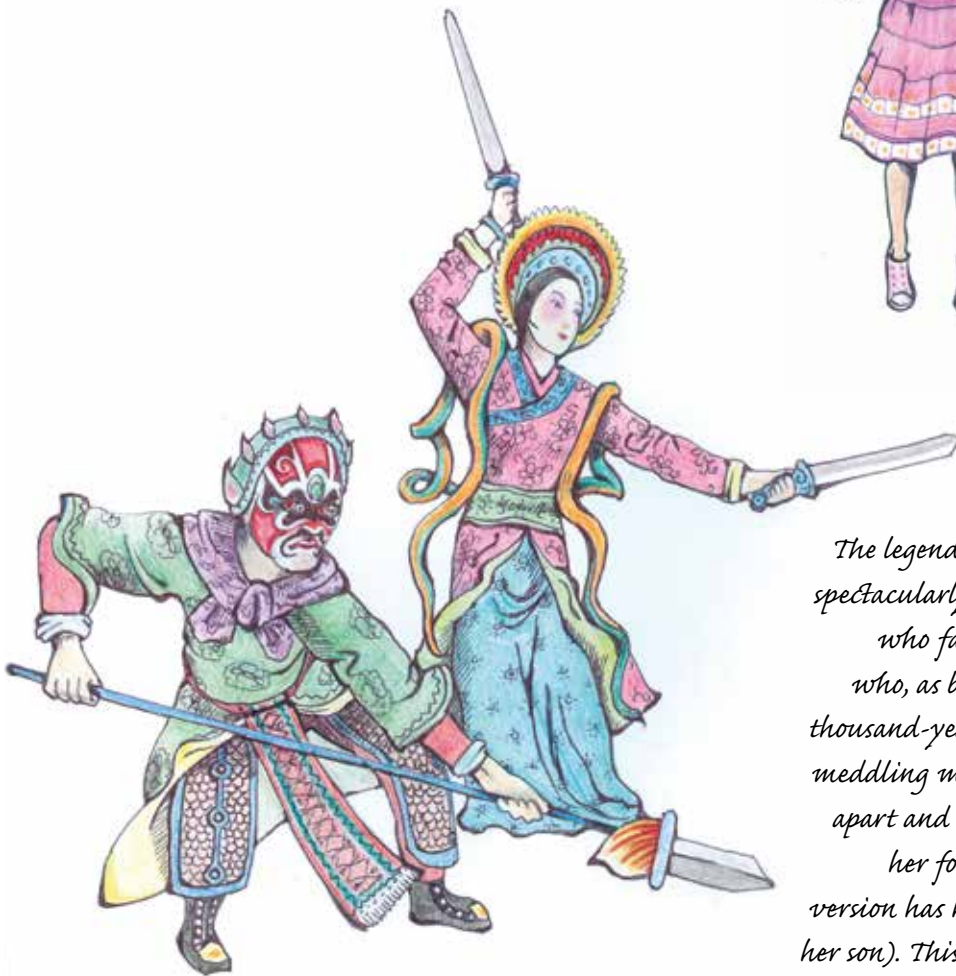


# Snake Tales

By Heather Clark

If you've spent any time living in Singapore, chances are you have a snake story. In my years here I've seen a few of our legless friends – most memorably a fluorescent green Oriental Whip Snake on the footpath to Demsey Hill and a python sedately digesting a great lump of cat on the granite banks of Keppel Bay. Though sadly reduced from their pre-colonial heyday, there are still 70 species of snakes in Singapore (only a very few are venomous). But they have left their sinuous mark on the nation and if you look carefully you can still see quite a few about – at times in some rather surprising places.

*We met Muhammad Salim, one of Singapore's last snake charmers, on a recent trip to Sentosa. His family has been here for three generations, charming snakes since the days of the British Empire. Popular roadside entertainers up until the 1960s, today there are fewer than a dozen snake charmers on the island. For five dollars, Salim plays the naskar (a flute made of bamboo and coconut shells) to his yellow albino python, while both the squeamish and the brave pose for photos with the snake.*



*The legend of Madame White Snake is a tale of spectacularly star-crossed lovers: a young scholar who falls in love with a beautiful woman, who, as bad luck would have it, is actually a thousand-year-old snake. After their marriage, a meddling monk is determined to keep the lovers apart and after many adventures he imprisons her for eternity in the Leifeng Pagoda (one version has her released due to the filial piety of her son). This is a view of the legend as it appears at Haw Par Villa, Singapore's eye-popping theme park of Chinese mythology.*

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