

PASSAGE

FRIENDS OF THE MUSEUMS SINGAPORE

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ISSUE I



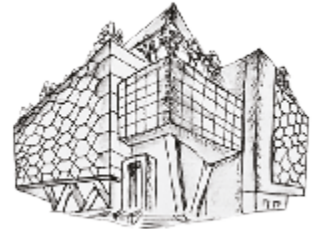
Trade



ART
HISTORY
CULTURE
PEOPLE



Friends
of the Museums
Singapore



TRAIN AS A FOM VOLUNTEER GUIDE

*Find out more about Friends of the Museums
docent training programmes**



PUBLIC INFORMATION MEETING



TUESDAY 7 MAY 2024 | 10 am to 12 pm

Asian Civilisations Museum
Basement One Auditorium
1 Empress Place
Singapore 179555



Sketches © Thea Tamsitt

**This event is open to
FOM members and the public.**

***FOM training will be conducted on
weekdays in English.**

**SCAN our QR Code
or check us out at
www.fom.sg for
more information**



C O N T E N T S



ON THE COVER

This *mancerina* is a 17th century tray designed to hold a *jícara* (a handleless hot chocolate drinking vessel). It blends Spanish design with Chinese porcelain artistry in order to contain a beverage adapted from Mesoamerican recipes. Read about this very special hot chocolate drinking accoutrement in *Cultural Hybridity: Art Simultaneously Within and Beyond Borders* (page 3).



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PASSAGE

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PRESIDENT'S BLOG

Greetings everyone! A very happy and healthy 2024 to all.

I am honoured to have been elected to the role of President. I have big shoes to fill and with members' full support I look forward to working with everyone and fulfilling my duties and responsibilities.

We will continue to celebrate our volunteers in the new year with our Volunteer Appreciation Night (VAN) on 14 May (mark the date!). The theme is Bollywood, so get cracking on your wardrobe and dance moves. More importantly, update your profile online to make sure we know all the contributions you have made to FOM and that our emails always reach you. We want to acknowledge and show appreciation for FOM volunteers with service pins. You can also check if your membership is valid at least a month before the event so our system will send you an invitation.

We held our 20th AGM last year and are happy that our use of electronic voting for the election of Council members and approval of resolutions went smoothly for the second time. FOM is on a firm footing with efficient technology and environment-friendly practices even as we embark on our tech refresh project in 2024.

At the AGM, we bade farewell to Millie Phuah for helming FOM as President for the past two years. We are grateful she will continue to offer guidance and advice to the new Council as Immediate Past President. We offer heartfelt thanks to our outgoing Council reps, Charlotte Dawson (Museums Rep) and Oksana Kokhno (Volunteer Appreciation and Membership Rep) for their dedication and commitment. We warmly welcome Larissa Wiegele (Communications Rep), Tabitha Manresa (Museums Rep), Paroma Sen (Volunteer Appreciation and Membership Rep) and Srivalli Sastry-Kuppa (co-Overall Head of Docent Training and co-opted Council member) who graciously stepped up to the leadership roles. A big shoutout to Michelle Lim for taking on the role of Honorary Secretary after a fruitful stint as Communications Rep. I am also grateful to Linda Lim (Honorary Treasurer), Robyn Lloyd (Activities Rep), Rupa Tamsitt (Marketing Rep) and Jyoti Ramesh (Volunteer Data Management

Officer and co-opted Council member) for agreeing to continue in their roles. I look forward to working with all these dedicated ladies who are, and have been, so generous with their time and talents.

Sadly, FOM said goodbye to a beloved member of our community, Tan Shook Fong, who passed away on 15 December 2023. Shook Fong, the 2022 recipient of the Salome de Decker award, was a familiar figure in our docent community. She remained an active docent right till the end. We pay our tribute to her on page 49.

In this first issue of *PASSAGE* of 2024, I want to offer my heartfelt gratitude to Charlotte Dawson who, as Managing Editor, has assembled an amazing production team who have been unstinting in their efforts to produce a magazine par excellence.

We look forward to 2024 and to bringing to all members a wide range of activities so as to deepen our understanding of the arts, as well as the cultural and historical heritage of Singapore and the region.

Lee Hong Leng
President
president@fom.sg



Millie and I bumped into each other in Ubud, Bali, while on our respective breaks.

FROM THE EDITORIAL TEAM

Happy 2024 and happy Year of the Dragon!

Please allow me a moment to introduce myself. I am Charlotte Dawson. Originally from New Orleans in the US, I was an architect early on in my career but have been overseas now for nearly 17 years. Through my work and volunteering my skillset lends itself well towards project management. I will be the Managing Editor for *PASSAGE* as we transition from the capable hands of Dawn and Tim. They set the bar high and I can only hope we do their previous years of work justice. On behalf of the *PASSAGE* team, I thank them for their time and contributions, and also continued support moving forward.

We have kicked off the 2024 year of *PASSAGE* Magazine with a theme that resonates with our FOM mission to embrace history, culture, heritage and art in the region: Trade! Singapura (a.k.a. Temasek) was renowned as an entrepôt trade hub in times of old, and Colonial Singapore was started by the East India Company for that very same reason just over 200 years ago. Merchants, traders, visionaries, labourers and more flocked to this new port city seeking their fortunes.

Prior the East India Company's arrival in Singapore, there were well-established trade routes, connections, and goods that made Southeast Asia a very desirable place to be! Traders from Europe, the Middle East, India, China, the Philippines, and across the Malay World introduced one another to new cultural practices and religions, new foodstuffs and luxury goods, and also some less savoury aspects of exchange. In this issue we discover the people and their wares that proliferated in the region through the auspices of trade. Our writers have shared a wealth of knowledge, and we forewarn you: be prepared to make a few surprising discoveries as you enjoy this issue!

Our *PASSAGE* team is a robust one and I must take a moment to recognise their dedication to the magazine. Priscylla Shaw (Features Editor) and Parul Mehra and Vaishali Teneja (News Editors) are strong partners whose input and advice have been invaluable. As Art Director, Christine Zeng is the



force behind our vision, working with the layouts to ensure the look of *PASSAGE* is one for which we can all be proud. Our sub-editors – Ian Cash, Julina Khusaini, Jyoti Ramesh, Tina Sim, and Tang Siew Ngoh – responded with timeliness and diligence in working with the writers. And once the layouts were complete, our ever-reliable proofreaders – Heike Bredencamp, Carla Forbes-Kelly, Aditi Kaul, Millie Phuah, and Mousumi Rao – ensured the quality of the final product was top notch. And to the Council members who contributed, advised and supported various aspects of the publication process, I give you many thanks. Kudos to you all for a smooth and successful first issue in 2024!

We are well underway preparing for the second issue with a theme of Mountains and Rivers. We invite all our readers to consider article submissions for the third issue: The Fantastic Issue! If you have an idea about mythical creatures, fantastic beasts, mystical animals, or deities on earth, please email us at passage@fom.sg.

Charlotte Dawson
Managing Editor, *PASSAGE*
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CULTURAL HYBRIDITY: ART SIMULTANEOUSLY WITHIN AND BEYOND BORDERS

GERALDINE LIMPO SHARES THE CULTURAL EXCHANGE THAT LED TO HYBRID PRODUCTS THAT FLOURISHED DURING THE ACAPULCO-MANILA GALLEON TRADE.



Reception of the Manila Galleon by the Chamorro in the Ladrone Islands, ca. 1590. Image sourced from Wikimedia Commons.

Human beings are social animals who mirror each other's brain activity upon encounter and communication. Such reactions and synergies stemming from interpersonal contact is often reflected in material culture.

Then as it is now, trade sets an ideal stage for intercultural dialogue. In the special exhibition entitled *The Manila Galleon Trade* at the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM), artefacts are lit up in dramatic fashion, deftly transporting audiences to 1565. That year marked the start of a 250-year period when trade connected Asia to the Americas (present-day Mexico and Central America) and Europe.

SILVER FROM THE AMERICAS

China, Spain, Acapulco (port city in Mexico) and Manila (Philippines) are the main actors of our historical narrative. Ming China (1368-1644), suffering hyperinflation as a result of overprinting paper money, decided to shift to silver currency. Silver supply from Japan was insufficient so China turned elsewhere. Almost concurrently, Spain wrestled Tenochtitlan (today's Mexico City) out of the leadership of Aztec ruler Moctezuma (d 1520). Tenochtitlan had bountiful natural resources, and one in particular greatly enriched Spain via the galleon trade: her silver mines.

One side of this Spanish silver dollar, minted in Mexico, bears the name of the Spanish King (Philippus V) with the Castille shield of arms (two lions and two castles),

assayer letters (MF) and denomination number (8). On the other side are two columns topped with crowns, between them two intersecting circles (symbolising Old and New Worlds) surmounted by a bigger crown (signifying Spain's dominance). On the outer register is printed: *Ultraque Unum* (In Latin: both are one). These silver coins became popular throughout Europe, Asia and the Americas because of its uniformity and wide circulation. It became the world's first global currency.

In addition to silver, the port of Acapulco collected Flemish lace, French linen, Venetian glass along with produce such as maize and chillies to load onto galleons headed to Manila. At the other end, the port of Manila assembled silk and porcelain from China; folding screens and lacquered objects from Japan; textiles, ivory and the gems from India; and spices from Java and the Moluccas. They loaded these products onto galleons constructed out of Philippine hardwoods in shipyards in Cavite. The rich exchange of goods influenced the fashion, behaviour, consumption habits, and thinking patterns of the Spanish, Mexicans and Filipinos.



Coin: 8 reales, with multiple Chinese silversmith's marks; silver, 1734, Mexico. From the Collection of the National Museum of Singapore.

GOLD FROM THE PHILIPPINES

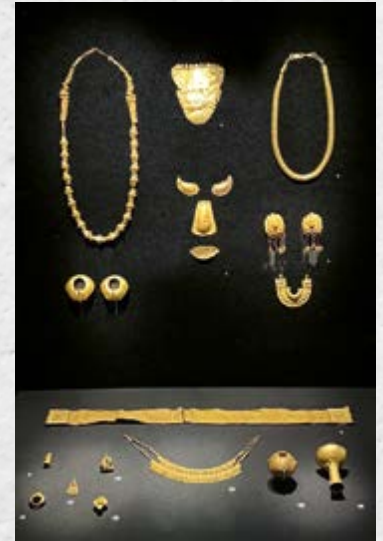
Rich veins of gold-bearing ore were forced to the surface of the earth's crust by massive volcanic activity, which also formed the archipelago. In ancient times, gold was relatively abundant and the earliest gold objects found date as early as 500 BCE.

Asian regional trade that predates Spanish colonisation is reflected in pre-colonial gold jewellery found in Butuan, which is dated from the 10th to 13th centuries CE. These gold pieces demonstrate strong influences from Hindu-Buddhism in India and maritime Southeast Asia.

Upon their arrival in the 16th century, the Spaniards recorded that every local man and woman wore gold on their ears and around their necks, wrists and ankles. It was part of one's dress and was valued across the social classes. Chieftains certainly wore an abundance of golden jewellery, affirming their power and prosperity. Despite its seemingly common usage, there was a mystical quality to gold as well. After death, spiritual forces were believed to travel in and out of the body through openings such as one's eyes and mouth. Gold covers, or masks, (right) were placed on the deceased one's face to protect the person from malignant spirits. These also were believed to assure the soul a cordial welcome into the afterlife.

Abundant in the Philippines and worn as part of daily dress by islanders, gold jewellery was part of their identity. From the 10th century CE, gold served as a measure of value as it was also considered a trade currency or good.

Concurrent to the Manila Acapulco galleon trade was the exchange of goods between Spain (in the Iberian Peninsula) and New Spain (as Mexico, Havana, Peru, and Bolivia were collectively referred to from the 16th to 19th centuries CE).



Face masks, belt, neck & ear ornaments: gold, 10th to 13th centuries CE, Philippines. Artefacts on loan from the Ayala Museum Collection and Vicky Amalingan-Sales, photo taken by author.



Petaca chocolatera: bamboo structure lined with leather embroidered in pita fibre, interior in coated linen, wrought iron fittings, chiselled and openwork, 17-18th century, Mexico. Image from the Museo Franz Mayer.



Mancerina: Porcelain with polychrome enamels, 18th century, China. From the Collection of the Asian Civilisations Museum.

DRINKING HOT CHOCOLATE MEXICO x SPAIN

The Aztecs (1300-1521) drank a mixture of *cacahua* (Nahuatl word that evolved to cacao), *atl* (meaning water) and cinnamon or chillies as elixirs of strength. When cacao was introduced by the Americas to Spain, the Spanish nobility was quickly won over, serving it as a decadent afternoon drink, and replacing chillies with expensive sugar. Drinking hot chocolate while dancing became fashionable, and the *mancerina* with its raised ring in the centre was created to keep the hot liquid from spilling onto dancers' clothes.

Leathercraft, on the other hand, went from Spain to the Americas. The *petaca chocolatera* was one more indulgence in the already luxurious chocolate drinking experience. Craftsmen in the Americas covered the woven bamboo box-shaped *petaca* with leather, attached European style metal fittings and partitioned the interior space to accommodate the pot, stirring rod, cups and related paraphernalia.



Virgin of Guadalupe, enconchado, Agustín del Pino (Mexico, active around 1705–28): oil on wood and mother of pearl lacquered on wood, early 18th century, Mexico. On loan from the Museo Franz Mayer, image from the Asian Civilisations Museum.

VIRGIN OF GUADALUPE MEXICO x NAMBAN (JAPAN x PORTUGAL) x CHRISTIANITY

Accompanying the trade goods from the port of Acapulco were Christian missionaries. Besides enriching the Spanish coffers, and expanding the Hapsburg empire, Spain's third objective for colonisation was to evangelise.

Europeans were charmed by the lustrous and smooth surfaces of lacquered objects imported from Japan; thus, Mexican artisans adopted the technique to create portable shrines with Christian iconography. In some cases, they embellished their lacquerwork compositions by painting coloured pigments on top of veneered mother-of-pearl pieces. This technique called *enconchado* was employed in creating the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe, Mexico's most beloved Christian saint.

The Virgin's face and hands, handpainted on wood, are depicted darker than European models, making the icon a powerful symbol of Mexican identity and faith.

JOHN THE EVANGELIST
MEXICO (AZTEC) x EUROPE x CHRISTIANITY

Objects made of feather are especially meaningful to the Maya and Aztecs whose creation myths are linked to Quetzalcoatl: deity of maize, fertility and regeneration. Quetzalcoatl is part-quetzal (bright bird native to South and Central Americas) and part-serpent. Aztecs regarded birds (who possess flight) as special living beings linked to the heavens; thus, their rituals and weapons incorporated feathers of the brightly coloured birds like the quetzal. During Spanish colonisation, feather artists (*amantecas*) carefully selected and cut coloured plumes to form compositions. For them, coloured feathers plucked out of living birds symbolised power and authority. One of two feather mosaics in the special exhibition depicts John the Evangelist holding a chalice. The scene recalls a legend wherein he was given a cup of poisoned wine but was unharmed—demonstrating how Christian faith prevails.



John the Evangelist: feather mosaic and paper on copper, 17th century, Mexico. On loan from the Fundacion Nacional de Historia (Mexico), image from the Asian Civilisations Museum.



Virgin Mary: ivory and gold gilding, 17th century, Philippines, decorated in Mexico. From the collection of the Asian Civilisations Museum, photo by Charlotte Dawson.

THE VIRGIN MARY
PHILIPPINES x CHINA x MEXICO x INDIA x CHRISTIANITY

The Virgin made of ivory is a fascinating case study. The ivory is sourced via regional (Asian) trade. A Chinese artisan living in Manila carved the icon based on European images but ascribed local features (details of the face, hair, body proportions). When the icon reached Mexico via the galleons, Mexican artisans added gold gilding. This cross-cultural artmaking demonstrates how craftspeople in Manila and Mexico engaged in their world of artistic creation while remaining aware of other worlds.

PIÑA
AMERICAS x PHILIPPINES

Pre-colonisation, women in some tribes across the Philippine archipelago did not wear anything above the waist. This was problematic given the Christian definition of femininity and respectability taught by the Spanish missionaries. Thus, the collarless boxy blouse with bell sleeves (*baro*) came to being and was locally adopted by *mestizas* (people of mixed indigenous and European heritage) and female Christian converts.

When Acapulco exported red Spanish pineapple *Ananas Comosus* to Manila, Filipinos experimented on extracting fibre from its leaves to weave *piña*, based on their heritage of extracting fibres from wild banana. The *baro* is part of the four-piece ensemble called the *Maria Clara* whose form was inspired by Victorian silhouettes and aforementioned Christian virtues. The *Maria Clara* is closely linked to the identity of the Filipina, and continues to be worn as national dress.



Piña: pineapple fibre, late 19th to early 20th century, Philippines, Intramuros Administration. Photo by author.



Our Very Noble and Loyal City of Mexico: folding screen depicting view of Mexico City, attributed to Diego Correa: tempera and oil on paper, wood, gold gilding, 17th century, Mexico. On loan from the Collection of the Museo Nacional de Historia, image from the Asian Civilisations Museum.

FOLDING SCREEN DEPICTING VIEW OF MEXICO CITY MEXICO x JAPAN

The efflorescence of art resulting from the active exchange of material culture, traditions and philosophies combined with the mobility of diverse groups of people is evidenced in the hybrid forms of other secular artefacts.

Japanese folding screens, decorative objects that doubled up as room dividers, were traditionally painted by master artists with landscape scenes, depictions of the four seasons and folklore. Usually executed in six panels that may easily be folded and unfolded like an accordion, visual imagery was painted using tempera on silk or Japanese handmade paper *washi*. During the Edo period (1603-1868), gold leaf was added to enhance the composition, and lacquer was applied onto its bamboo lattice frame. Simultaneously impressive and delicate, Japanese folding screens made worthy tributes to Spanish royalty.

Commissioned Mexican painters and craftsmen adopted and replaced some elements of the folding screen to make it their own. First, national identity is reflected in compositions of idealised local landscape, indigenous festivities and historical events using tempera and oil on paper. Secondly, local artisans added more panels. On the painted folding screen displayed in the special exhibition (*above*), numbers appear beside 84 landmarks linked to local history, and the index located on the lower left corner of the composition identifies each one. Given that it is the Spanish who

introduced Christianity to the indigenous peoples and that most of the landmarks are Christian edifices, the agency of (Spanish) power and authority is one new function that the Mexicans added to the folding screen.

MANILA SHAWL MEXICO x CHINA x SPAIN

Silk was China's main export in exchange for silver. Manila shawls (*mantones de Manila*) are large silk scarves richly embroidered in Canton with flowers and elements of Chinese iconography. Named after the route that transported these luxurious objects from China; fringed Manila shawls rose in popularity among the fashionable Mexican and Spanish ladies. The special exhibition proudly displays two pieces; the luxuriant floral embroidery on the shawl with a black ground features well-dressed Chinese gathered in a pavilion, their faces delicately painted in thinly carved ivory pieces sewn into the fabric.

These artefacts are fruits of synergistic creation and recreation, innovation and hybridity that took place when diverse people met, acknowledged beauty and chose to work together. They demonstrate how meaningful encounters are both social experiences and platforms on which material culture, habits and belief systems evolve.

Manila Galleon: From Asia to the Americas runs until 17 March 2024. Guided tours are free with an ACM admission ticket, and commence at 10:30am and 3pm daily. [P](#)



Manila shawl: silk, bone, Qing China (1644-1911). On loan from the Museo Franz Mayer, image from the Asian Civilisations Museum.

GERALDINE LIMPO guides at the Asian Civilisations Museum, the National Gallery (Singapore) and the private galleries at Gillman Barracks.

EDIBLE TRADE CURRENCIES

LEE SHIN JIE TRACES THE HISTORY OF EDIBLE CURRENCIES.

Unless otherwise stated, all images courtesy of Wikipedia Commons.



Mound of Salt

Why do we use the phrase ‘worth your weight in salt’? This saying is thought to have originated from Ancient Rome where it is believed that wages for soldiers were sometimes paid in parts in salt. Derived from the Latin origin of the word ‘salary’, *salārium*, which in turn, stemmed from *salārius* or relating to salt, one can clearly see the link between salary and salt despite the lack of solid proof to this effect.

But, apart from salt, what other edible trade ‘currencies’ did we have in history? Grains were certainly one and spices, such as black pepper dubbed the ‘black gold’ made the list. In Mesoamerica, the famous ones were cacao beans and chillies. Certain types of alcohol also joined the party and this list is not exhaustive. Even today, a certain Italian Bank allegedly accepts wheels of Parmesan Reggiano cheese as collateral for loans!

IN THE BEGINNING

Trade has long existed since prehistoric times before the usage of common coinage systems that developed independently in various cultures more than two and half millennia ago.

Trade began with the barter system. Over time, some items became more valuable than others and lo and behold, we have the predecessor of a common legal tender.

SALT

Salt is the only rock mineral that is indispensable in human diet to ensure our survival. Thus, unsurprisingly, in ancient times, salt was a highly valued commodity especially in places that are far away from salt production areas. Due to its importance, salt forms a part of transactional currencies in many ancient societies becoming more often than not, a government-controlled commodity.



*Amole, Salt Bar
Currency of Ethiopia.*

In Ethiopia, salt was made into bars called 'amole' with numerous records indicating it was once the most favoured form of currency and preferred over other types of payment. They were also used to pay taxes and fines. Salt currency was widely used in sub-Saharan Africa since as early as the sixth century where they were traded ounce to ounce for gold. And these salt bars were still in circulation up until the mid-20th century.

GRAINS

In many cultures, where grains were a major staple food item, they become a preferred form of currency. Throughout various dynasties in China, grains were used to pay agricultural and land taxes in lieu of silver.

In ancient Mesopotamia, as barley grains were considered cheap monies they served as day-to-day currency, alongside precious metals such as gold and silver which were of higher value.

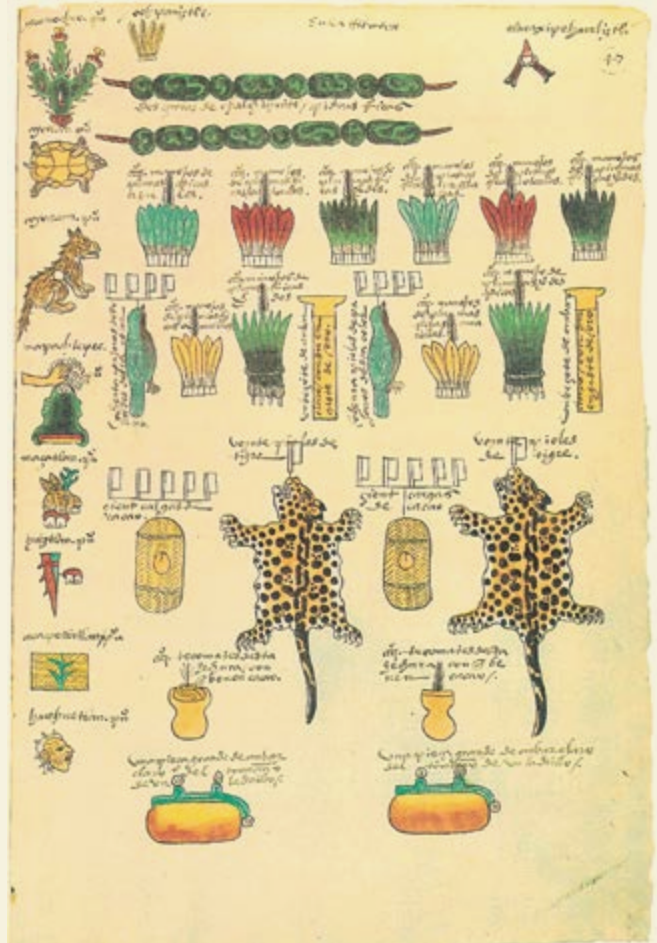
BLACK PEPPER

The all-familiar spices that propelled global trade through various spice routes were once top of the list in their value. Some spices such as cinnamon, clove, nutmeg were more precious than others, with black pepper, crowned the King of Spice. The latter was also coined Black Gold, further indicating its trade value due to the scarcity and obscurity (to the western world, at least) of its source (originally from Malabar coast, India) and its usage in food preparation as well as medicinal purposes.

Thus it was unsurprising that black peppers were used as currency in Europe and some other parts of the world during the Middle Ages up until the 18th century. In its heyday, one could pay taxes, rent and even solicitors with spices. Unfortunately, after the Age of Exploration, black pepper became more accessible to the European market and now a peppercorn rent is the exact opposite of the value black pepper once was.



Ming Herbal Painting of Black Pepper.



The Codex Mendoza (c. 1541). Lists of tribute extracted twice a year from the cacao growing region of Soconusco in Southern Mexico to the Aztec empire in the form of cacao beans. The bags next to the jaguar skins signifies load of cacao beans.

CACAO

Does money grow on trees? Well, they do, in the form of cacao beans or more accurately, cacao seeds that come from the fruit of a tree which originated from the Americas. In ancient Mesoamerican civilisations, cacao had a sacred status and was used only during religious and special ceremonies. Consequently, the seeds were used to pay taxes and even marriage dowries. In fact, they were so valuable that counterfeit cacao beans made of clay were excavated at multiple archaeological sites in Mexico and Guatemala.

Cacao beans were so well established as a currency that a list of specific quantification was devised taking into account of market fluctuation and the quality of the beans themselves. For example, in the 1500s, a good turkey can be purchased for 100 cacao beans whilst a fully ripe avocado equates to one cacao bean and the list goes on. Such information on the economies of cacao beans currency was noted in documents such as *Codex Mendoza*, an Aztec codex named after Don Antonio de Mendoza (the Viceroy of New Spain) who supervised its creation, written by natives using traditional Aztec pictograms with annotations in Spanish, and also in the *Florentine Codex* (a 16th century ethnographic research study in Mesoamerica by Spanish Franciscan friar Bernardino de Sahagún).

CHILLI OR CHILLI PEPPER

Ah, chilli! The love of many in the region. Alas, it is not a native plant of Asia! Like cacao, the plant is from the Americas. Chillies, the fruits of a shrub, formed a vital part of the diet of early Americans. It was of such significance to the local population that a meal without chillies was seen as fasting! Chillies were nourishing not just the living but also offered to dead elites and even made into salsas for the gods. With its great significance and appeal to the local population, it naturally became a reliable form of exchange.

It was recorded by Diego Alvarez Chanca, a journalist and physician on Christopher Columbus's second voyage to the New World that an annual tribute of 1,600 bales of chillies was to be paid by each province of Mexico to the 9th Aztec Emperor, Montezuma II.

ALCOHOL

Alcohol, the chosen beverage for many parties throughout human history. A wise person once said that for as long as human history exists, so has alcohol. Hence, it is hardly a stretch to see alcohol being used as a medium of exchange.

The world's oldest payslip, an approximately 5,000-year-old cuneiform clay tablet (*right-hand page, above*) from Mesopotamia in the city of Uruk (modern day Iran), recorded wages being paid in beer as it was a staple drink back then for everyone in Mesopotamia.

Later on, in medieval Europe, ale, dubbed 'small beer' was also a staple food item, consumed in large quantities daily by every man, woman and child because water sources were often contaminated. Thus, ale which was boiled during the brewing process made it safe for consumption. Moreover, ale was nutritious, cheap and easy to produce, and became a substitute for water. Naturally, these useful calorie-rich pints of essential daily sustenance were often used to pay wages of labourers. In the 14th century, women and children were said to drink five pints of ale a day.

In Australia around 1790, rum became a trade currency. It was such a popular form of currency that even major building construction projects such as the Sydney Hospital were paid in rum.

Even as late as the early 20th century, bottles of imported alcohol were used as transitional currency in Southern Nigeria. It was such a success that people often hoarded crates of alcohol and became rich as a result. This lucrative trade was known as 'gin currency' even though other types of imported trade spirits were also used.



Capsicum Annuum. Köhler-s-Medizinal Pflanzen-027.



Photo of the back of a modern one-pound tea brick with eight sections for ease of breaking into smaller portions. Most tea bricks are from Southern Yunnan in China and parts of Sichuan Province.

TEA BRICKS

Tea, another vital commodity in the history of trade. Compressed tea in the form of bricks were once commonly used as currency in the hinterland stretching from China to central Asia. For the nomads of Mongolia and parts of Siberia, these were a preferred form of currency over metal coins as tea bricks could be consumed when food was scarce and were also used as medicine for treating colds and coughs. In the 18th century, small silver coins, struck in Ladakh, India (which had trade relations with Tibet), were known as *jau* (*ja'u*) meaning 'a little tea' serving as a reminder of tea bricks' previous status as currency in the region. Up until the 19th century, tea bricks were still used by the Chinese to pay for Mongol troops.



Clay tablet in proto-cuneiform, late Uruk period, 3000-3100 BCE, from the Collection of the British Museum. The upright jar with a pointed base symbolises beer with the beer itself shown as wavy lines inside the jar.

COCONUT

This native Indo-Malaya plant was circulated throughout islands in the southern Pacific Ocean to South America by Polynesian immigrants, whilst traders brought it to Egypt and the rest of the Mediterranean around 500 CE. In 1769, Captain James Cook’s men traded 10 coconuts for a white glass bead. On the Nicobar Islands, coconuts were used as barter currency and petty cash as recently as in the 1950s. In 1885, Indian merchants established an exchange rate of 500 coconuts to 1 rupee.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Whilst our modern societies have long since moved on from using food items as medium of exchange, it is no doubt interesting to look back at how the use of edible currencies have developed and shaped our economies. From items of staple sustenance to modern intangible virtual money, we have indeed come a long way, evolving and developing a system of trust in the medium of exchange. For what are paper or virtual monies, both of which without intrinsic values but for the trust in a system that relevant institutions will honour them as promissory notes?

Our ancestors may well look at our virtual currency and find it inconceivable to be accepting effectively ‘nothing’ as a form of payment. Will edible currencies make a comeback one day? As the saying goes, ‘never say never’, but perhaps best not be there when that happens. **P**

LEE SHIN JIE guides at the Asian Civilisations Museum.



Picture depicting a lady bringing spices to a lawyer in France in the time of Louis XIV, no doubt in payment of a fee. Image from Spices: A Global History by Fred Czarra.

FROM INDIA TO THE WORLD

ADITI MANN EXPLORES THE INDIAN TRADE TEXTILES AT THE ASIAN CIVILISATIONS MUSEUM.

Throughout history, India has been renowned for its rich and varied textile traditions, evidence of which can be found in several textual and visual sources.

ANCIENT PERIOD

The production of cotton textiles can be traced back to the Indus Valley Civilisation which dates back to the third millennium BCE. The steatite sculpture of the Priest King from Mohenjo-Daro (in today's Sindh, Pakistan), one of the important cities of the Indus Valley Civilisation, provides the evidence. The textile draped over the left shoulder of the priest king has the trefoil pattern, and there is evidence of red colouration as well. This is proof that textiles were woven, patterned, and coloured in the third millennium BCE.

Not only were textiles being produced in the Indian subcontinent, but they were also being exported as well. Famously, Pliny the Elder, the Roman historian and geographer of the first century CE, in his book *Naturalis Historia* complains that Indian textiles are draining Rome of its gold. Archaeological excavations in various parts of the world like Niya (Xinjiang, China), Nahal Omer (southern Israel), Berenike and Fustat (Egypt) and others have yielded Indian textile fragments dating from the first to the 14th centuries CE. Textiles being organic in nature degrade and disintegrate over time, so most textiles from this early period have not survived. However, several intact pieces have been found in Indonesia, with the earliest dated to the 14th century CE. These early textiles are extremely rare, and the ACM is very lucky to have a few in their collection. By the 17th century, it was said that Indian textiles clothed the world; Indian textiles were being traded to Europe, the Americas, Africa, and the Middle East in the west, and to Southeast Asia, China, and Japan in the east. In fact, Indian textiles were an important commodity lubricating the wheels of trade in the early modern world.

COLONIAL PERIOD

The early textile trade was conducted by Indian and Arab merchants, until the arrival of the European trading companies in Asia in the 16th century CE. The European trading companies came to Asia in search of spices and were confronted with a thriving, well-established intra-Asian trade. Spices were exchanged for Indian textiles – the



Statue of the Priest King from Mohenjo-Daro.
Image courtesy of Harappa.com.

spice merchants would not accept any European goods in exchange for the spices. The Europeans were forced to re-think their strategy to obtain spices. It was the Dutch VOC who first came up with the idea of a three-way trade. Thus, a triangular trade developed where silver or gold was used by the trading companies to buy Indian textiles, which were then exchanged for spices and other commodities in



An Indian Weaver and His Wife (Company Painting Style). From the Collection of the National Museum, Copenhagen, Denmark.

Southeast Asia. These commodities were then shipped to Europe where they were sold at high prices which then generated the silver/gold used to buy more Indian textiles. Soon the European trading companies were competing with each other to buy Indian textiles.

DESIRABILITY OF INDIAN TEXTILES

The question arises – what was so special about Indian textiles that they were in such high demand all over the globe? The dominance of Indian textiles can be attributed to four main reasons. Firstly, cotton has one major advantage over other fibres like silk or wool – it can withstand repeated and vigorous washing, which makes it ideal for clothes and other household uses. Cotton cultivation in India dates back at least five thousand years and the Indian artisan’s mastery over the spinning and weaving of cotton is very well known. The Romans called the fine, tightly spun cotton cloth “woven air”. Secondly, the Indian artisan’s mastery over dyes and colour remained unbeatable for centuries. Unlike silk or wool, it is exceedingly difficult to infuse colour on cotton fibre or cloth with natural dyes. Yet Indian artisans with their in-depth knowledge of dyes, dyestuffs and the complex chemistry associated with them, developed and perfected recipes for bright, vibrant colours that were light-fast and wash-fast. The third reason was the Indian artisan’s knowledge and skill of the various techniques to decorate cloth – including different types of weaving, dyeing, embroidery and adding other embellishments. Lastly and the most important reason was the ability of the Indian artisan to adapt and customise their products for different cultural and aesthetic

preferences, which helped them cater to varied markets.

The three main manufacturing regions for Indian trade textiles were Gujarat in Western India, The Coromandel Coast in Southern India, and later Bengal in Eastern India. The antiquity of the textile trade can be gauged from the fact that these three regions have been mentioned as “cotton exporting centres” in the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* from the first century CE.

PRIZED PATOLA

Patola were the most prized of all Indian trade cloths. These were the traditional silk sarees of Gujarat in Western India, that were made using the complex double ikat technique where both the warp and the weft threads were tied and dyed according to a pattern before the yarns are woven into cloth. The complete pattern becomes visible only after the cloth is woven. This technique is so complicated, laborious, and time-consuming, that it is practised only in three countries in the world – India, Indonesia, and Japan. *Patola* were probably introduced into Southeast Asia by Gujarati merchants who dominated the early textile trade. The size of the cloth and the motifs were adapted to suit the preferences of the Southeast Asian markets. *Patola* were most highly regarded in Indonesia where they were attributed talismanic properties and were cherished, revered, and preserved as sacred heirlooms. They were frequently used as ceremonial and diplomatic gifts given by the rulers. They also served as indicators of class and status – wearing a *patola*, in the form of breeches underneath a *dodot* (ceremonial waist cloth) by men or as shoulder cloths or waist cloths by women, became the prerogative of royalty and nobility. The eight-pointed star



Silk Patola Breeches. From the Collection of the Asian Civilisations Museum.

motif known as *Chaabdi Bhat* (flowering basket) in Gujarati and *Jelamprang* in Bahasa Indonesia was one of the most popular motifs in Indonesia. The designs and motifs of the *patola* have also greatly influenced the various indigenous textile traditions in Indonesia.

Patola have always been among the most expensive of the Indian trade textiles mainly because they were traditionally made of silk, which is a more expensive material, and because of the complex double ikat technique used to make them. Silk *patola* therefore were mostly used by the upper strata of society. To meet the needs of the others who could not afford these expensive textiles, block printed cotton imitations were specially produced in Gujarat itself for the Indonesian market. Since these were made of a cheaper material – cotton, and were produced using the simple block printing technique, these textiles were more affordable. These too were revered just as much as the silk *patola* and were used

as ceremonial hangings, ceremonial gifts and were preserved as family heirlooms. The motifs on these imitation *patola* were exactly the same as those on silk *patola*. For the Indonesian market, *tumpal* or the triangular motifs were added at the two ends of the cloth. This motif is commonly found in Southeast Asian textiles where they symbolise growth, fertility, and the holy Mount Meru.

COLOURFUL CHINTZ

While *patola* were the favoured Indian trade textile in Indonesia, *chintz* were the favoured Indian textile in Europe. *Chintz* was the European name for Indian textiles that were patterned using the techniques of *kalamkari* (hand painting). The word ‘*chintz*’ is thought to have originated from the Hindi word *chheent* which means speckled, sprayed, or spotted and was used to denote patterned cloth. The word *kalamkari* is derived from two Hindi-Persian words - *kalam*,



Imitation Patola with the flowering basket motif. From the Collection of the Asian Civilisations Museum.



Palampore. From the Collection of the Asian Civilisations Museum.


which means pen, and *kari*, which means craftsmanship. It is an ancient Indian technique in which a bamboo pen is used to draw the patterns or motifs by hand on the cloth. Using a combination of the mordant dyeing process and the resist dyeing process, the entire cloth is decorated with colourful motifs and designs. Like the double ikat process, *kalamkari*, with its twenty-three-step process, is also complex, laborious and time consuming. Although this technique was practised in various parts of India, the trade textiles were produced on the Coromandel Coast which is the southeastern coast of India. *Kalamkari* textiles from this region were exported to Southeast Asia, the Middle East and Africa but it found the greatest popularity in Europe.

In the 16th century, European trading companies discovered that there was a market for chintz in Europe and soon started exporting them to Europe. At first, chintz were used as home furnishings in bedrooms and antechambers as wall hangings, curtains, bedcovers, bed hangings, and floor coverings, and by the mid-1600s it was used to fashion clothing for both women and men. The large, rectangular chintz used as wall hangings or bedcovers were called palampores, which comes from the Persian word *palangposh* which means bedcover. The most iconic central motif on the palampores was that of an exotic tree with flamboyant, multicoloured flowers emerging from a rocky mound. The inspiration for this design is thought to have come from Islamic metalwork, Chinese ceramics, English crewel work, and Dutch floral paintings and engravings. The Indian artisans blended these varied ideas to create a unique motif that appealed to Western tastes. The bright, vibrant colours added to

the overall appeal of these pieces. The craze for chintz continued throughout the 18th century despite government bans and chintz continued to dominate fashion in both dressing and furnishing.

IMPACT AND INFLUENCE

Indian trade textiles have had an enormous and lasting social, economic, and environmental impact throughout the world. The Industrial Revolution that started in Europe and completely changed the world started with the mechanisation of textile production in order to cope with the insatiable demand for Indian trade textiles. The craze for Indian cotton textiles led to the cultivation of cotton in America, and the associated slavery and slave trade. Not only did Indian trade textiles change the sartorial tastes and fashion around the world, but they also inspired many indigenous textile arts especially in Southeast Asia and Africa.

One important aspect of Indian trade textiles that is often overlooked is the knowledge, ingenuity, creativity, adaptability, and hard work of the Indian artisans who for millennia have been producing textiles that are still admired around the globe. So, on your next visit to the Asian Civilisations Museum, make it a point to stop by at the Fashion and Textiles Gallery on the third floor where a number of these beautiful Indian trade textiles are displayed. 

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DOWN SEASONED PATHS: TRADE ROUTES AND THEISM

MADDIE THAM EXPLORES ISLAM'S SPREAD AND THE SPICE TRADE

Photos provided by author unless noted otherwise.



The above map indicates the Spanish Galleon trade route in white and the Portuguese trade route in blue. Image accessed from Wikimedia Commons.

The European Age of Discovery was sparked in the 15th century by the desire of Western nations to secure direct access to the lucrative spice trade then under the control of Asian Muslim traders and middlemen in Venice and Genoa.

THE VERY ANCIENT SPICE TRADE

How the Muslims became the gatekeepers of the spice trade to Europe, was a matter of geography and commerce. Since pre-Islamic times, spices, incense, and other luxury goods had to pass through Arab hands on the way to the Egyptian and Greco-Roman world. In the second half of the first millennium BCE, Arab tribes of South and West Arabia had control of the land trade of spices from South Arabia to the Mediterranean Sea. Meanwhile in the north, another tribe, the Nabateans, had control of the trade route that crossed the Negev from Petra to the Gaza. The Nabatean capital of Petra served for centuries as an important trans-shipment point for goods to be graded and repackaged before being sent onward to

Gaza where ships bound for the Mediterranean awaited. The Nabatean Kingdom was annexed to the Roman Empire in 106 CE and Petra was one of the earliest cities of the Eastern Roman Empire to fall under Muslim rule in the seventh century CE.

RISE OF THE ISLAMIC REALM

The year 610 CE is taken as the founding date of the Islamic religion – marking the year of the first divine revelation to Prophet Muhammad. By 630 CE, Muhammad and his followers had gained control of the important trading and pilgrimage centre of Mecca after securing the support of the Arabian tribes. After Muhammad's death in 632 CE, Muslim leadership was successively held by four of his associates historicised as the Rightly Guided or Rashidun Caliphs. The title of Caliph carried both spiritual as well as temporal authority. Within a span of 30 years, the Rashidun Caliphs led successful military expeditions beyond the Arabian Peninsula into lands belonging to the Persian Sassanid and Eastern Roman Empires. Muslim influence thus expanded further across Mesopotamia, Syria, Egypt and North Africa.

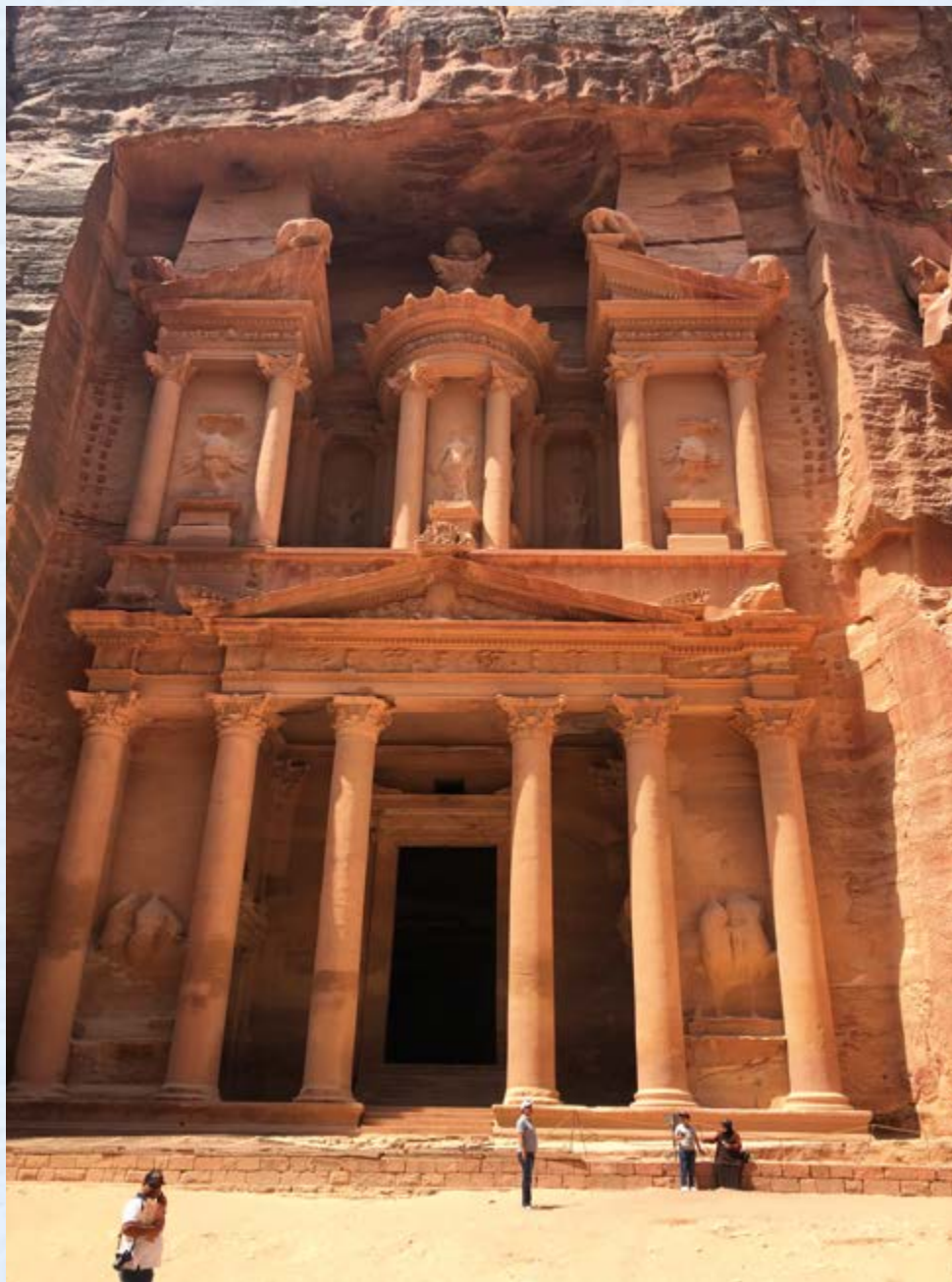
Later Arab and non-Arab Muslim dynasties would further expand Muslim territories. By 751 CE, Muslim hegemony was over parts of Spain in the west, throughout northern Africa, over all of Persia and the entire Middle East, spreading over Central Asia as far to the east as the edge of the Tang Empire in the Tarim Basin, and crossing the Indus River into the Indian subcontinent. This 'Muslim Empire' was not centrally controlled but rather an aggregation of various Muslim ruled territories governed by Islamic law.

The various Muslim capitals developed as urban centres of culture and learning. Places of worship and religious schools were built not only at the capitals but at key trading towns. The conversion to Islam as a faith was not automatic with conquest but came more gradually as the populace interacted with Muslim traders, settlers and religious teachers who moved through the expanded Muslim realm. Indeed, the peaceful process of trade is suggested as the

main factor for the spread of Islam by Arab and non-Arab converts to port cities in the Far East, Coastal South Asia and Southeast Asia.

ACROSS DESERTS, PLAINS AND HIGHLANDS

Just how far did Arab traders travel overland on the Silk Roads? Historical and archaeological sources indicate Korean-Arab contact was established at least by the Unified Silla Dynasty (676 to 918 CE). United Silla was roughly contemporaneous with China's Tang Dynasty (618 to 907 CE) and its capital at Gyeongju was an important trading hub, welcoming traders from China, Japan, Central and West Asia. According to a ninth century Arab source – Ibn Khurdadbih's *General Survey of Roads and Kingdoms* – the United Silla Kingdom traded silk, swords and musk with Arab Muslims for glass items and spices like cinnamon (likely *Cinnamomum verum*).



The iconic Treasury Building in Petra, Jordan.



Persian and Roman glassware were excavated from Silla Kingdom Royal Tombs. Collection of the Gyeongju Museum, Korea. The origins of glass can be traced back to Ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt. Glassware and glass making technology spread via trade to other parts of the world.

SPICES AND SHIPPING

The next form of contact between Arab Muslims and the lands to the East was via the maritime Spice Route linking the Middle East and South Asia to China with supply stops in Southeast Asia. A ninth century Arab ship salvaged off the coast of Belitung Island, Indonesia, provides us with information on the type of ships the Arabs used and the type of goods from China that was bound for the Middle East.

Chinese ceramics formed a large part of the Belitung ship's salvaged cargo. Recovered spice jars and star anise suggest spices had been loaded on the ship. Star anise (*Illicium verum*) together with cassia bark (*Cinnamomum cassia*) were Chinese spices exported to the west since Roman times. Chinese shipping was not active in maritime trade until the late Song Dynasty (960 to 1279 CE) when its naval capability was well developed. Prior to that, Chinese maritime trade and transportation were largely carried out using foreign shipping. Chinese merchants and missionaries would charter Indian or Arab ships to go westwards.



The Jewel of Muscat, a replica of the Tang era ship salvaged at Belitung was made in Oman and presented as a diplomatic gift to Singapore in 2010. Unlike most Arab dhows with triangular lateen sails, it has square sails. The original ship could have been made in India or the Arab Peninsula. It features a hull made of planks sewn with ropes made of vegetable fibre. This picture was taken when the Jewel of Muscat was housed at the Maritime Experience Museum at Sentosa, Singapore.



Ritual Cloth made from Gujarati resist and mordant dyed cotton, 17th-18th century, from the Collection of the Asian Civilisations Museum. Indian textiles from Gujarat and the Coromandel Coast were valued in Southeast Asia for daily as well as luxury and ceremonial use.

Meanwhile, since ancient times, Indonesian ships served as long distance carriers supplying Southeast Asian forest and sea products as well as spices like nutmeg (*Mryristica fragrans*) and cloves (*Syzygium aromaticum*) to China, South Asia and lands further west.

RISE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN MUSLIM PORTS

During the 10th to 14th century however, an Asian sea trade boom brought more foreign merchants to the ports of Southeast Asia as trade entrepots rather than supply stops. Along with South Asian and West Asian traders came Chinese traders to the ports of Southeast Asia to trade with each other and also source the region's products. The reliance on suitable monsoon winds to assist sea travel encouraged longer stays and even settlement at these ports. Foreign accounts attributed the introduction of Islam to this part of the world, to Arab and non-Arab Muslim traders while local literature and lore detailed the role of Muslim clerics and the influence of converted local rulers.

Expanded trade in the region gave rise to new port kingdoms in North Sumatra, Java's North Coast and the Spice Islands of Maluku. It would seem that the early inroads for Islam occurred at these new ports. The ruler of Samudra Pasai in north Sumatra is deemed to have converted to Islam in 1267. By the 15th century, the rulers of several other port kingdoms had adopted Islam. This included Gresik on Java's North Coast as well as Tidore and Ternate located in the Maluku Islands. By this time also, the powerful port kingdom of Malacca, founded by a Buddhist prince from Palembang, had also converted to Islam. Malacca held a key position as the gateway to the eastern Indian Ocean and as an entrepot for goods exchange. A plethora of goods would exchange hands in Malacca including tin from the Malay Peninsula, Sumatran gold, Indonesian spices, Chinese porcelain and silks, as well as Indian textiles.


CLOTH FOR CLOVES, NUTMEG AND PEPPER

The economy of Southeast Asia at that time was not fully monetised and a system of barter was in place where Indian textiles from Gujarat and the Coromandel Coast were greatly valued as a medium of exchange. Indian textiles would be brought to Malacca, as well as other ports in Sumatra, Java, the Philippines and what is today Vietnam, Myanmar and Thailand, to be exchanged for spices and other products.

From the 15th to 16th century, the South Asia to Southeast Asia leg of the spice trade was dominated by Muslim Gujarati traders who had access to Malabar pepper, which was then exported globally. More importantly, the Gujarati traders had a source of prized textiles that could be used in Southeast Asia to barter for spices and other goods.

CHANGING ROUTES AND MASTERS

This Asian trade ecosystem was disrupted by the Portuguese and later European arrivals into the East Indies. The Muslim Gujarati merchants were at the frontlines of conflict with the Portuguese who aimed to obtain control of the spice trade as well as spread the Catholic faith. When the Portuguese seized control of Malacca in 1511, the Gujarati and other Muslim traders decamped to Aceh. When the Portuguese disrupted pepper supplies in India, the Gujarati traders cooperated with Arab, Turkish and Acehnese shippers to operate an alternative pepper route from Aceh to the Red Sea, bypassing Portuguese naval strongholds in India and using pepper supplies from Sumatra. (China's insatiable demand had earlier prompted the growing of Malabar pepper as a cash crop in Java and Sumatra.)

However, there was no stopping the forces of European commerce. The Muslim Ottoman Empire's attempts to extend Turkish power into the Indian Ocean were scuppered by the Portuguese. The Portuguese followed later by the Dutch and British fought over strategic ports and spice producing areas in South Asia and Southeast Asia. In the process, local kingdoms lost their autonomy and their source of trade revenue. By the 18th century, Muslim domination over the spice trade had ended. However, its legacy has remained in the religious landscape of the world. 

FURTHER READING

An Early Age of Commerce in Southeast Asia, 900-1300 CE, by Geoff Wade. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 40(2), pp 221-265, retrieved via JSTOR.

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OLD AND FRANKINCENSE

KARIEN VAN DITZHUIJZEN TRACKS THE AROMATICS TRADE THAT LINKED *ARABIA FELIX* AND NUSANTARA

All images are by author unless noted otherwise.



Arabia Felix found on this map of the Middle East, India and Indian Ocean, ca 1596 by Hendrik van Langren. Image from Wikimedia Commons.

Arabia Felix, or ‘Happy Arabia’ – a name that sounds like a magical place – was the home of the legendary Queen of Sheba and was known for its frankincense and myrrh. It is also the place that brought forth some of the most famous traders of all times. Who hasn’t heard of the frankincense trade routes, of which *Arabia Felix* was the epicentre? It was situated in the South of the Arabian peninsula, in what is now part of Oman and Yemen.

THE FRANKINCENSE TRADE

Frankincense is an aromatic resin that is burned all over the world to release its clouds of aromatic smoke, for religious rituals, to welcome guests, or for the sheer pleasure of its enticing scent. Frankincense is harvested from the *Boswellia* tree, that only grows in a very specific area, in Southern Arabia and part of Somalia. The Arab traders became rich by selling their frankincense and myrrh across the Mediterranean, India, and beyond. On the way they picked up other items to trade, and soon they became not only wealthy but accomplished travellers. They reached the Malay Archipelago, or Nusantara, as early as the seventh century CE. Arabs are known for bringing Islam to this part of the world, and spices like nutmeg and cloves to Europe. But when they set out on their travels, neither were their main goal. There was something more valuable they were looking for, an aromatic that could rival their beloved frankincense.

Aromatics were of utmost importance to the Arab traders, not only as valuable merchandise, but also for the role they played in their religion. The Prophet Mohamed was said to be a great fan of aromatics, and their use is encouraged for Muslims. Islam was not alone in valuing fragrance, most of the world's religions did. From ancient Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, Hindus, Buddhists and Catholics to the Chinese ancestor worshippers, they all used aromatics in their rituals and were prepared to pay dearly for them. And the most valuable of all aromatics was oud.



(top) Omani frankincense burner.



(right) Incense burner found aboard the Tang Shipwreck. Collection of the Asian Civilisations Museum.



Myrrh, Frankincense and Oud resins.

WHAT IS OUD?

Oud was first documented in India, the Assam region, and goes by many names: agarwood, gahura, aloeswood. The name 'agar' comes from the Sanskrit, whereas 'oud' is simply the Arab word for wood. Oud is in fact a resin that is formed inside the agarwood or *aquilaria* tree. It is made by the tree as a reaction to adversity, such as a fungus or boring insects attacking the wood. Frankincense and myrrh are resins too, but are easier to collect as they can be harvested by tapping. To get the oud, whole agarwood trees must be cut and sliced open, even though only a small percentage of the trees will contain the treasured resin. Oud is so sought after that the agarwood tree is almost extinct in the wild. Pure resin of a high quality can fetch hundreds of thousands of dollars per kilogramme. For Arabs, particularly those in Yemen, oud is the holiest of all aromatics. To find their own source was therefore important to the Arab traders. Agarwood trees grow all over the South Asian tropical jungles, with every region yielding a distinct aroma. From Thailand to Borneo and Papua different oud oils can be sourced.

In the Middle East, oud has always been a top ingredient for personal perfumes as well, and in the last decade European perfumers have started to use it too. Unfortunately, due to the exorbitant price of natural oud, many use either farmed or synthetic alternatives.



The Jewel of Muscat mosaic at Muscat Street showing the Arab Trade routes.

ARABS IN SINGAPORE

When Raffles founded modern Singapore, he knew that he could never make his trading post a success without the support of the Arab traders since they had the best networks as well as the finances needed to build his free port. Many of them came from an area called Hadramout in Southern Yemen. Hadramout had once been a fertile and prosperous area, but over the last 500 years the climate became drier and the land barren. Because of this, many Hadhrami had permanently settled overseas, and Raffles invited traders from Palembang and Melaka to join his new settlement. Their contribution to the success of early Singapore is still visible in street names and landmarks all over the city, as they became the founders of influential Singapore-Arab dynasties, examples of which are the Aljunied, Alsagoff and Alkaff families. The fortunes of these traders helped build the foundations of the city we now know. At some point, the Singapore Arabs owned about half the land on the island. They were philanthropists too, who generously

donated to the community. Many religious buildings, not only mosques but also St Andrews Cathedral, were built on land donated by the Aljunieds, as was the Chinese Pauper's Hospital that eventually became Tan Tock Seng Hospital. The land of the famous Raffles Hotel was owned by the Alsagoffs. By the 20th century, the Arabs began to lose their prominent economic position in Singapore due to various factors, including government policies such as rent control and compulsory land acquisition.



A Hadhrami perfumer in Kampong Gelam.

Singapore today is a modern city, a large financial centre and busy port, whose residents hail from many corners of the world. But let us not forget those two remarkable resins, frankincense and oud, and the group of seafaring Arabs that linked their home in Southern Arabia to the islands of Nusantara, establishing a long history of trade that contributed to making Singapore the place it is now.

Oud was not the only perfume ingredient that traders found in Southeast Asia. The biodiversity of the region has few rivals, and many valued aromatics can be found in its jungles.

BENZOIN

Benzoin is a fragrant resin taken from the *Styrax* tree, also called 'the incense of Java'. A piece of *Benzoin Sumatra* was found inside a 9th century shipwreck of an Arab ship near Belitung, Indonesia. Egyptians used benzoin to embalm the dead, and its mention in their ancient texts gives evidence of an early aromatics trade with Southeast Asia. Benzoin is still popular in modern perfumery with its sweet vanilla, balsamic smell, and hints of caramel and almond. It is used as a fixative, helping to slow the dispersion of more volatile essential oils, allowing the perfume to stay on the skin longer.



Benzoin Sumatra resin

PATCHOULI

Patchouli is native to the islands of Southeast Asia. It has a heady, spicy smell. Patchouli was detected in an ancient perfume bottle from Rome, and made famous by the hippies of the 1960s. Despite its woody scent, patchouli is a leafy plant from the mint family. Though not native to India, the name comes from Tamil, *patch illai* meaning 'green leaf'. Patchouli was layered between fabrics during shipping to repel insects, and in 1800s Europe the scent became associated with colourful paisley scarves. After the British started plantations in Malaya, Singapore became the centre of the patchouli trade, until Medan took over in the 1960s. Indonesia produces over 95 percent of the world's patchouli, a market still run by southern Chinese immigrants.



Patchouli plant

CAMPHOR

Camphor is a chemical produced from the bark from two different trees, the common camphor tree, a relative of the cinnamon tree, and the Borneo camphor tree. In Malay, camphor is called *kapur barus*, referring to Barus, a port on the western coast of Sumatra that was a regional trade centre between the seventh and 17th centuries CE. Barus traded in Borneo camphor, which has a different aroma from the common camphor that grows further north. In the ancient

Arab world, Borneo camphor was particularly valued, as a perfume ingredient as well as a medicine. The Chinese referred to camphor as dragon's brain perfume, due to its sharp aroma. It adds a spicy, masculine note to modern perfumes.

YLANG YLANG

Ylang ylang trees are native to the Philippines. The name comes from Tagalog, where *ilang* means wilderness, showing where the tree grew originally. With a strong floral note, ylang ylang is extensively used in perfumery and sometimes called 'The Queen of Perfume.' In the Philippines and in Indonesia the flowers are scattered on the beds of newlyweds, and to this day the scent is thought to be an aphrodisiac. French colonists took the trees to Madagascar and the Reunion Island, which are now the largest producers of the essential oil.



Borneo Camphor tree in the Botanic Gardens



Ylang ylang flower

VETIVER

Vetiver was found in India and Indonesia and was known for centuries as *Khus Khus*. It is part of the grass family and related to lemongrass and citronella. Vetiver roots have a surprisingly earthy and deep aroma. The Javanese variety is grown in the Garut area, which has a volcanic soil that gives the root a particularly smoky note. In Europe vetiver has been used in perfumes since the Middle Ages, but in India and China it was mainly used for its medicinal properties. Vetiver is known as the 'oil of tranquillity' due to its relaxing and calming properties. 📖



Vetiver roots

FURTHER READING

In Search of Perfumes: A Lifetime Journey to the Sources of Nature's Scents by Dominique Roques

An Ethnography of Fragrance, the Perfumery Arts of 'Adan/Lahj by Dinah Jung

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BLUE-AND-WHITE CHINA: THE MONGOLS' LAUNCH OF A GLOBAL BRAND

PRISCYLLA SHAW REVISITS THE MONGOLS' ROLE IN ARGUABLY
CHINA'S FIRST GLOBAL BRAND

Speak of the Mongols, and one immediately thinks of the legendary nomadic warriors on horseback who advanced outwards from their Southern Siberia ancestral heartlands to conquer vast territories across Eurasia in the 13th century. But what is perhaps less well-known is their role in creating a Chinese global brand during the century of their rule over China.

Ceramic-making in China has a history of seven thousand years, and yet blue-and-white porcelain burst onto the scene only about six hundred years ago, in the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368). How did the Mongols come to preside over the mass production and export of Chinese blue-and-white porcelain?

The success of blue-and-white porcelain internationally can be attributed to the confluence of three factors — *Pax Mongolica* (the 'Mongolian Peace'), the dynamism and aestheticism of the Chinese potter, and the open and cosmopolitan attitude of the Mongol dynasty towards trade.

PAX MONGOLICA

At their peak, the Mongols ruled over the largest contiguous land empire in world history, from the Yellow Sea to the Hungarian Plain. This meant that exchanges by overland routes that had been unsafe under the Song (960–1279) were revived, leading to unprecedented international trade and intellectual and artistic exchanges between China and the Islamic East, and prosperity in the region. To quote Morris Rossabi, the whole territory, which used to be a series of micro-economies, became in effect a 'macro-economy of overland trade on the Silk Road and by sea'.

By around the late 13th century, the sheer size of the empire had made it difficult for a single Khan



Portrait of Kubilai Khan, from an album of Yuan rulers, 14th century, ink and colours on silk, National Palace Museum, Taipei. Image sourced from Wikimedia Commons.



The Mongols' four main territories, 1294. Image from *The Mongol Century*, Reaktion Books, London 2014.



Shufu-ware bowl (slightly more heavily potted than qingbai), 1300s, Yuan dynasty (1279–1368), diam 17.2 cm. Image from the Cleveland Art Museum.

to govern. Consequently, it was split into four territories (*khanates*): the Persian Ilkhanate (corresponding roughly to pre-Islamic Iran), the Golden Horde (rising on both sides of the Caspian Sea), the Chagatai Khanate (Central Asia) and the Yuan empire of China (1279–1368).

Khubilai Khan (1215–94), the grandson of Genghis, ruled from Dadu (Beijing) over the whole empire as the Great Khan, but practically, the other khanates governed themselves autonomously. Although there were disagreements amongst the khans, they made sure to keep *Pax Mongolica* for the sake of steady income from trade. The Mongols were not traders themselves, but they appreciated the importance of the trading networks which facilitated a free flow of raw materials, skilled workers and the distribution of finished goods, of which porcelain was a major group.

IMPERIAL PATRONAGE

The Yuan court supported large-scale porcelain production as part of their policy to augment state commercial activity in the Greater Mongol Empire. In 1278, even before the ‘official start’ of the dynasty (upon the death of the last Song emperor in 1279), a Porcelain Bureau had already been ordered to

be set up at Jingdezhen. It was a ‘consolidating centre’, to which porcelains for export were delivered from kilns to be despatched to export centres in fulfilment of orders from the Palace in Dadu.

THE DAVID VASES: LOCKING IN A DATE

Jingdezhen was already famous during the Song dynasty for its monochrome white porcelain, *qingbai* and *shufu*-type wares. However, it was Yuan blue-and-white porcelain, *qinghua* (‘blue-decorated’) which would emerge as the ‘stars’. But when did that happen?

Until an earlier example is found, it is the famous Percival David temple vases (made for the domestic market) that tell us definitively that potters had mastered the art of underglaze cobalt decoration by the mid-14th century. The inscriptions on one side of the necks of the vases provide documentary evidence that blue-and-white porcelain was already well established at Jingdezhen by 1351. As such, we might suppose that bulk production could have begun years prior.

SO WHAT WAS NEW?

Neither underglaze painting nor the use of cobalt for decoration were new techniques. Cobalt was already used as a ceramic pigment in the northern Chinese ceramics of the Tang dynasty (618–906) either as a monochrome glaze or a polychrome colour. However, there is no evidence so far that cobalt-decorated ceramics made as early as 830 (such as those found on the Belitung wreck) were produced in bulk for export at this time.

The technique of underglaze decoration was also not new nor complex. It involves painting pigment onto a dried porcelain body, covering it with a glaze, and then firing the body to a high temperature. Iron pigment had been used in China this way about a thousand years earlier.

What was innovative about blue-and-white porcelain in the Yuan was the large-scale production of it as a type of ware at Jingdezhen, albeit concurrently with celadons (‘green-glazed stonewares’). Besides Imperial support, manpower and expertise and the supply of cobalt made this possible.



(left) Blue-and-white temple vases, the ‘David Vases’, height 63.6cm, porcelain, Jingdezhen, dated by inscription to 1351. Percival David Collection, British Museum, London. Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

(right) Detail of one of the ‘David Vases’. Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.



Model of Mongolian yurt, China probably Jingdezhen, porcelain, blue cobalt, Yuan dynasty (1345–55), height 18cm. Image from the Hermitage, St Petersburg. no.JIK-349.

AN INSPIRED NEW STYLE OF DECORATION

Potters in Jingdezhen seized upon the freedom to create a ‘new look’ under their new masters. Whereas in the Southern Song (1127–1279) the focus was on sedate beautiful forms and minimal surface decoration for scholars and the elite, in the Yuan, decoration took centre-stage. Potters suddenly had a new group of wealthy customers whose tastes ran to creations in bright, bold, and lively designs. Without any precedents to refer to, the potters’ imaginations, painting skills, and draftsmanship produced a new style of decoration, which was all the more stunning on larger-sized bodies.

Evidence from finds of blue-and-white in Mongol territories reinforce the argument that the Mongols favoured and stimulated the blue-and-white style. Pieces of early blue-and-white porcelain have been found throughout Inner Mongolia, including in Khubilai Khan’s garrison city in the Gobi Desert from where he launched his conquest of China. The Hermitage in St Petersburg has in its collection a porcelain blue-and-white model of a yurt (*Ger*) dated to the 14th century, which shows the Mongols’ appreciation of the style. The model is decorated in the typical Yuan style, in registers, horizontal bands with breaking waves, lotuses, and Buddhist auspicious symbols (*bajixiang*). Blue was the Mongols’ sacred colour, representing eternity.

SIZED TO SUIT NEW ‘MENUS’

Coinciding with the new style of decoration, bowls, jars, and other utilitarian vessels grew significantly in size to suit Mongolian dishes such as stews, soups, *pilafs*, and sweetmeats, and their dining traditions. Recipes, dining trends, and foreigners arrived in China from other parts of the Mongol realm thanks to the free movement of people, ingredients, and cultures. The dining tradition whereby guests gathered around a large centrally-placed dish made larger serving vessels necessary. Thus, the new scale of vessels can also be attributed to the Mongols.



Large dish made for the Islamic market, porcelain, underglaze cobalt, Jingdezhen, mid-14th century, dia. 60cm, height 10.5cm. Collection of Sèvres, Manufacture et Musée Nationaux, inv.MNC 12967. Image from Dragon and Phoenix, Snoeck Publishers, Department of Culture and Tourism Abu Dhabi, and France Museums, Ghent 2021.



Platter with Chinese mythological animal, underglaze cobalt, Jingdezhen, mid-14th century, dia. 47.4cm, height 8.8cm. Collection of Limoges, Musée Nationaux Adrien-Dubouché, inv.ADL 7238. Image from Dragon and Phoenix, Snoeck Publishers, Department of Culture and Tourism Abu Dhabi, and France Museums, Ghent 2021.



Giovanni Bellini and Titian, *The Feast of the Gods*, 1514 (additions 1529), Oil on canvas, 170cm x 188cm. Image from the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

The platters (*left, below*) are examples of luxury objects designed for Muslim markets to the West. Both carry characteristics of the new style, an Islamic form with Chinese decoration. The decoration, in concentric circles (typically three), covering the entire surface of the dishes, reflects the Islamic artistic tradition of *horror vacui* (Latin: fear of empty spaces). The large size of the dishes caters to Islamic communal dining whilst the scalloped rim recalls Islamic metalwork. The rims are decorated with breaking waves whilst the middle rings are concave and decorated with Chinese peonies. In the larger dish, three bands of Chinese 'cloud collars' radiate from a stylised rosette centre comprising eight triangular sections each containing a symbol of the Buddhist 'eight auspicious symbols' (*bajixiang*). In the slightly smaller dish, a horned Chinese mythological and protective *baizi*, from the family of *qilin*, dominates the inner circle and orientates the platter.

IRANIAN COBALT ON CHINESE CLAY

Scientific analysis has revealed that what Rose Kerr has described as the 'magnificent purplish-blue tone, typical of the best-quality pieces', came from cobalt imported from Iran. Some of the purest mineral ores originated from mines in the mountains around Kashan. No doubt a steady supply of cobalt to Jingdezhen facilitated the industrial-scale production of blue-and-white porcelains there.

GLOBAL MARKETS

The free flow of people, ideas, and goods as a result of the Mongols' open and cosmopolitan attitude towards trade had an impact even beyond the empire's borders. The huge collections in the Ardebil Shrine, Iran, and in the Topkapi Palace, Istanbul, are evidence of the enthusiasm for Chinese blue-and-white porcelain in the Muslim world. Outside the Mongol empire, thousands of Chinese blue-and-white shards have been excavated in Damascus and Cairo. By the 15th century, Chinese blue-and-white had also reached Europe, where it was also associated with fine dining. The painting *The Feast of the Gods* (*above*) shows large items of recognisably Chinese export blue-and-white porcelain used by Gods, no less.

LEGACY OF THE MONGOLS

Undoubtedly, one of the greatest achievements in the arts in the Yuan was making blue-and-white porcelain a global brand. In spreading blue-and-white porcelain across the world, not only did the Mongols launch an iconic consumer object, they also exported the cultural East-West 'mix' that characterised that century. Blue-and-white porcelain is a legacy that is the Mongols' to claim, and happily, ours to continue to enjoy. ■

PRISCYLLA SHAW is an FOM Member and Features Editor of *PASSAGE*.

SEX, DRUGS, DOCKS 'N' TOLLS

MELISSA NESBITT EXPLORES THE DARK UNDERBELLY OF SINGAPORE'S TRADE HISTORY.



Opium and pipe smokers, from the Collection of the National Museum of Singapore.

In 1819, Sir Stamford Raffles established Singapore as a trading port for the British East India Company (EIC). In the settlement's infancy, the rules of business were murky and bendable (by today's 'best practice' standards). One can't help but imagine an 'anything goes' environment as barter-style trade continued to flourish within a cash-dominant economy. Everything had a price, from flesh to opium, and commodities purchased were also used as compensation or to service debt. How much opium would you have paid to buy a person? To answer that you'll need to know a little more about Singapore's darkest trade chapter.

A TRADING PORT BUILT ON THE OPIUM TRADE

The British arrived with an urgent need to build a settlement and establish a lucrative free-trading port, a significant challenge due to a dire lack of funding (not least because by adhering to its 'free port' principles, there were no duty or port taxes). To fortify the coffers, Singapore's first Resident, William Farquhar, allowed shady enterprises such as the opium trade to operate provided those directly involved in such enterprises purchased licenses. With funds raised, the next step was to address the issue of manpower.

Singapore was a sparsely inhabited island when the British arrived. There was a lack of available manpower needed to lay roads, construct buildings, transport goods, and load and unload ships. So, the British imported labourers, mostly from China. Coolies were lured to

Singapore by the possibility of building brighter futures overseas. They were agreeable to back-breaking work in sweltering conditions so long as they could access opium, which was valued for its medicinal properties. Opium was a powerful analgesic, erasing the aches and pains the coolies suffered daily owing to their gruelling work. Moreover, opium suppressed appetite and caused constipation – a double-pronged solution to juggling meals and toilet breaks during 12-hour work shifts.

PAY THE PIPER

Bosses sometimes even paid coolies in opium. By facilitating access to a steady amount of the drug, coolies' dependence grew gradually. As a result, when they didn't work, they plunged into a state of withdrawal, ensuring they would return for more work. Opium habits were easy to form and difficult to shake. By 1847, of the 40,000 to 70,000 Chinese immigrants, 15,000 were regular opium users.

DENS AND DENIZENS

While the majority of opium abusers in Singapore were coolies, the appeal of opium transcended race, class, and gender. Still, 19th-century Singapore was strictly segregated by race and class. The wealthy elite mostly enjoyed their pipes from the comfort of their own homes. Should these well-to-do gentlemen hanker for a night-on-the-town experience, they would frequent high-end opium dens furnished with ornately carved, blackwood opium beds and heavy silk drapery to ensure a modicum of discretion. While not illegal, opium was not something respectable Victorian society dabbled in publicly. The *towkay*



(left) William Farquhar, Singapore's first Resident, was tasked with building the settlement. With little funding available to him, Farquhar resorted to allowing opium dealing and prostitution, provided those involved purchased licenses. The money collected from those license purchases was put toward building the settlement. Image sourced from Wikimedia Commons.



(right) The East India Company employees walking around Singapore in the mid-1800s would have looked something like these men. Image sourced from Wikimedia Commons.

(Chinese movers and shakers) preferred to indulge in similarly exclusive style. The opium dens frequented by coolies, on the other hand, were no-frills establishments. Rough benches with woodblock 'pillows' lined the walls, and the pipes were communal. By 1848, there were 51 licensed opium dens and at least half as many illegal establishments.

A GENTLEMAN, AND A LADY (OF THE NIGHT)

Opium dens posed risks. European men had the wealth to establish deep habits. Addiction put them at risk of unseemly behaviour contradictory to the colonial social construct. It was imperative that the air of superiority the colonial community had cultivated continued in order to maintain control of the rest of the population. But the dangers weren't restricted to European men. Women were also at risk, because once addicted, they might turn to prostitution to fund their habits. And prostitution had to be carefully managed.



Rickshaw coolies and boatmen are examples of labourers who fell into the opium addiction trap. Here, coolies and boatmen go about their daily business, with the waterfront office of *The Straits Times* in the background (circa 1900). Image sourced from Wikimedia Commons.



Sex workers, such as these prostitutes from Japan, were brought in from other countries to satisfy the carnal urges of a largely male population. Photo from the Collection of the National Museum of Singapore.

ONE ANCIENT VICE SERVES ANOTHER

When Raffles settled Singapore for the EIC, he was free to use British military power to support his initiative of creating a lucrative, commercial territory. However, as the employees of the EIC were men, and the British troops were men, and the coolies were men, Singapore was, at the start, a male-dominated, homosocial island. Society was lopsided. How lopsided? As of 1860, there were 14 men for every woman on the island. Where were the women? Sure, there would have been some women in Singapore's indigenous population, but that population was a small fraction of the overall population now comprised of migrant and expatriate male workers. A clear problem arose, namely a sizeable, sexually unsatisfied male population. Fortunately for the colonial powers, there was an easy and obvious solution: bring in the sex workers.

It is difficult to set aside the obvious moral objection to this practice that a modern perspective implores. In the 19th century, however, importing women for the sole purpose of satisfying the sexual needs of a male-dominated population was regarded as acceptable. Little time would have been spent arguing the ethics of such decisions. And so, policies were drawn up – chief among them a means to racially segregate these establishments. Why? In a doubling-down of eschewing ethics (and germ science), colonial men were cautious to avoid brothels catering to Asian men to avoid picking up a disease from sharing the same (non-white) sex worker. As such, European muckety-mucks, diplomats and planters frequented brothels on Malay and Malabar Streets (on one side of the river), and coolies beelined for the brothels on Smith Street or Sago Street in Chinatown (a safe distance away, on the other side of the river). This would ensure that sexually transmitted 'pestilence' would not leap the racial divide.



Opium paraphernalia from the Collection of the National Museum of Singapore. The tools and instruments were used to prepare the opium to be smoked.



Opium bed from the Collection of the National Museum of Singapore. Wealthy opium users would enjoy their smokes from the comfort of elaborately carved beds such as this one. Less privileged users would share rough benches.

FROM WHENCE THEY CAME

In 1884 there were 60,000 Chinese men in Singapore, and 6,600 Chinese women (of whom about 2,000 were prostitutes). Up to 70 per cent of young Chinese girls who came to Singapore in the 1870s were sold to brothels.

The women and girls came from patriarchal societies where objectifying and utilising women for the purpose of sex was a man's prerogative. Women and girls were shipped from Japan or China on journeys that took between 3-4 weeks, as well as from the nearer colonial neighbour, Hong Kong. Once the ships reached port, the goods were dressed up and paraded in front of the godowns by *zegen* (pimps) and purchased at auction by brothel owners. Attractive women and girls commanded a steeper price.

Prostitutes surrendered roughly half their earnings to the brothel owner for room, board, jewellery, and a protection fee. Some sex workers were able to save their earnings and buy their freedom. Occasionally, they were purchased by wealthy clients to live as concubines or mistresses. Mostly, women remained in their profession until death, which typically came young, either from disease, addiction, or suicide. Death was often the only chance for escape.

VIRTUE IS A VIRTUE

As the sex trade flourished, there was a growing focus on the policies around the well-being of the women in the industry. (Not all colonial men were monsters, and the reproachable behaviour of some should not diminish the honourable behaviour of many.) One such colonial administrator, William Pickering, established the Po Leung Kuk (the Office to Protect Virtue). The Po Leung Kuk served as a safe house for women and girls who had been sold or tricked into prostitution, as well as a refuge for the *mui tsai* community.

Mui tsai were girls whose families had sold them into domestic employment, similar to indentured servitude. The girls, as young as eight-years-old, were often accompanied to Singapore by a family acquaintance on the pretence of delivering them to their new place of domestic work but were sold into the sex trade instead. Even for *mui tsai* who were faithfully delivered into their agreed upon new homes, danger lurked as they approached adolescence. If they were

attractive, they risked being used to satisfy the sexual whims of the male household members.

The Po Leung Kuk housed and trained the girls so they would be able to find work outside the sex industry. Additionally, the Po Leung Kuk would help them to repatriate to China. Frequently, the Po Leung Kuk served as a matchmaking office for the young women in its care, screening and vetting potential husbands (migrant workers who couldn't afford to import a bride from their hometown).

TALE AS OLD AS TIME

While there is much to be proud of Singapore's dynamic trade history, there exists a dark underbelly that must not be forgotten. Opium was not a Victorian construct. Neolithic opium poppy fossils have been discovered, as have Mesopotamian clay tablets (circa 3,000 BCE) inscribed with references to opium. Prostitution is similarly deep-rooted. The oft-touted 'oldest profession in the world' was prolific in this region long before the EIC arrived on the scene. With that said, both the opium trade and the sex trade remain significant blights on Singapore's trade history, and both continue to torment as modern-day evils on a global scale. **P**



William Pickering, in his role of Protector of the Chinese, sought to protect the victims of sex trafficking and eliminate abuses of the coolie trade. Image sourced from Wikimedia Commons.

FURTHER READING

Triads, Coolies and Pimps: Chinatown in Former Times. Biblioasia Volume 11, Issue 3.

MELISSA NESBITT is an FOM docent at the National Museum of Singapore.

CONNECTIONS THAT MATTER

SHRADHA NAYAN SHARES HOW EARLY CHINESE MIGRANTS SURVIVED AND BUILT AN ECOSYSTEM NECESSARY FOR GROWTH.



The Imperial Scroll sent to Thian Hock Keng Temple; from the Collection of the National Museum of Singapore. To show his appreciation and acknowledgment of the contribution of the overseas Chinese, Guangxu Emperor of China sent a plaque and scroll stamped with the imperial seal to Thian Hock Keng Temple. The scroll was only discovered during the restoration works at the temple in recent years. It carried the message “Calm Seas in the South Seas”. This was a message of favour and good luck to overseas Chinese in colonial Singapore. The scroll was one of the important artefacts in the exhibition.

The special exhibition *Connections Across Oceans: Early Chinese Mutual Aid Organisations*, a collaboration with the CV Starr East Asian library at the University of California Berkeley, was held at Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall. It looks at a time when Singapore was still a colony with few social institutions like schools and hospitals.

BRAVE NEW WORLD

The Chinese migration during the late 19th and early 20th century saw the movement of millions out of mainland China. Natural disasters, over population, poor governance, heavy taxation, incursion by foreign powers had made it difficult for many to survive. Colonial Singapore and North America were becoming popular destinations to earn a living and remit money home.

The local governments did not provide any aid to these migrants. The Chinese migrants brought with them their traditional social structure and supported each other, via associations, clans and secret societies – these came to be known as Mutual Aid Organisations (MAOs). The MAOs were important to the migrant communities outside China. The exhibition, divided into four sections, showcases how MAOs provided much needed support in foreign lands – helping with basic needs like food, shelter and jobs and later on, with marriages, health care, and even burials.

MOST STARTED IN TEMPLES

The first section, *Bond beyond Borders*, traced the beginnings and roles of MAOs in Singapore and San Francisco. In Singapore, the early MAOs were formed along the lines of *bangs* or dialect and began in temples. The Hokkiens set up the Thian Hock Keng Temple; the Teochews at the Wak Hai Cheng Bio; Fuk Tai Chi was set up by the Cantonese and Hakkas; and



Chinese sinkeh (newcomers) depicted by Yip Yew Chong on the mural on the wall of the Thian Hock Heng Temple, on Amoy Street. Photo provided by Mr. Yip Yew Chong.



Thian Hock Keng Temple, photo from the Collection of the National Museum of Singapore. Thian Hock Keng Temple began as a shrine in 1821-22 and was one of the earliest temples to serve the Hokkien Community in Colonial Singapore. The Hokkien Huay Kuan (clan association), currently known as the Singapore Hokkien Huay Kuan, began in 1840 within the compound of the temple.



Chui Eng Free School, photo from the Paul Yap Collection courtesy the National Archives of Singapore, via NHB Roots.sg. The school was founded in 1854 by the Tan Kim Seng, a prominent member of the Hokkien Huay Kuan, and was one of the largest private schools for the Hokkien community.

Kheng Chiu Tin Hou Kong by the Hainanese. In the United States, these clan organisations were not organised along dialect lines but were locality-based. This was because most of the migrants spoke Cantonese. The MAOs in Singapore involved themselves in social well-being and financial support of their community, while the ones in San Francisco took up additional issues like the Chinese Exclusion Act. With the increasing number of migrants, the MAOs moved out of the temples and into their own buildings.

SOME WERE SECRET SOCIETIES

The second section of the exhibition covers a type of MAO known as *Hongmen*, which were formed out of the mission to overthrow Qing rule in China and to restore Ming rule. In Singapore and San Francisco, they came to be known as secret societies. This section features many artefacts from the William Stirling Collection. One of the artefacts is the initiation ceremony at Ghee Hin Kongs. The organisation, its activities and initiation ceremonies were always kept under wraps to prevent members being caught and persecuted.

THE MANY ROLES MAOS PLAYED

The third section, *Community Connections*, looks at the many roles the MAOs performed in colonial Singapore. They set up schools, conducted and registered marriages and built hospitals. They even set up cemeteries to ensure migrants far away from home were accorded proper burial. Did you know where Bishan Town now stands used to be part of the old Kwong Wai Siew Peck San Theng Cemetery, then the size of 180 football fields?

It also features the role the MAOs like Overseas Chinese Association (OCA) performed during the Japanese Occupation. The OCA was tasked to raise 50 million dollars



Ghee Hin Lodge, from the Collection of the National Museum of Singapore. This image details the initiation ceremony for new Secret Society members. The member to be initiated had to pass through three gates under which they swear to 12 oaths each. When they reach the final Red Pavilion, they drink a mixture of their own blood mixed with chicken blood. The bowl is then smashed and the initiation ritual is completed.

from the Chinese to compensate for their anti-Japanese activities. The OCA also helped the community look for the loved ones lost during the early days of occupation.

A NEW ROLE FOR THE MAOS

The final section, *New Roles for New Era*, looked at the new roles undertaken by the MAOs today. With Singapore's independence in 1965, many of the functions performed by the MAOs were taken over by the government. For example, schools came under the ambit of the Ministry of Education; marriages were now registered under the Registry of Marriage; while the Ministry of Manpower helped workers on job matters. The MAOs had to adapt themselves to stay relevant and to attract the interest of the younger generation. Now, under the umbrella of the Singapore Federation of Chinese Clan Associations, the MAOs continue to strive to support the Chinese community in Singapore.

Mutual aid organisations were a social support network. They grew and expanded with the migration of the Chinese population across the globe. They took on welfare roles and became a pillar of the community in foreign lands. They took over religious and social roles and even advocated for the rights of overseas Chinese in foreign lands. With the changing times there has been a decline in membership and a streamlining of their scope of duties. They are trying to adapt and stay relevant. They have taken over the role of art, culture and heritage ambassadors to better serve the changing needs of their communities. **P**

SHRADHA NAYAN became an FOM Docent in 2022 with Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall.



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I PAINT MY SINGAPORE: THE MURALS OF YIP YEW CHONG

GREGORY PECK VISITED THE MURAL OF THE ARTIST AND REMINISCES.

All images thanks to Yip Yew Chong.



This was the first panel Yew Chong painted, launching his work on the 60m painting. This Kreta Ayer night scene is the 12th in the flow order. It lies at the heart of the exhibition.

From his very first murals, Yip Yew Chong's memories and experiences have been transformed into images of a bygone time that have captured the imagination of locals and tourists alike. His latest opus is no less breathtaking in its breadth – both in its length as well as the number of locations included from across the island of Singapore.

AN ARTIST OF FAVOURITE MEMORIES

I've dreamt of creating a long canvas painting. I was inspired by the famous Song Dynasty painting '清明上河图' (Along the River During the Qingming Festival). I wanted to create a Singapore version showing her everyday life in the 70s, 80s. In my eyes, Singapore's physical cityscape transformed most drastically during these two decades. - Yip Yew Chong

The 1970s and 80s were a time of great change for Singapore. Many of us have memories and experiences from that era. One man has brought that nostalgia to life in a glorious set of 27 panels spanning a total of 60 metres. This magnum opus was on display at the Raffles City Convention Centre from 30 November 2023 to 1 January 2024.

The artist himself reached out to Friends of the Museum (FOM), to ask if our docents would like to guide his exhibition. It was a rare and special opportunity for our guides who love history and heritage. Such a level of collaboration and learning across so many docent communities



The artist at work on the last of his panels in the I Paint my Singapore exhibition.



A close up of hawkers in Kreta Ayer, Chinatown, featured in Panel 12.

in the exhibition of a work, which resonates so deeply with so many of us, is a chance that does not come around very often. Docents from NMS, TPM, IHC, MHC, SYSNMH, and the Kampong Gelam and URA Chinatown Heritage Trails were involved in the research and sharing.

THE CHINATOWN HE LOVES

Chinatown is dear to Yew Chong's heart. It was here that he grew up and had the happiest memories. The area is so special that he painted the Chinatown night scene first and its day scene last, even though they sit side by side as panels 12 and 11 respectively in this series. What are some aspects of Chinatown he remembers?

OF HAWKERS AND STREET OPERA

People still reminisce about the street hawkers of yesteryears that sold food from satay to *char kuay teow*. Many a child of the 70s can still remember the stalls that ringed the brightly coloured stages of street opera that was the mainstay of local entertainment. Here, for the odd coin, one could get a drink of birds' nest or water chestnut scooped from large green-rimmed plastic containers, and sipped from a plastic bag you held on to with a red nylon string. Or a scoop or two of ice cream wedged in a folded piece of bread. Or a tall rolled up paper cone of *kacang putih* (nuts) to munch from.

For me too. As a child these stalls would fascinate me. These rare treats were an integral part of night markets, part of the festive atmosphere around the temporary street opera stages that were the entertainment of the masses before affluence made televisions the centre of many living rooms. Their bright fluorescent lamps made them islands of light in the darkness and coupled with the heady aromas of their offerings, they drew patrons to them like moths to a flame.

Street opera was often performed for hours late into the night. Sponsored by temples and associations for the amusement of the deities on days of

commemoration as part of religious rites, the public got to watch for free. And where there were crowds there would be opportunity for profit. Hawkers were only too happy to fulfil the cravings of a captive audience. There was no need to pause for an intermission. Just hop over to one of the many stalls and get what you want without missing the action on stage; then back to your spot (hoping your friends have kept it for you) to munch on your *kacang putih*.

Sounds like watching a movie with popcorn? Almost, just without the air conditioning. More like movie night on Fort Canning Green but with the sights and sounds of a bustling city always within earshot ... no seats ... standing room only unless you were smart enough to bring your own wooden stool ... and the whiff of cigarette smoke in the air as the adults relaxed.

These entertainment venues would usually be muddy from the water that had washed away the market detritus of the day. Navigating the puddles in slippers while trying not to get one's feet too muddy was a learned skill, a necessity if you wanted to avoid an earful from a matriarch about tracking mud onto her freshly scrubbed floor when you got back home!



A street opera performance in Kreta Ayer, Chinatown, from Panel 12.



A cobbler, letter writer, and street artist in Chinatown, featured on Panel 11.



A barber and sundry goods stall, known as a *mamak shop*, in Chinatown, from Panel 11.

OF MARKETS

Markets were and still are a mainstay of grocery shopping. Whether in present-day wet markets or supermarkets, fresh produce is still important for many households. Many vegetable stalls then were run by the farmers themselves still dressed in their wide-brimmed farmer's straw hats. There was still a rural Singapore then of which farms were a mainstay. In these city markets, it was not uncommon to find *majie* (female domestic helpers mainly from Shunde in China's Guangdong province), or women in *samfu* (a light blouse and pants suit worn by the Chinese) or *kebaya* (a blouse of the Malay region) haggling over the freshest fish or the juiciest fruit. They usually carried a straw-weaved or rattan basket to squirrel away their bargains.

Stalls came in all shapes and sizes – a counter on wheels, a trolley-cart or just a tarpaulin on the tarmac – usually overflowing with items for sale, surrounded by boxes or baskets of produce. A myriad of drab awnings and canvas umbrellas would spout along the street providing shade for the vendors for as long as their stall was open.

Morning markets would usually operate from early to late morning before they made way for the food stalls that met the needs of the lunch crowd. While street markets like the




A market scene in Chinatown, from Panel 11.

one in the picture once lined streets like Smith Street at Kreta Ayer, the wet markets or night markets that can still be found in modern housing estates and new towns still have some of the vibe of the hawkers and markets of yesteryears.

OF STREET TRADERS

Street traders were once commonly found along the five footways that still parallel many roads. They used to be the backbone of the urban landscape then and some still exist in the present day. Cobblers armed with glue and nails would re-sole your shoe for a nominal fee. People used to walk a lot more as part of work and life in general and shoes were then much more expensive than the mass-produced items we purchase nowadays. Barbers armed with scissors and a mirror would also ply their trade along the streets. Likewise, letter writers were the literate few who provided a service to the many illiterate immigrants who needed someone to write them letters back home as well as read the replies they received. This trade has vanished with rising literacy while cobblers and barbers are now found in shopping centres where we can engage them in air-conditioned comfort. Even the humble *mamak* stall (*mamak* is Tamil for uncle, referring to the Indian men who used to run these sundry stalls along the five footway) once frequently found against vacant wall spaces has morphed into the ubiquitous convenience stores that now dot the island.

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES!

Life in Singapore as we know it has changed irrevocably since the carefree years of childhood conjured up by these nostalgic images from the brush of Yip Yew Chong. We may perceive them with a wistful sense of loss but they are touchstones from the mists of memory to share with the generation that never knew them and the generations after. These are memories of an artist brought to life in vivid colour and bequeathed to those who will come after about a time long gone but nonetheless dear. 

GREGORY PECK became a FOM Docent in 2021 and enjoys showing intrepid visitors the hidden drama behind the mundane artefacts of the galleries of NMS and TPM. He is also a URA-FOM Chinatown Heritage Trail Docent, guiding in Bukit Pasoh.

FINDING ROOTS AND A PLACE TO CALL HOME

VIDHYA NAIR SHARES INSIGHTS ON THE RICH HERITAGE OF KERALA AND THE NEW EXHIBITION AT INDIAN HERITAGE CENTRE THAT FEATURES THE COMMUNITY SHE BELONGS TO – THE MALAYALEES.

All images courtesy of Indian Heritage Centre, National Heritage Board, unless otherwise stated.



Kizhthali Siva Temple complex which existed during the Cheraman Perumal reign (113 BCE - 343 CE) . This temple was first destroyed by the Portuguese, then the Dutch, and later, Tipu Sultan's army. Only the main tower still stands. Image Courtesy of Muziris Heritage Project website.



New exhibition co-curated with the Malayalee community with the title in Malayalam script (to the left) and Tamil script (to the right) of the title in English.

Every time a new exhibition opens, it is an opportunity for retrospective review of history and how it places itself within the present and what it holds for the future. Invariably trade plays a part as traders bring along their faiths everywhere they may establish their networks and/or settle.

Indian Heritage Centre's latest special exhibition, *Ente Veedu, My Home: Malayalees in Singapore*, which opened in November 2023, showcases the rich history and heritage of the Malayalees, the second largest sub-group within Singapore's Indian community.

The exhibition, co-curated with the local community and guest curator Dr. Anitha Devi Pillai, traces ancestral roots and migration from Kerala and uncovers stories of how the community arrived, settled, kept their traditions alive and contributed to Singapore. The exhibition features over 200 artefacts from the community and national collection as visitors are taken on a journey to discover the roots of the Malayalees as well as their dedicated efforts in preserving cultural heritage, shaping a distinctive identity and creating and sense of home and belonging in Singapore.

EARLY ROOTS OF THE MALAYALEES

The story of the Malayalees begins in Kerala, located on the south-west coast of India sandwiched between the Western Ghats, a lengthy mountain range stretching hundreds of kilometres, facing the Arabian Ocean. The ancient history of Kerala is both mysterious and colourful with many characters that shaped it and periods of high adventure and conquests.

The Cheras kingdom of the early historical period (2nd - 3rd century BCE) had harbours that profited from maritime trade via extensive Indian Ocean networks. Today, archaeological evidence is still being investigated to locate the now disappeared harbour of Muziris in central Kerala and trace the ancient land route into Tamil Nadu, the closely associated neighbouring state. Favourable monsoon winds carried ships directly from Arabia to Kerala's coast and the



The headdress, Nettipattam, (left) was worn by a ceremonial elephant during the annual Trissur Puram, a large scale festival that assembles native Indian elephants, which draws thousands to this colourful spectacle. Ancient maps of Kerala and trade artefacts (showcase on the right).

biggest draw were exotic spices. As documented in Greco-Roman accounts from second century BCE, Muziris was the most important centre with Roman, Greek and Arab ships exporting bulk spices such as pepper, along with ivory, timber, pearls and gems, which travelled to the Middle East and Mediterranean regions. Evidence of Roman coin hoards has since been found around Kerala as Roman Empire declined in the third to fourth centuries BCE, making way for the Chinese and Arab merchant ships whose influence is seen in today's Kerala.

TRADE NETWORKS AND FAITHS

Kerala's open seas brought in the earliest form of Syrian Christianity which traced its origins to the evangelistic activity of Thomas the Apostle in the first century CE. The Syrian Christians speak Malayalam, the native language of Kerala and are referred to as "Nasranis" – the Syriac term for Christians – who are among the first converts to Christianity in the Near East.

Traders from Arabia carried the message of Islam to Kerala during the time of the Holy Prophet, Muhammad. According to written records, Cheraman Perumal, the last Chera dynasty king had received a letter in the year 628 CE from the Holy Prophet himself along with many rulers of the known world. He travelled to Mecca and embraced Islam at the hands of the Prophet and became the first royal to convert to Islam and his Muslim name became Tajuddin. Today, the oldest mosque in the Indian subcontinent, Cheraman Juma Mosque, established in 643 CE, stands in Kerala. This cemented the era of the Arab traders into Kerala who began settling on the northwest coast in a region known as Malabar and came to be known as "Malabaris" or



Syrian Christian Granary Door with traditional locking system. 19th century CE.



Malayalee Attire. The writer's family artefacts on display.

"Mapillas". With British rule from the 18th century, many Malayalees of different faiths came to Singapore seeking jobs, worked at British establishments as administrators and clerks, and over the decades, kept contact with their homeland while establishing a Singapore home.

Each of these distinctive communities is showcased in this exhibition; their migratory journey, culture, their cuisine, their marriage, birth custom, attire and even where they settled and contributed in Singapore has been carefully displayed. The Malayalees of Singapore also include the Hindus of Kerala with names like "Nair" and "Menon" including the *Pattars*, the Brahmin community who emigrated from Tamil Nadu to become part of Kerala society.

Trade exchanges throughout this period kept Kerala open even in the Middle Ages till the 15th century during the reign of the Zamorins of the Kingdom of Calicut, in North Kerala. The exhibition also features the Roman Catholics of Kerala who, after the arrival of the Portuguese in Kerala in the 15th century, formed a distinct identity and are identified by their Portuguese surnames such as "Pereira", "Gomez" and "Fernandez."

FINDING COMMON GROUNDS

All of these subgroups unite in their identity as Malayalees and have embodied cohesive inter-faith relations and inter-connected cultures with the use of the common language, Malayalam, and shared festivals such as Onam, celebrated during the harvest in late August to early September. This exhibition culminates on the auspicious date of Onam on 15th September 2024, with the customary grand "Sadya," a typical feast featuring 26 vegetarian dishes, balanced in flavours to create a harmonious communal experience of joy and fulfilment.

The rich stories and culture of the Malayalees who made Singapore their home is the key ethos of this exhibition. Indian Heritage Centre has plans for special interactive and instructive programmes for visitors to further learn and appreciate in depth the many unique features of this group within the Indian community. Tours led by docents from the Friends of the Museums and Museum Volunteers begin twice weekly from mid-January 2024. 📍



Singapore street names and areas associated with Malayalees.

VIDHYA NAIR is a third generation Singaporean-Malayalee with family artefacts featured in this exhibition. She is a Docent at both IHC & NMS.

PROFITEERS OF THE OCCUPATION

CHARLOTTE DAWSON LOOKS AT THE FACETS OF BLACK MARKET TRADE DURING THE JAPANESE OCCUPATION OF SINGAPORE (1942 – 1945).

On 15 February 1942, when Singapore fell and was renamed *Syonan'to* ('Light of the South Island'), it came under the authority of the Japanese Administration. Seizing control over the populace was a top priority, and this was done, in part, by controlling the distribution of foodstuffs and goods, leading to thriving black market trade.

SEIZING CONTROL

Sellers, tradesmen, and labourers now had to register with the *Tokubetsu-shi* (municipal administration) in order to conduct business. The new regime's authorities would issue them the necessary permits and licenses. This control extended into the everyday lives of Singapore's residents. On a daily basis one was required to carry a variety of papers – permits, licenses, ration cards, employment passes – to prove one's identity, facilitate transactions, and ensure work permissions had been granted. If found without the required

paperwork, one faced punishment at the hands of the much feared *kempeitai* (military police).

Near the end of 1942, the Japanese Administration established *kumiai* (business associations) to control trade commodities like coffee and sugar, in an attempt to stabilise the prices and ensure fair distribution. The process went like this: producers and retailers of controlled products had to obtain a permit from the *kumiai* to deal in the commodities. Suppliers had to sell directly to the *kumiai* at set prices. Shopkeepers bought from the *kumiai* and had to sell at controlled prices which were published in the newspaper. Despite these efforts, there were acute shortages of foodstuffs, daily essentials, medicines, and many other of life's necessities.

RATIONING

Oral histories have informed us that one of the most distinctive memories of the people living in Singapore was the unbearable sensation of lingering hunger.

From the start of the Japanese Occupation, the military administration seized food supplies from warehouses and shops, as well as ceased the importation of these foods, leading quickly to severe food shortages. A rationing system was put into action to equitably distribute essential goods like rice, salt, sugar, cooking oil, and cloth.

The amount one could obtain was based on the size of the household. Ration allocations were further limited by the first-come-first-serve method of distribution. This, in turn, was complicated by limited and unpredictable availability of those items. People would leave home before



This coffee seller signboard was hung above the kumiai to indicate this was a designated shop for buying coffee beans. From the Collection of the National Museum of Singapore.



This ration card, belonging to Wu Sheng, records monthly rations between November of 1944 and August of 1945. Because Mr. Wu worked for the Free Labour Service Corps, he was awarded extra rice rations. From the Collection of the National Museum of Singapore.

dawn to queue for a loaf of bread or a *kati* (600g) of rice. Once a person reached the quota, it was not possible to buy anymore. People improvised with creative substitutions or growing their own food, but for a majority of the city populace this was not a sustainable solution.

Retailers and residents alike found that the heavily controlled *kumiai* distribution system and rationing practice were neither practical nor efficient. In actuality they could get better prices than those published elsewhere.

RATIONS BREEDS SCARCITY AND HOARDING ... CREATING A BLACK MARKET

With food, commodities and essential necessities in short supply and desperation high, people turned to underground sources, willing to pay high prices to acquire more than their allocated rations. A booming black market began to overshadow the formal Singapore economy by 1943.

Though there were several throughout Singapore, one popular black market location was at Sungei Road. Established in the 1930s as a flea market, it adapted to serve as a black market during this time. Before the war, it was cheekily referred to as the *Robinson Petang* (Evening Robinson), meaning this market catered to the poor working class, as opposed to the rich upper class who frequented the department store. Post-War, it was nicknamed the Thieves' Market because one could purchase goods at a steal of a price, though local lore contended that this is where one could go to find goods that had been stolen at much cheaper prices than in the shops.

AN ECONOMY OF BARTER

Nearly *everyone* participated in the black market so there was an incentive to hoard and sell. For every person that wanted to buy food, medicine, clothing, cigarettes, or light bulbs, for instance, there was a seller keen to cash in. But cash was not king in these markets!

The Japanese authorities circulated currency to replace the Straits Dollar. When first introduced its value equaled the Straits dollar, but to fund their war efforts, the Japanese



In this delicate watercolour we see how people queued for rice rations at a food distribution centre, as indicated by the signboard in the background. From the Collection of the National Museum of Singapore.



This is a picture of a black market in Chinatown where you can see goods that could not be found in shops being sold and bought for very high prices. Those who could not afford went without. Image from the National Museum of Singapore, Level 2 Surviving Syonan gallery.

Administration printed more notes. Furthermore, they were easy to counterfeit. This led to extreme inflation. Eventually there was not enough money to buy goods, so the government just printed more, essentially making the currency valueless.

It became so bad that a suitcase full of Japanese currency could buy one a pack of cigarettes! Sellers refused to part with goods for this overinflated worthless currency, preferring the highly valued, oft-hoarded Straits dollar instead. Food was the most common exchange currency. Even service providers like doctors or lawyers, preferred payment in necessities like rice and eggs.

People did their best to hide possessions and hold on to ration coupons, saving them for a time they may need to sell or barter them at the black market. Watches and jewellery could buy food and medicine. And those who bought these goods were able to sell them at a large profit to others wanting such luxuries.

PROFITEERING ON THE BLACK MARKET

With large sums of local money, the Japanese guards and authorities were using the black markets to buy the aforementioned luxury goods. Not only did they have the cash in hand, but they were also the behind-the-scenes force that was the architect of these black markets. Ironic given that, if caught, punishment for the Singaporeans was quite harsh! If caught by the *kempeitai*, participants were arrested, interrogated through torture to disclose others involved in black market trade, and held in custody under harsh conditions.

Reports by eyewitnesses said that abundant supplies of rice and other commodities were stashed in government or military warehouses, reserved for the Japanese and supporters of the Japanese administration. This suggested that there was an artificially created situation of lack.

Purposely hoarding supplies served a second purpose: to drive up prices. In taking part in the black market, this allowed the authorities to profit beyond measure. Between driving up prices and accepting bribes by traders desperate to acquire these goods, corruption was endemic. Though



The motifs of the Japanese currency were inspired by the occupied territories, colloquially referred to as 'banana money' in reference to the banana tree motif on the \$10 note. The code letter (in this case MM) referred to the printing block. The first M, for Malaya, informs where the money was allowed to be circulated. From the Collection of the National Museum of Singapore.



George Sprod depicted in this *SmokeOh!* cartoon what he imagined the black market at home in Australia may look like given what was happening in the POW camp. The sales approach in the cartoon contrasts the hawking of products common in Changi. Image from the Australian War Memorial.

illegal, both the traders and the Japanese authorities involved stood to make a nice profit releasing these hoards on the black market through patient and calculated planning.

THE BLACK MARKET OF THE POWS

We often like to look back at the Allied Prisoners of War (POW) through rose tinted glasses, admiring them as brave men who used their ingenuity and mental grit to survive their experiences in captivity. The reality is that captivity, forced labour, and the severe lack of food, medicine and essentials affected them greatly. Desperate people do desperate things.

From the very first days of captivity, crime was a serious problem that the officers attempted to contain. As the men became hungrier and more anxious, everything in the camps gained a market value. When one sold all his possessions, a man with nothing then turned his attention to his neighbour's property.

A large and very organised black market was established at the Changi POW camps early on, in part a result of thievery and in part by smuggling in the supplies. Clothes, shoes, watches, even gold teeth fillings were sold for food at exorbitant prices. Those responsible for the black market contended the punishment, if caught, warranted the high prices ... and there was always someone willing to pay.

The men paid for items in the POW black market through barter, IOUs, cheques, cash, and securities. The rates for gold and silver were quoted weekly, as was the exchange rate between the British pound and the Japanese dollar. This exchange rate became untenable by 1945 and the officers

stepped in to defend starving prisoners from extortionate practices. In declaring the maximum exchange rate of \$8 to £1, the illegal black market was given semi-official status.

POST-WAR BLACK MARKETS

With the end of the War and the return of the British, the expected immediate relief failed to materialise. A critical shortage of rice in the region threatened to undermine the British Military Authority (BMA). Rations continued and, subsequently, so did the black markets. The Special Commissioner of Southeast Asia, Baron Miles Wedderburn Lampson, the Lord Killern, had been under attack due to rationing rice to a level as low as that during the Japanese Occupation. He was parodied as the 'Black Market King'.

Accused of inefficiency and incompetency, Lord Killern wanted to set the record straight. He informed the public, nearly one year post-War, that 'the days of Japanese tapioca are not over' because the Thai government declared all their rice supplies national property in order to prevent hoarding and to supply Malaya. Wartime bombing in Burma had disrupted the infrastructure, slowing the rice from getting to Malaya. The Thai rice stocks were at an all-time low, thanks to the Thai policies.



In *The Modern Ancient Mariner* the cartoonist shows how the everyday man in Malaya (inclusive of Singapore and today's Malaysia) felt, as if there was 'Rice, rice, everywhere, nor any grain to eat'. Image from *NewspaperSG* (Singapore Free Press, 18 Sept 1946).

To combat this, ease community fears, and kill the black market, communal feeding programmes were launched. The first of the People's Restaurants opened in June of 1946 in Telok Ayer; by the end of the year there were ten in total which served lunch five days a week to city workers. Through People's Kitchens, more sponsored restaurants were opened to serve the factory workers outside of town. These programmes took a little while to find traction, but once the positive impact of the feeding schemes was realised, the black markets ceased to be. ■

FURTHER READING

Wartime Kitchen: Food and Eating in Singapore, 1942 – 1950, by Wong Hong Suen.

CHARLOTTE DAWSON is a docent at the National Museum of Singapore and the Changi Chapel and Museum.

THE ART AND DIPLOMACY OF CHOCOLATE

DARLENE KASTEN DELVES INTO THE LUXURIOUS ARTISTRY OF CHOCOLATE.

Photos provided by author unless noted otherwise.

During the many weeks of preparation for ACM's special exhibition, *Manila Galleon: From Asia to America*, 50 FOM docents participated in the exhibition research in order to be able guide the public, and in the process became obsessed with chocolate. Not necessarily the consumption of chocolate (though, full disclosure, at least one of us is now addicted), but with the stories behind its divine place in Mesoamerican traditions, its uses, and the material culture surrounding its preparation and consumption. In pre-Hispanic Mayan and Aztec cultures in the Americas, cacao was many things: a god, part of the creation myth, medicinal, used as currency, consumed by royalty and priests during rituals, and buried in tombs alongside precious gold items. 2000-year-old pottery on loan from the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia of Mexico City bears silent witness to that rich history.



At the 1565 Chocolate High Tea at Furama RiverFront, Singapore: (from left) Angelie Toquero-Choa; Rosellie L. Bantay, Cultural Officer and Vice Consul Joy Anne Lai, Embassy of the Philippines, Singapore; Raquel Toquero-Choa; Don Luis Coronado, President of the Mexican Chamber of Commerce in Singapore; HE Ambassador Agustin García-López Loaeza and his wife Señora Katya Anaya dela Fuente; Clement Onn, ACM Deputy Director and Principle Curator, Manila Galleon: From Asia to the Americas; FOM docents Darlene Kasten, Geraldine Limpo, Talia Webb, Jo Wright and Charlotte Dawson, with a painting by John Paul Toquero-Choa to be auctioned off at an upcoming Cacao Soirée to benefit the victims of the Acapulco Hurricane. Photo courtesy of the Furama Hotels (Singapore).

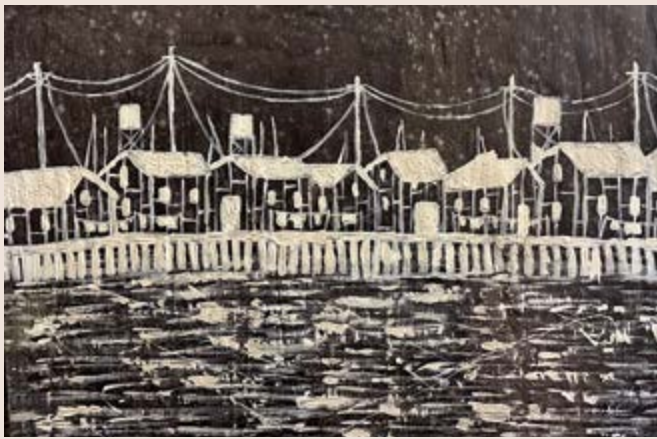
We were fascinated too by chocolate's transfer from Mexico to Europe and Asia aboard the Manila Galleons, and the new place it forged in societal customs and economies there. In Europe and among the Spanish elite living in the colonies of New Spain and Manila, drinking hot chocolate made from cacao was reserved for the upper echelons of society. To partake, special porcelain containers were commissioned from the Imperial kilns of China. *Mancerinas* to hold handleless cups between sips and protect expensive textiles from spillages and stains, chocolate pots used to prepare the hot froth so desired in the drinks, and colossal metal-topped jars to preserve precious roasted and fermented cacao beans were just a few of the special purpose pieces on display.

THE ART OF CHOCOLATE

However, did you know chocolate is also an art medium? Part of the art exhibit *Harmony Across Horizons*, on display at the Philippine Embassy, which ran concurrently with the Manila Galleon exhibition, were several paintings by a young Filipino artist named Mr John Paul Toquero-Choa. He uses chocolate lava made of pure cacao as a medium for original artworks to portray Philippine seascapes and stilt houses built on the coastal waters of Bohol and Cebu, Philippines. The opening night art reception was hosted by the Philippine Ambassador to Singapore, H.E. Medardo G. Macaraig with the Mexican Ambassador, H.E. Agustin García-López Loaeza as a guest of honour. There is a friendly, but serious, competition over chocolate between the Philippine and Mexican Ambassadors. Exactly which country produces the best chocolate in the world, cacao's



An 18th century mancerina made for serving hot chocolate. The form was designed to catch spilled liquid and to avoid burning fingers on the hot sides of the cup. The tray could be used to hold pastries. Image courtesy of the Asian Civilisations Museum.



Stilt House Series 5 / 2023 by John Paul Toquero-Choa. Cocoa lava and acrylic on canvas. Image courtesy of the artist.



Chocolate Queen Raquel Toquero-Choa with three of her 10 children, Angelie, Jonathan, and John Paul with a block of cacao lava.

native country (Mexico) or its prodigious but relatively recent producer (Philippines)? And which preparation is best as their recipes for hot chocolate are very different. For instance, Mexico adds chili, vanilla and cinnamon, and the Philippines might add condensed milk or sugar.

THE STORY OF THE CHOCOLATE QUEEN

John Paul comes by his chocolate pedigree naturally because he is the son and the ninth of 10 children belonging to the Philippines' reigning Chocolate Queen, Ms Raquel Toquero-Choa. Raquel, who prefers to be called a *tablea*-maker, grew up in the rural mountains of Balamban in Cebu, Philippines, perfectly suited for the cultivation of cacao trees. Her favourite stories growing up involved the legend of Maria Cacao, believed to be the Queen of the Forest as told by her grandmother. Raquel learned how to plant trees and harvest, sun-dry, and roast the beans to make pure cacao tablets called *tablea*, a task which inspired her chocolate journey.

Philippine cacao has a distinct flavour that is unique to the country and Raquel's mission in life is to share it with the world. She travels extensively as a chocolate ambassador and has even given a TEDx talk on the subject, *My Affair with Chocolate*. Raquel has two shops in the Philippines, one in Cebu and another in Bohol, both called The Chocolate Chamber – a café-cum-shop that showcases cacao-infused food and beverage products. In Bohol, Raquel has recently launched La Factoria by The Chocolate Chamber in an adjacent chocolate space, where an array of freshly baked goods and chocolates are crafted. She is planning to open her third location in Singapore in 2024.



Opening of Harmony across Horizons at the Philippines Embassy: (from left) Artist John Paul Toquero-Choa, H.E. Agustin García-López Loeza, Mexican Ambassador to Singapore, artist Angela Lee, FOM members Darlene Kasten and Kumiko Matsushima, H.E. Medardo G. Macaraig, Philippine Ambassador to Singapore and Yalin Chen, Director Olal'art Gallery, with one of John Paul's Stilt House Series in the background.

CHOCOLATE AS THE LANGUAGE OF DIPLOMACY

Cacao also served a diplomatic function for the FOM docents as Mexico and the Philippines came together for the victims of Hurricane Otis,

which struck Acapulco, Mexico on 22 October 2023, about halfway through our Manila Galleon research period. Many of the docents felt a special empathy for the hurricane victims as we had been concurrently reading about the importance of the port of Acapulco during the 250 years of cross-Pacific trade. One docent, Hilary White, took it upon herself to start a weekly collection for the remainder of our sessions to raise money for the International Red Cross relief effort.



The "Help Acapulco" collection box at a Manila Galleon Special exhibition research session.

A few FOM docents representing the Manila Galleon research group were able to give our donation to the Mexican Ambassador to Singapore in person at a "1565 Chocolate High Tea" organised by Raquel at Furama RiverFront. The special event featured a cacao-infused menu and hot chocolate prepared by Raquel's daughter Angelie Toquero-Choa, Batidores (one who prepares hot chocolate using a *batidor*) and Chocolate Couturière of The Chocolate Chamber. Raquel is planning a special Cacao Soirée chocolate dinner in partnership with the Mexican Embassy soon to raise additional funds for Acapulco relief.

There are many foods that made the journey from the Americas to Asia besides chocolate including pineapples, tomatoes, and chili but for some sweet reason, chocolate is the one that captured our collective imaginations. **P**

Currently, John Paul's artworks are being showcased on loan at the Embassy of Mexico in Singapore and they can be viewed by appointment.

DARLENE KASTEN is an FOM Docent with several institutions including the Asian Civilisations Museum. She was one of the Manila Galleon special exhibition research co-Coordiators, and is a recovering chocoholic.

FOM LEADERS 'SET SAIL' ON A GREEK CRUISE

LARISSA WIEGELE REPORTS ON FOM'S ANNUAL LEADERSHIP DINNER.



Lee Hong Leng, Melissa Enders-Bhatia, Charlotte Dawson, Jariyah Yusoff, Susan Fong, Garima Lalwani, Jo Wright, Avia Astryd



Jeffrey Tan, Laetitia Paoli, Srivalli Sastry-Kuppa, Tabitha Manresa, Deena Goh

The rain put paid to the alfresco drinks, but the spirit inside the Greek restaurant Blu Kouzina, on East Coast Road, could not have been brighter as over 50 volunteers holding leadership roles in FOM came together for the traditional annual thank you dinner. Beautifully put together by our Council Representative for Volunteer Appreciation and Membership, Oksana Kokhno, the evening started with welcome cocktails, ended with sweet treats, and offered seemingly everything in between.

After mingling by the bar, guests - many of whom opted to dress in blue and white in homage to the Greek setting - took to their seats and enjoyed the ice breaker game to find out something lovely about their table neighbour. A few words of thanks and appreciation to all the leaders and volunteers were extended by FOM President Millie Phuah before plate after plate of food emerged carrying dips, cheeses, salads, seafood, meat and - just in case there was any space left - a selection of Greek sweet pastries and fruit.

Guests left with an incredibly thoughtful gift chosen to also reflect the values of FOM: a custom-made batik produced in Central Java by aNERDstore. The print, from the spring series, captures the elements of fire, earth, water, and air together in balance and harmony with the FOM45 logo in the centre. The evening was certainly harmonious and more; a wonderful, relaxed gathering of old and new friends coming together as well as a real treat for those who contribute so much to the running of FOM.



Larissa Wiegele, Caleigh Hu, Ramya Narayanan, Isabel Telford



Sophia Rao, Rupa Tamsitt, Linda Lim, Mathangi Venkatesh, Shriya Narula



Kumiko Shima, Toshiko Kujime, Etsuko Asaga, Oksana Kokhno, Leong Lee Chiew, Karen Ng, Sadiah Shahal, Priscilla Tan, Sylvia Khoo



FOM Museum and Activity Leaders mixing and mingling during the pre-dinner cocktail hour.



Jariyah Yusoff and Oksana Kokhno



Leong Lee Chiew, Millie Phuah and Karen Ng



Hilary White, Sylvia Khoo and Michelle Foo



An Artisan from Bayat in Central Java stamping our FOM45 logo on the custom-made batik.

LARISSA WIEGELE is the NMS-FOM Museum co-Coordinator, and new Council Representative for Communications.

MILESTONES & MOMENTUM: HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE 20TH AGM OF FOM

TABITHA MANRESA REPORTS THAT ALL MOTIONS PASSED AND NO ONE NEEDED EXTRA FIBRE IN THEIR DIET TO GET THE JOB DONE. (YOU ARE WELCOME FOR THE FREE JOKES.)

The 20th Annual General Meeting (AGM) of FOM was held at the National Museum of Singapore on 6 December 2023. As FOM celebrates its 45th year as an organisation, outgoing President Millie Phuah was thrilled to announce we have much good news to report and reflect on. In the past financial year (September 2022 - October 2023), FOM welcomed 348 new members bringing our total membership to 1,627 representing over 40 countries.

FOM continues to guide 12 of Singapore's museums, heritage institutions, and walking trails. FOM's dedicated volunteer docents conducted 3,767 tours for 31,078 visitors. 124 new docents joined the ranks from ACM, NMS, CCM, IHC, Chinatown Heritage Trails, TPM and Gillman Barracks, including new Japanese docents. 365 active docents were celebrated this year with 40 receiving the three-year pin for service, 19 for the five-year pin, 22 for the 10-year pin, 11 for the 15-year pin, four for the 20-year pin and three for an outstanding 25 years.



New FOM President Lee Hong Leng with Immediate Past President Millie Phuah. Photo by Millie Phuah.



Outgoing 2022-2023 FOM Council (from left): Robyn Lloyd, Michelle Lim, Charlotte Dawson, Karen Ng, Millie Phuah, Linda Lim, Rupa Tamsitt, Leong Lee Chiew, and Oksana Kokhno. Photo by Evonne Tay-Koh.



FOM members in attendance at the 2023 FOM AGM. Photo by Evonne Tay-Koh.

We welcomed a full return to guiding and training with our docent programmes. The Peranakan Museum sprung back to life and STPI kicked off their first training batch in four years. Activities are buzzing with a dozen ongoing events and special interest groups for members to join. *PASSAGE* magazine celebrated its 15th anniversary this year. And we continue to support the FOM-National Heritage Board Heritage Grant. Enriching and engaging reports from recent grant recipients were given at the AGM, reporting various top international museum experiences.

We say goodbye and thank you to exiting Council members and welcome the incoming crew, ready for the new year ahead. 'We find FOM at the end of FY23 active and in good shape, not just financially but also in the myriad activities we continue to organise for our members, and at the same time contributing in no small way to the vibrant arts, history and heritage scene in Singapore. Thank you', concluded Millie Phuah, Outgoing President, Friends of the Museums.



New 2023-2024 FOM Council (from left): Rupa Tamsitt, Karen Ng, Linda Lim, Srivalli Sastry-Kuppa, Tabitha Manresa, Lee Hong Leng, Robyn Lloyd, Michelle Lim, Larissa Wiegele, Paroma Sen, and Millie Phuah. (Not in photo: Jyoti Ramesh.) Photo by Millie Phuah.

TABITHA MANRESA is the former co-Coordinator for the URA Chinatown Heritage Trails and is the new FOM Council Representative for Museums.



FOM BOLLYWOOD

very very jolly good!

**VOLUNTEER
APPRECIATION NIGHT
TUESDAY, 14 MAY 2024**

Save the Date! Details to follow soon.

IN MEMORY OF TAN SHOOK FONG FRIEND. LIFE LONG LEARNER. DOCENT.

LEONG LEE CHIEW PAYS TRIBUTE TO A BELOVED DOCENT AND FRIEND.

Tan Shook Fong, or Shook as most of us knew her, passed away on Friday, 15 December 2023. FOM lost a dear friend.

In 2003, Shook retired from the Ministry of Health, where she headed the Pharmaceutical Division. She immediately embarked on another career, this time with FOM as a volunteer, and started her journey in sharing art, history and culture. This year Shook received her 20-year pin for guiding with FOM. Throughout this time, Shook trained and guided at ACM, TPM, NMS, IHC, MHC, SYSNMH and SAM, a lifelong learner indeed! As a docent, she did more than guide, she assisted in docent training, mentored many batches of trainees, and led many engaging student tours.

In 2022, Shook received the FOM Salome de Decker award, an award presented each year to an FOM volunteer who quietly and positively gives their time and skills, and who models the values to which we all aspire: teamwork, respect and giving freely.

Shook touched our lives in many ways. FOM docents express great sadness to hear of her passing. She will be remembered fondly and missed dearly by so many of us. Chan Meili, Mae Chong, Leong Lee Chiew, and Heike Friedrich share their memories of Shook.



Shook holding the Salome de Decker award, received in May 2022, at the Malay Heritage Centre. Photo by Rosalind Tan.

"Shook and I had shared rooms on many FOM trips. We would discuss history and textiles, especially batik. She loved clothes and was not afraid to dress up to suit the theme of the occasion, such as Tang dynasty costumes including Tang ladies' makeup and hairdo. She didn't mind playing the part although I would hesitate to dress up in outlandish clothes with makeup to match! She was easy to get along with and keen to extend the FOM trips so that we could spend a little longer to see the country. She was a good cook, especially Hakka cuisine. FOM has lost a keen volunteer in many museums. We all miss her."

- Chan Mei Li

"Shook loved travelling, shopping and new experiences. Lilee, Mako, Shook and I met 20 years ago in 2003 at Docent training for ACM. We have fond memories of activities with Shook outside FOM, like doing yoga, learning Chinese and going out for meals. Shook was always generous and game to hang out. She is a great example of active aging, and an inspiration to us to age as well and as gracefully as her. Thank you, Shook" - Mae Chong



Lilee, Mae, Shook and Mako on their trip in Japan in 2008. Photo by Mae Chong.

"Shook was my mentor at TPM, where I first started my FOM journey in 2015. I was naturally nervous when it came to preparation for the Mentor Tour. Shook helped me improve my Mentor Paper, suggested that I prepare more stories as they are easy to add or remove without affecting the flow. Good advice! I cannot remember how many visitors I had, but I do remember it was not difficult to look for Shook for assurance. Shook, pretty in her pink dress, stood out among the visitors. She was smiley and gave nods of approval throughout my tour, and to my relief presented me with the FOM lanyard and certificate at the end of the tour. Thanks to Shook, I passed my first FOM Mentor Tour! Rest in peace, Shook, I will always remember you." - Leong Lee Chiew



Shook presented Lee Chiew the certificate at the Peranakan Museum after Lee Chiew's mentor tour, March 2016. Photo by Leong Lee Chiew.

"Shook attended the DOT (Docent Ongoing Training) we had in the morning and then also joined us for the lunch. During lunch we played a couple of games. One was for each of us to write down our most memorable FOM moment. All entries were collected and then one person from each of our two tables chose a winning entry for the other table and I had the honour of choosing the overall winner. The winner, very clearly, was Shook. Her most memorable FOM moment was when she got her 20 years badge from NHB. Imagine! 20 years! None of us could top that moment."

- Heike Friedrich



Christine, Shook and Heike at the NMS DOT, December 2023. Photo by Catalina Tong.

ASIAN FILM STUDIES GROUP STAGES A COMEBACK

VAISHALI TANEJA SHARES WITH US THE REVITALISATION OF THE FOM ASIAN FILM STUDY GROUP!



Lights! Camera! Action!



AFSG Season 2024 members (from left): Vaishali Taneja, Noelle Spears, Connie Yang, Regine Parker, Shantanu Ambedkar, and Isaac Keh. (Not in photo: Priya Balasubramaniam and Claudia Figge.)

The FOM Asian Film Study Group staged a comeback with a new season that started Jan 2024. This is a group of serious movie lovers who treat cinema as a window to understand diverse cultures and happen to be fun loving too! The previous season was a resounding success, led by program coordinator Suvidha. This season too has all the makings of a blockbuster, ably led by a new FOM member and now the program coordinator, Vaishali.

The theme for this season is “Director’s Special”, with handpicked movies of well-known Asian Directors from South Korea, Japan, Philippines, Taiwan, China, Singapore, India, and Iran. The members had the daunting task of selecting the movies for this season, across popular genres and eras. The decision came after many passionate deliberations and finally voting.

The list of Asian directors who have left their unique mark in the world of cinema is long and impressive, whether



Popular film genres and subgenres

it is the famed Taiwanese filmmaker Tsai Ming Liang best known for exploring human emotions like desire, alienation and loss with bursts of humour; or the well-known Japanese film maker Takashi Miike best known for films with graphic display of gore and violence; or Ann Hui from Hong Kong, best known for her ability to display feminine perspective of women in China. It was indeed a difficult choice to handpick movies for this season.

The group watches the movie at their own time and meets once in two weeks to discuss the various aspects of the film - context & setting, cinematography, director’s style, editing, actors and other finer aspects. The discussions unravel the complexity of film making, from the effect of light to the more technical aspects of sound and editing. Each meeting leads to a new set of appreciation for filmmakers and their art. It is amazing how movies visually transport us to the past era, frame by frame.

The meetings are hosted by volunteer members at their home, and discussions happen over a hot cup of tea or coffee. The group has built a strong bond and camaraderie over fun and engaging mornings. Can you think of a more engaging way to learn and have fun!!

The group is keen to watch the new movie premier together ... the countdown has already begun! It’s not too late to join the group, see the website for more details.

ASIAN FILM STUDY GROUP (AFSG)

Season : January - April 2024

Meeting : Alternate Tuesdays

Timings : 9.30am - 12noon

VAISHALI TANEJA is the Activity Coordinator for the Asian Film Study Group and the News co-Editor of *PASSAGE*.

THE GREAT JOURNEYS OF ASIA

KIM ARNOLD SHARES THE MOST RECENT LEARNING JOURNEY OF THE FOM ASIAN STUDY GROUP: THE GREAT JOURNEYS OF ASIA.

All images sourced from Wikimedia Commons.

The FOM Asian Study Group meets on Wednesday mornings to study a theme related in some way to Asia.

We meet for approximately eight weeks and each member prepares a 40-minute presentation related to the theme. We enjoy two presentations at each meeting; comradery combined with this fun way of learning is wonderful for keeping one's brain active, engaging in interesting conversations, and enjoying those 'ah-ha moments' of learning something new. Our themes are usually quite broad and allow members to research a topic within their personal interest.



Model of the Jewel of Muscat on display at the Asian Civilisations Museum.

The Afanasy Nikitin Monument: a statue of Nikitin in Tver, Russia (his hometown) on the banks of the Volga River.



The last theme we studied was **Great Journeys of Asia** and the presentations were diverse and fascinating. A few are summarised below....

We learned about Afanasy Nitikin, a Russian horse-dealing merchant, who was one of the first Europeans to document his travels in Central Asia and India in the 15th century. His narrative, *The Journey Beyond Three Seas*, documents social systems, governments, economies, and religions. Every Russian schoolchild learns about Nitikin and his association with India has been used by the Russian government to forge closer ties to India.

A presentation on the *Jewel of Muscat* gave us insights into the ship that was based on the design of the Belitung shipwreck. Also known as the Tang Shipwreck, the contents of the original Arabian trading ship, or dhow, are on display at the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM). The ship sank nearly 1100 years ago but was so well preserved that archeologists could determine its method of construction and the material used. The *Jewel of Muscat* was built in 2008 in Oman using ancient methods



Tash Rabat Caravanserai: a fortified and remote caravanserai on the silk route in Kyrgyzstan.

and sailed to Singapore two years later. The project was jointly funded by Oman and Singapore, building on their strong trade and diplomatic relationship. The *Jewel of Muscat* was on display at the Maritime Experiential Museum in Sentosa until 2020.

A modern spin on great journeys was *Journeys Taken to Fish (illegally)* highlighting how fishing fleets routinely fish in territories where they have no right to do so. This is a difficult and hard-to-monitor situation and results in some fisheries being overfished despite local national laws and regulations. We learned how some fishing ships remained at sea for months travelling around the world to fish in foreign waters despite the illegal nature of it.

A presentation on caravanserais showed how these inns provided the necessary protection and storage for merchants travelling along the overland Silk Route. Caravanserais were located a day's journey apart, were fortified, and provided room and board and both people and livestock. Some were owned by the local rulers, but others were privately owned. The last slides showed old caravanserais that had been developed into modern hotels and we all agreed we needed to form a study tour to visit them.

We also had wonderful presentations on the well-known travellers Ibn Battuta, Cheng Ho and Marco Polo as well as a fun presentation on the *Seven Voyages of Sinbad the Sailor* – a fictitious character from Arabian folktales. Other topics included A Journey on The Vietnamese Reunification Train, Near Death Experiences, and an exploration of cleaning up the Yangtse River. As you can see, there was a diverse range of exploring this most intrepid topic of Great Journeys of Asia!

The Asian Study Group's next theme is something completely different – Beauty & Fashion in Asia! We are hoping to explore many themes ranging from contemporary Asian fashion designers, to royal dress in Java, to the Korean cosmetic surgery business. Sign up will open (via the FOM website) in January and we look forward to welcoming you and learning all about your take on Beauty and Fashion in Asia!



The Tales of Sinbad the Sailor stories are part of the larger literary-cycle One Thousand and One Nights, 16th Century Manuscript in British Library by Unknown South Indian artist.

KIM ARNOLD co-chairs the Asian Study Group with Priti Sanghavi.



The Vietnamese Reunification Express goes through atmospheric scenery between Hoi An and Hanoi.

MONDAY MORNING LECTURES (MML)

MARCH - APRIL 2024

Lectures will be held in-person on the 1st, 3rd and 5th Mondays of the month, and on Zoom on the 2nd and 4th Mondays of the month. In-person lectures are held at the Asian Civilisations Museum and are open to the public. Zoom Lectures are open to FOM members only (visit the Public Events page on the FOM website to sign up). The lectures will begin promptly at 11am.

These are just three highlights in the upcoming months, but for the full programme of weekly MML lectures, please visit the FOM website Public Events page.

11 MARCH

ON BEING INDIGENOUS- STORIES FROM THE ORANG SELETAR

Zoom lecture, Speaker Ilya Katrinnada



Orang Seletar, a sea community settled in Johor Bahru

The Orang Seletar are a sea community native to the Tebrau Straits and its surrounding mangroves that line the northern coast of Singapore and southern side of Johor. Historically nomadic, they maintain their strong ties with the sea even as they settle in villages in Johor Bahru today. In this presentation,

Ilya Katrinnada explores what

it means to be indigenous, through her work with the Orang Seletar, offering a peek into their rich environmental knowledge and cultural traditions, as well as the ongoing challenges faced by the community.

Ilya Katrinnada is a researcher, writer, and educator with a geeky interest in the intersections of creativity, community and education. She is an Anthropology graduate and enthusiast, and currently works as a special education teacher. Her written works have been published by BiblioAsia (2022), Kitaab International (2021), and BeritaMediacorp (2018), among others.

15 APRIL

SIR CHARLES BULLEN HUGH MICHELL G.C.M.G., 'THE FORGOTTEN COLONIAL GOVERNOR'

In-person lecture, Speaker Michael Gray



Sir Charles Bullen Hugh Mitchell G.C.M.G., a biography by Michael Gray

This is the first known biography of Sir Charles Bullen Hugh Mitchell G.C.M.G., former Governor of the Straits Settlements and District Grand Master of the freemasons in the Eastern Archipelago. His early life was as an officer in the Royal Marines, where he was involved in the Crimean War. He also had a long and distinguished career in the Colonial Service, serving Queen Victoria in many countries including Natal in Southern Africa, during and after the Zulu Wars, British Honduras, British Guiana, Fiji and Singapore. On 1 February 1894 he was appointed Governor of The Straits Settlements colony, which was then in a very serious financial difficulty. With his prudent financial management, he brought the Colony back to a strong financial position. His governorship was cut short when he died suddenly at Government House (the current Istana) on 7 December 1899 and was buried in Singapore.

The author Michael Gray was, prior to retirement in 2004, a partner in PricewaterhouseCoopers (PWC) having moved to Singapore in 1978. Mike spent 10 years in the shipping industry as a ships officer in the Merchant Navy before training as a Chartered Accountant. He is a Singapore Citizen and has held many positions in boards of voluntary welfare organisations and government committees. He received from the Singapore Government the Public Service Star Bar (B.B.M. [L]) in 2010. He holds a Master of Arts degree in South East Asian Studies from the National University of Singapore and Doctor of Business (Honoris Causa) from the University of Newcastle in Australia. He is currently the librarian for the Singapore Masonic Library.

22 APRIL

IN A NEW LIGHT : REDISCOVERING FRANCIS LIGHT WITH THE PENANG CHRONICLES

Zoom lecture, Speaker Rose Gan



The Penang Chronicles by Rose Gan

The story of Captain Francis Light, founder of Penang, is known mainly through colonial era biographers. They make scant mention of his enigmatic wife, Martinha Rozells or the peoples of the 18th century Straits. *The Penang Chronicles (Dragon, Pearl and Emporium)* revisit the narrative anew, asking some new questions of

the historical evidence in a fresh look at this pivotal moment in the history of the region. In this lively presentation, Rose Gan will offer a different perspective and take us through her personal journey of recreating an authentic Martinha Rozells for a modern audience.

British by birth, Rose Gan has been based in South East Asia for many years with her Malaysian husband and family, having lived in Bangkok, Penang and Jakarta. With an academic background in Ancient and Medieval History and Classical languages, Rose worked for many years as a teacher and then later as a docent at various museums in Malaysia and Indonesia. Rose has also contributed to various museums publications as both writer and editor. Now based in Kuala Lumpur, Rose is mostly tied to her desk writing her next novel when not travelling, knitting (a singularly useless hobby in Malaysia) and inevitably perfecting her sourdough bread.



Rose Gan, a teacher, a docent, a writer, and an editor

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FRIDAY WITH FRIENDS (FWF)

After a long break, Friday with Friends resumed in 2023 with a bang with a flurry of interesting talks covering a wide range of topics from alcohol to romance, epic tales, politics and moving personal journeys. There are some interesting talks planned in the coming months. Lectures are held in the Ngee Ann Auditorium at the Asian Civilisations Museum and are open to the public. Lectures will begin at 7:00 pm. Go to the Public Events page on the FOM website for the most current information. Here is a preview what you can expect for 2024.

SEARCHING SHAKTI IN ART: AN ANCIENT FORTRESS, TANTRIC TEMPLES AND MUSEUMS

(India Edition)

Speaker: Nor Wang

Date: 23 February 2024

Art Specialist Nor Wang, shares with us her self-determined journey in search of Shakti – the divine feminine. In Tantric philosophy, Shakti is seen as the dynamic force that underlies creation. Tantra has transformed South Asia's major religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism and today Tantric elements can be found across Asia's diverse cultures. The talk presents an aspect of Nor's ongoing research and travels in Asia to develop and share knowledge of art forms that illuminate ways in which Shakti – the divine form has influenced a cornerstone of Asian art and thought.

About the speaker: Nor Wang, Art specialist with 20 years' experience in patronage, collections and communications for leading visual arts and cultural institutions in Asia. She is currently the Head of Development at Asian Civilisations Museum and Peranakan Museum.



Nor Wang posing with carved rock sculpture of Lord Shiva and Goddess Chamunda at 3rd century Kalinjar Fort in Uttar Pradesh.



Speaker Nor Wang. Image from Vogue Singapore.

FIRESIDE CHAT WITH ARTIST YIP YEW CHONG

Speaker: Yip Yew Chong

Date: 26 April, 2024

Yip Yew Chong is a Singaporean accountant turned Visual Artist. His more visible works are street murals depicting old Singapore. He started painting street murals part-time in 2015 and became an artist in 2018. The stories he shares through his murals are his own but it is one that resonates with many Singaporeans. Join us for a chat with the Artist and learn more about his thought process, his inspirations and his muses.



Speaker Yip Yew Chong with his painting depicting children in different parts of the world playing in a wonderland.



Dreams of Chinatown on 30 Temple Street. Wet market scene showing larger than life uncle pouring tea. A monumental three-storey mural by Yip Yew Chong.



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EXPLORE SINGAPORE!

MARCH - MAY 2024

There are people who think Singapore is a dull, boring place given its small size. Some only know its urban side – the bustling financial district, glittery shopping malls, trendy dining and drinking enclaves, and luxurious hotels and condominiums – or its suburban HDB (Housing Development Board) estates with local shops and markets. Yes, there are also the green lungs – its parks, both natural and man-made. However, Singapore has a lot more to offer if you care to venture out to explore and delve deeper. FOM's *Explore Singapore!* aims to provide members with opportunities to do this.

Explore Singapore! curates journeys and experiences which allow you to discover many facets you do not normally encounter. Just look at the diverse range of exciting programmes lined up in the next quarter – from exploring a natural, wild forest to the high-tech buildings of our premier university, from learning about a minority group's religion to tracing the historical steps of a dominant one, and more.

Explore Singapore! tours are held on Thursdays. For more details and to register, go to the Member Events page on the FOM website. And great news, we've lowered tour prices in 2024!



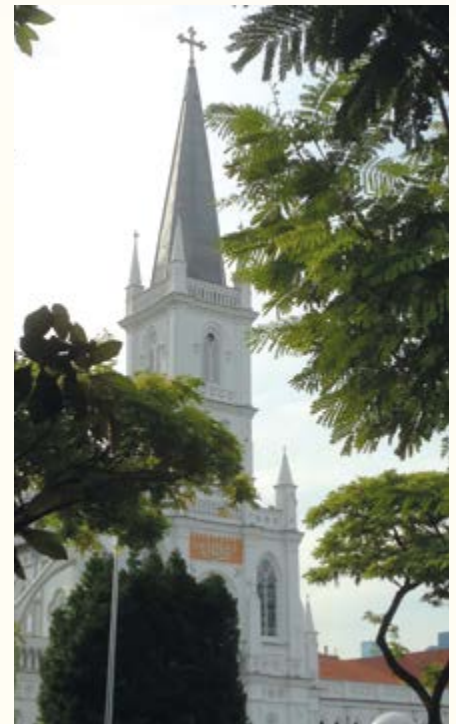
MARCH 2024

A magical and mysterious experience awaits you if you join us to cross the boundary from the urban to the truly wild. We will show you seldom seen wonders waiting to be discovered, like the denizens of the enchanted forests of Hayao Miyazaki's films.



MARCH 2024

Want to learn to make chapatti or tie a turban? You may not easily have an opportunity to do so, but you can with us!



APRIL 2024

When did Christianity first arrive in Singapore? Where were some of the early churches? Come and walk with us on this trail to find out.

APRIL 2024

An important ingredient in many curries is ginger, but good chefs use more than just common ginger. Do you know that there are many varieties of ginger? Perhaps you have eaten the popular Peranakan dish called *Ayam Buah Keluak*, also known as ‘black gold’, yet have you seen it in its raw form?



MAY 2024

Carbon footprint, carbon credit, carbon neutral, net-zero energy – these are buzzwords making the news these days. In Singapore, architects and scientists have made carbon neutrality a reality! For anyone who is earnestly concerned, and cares about the environment and climate change, we are pleased to take you on a tour of some net-zero energy buildings.



MAY 2024

If the stones on Fort Canning could talk, what stories would they tell? How Raffles enjoyed living in his house, even though the local people thought it such a flimsy structure that they worried whether it was still standing after each Sumatra (storm)? The lives of the early Europeans buried in the cemetery there? What was it like when the Japanese occupied the Fort during World War II? You will be fascinated by the stories of the numerous layers of the Fort’s history.



For the most up-to-date information and to register for a tour, please go to www.fom.sg
For queries, please contact Lim Chey Cheng: fomexploresingapore@gmail.com

DEEPEST GRATITUDE TO FOM'S MEMBERSHIP & WELCOME AND HOSPITALITY TEAMS

A NOTE OF THANKS FROM **ROBYN LLOYD** AND **RUPA TAMSITT** TO THE RESPECTIVE TEAMS.

Photo credits: the Membership & Welcome and the Hospitality teams.



Whether you're a regular at Monday Morning Lectures, join Friday with Friends, or are an occasional visitor at one of our major annual events (Public Information Meeting, Open Morning or New Member Coffee Mornings) you'll be familiar with the welcoming smiles of the Hospitality and Membership teams.

Dispensing coffee, tea and sweet treats at one table and sweet talking prospective and existing members at another, these ladies (and gentleman!) are the face of FOM.

The teams always welcome new recruits to the cause. If you are interested in volunteering, drop an email to the Coordinators:

- Jutta Schutte at fomhospitalityteam@gmail.com to join the Hospitality team, or
- Vanessa Spencer at mvlspencer@icloud.com to join the Membership and Welcome team.

If you decide to sign up for these groups, not only will you be giving your time to our great organisation, you'll also have the pleasure of meeting many FOM members and be part of a fun loving team of volunteers.

We take this opportunity to thank both teams for their outstanding service in 2023, supporting over 30 FOM events.

Our **MEMBERSHIP AND WELCOME TEAM** members are: Vanessa Spencer (Coordinator), Joyce Jenkins, Sim Chong Teck, Neerja Shastri, Smitha Suraj, and Charu Shahani.

Our **HOSPITALITY TEAM** members are: Jutta Schutte (Coordinator), Kim Arnold, Sim Chong Teck, Maria Carvalho, Jariyah Yusoff, Sangeeta Bagga, Christiane Duckworth, Joyce Jenkins, and Garima Lalwani.



EXPLORING SINGAPORE WITH YIP YEW CHONG

CHARLOTTE DAWSON CHATS WITH YIP YEW CHONG, THE ARTIST BEHIND THE *I PAINT MY SINGAPORE* EXHIBITION ABOUT HIS WORK, IDEATION PROCESS AND FUTURE ASPIRATIONS. DISCOVER SOME EXCITING REVELATIONS ABOUT THIS MUCH-LOVED ARTISTIC TALENT.

Like many of you, I'm a huge fan of the street art and exhibition work of Yip Yew Chong. Alongside other docents, I had the privilege of working with Yew Chong to guide his latest exhibition: *I Paint my Singapore*.

Recently, I posed some burning questions to him from our FOM docents – about his installation, his murals, his ideation process, and more. Grab a cup of tea and join us in this conversation with Yip Yew Chong!

What's the most challenging street mural you've ever done and why?

Actually, every mural has its own challenges. It's really hard to say which one. I guess, logistically, some really tough ones are those where I had to maneuver the boom lift in such a way to prevent it knocking into walls, lampposts or other structures.

There's other challenges too, like super-hot or rainy days, and sometimes the mental blocks on 'what should I paint here?'

I wouldn't say any one street mural per se; I think the most challenging series is Chinatown. If you've read my book *The Art of Joy*, you'll have seen it took six or seven years of navigation – finding the house owners, looking for funding, approval from stakeholders, etc.

Of all the Singapore murals, which one is the most satisfying or your favourite? Is there one you connect with more than others?

Undoubtedly, it's my own Chinatown home at 30 Smith Street because it depicts where I lived the first 14 years of my life with my family.



Scene from Yew Chong's Chinatown Wet Market mural at Temple Street. Image taken by author.

You've painted several murals outside of Singapore. Which one has been your favourite, whether it's the mural or the destination?

Wow, really hard to say! Every one of them had different experiences. Favourite? You just caught me!

Okay, I would say, the biggest one, my most memorable, is the one in India because of the scale of it. The others are smaller. That was also my first time using a boom lift – in India without a license. It was like, 'Oh, okay!' 10-15 minutes training and then off you go. Of course, there's a trained operator who's down at the bottom helping me to navigate. It was a crash course. Not like Singapore, where it's a full day course.

Where in the world would you like to paint a mural, that you haven't done so yet?

I would love to paint in many countries. Of course, I wouldn't forget my roots. This is where I am born, bred and appreciated first. I will always have Singapore at heart, but at the end of the day I also want to be an international artist with my works appreciated not just in Singapore, but the world. I will work hard for that!

In your past exhibition *Something Somewhere Somewhen* you created vignettes inspired by your city murals. How did you choose these particular scenes to make the triptychs?



A triptych on canvas inspired by Yip Yew Chong's Amah mural at Everton Road. Image by Simone Lee.



Yip Yew Chong's Amah mural located at Everton Road. Image taken by author.

Because that was my first exhibition I wanted to create something that people still associate with what they've seen on the streets, they have a reference for it... Something, somewhere and some when like that, hence the name. And I transported these images on the canvas to a gallery setting. That's the idea behind it.

Where in Singapore would you recommend to our FOM members to visit, in the context of 'somewhere' and 'somewhen' (in that it may no longer be here)?

After you've finished looking at my murals in Chinatown, go to my old Chinatown home. That very spot, which is today a carpark and the entrance to the Maxwell Road MRT station, Sago Lane. Stand there and imagine the coffins, the funerals, the wakes, and all those businesses related to death on that very street.

What was your process for planning and working on *I Paint my Singapore*?

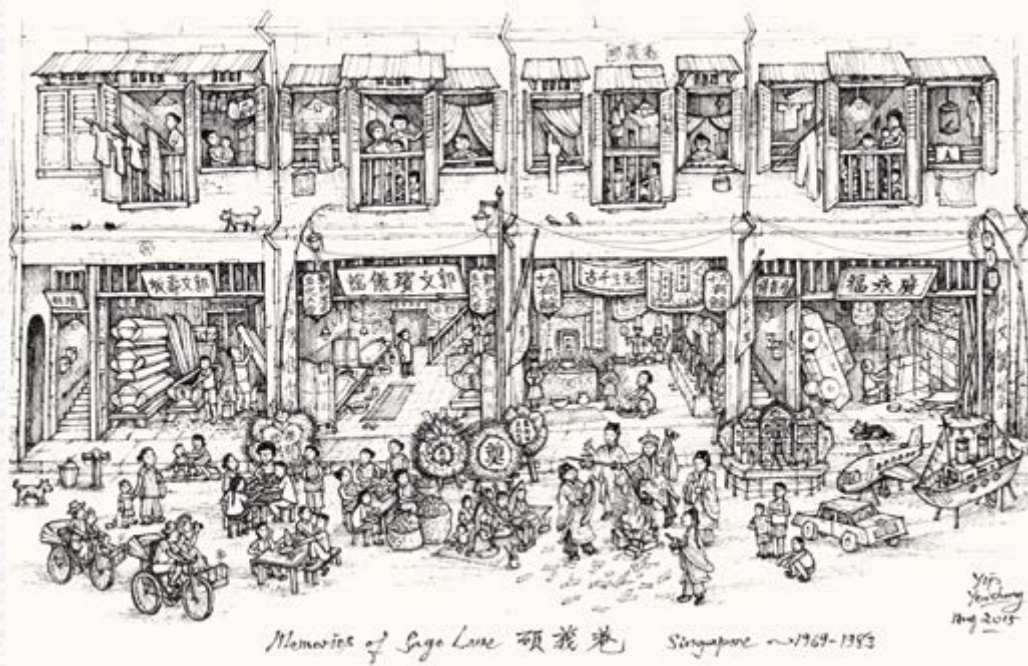
I jotted down a list of all the places that I wanted to paint, that I've experienced in Singapore, that I'm connected with:

Chinatown where I was born, Tiong Bahru, Pulau Tekong (my National Service), etcetera. It's a long list which I tried to fit like a jigsaw into a scroll and rearrange. It was very fluid. This is *my* impression, it's my life that I am trying to portray. Even though it's a collective memory, very similar to everyone living in Singapore in those days.

I started somewhere in the middle, which is Chinatown, and the next one I painted is The Woodlands and then Toa Payoh. And when people gave me more suggestions on social media, 'Oh, you have to include that', I tried to fit in or tried to just reach out to further areas. I shuffled a lot along the way. I inserted new ones and threw away some ideas too. It was all very haphazard but somehow it just fits in nicely.

We noticed that across the panels there are several cinemas, with marquees or movie posters. Are any of these favourites from your childhood, or are they more to mark a timeline?

It reflects the times. And when doing the research I was like, 'Oh yeah! I watched this movie', for example *Back to the Future* and *Aces Go Places*.



Ink sketch titled Memories of Sago Lane, where Yip Yew Chong grew up. If one could go anywhere in Singapore at any point in time, this is where Yew Chong would like for us to visit. Image from Yip Yew Chong.



The central panel is the Padang scene from *I Paint my Singapore*. Situated between the Singapore River and Bras Basah panels, it was inserted after the initial planning stage to (artistically speaking) tie the two together seamlessly. Image taken by author at the exhibition.

Bugis Street, however, is not of that period. I'm depicting 70s, 80s; it's actually early 90s but I wanted to add this very iconic film. It's like an icebreaker in the period where we had restricted artistic freedom.

You've included some controversial elements like the funeral, red light district, and the R-rated movie. Anything you considered but chose not to include?

I wouldn't say they're controversial. They are there and they are just part and parcel. I always like to portray reality-based story-telling, not fantasy. They are real.

Is there any intentional mistake in these 27 panels?

There are unintentional mistakes. Sometimes I just leave them and cannot go back to correct.

[The work] is a quasi-impression. Impression means you remember something and think it looks like this. It is an expression of an impression, what you remember you put in. Some mistakes are intentional. You have to discriminate. Otherwise you drown the whole story with details.

So you have to be very selective about what you want to showcase in the fore and sink anything you don't want to be too distracting into the background. So that is why I had to condense, I had to cut things, make it generic, and [shift buildings to] show the best facades.

In your murals and paintings, your calendars tell us it's the 12th and your clocks are set at 10:10. What is the significance of these details?

10:10 doesn't mean anything. It just looks good, as a happy face.

I use 12th consistently, even for my murals, ah, I started to use it because it was nothing significant. It's my birthdate, and because . . . it's double digits and looks good, that's all. I don't really celebrate birthdays. It just looks nice. Aesthetically it's more balanced with two digits.

Conceptually speaking, what might be your next project?

I don't know. Fluidly I have many plans in my mind. And sometimes when new things come on board, I'll just brush the old things away, and maybe after a while, I'll come back to them. I don't really plan in detail. I flow with the river and if there's a new tributary that looks

interesting, I'll go in and explore, and who knows, it may lead me to new branches!

That is the same way I travel. I don't plan my itinerary in detail. I just choose a city, take a bus and, oh wow, I stay in somebody's home. It makes the trip so much more interesting. Same for my artistic journey. When I started my break in 2015, I wanted to actually make films. I bought equipment. And then I got distracted by murals and I put my equipment aside. And one day I think I will become a filmmaker again.

FURTHER READING

The Art of Joy: The World of Yip Yew Chong by Woon Tai Ho.



Can you spot the calendar and clock? In this close-up, we see Yew Chong's childhood home. He paints himself as a young boy, in the white top and blue shorts. His mother is working on her sewing machine as most of the family watches the street performance happening outside. Image cropped from Yip Yew Chong's original photograph of the Chinatown night scene panel in *I Paint my Singapore*.

CHARLOTTE DAWSON was co-Coordinator of the special exhibition team that researched and guided Yew Chong's *I Paint my Singapore*. The questions for this interview were compiled from docents guiding the *I Paint my Singapore* exhibition who were asked: 'if you could ask Yip Yew Chong anything, what would it be?'

A CONVERSATION WITH EXPLORER JAYA

PARUL MEHRA INTERVIEWED IHC FOM DOCENT JAYASREE ALAMURU ON HER NOTEWORTHY RECORD-BREAKING ACCOMPLISHMENT.

Photos provided by Jayashree Alamuru.



Over steaming cups of chai latte, I sat down to discuss what drove Jayasree to achieve her walking records in Singapore, commendable feats, along with her other creative pursuits.

Jayasree, you have been mentioned in the Singapore Book of Records, could you please elaborate more on this?

During the Covid-19 pandemic, social interactions were restricted. It was a morose time for me personally wherein I felt the need to engage in activities which would uplift me. I started exploring different parks around me and slowly

started increasing my stamina to walk for longer periods of time. This led to my building enthusiasm for participation in a group challenge (which was split into smaller cohorts due to pandemic restrictions), and my exciting journey to establish records started.

So, when and how did you establish two walking records, one with a group and another on your own?

In 2020, I joined SGTrek, a company which organises walking tours. I took this as a great opportunity to motivate myself and get out of my comfort zone to explore Singapore on foot. It was a larger group and each of us had our separate walking routes. Over seven days we followed our own trails and circled the whole island. It was an exhilarating experience.

Then, on my 50th birthday (May 2020) I felt the need to push myself again and celebrate this landmark moment. I decided to cover 50 kms of walking in one day! This was a mammoth task, however I managed it with the support of my family and friends who joined me at various intervals over the 12 hour walkathon.

Do share highlights and challenges you faced with this walking expedition, and which shoes did you prefer to wear throughout the experience?

I really enjoyed walking on the eastern side of Singapore, which has 12 kms of flat land, near Tanah Merah coastal road. However, on this stretch there are no amenities and shops only lamp posts along the road, hence I needed to be fully prepared with water, etc. One of my walking buddies was also with me throughout, which made it easier.

I would like to recommend the footwear named *Hoka* for the benefit of all the readers who may be keen to take up brisk walking. This brand is available at select shops





islandwide. They are great for long walks but be warned: they're slightly tricky to wear in wet weather as they tend to slip! However, these have been my tried and tested walking companions.

I would like to share with your readers a realisation I had during this journey. There's so much beauty and variety of flora and fauna in our country which we tend to overlook in our busy schedules, whizzing around in our private vehicles! My suggestion would be that we all step out on foot more often, connecting with nature and appreciate what we have in terms of nature's bounty.

Our readers would love to know more about your association with FOM?

Sure, I joined FOM in 2018 as a docent with the Indian Heritage Centre (IHC) as I was always inclined to learning more about history, arts, and culture. I attended one session of the Open Morning at FOM and was thrilled to meet like-minded individuals.

My father worked in the office of The National Archives of India, so I feel that my curiosity to learn more about historical facts may have originated from there.

Please tell us more about your stint as a tourist guide with the Singapore Tourism Board (STB) and your role as a community volunteer?

Yes, I'm actively conducting tours around Singapore with STB as I'm a freelancer and I partner with various agencies. This gives me a chance to interact with visitors and give them more information about what all to explore in our beautiful island city.

My role as a community volunteer with the People's Association organisation, since

2014, is as a grassroots leader working with three committees. During the Covid-19 pandemic I was involved with the distribution of food and masks for those in need of support. For this contribution I was also awarded on Singapore's National Day in 2023.

What about your other hobbies? What is one other activity you are very passionate about?

I've learnt the Veena instrument and also accompanied my teacher's performance group at various recitals in India and Singapore. I had the chance to perform solo at a community centre event here, which shall always be a cherished memory.

I also enjoy making rangolis (floor patterns made with flowers, coloured powders, and embellishments). It is something that I have done since my childhood during any festivities. This colourful artform really excites me and I'm deeply passionate about it.

I am also creatively engaged in painting small gift items such as cups, lanterns, glass tiles and ceramics. I also paint canvases in my free time, these artworks are mostly based on what I observe in my walks. The inspiration for my glass art comes from brightly coloured church windows which fascinate me.

I enjoy flower photography and I regularly update images with all details of the flower families after I research about them and then upload on my Facebook page, bringing joy to nature lovers who follow me.

Jayasree, this has definitely been a stimulating conversation, any parting thoughts which you would like to share with our readers?

Travelling gives me great joy, especially my recent trip to Cambodia. I also have a safari planned on my bucket list along with many other destinations. I'm always happy to explore new territories and love the nick name Explorer Jaya!



PARUL MEHRA is an FOM Member and the News co-Editor of *PASSAGE*.

THE BLACK AND WHITE HOUSE

KARIEN VAN DITZHUIJZEN TELLS US ABOUT THE RESEARCH THAT WENT INTO HER NEWEST NOVEL, AND CONNECTED HER WITH FOM.

When we moved into our new house, my Singaporean friend commented: ‘You’ll love it. Lots of ghosts there.’ She knows me well. I love a home with hidden stories to explore and share. Our last house at Adam Park was a wealth of inspiration. Built in the 1920s by the colonial government, it saw a battle in WWII and housed around 200 prisoners of war. The house inspired my novel: *The Black and White House*. It’s not history itself that fascinates me, but how our past impacts our present and future.

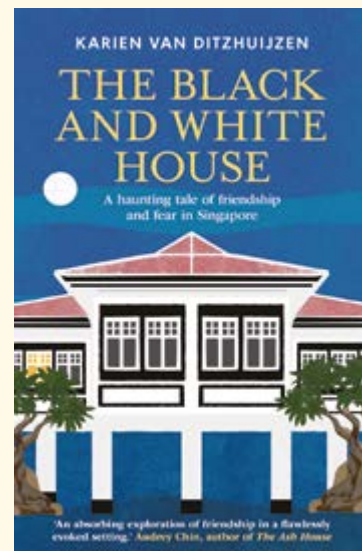


The Adam Park black and white house that inspired Karien to craft this story. Photo by Marry Fermont-ter Steege.

In *The Black and White House*, newly arrived expat Anna is excited to move into her new house, but soon starts to unravel. Is the rambling, increasingly filthy house playing tricks on her? Meeting Malay Singaporean Salimah feels like a godsend. Salimah has her own connection to the house and when Anna mistakes her for a cleaner, she says yes, hoping to solve a mystery from her childhood that uprooted her life. The two women form a fragile friendship, but is there something in the house out to thwart them?

Writing the book from the perspective of both characters required some research. Malay Singaporeans come from all over the Malay archipelago, and having lived in Indonesia and Malaysia, their culture is familiar to me. Searching for a fitting background for Salimah, I came across the Baweane

Front cover of Karien’s book *The Black and White House*.



or Boyanese, immigrants from the island Bawean in the Java sea. When I found out that this particular group is often discriminated against for using ‘black magic’, I had found another key to my story!

Anna’s family history took some work too. She is an expat from the Netherlands whose father was born in Sumatra. They were *totoks* – ethnically whites who had lived in Indonesia for generations, until independence forced them out. She is happy to be in Asia, but also struggles with guilt and insecurities. Her father refused to talk about what he considered his family’s shameful past. When Anna finds out her house was a POW camp in the war, she unearths her grandmother’s diary from when she was interned in Sumatra.

Both women need to face their past before they can move on, together. But now, I already gave away too much, and if that got you hooked, you’ll simply have to go and read the book for yourself! Writing and researching this novel has brought me many things, and in a serendipitous way, it has connected me with FOM.

At the FOM open morning, I chatted at the Malay Heritage Centre stand about our shared passion for Malay culture, and before I knew it, I had impulsively signed up to become a docent for the Kampong Gelam Heritage Trail. The training was excellent and deepened my knowledge of Malay culture and the fascinating history of Kampong Gelam, which is closely interwoven with that of Singapore. I got to meet likeminded people who love to learn about the history and cultures of South East Asia. I made many new friends. The only problem I face now? I’ll need to write another book to use all that knowledge.



Karien at work on the porch of the Adam Park house. Photo by Lina Meisen Photography.

KARIEN VAN DITZHUIJZEN is a novelist and docent for the Kampong Gelam heritage trail.



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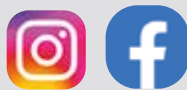
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