the museum's first exhibition based on the Collecting Contemporary Singapore initiative.

We felt that *Off/On* was successful in sparking interesting conversations; seeing families of different age groups, even three-generational ones, coming to view the exhibition was really nice. It was a very tactile exhibition—for example, we recreated the experience of using a pager, now a veritable relic, to send messages, and visitors could touch the typewriters displayed.



A section of the exhibition, *Off/On: Everyday Technology that Changed Our Lives, 1970s–2000s*.



05.

HOW DO YOU PERCEIVE THE
ROLE OF THE MUSEUM TODAY?

I see the museum playing a critical role today as a social space enjoyed by people for what it is; for some, just because they want a place to hang out. But I also see it as a space for people seeking solitude, where they can escape from the stressors of daily life or the harsh reality of the ongoing pandemic. I think the latter is something we can better appreciate today after battling the worst of the pandemic.

Since 2006, the museum has been making concerted efforts to move away from traditional and elitist ideals of what makes a museum, to becoming a more relevant space for the community—a people's museum where everyone is welcomed, and with no barriers for all strata of society. I know some people in the past didn't dare step into the colonial-era building that houses NMS because they just found it too intimidating.

One of the ways we are making the museum more accessible is through Collecting Contemporary Singapore, which signals that we are interested in the 'now', issues that resonate with the people today. We want to be the bridge between the past and the present.

06.

YOUR BACKGROUND IS IN
FASHION. IF THE NATIONAL
MUSEUM WAS AN OUTFIT, WHAT
WOULD IT BE, AND WHY?

Oh, it would be the cheongsam, for sure—a classic! It emerged at the turn of the 20th century, and the modern cheongsam has survived over a hundred years. In the 1950s and '60s when women wanted to express their modern identity, the shape of the cheongsam took on a cosmopolitan flavour with a nipped-in waist for a more figure-hugging silhouette. The cheongsam symbolises resilience and modernity—and it is sexy.

The cheongsam has reflected different identities in different eras, but it always has a role to play. Similarly, this is my wish for the National Museum: to stay relevant for different audiences. Having a progressive mindset and constantly evolving according to the times will ensure that the grande dame will never go out of fashion. ●

**Black cheongsam with
embroidered dragon**

Creator: Unknown

Date: 1950s–70s

Dimensions: 121 × 41 cm

Accession no.: 2004-00715

Collection of: National Museum of Singapore

Cheongsam with gold sequinned dragons such as this one were a popular evening outfit among Singapore women in the late 1950s and 1960s. The dragon signifies strength, power and good luck in Chinese mythology. By the 1950s, the wearing of black cheongsam by women in Singapore had become more widespread due to both modernisation and Westernisation. Black—previously considered inappropriate and taboo because of its symbolic associations with death and tragedy—became a staple in women's wardrobes. A black cheongsam was considered extremely versatile as it was suitable for both day and evening functions when matched with the right accessories.

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**Once Upon
a Time in
Little India**

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Across the world, the epithet "Little India" has come to connote an enclave or a microcosm with a concentration of Indian and South Asian communities.

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**View of Singapore
from Mt Wallich
at Sunrise**

[Collections](#)

**Title**

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Mt Wallich at Sunrise

Region

Singapore

View of Singapore from
Mount Wallich, 1856
Collection of National Museum of Singapore,
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