



# Tanjong Pagar Railway Station

By Jerome Lim

*The crowd at Tanjong Pagar late on 30 June 2011 to witness the departure of the last train*

Standing silently and somewhat forgotten is a building that only a year ago, attracted many people's attention in Singapore. This building, the former Tanjong Pagar Railway Station, a magnificent architectural achievement once described as having a "palatial appearance", recently joined Singapore's list of National Monuments. Completed in 1932, the station was built as a centrepiece to underline Singapore's growing importance as an economic centre in the British Far East, serving as a gateway for the southernmost point in continental Asia to the Pacific and Indian Oceans.

Located opposite the docks at Tanjong Pagar, the station was one that had been well-considered. The then-Governor of Singapore, Sir Cecil Clementi, in his address on 2 May 1932 at the station's opening, had made the observation that it was "a natural junction between land-borne and sea-borne traffic" and mentioned that it was "where every facility will be afforded for interchange between railway and ocean shipping". The promise was, however, not fulfilled – Sir Cecil could not have predicted that the railway's importance as a means of transportation in the Malayan peninsula would diminish.

The station's opening that day was marked by the 5:15 pm arrival, from Bukit Panjang Station, of its first train. This train carried several dignitaries, including the Governor, the Sultan of Perak and Mr J Strachan, the General Manager of the Federated Malay States Railway. Several months prior to the opening (on 2 January 1932), the station had already made its public debut by playing host to a manufacturers' exhibition, an indication perhaps of its eventual destiny.

My encounters with the station took place at the end of the 1960s and early 1970s. My parents often drove past, drawn by the hawker stalls which operated in the evenings in a car park facing the station's entrance. It was while sitting at the tables in the car park that I would gaze across to the station's façade and stare at the four large, triumphal figures that flanked the portico's arches. The figures were the work of Angelo Vannetti of the Raoul Bigazzi Studios, Florence, and represented the pillars of the Malayan economy. These triumphal figures are evidence of the Art Deco style chosen by its architects, Swan and MacLaren. Thought to have been inspired by Helsinki's Central Station, it is believed the



*A few former food-stall operators having a last breakfast on 30 June 2011*

station also shares some of Washington DC's Union Station's design features. In fact Tanjong Pagar Station's architectural elements reveal both western and eastern influences; the green-tiled roof structures were inspired by the roofs of Chinese temples.

On the rare occasions when I found myself in the main hall, the high vaulted ceiling that rises some 22 metres above the ground caught my attention, as did the six sets of mosaic panels that resemble giant batik paintings. The mosaic panels, which contain a total of 9,000 tiles, looked very much like the batik prints hanging in my home. The panels depict scenes that represent the economies of the then Federated Malay States. At that time, the station had also housed a hotel on the upper floors, around the main hall. A huge sign in the northeast corner of the hall made sure this did not go unnoticed.

It was in the 1990s that I first took a train out of the station. Seemingly in defiance of its location, a huge blue "Welcome to Malaysia" sign stood above the station's entrance. A Points of Agreement (POA) had been signed in 1990 between the Malaysian government and their Singapore counterparts. This was to pave the way for the eventual moving of the station from Tanjong Pagar and would



*The station's façade with the four large triumphal figures*

involve its handover, along with the land the railway ran through (whose ownership was transferred to the railway administration through a 1918 ordinance, effectively making it part of Malaysia).

Two decades of protracted negotiations followed the 1990 POA before the differences in its interpretation resulted in a renegotiation of land swap arrangements between the two governments. The moving of the station from Tanjong Pagar and the handover of land was finally agreed on only in May 2010.

It was perhaps at the beginning of 2011 that interest in the station and in train journeys from Tanjong Pagar started to build. The realisation that the station was soon to close drew crowds not previously seen at the station. Many turned up

for a final look, to make a last departure or to have a last meal at the station, joined by a frenzy of photographers and members of both the local and overseas media, who seemed intent on recording the station's last days.

The final day of operations at the station, 30 June 2011, came all too soon. It was an especially poignant day for the station's railway staff and also for the food-stall operators – some were seen having a last breakfast in the almost empty room that only days before had been filled with food-stalls and tables filled with diners. Well before the first train was to depart, a crowd had already gathered in the main hall. Many had come to witness the final moments. Some had come to start a journey that would end with a final homecoming to the station on the very last train that evening.

The crowds grew as the day passed. As night fell, many more gathered to witness the historic departure of the last train out, to be driven by the Sultan of Johor. I had come on the very last in-bound train and was prepared for the reception at the station by the scenes I had seen along the way. Huge crowds had gathered at Bukit Timah Station and at each of the five level crossings, to bid goodbye. After the train finally pulled in, following a long delay at Bukit Timah, I lingered a while before stepping out onto the platform. I turned back for a final glance at the platform, realising that this would be the last of my many homecomings into Tanjong Pagar.

As I stepped through the barrier, a crowd of would-be passengers heading towards the same train that had pulled in (now the last train out) almost swept me along with them. I managed to squeeze my way out while a frenzy was developing in the public areas. Through the crowd I spotted the sultan, dressed in a checked shirt and speaking to reporters with tears in his eyes. At the final hour a huge cheer could be heard as the train pulled out, driven by the sultan. In a daze I stared after it as the train faded into the darkness. It was then that I heard the silence that was there despite the noise coming from the crowd. It was one that filled the air – a silence that after some 79 years would never again be broken by the once-familiar sounds, a silence that spoke of the promise that we now know will never be fulfilled.

---

**Jerome Lim** is a member of the Rail Corridor Consultation Group. He blogs on *The Long and Winding Road* ([www.thelongandwindingroad.wordpress.com](http://www.thelongandwindingroad.wordpress.com)) about his many experiences and impressions of life.

---



*The main hall of the station, part of the vaulted ceiling and batik-style mosaic panels can be seen*

*All photos by Jerome Lim*