

PASSAGE

FRIENDS OF THE MUSEUMS SINGAPORE

2 0 2 3
ISSUE II

Celebrating Remarkable Women



CELEBRATING
40
YEARS
1978-2023
art. history. culture. friendships

Train as a Volunteer MUSEUM GUIDE



Docent trainees at Changi Chapel & Museum

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

PUBLIC INFORMATION MEETING

Tuesday 30 May 2023
10 am to 12 noon
National Museum of Singapore
 Gallery Theatre, Basement
 93 Stamford Road, Singapore 178897

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



* FOM training will be conducted on weekdays in English



(L - R): Docents at Asian Civilisations Museum, Indian Heritage Centre, and URA-FOM Chinatown Heritage Trails

This event is open to FOM members & the public

C O N T E N T S



ON THE FRONT COVER

Detail from a 17th century hanging scroll, a portrait-icon of Murasaki Shikibu by Tosa Mitsuoki (1617–1691). Edo period. Collection of Ishiyamadera Temple, Shiga Prefecture. Murasaki is dressed in red trousers and colourful robes corresponding to her status as a court lady. She holds a brush and is poised to begin her masterpiece, *The Tale of Genji*, possibly the world's first novelist. Read about her on page 3.

BACK COVER

Detail from *A Lovely Garland* by Tosa Mitsuyoshi (1573–1615). Painting on paper mounted on a scroll. Collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. This scene from Chapter 22 of *Genji* shows New Year robes being distributed to court ladies. Prince Genji sits near his beloved Murasaki while the women put garments into lacquered boxes.

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PASSAGE

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President's Blog

Hello everyone,
Welcome to this issue of *PASSAGE*, which pays tribute to remarkable women through the ages. To all the wonderful women of FOM, thank you! Where would we be without you?

It's been a busy few months at FOM.

In January, two docent training programmes began, for the FOM-URA Chinatown Heritage Trails and for the first time at the Changi Chapel and Museum. February saw some happy docents starting guiding art and history again at Gillman Barracks after a break of several months.

The highly anticipated reopening of the Peranakan Museum (TPM) after an almost four-year closure for major refurbishment happened at a grand reopening on the 16th of February. FOM took the opportunity to sponsor a copy of *PASSAGE* magazine for the event goodie bag for the guests. Once retraining of docents is complete, we should be back guiding at TPM soon.

We also held the first New Member Morning of the year to welcome new members. It was held at Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall (SYSNMH). Read about it on page 60. Council members made presentations and mingled with attendees before they went off for taster tours. Please tell your friends about us – we love making new friends!



With Council Rep for Museums, Charlotte Dawson and TPM Coordinator Angela Kek at the reopening of TPM.

Do look out for the monthly notes I've begun sending out via our monthly e-newsletters.

Till the next blog, take care and enjoy this issue of *PASSAGE*.

Millie Phuah
FOM President
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Members of the FOM Council after a site recce for VAN.

Friday With Friends also kicked off again at the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM).

Council has been meeting regularly as usual. Many projects and events are being run concurrently all the time. After working very hard to find the right venue within our budget for this year's special Volunteer Appreciation Night (VAN), we've finally made the selection although I've been clearly reminded to keep it a secret for now. Thanks to Oksana for much of the legwork. Lots of backend work continues.

Please help us to update your personal particulars and FOM involvement in the member section on our website. I cannot emphasise how important this is, so we can ensure you get the right appreciation pins.

From The Editors

"Well behaved women rarely make history."

- ELEANOR ROOSEVELT

This issue of *PASSAGE* is devoted to the theme of 'Remarkable and Iconic Women'. International Women's Day is observed on 8th March. It commemorates a protest on the same day in 1857 when female textile workers in New York rebelled against unfair conditions, poor pay and unequal rights.

In more recent times, International Women's Day is celebrated as Women's History Month by museums like the Ashmolean in Oxford. The contributions of women in history are highlighted through art and artefacts. *PASSAGE* goes a step further by honouring women for a whole season in this, our Spring edition.

From the early days of the Suffragette movement, posters were used to advance the cause of women's rights. In World War II America, 'poster girl' Rosie the Riveter became an icon of female strength. Even during the Communist period in China, women were depicted on propaganda posters as being equal to men, echoing Mao Zedong's famous words: "Women hold up half the sky".

We have both worked in advertising so we are very aware of how advertisements can be viewed as a barometer of society as well as an influencer. The 'poster girl' advertising

of 1930s Shanghai is a classic example. It says so much about the decade during which Shanghai was referred to as "Paris of the East". It provided a model of the daring, western-orientated modern woman that some might aspire to. But it also presented a sensuous, objectified view of women that advertising has always been guilty of exploiting.

An advertising poster back in the 1960s acknowledged the progress women had made in striving for equality with the headline: "You've come a long way, baby". Virginia Slims stole the line to market cigarettes to women before realising that these words were patronising as well as praising their customers. So, they dropped the word "baby".

Some religions have given Woman a bad image by presenting her as Eve, the 'woe of man'. But at the same time women have been revered and worshipped as divine mother figures and symbols of fertility. In the ancient world, women were often idolised.

This issue looks at multiple manifestations of female achievement. We throw the spotlight on artist Georgette Chen; the world's first novelist Murasaki Shikibu; the selfless Ethel Mulvany who inspired fellow POWs to keep going; and champion of women's rights Checha Davies.



Photo by Darlene Kasten.

From the avenging Hindu deity Durga to the Goddess of Mercy Guan Yin; woman warrior Lady Chan who saved an island; to adventurers Maria Revere Balestier and Nellie Bly; opulent Peranakan matriarchs and proud but humble Samsui women – get to know them all in the pages that follow.

Our next issue will have the theme Black and White. If you feel inspired to contribute a story, please write to us to pitch your idea in a few sentences.

Tim Clark and Dawn Marie Lee
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A suffragette poster by artist D. Meeson Coates published in 1914, UK. A woman is serving six boys from a large bowl labelled "Political Help." The small bowl she holds in her hand reads "Votes for Women." "John Bull" was a symbol of the British government, just as "Uncle Sam" symbolised the American government.



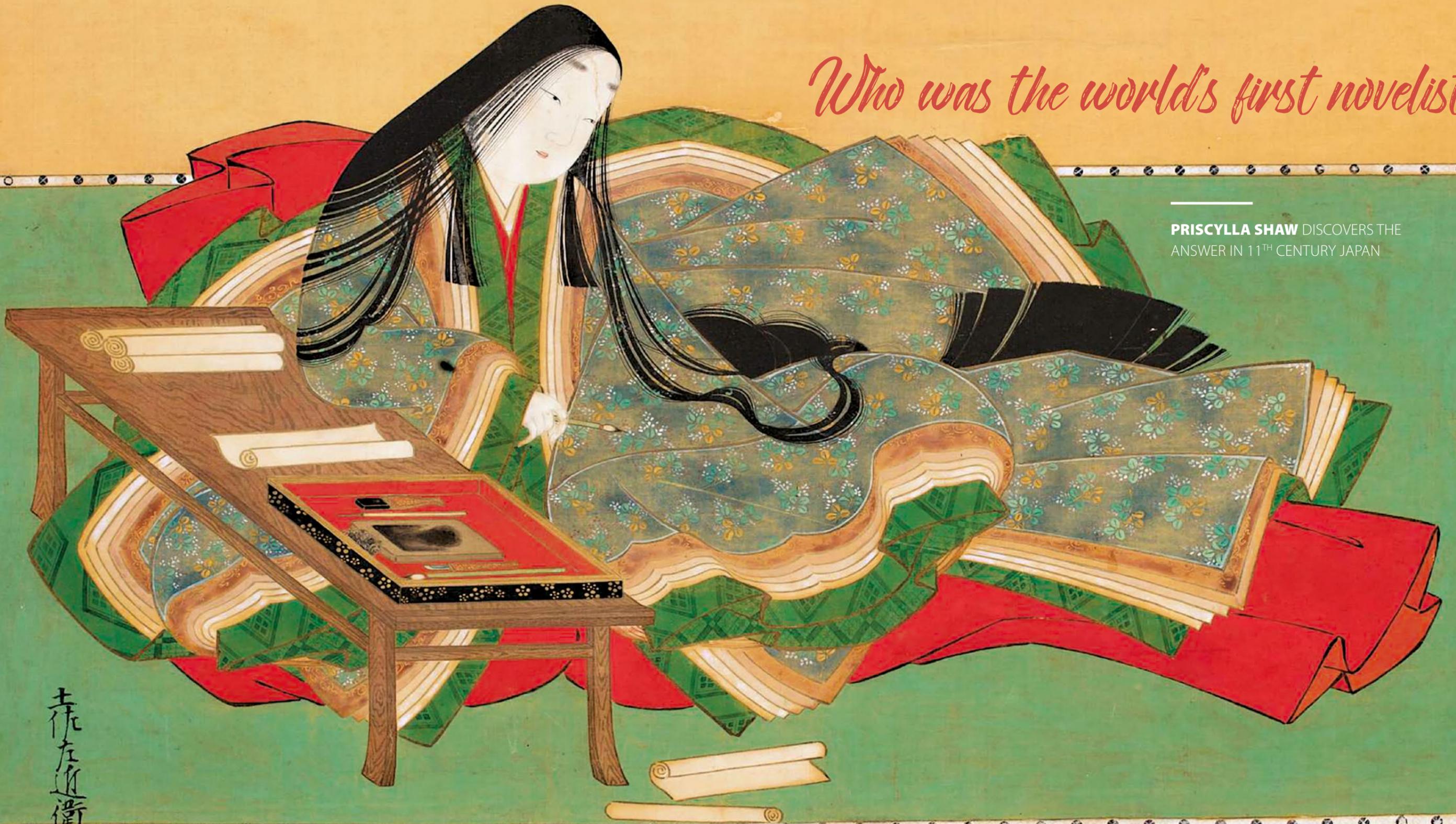
"Rosie the Riveter" was an iconic poster of a female factory worker flexing her muscles, exhorting other women to join America's World War II effort with the declaration "We Can Do It!". As women were encouraged to take wartime jobs in defence industries, they became a celebrated symbol of female strength and patriotism. This poster designed by American artist J. Howard Miller in 1942 has become one of the most famous American icons of World War II.



A Communist propaganda poster, 1968, China.

Who was the world's first novelist?

PRISCYLLA SHAW DISCOVERS THE
ANSWER IN 11TH CENTURY JAPAN



土佐左近衛將監藤原光起

It is generally accepted that the first modern novel in western literature was Don Quixote. But 600 years before Cervantes wrote his epic romance, an even greater tome was written by a Japanese noblewoman.

Murasaki Shikibu is an icon of Japan and a pioneer of literature. She was born in Japan's golden age, the Heian period (794–1185), spanning almost 400 years of peace and prosperity. This period is considered by many Japanese to be the most elegant period in the country's history.

With a new capital at Heian-kyo ("capital of peace and tranquillity", modern-day Kyoto), Imperial Japan matured rapidly as a prosperous independent kingdom with fine palaces and exquisite art. Concurrently, its political and social structures also evolved. Firstly, and somewhat paradoxically, the Emperor lost power to his regents. By the mid-Heian period, he was merely a figurehead. In effect, Japan was ruled by the powerful Fujiwara clan (Fujiwara period 897–1185), who had intermarried into the Imperial family and whose power base was Kyoto. Secondly, there was a momentum towards replacing borrowed Chinese conventions with Japan's own language and art.

THE WORLD'S FIRST NOVEL

Against this backdrop, Murasaki Shikibu emerged in the 11th century, as a writer, court poet, diarist and lady-in-waiting. She was probably the world's first novelist and the author of Japan's most renowned literary work, *The Tale of Genji*.

Eminent *Genji* scholar, Sano Midori, calls it "an epic work of literature". Written in prose and *waka* (thirty-one-syllable court poetry), it has 54 chapters and spans more than 70 years, up to the heyday of Japanese aristocracy in Kyoto.

It follows the life of the dashing Prince Hikaru Genji including his marriage at age 12, and his star-crossed love for the beautiful, aristocratic Lady Murasaki whom he first met when she was just ten years old. Over 400 characters stand as the supporting cast in the novel. All the episodes of *Genji* were set in real places in and around Kyoto; the gardens, architecture, palace interiors and furnishings described in it have been corroborated by scholars.

Murasaki wrote *Genji* as fiction but she drew heavily on her acute observations of court life, weaving love, despair, political and social plots into her stories. Over the centuries, readers and *Genji* experts have dissected it in different ways according to themes ranging from philosophy and Buddhism to court fashion.



(above) An interior court scene from *The Tale of Genji*. Ukiyo-e (woodblock print), Utagawa Hiroshige, 1852. Collection of Japan's National Diet Library. Image from Wikimedia Commons.

(previous spread) Detail from a 17th century hanging scroll, a portrait-icon of Murasaki Shikibu by Tosa Mitsuo (1617–1691), Edo period. Murasaki is dressed in red trousers and colourful robes corresponding to her status as a court lady. She holds a brush and is poised to begin her masterpiece. Ink and colours on silk. Collection of Ishiyamadera Temple, Shiga Prefecture.



Murasaki composing *The Tale of Genji* on the moon-viewing platform of Ishiyamadera temple. Hanging scroll, Gakutei Harunobu (1786 – 1868), Edo period. Collection of the Freer Gallery of Art.



Japan's 2,000 Yen banknote depicting a scene from *Genji* was commissioned in honour of Murasaki Shikibu. Image from Wikimedia Commons.

Like many of her contemporaries at court, Murasaki also kept a diary in which she expressed her private wry observations, musings and thoughts about the people and the court life around her. The literature written by Heian court women is recognised as some of the earliest and best in Japanese history. Excerpts from Murasaki's diary are still frequently quoted today and it remains an important historical reference on the individuals, customs and fashion within Heian palace walls.

Murasaki has been immortalised as various statues, and episodes in her novel have inspired all forms of Japanese art from the Heian period to the present day. The earliest extant

art are 12th century illustrated *Genji* handscrolls which survive in fragmented form and are designated national treasures. The most recent are the images on the Japanese 2,000 Yen banknote and animated films.

After more than a thousand years since the publication of *Genji*, images of Murasaki and illustrations of the novel are still instantly recognisable in Japan. Yet, she remains an enigmatic figure.

WHO WAS SHE?

Murasaki Shikibu was a pen name. Her real name is unknown. It was customary then for a daughter's name to go unrecorded. Her family name Shikibu was taken from her father's court title, *Shikibu no Daijo* (Senior Secretary of the Ministry of Ceremonies), in accordance with the custom of using the court title of the senior male family member as the family surname. An entry in her diary reveals that her first name was adopted in 1008, after a nobleman asked for her at the Fujiwara mansion by this name, which is also the name of the heroine in her epic novel.

Murasaki was a minor Fujiwara aristocrat, both parents being descendants from a junior branch. Cultural historian Christopher Harding suggests another, more convoluted, explanation for 'Murasaki', which connects her to the Fujiwara clan. Fujiwara in Japanese means 'wisteria (fuji) field'. Wisteria is purple in colour and 'Murasaki' means 'purple'.



Lacquer box with a scene, Ukifune, (Boats upon the Waters) from *Genji*, Meiji period (1868–1912). Bequest of Stephen Whitney Phoenix, 1881. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

A YOUNG WIDOW IS INSPIRED TO WRITE

Murasaki is believed to have started writing *Genji* around 1001, completing it sometime between 1013 and 1016; the date is undetermined. But what made her embark on such an undertaking?

Around 998, Murasaki married an older man called Nobutaka, also of the Fujiwara clan. (Their daughter, Kenshi, became a distinguished poet.) When he died unexpectedly in 1001, she travelled to Ishiyamadera, an 8th century Buddhist temple close to Lake Biwa, to find solace and pray for inspiration. It is said that she was so moved by the beautiful scene on the night of a full moon in the eighth month that she decided to take up her brush. This story has inspired numerous images in visual art, textiles and furniture.

How did Murasaki enter the Imperial household? Her name came to the attention of Imperial courtiers when the

early chapters of *Genji* circulated amongst Fujiwara court circles. Around 1006, she was appointed court poet and tutor to Fujiwara no Michinga's (966–1027) daughter, Shoshi (998–1074), the future Empress Jotomon'in. She became an insider at court, and lived in the east wing of the sprawling Tsuchimikado mansion.

LASTING INFLUENCE ON JAPANESE ART AND CULTURE

Through *Genji*, Murasaki put Japanese literature on the map, carried the momentum of Japan's expansion of its own language and culture, and raised the profile of women at court as writers. *Genji* inspired more elite art than any other Japanese literary work. More than a thousand years ago, she challenged existing norms of education for women, elevated *hiragana* as a literary language, and created ways for women to gain status in society.

Genji is not only the foundation of Japanese literary canon. It has been translated into more than ten languages and is an important part of world literature. Amongst its English translations, are Suematsu Kencho's partial translation (1882), Arthur Waley's translation (1925), Edward Seidensticker's (1926) and Dennis Washburn's (2015).

Murasaki wrote in a combination of Chinese and *hiragana*, the Japanese script. At the time, it was unusual for a woman to be literate in Chinese as it was viewed as a 'strong and masculine' language, traditionally only taught to men. Women were taught Japanese literature and poetry in *hiragana*, the 'women's hand'. Murasaki recorded in her diary that she learned Chinese by eavesdropping on her brother's lessons with their father, a scholar of Chinese classics.



54 scenes from *The Tale of Genji* on folding screens, Edo period. Ink, colour, gold and gold-leaf on paper. From the Mary Griggs Burke Collection, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

A TRAILBLAZER IN THE LITERARY WORLD

The popularity of *Genji* within court circles added to the impetus for *hiragana* to be accepted and developed as the dominant literary language in Japan and inspired women to join the literary world, writing romances and other novels. Before *Genji* was published, the Japanese literary world had been dominated by men up to the 9th century and Chinese was their language of choice.

However, by the late-Heian period, women dominated the Japanese literary world and *hiragana* had replaced Chinese as the main language of the Japanese literature. Japanese poems spoke about Japanese cherry blossoms and not Chinese snow prunus, Japanese paddy fields and not majestic Chinese mountains.

Murasaki's novel gave women an influence within the Heian court as arbiters of form and good taste, which were prioritised during the Heian period. *Genji* was written by a woman for women. Most of the supporting characters were women. Women used *Genji* as a guide to determine the correct and fashionable colour combinations of dress, and set the tone at court.

Over the centuries, episodes from *Genji* have been represented in handscroll paintings, lacquer work, kimonos, paintings and furniture, and expressed in calligraphy. *Genji* was more than just an exceptional work in its time – a whole new industry rose from illustrating the novel.

Murasaki Shikibu is part of the national fabric of Japan. Her writing and her personal courage to tread new paths will surely continue to enthral new readers and inspire admirers for generations to come. ■



A scene from chapter five of *Genji*. Court ladies are seen viewing cherry blossoms from a platform. Their floor length hair, worn loose, flowing down their backs, was typical court fashion and a mark of nobility during the Heian period. The longest hair recorded during that period was seven metres. Detail of scroll painting by Tosa Mitsuoki (1617–1691). From the Mary Griggs Burke Collection, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Murasaki in discussion with male court poets. Ukiyo-e (woodblock print), Kitagawa Utamaro, 1795. Image from Wikimedia Commons.

the sisters who saved phuket

ERIC ROSENKRANZ EXPLAINS A BATTLE ONCE FOUGHT CLOSE TO HIS HOLIDAY HOME

Photos by the author unless otherwise stated.



The Thalang Victory Monument in Phuket, built on the site of the Burmese camp. Lady Chan and Lady Mook are seen at the front. Celebrations commemorating the victory are held here every year on March 13. Offerings can be seen at the base of the monument.

The attack came from the west.

The Burmese had been waging war for decades against their neighbours to the east. Bodawpaya, King of the Burmese, had halted activities for a while but recently had started up again, this time attacking with nine distinct armies, an auspicious number, but there were those who doubted it was wise to divide forces.

Seven of his armies went north, over the mountains through the Three Pagoda pass into Northern Siam. One went south, while the last came up through the klong canals at Layan Beach to the town of Thalang on the island called Thalang.



Statue of Bodawpaya, King of Burma, at Mandalay Palace, Myanmar. Image from Wikimedia Commons

HOW PHUKET GOT ITS NAME

The island had always been named Tanjung Salang, Malay for Cape Salang, but when the Dutch came they thought the island looked like Ceylon, so they teasingly called it Jung (or Little) Ceylon. From Tanjung Salang and Jung Ceylon the new name Thalang emerged. But when seen from the sea, the most distinguishing feature was the island's interior mountain range, so some people were now calling the island after the Malay word for mountain—Bukit—or Phuket.

Francis Light, a British merchant and soon to be founder of Penang in Malaysia, had been departing Thalang to sail north when he saw the Burmese fleet assembling and sent word of warning, that ... "3,000 of the Burmar army in 80 large prows" were approaching.

LADY CHAN TAKES CHARGE

The letter was sent to Lady Chan, a Muslim woman of 45 years (some say 50), whose husband, the Governor of the island, had just died. Chan was made of sturdy stock and not about to give in to the despised Burmese. She was the eldest daughter of the most illustrious family on the island. Married at 15, she divorced at 30 and married a man who was governor on the mainland but with Chan's family connection moved to Thalang and became governor there.

But her husband had just died, a few weeks before the Burmese attacked. It would be months before a new governor was appointed and now who was in charge? No one, was the answer, or better put, no man, as Chan saw no other option but to take charge herself. But not alone, as she had the support of her younger sister, Lady Mook, and her son Thien.

Before the Burmese had landed, Chan had written to her friend Light, "I congratulate you on your appointment as Superintendent of Penang. If you oblige me on this occasion all the Thalang tin shall be at your disposal. Please be sympathetic to me for I have no one but you to rely on as a patron. I need your help and interest for I am a woman. Kindly send all the rice you can supply. Also, the men sent to guard the town and the fort are short of opium. Please have Captain Sakat bring up nine or ten Thaen..."

WOMEN DEFEND THE CITY

But the Burmese were now attacking, and Chan had to prepare the defence. Near to the village of Thalang was a stockade that had originally been built a hundred years before by a French Missionary named René Charbonneau. It was a few hundred meters square, made of teak with four towers, one at each corner, each tower covered with palm leaves. Chan had ordered a ditch be dug outside the walls with the dirt being used to build up an earthworks inside the defenses, both to stop cannonballs as well as provide a platform for the soldiers to stand on to fire down.

The stockade wasn't Chan and Mook's major concern, their worry was their lack of men, as they had few fighting men within the wooden stockade walls. Too few to withstand the 3,000 Burmese camped outside. Until Chan had a brilliant idea.

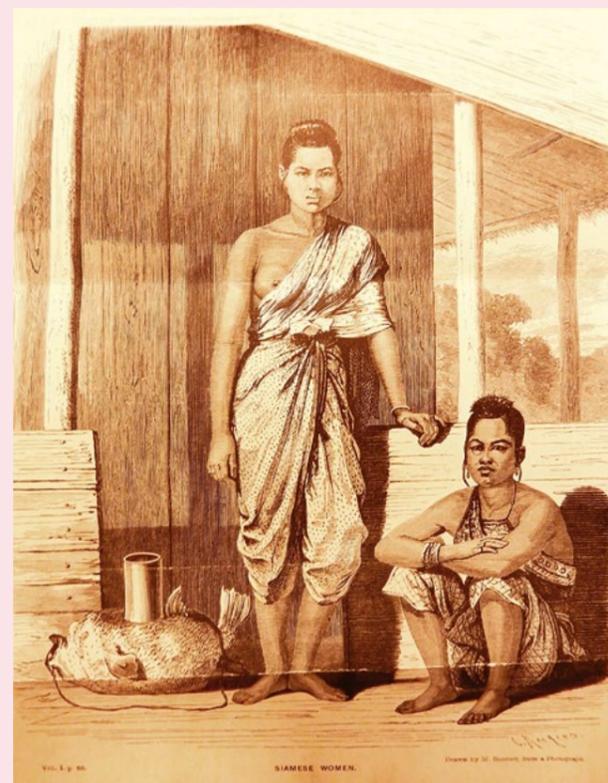
When the attack had begun 25 days before, Chan had realised that she hadn't sufficient men to withstand the repeated charges. But she saw that the women in the fort had been toughened by years of working the land and helping out in the tin mines, and with their short hair looked just like men.

The troops she was now inspecting were made up of both men and women. The Burmese, from afar, couldn't tell them apart. But apart from a few cannons (albeit with greater range than the Burmese) and a few muskets, the defenders were also woefully short of weapons. That problem was solved by another brilliant idea from Mook.

Thai women traditionally kept their hair short until the early 1900's when they were encouraged to grow it long. Siamese Women drawn by M. Bocourt. Illustration from French naturalist Henri Mouhot's book, Travels in the Central Parts of Indo-China (Siam), Cambodia, and Laos: Vol. 1, 1864



Statue of Captain Francis Light, Fort Cornwallis in George Town on Penang Island, Malaysia. Image from Wikimedia Commons





One of the many murals featuring the two heroines on the walls of the Wat Phra Nang Sang temple, one of the oldest on the island.

SHOW OF FORCE BY CUNNING DECEPTION

Mook suggested stripping the coconut palm fronds of their leaflets and shaping the stems to look like muskets, with a shiny covering of tin.

This they did. And the deception worked. The stockade had two doors, and Mook had the women dressed as men, carrying their coconut fronds dressed as muskets, go out one door, around the walls and in the other door. The Burmese thought there were many more soldiers than there really were and were hesitant to attack.

That had produced the stalemate over the previous month, which it appeared now that the Burmese were breaking.

The Phuket defenders responded by firing what real muskets they had and letting loose their two cannon.

The Burmese answered back but as they were armed primarily with swords and had only small ship borne swivel cannons they could do no return damage.

Then, surprisingly and shockingly for the defenders, the Burmese started retreating. More than retreating, they started packing up to leave.

The news came by courier.

VICTORY UP NORTH

King Rama I had defeated the Burman army outside Bangkok. He then sent an army south and won another battle. The rest of the Burmese army fled back to their country. Learning this, the Burmese general at Thalang

wisely decided that there was no point to attempting to take Thalang if the Burmese had lost everywhere else and were retreating.

Chan and Mook, through their valiant defense, had saved the town. But at a price. They lost 200 people as slaves and once they ventured outside the stockade walls found their crops destroyed and their homes and temples burnt to nothing. It would be months before the next crop would come in and many villagers would die of starvation until then.

Over the next months many more letters were written to Francis Light, by Chan as well as others:

"Now I am destitute without anything ... because of the Burmese attacks on Thalang, the district is in confusion ... we are in great dearth of food ... the people of Thalang are starving from want of rice. I am undergoing the most extreme degree of hardship and difficulty ... In the Burmese attack on Thalang many of my friends were lost to me, killed in the fighting. At present the people are scattered because of the destruction of their villages. The whole region here is in disorder. The Burmese burnt much rice and it is in very short supply; there is insufficient to provide for the people until rice is again available from the fields. Please think of us and bring a trading ship with rice so that the officials may be able to distribute enough for the people to go on cultivating their fields. ... I have organised the digging of tin in the forest and have obtained some which has been used to purchase all the rice available at a high price."

THE BATTLE ENDS...BUT WHERE WAS IT?

The battle of Thalang ended on March 13, 1786 and the Nine Armies war shortly thereafter. The stockade has now disappeared and while there are local legends giving its general location, the exact location is unknown although it is considered to be around Ban Don Village near the present day town of Thalang. Every year on the anniversary of the withdrawal, a huge festival is held on the grounds of what may have been the Burmese army campground.

The canal at the northern end of Bangtao Beach where the Burmese brought their boats to attack the city is still called today "Burmese Soldier Canal".

After founding Penang in Malaysia, Francis Light and his longtime companion, Martina Rozells, had a son who founded the city of Adelaide.

The tin mines that were the source of Thalang's wealth ran out in the 1950's and were filled in with water to create lakes. They were named "Laguna" and remain today one of the original and most famous tourist areas in Phuket.

Chan recommended that Francis Light become the next Governor as she was unable to take the official position due to her being female. When Rama I rejected this proposal, Chan's son, Thien, eventually became Governor of Thalang. He was still Governor in 1809 when the Burmese attacked again, destroyed the town of Thalang completely and brought him back to Burma as a prisoner.



The best-known monument on the island stands at the intersection of two major roads: each named after one of the two sisters. Thais apply gold leaf to the statue as a mark of their respect.



A two-baht stamp marking the bicentennial of the Battle of Thalang and featuring the Heroines Monument issued on 13 March 1985. Image from Wikimedia Commons

THE TWO HEROINES GET REWARDED

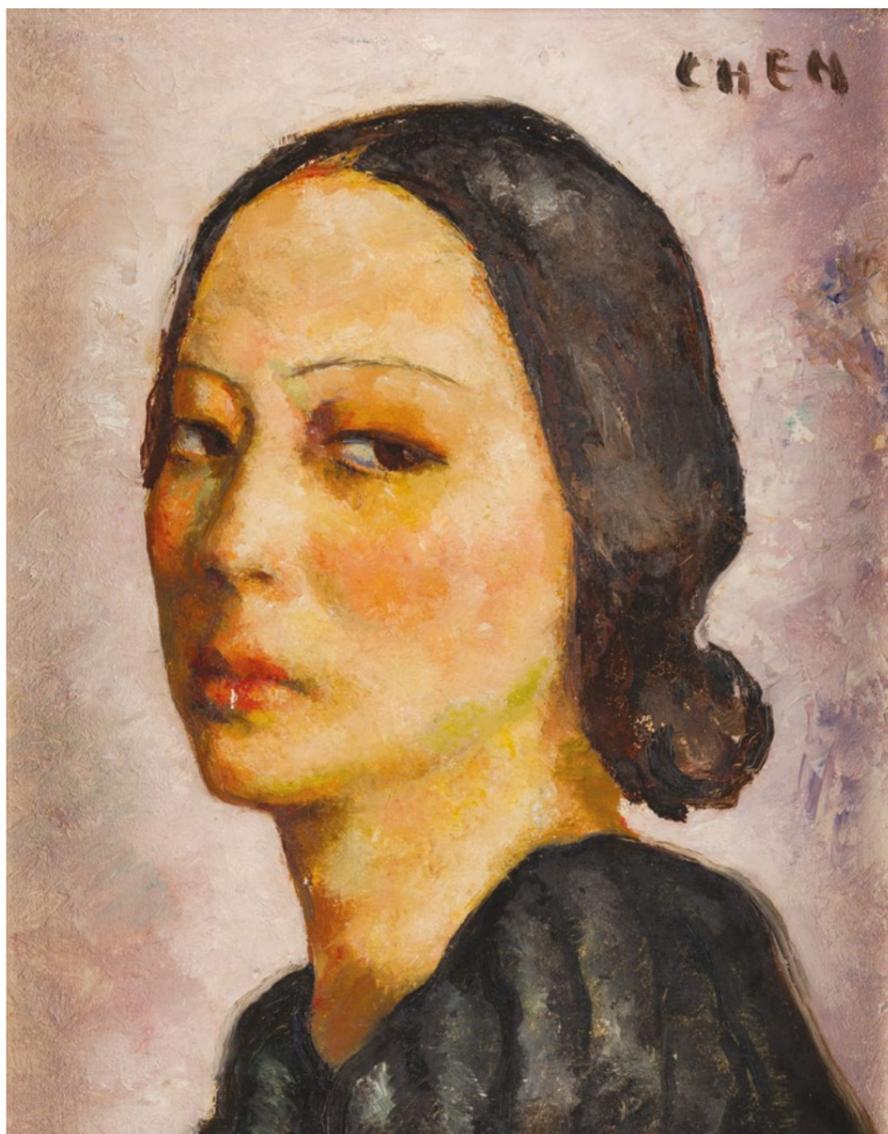
Chan and Mook were awarded for their bravery and given by Rama I the titles of Thao Thepkraasatri (Angelic Queen) and Thao Srisoonthorn (Goddess of Beauty). Chan later moved to an eastern port area on the island, founded what is now Phuket City, and died in 1792. The two women appear on the official seal of the province while the intersection today in Phuket of two major roads each named after one of the sisters contains the Heroines Monument. 📍

ERIC ROSENKRANZ'S bicycle rides through the Phuket countryside take him past all the sites listed above.

Reflections on a Remarkable Artist

TIM CLARK LOOKS BACK IN WONDER AT THE LIFE OF GEORGETTE CHEN

All photos courtesy of the National Gallery Singapore (NGS).



Self-portrait, c. 1934, Gift of Lee Foundation, Collection of NGS.

Georgette Chen was born in China in 1906 but spent her childhood in Paris where her father had an art and antiques business. He also had business in the USA, so after studying for five years at a *lycée* in Paris, where she learned to speak and write fluently in French, Georgette attended high school in New York. This was followed by three years at a finishing school in Shanghai. Such international exposure made her trilingual, but her limited grounding in Chinese calligraphy meant that her artistic talent was bound to be drawn to the western style of oil painting rather than ink brush painting, as her father would have wished.

There are two self-portraits of Georgette Chen, painted in oil, in the National Gallery Singapore. They were painted in different continents at different stages of the artist's life. The earlier portrait was painted in Paris, c. 1934, four years after marrying Eugene Chen, a Chinese scholar and diplomat. The second was painted in China about twelve years later, and two years after her beloved husband's death.

They now hang in different rooms, but when they appeared side by side it was amusing to invite visitors to guess which one was painted first. The answer is counterintuitive. In the later painting she looks more alluring. Proof that inner beauty can radiate and conquer time.

The earlier portrait, I conjecture, may have been painted on a rainy day in Paris, at a time of uncertainty in her early, married life, when Georgette was possibly anxious about the future. The later portrait was painted in China in 1946. Her husband had died two years earlier, so she had reason to still be sad. But she also had reason to be glad. The war had just ended so she was now free from the restrictions imposed by the Japanese occupation.

In the earlier painting she is wearing a western blouse. The later painting shows her dressed in a black top with a mandarin collar. And the colour black seems more likely to have been chosen because it suited her rather than as a lingering sign of mourning. The most significant indication of optimism is the rouge, which gives her a confident, coquettish appearance. It suggests a readiness to move on. And the following year, 1947, she does just that.

After staging an exhibition of her work in Shanghai she leaves China (little knowing that it would be for the last time) and marries her second husband, Ho Yung Chi in New York. Ho was a close friend and former aide of her first husband.

TURBULENT TIMES AND MARITAL STRAINS

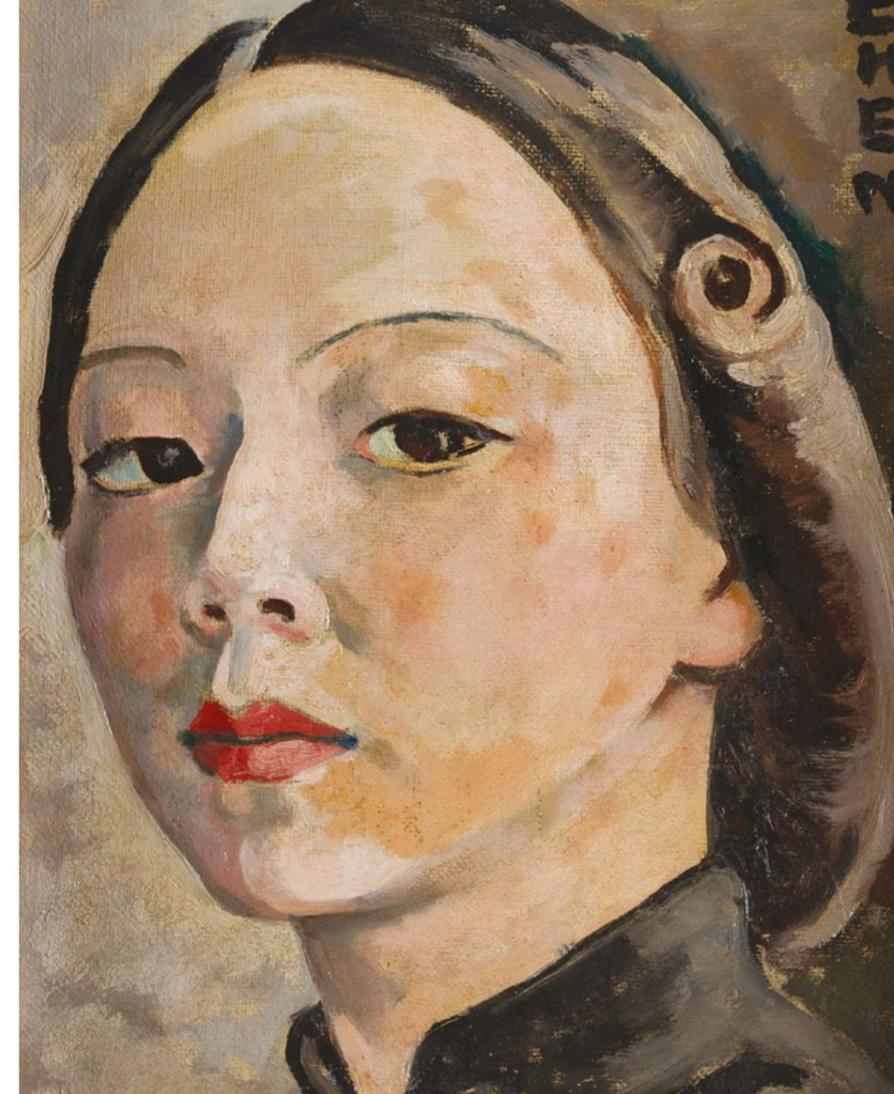
Chen appears to have disliked the "dollar brutality" of the United States. So, in 1949 she returned to Paris where she found the cost of living and international climate more conducive to an artist. She managed to recover her studio, which had been illegally occupied by squatters during the war. She also travelled to the countryside to paint *en plein air* and held several exhibitions of her work.

However, she now felt a yearning to return to China. She wrote to her friend Soong Ching Ling, the widow of Sun Yat Sen, enquiring about the prospect of finding employment as an artist in China. But the timing and political climate there appears to have been unfavourable. So, in 1951, she and her husband managed to get jobs teaching at the same high school in Penang.

Teaching seems to have suited Chen but the same could not have been said of her second marriage.

SANCTUARY IN SINGAPORE

In 1953, Chen obtained a divorce and held her first exhibition in Singapore. With the help of friends in Singapore, including artist Liu Kang, whom she knew in Paris, she was able to



Self-portrait, c. 1946, Gift of Lee Foundation, Collection of NGS.

make a fresh start. Her work attracted the attention of Lim Hak Tai, founding principal of the Nanyang Academy of Fine Art (NAFA), and the following year she began teaching there. She continued to exhibit her work through the Singapore Art Society every year till 1979. And she remained a devoted teacher at NAFA until ill health forced her to retire in 1980.

This was not Chen's first visit to Singapore. It was a stopping point on her frequent journeys by ship between China and Europe. On one such voyage, she and her first husband Eugene Chen befriended Tunku Abdul Rahman. The Tunku admired Eugene's idealism and credited him with being his inspiration to enter politics, subsequently becoming Malaysia's first Prime Minister. He was also impressed by Georgette whom he described as the best-looking woman he had ever met.

Though diminutive in stature, Georgette was striking in appearance, always elegantly dressed and immaculately coiffed. This gave her a self-assurance that still shines through in her self-portraits. But how did she see herself spiritually and symbolically? It is tempting to suggest that she identified with the lotus. A flower she painted many times around a pond in a friend's garden in Singapore. Like Chen, the lotus is quintessentially Chinese and symbolises a purity of purpose as well as strength, resilience and rebirth. These qualities remind us of how Chen revived her fortunes when she settled in Singapore, withstanding the winds of adversity as seen in her painting *Lotus in a Breeze*. Was this a subconscious self-portrait?



Lotus in a Breeze, c. 1970, Gift of Lee Foundation, Collection of NGS.

CHEN'S LASTING LEGACY

Chen bought a small house cum studio in Siglap in 1955 and Singapore became more than just home. It became Chen's homeland as she was granted citizenship in 1966. Prior to this date Chen committed herself to her adopted country by learning and passing an examination in Bahasa Melayu, so she could correspond with her Malay friends. She even acquired a nickname, Chendana, a homophone for sandalwood in Malay.



Chen painting Lotus Symphony, 1962. Collection of NGS Library & Archive.

Chen was a very positive person. Although she arrived in Singapore during a period when the arts were receiving scant recognition and support, Chen became their champion. In 1982, she was awarded the Cultural Medallion by the government of Singapore. Her contribution to fostering and promoting the arts was immeasurable and transcended her death in 1993. Her donations and bequests led to the National Collection accumulating, by 2021, no less than 106 of her works. So, her legacy lives on.

Georgette Chen once encouraged her Singapore students with these prescient words:

"I foresee the blossoming of all the arts and crafts, both fine and applied, the erection of art galleries, art schools and museums."

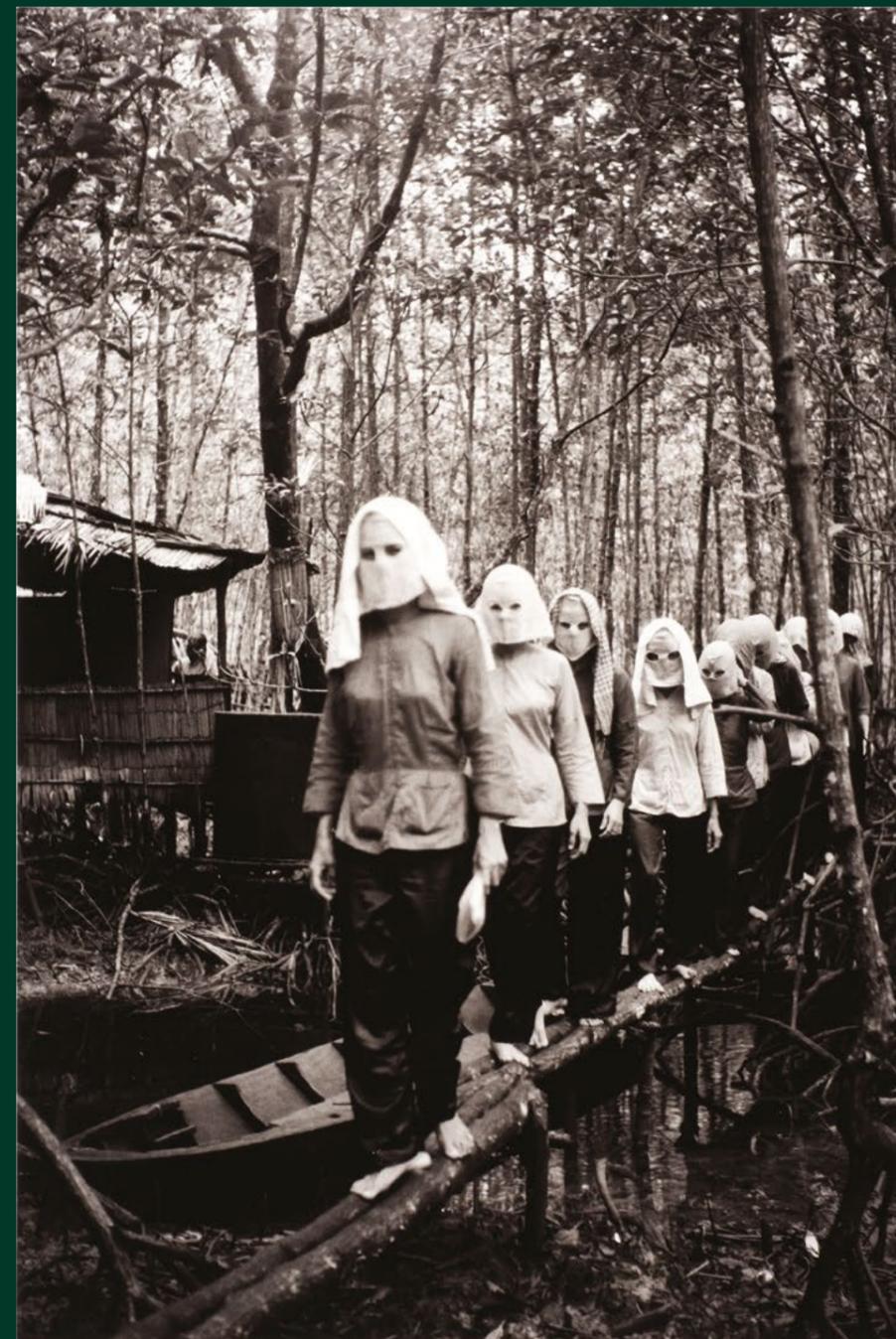
How right she turned out to be. 📌

TIM CLARK is a docent at the National Gallery Singapore and the Co-Editor-in-Chief of *PASSAGE*.

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NEWSMAKER, RECORD BREAKER

DAWN MARIE LEE CELEBRATES A 19th CENTURY JOURNALIST WHO BROKE THE MOULD

The Pulitzer Prize, established in 1917, is regarded as one of the highest honours in print journalism. In the last century, only 16 per cent of the winners have been women, and just 12 women have won the prize for investigative journalism. Nellie Bly was a bold young woman who was a pioneer of the genre. Her dedication to her profession led her to circle the globe in record time, a feat that had never been accomplished by anyone before.

Elizabeth Jane Cochran was born in Pennsylvania on 5 May 1864, her father's 13th daughter. She was an American journalist who was better known by her pen name, Nellie Bly.

In 1885, when she was 21 years old, the *Pittsburgh Dispatch* published a column titled "What Girls Are Good For", stating that women existed mainly to have children and do housekeeping. This prompted Elizabeth to write a fiery retort to the newspaper under the pseudonym "Lonely Orphan Girl". The editor of the paper was so impressed with her letter that he not only published it, but offered her a job as a journalist.

A VOICE FOR WOMEN

In her first few articles, she wrote about the need for better jobs for women, reforming divorce and property laws and how women need not marry. It was common for women writers at the time to use a *nom de plume* to be able to publish without prejudice in a male-dominated society, and her editor suggested "Nellie Bly" after the title character in popular song.

Nellie focused her early work on the lives of working women, especially the terrible and dangerous conditions that they toiled in at factories. After many complaints to the newspaper from male factory owners about her articles, she was reassigned to cover "women's pages" and write about fashion, gardening and society gossip, which she loathed.

Determined, in her own words, "to do something no girl has done before", she left for Mexico to work as a foreign correspondent for six months where she wrote dispatches on the lives and customs of the Mexican people. In one of them, she criticised the government for the wrongful imprisonment



Nellie Bly. Photo by H.J. Meyers, c. 1890. Image from US Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.

of a journalist. She was immediately threatened with arrest and had to flee the country. On her return to Pittsburgh, she was assigned to reporting on arts and theatre.

Bored by her beat, she left for New York City where she sought employment with leading newspapers, but none of them wanted to hire a female journalist. Nellie faced countless rejections for four months until she ran out of money.

TEN DAYS IN AN ASYLUM

Finally, she talked her way into the office of Joseph Pulitzer's newspaper, *New York World*, where she took an undercover assignment to investigate claims of abuse of



21-year-old Nellie in Mexico, 1888. Photographer unknown.

the inmates at the Women's Lunatic Asylum. She feigned madness to get admitted as a patient so she could experience first hand the deplorable conditions and brutal treatment these women endured. After ten days in the asylum, she was rescued by her editors.

Nellie's report, published in October 1887 caused a sensation and catapulted her into fame as journalist. Her exposé was a precursor to investigative journalism which Joseph Pulitzer began to advocate in his newspapers for the next decade after her story was published.

Her ground-breaking report shed light on the experiences of the women in the asylum who were neglected and beaten by staff, forced to eat rotten food and sleep in rat-infested rooms, doused with freezing water and made to sit straight on hard benches for up to eight hours in the cold.

While sensationalist "stunt girl stories" were often dismissed as gimmicks to sell papers, Nellie's story proved that good reporting could bring about real change. Her report was turned into a book, *Ten Days in a Madhouse*, and this prompted a grand jury to launch its own investigation into the asylum. The jury's report led to the implementation of lasting reforms in asylums and a budget increase of \$850,000 for the government Department of Public Charities and Corrections.

HER RECORD-BREAKING RACE AROUND THE WORLD

In 1889, she convinced her editors to let her take a trip around the world in an attempt to turn Jules Verne's work of fiction, *Around the World in 80 Days* (1873) into a real voyage. She boldly declared that she would beat the novel's protagonist, Phileas Fogg, by making the trip in less time.

With just two days' notice, carrying a small bag of essentials and the clothes on her back, Nellie began her

race around the world. She boarded the steamship *Augusta Victoria* in Hoboken, New Jersey at 9.40am on 14 November 1889 and set sail across the Atlantic for England. She arrived in Southampton on 21 November and set off for London. There, she received an invitation from Jules Verne to visit him at his home in Amiens, France.

One of her first questions when she met the author was to ask how he got the idea for his celebrated novel. He told her that an article in *Le Siècle* newspaper had inspired him. The article showed calculations on travelling around the world in 80 days which he used as the basis of the book. But it had not taken into account the difference in the meridians which gained a day for his protagonist Phileas Fogg and meant that he would win his bet. Jules Verne revealed to Nellie that he would never have written the novel had it not been for what he called "this denouement".

Nellie's journey took her across Europe, through Egypt by the Suez Canal, and across the Indian Ocean to Sri Lanka and then on to Singapore. Sailing down the Straits of Melaka from Penang, she wrote that "It was sultry and foggy and so damp that everything rusted, even the keys in one's pockets, and the mirrors were so sweaty that they ceased to reflect." She also yearned to encounter the swashbuckling pirates she had read about that "infested the Straits" and "regretted to hear that they had ceased to exist".



A publicity photo of Nellie Bly taken just before she embarked on her epic voyage around the world with just a small bag of essentials and the clothes on her back.



An imagined scene of Nellie Bly arriving in Singapore by steamship. Created by Dawn Marie Lee using Midjourney



In Singapore, Nellie bought a pet monkey which she named McGinty. He accompanied her on the rest of the adventure around the world. Created by Dawn Marie Lee using Midjourney.

HER SINGAPORE SOJOURN

Nellie was halfway through her voyage around the world when she arrived in Singapore, the southernmost stop on her trip, on the evening of 19 December 1889. It was 6pm and the fading light made it too risky to dock, so her steamship, the *P&O Oriental*, was forced to drop anchor in the harbour, which greatly annoyed her.

The clock was ticking. "A wave of despair washed over me. The mail contract with the British government made it compulsory for the ship to stay in port for 24 hours. The sooner we got in, the sooner we could leave, and every hour lost meant so much to me," she wrote.

The next morning she described the scene that greeted her when she came on deck, "The ship lay alongside the wharf and naked coolies were carrying, two by two, baskets of coal suspended between them on a pole, constantly traversing the gangplank between the ship and the shore, while in little boats about were peddlers with silks, photographs, fruits, laces and monkeys to sell."

Once on shore she hired a gharry with a young Welsh doctor to tour the island. She described it as a "light wagon being drawn by a pretty, spotted Malay pony whose speed was marvellous compared to its diminutive size". She marvelled that the roads were "as smooth as a ballroom floor, shaded by large trees made picturesque by native houses built on pins in marshy land on either side".

She observed that there were "no sidewalks in Singapore and blue and white in the painting of houses dominate over other colours. Families seem to occupy the second storey with the lower floor generally devoted to business

purposes". She also wrote that the "people here constantly chew betel, and when they laugh, one would suppose that they had been drinking blood".

During her short stay in Singapore, she visited the Raffles Museum (now known as the National Museum Singapore), dined at the Hotel L'Europe, one of the finest hotels on the island situated at a corner of the Padang facing the sea, and witnessed a Chinese funeral procession.

She was furious when she was denied entry into a Hindu temple because of her gender. "I was curious to know why my sex in heathen lands should exclude me from a temple, as in America it confines me to the side entrances of hotels and other strange and incommensurable things."



AROUND THE WORLD IN SEVENTY-TWO DAYS AND SIX HOURS—RECEPTION OF NELLIE BLY AT JERSEY CITY ON THE COMPLETION OF HER JOURNEY—FROM SKETCHES BY C. BENNELL.—[SEE PAGE 7.]

A woodcut image of Nellie Bly's homecoming reception in Jersey City printed in Frank Leslie's Illustrated News on February 8, 1890. Image from Wikimedia Commons.

A VERY SPECIAL SOUVENIR

On her way back to the ship, Nellie's gharry driver invited her and the Welsh doctor to his house where she met "his pretty little Malay wife dressed in one wrapping of linen and several little brown naked babies". It was there that she fell in love with and took away a very special souvenir from Singapore – a pet monkey.

"I did resist the temptation to buy a boy at Port Said and also smothered the desire to buy a Singhalese girl in Colombo, but when I saw the monkey my willpower melted and I began straight away to bargain for it. I got it," she wrote. She named it McGinty and it travelled with her on the rest of her voyage and became one of the icons of her epic adventure.

After leaving Singapore, Nellie sailed on to Hong Kong, but her ship was struck by rough seas in the monsoon. As water crept into her cabin, she was so convinced she might die that she slept with a life jacket on. She travelled on to Japan where she boarded the steamship *Oceanic* and crossed the Pacific to San Francisco.

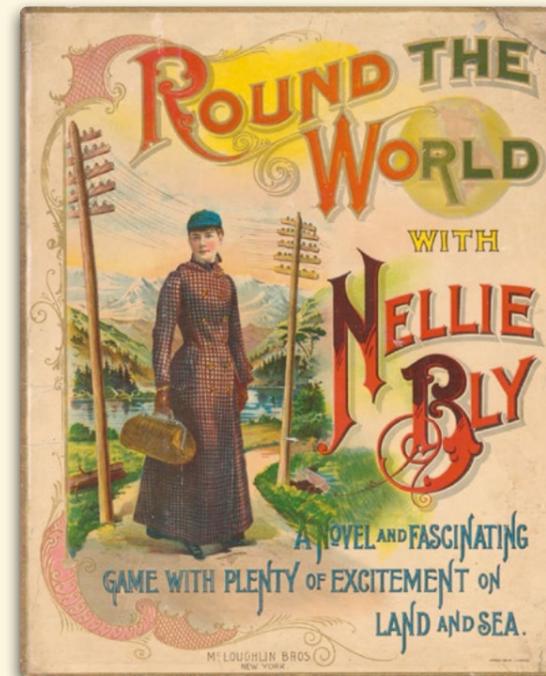
A GLORIOUS HOMECOMING

On home soil, she chartered a one-car train to speed her across the continent amidst winter-weather delays. She despaired when they were stalled by bad weather and tried to persuade the Chief Engineer to push on despite "strong head winds, wild rolling and frightful pitching". "If I fail, I will never return to New York" she declared, "I would rather go in dead and successful than alive and behind time."

On 25 January 1890, her train pulled into Jersey City at 3.51pm where she was greeted by cheering crowds. She had made the 40,000 kilometre journey in a record-breaking time of 72 days.

Following the success of her trip around the world, Nellie published a book about her journey, *Around the World in 72 Days*. She married millionaire industrialist, Robert Seaman, in 1895 when she was 31 and he was 73. Due to his failing health, she left journalism to help run his company, the Iron Clad Manufacturing Co. which made steel containers such as milk cans and boilers. Sadly, Robert died in 1904 from complications after being struck by a wagon while crossing the street.

An inventor in her own right, Nellie patented two designs for a milk can and a stacking garbage can, and was for a time, one of the leading female industrialists in the United States. Unfortunately, due to her inexperience in running a business and embezzlement by employees, the company went bankrupt.

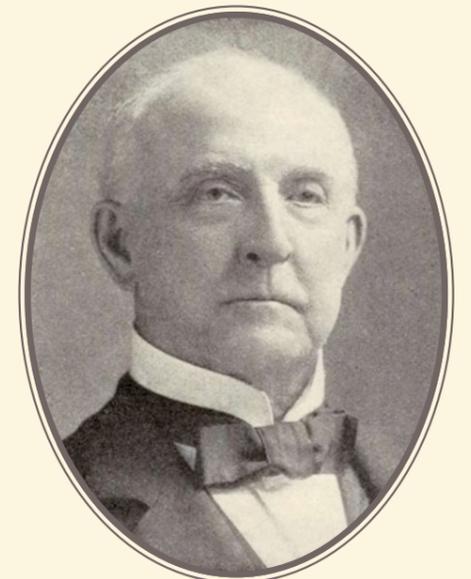


Nellie's record breaking trip even inspired a board game. Manufactured by J.H. Singer, New York. Image from Wikimedia Commons.



Nellie Bly on the Fly, advertising trade card for Dr Morse's Indian Root Pills. Courtesy of the Alice Marshall Women's History Collection, Special Collections, Pennsylvania State University Libraries.

She returned to reporting in 1913 and wrote stories on Europe's Eastern Front during World War I. She was the first woman and one of the first foreigners to visit the war zone between Serbia and Austria where she was arrested when she was mistaken for a British spy. A trailblazer to the very end, she died of pneumonia in New York City in 1922 at the age of 57. In her own words:



Nellie married millionaire industrialist Robert Seaman in 1895. Photo from Wikimedia Commons.

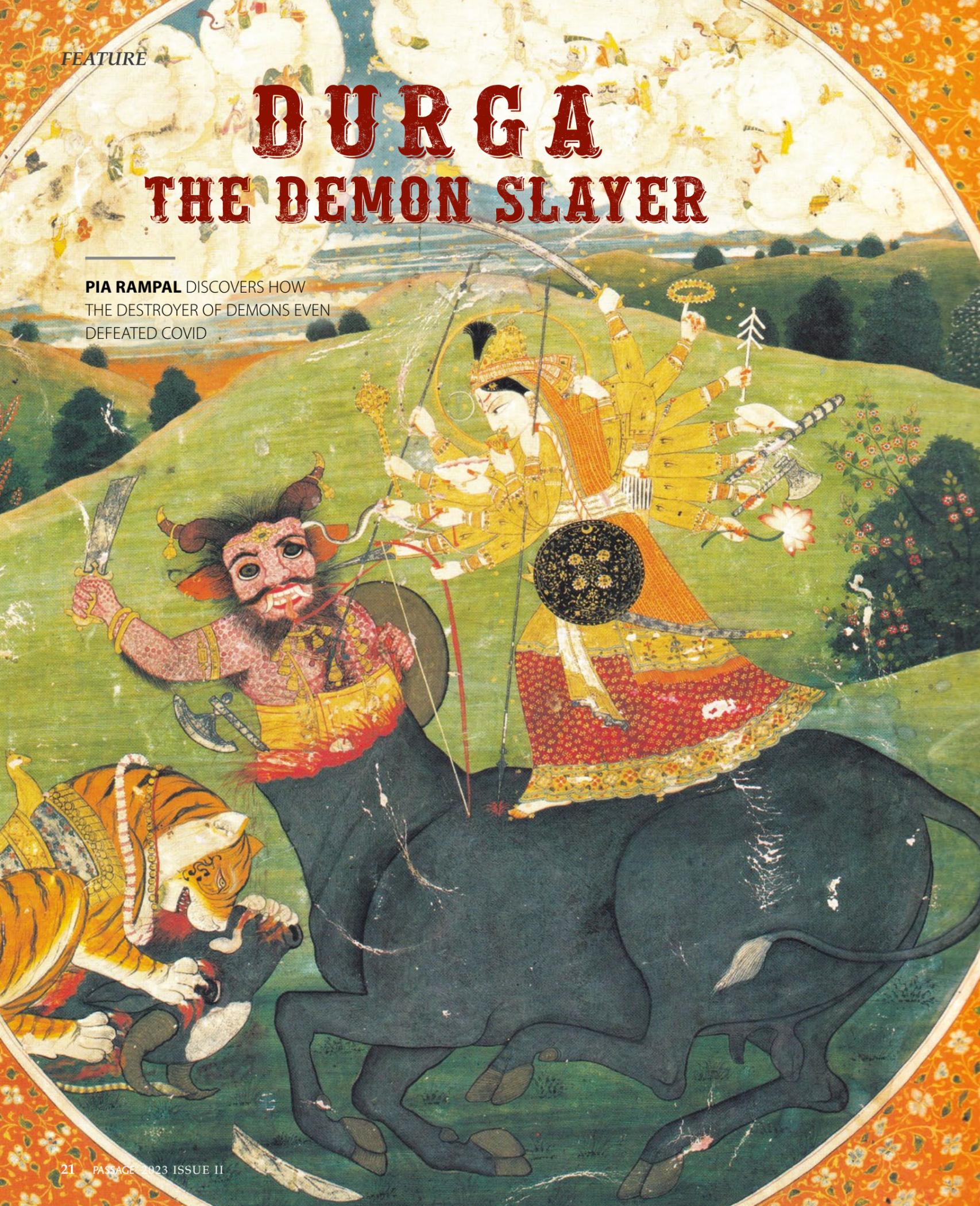
"I said I could and I would. And I did." ■

DAWN MARIE LEE is a former newspaper journalist and the Co-Editor-in-Chief of *PASSAGE*. She is a docent at the NUS Baba House.

DURGA

THE DEMON SLAYER

PIA RAMPAL DISCOVERS HOW
THE DESTROYER OF DEMONS EVEN
DEFEATED COVID



*“Compassion in mind and severity in battle,
both reside in you O Goddess who bestows
boons upon the entire universe.”*

- THE DEVI MAHATMYA

The Great Goddess in Hinduism can manifest in many forms, including gentle Parvati, terrifying Kali, and the cosmic warrior Durga. In each of these she is ‘Ma’ or mother to her worshippers. One of the key underlying ideas linking all the goddesses is *Shakti*, defined as power or divine feminine energy. In the 5th and 6th centuries, the philosophical text, *Devi Mahatmya (The Glory of the Goddess)* firmly established Durga within the highest echelons of the Hindu pantheon. The *Devi Mahatmya* tells of three occasions when Durga defeated Asuras, superhuman demi-gods or demons, to restore order. To this day, Durga the unassailable is worshipped for her supreme compassion and fearlessness in protecting her devotees.

DURGA'S ORIGINS AS COSMIC WARRIOR

Her most famous battle is the victory against Mahisha, the buffalo demon in the second chapter of the *Devi Mahatmya*. After years of austerities, Mahisha was granted a boon by the god Brahma and asked for immortality. They reached a compromise; Mahisha could only be killed by a woman which he did not see as a threat. Mahisha's ego went out of control, and he threw the gods out of heaven. They turned to the most powerful gods, Shiva, and Vishnu, for help. From the anger of the gods, unable to defeat Mahisha, a great mass of light emerged from their combined energies to create the beautiful goddess Durga, whose splendour filled the universe.

Each part of Durga was formed from a god. For example, her face was formed from Shiva, her arms from Vishnu and so on. Each god then armed her with their weapons, Vishnu's *chakra*, Shiva's trident, Indra's thunderbolt and from the Himalayas, a lion as her mount. Durga was more than ready to face Mahisha and his army of demons. She made the earth bend with her power and her crown touched the heavens as she calmly rode on her lion to meet him.



(top)

Durga Killing Mahisha, gilt copper alloy sculpture, Nepal, 13th century. Image courtesy of Rubin Museum of Art, New York

(left)

Durga Slaying the Buffalo Demon, opaque watercolour and gold on paper, Punjab Hills, Chamba, India, c. 1830.
Image courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.



THE GREAT MYTHIC BATTLE

Mahisha saw a beautiful woman approach and was unconcerned until Durga effortlessly destroyed his demon generals. After a long and violent battle, Durga defeated Mahisha in each of his forms, finally killing him when he appeared in human form from the severed neck of the buffalo. The Gods sang her praises and Durga promised to return in times of cosmic imbalance. Durga as Mahishasuramardini, (She who kills the buffalo demon Mahisha), is the most widely depicted and iconic visual form of the Great Goddess in sculpture and painting across the Indian subcontinent. Despite the frenzy and bloodshed in the battle, Durga's expression remains serene and confident throughout.

Paintings were commissioned as devotional images and to illustrate folios of the *Devi Mahatmya*. From the Hindu courts of the Punjab Hills, *Durga Slaying the Buffalo Demon* is one of the most resplendent. The ambiguity in this painting is expressed by the fierce battle reaching its violent and inevitable end against a gentle landscape of hills and flowering trees. Durga is depicted calmly pulling out Mahisha's human head from his decapitated buffalo body with a delicate red noose. She is elegantly dressed like a princess, in a richly gilded, delicately embroidered outfit, while her many arms hold jeweled weapons and move with frenzy to destroy Mahisha. In this quiet landscape of green hills, her lion chews on the buffalo head, while gods celebrate by showering her with golden flowers from the clouds above. Durga's victory symbolises the eternal mythic battle of good over evil, and on a personal level, the battle over inner demons such as ego and greed.

FROM THE HIMALAYAS TO SOUTHEAST ASIA

Her victory over Mahisha was celebrated beyond India, from the Himalayas to Southeast Asia. While Durga's basic iconography originated in India, artists in each country had their own interpretations. In Nepal, Durga is universally popular with several representations of her slaying Mahisha. One of the most elaborate is the 13th century copper alloy sculpture inlaid with precious gems shown on the previous page.

Durga remains calm and confident even while her 18 arms brandish weapons moving in dynamic motion, standing with one foot on her lion and the other on the demon's decapitated buffalo head. At each end of the pedestal are two kneeling demon companions of Mahisha who know it's all over and have dropped their

(left)
Durga Killing Mahishasura, sandstone sculpture, pre-Angkor Khmer, Cambodia, 7th – 8th centuries, at the ACM on loan from the National Museum, Cambodia. Photo by the author.



Durga Slays the Corona-Asura, clay tableaux, Puja pandal, West Bengal, India, October 2020. Photo by Nittya Paul.

arms bearing weapons in defeat, an innovation by the famed Newari artists of Nepal.

In Cambodia, Goddess Durga, as renowned art historian P. Pal explains, is most frequently, "shown in a peaceful mode with the buffalo's severed head at her feet as if it were a sacrificial offering."

This type of image was also popular in Tamil Nadu beginning in the early 7th century. In the Ancient Religions Gallery of the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM) is an outstanding peaceful Khmer Durga, made in sandstone from the 7th – 8th centuries. It is on loan from the National Museum of Cambodia. This distinctly Khmer, youthful and peaceful Durga wears a skirt with a triple fan to secure it in the front. Indications of violent action are very subtly suggested by the flex of her knee and the gentle swaying of her skirt. Look closely, the vanquished Mahisha appears as a buffalo head that she stands on like a pedestal; unlike in India and Nepal there is no depiction of her lion. In a dimly lit sanctuary, the Khmer Durga would have been surrounded by the flicker of oil lamps, robed and bejewelled.

CELEBRATING DURGA

Durga and Mahisha return year after year to enact their great battle during her autumn festival, Durga Puja in Kolkata, West Bengal. At its heart, giant *pandals* (temporary structures) each with elaborate clay tableaux feature the moment of cosmic rebalance when Mahisha is destroyed. There is competition for the best or most innovative tableaux and for families. *Pandal*-hopping is one of the joys of Durga Puja.

In October 2020, just weeks before the festival, Covid-19 restrictions were announced, and the pandemic seemed to have stilled even the Great Goddess. But Durga was not to be kept away, and in one innovative tableaux, she appeared as a doctor wearing a white coat. Instead of Shiva's trident, she wielded a syringe with a vaccine. Mahisha was given a new title, Corona-Asura or the coronavirus demon. His human head emerging in the form of the green spiked virus. As always, he had no chance against Durga who stood for the doctors, nurses and health care workers.

In his seminal book, *Hindu Goddesses*, David Kinsley suggests that the immense appeal of Durga as cosmic warrior is due to her world-supporting qualities. She is not submissive, not subordinated to a male deity, not bothered by household duties and excels at what is traditionally viewed as a male function, fighting in battle. ■

"To the one who is exceedingly gentle and exceedingly terrible, we bow down: Hail, hail!"

- THE DEVI MAHATMYA

PIA RAMPAL is an ad person, ACM docent, eternal student of Asian art and believer in feminine power or *shakti*.

THE LADY VANISHES



(top)
Portrait of Madame Wellington Koo (Oei Hui-Lan), 1921. Oil on canvas by Charles Tharp. Collection of Peranakan Museum. Gift of Lim and Tan Securities Pte Ltd in memory of Johnny and Nancy Lim.

(right)
Oei Hui-Lan in her teens in Semarang, Indonesia.

PASSAGE EDITORS INVESTIGATE THE REMARKABLE LIFE OF AN HEIRESS WHO CHARMED THE WORLD

A most elegant woman used to inhabit the top floor of the Peranakan Museum. But when the museum reopened in February, bolder and brighter than before, one leading light was missing. The socialite and style icon, Madame Wellington Koo.

She was born Oei Hui-lan in 1889, daughter of the sugar tycoon Oei Tiong Ham, a Chinese Peranakan from Semarang, Java, who was reputed to have been the richest man in the region. It was her father who donated the land upon which the Tao Nan school, which later became the Peranakan Museum, was built. So, she had good reason to reside there.

She grew up in Semarang surrounded by wealth and privilege. Taught by European tutors and governesses, she became fluent in English and French and was competent in Hokkien, Mandarin and Dutch. She studied music in Singapore and gave recitals in both Singapore and Java. The performance of a Chinese girl singing in French before an English audience was remarkable indeed and was reported in a local newspaper as being “novelty in a nutshell”.



PERANAKAN HEIRESS WOWS LONDON SOCIETY

In 1909, at the age of 20, Hui-lan married Beauchamp Caulfield-Stoker, the Anglo-Irish consular agent in Semarang and they moved to London where her husband represented her father’s sugar interests. They had one son, Lionel, born 1912, but the marriage soon got into difficulties, apparently because Hui-lan was very headstrong. By the outbreak of World War I the couple were estranged and in 1919 she filed for divorce, which was granted in 1920.

At this point she joined her sister in her mother’s townhouse in Mayfair and launched herself into high society. The Times noted that “no dance or other function was complete without (her) ... a famous beauty who drove her own motor car about London... a little two-seater grey Rolls Royce”. The post-war period certainly seems to have suited her. It was, she later remarked, “the brink of the flapper era and I fitted in like a charm. I had the figure for it, tiny and small bosomed, and the vitality. If you can imagine a Chinese flapper, it was I”.

Hui-lan was referred to as Countess Hoey (an anglicised version of Oei), for no other apparent reason than that her father, the ‘sugar king’ or ‘baron’, was referred to as ‘the count’. However, she seems to have preferred to be addressed as Lady Stoker, even though her husband was not knighted.



Oei Hui-lan with her son Lionel, from her marriage to Beauchamp Caulfield-Stoker, 1919. In London, she was referred to as Countess Hoey (an anglicised version of Oei), because her father, the sugar baron, was referred to as ‘the count’.

BECOMING MADAME KOO

Hui-lan’s mother encouraged her newly divorced daughter to make the acquaintance of Columbia University-educated, rising politician and diplomat, Wellington Koo Vi Kyuin. They met at a dinner party in Paris, in August 1920 and were married in Belgium in November the same year. They began their married life in Geneva, where Koo was involved in the formation of the League of Nations. They had two sons, Yu-chang Wellington Koo Jr. born in 1922 and Fu-chang Freeman Koo in 1923. The couple moved to Beijing in 1923 where Koo took up the position of Foreign Minister and Finance Minister in the Republican Government. (Photo 6)

Here they lived in style because Hui-lan’s father bought a Ming palace compound in his daughter’s name. The following year her father died in Singapore, and Oei Hui-lan, now known as Madame Koo, was obliged to return to Semarang to officiate at his funeral. In 1925 the Kooos hosted the statesman Dr Sun Yat Sen and his wife Soong Ching-lin for an extended stay in their Beijing residence. Sadly, this is where Sun Yat Sen died, later the same year.

FIRST LADY OF CHINA

There followed a turbulent time in Chinese history and Wellington Koo was in the thick of it. He had already briefly served as acting premier in 1924, and from 1926 to 1927 he acted as President of the Republic of China, during which time Madame Koo assumed the role of First Lady of China.

As she recalled in her memoir, *No Feast Lasts Forever*, published in 1975, “Wellington and I lived in a style far beyond that of other Chinese in government. It did not hurt China’s cause, nor the status of my husband. In fact, I am sure that it helped and for a few years the world was my oyster.”

By 1927 Wellington Koo was no longer in office so the couple settled in Shanghai, a place she had mixed feelings about. As she recalls:

“I was impressed by the chic of Shanghai’s modern young women. They had inaugurated a successful revolution against China’s traditional costume, substituting long, slim gowns, becomingly moulded to the figure, for the cumbersome pleated skirt and bulky jacket. Though I had been wearing European clothes for years, the new gowns appealed to me. They were comfortable as well as smart and, requiring little material, were relatively inexpensive. I started a Chinese wardrobe and, in the process, accidentally made several adaptations which, because they were widely copied, set me up as a fashion leader.”

Indeed, Madame Koo is credited with having reinvented the Chinese *cheongsam* in a way that flatters the female form, wearing it tighter and with higher slits.

While she enjoyed the fashion, Shanghai society seems to have proved disappointing.

“I did not like Shanghai. It was big, pretentious, jazzy, filled with White Russians and British shipping people who were nobodies at home but put on upper-class airs in China.



Hui-lan with her newborn son, Yu-chang Wellington Koo Jr. in 1922. Photo from Wikimedia Commons. In the collection of the National Portrait Gallery, UK.



An elegant and poised 22-year-old Madame Wellington Koo, dressed for the State Ball at Buckingham Palace in July 1921. She wears a gown of cream brocade velvet, with a narrow train edged with trails of flame-coloured tulle. Her closely fitting draped corsage of gold tissue is ornamented with diamanté trimming. The fur wrap upon which her left hand rests would have been discarded before entering the Court as regulations permitted no cloaks, shawls, capes or wraps of any kind. She wears a very fashionable diamante bandeau and two ropes of pearls, and carries a dyed (probably green) ostrich feather waterfall fan. Photo in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.



Vi Kyuin Wellington Koo, Diplomat, Statesman, Chinese Minister to Great Britain (1921), Ambassador in London (1941-46). He is photographed here in the Chinese diplomatic uniform he wore to the State Ball at Buckingham Palace in July 1921. He wears a coat of navy blue cloth, embroidered with distinctive corn sheaves in gold with gilt buttons, engraved with the letters RC (Republique Chinoise) in the centre, surrounded by the Chinese motif symbolising five blessings. In his hand he holds a cocked hat edged with white ostrich plumes. He also wears the Star and Sash of The Precious Brilliant Golden Grain (Republic of China); Star of The Golden Grain (Republic of China) and the Star of The Order of George I (Greece). Photo in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Today we would call them phonies; they were so insular, so middle-class... (they) looked down their noses at everything really beautiful and indigenous to our culture: jade, porcelain, antiques. And the poor foolish Shanghai Chinese were so impressed with these upstarts that they copied their manners and filled their houses with "Western" furniture."

During her time there she met celebrities such as Mrs Wallis Simpson (later to become Duchess of Windsor) who she recalled could only muster one phrase in Mandarin: "Boy, pass me the champagne".

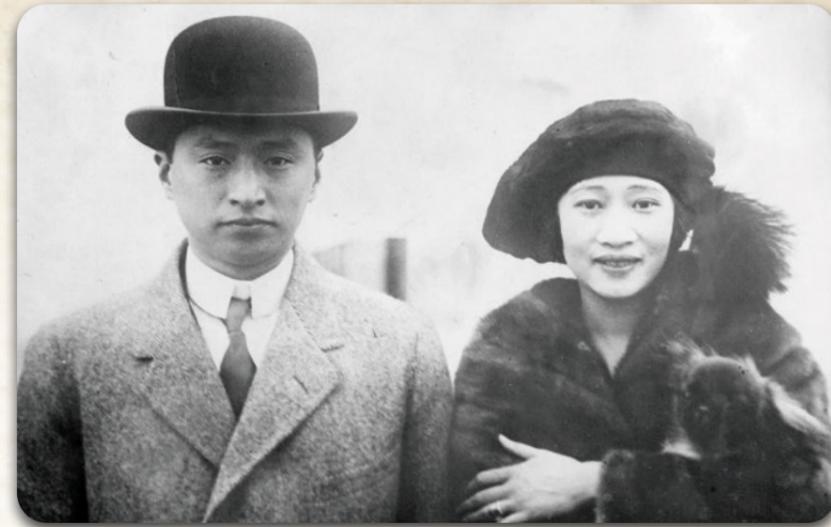
LIFE AS AN AMBASSADOR'S WIFE

In 1932 the Koos moved to Paris where Wellington served as Chinese Ambassador to France, a position he held until 1940. Following the fall of France to Germany during the Second World War he served as ambassador to the United Kingdom until 1946 and represented China in 1945 as one of the founding members of the United Nations. Madame Koo was accustomed to being in the spotlight, but as wife to his Excellency the Ambassador she felt even more elevated.

As Madame Koo reflected in her memoir: "...being the wife of an ambassador is heady wine, indeed. People toady to you until you begin to expect it. And our position, with Wellington now representing the fifth great power among the Allies, was enough to give anyone delusions of grandeur... I confess that it is hard to maintain one's balance, even if you are an adult. When you are deferred to and given privileges, when you mingle with the top men in the world, the men who are making headlines and changing the fate of nations, you can't help having an inflated idea of your own worth."

In 1941 Madame Koo moved to New York to oversee the education of two of her sons, Wellington Jr. and Freeman, at their father's alma mater, Columbia University. She also intended to use her connections and influence to encourage the United States to join the war effort on the side of the Allies and to support China's war effort in Asia. And her efforts did not pass unnoticed when joined by her husband, as she recorded.

"One day in Washington, when we were posted there after London, a group of Chinese officials were praising Wellington Koo for the role he had played in the recognition of China abroad. Madame Chiang Kai Shek said, "Don't forget that the



From 1926 to 1927, Wellington Koo acted as President of the Republic of China, during which time Madame Koo assumed the role of First Lady of China.

ambassador's wife played a great role, too."

An article in Vogue magazine in 1943 confirmed as much by describing her:

"As wife of an outstanding Chinese diplomat, she has used her intelligence, looks and fortune to advance China... Mme. Koo, a leading lady in an uneasy age, brought two hemispheres together with her persuasive personality... true Chinese, with the added finesse of an extraordinary European education.

Ironically Oei Hui-lan was neither a Chinese national nor was she educated in Europe. And although she believed that women should be self-reliant, she was no feminist. As she confessed in her autobiography: "I am not a believer of



Madame Wellington Koo by Bassano Ltd, December 1943. Photo courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery UK.

women's liberation, as I understand it. I think every woman should have an education (would that I had been sent to a good school instead of being tutored at home in arts like sword dancing and riding side-saddle!) and be able to work at something in case she needs to support herself..."

Maybe it was her reflection on the failure of her first marriage that prompted her to add:

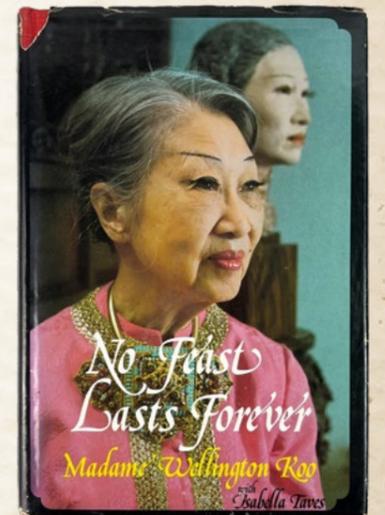
"I am still old-fashioned enough to believe that a man must be allowed to be head of the house, to occupy center stage. No matter how clever and able a woman is, she must never seem to dominate her husband, because if she does, she castrates him and fails herself as a woman. He must feel he is the boss; only then is she loved and respected by him..."

Although the Koos were reunited in New York, the war years had taken their toll on the marriage, and they were divorced in 1958.

She remained in New York until her death in 1992 at the age of 103, having outlived both her former husbands and all three of her sons.

Her portraits, photographs and dresses belong to collections of the Victoria and Albert Museum and the National Portrait Gallery in London as well as the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

But what of Singapore? For how long, we wonder, must the portrait of Madame Koo languish in some warehouse, deprived of the admiration she had enjoyed in person all her life? Let's hope she will return to the top floor of the Peranakan Museum one day, and reward us for climbing the stairs, by greeting us with her gorgeous, imperious gaze. ■



Book cover of her memoir No Feast Lasts Forever, published in 1975. She published an earlier autobiography in 1943.

MATRIARCHAL PRIDE



A 'phoenix and peony' kamcheng with overglaze enamels on yellow ground, lotus pallets band on the base and bajixiang (Eight Auspicious Buddhist Symbols) on pink ground on the cover. China, Republican period (1912–30). On display at the Peranakan Museum.

PRISCYLLA SHAW EXAMINES THE ENAMEL DECORATION ON PORCELAIN SO PRIZED BY PERANAKAN WOMEN

All photos by the author unless otherwise stated.

Peranakan enamelled porcelain, also known as 'nyonyaware', is famed for its exuberant colours, dense decoration, naturalistic motifs like phoenixes and peonies, and Buddhist symbols. Through some best-in-class pieces, this short article introduces Peranakan enamelware as a late Qing dynasty (1644–1911) export ware, and outlines the 'polychrome revolution' that later finds expression in these distinctive enamelled wares that we know today.



A Guangxu period (1875–1908) kamcheng with polychrome enamels on mauve-pink ground, China. Collection of Dr Roger and Mrs Betty Mariette. This kamcheng is a masterpiece in Peranakan enamelling. The mauve-pink ground and other colours are intense. Meticulously painted phoenixes grace the body and cover. The edge of the cover is decorated with the bajixiang. The decorations are crisp and carry the Qing colours of blue, yellow, white, green and pink, and the prized coral colour.

PERANAKAN ENAMELWARE AS LATE QING EXPORT WARE

Qing enamelled wares were much admired in the West and exported in large quantities. Some were commissions whilst others were even products of Imperial kilns which found their way overseas. Peranakan enamelware were distinctive wares solely made for Peranakans, specially ordered for festive occasions and special dates like weddings, important birthdays or New Year.

It is generally assumed that Peranakan enamelware was first commissioned during the Tongzhi 同志 era (1862–74), which was also the heyday of wealthy Peranakans in Singapore, Penang and Melaka. A large number of the finer pieces found today were also made between the Guangxu 光緒 era (1875–1908) and the early 20th century.

An even more expensive group of Peranakan enamelware were those decorated on the interior and exterior. These include large 'marriage basins' for morning ablutions in the bedroom, cups, teapots, trays, kamchengs (globular lidded containers) and chupus (smaller lidded bowls for double-boiled soups). Some of these wares are of very fine quality in their potting and decoration, which would suggest official Imperial kiln production. These 'in-and-out' wares were particularly extravagant productions that left no doubt about the wealth of their owners.



A 'phoenix and peony' dinner plate, jade-green ground, polychrome enamels, ruby-red rim with Eight Auspicious Buddhist Symbols. Guangxu (1875–1908). Collection of Dr Roger and Mrs Betty Mariette. The phoenix amongst rockery is a traditional Chinese group. It is incredible that this immaculately decorated plate was actually used for meals, rather than for display.



A rare powder pink kamcheng with phoenix amongst rockery, lime-green shoulder. Decorated in and out. Guangxu (1875–1908). Collection of Dr Roger and Mrs Betty Mariette. The interior is not fully enamelled like the exterior, but is skilfully painted with five playful goldfish amongst water vegetation. The interior of the lid has three more goldfish, making up the auspicious number eight in the group.

Figural decorations were rare. Pictorial scenes were executed on white ground in ogival cartouches. The enamel painting of the figures was often accomplished but not exceptional, with minimal to no shading. The decoration of the ground coral kamcheng on the right is at a very fine.

ENAMELLING: WHERE SCIENCE MEETS ARTISTRY

What was the technology behind these extraordinary wares? That would be the ‘polychrome revolution’ of the late Kangxi period (1662–1722). But before going into Qing enamelling, it might be helpful to recap the enamelling process.

Enamels are classified as a silicate pyrotechnology, as they contain silica and require firing.

An enamel is essentially glass that has been melted onto a ceramic, glass or metal surface. Enamel paints are glass-based pigments, a combination of crushed glass, a metal-oxide colourant, a flux (such as lead, which lowers the melting

temperature of the mixture), and a dilutant (such as water or oil). In enamelled porcelains, enamel paints are applied onto a ceramic body and melted onto it by firing, thus fusing the paints with the body.

Enamelled porcelains are twice-fired. The first firing is done after the ceramic body is glazed. For pure porcelain bodies, the initial firing would be carried out at up to 1,350 degrees Celsius to form the body. Stoneware bodies would be fired to approximately 1,200 degrees Celsius and the bodies could be greyish, cream or white, depending on the iron content of the clay.

It should be noted that unlike the three-tier classification used in the West (earthenware, stoneware and porcelain) Chinese ceramic historians have traditionally recognised just two types of bodies: high-fired (ci, 瓷) or low-fired (tao, 陶). For high-fired bodies, there was therefore often little distinction in China between porcelain and stoneware; ‘porcelains’ when translated from Chinese, could be stoneware according to Western classification.

Enamel decoration is then applied, after which the body is fired for a second time, at a lower temperature of up to 800 degrees celsius, to fuse the enamels with the body. The advantage of painting on a glaze is that mistakes can be wiped off, whereas designs painted directly onto the body cannot be erased.

FOREIGN COLOURS AND THE POLYCHROME TECHNOLOGICAL REVOLUTION

The Qing Kangxi 康熙 emperor greatly admired European multi-coloured enamels that had been presented to him by the French king Louis XIV (r.1226 -1270) and was eager to produce them. He set up his own workshops, the Yangxindian 養心殿, in the Forbidden City, with that objective.

At the turn of the 18th century, in the final third of Kangxi’s reign, a ‘polychrome revolution’ swept over the

Qing court. Four key enamelling colours were ‘invented’ which transformed the appearance of Chinese porcelain then and for centuries to come. The four colours were pink from Guangdong, an opaque white from Shandong, a lemon-yellow known as Naples yellow, and a deep blue from Europe. Mixing these colours, especially white, meant that there was no limit to colours used in decoration. Famille rose porcelains, with pink as their dominant colour, are emblematic of this colour revolution. The pink colour derived from gold reduced to nano-particles known as ‘colloidal gold’.

The new colours also transformed style — from a ‘watercolour’ style to what art historians Rose Kerr and Nigel Wood have referred to as an ‘opaque, near-impasto’ style. The stability of enamels meant that minute details could be painted without colours running into each other.



A kamcheng with polychrome enamels on coral ground. Guangxu period (1875–1908). Collection of Dr Roger and Mrs Betty Mariette. It is decorated with four-petaled cartouche showing amusing scenes of two old men fishing by a river, an official and his servant, and two friends. The painting in the cartouches is at a very fine level. The black outlines are evenly drawn and the costumes have been shaded carefully.

Researchers like Julie Bellemare of the Corning Museum of Glass and Shih Ching-fei of the National Taiwan University concur that whilst the inspiration for the new colours came from the West, the invention of the new Chinese colour palette developed from lively exchanges between producers up and down the country (the Beijing workshops, Jingdezhen kilns, official and unofficial, and independent enamelling workshops in Guangdong) and cannot be traced to a linear pattern or attributed to any one producer.

Manufacturing techniques also evolved in parallel. New kilns such as the muffle kiln were invented, which had a lining that acted as a sagger (a ceramic box-like container) to protect delicate enamel decorations from direct heat and soot during firing. Oil was used to dilute the enamels instead of water, glue or soluble gum, facilitating the painting of finer lines and effects similar to painting on canvas.

Different terms were coined to describe enamelled ceramics exemplified in the late Kangxi, Yongzheng 雍正 (1723–35) and Qianlong 乾隆 (1736–95) periods: *yangcai* (洋彩, foreign colours), *hua falang* (畫琺瑯, painted enamels), *falangcai* (琺瑯彩, coloured enamels) and *fencai* (粉彩, powder colours or famille rose). *Yangcai* as a term gained precedence

over *falang*, which fell into disuse. *Yangcai* continued to be used throughout the Qianlong period. *Fencai* appears to have been used from the 19th century onwards.

Some Imperial porcelains were a combined effort, where the bodies were produced by official factories at Jingdezhen, but decorated in the Imperial workshops in Beijing. The marks on the base of porcelains, whether they were underglaze or overglaze blue, and the density of the cobalt, may provide clues to such combined expertise.

QUESTIONS UNANSWERED

As the images above show, there is quite a difference between late Qing enamelware and Peranakan enamelware. The common technique is certainly ‘*impasto*’ and the Peranakan colours are a take on *famille rose*, but there the similarities end. The two genres look different even to the untrained eye.

Peranakan collectors generally agree that the finest pieces are of the Tongzhi and Guangxu period. However, the potting is relatively heavier and when struck, the resonance of even these pieces lack the ringing timbre of Chinese porcelain. Shards would provide answers to the composition

of the bodies, but to date, production sites have not been identified conclusively and enamelled shards have not surfaced at Jingdezhen or in Guangzhou or at other possible kiln sites like Dehua, Zhangzhou, Guangdong, including areas around these sites.

The Peranakan decorations are packed and multifarious and the *impasto* appears heavier. Some pieces do carry Jingdezhen marks. Were these Peranakan enamelwares made and decorated in Jingdezhen? It is probable that the best pieces were, but equally, they could have been decorated in Guangdong, as there are records of porcelains arriving in Guangdong from Jingdezhen, to be decorated according to commissions.

Lastly, did the Peranakans provide input for the distinctive look? Factory marks do not throw better light on the subject because unfortunately, the factories are long gone and no order books have been found.

The decline in extravagant orders of Peranakan enamelware after the early 20th century mirrored the declining fortunes of wealthy Peranakans in Southeast Asia after financial market crashes, war, and the increased use of imported wares from the West.



Yellow ground ‘landscape’ bowl, China, Jingdezhen, Qianlong era (1736–95). Private collection. Exhibited at Eskenazi, London, 2022. New techniques made the painting of fine lines and shades possible, like the delicate shades of pink and the two tiny figures at the bottom of the rock formation.



Famille rose dish with scene from Pavilion of the West 西廂記, porcelain, overglaze polychrome enamels and gold, China, Qing, Yongzheng (1723–35) c.1730. D. 22.3cm. Collection of the Musée Ariana, Geneva. Photo courtesy of the Baur Foundation. An amusing scene of a night tryst. The suitor has lost his boots! The white ground is like a painting canvas to the enameller. Outlines have been executed in very fine black enamels. The detail in the decoration is breathtaking.



Porcelain bowl with *yangcai* polychrome enamels on yellow ground, Douguang era (1821–50). China, official imperial kilns, Jingdezhen. Photo courtesy of the Baur Foundation, Geneva. This bowl presents all the new Qing-era colours on one object. Although made in Jingdezhen, it is possible that bowls like this were sent to the Imperial workshops in Beijing to be painted.

A FRESH LOOK AT PERANAKAN ENAMELWARES

The pieces on display at the recently re-opened Peranakan Museum, whether they be old friends or new stars, will be worthy descendants of their Qing counterparts, a unique genre of ceramics that Peranakans can proudly call their own. ■

PRISCYLLA SHAW is a new member of the *PASSAGE* editorial team and an admirer of *nyonyaware*. She thanks Mrs Betty Mariette for sharing her personal favourites with *PASSAGE* readers.

SHE WHO HEARS OUR CRIES

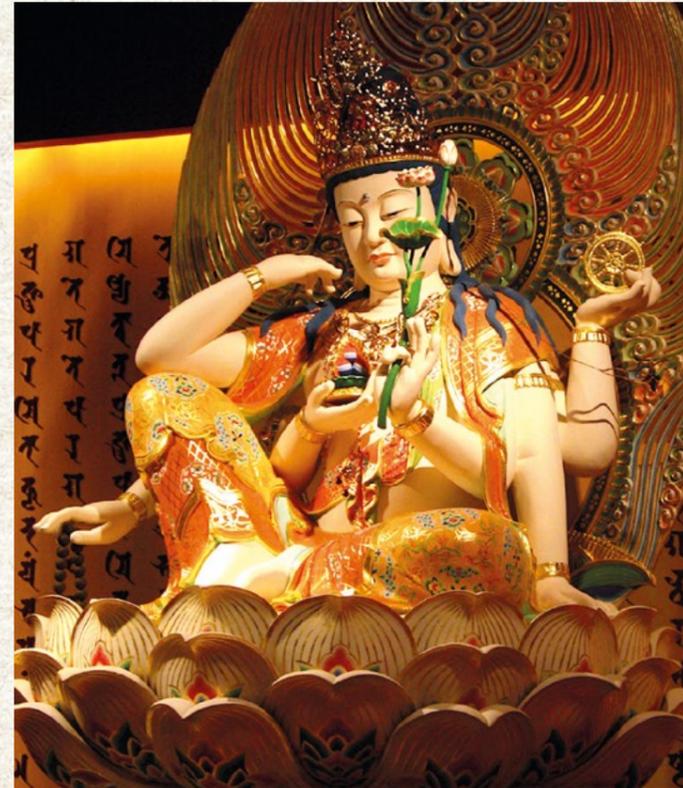
VIDHYA NAIR REVEALS THE ORIGINS OF THE POPULAR GODDESS OF MERCY

All photos by the author unless otherwise stated.

“It is easier to count all the leaves of every tree of every forest and all the grains of sand in the universe than to count the blessings and power of Avalokiteshvara,” says the *Kāraṇḍavyūha Sūtra*, compiled at the beginning of the 5th century. This ancient text extols the virtues and powers of Avalokiteśvara, a bodhisattva who embodies Buddha’s compassion and who’s Sanskrit name translates to “The one who perceives the sounds of the world.”

In East Asia, compassion was felt to be more of a female virtue so this popular bodhisattva changed gender and became known as Guanyin. While in Japan she became known as Kannon. There are 33 female manifestations of Guanyin, each wearing flowing white garments. She serves to assist other beings to seek salvation or simply acts as the Goddess of Mercy, lending a sympathetic ear, and responding to the “sound” of her devotees.

In China, Guanyin often has many arms, each wielding different symbols and weaponry that



Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva (Guan Yin) statue at Universal Wisdom Hall in the Buddhist Tooth Relic Temple, Singapore. A Sanskrit passage written with the Siddham script is seen in the background. Image by William Cho on Wikimedia Commons.

symbolise Dharma or universal truth, sitting on a lotus flower. It is said that fishermen pray to her for safe voyages and the title “Guanyin of the Southern Ocean” and “Guanyin of the Island” stem from this tradition. As Guanyin holds a white lotus in her hand, she eliminates all the oppression of suffering for all sentient beings and bestows upon them bliss and benefit.

GODDESS OF THE SEA

In the 20th century, many overseas Chinese populations have maintained Chinese folk religions, adapting to the new environment by developing new cults and incorporating elements of local traditions. In Southeast Asia, Chinese deities maintain their relations to their devotees via clan associations; with each clan having a patron deity whose temples they manage. The most important deity among Southeast Asian Chinese is Mazu, the Queen of Heaven and Goddess of the Sea. She holds particular appeal among the seafarers and traders of this region. And she is the dominant deity in Singapore’s oldest temple, Thian Hock Keng Temple on Telok Ayer (managed by the Hokkien Huay Kuan). At this temple, Guanyin is incorporated in a parallel hall just behind Mazu.



A makeshift Guanyin shrine in Bukit Brown Cemetery, Singapore.

In Chinatown’s Buddha Tooth Relic Temple, Guanyin has a secondary hall back to back with Maitreya, the future Buddha. Guanyin is also the resident deity at Bukit Brown cemetery, one of the largest and oldest cemeteries outside China.

On Waterloo Street, the Kwam Im Thong Hood Cho Temple, Guanyin is the focal point for all devotees, placed in front of Shakyamuni Buddha. A popular temple among Chinese Buddhists, the most festive period is the eve of Chinese New Year when the temple is kept open all night. Devotees offer incense to the Goddess of Mercy for an auspicious start to the year and on the sixth lunar month on her birthday when she attained Buddhahood.

GUAN YIN IN A HINDU TEMPLE

An interesting evolution in recent decades is the cross worship at the Shri Krishnan Temple located on the same street. This Hindu temple features Guanyin in their *Vasantha Mandapam* (a pantheon of deities in a “Great Hall”). Here, Chinese Buddhists offer incense and donations as well. The ease of prayer: “the more, the merrier” and the physical proximity of the temples has come to epitomise Singapore’s diversity and long-held acceptance of multiple faiths and practices.

Shri Krishnan Temple sees at least 100 Chinese worshippers a day. That number increases to approximately 400 a day on weekends and peaks at 1,000 on the first and 15th day of the lunar month when Chinese worshippers usually visit temples. Guanyin is specially adorned with floral garlands like a Hindu deity and mounted close to the temple entrance on these days to provide easy access for Chinese devotees who prefer to pray to her from the outside, out of respect for the other Hindu deities. This is also a nod of acknowledgement and respect by Chinese Buddhists in Singapore towards the origins and influence of their faith from Hinduism, giving these practices greater resonance and universality.

GUAN YIN THE MOTHER FIGURE

There are Christian observers who find Guanyin similar to Mother Mary, as she is often seen holding a child in Chinese sculpture and

Wooden statue of Guan Yin. On view at Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM). On loan from the Kwam Yim Hood Cho Temple, Singapore.

art. Guanyin is regarded in the *Lotus Sūtra* as the patron of mothers. She is believed to be the giver of sons and blesses parents with filial piety.

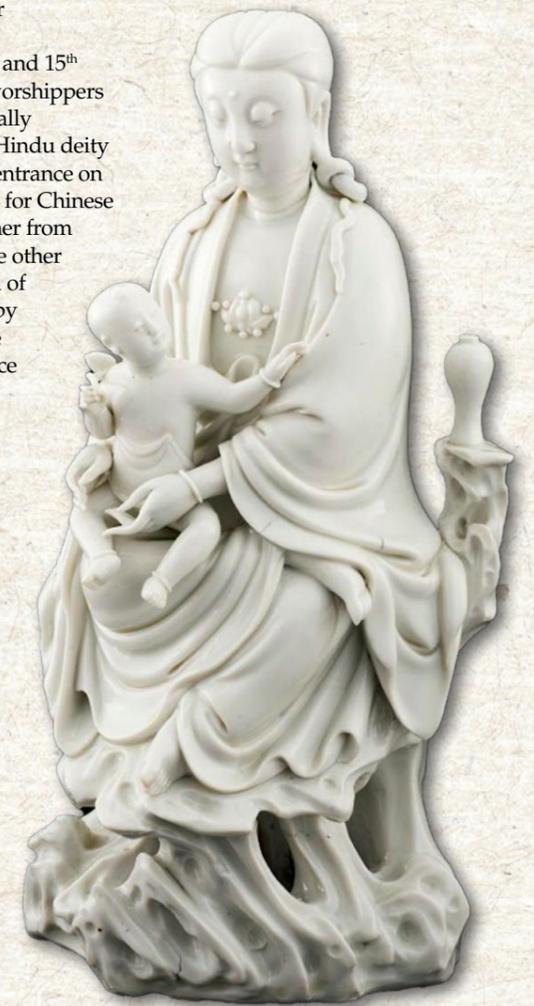
In her left hand, she holds a vase, one of eight symbols of good fortune, as the sprinkling of water is believed to relieve suffering. Her feminine white robes and jewelled chest are influenced by tantric sutras and its looseness indicates her androgynous origins and ability to change forms. Her crown often contains an image of her teacher, Amitabha, Buddha of the West.

Guanyin is in constant evolution and limitless, in tandem with her devotees, ever available and beloved and most importantly, listening. The next time you see her, be sure to sound your mind. **P**

VIDHYA NAIR is a docent at NMS and IHC and the coordinator for Monday Morning Lectures.



Guanyin decked up for Chinese New Year 2023 at the Shri Krishnan Temple, Waterloo Street.



A blanc de chine figure of Guanyin seated with a baby and vase. The presence of a lively baby on her lap holding a lotus bud signifies Guanyin’s fertility-bestowing powers. She was worshipped in this form as Songzi or ‘Giver of Children’. Porcelain. Dehua, China. Photo courtesy of the ACM.

MOTHER*DIVINE

WITH LOVE TO ALL MOTHERS FROM THE **PASSAGE EDITORS**

One of the American astronauts, upon returning to Earth from the Moon in 1969, was reportedly asked by a journalist if he saw God up there. He jokingly replied: “Yes, and she’s black”. This apocryphal story poked fun at all the entrenched notions, reinforced by Renaissance paintings, of an anthropomorphic white male supreme being. And it also invites the question: Was man’s earliest object of worship male or female?

Archaeological evidence from sites all over the world seems to indicate that Woman was the most natural and universal object of veneration. Like the queen bee, she was central to the survival and perpetuation of her species. Many palaeontologists therefore presume that the earliest human societies must have been matriarchal.



Venus of Willendorf, a 29,500-year-old limestone figure of a woman. Found in Austria and displayed at the Natural History Museum in Vienna.

ANCIENT EGYPTIAN AND GREEK GODDESSES

The ancient Egyptians certainly revered the mother figure in the form of Isis. She married her brother Osiris and produced a son, Horus, seen in numerous statuettes sitting on her knee. When Osiris was murdered by his evil brother, Seth, Isis brought him back to eternal life using her magical powers. She also cured her son when he was bitten by Seth, who disguised himself as a snake. And thereafter Horus became the avenger of his father and the main protagonist in the triumph of good over evil forces.

Isis seems to have been such an appealing and worthy object of worship that the Romans added her to their pantheon of deities and built temples in her honour all over their empire.



Egyptian goddess Isis nursing her son Horus. Egypt 664–332 BCE. Collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Roman Earth goddess Tellus (aka Terra Mater), Relief panel, 13-9 BCE, Museo Dell’ Ara Pacis, Rome



Mother (possibly Gaia) nursing child, limestone 5th century BCE, Cyprus. Collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Of course, the Romans also had their own Earth Goddess known as Tellus which was possibly based on the Greek Earth Goddess Gaia. She was one of ancient Greeks’ most important primordial deities, the mother of all creation. Like Isis, Gaia was associated with the fertility of crops as well as the nurturing and safeguarding of children and fledgelings of all kinds.

CHINESE GODDESSES

According to one of the many Chinese creation myths, humanity was created by a lonely goddess called Nuwa who saw her reflection in water and decided to create some human companions in her likeness made of wet clay. The first editions were meticulously crafted and became the royalty. The rest were made carelessly of clumps of clay, and they became the peasants.

Nuwa is often depicted with a human face and the body of a snake. She is still a popular deity, being the mother of all things. And women pray to her for assistance with marital problems or fertility issues. However, Chinese women who wish to conceive a son might more likely pray to a goddess who, according to legend, was never a mother herself. Her name is Guan Yin, which means “the hearer of cries”.

In addition to hearing the cries and showing compassion to those in peril, Guan Yin gained a reputation for granting sons to women who implored her. It is thus that she is often depicted holding a boy child, a token of her power to bestow such a gift upon would-be mothers.



Guanyin, ‘the giver of sons’, Sandalwood, 17th century. Collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

THE CHRISTIAN MADONNA

Not surprisingly, any Christian confronted by such a serene image of what appears to be a divine mother and child would immediately be reminded of the Madonna and infant Jesus.

In China, Guan Yin was therefore able to transcend from her origin as a male and then female Buddhist bodhisattva imbued with compassion, to a Taoist deity, and to a Christian Madonna. The potters of Dehua only needed to tweak a porcelain figure of Guan Yin to convert her to Christianity. The addition of an orb with a cross in the hand of the infant Jesus is a classic indication of his identity. And the crucifix medallion worn by the group of three madonnas confirms their identity. But what is the child holding in the other standing Dehua figure? Could it be the fleur-de-lis, a sign of the Virgin Mary? This is open to speculation. **P**

With thanks to Ratika Shah Singh for her initial research.



(left) Madonna and Child holding the orb with a cross, as often seen in Renaissance paintings. Dehua Porcelain, 1690–1710. Asian Civilisations Museum. Gift of Agnes Tan Kim Lwi in memory of Tun Tan Cheng Lock. (right) Madonna and Child holding a fleur-de-lis (possibly) China, Dehua Porcelain, 1690–1710. Asian Civilisations Museum.



Group of three Dehua porcelain Madonnas with Child, late 17th–early 18th century. Royal Collection Trust, UK.

AMERICA'S First Lady of SINGAPORE

CHARLOTTE DAWSON RETRACES THE
ADVENTURES OF A PIONEERING COMPATRIOT

They say, “someone has to be first” and often that person is quite brave to take on the challenge. As an American woman, I was certainly impressed by our Singapore first: Mrs Maria Revere Balestier.

Hers was a time when journeys to the Far East crossed the Atlantic and Indian Oceans by sail, relying on regular weather and ocean current patterns to stage a journey. Well-timed, a trip from the New England coast to Singapore would take about four months.

It was in 1833 that the US government decided to appoint a consul to the region and Joseph Balestier was the man. From a prominent New England family in his own right, he was married to Maria Revere, the real hero of this story.

DAUGHTER OF AN AMERICAN HERO

Maria was born in 1785 in Boston, the 15th child of Paul Revere, hero of the American War for Independence. Perhaps his name is familiar as it was made immortal through a Longfellow poem about his midnight ride to warn that “the British are coming”.

Maria was the youngest of the Revere daughters, and arguably the best educated because of her father’s growing business success with his iron foundry; it meant that he could afford better education opportunities for his younger children. After attending boarding school, which focused on “Republican motherhood” to instill new American values in her future children, Maria returned to live with her parents until her marriage to Mr Balestier in 1814. Five years later, Maria gave birth to their only child: Joseph Warren Revere Balestier, whom she called Revere.

THE ACCIDENTAL TRENDSETTER

It was when her son was 14 years old that the family’s Singapore adventure began in 1833. Not one American woman had yet to travel to, much less pack up their lives and family to live in, Singapore. After the arduous journey, the Balestier family arrived to a place that was foreign, exciting, challenging, and uncertain. Maria had to adapt to new European customs while being exposed to several different cultures for the first time. It is thanks to many of her letters to her sister surviving that we can read her own words, in her own hand, about her experiences and thoughts on life in Singapore.



An American clipper, the “Houqua” c. 1851. The Balestiers would have taken a similar ship to reach Singapore in 1834. Image from Wikimedia Commons.

Walking into a European community, Maria thought she had an idea of what to expect, but she was mistaken. She quickly realised she was older than the other women and that she dressed differently to them. Though it seemingly made her a bit self-conscious, one of those differences elevated her to the status of trendsetter. She styled her hair in braids that wrapped around to the back of her head. Many of the European women still attempted to wear curls, which didn’t stand a chance in this humid weather. Much to Maria’s amusement, quite a few ladies adopted her hairstyle.

Hairstyle alone was not enough, and Maria found the European social customs unyielding. The social positions were clearly defined but her place in them was less so. Though not welcomed with open arms, Maria did eventually accept and overcome the difficulties of navigating these social norms. But there was another hurdle – cultural assimilation – that she embraced wholeheartedly.

Growing up in Boston, her arrival to Singapore introduced her to a variety of cultures the likes of which she had never been exposed, and she enjoyed discovering the different people and their customs.

HER SINGAPORE ADVENTURE

Upon their arrival in Singapore, Mr Balestier was able to secure accommodation at the Boustead Building, also known as “The House of Seven and Twenty Pillars”. The family lived above the godown overlooking the mouth of the Singapore River, which she described quite vividly. The grandly named godown no longer exists, though you’ve likely trodden the same ground as Maria as it was eventually replaced by the Empress Place building. If you visit the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM) and look out to the Singapore River you will see our modern version of the “hustle and bustle”, the term she used to describe what she witnessed.

Four years after arriving, Balestier took ownership of the land on Serangoon Road that would become his sugarcane plantation. In this time period the family lived in two other homes, both in the Kampong Gelam neighborhood. They eventually moved to the plantation house, some two miles (and an hour’s drive) from town. The house was described as a “modest” one, with five immense rooms, ornate glass

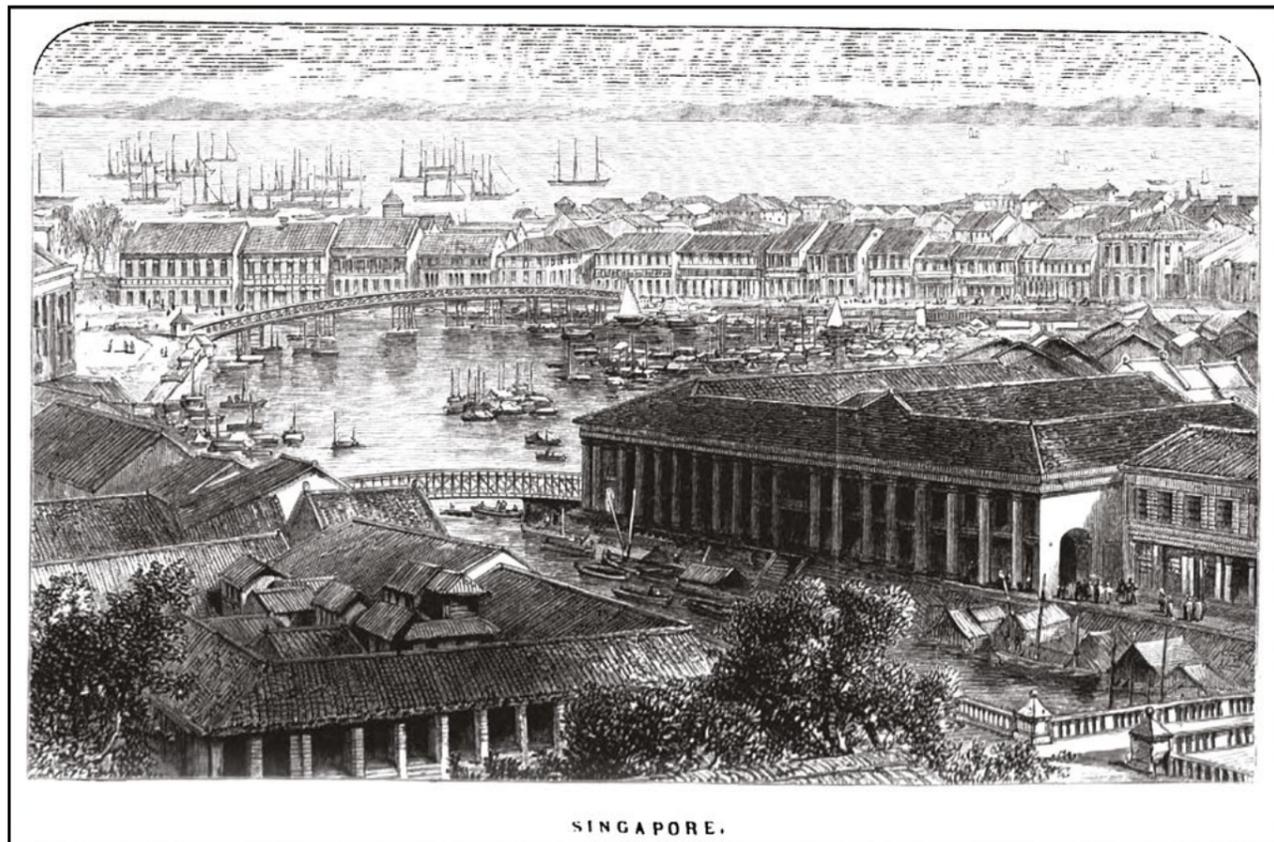
fixtures for candlelight, a gallery full of pieces from India and China, and a library, “being a fairy palace of the east!”

Though her husband was a diligent worker, the plantation truly thrived under the care of their son Revere. In today’s terms we’d consider him quite the mechanical engineer, and his creations gave efficiency to the farm he loved. She wrote often about his accomplishments so you can imagine her devastation when Revere died just shy of his 25th birthday after a short bout of illness. To read the many pages of her describing his illness and death, detailing her profound grief, and reliving her fondest memories of him was truly heartbreaking. Revere was buried at the Christian Cemetery at Government Hill, just behind where the National Museum Singapore (NMS) stands today.

When Revere died, both Maria and Joseph were getting on in age. Without him, they struggled to ensure the plantation remained profitable enough to pay off debts. They were both far from good health but found themselves in a situation where they could not retire as there was no buyer for their plantation.

have employment difficult for our support - You cannot imagine the variety and concourse of people, that are constantly coming and going, gazing and chattering, it would be a constant source of amusement to yourself and I'llow to sit in the outer gallery of our great unfinished theatre of a place, and see the variety - Just now was passed by a Boat full of Chinese going to Balte in the front of the Boat hung a Gong which a person who was sitting beside it, struck to a to keep time with another person who was playing on a kind of guitar, and singing a Batting Song it had a wild and yet musical sound and company dunt in white with the half naked women had a most picturesque appearance - At this moment there is coming down the basin, a Boat full of Arabs, their cry or song resembles the sound of our chimney sweeps, in some degree, but constantly reminds me of the North Church Bells when they ring one, two, three at Christmas time, they are half

A description of the busy Singapore River in 1834 in Maria's handwriting. "At this moment there is coming down the basin a boat full of Arabs. Their cry or song resembles the sound of our chimney sweeps in some degree but constantly reminds me of the North Church bells when they ring one, two, three at Christmas time."



In the foreground is the Boustead Building aka "House of 27 pillars" inhabited by the Balestiers in 1834. It was later replaced by the building known as Empress Place, where the ACM stands today.

Life became difficult and in 1847 at 62 years old, after 13 years in Singapore, Maria passed away. She was buried beside Revere though we will never really know where, as the cemetery no longer exists. Joseph Balestier left Singapore soon after his wife's death.

American missionaries often buried the dead in lead-lined coffins in order to one day bring them home. Although supposition, Maria and Revere's bodies were most likely

exhumed when Balestier was visiting Singapore in late-1850. It was at this time that the American vessel, the Santiago, passed through Singapore destined for Boston. We do know that Maria was reinterred in the family plot at the Granary Burial Ground in Boston, Massachusetts on 11 March 1851. We know from the ship's logs that its departure from Singapore was the right duration of time to align with her re-interment.



St Andrew's Church depicted in the painting Esplanade at Scandal Point by J T Thompson at NMS. Photo by author.

THE REVERE BELL

Maria Revere Balestier really was a special lady, and her letters give us insight into what life was like for this intrepid American. But her legacy also rings through the years to us ... through a bell.

In 1835 a Church Council was formed to develop the plans for a new Protestant church in Singapore, to be situated on the Padang. The vast majority of donations came from the Scottish community so it was decided the church would be named in honor of their patron saint, St Andrew.

Upon completion, one very noticeable thing about this church is what was missing: the spire. This did not go without remark, and when the Bishop of Calcutta was visiting Singapore, he commissioned the addition of a small tower and spire to distinguish the church from secular buildings as it "may be mistaken for a townhall." It is highly likely that Maria offered the bell at this time.

Unfortunately, a whole parcel of her letters from this period is lost to us. What we do know is that the Revere Bell was physically gifted to St Andrew's church on 20 October 1843. There was one condition placed upon donation: that the bell would ring out for five minutes after the 8pm gun had been fired. The curfew was to remind sailors to return to their ships and residents to be mindful of robbery and assaults. This condition was upheld for thirty years.

The Bell has lived in several places: from St Andrew's church to the subsequent St Andrew's Cathedral, from storage sheds to a museum and even temporarily at the US embassy. Since 2006, the Revere Bell has been a part of the permanent exhibition in the Singapore History Gallery at NMS. It is the only Revere Bell outside the United States, and proudly bears the name of its donor: Maria Revere Balestier. 🇺🇸

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The Revere Bell on display at NMS. Photo by author.

Women's Champion

TANG SIEW NGOH HONOURS THE MEMORY OF AN ICONIC WOMEN'S RIGHTS ACTIVIST

Unless otherwise stated, all photos courtesy of Susheel Sundram Croft, grand-daughter of Checha Davies.

Imagine playing tennis in a sari! That was the daring Checha Davies in her early days in Singapore. Checha was a woman of many talents, but she is best remembered as a women's activist, social worker and volunteer.

She assumed leadership roles in organisations like the Singapore Council of Women (dissolved in 1971) and the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) during the early years of Singapore's nation building in the 1960s.

As a champion of women's rights and women's welfare, she was posthumously inducted into the Singapore's Women's Hall of Fame in 2014. For her social work and community service, she was singled out in Singapore's 2015 Bicentennial publications as one of "Five women who shaped Singapore".

Together with Sophia Blackmore, Elizabeth Choy, Hajjah Fatimah and Constance Goh, Checha was praised for "rising above the call of duty, for her commitment to her causes, and for improving the lives of the people" in her adopted home, Singapore.

EARLY LIFE

Checha was born in Kerala, India in 1898. Her father, T.D. George, was a Methodist lay preacher. Her Methodist upbringing probably provided the religious and moral grounding which supported and guided her in her life of service to others.



Mrs Checha Davies. Photo courtesy of YWCA.

After receiving bachelor's and master's degrees in economics and English history, she lectured at the Women's Christian College in Madras, India. Love entered her life when she was introduced to her future husband, school teacher Edward Vethanayagam Davies (d. 1963) by his sister.

Neither Checha nor Edward Davies spoke each other's mother tongue. Instead, they found common ground in English. As a Malayalee, her marriage to a Tamil was an indication that she would ignore traditional boundaries if she disagreed with them.

A NEW START IN SINGAPORE

Edward Davies accepted a teaching post in Singapore in 1925. Checha gave up her teaching career in Madras and moved to Singapore with him.

Edward taught at Outram Road School. From 1931 to 1933, he was the principal of Telok Kurau English School where Lee Kuan Yew and Datuk Hussein Onn (former premiers of Singapore and Malaysia respectively) had been students.

In 1949, in his capacity as Labour Party Member of the Singapore Municipal Commission for North Ward, he served as City Councillor, for a year. It would appear that Checha and Edward also shared a love of serving the community.

Checha enjoyed preaching at the Tamil Methodist Church. Her talks must have been greatly appreciated. At the invitation of the Methodist Church of America for Missionaries in Asia, she spent four months in Europe, the Middle East, and America, giving talks every week despite being the only non-ordained church member.



Checha and Edward Davies in the 1920s.



Checha (holding the umbrella) with members of the Lotus Club on a beach outing, 1930s.

THE LOTUS CLUB

It was on social activism that she spent the most time and energy. In 1931, Checha founded Singapore's first Indian ladies' club, the Indian-Ceylonese Club, later re-named the Lotus Club. The members were affluent local and expatriate women from India and Sri Lanka. The Club had no permanent premises and met at the YWCA, where Checha was a prominent member. The main thrust of the club was the advancement of Indian women, with the lotus symbolising rebirth for oppressed or downtrodden women.

For example, many of them lived under *purdah*, a custom that obliged women to cover their faces under veils and isolate themselves away from men who were not family members. The Club organised gatherings and when the women were together, instead of being hidden under their veils, they were free to show their faces, like lotuses emerging beautifully from the mud.

At the suggestion of India's Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru during his 1950 visit to Singapore, the Lotus Club merged with the Ladies Union, a similar establishment with premises and a more diverse membership, to form the Kamala Club. Besides forming a larger social club where Indian women of different backgrounds, castes and creeds could meet,

it also organised fundraising activities, giving Indian women a role outside the domestic world. (Kamala means "lotus" in Hindi; it was also the name of Nehru's wife.) The Kamala Club exists to this day and the Indian Heritage Centre in Singapore has memorabilia relating to it.



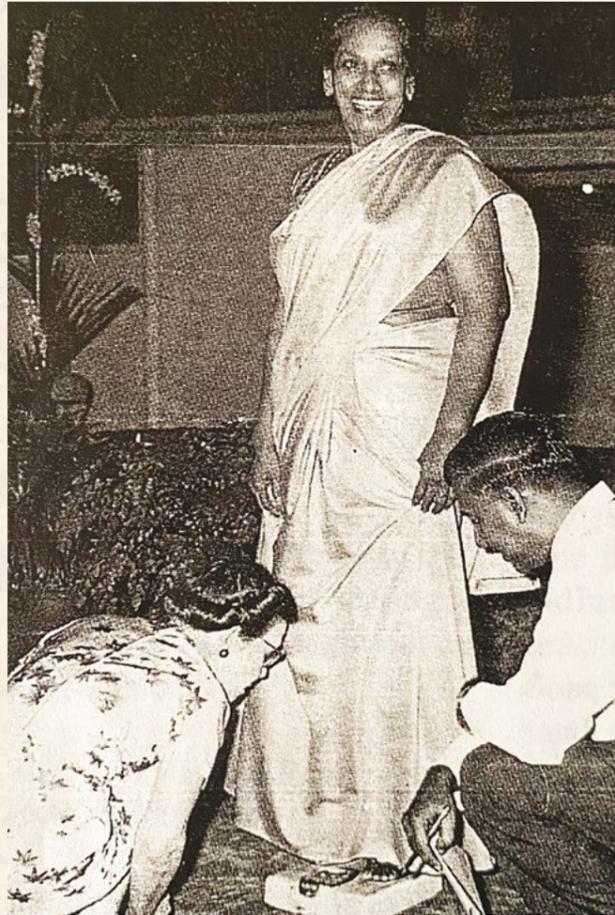
Committee members of the Indian and Ceylonese Club, 1931. Front row (from left to right): Mrs M. M. A. Namazie, Mrs K. M. R. Menon, Mrs J.T. N. Handy, Checha Davies and Mrs R. Jumabhoy.

SOCIAL WORK IN THE POST WAR YEARS

Checha was particularly interested in helping women who routinely suffered abuse by their husbands, or were left destitute after their husbands deserted them. She wanted to make life better for them. In 1951, together with 30 prominent women in the community including pioneer women's rights activist Shirin Fozdar and war heroine Elizabeth Choy, she formed the Singapore Council of Women (SCW) to campaign for the advancement of women's rights.

Checha focused on SCW's social projects for needy women, whilst Shirin Fozdar championed gender equality. Through the SCW's unrelenting efforts, many campaign objectives such as banning polygamy among non-Muslims and protecting women's rights were encapsulated in the Women's Charter which came into law in 1961 to protect and advance the rights of women and young girls in Singapore. In time, as the Women's Charter led to improvements in women's lives, SCW's membership numbers declined. It had done its job and it was dissolved in 1971.

Checha was also active with the YWCA, and served as president from 1960 to 1964, and again from 1966 to 1968. This was the decade just after Singapore achieved self-rule in 1959 and became an independent and sovereign nation in 1965. Life was tough. To put things into perspective, in the early 1960s, probably more than half the population lived in slums. Checha organised fundraisers for women's education, children's programmes and community services provided by the YWCA Outram Centre, including visitation teams to relieve the loneliness of old women living on their own in the Tiong Bahru area.



Checha not only donated her weight in gold but also sold her house to fund the construction of a new YWCA hostel for women. Photo courtesy of the YWCA.



Checha with her family on her 80th birthday.



The opening of the Fort Canning Lodge in 1969. Checha was integral in getting the hostel built for women. She is seated in the centre, behind the microphone. To her right is Puan Noor Aishah who was then the First Lady of Singapore. Photo courtesy of the YWCA.

DONATED HER WEIGHT IN GOLD TO THE YWCA

Checha believed that the essence of a religious life was in doing rather than talking. With her heart of gold, she rolled up her sleeves to care for the less fortunate. In 1967, Checha formed and chaired the Hostel Building Committee to oversee the building of a six-storey hostel for lower income women at Fort Canning Road. Her novel idea was for YWCA members to donate a dollar for each pound they weighed. Leading by example, Checha not only donated a gold sovereign for each pound of her weight, she also sold her house in Johor to pay for the installation of the lift. The YWCA Hostel was opened in 1969 by the then First Lady of Singapore, Puan Noor Aishah. It was welcomed as a new base for YWCA. It also generated rental income from young women who stayed there when they were away from home.

Indeed, Checha lived by YWCA's motto: 'By love, serve one another'. For services to Singapore, she was recognised by the Public Service Commission with Bintang Bakti Masyarakat (Public Service Star) in 1970.

REMEMBERED FOR HER SHARP WIT AND INNER STRENGTH

In her later years, her wit and inner strength helped her in her battle with cancer. Even in her illness, Checha continued to enrich those around her. Her hospital roommate recalls

that Checha never complained despite her pain and often joked with the nurses. In the last two weeks of her life, a nurse complimented her that she looked nice in her pair of matching pajamas. Not missing a beat, Checha said softly, "And now, who will you introduce me to?"

In her youth, Checha had been called "the most humorous delegate" at an international conference on women's affairs, the 3rd Pan Pacific Women's Conference in Honolulu in 1934. Years later, one of Checha's contemporaries would declare that, "When she died, ...the realm of social life in Singapore was never to be the same again." Checha's humour was never at the expense of others. During a sweltering afternoon when she and her friend were sweating in their saris, she remarked, "If only Eve hadn't sinned, we wouldn't be perspiring in these clothes".

Checha passed away at the age 81 in 1979. Whether it was challenging the social norms of the time, winning a tennis championship match in a sari or practising yoga well into her 70s, she was a precious gem who lived a life of service to others; an unforgettable champion for women in Singapore. 

TANG SIEW NGOH is a docent of the Indian Heritage Centre, the Peranakan Museum and the Malay Heritage Centre.

Street Walking

JYOTSNA MISHRA DIGS DEEPER INTO STREET NAMES AND DISCOVERS SOME REMARKABLE WOMEN

Photos by the author unless otherwise stated.

As an avid walker, street names have always intrigued me. The mind dwells as the feet wander and I am curious about the people that streets are named after and what their lives were like. I was surprised to discover that only 40 of the 3,000 roads in Singapore are named after women – that’s just barely over one percent!

In comparison, a study of street names of seven large cities in the world - London, Paris, San Francisco, Mumbai, New Delhi, Chennai, and Bangalore - found that, on average, only 27.5 percent of the streets had female names. In Paris and Rome about three percent of streets are named after women. In Italy, female street names are rare, with the exception of the Virgin Mary. An interesting find was that female street names were more common away from the city center.



Prominent Straits Chinese merchants at Government House (which is the Istana today) with a statue of Queen Victoria, Empress of India, which they commissioned and gifted to the Governor of the Straits Settlements, Sir Cecil Clementi Smith, 1889. Photo from the Royal Collection, UK.

THE ROYAL STREETS OF SINGAPORE

Many of Singapore’s streets are named, unsurprisingly, after British royals. There are no fewer than six streets named after the Queen (presumably Elizabeth), two after an Empress (Victoria), and four after a Duchess. The Asian Civilisations Museum is at one such location - Empress Place. Completed in 1867, the building once housed colonial government offices.

Other streets in Singapore are named after women who are less well-known, but remarkable nonetheless. Here are a few interesting ones, which also collectively point to Singapore’s multicultural heritage.

THE MALAY HEIRESS

Jalan Hajjah was named after Hajjah Hajjah binti Jumat, a Malay heiress who founded a kampong on land she had purchased off Upper East Coast Road. The kampong was likely established in the 1900s and had about 30 houses. Hajjah Hajjah contributed to the welfare of the community. She also funded the construction of a mosque in neighboring Kampong Siglap.

Kampong Hajjah was home to Chinese and Malay families while the nearby Kampong Goh Choo had predominantly Hokkien and Hainanese families from one region of China.

Kampong Hajjah, Kampong Goh Choo and Kampong Siglap were all fishing villages situated along the coastline. They were cleared in the 1980s to make way for high rise housing. Today, the Siglap area is dotted with hip cafes and restaurants with no trace of the area’s coastal past. One can no longer view the sea from Siglap.



Malay Kampong at Jalan Hajjah c. 1985. Image from National Archives Singapore.



The busy intersection of Jalan Hajjah with Upper East Coast road today.



Half-length portrait of Lady Sophia Raffles, a reproduction made through the courtesy of Jack Drake of Aviemore, Scotland, of the miniatures in the collection of Mrs M. Rosdew Drake, great-granddaughter of Maryanne Raffles (sister of Stamford Raffles) and Captain William Flint, Royal Navy officer and the first Master Attendant of Singapore.

THE ENGLISH LADY

Mount Sophia near Selegie Road is another area in Singapore named after a woman. The hill was once known as Bukit Seligi.

Mount Sophia was one of the earliest middle-class residential districts in Singapore established in the 1800s. It was believed that Captain William Flint (who married Sir Stamford Raffles’ favourite sister, Maryanne) was the very first resident of Mount Sophia. The hill was later renamed Mount Sophia, after Lady Sophia Raffles, second wife of Sir Stamford Raffles.

In 1825, Raffles and his wife returned to England from Singapore. Their voyage took almost a year and they lost most of their possessions after a fire broke out on their ship, *Fame*. When they finally arrived in England in 1826, both were in poor health. Raffles died soon after and Lady Sophia found that she was in debt to the East India Company. Nevertheless, she was determined to preserve Raffles’ legacy and authored his posthumous biography.

Sophia is the Goddess of Wisdom, so fittingly Mount Sophia was once home to many educational institutions including the Methodist Girls’ School and Saint Margaret’s Primary School.



Sophia Road was one of the earliest middle-class residential districts in Singapore. The first residents including Raffles’ brother-in-law, lived here from the 1820s.

SURVIVOR AND SAVIOUR

ISABEL TELFORD RECOUNTS HOW ONE WOMAN WAS AN INSPIRATION TO OTHER POWs



Portraits of Peter Lim Ah Pin and his wife, Florence Yeo, early 20th century. Collection of the Peranakan Museum. Gift of Angelina, Stephen, Josephine and Clement Lim in memory of their parents Lim Keng Teck Moses (4th Son) and Alice Tan Choo Neo.

THE TOWKAY NEO

Florence Road in the Upper Serangoon area was named after Florence Yeo, the wife of Straits Chinese business tycoon Lim Ah Pin. In the early 1900s, Lim Ah Pin was known as the “Bee Hoon King” of Singapore as he made his fortune manufacturing “bee hoon”, a thin, dried, rice noodle.

Lim Ah Pin Road is located alongside Florence Road, on both sides of the estate where the couple lived. Florence attended a Catholic convent school and the couple married in their teens. They were devout Catholics who went to Mass daily, even during the war.



Old and new juxtaposed along Florence Road today, where the home of Florence Yeo once stood.

In some ways she was a typical Peranakan matriarch and *towkay neo* (literal translation: boss’ wife), managing the household and raising ten children. Florence Yeo was an advocate for women’s rights, ensuring her daughters inherited a share of the family property, a highly progressive act at a time when most women didn’t have a voice, let alone the nerve to demand their rights. A pair of portraits of the couple have been donated to the Peranakan Museum by their descendants.

Singapore government’s current policy is for street names to encourage a retention of heritage and “reinforce a greater sense of history and identity among the community”. The URA vets and approves the naming and renaming of buildings, estates and streets. There is a movement to increase the number of places named after women, mirroring similar campaigns in Europe. The Singapore Council of Women’s Organisations (SCWO) has called for more locations to be named after women believing that this will pave the way for greater recognition of women’s contributions to Singapore, and correct the long standing imbalance. Who do you think will find a place on Singapore maps in the next few years? 

JYOTSNA MISHRA is an ACM docent and a first generation Singaporean. She has a background in strategy consulting and technology entrepreneurship.



Portrait of Ethel Mulvany while in Changi prison, 1942 by Joan Stanley-Cary using a human hair brush and brick dust. Collection of the Pioneer Museum, Manitoulin, Canada

Often, remarkableness arises in the face of adversity. Canadian Ethel Mulvany was an ordinary woman who lived through extraordinary times and rose to the occasion. From humble beginnings in Manitoulin Island, Canada to meeting an Emperor in Asia; from a comfortable colonial life as a doctor’s wife to incarceration and torture during World War II.

Her recollections, compiled in a book by Suzanne Evans appropriately titled *The Taste of Longing* give us a rare, precious insight into the experience of civilian women from Allied countries incarcerated for three and a half years in Japanese-occupied Singapore.

These women arrived at the gates of Changi Prison after a long, forced march. Along the way, with their heads held high, they sang at the top of their voices the Vera Lynn hit *There will always be an England*. These were ordinary women: doctors, nurses, teachers, civil servants, military wives. They were mostly used to a comfortable existence when they were suddenly deprived of their liberty. Worse still, they had to fend for their most basic needs and plead directly with their incarcerators.

Despite her possible bipolar disorder or indeed because of it, Ethel Mulvany was a force of nature who tirelessly confronted the Japanese guards and negotiated better conditions for the women imprisoned in Changi. What’s more she frantically organised activities to raise morale and keep the women occupied.



Ethel in 1933 before being presented to the Emperor and Empress of Japan. Photo courtesy of Ethel's niece, Marion King.

THE CANADIAN FIREBRAND

This almost manic energy or “can do” attitude explains perhaps how she rose above her humble beginnings, and how she went from not having money to continue her studies to becoming an educator. She achieved this by convincing the Canadian government to subsidise a world tour of education programmes. This was to be the base of her future lectures on education. It was during this tour she met not only kings, emperors and the “crème de la crème” of society but also her future husband, Dr John Mulvany, a young British military doctor. His proposal of marriage led her to simply abandon the tour and the education project and settle into married life.



Ethel Rogers married British Army doctor, Denis Mulvany in India in 1933. Photo courtesy of Ethel's niece, Marion King.

Settling was not a word that agreed with Ethel though. Even during the early days of her marriage, she would embark on projects that flew in the face of convention. She single-handedly organised an exhibition to showcase local handicrafts from Uttar Pradesh in India. And, in a desperate bid to help the Indian craftsmen and artisans, she arranged for their work to be marketed in Canada.

THE WAR YEARS IN SINGAPORE

When WWII broke out, the couple found themselves stationed in Singapore and again Ethel's spirit saw her looking for ways in which she could be useful. She joined the Australian Red Cross, drove ambulances and unashamedly approached the wealthy Straits Chinese community to raise much-needed funds for the war effort. These contacts were later going to prove invaluable during the Japanese occupation.

In Changi Prison, Ethel's frantic activity and spirit soon started to unsettle a few more conventional women, but their prejudice did not discourage her. She bravely cajoled the Japanese guards into giving her concessions, and used her many contacts in the local community to obtain all sorts of extra supplies that she would then share amongst her fellow inmates.

KEEPING SPIRITS UP

She would also contrive elaborate projects to keep everyone's spirits up. One day, seeing a group of Girl Guides in the camp working on a quilt, Ethel had an idea. She organised all the women to create three quilts to offer to the patients in the prison hospital. One for the British patients, one for the Australians and...one for the Japanese, as this would hopefully convince the guards to deliver the other two.

THE CHANGI QUILTS

This project was initially just for the military wives but was soon open to everyone in the camp. It allowed the women to express themselves creatively and to send messages to their loved ones. Of course, whatever they embroidered was going to be scrutinised by the guards and there were many floral patterns, but also some personal designs.

Each quilt had 66 six-inch squares of cotton and each square tells a different story. Some women didn't live long enough to see the end result but these quilts survive till today. A replica of the British quilt, made by the Asian Women's Welfare Association in 2003, can be seen in the Changi Chapel and Museum. The original is in the British Red Cross headquarters and the original Australian and Japanese quilts were loaned and donated to the Australian War Memorial. They are a testimony of hope and creativity in the face of adversity.

A TASTE OF LONGING

Another of Ethel's legacies was the conjuring up of imaginary feasts. In times of despair and scarcity the women would gather together and plan pretend dinner parties. They would also exchange their favourite recipes. Ethel even managed to convince the Japanese camp guard to give her an old ledger book where she recorded these recipes.

The harsh conditions, the long incarceration, the loss of many fellow internees and the move of civilian prisoners from Changi to Sime Road camp eventually took a toll on Ethel's already fragile mental health. She also suffered physically, spending the last few months before liberation in solitary confinement after being repeatedly tortured.



The British Changi Quilt, Red Cross Museum, UK. A replica made by the Asian Women's Welfare Association in 2003 can be seen in the Changi Chapel and Museum, Singapore



Detail of the quilt featuring a thought-bubble with a table full of food, a popular fantasy among the female prisoners.

GRAPPLING WITH POOR MENTAL HEALTH

Sadly, the end of war was not the end of her torture. She was a typical victim of her time, when the approach to mental health issues, especially in the case of women, was nothing short of barbaric. Ethel was subjected to “treatments” such as insulin induced coma and electric shock “therapies”.

Despite all these setbacks, after the war Ethel eventually took a transcript of the recipes collected during her time in Changi and, by contributing her own savings, convinced a publisher to publish them.

She then went on a self-organised tour to promote the book and managed to sell 20,000 copies, raising \$18,000

Canadian dollars (nearly \$300,000 dollars in today's terms). With this money, she sent real “feasts” (mostly oranges, cigarettes and tea) to ex-POWs who were hospitalised in post-war England where food was still rationed.

If nothing else, the simple fact that amid all her many troubles Ethel's immediate concern was once again to find a way to help others, makes her without a doubt a truly remarkable woman. 

ISABEL TELFORD is a docent at the Changi Chapel and Museum.

THE WOMAN WHO HEALED A QUEEN



My great-grandmother Sharifah Alawiyah Aljunied whom we called Mak Tok.

Mak Tok was a confident and independent lady who was ahead of her time. She embraced and assimilated her own Arab heritage seamlessly with that of the Malay community in Singapore and was a well-known traditional healer and midwife.

NOBLE LINEAGE

Mak Tok's grandfather was Syed Omar Aljunied, an early Arab pioneer who came to Singapore from Yemen in 1819, shortly after Raffles set up a trading post here. Her ancestors sailed from Yemen to Palembang and traded there before coming to Singapore. Mak Tok's father was Syed Abu Bakar Aljunied.

Mak Tok's father was a close friend of Sultan Abu Bakar of Johor who had established ties with the Turkish Ottoman Empire. During one of his visits to Istanbul, the Ottoman ruler, Sultan Abdul Hamid, presented Sultan Abu Bakar three Turkish noble ladies who accompanied him back to Johor. One of them, Fatimah al-Aruj, eventually became the wife of Syed Abu Bakar Aljunied and gave birth to their only child, Mak Tok.

Syed Abu Bakar Aljunied was one of the founding members of the Singapore International Chamber of Commerce although he was not its first president. He was the only non-European on the board of Governors of the Singapore Harbour Board (now Port of Singapore Authority).

With such an influential father and a noble mother, Mak Tok was raised in a privileged but disciplined household. She was better educated than most girls of her generation and was trained in every aspect of Malay tradition and culture.

Mak Tok grew up in Kebun Limau, a grand mansion at 540 Balestier Road, built by her father in 1873 when she was five years old. It was set in a citrus grove, hence the name "Lime Garden". It became one of the famous ancestral homes of the Aljunied family in Singapore.

The two-storey bungalow had 24 rooms, including special rooms such as medicine rooms and maternity rooms where Mak Tok practised traditional Malay medicine and midwifery.



Kebun Limau built in 1873, the grand mansion Mak Tok grew up in on Balestier Road.

ZAHRA ALJUNIED SHARES THE STORY OF HER GREAT-GRANDMOTHER

All photos provided by the author.

My great-grandmother, the matriarch of the Aljunied family, Sharifah Alawiyah Aljunied, was born in Singapore in 1868. She was popularly known as Wan Kechot due to her petite stature. ("Kechot" means "shrunken" in Malay.) but had a huge personality. Her descendants fondly called her Mak Tok.

A GIFTED HEALER

She willingly treated anyone who needed help, not just Arabs and Malays but Chinese Peranakans and Europeans as well. The ladies from these communities had become her close friends, especially those from the Chinese Peranakan community. Chinese Peranakans observed some customs and traditions of the Malay world, especially those surrounding pregnancy and birth, so they looked up to Mak Tok to guide them.

Mak Tok was so well-liked that her Peranakan friends included her in Chinese New Year celebrations. In return, Mak Tok would prepare various desserts like cakes and jellies, putting them in the traditional *bakol siah* (tiered lacquered Chinese baskets) as gifts to her Peranakan neighbours and friends.

In the Malay community, Mak Tok was well-known for her midwifery services and her abilities to cure various diseases using traditional medicine. She had an extensive knowledge of healing herbs and their properties. Given her close family ties to the Johor royal family, she was called upon to heal the Permaisuri (Queen Consort) of Johor. In gratitude, the Sultan of Johor rewarded her family with a huge piece of land in Johor Bahru in 1937.

Mak Tok married her cousin Syed Abdul Rahman Aljunied. In 1927, he founded the Madrasah Aljunied Al-Islamiah, a leading institution in Singapore and Southeast Asia. Mak Tok was a pillar behind her husband, an important public figure. She would ensure that all the banquets her husband hosted at Kebun Limau were well-organised.

A LOVE FOR LITERATURE

Although an Arab by heritage, Mak Tok observed and respected Malay traditions. She loved to study Malay historical scripts and literature. Since these works were not printed but handwritten and passed down within a family, they could not be purchased anywhere. Realising their importance and fragility, she commissioned female scribes from Palembang and the Riau Islands to come to Singapore to scribe copies of these traditional manuscripts for her, which she then distributed to her family. These scribes stayed at her home for months for this purpose. Growing up, I used to read these beautifully written manuscripts aloud to my relatives.

EXCEPTIONAL HANDIWORK

Mak Tok's embroidery skills and handiwork were well-known. Ladies would commission her to make traditional embroidered clothing and fine beaded slippers especially for brides. Her skills encompassed various traditional techniques including *keringkam* (embroidery

using broad, flat gold or silver threads) and *tekat emas* (couched gold threadwork on velvet) which took months to finish. My sister Radhiyah has carefully preserved some of her pieces including ceremonial fans in gold embroidered velvet, richly decorated mirror and tray covers, bolster ends and even a huge three metre long valance used for a wedding dias, entirely embroidered by hand. Some of these techniques can no longer be found in Singapore today.

Mak Tok also served the community as a *mak andam* (a woman who prepares the bride for her big day). She was well-versed in all the customs and rites that a Malay bride had to observe.

I was born when Mak Tok was 87 years old and dementia had taken a toll on her. Thankfully, all her knowledge and skills were passed down to her five daughters including my paternal grandmother, Sharifah Khadijah, who was also well-known as a healer.

I have many memories of Mak Tok from my visits to Kebun Limau. Even with dementia in her old age, she was impeccably groomed and well-dressed in crisply starched *baju kurung* (a loose, long blouse and skirt set traditionally worn by Malays) sewn from fine linen.

An annual event that I looked forward to was Mak Tok's birthday celebration. The ladies in the kitchen at Kebun Limau would churn out as many packets of *nasi padang* as her age. The last celebration I remember was Mak Tok's 99th birthday in 1967. On the long table in the front dining room, 99 rice packets were neatly arranged. All the family members each took a wrap and the rest were distributed to the mosque for the poor. Mak Tok passed away in 1968 at the grand old age of 100. Her legacy remains alive in our family. 📖

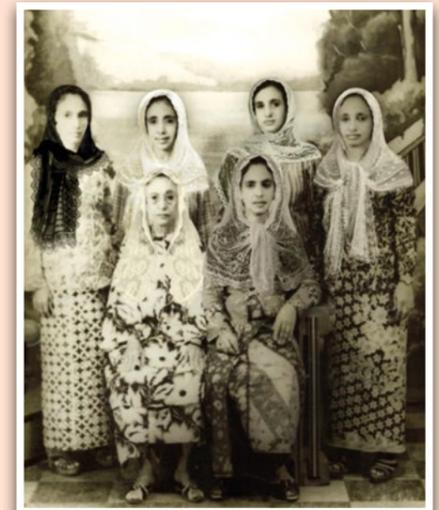
ZAHRA ALJUNIED is a retired Senior Librarian of the National Library Board. She is passionate about her family history and has written a book and given talks on the subject.



A tiny pair of gold embroidered slippers made by Mak Tok for herself.



A plate Mak Tok used to blend her herbal medicines.



Mak Tok (seated, wearing a white lace veil) with her five daughters – Zainab (seated next to her), standing from left: Zubaidah, Bahiyah, Khadijah and Noor.

The Mystery of the Pious Woman

CHARLOTTE DAWSON DISCOVERS THE STORY BEHIND A TOMB IN CHINATOWN

When you are walking along Duxton Plain Park, stretching through the Tanjong Pagar and Bukit Pasoh areas of Chinatown, you may find a surprising structure. Nestled in the shade of the shophouses and trees lies a tomb. Upon closer inspection, you will see a brass plaque in Jawi and English, marked with the name: Sharifah Rogayah.

It is thought that at some point the land held a Muslim cemetery. Having overlaid two maps, one from 1840 and the other from 1913, you may notice a few things looking at the encircled area. The older map labels an area called Malay Village. Certainly, burial grounds would have been set nearby but at a distance from the village. The 1913 map shows much progress, including a solid black line of the Singapore-Kranji rail (today's Duxton Plain Park). Marking an approximate location of the grave, we can understand how a Malay cemetery might have been exhumed to make way for the rail line. Legend has it that one grave simply could not be removed; that when workers attempted to do so the earth would fall back in.

It was decided that the grave was protected by divine powers and it was best to leave it alone. Awed by this, the community upgraded it to a shrine and maintained it



The tomb is located at Duxton Plain Park between Keong Siak Road and Bukit Pasoh Road. Photo by Dawn Marie Lee.



An overlay of two maps, one from 1840 and another from 1913 showing the development of the area. The encircled area is where a Muslim cemetery may have possibly been located and exhumed to make way for a railway line. Historical maps retrieved from NUS Library.

through the years, not knowing who the divinely protected person may be.

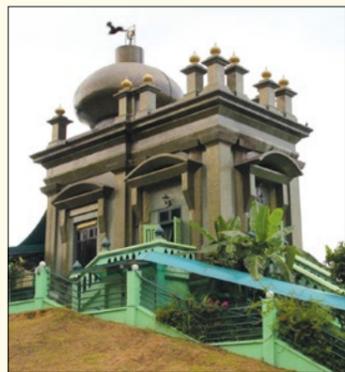
About 24 years ago a Malay boy, named Mohamed Ridhwan, had a dream where the holy man, Habib Noh, appeared to him, instructing him to find his only granddaughter's grave and to be its caretaker. The boy decided to do so. The only information he had to go on was the instruction in his dream that the grave was in the Tanjong Pagar area. He looked at maps and came down to the area asking residents questions. An old man, one day, led him to this single grave and the boy believed he had found Habib Noh's granddaughter. So is this the grave of Sharifah Rogayah? Who is she?

To understand who Sharifah Rogayah is, you must know her family. Habib Noh is a very important person in Singapore's Muslim history. He was the son of a Yemeni trader living in Penang before he arrived in Singapore, now over 200 years ago. A descendant of the Prophet Muhammad, Habib Noh was a devoutly religious man with spiritual powers. As a healer, many miracles have been attributed to him, and for these mystical powers he is considered a Muslim *wali*, or saint. The revered man, though, suffered personal tragedy through the deaths of his wife and oldest child. His remaining child, a daughter, married a man from Penang and together they had only one child: Sharifah Rogayah. Not much is known about this pious woman, who is often only referred to as "the granddaughter of Habib Noh". We do know that she married Syed Aljunied, they had five children, and she passed away in 1891.

What might the Aljunied family say about this shrine? Surely their records would tell us if it is their beloved ancestor. According to the family, Sharifah Rogayah was buried with her family in another location, at Paterson Road. The shrine is now looked after by believers who, in recent years, have placed a brass plaque with her name. This seems to provide a permanent indication of who is interred, shifting the shrine's resident from urban legend to reality for those who believe. Though there is no consensus as to whose final resting place this may be, one can visit this quiet shaded place in Duxton Plain Park and feel the sense of mystery exuding from the solitary tomb.

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CHARLOTTE DAWSON is a docent with the URA Heritage Trails, guiding in the Bukit Pasoh precinct.



The Habib Noh shrine located at 37 Palmer Road. Sharifah Rogayah was the granddaughter of this Muslim saint. Photo from Wikimedia Commons.



ISLAND NOTES

WOMEN AT WORK

YUSOFF ABDUL LATIFF PAYS TRIBUTE TO SAMSUI WOMEN

Paintings by the author.

Samsui women were Chinese female immigrant workers who came to Singapore largely in the early 20th century. They were mainly from Shansui in Guangdong. China was in a period of political turmoil and economic hardship was compounded by natural disasters. Faced with starvation, these women flocked to Singapore where they worked as manual labourers to clear jungles, construct roads and buildings. The colonial government at the time had set a limit on the inflow of Chinese male immigrants as there was a threat of overcrowding, lawlessness and a rise in gangs and secret societies.

Samsui women were easily identified by their dark blue samfoos and distinctive red headgear. A square piece of red cloth was starched and folded to protect their heads from the scorching sun, and was also used to store money and cigarettes. The bright red colour was eye-catching and reduced the chance of accidents on worksites, much like the yellow construction helmets of today. For footwear, they cut up pieces of used rubber tyres and added straps to wear them as sandals.

Their daily work included digging and carrying soil, debris and building materials like bricks, sand and cement in two pails or wicker baskets hung on a bamboo pole balanced over their shoulders. They carried heavy wooden and steel bars



A statue of a Samsui woman outside the Chinatown Heritage Centre on Pagoda Street. Photo by Dawn Marie Lee.

and mixed concrete. All this for a meagre wage of 50 to 60 cents a day.

They lived spartan lives, saving as much money as they could to send back to their families in China. They rented cubicles in shophouses in Chinatown and shared them with fellow Samsui women. They ate frugal meals of vegetables, beans and rice. Many were illiterate and would regularly visit letter writers to communicate with their families by mail.

Most Samsui women were single and did not marry even after many years in Singapore. In their old age, some returned to China. Sadly, many who remained continued to live in poverty around Chinatown or Bukit Merah and survived by collecting cardboard or doing menial jobs. Organisations such as the Sam Sui Wui Koon Singapore looked into the welfare of the remaining Samsui women by providing them with meals and free trips back to China to visit their relatives.

Samsui women were hardworking and known for their strength, discipline and perseverance. They played a significant role in building Singapore's infrastructure and economy. In 1986, the Singapore Broadcasting Corporation produced a drama series to portray their hard life. In 1987 when Singapore's first MRT line opened, Samsui women were invited to ride on the first train from Toa Payoh MRT station. There are also statues dedicated to Samsui women on Pagoda Street outside the Chinatown Heritage Centre and at the URA Building at Maxwell Road.



This granite sculpture by artist Liu Jilin outside the URA building on Maxwell Road shows a trio of samsui women, identified by their characteristic hats and the loads carried on their backs, 1999. Photo by Tim Clark.

YUSOFF ABDUL LATIFF is a watercolour artist based in Singapore. Check out his work on Instagram: @yusofflatiff

SEX SELLS in SHANGHAI

PASSAGE EDITORS REVISIT A GLAMOUROUS FEMINE ICON

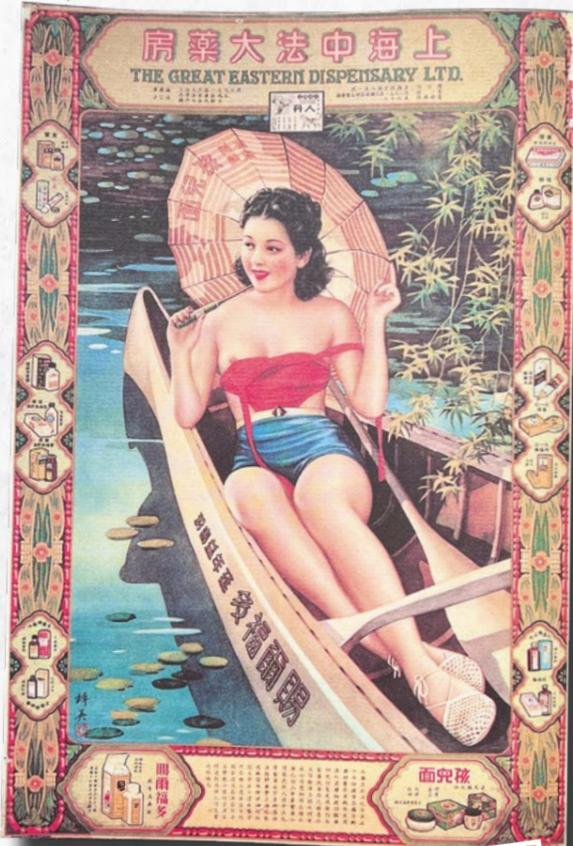
Poster advertising in Shanghai in the 1920s and 1930s evokes images of glamour and daring with more than a dash of sex appeal, reinforcing the city's reputation as the Paris of the East. Shanghai was a hub of commerce and culture, attracting people from all over the world. It came to symbolise Sino-Western hybridity. And the gorgeous poster girls said it all.

Seductive women, presented as models of modernity, were depicted in advertisements for everything from cigarettes to cosmetics, bug spray to diarrhoea pills.

Poster girls were typically idealised as fashionable, cosmopolitan women with their bobbed haircuts, bright red lips, and stylish clothing. They usually wore a form fitting cheongsam with slits up to the thigh, or a revealing Western gown. And they were often shown smoking a cigarette or holding a cocktail, exuding an air of confidence and sophistication that was both alluring and aspirational.

Shanghai poster girls reflected the changing social norms and attitudes. 1930s Shanghai was a city in transition, as traditional Chinese culture collided with modern Western influences. With the collapse of the Qing Dynasty, Chinese women were beginning to enter and participate in public life in ways that had not been possible before. And the Shanghai poster girl represented this new, independent female identity.

Despite their prominence, however, these girlie posters were not universally admired. Critics accused them of promoting Western decadence and undermining traditional Chinese values. But they remain popular among collectors of nostalgia today, defining icons of a bygone age. ■



A JEWEL BOX OF LIVING COLOURS

Culture comes alive at the revamped Peranakan Museum which finally re-opened on 17 February 2023 after four years of renovations. Brand new permanent exhibitions in nine galleries spread over three floors provide a comprehensive insight into the diverse Peranakan cultures of Singapore and Southeast Asia. The galleries are designed around three broad themes pertaining to Peranakan identity, namely "Origins", "Home", and "Style".

EMBRACING DIVERSITY

The revamped museum seeks to redefine the way we understand Peranakan culture and history by exploring the varied contributions of different Peranakan communities. Interviews, photographs and stories showcase living cultures such as that of the Arab Peranakans, Chinese Peranakans, Chetti Melakans (or Peranakan Indians), and Jawi Peranakans while anchoring these cultures within the context of the larger Malay-Indonesian world. This can be distinctly seen in the "Origins" gallery on the ground floor.



A beaded footstool used in Chinese Peranakan weddings. A pair is displayed at the museum.



Artist Sam Lo's version of a Ti Kong lantern.

SHOWCASING OLD AND NEW

The "Home" galleries on the second floor present objects related to family and community life, revealing a range of Peranakan customs, food, languages and beliefs. It reunites furniture, portraits and furnishings from the grand mansions of wealthy Peranakans that have since long been demolished. Objects on view include ancestral and deity altars, *pintu pagar* (half height swing doors) and a wedding bed. In the same gallery, commissioned photographs by artist Lavender Chang feature the modern interiors of public housing apartments of contemporary Peranakans. This lovely juxtaposition of old and new shows how the museum reflects that Peranakan culture is constantly evolving.

At the heart of the museum, in the central skylight is a dazzling display of painted paper lanterns, traditionally hung at the entrances of Chinese Peranakan homes. Artist Sam Lo's lantern installation titled "Coming Home" features scenes of Peranakan life, including *cherki* cards, and *sireh* chewing. At the very top of the installation is his version of a Ti Kong lantern, which was traditionally lit for the Emperor of Heaven. His version is decorated with auspicious symbols such as bats and the implements of the Eight Immortals.

MORE THAN SARONG KEBAYA

The "Style" galleries on the third-floor present textiles and fashion – two strengths of the museum's collection.

DAWN MARIE LEE REPORTS ON THE REFRESHED PERANAKAN MUSEUM

Photos by the author unless otherwise stated.

Different interpretations of the sarong kebaya are displayed side by side. A jacket by American fashion designer Diane Von Furstenburg looks surprisingly similar to a kebaya. Menswear, footwear, bags and jewellery including a Chetti Melaka wedding necklace are also displayed. Together, they show how the fashion of the Peranakans is diverse, reflects hybrid influences and has evolved over centuries. Highlights include a batik cheongsam worn by the late Madam Kwa Geok Choo and a pair of *kasut manek* (beaded slippers) worn by lead actress Jeanette Aw in the blockbuster TV drama series *The Little Nyonya* (2008).

The refreshed Peranakan Museum is a sparkling jewel box that holds delightful surprises for every visitor. The museum is open daily from 10am-7pm (9pm on Fridays).

FOM members and one guest enjoy free entry. FOM guided tours of the Peranakan Museum will resume soon. Please check the FOM website (under the Museums section) for updates.



A Chetti Melaka addigai (wedding necklace) adapted from South Indian examples, early 20th century. Image courtesy of the Peranakan Museum.

Shang Antique

Established Since 1984



Hevajra - Angkor Wat period, 12th century. Ht. 79cm



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WELCOMING

the NEW YEAR with NEW BEGINNINGS

DARLENE KASTEN REPORTS ON THE FIRST NEW MEMBERS MORNING OF 2023

Photos by Mohamed Ismail.

Over 50 FOM members spent a delightful Thursday morning on 9 February at Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall (SYSNMH) for the first New Members Morning of 2023. The memorial hall was festively attired for the Wan Qing Festival of Spring with "bunny-full" lawn installations offering visitors blessings of good luck and great fortune for the Year of the Rabbit.



FOM members at a festive SYSNMH.



The return of refreshments! FOM volunteers Sim Chong Teck and Jariyah Yusoff, FOM council representative Lee Hong Leng (Honorary Secretary), Michelle Yeow-Jong, and hospitality team coordinator Jutta Schutte.



The cessation of government restrictions on group size and food service meant that both new and veteran FOM members could once again meet and mingle over refreshments before being welcomed by Oksana Kokhno, council representative for Volunteer Appreciation and Membership and FOM president Millie Phuah.

Council reps Robyn Lloyd (Member Activities), Charlotte Dawson (Museums), Leong Lee Chiew (Docent Training), and Rupa Tamsitt (Marketing) each gave brief presentations on the array of FOM-supported museums, heritage institutions and walking trails, public and members-only activities, as well as volunteer opportunities and docent training available exclusively for FOM members.

The presentations were followed by short tours of the permanent galleries at SYSNMH by volunteer docents Sadiah Shahal, Tina Tan and Shradha Nayan. When asked how she would describe the morning, new member Smitha Venugopal said, "It was beyond my expectations. The energy was really great and FOM reps presented so many opportunities. There's so much interesting stuff. I'm now confused as to what to join, but that of course is a happy problem to have."

A note to new members: Please check the FOM website for the latest updates on upcoming lectures and activities, museum exhibitions and volunteer opportunities. For more information on docent training, come to the Public Information Meeting (PIM) at the National Museum of Singapore on 30 May 2023. Look out for announcements on the website and in the weekly e-newsletters for the next New Members Mornings.

(clockwise from top left)
FOM council representative Oksana Kokhno welcomes the new members.
FOM president Millie Phuah and council representatives Robyn Lloyd, Rupa Tamsitt and Oksana Kokhno.
Council representative Charlotte Dawson addresses a full house.
Dynamic SYSNMH docents Shradha Nayan, Tina Tan and Sadiah Shahal.



Batik Walk in Kampong Gelam

(left) Zahra Aljunied and our guide Hafiz Rashid show a kain lepas batik at Toko Aljunied. (right) Kiah's Gallery owner Yati Hairi and Hafiz present a batik prada with motifs outlined in gold.

LENA KOH MALTESEN EXPLORES THE RICHNESS OF BATIK FABRICS IN SINGAPORE

Ten docents from Kampong Gelam Heritage Trails and the Peranakan Museum ventured on a walking tour to learn more about the history of batik in Singapore. The tour was led by batik enthusiast Hafiz Rashid who has been a docent at the Malay Heritage Centre for ten years.

Our first stop was Toko Aljunied on Arab Street run by siblings Radhiyah, Zahra and Mohammed. They are 6th generation descendants of Syed Omar bin Ali Aljunied, a pioneer of modern Singapore who was involved in the textile trade. He came to Singapore from Yemen shortly after Raffles arrived in 1819. Toko Aljunied was established in 1940 by the siblings' grandfather.

Zahra presented two types of batik sarongs to our group. *Kain lepas* is a single piece of unstitched fabric, at least two metres long and worn with the *kepala* (head) or main design panel in front. She also showed us batik *wiron*, where the fabric is stitched into a tube-like skirt and the front is pleated by hand or machine.

A few doors down, we visited Basharahil Bros House of Batik, established in 1939. They stock uncut batik fabric as well as readymade batik clothing. We were invited to view their 'secret chamber'. Privy only to batik connoisseurs, its precious pieces can cost over \$800 for two metres of cloth. Quality batik should be kept away from UV light, hence it is stashed away in cabinets.

Near Sultan Gate, designer Yati Hairi started her contemporary boutique, Kiah's Gallery in 2011. Her shop is decorated with hand-spun, hand-loomed batik from Yogyakarta and Lasem. Yati also tailors her batiks into bespoke dresses and shirts for her clients. The showstoppers were the batik prada sarongs with motifs

outlined in gold. Each piece takes over 12 months to make and costs over \$600.

Our last stop was Galeri Tokokita on North Bridge Road. Since 2016, owner Oniatta Effendi has been working with artisans in Indonesia to create original batik fabrics. Oniatta tells a story with each new pattern she creates, reinterpreting traditional motifs in contemporary colours. Her ready to wear pieces are stylish and modern. Galeri Tokokita reminds me of a Paris atelier where the designer connects with a customer over coffee and a leisurely chat, and the outcome is a well thought out and well designed outfit.

After three hours of batik discovery, we left Kampong Gelam with a better appreciation of this treasured cloth.

Addresses:

- Toko Aljunied: 91 Arab Street
- Basharahil Bros Batik: 101 Arab Street
- Kiah's Gallery: 71 Unit B - Sultan Gate
- Galeri Tokokita: 757 North Bridge Road



Kampong Gelam and Peranakan Museum docents with Oniatta Effendi (centre, in white blouse) at Galeri Tokokita.

Discovering MALAY FOOD CULTURE

GISELLA HARROLD SHARES SNIPPETS OF A CURIO SALON SESSION

On 9 December 2022, Khir Johari, FOM member and award-winning author of *The Food of Singapore Malays: Gastronomic Travels Through the Archipelago*, and Ivan Brehm, chef and owner of the Michelin-starred restaurant Nouri hosted a salon session for Curio at a quaint shop house on Amoy Street. It was the perfect setting for an informal discussion about the influence of Malay foods on the cultural and culinary scene of Singapore and beyond.



Khir Johari and Ivan Brehm in discussion. Photo by Gisella Harrold.



Kueh bakar berlauk, a savoury kueh of spiced ground beef atop baked custard. Photo by Khir Johari.

The two culinary experts dug deep into the cultural heritage of food in their talk titled *The Malay Archipelago: A metaphor for inclusivity in the age of globalisation*. The audience gained insight into cultural ideas that have been developed and shared across countries and time. Food sustainability was also discussed as it has always been an important aspect of cooking. Today, it is even more of a concern when food prices are rising worldwide and there are food shortages due to the impact of climate change.

After the talk attendees mingled with the two speakers. It was a great opportunity to discuss cooking techniques and get tips on where to find specific ingredients in Singapore. To everyone's delight, Khir brought delicious homemade snacks. *Kueh bakar berlauk*, a savoury custard cake, was traditionally prepared for Malay weddings, special occasions and is rarely sold in shops.

Here's some exciting news for all budding chefs. Curio intends to organise a special cooking class with Khir to learn a few recipes from his book. Look out for more information on the FOM website.

TEMPLE TRADITIONS AND BEYOND

LORENA TAN EXPLORES NEW FACETS OF THIAN HOCK KHENG TEMPLE AND ITS IMPORTANCE

Explore Singapore! takes FOM members and their guests to places which may pique their curiosity. Juggling geography and history, the Explore Singapore! team curates about 20 tours, walks and activities a year to discover Singapore's multicultural environment.



Built in 1840, the Thian Hock Keng temple on Telok Ayer Street is the oldest Chinese temple in Singapore. Photo by the author.

Some of our tours are so well subscribed that they need to be repeated. Tours that are especially popular with newcomers to Singapore are our Deepavali festival tours in Little India, Chinese New Year celebrations at Chinatown, visits to the Gurdawara (Sikh temple) and Parliament House.

Chinese temples are a big draw as Chinese religions are a mystery to most new expats and tourists and even some locals. The oldest Chinese temple in Singapore is the Thian Hock Keng (Palace of Heavenly Happiness), dedicated to Mazu, Goddess of the Sea. The temple was so famous that it attracted the attention of the Qing Emperor Guang Xu who sent an imperial plaque that is now in Singapore's National Collection. The beautiful and careful restoration of this structure has won four awards, including one from UNESCO.

One of our team members is a 6th generation descendant of Tan Tock Seng, a well-known philanthropist and the main donor for the temple's construction in 1840. She gave a wonderfully informative tour of the temple, introducing deities, rituals, architecture, mythology, and pointing out symbols for longevity, resilience, career success and the wish for progeny.

Other facets of the temple's story include British colonial forays to the East and the droves of migrants from China. The British fought the first Opium War during the building of this temple.

Yet another skein in the temple's tapestry is the different waves of Chinese migration to Singapore. The first benefactors of the temple were Melaka-born Chinese whose descendants are known as Peranakans. Today, the Hokkien Huay Kuan manages the temple and newer Chinese immigrants have taken the lead.

FOM ACTIVITY GROUPS

Please check the FOM website for more information and current events for these activities.

ASIAN BOOK GROUPS

FOM Book Groups meet monthly focusing on books with Asian subjects, fiction/non-fiction. The aim is to familiarise members with this region through reading. Also exchange views within a small group setting.

Non-native English speakers are welcome to join. Our members come from diverse backgrounds. Though the topics are Asian, all viewpoints are global and our discussions are very lively.

Coordinator: Durriya Dohadwala
fombookgroups@gmail.com

CURIO

Uncover the rare and intriguing delights of Singapore with FOM members.

Curio offers a range of events such as an evening at the theatre to sampling local cuisines with our Foodie Groups.

We also have workshops for photography, drawing & culinary skills.

Follow us on Instagram #fomcurio

Coordinator: Gisella Harrold
fomcurio@gmail.com

ASIAN STUDY GROUP

This group has 10-16 members who meet weekly to gain knowledge on specific themes. Weekly, we have two 40 minute presentations. This is by a member, who chooses his/her own topic of interest within the theme.

If English isn't your first language that wouldn't be of any consequence. As we appreciate viewpoints of all members from all over the world.

Coordinators: Kim Arnold & Priti Sangavi
fomstudygroup@gmail.com

STUDY TOURS

FOM's study tours are educational. They offer a range of travel experiences to expand members' understanding of Asian culture.

Each itinerary is meticulously planned by an FOM member who leads the tour. Each participant is expected to do preparatory reading on any topic related to the country they are visiting. This is required to make a presentation at the pre-trip meeting or during the trip.

Coordinator: Abha Kaul
abhakaul@gmail.com

FOM MEMBERS CARE

FOM Members Care organises events for members to gather in the spirit of fun, friendship and philanthropy. The projects maybe ranging from preserving Singapore's heritage, helping the community, or improving our planet's health.

Coordinators: Nilofar Iyer & Effie Rigopoulou
fommemberscare@gmail.com

ASIAN FILM STUDY GROUP

We are a passionate group of 'MOVIETTES' who watch films and discuss various aspects of storytelling. We meet weekly to view and discuss classics/new films with Asian themes or by legendary directors. We are a fun bunch who do movie nights and visit film festivals.

Coordinators: Suvidha Bala & Lakshmi Raju
fomafsg@gmail.com

TEXTILE ENTHUSIASTS GROUP

Do you enjoy learning about textiles? This group (TEG) was created to foster interest in Asian textiles. We invite speakers, conduct visits to interesting locations related to textiles and offer tactile experiences. You don't need to be an expert to enjoy TEG activities. We share our enthusiasm for textiles with like-minded individuals. Newcomers are welcome, so if you're new to Singapore or FOM, do join us.

Coordinators: Aditi Mann & Jyoti Ramesh
fontegsingapore@gmail.com

FRIDAY WITH FRIENDS!

Join us on the last Friday of each month for a series of free talks giving insights into diverse topics. Friday with Friends, organised by the Asian Civilizations Museum, is open to the public. Lectures start at 7pm sharp. See FOM's weekly newsletter or website for schedule of lectures.

Coordinators: Mathangi Venkatesh & Priya Seshadri
fufcoordinator@gmail.com

MONDAY MORNING LECTURE (MML)

All lectures are scheduled on Monday mornings at 11am. See page 71 for the upcoming schedule.

Coordinators: Yenping Yeo & Vidhya Nair
mmlcoordinators@gmail.com

EXPLORE SINGAPORE!

We offer detailed guided tours which are different from the usual tourist paths. Curated especially for members, Explore Singapore! events are held on Thursdays. See FOM's weekly newsletter or website for details.

Coordinator: Chey Cheng Lim
limcheycheng@gmail.com

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ABOUT FOM

Friends of the Museums Singapore (FOM) is a non-profit society that provides members with opportunities to learn, share and experience Asian art, history and culture through a myriad of activities organised by our volunteers.

As an FOM member, you will have the incredible opportunity to share your passion for museums with visitors by joining our docent training programmes that prepare volunteers to become guides and docents for Singapore's museums and heritage-related organisations.

You can also join a book club, attend an enlightening lecture series, participate in a charity event or immerse yourself in the world of Asian textiles. We even have a film club! Join a guided tour to explore Singapore or sign up for an overseas study tour for an unforgettable experience.

FOM members enjoy free access to NHB museums as well as discounts at selected retail outlets, theatres and restaurants along with a subscription to *PASSAGE* magazine.

Come and be a part of a truly vibrant, diverse community of like-minded people, form friendships and create memories that last a lifetime.

For more information, visit our website at www.fom.sg or contact the FOM Office.



Explore Singapore!

APRIL – JUNE 2023

AN INTRODUCTION TO TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE (TCM)

Thursday, 20 April 2023
10:30am – 12:30pm
Fee: \$35

Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) has existed since 2,000 years. The underlying theories of TCM treat body, mind and emotions as a single entity. It's practices take a holistic approach in prevention and cure. A unique principle of TCM is the emphasis on harmony within the body and its relationship with external forces in nature.

In addition to prescribing medicinal herbs, TCM often includes nutritional therapies, physical treatments such as acupuncture, cupping, massage or *tuina*. Therapeutic exercises also include *taiqi* and breathing. TCM is increasingly recognised as a credible alternative medical system in various countries outside China.

If you are curious about this topic, join us at a TCM centre where you will learn about the basic principles and practices. We will also see herbal and other exotic medicines in the dispensary.



HIGHLIGHTS OF THE OLD WATERFRONT: YUEH HAI CHING TEMPLE AND LAU PA SAT

Thursday, 4 May 2023
9.30am – 11.30am
Fee: \$35

Singapore's land reclamation started soon after its founding. A major reclamation in the 1880s filled in the Telok Ayer Basin. This enabled the building of major roads in the Central Business District (Cecil Street and Robinson Road).

Chinese temples are situated near water, such as the one on Phillip Street, close to the river and the seafront. This is the Yueh Hai Cheng Temple, the oldest Teochew temple in Singapore. It won a UNESCO award for cultural heritage conservation for the painstaking restoration in the 1990s. This was executed two hundred years after it's original construction. This is where our walk begins. Our guide will explain the two main deities and tales depicted by the carvings and ornate roof sculptures.

Phillip Street is parallel to Market Street, that leads to Old Market, or Lau Pa Sat. It's monumental cast-iron octagonal frame (from Glasgow) was restored and is still magnificent. Lau Pa Sat is now a food court for office goers. Our walk will end there and the attendees can stay on for a delicious meal.



TOUR OF THE SUPREME COURT

Thursday, 18 May 2023
10am – 12pm
Fee: \$40

As an expatriate or citizen living in Singapore, have you ever wondered how it's legal system works? Join Explore Singapore on a guided tour of the current Supreme Court and find out more. Our guide will tell us about significant developments in Singapore's legal history and major milestones. We will also find out why the Supreme Court had to move from the old building (now part of the National Gallery), with it's rich architectural history to the present one.



Have you ever noticed the strange "flying saucer" which sits on top of the court building? During our tour you will learn about it's function. As you enter this building designed by the illustrious architect Norman Foster, be sure to admire the luminous appearance of the marble panels. We will have an opportunity to look inside a courtroom and also enjoy the panoramic view of the civic district and Singapore's waterfront from the Viewing Gallery.

THE MAGHAIN ABOOTH SYNAGOGUE AND THE JEWS OF SINGAPORE MUSEUM

Thursday, 25 May 2023
10am – 12pm (1 pm with optional lunch at own cost)
Fee: \$35

The first Jews to settle in Singapore were the Arab speaking Sephardic Jews from Iraq. They migrated to Singapore after Raffles established it as a trading post in 1819. The first synagogue, a two-storey shop-house, in the Boat Quay area was established in the 1840s. Sadly, the building in Synagogue Street is no longer standing. However, it was replaced by two magnificent synagogues, both National Monuments on Waterloo Street and Oxley Rise. Our tour will cover the Maghain Abooth synagogue in Waterloo Street and newly established Jews of Singapore Museum.

We begin our tour at the Maghain Abooth Synagogue which was built in 1878. It is Asia's second largest and South East Asia's oldest synagogue. You will get to see the collection of elaborately decorated *Torah* scrolls in the Ark and admire it's architecture.

The Jews of Singapore Museum which opened in 2021, traces the 200 year history of the Jews here. You will find out why the early Jews made Singapore their home and learn about prominent members of the Jewish community. You will also learn about Jewish rites and festivals.

By the end of this tour you will gain insights into a minority community which has contributed significantly to Singapore's development. Feel free to conclude this tour with lunch (optional at own cost) at the Kosher Café and shop at the Kosher supermarket in the building.



LIVING WITH THE DEAD – THE STORY OF BISHAN

Thursday, 8 June 2023
9:30am – 11:30am
Fee: \$35

The area of Bishan, located in the northernmost part of the central region of Singapore, consists of Government HDB housing and private residences. As well as shopping malls and some light industries. It has a fascinating history of nearly 200 years not known to many young Singaporeans and foreigners.

All of Bishan today sits on what was once a huge cemetery of nearly 400 acres established by the Cantonese and Hakka immigrants in the 1820s. Within the cemetery was a village with a thriving community that had a school, market and cinema. During WW2 a fierce battle between the British and Japanese was fought in the cemetery.

In the late 1970s the government acquired the land for development, the graves were exhumed and the remains moved to a new columbarium specially built for that purpose.

Join our Explore Singapore tour for a visit to the columbarium and it's temples as well as the heritage gallery where you will learn about the history of Bishan and see this unique "condo for the dead".



For queries, please contact Lim Chey Cheng: fomexploresingapore@gmail.com

MUSEUM DIRECTORY

Please check individual museum websites for latest information on guided tours by FOM docents.

COMPILED BY PARUL MEHRA

ASIAN CIVILISATIONS MUSEUM

1 Empress Place, Singapore 179555
Tel: 6332 7798
www.acm.org.sg



Opening hours:
Daily: 10am - 7pm
Fridays: 10am - 9pm

FOM guided tours:
<https://www.nhb.gov.sg/acm/whats-on/overview>

Understanding Asia through Singapore
The new and renovated galleries at the ACM use Singapore's history as a port city as a means of understanding the interconnections among Asian cultures and between Asia and the world.

This museum houses Asian antiquities and decorative art. As the only museum in Asia with a pan Asian scope, ACM is devoted to exploring the rich artistic heritage of Asia through its outstanding collection of masterpieces and through ground breaking special exhibitions. ACM focuses on the many historical connections between cultures and civilizations in Asia and the world.

GILLMAN BARRACKS

9 Lock Rd, Singapore 108937
Tel: 6694 4077
<https://www.fom.sg/museums.aspx?MID=4>
<https://www.eventbrite.sg/o/fom-gillman-barracks-outreach-5691212557>

Opening hours:
Refer to website for different operational hours for art galleries

FOM guided tours:
Started on 25th February 2023
Saturdays: 4pm - 5:30pm

The walking tours cover the history of Gillman Barracks from its inception to the present day, as well as a visit to the art galleries for a sampling of their latest exhibitions. Registration is required on the Eventbrite website up to one week before the scheduled date. Join us for a fun-filled weekend of curated heritage, art, culture, and indulge in the wide array of F&B options onsite at sundown.

CHANGI CHAPEL AND MUSEUM

1000 Upper Changi Road North, Singapore 507707
Tel: 6214 2451 / 6242 6033
www.nhb.gov.sg/changichapelmuseum



Opening hours:
Tuesday to Sunday: 9:30am - 5:30pm
Closed on Mondays except Public Holidays

Guided tours:
Fridays at 11am

The newly revamped Changi Chapel and Museum (CCM) features new content and artefacts presented in an intimate and engaging format to tell the story of the prisoners of war and civilians interned in Changi prison camp during the Japanese Occupation. As part of the revamp, the National Museum of Singapore which manages CCM has been collecting stories and personal objects from families of former internees that emphasise their personal experiences. The museum's narrative is centred on remembrance and reflection, encouraging visitors to contemplate both the hardships that the internees underwent, as well as their courage and resilience in the face of difficulties.

INDIAN HERITAGE CENTRE

5 Campbell Lane, Singapore 209924
Tel: 6291 1601
www.indianheritage.org.sg



Opening hours:
Tuesday to Sunday: 10am - 6pm
Closed on Mondays
Closed on public holidays that fall on a Monday unless otherwise stated.

Guided tours:
Tuesday to Friday at 11am
Saturday, Sunday & Public Holidays at 2pm

The Indian Heritage Centre (IHC) celebrates the history and heritage of the Indian diaspora in Singapore and the Southeast Asian region. From early contacts between the Indian subcontinent and this region, the culture and social history of the community after the arrival of the British, through to the early stirrings of nationalism and political identity and the contributions of Singapore's Indian community – the five galleries take visitors on a fascinating journey through the Indian diaspora. Located in Singapore's colourful and vibrant Little India precinct, the center opened in May 2015 and is our only purpose-built museum.

MALAY HERITAGE CENTRE

(Closed until 2025)
85 Sultan Gate, Singapore 198501
Tel: 6391 0450
www.malayheritage.org.sg



The Malay Heritage Centre (MHC) is currently closed for a revamp. Situated amidst the Istana Kampong Gelam, Gedung Kuning and the surrounding Kampong Gelam precinct, the Centre acts as a vital heritage institution for the Malay community in Singapore. Through its exhibits, programs and activities, the center hopes to honor the past while providing a means for present-day expression.

NATIONAL MUSEUM OF SINGAPORE

93 Stamford Road, Singapore 178897
Tel: 6332 3659
www.nationalmuseum.sg



Opening hours:
Daily: 10am - 7pm

FOM guided tours:
Check museum website for updated tours.

The National Museum of Singapore is the nation's oldest museum that seeks to inspire with stories of Singapore and the world. Its history dates to 1849, when it opened on Stamford Road as the Raffles Library and Museum.

NATIONAL GALLERY SINGAPORE

1 St Andrew's Road #01-01, Singapore 178957
Tel: 6271 7000



Opening hours:
Daily: 10am - 7pm

FOM guided tours:
Check museum website for updated tours:
<https://www.nationalgallery.sg/>

National Gallery Singapore is a leading visual arts institution which oversees the world's largest public collection of Singapore and Southeast Asian modern art. The Gallery is housed in two national monuments - City Hall and former Supreme Court - that have been beautifully restored and transformed. The Gallery aims to be a progressive museum that creates dialogues between the art of Singapore, Southeast Asia and the world to foster and inspire a creative and inclusive society.

NUS MUSEUM

University Cultural Centre
50 Kent Ridge Crescent, Singapore 119279
Tel: 6516 8817
www.museum.nus.edu.sg

Opening hours:
Tuesday to Saturday: 10am - 6pm
Closed on Sunday and Public Holidays.
Mondays: Visits by appointment for schools/faculties only.

Located at the University Cultural Centre, NUS Museum comprises nine galleries and additional ancillary spaces which host a wide range of exhibitions, module collaborations and supporting programmes that contribute to the cultural and interdisciplinary conversation within NUS and beyond.

NUS BABA HOUSE

157 Neil Road, Singapore 088883
Tel: 6227 5731
www.babahouse.nus.edu.sg

Guided tours:
Monday to Friday at 10am
Online registration required

Heritage tours:
Tuesday to Friday at 10am
Explore hour (self-guided visit)
Saturdays: Selected entry time slots between 1pm - 4:30pm

Conceived as a heritage house facilitating research, appreciation and reflection of Straits Chinese history and culture, the NUS Baba House was built around 1895 and was once the ancestral home of a Peranakan Chinese family. During the one-hour guided tour, guests will be introduced to the history and architectural features of the house, and experience visiting a Straits Chinese family home in a 1920s setting, furnished with heirlooms from its previous owners and other donors.



THE PERANAKAN MUSEUM

39 Armenian Street, Singapore 179941
Tel: 6332 7591
www.peranakanmuseum.sg



Opening hours:
Daily: 10am - 7pm
Fridays: 10am - 9pm

Guided tours:
Check museum and FOM website for updates.

Peranakan Museum presents the cross-cultural art of Peranakan communities in Southeast Asia. Installed in the former Tao Nan School, built in 1912, it holds one of the world's finest public collections of Peranakan objects. Three floors explore Peranakan life through themes related to origins, home, and style as aspects of identity. Community interviews, recorded demonstrations, art commissions, and other contemporary expressions of Peranakan culture provide a multi-faceted experience for visitors, encouraging them to ask themselves: "What is Peranakan?".

SINGAPORE ART MUSEUM

71 Bras Basah Road, Singapore 189555
Tel: 6332 3222
www.singaporeartmuseum.sg



The Singapore Art Museum (SAM) focuses on international contemporary art practices, specialising in Singapore and Southeast Asia. The main building of the museum (located along 71 Bras Basah Road) is currently closed to prepare it for its next phase of development. While we wait, SAM is not missing in action but a Museum in Action: bringing art experiences into everyday spaces around Singapore and actively collaborating with partners and communities.

SAM AT TANJONG PAGAR DISTRI PARK

39 Keppel Road, #01-02, Singapore 089065
Tel: 66979730
singaporeartmuseum.sg

Opening hours:
Daily: 10am - 7pm

Guided tours:
Check updates on: <https://www.bit.ly/SAM-MuseumInAction>

This new space opened in January 2022 presents multiple art presentations by Southeast Asian artists and interactive

programmes for the public. There are two climate-controlled galleries that host large scale exhibitions, workshops and talks sparking collaborations between artists and audiences.

STPI CREATIVE WORKSHOP AND GALLERY

41 Robertson Quay, Singapore 238236
Tel: 6336 3663
www.stpi.com.sg



Opening hours:
Monday to Friday: 10am - 7pm
Saturdays: 9am - 6pm
Sundays: 10am - 5pm
Closed on Public Holidays

FOM guided tours:
Check updates on website.

STPI is a dynamic creative workshop and contemporary art gallery based in Singapore. Established in 2002, STPI is a not-for-profit organisation committed to promoting artistic experimentation in the mediums of print and paper and has become one of the most cutting-edge destinations for contemporary art in Asia.

SUN YAT SEN NANYANG MEMORIAL HALL

12 Tai Gin Road, Singapore 327874
Tel: 6256 7377
www.wanqingyuan.org.sg



Opening hours:
Tuesday to Sunday: 10am - 5pm
Closed on Mondays

Guided tours:
Tuesday to Friday at 2pm
Saturday and Sunday at 3pm

Built in 1902, this double-storey villa was the nerve centre of Dr Sun Yat Sen's revolutionary movement in Southeast Asia. It re-opened to the public on 9 October 2011 and the revamped Memorial Hall pays tribute to the vital role played by Singapore and Nanyang in the 1911 Revolution. Focusing on the contributions of Dr. Sun Yat Sen's key supporters in Singapore, the refurbished museum sheds light on the lesser-known details of Singapore and Nanyang's involvement in the 1911 Revolution.

Free general admission to all NHB museums for FOM members and one guest.

LADIESWARE

TIM CLARK SHARES HIS PASSION FOR PERANAKAN PORCELAIN

Photos by the author.

The word *nyonya* comes from the Portuguese word *dona* and refers to a married woman belonging to the locally born Peranakan Chinese community. Nyonyaware refers to porcelain made in China specifically for that community, and it was prized by the nyonias who owned it. Peranakan porcelain was indeed the pride and joy of the lady of the house.

I began collecting nyonyaware after being posted to Singapore 40 years ago, when Peranakan culture was not yet back in vogue. There were precious few Peranakan restaurants then. And Peranakan porcelain could be purchased in antique shops both here and in Melaka for a fraction of the prices it commands today.

In those days Lee Kuan Yew was Prime Minister and when I asked which ethnic group he belonged to, I was told that he was a Hakka. I learned decades later that both he and his wife were from Peranakan families, although no mention is made of this in his autobiography, published in 1998. Indeed, Peranakan culture was not actively celebrated then, as it is now.

So, what caused the hiatus in Peranakan cultural pride? Their golden age spanned around a hundred years from the 1830s to the 1930s, coinciding precisely with the popularity of Peranakan porcelain. I have never seen any of these distinctive porcelain pieces that could be dated much earlier than 1830. And I have never considered buying anything that could have been made after 1930, by which time the quality of the enameling was already in decline, as was the prominence and prosperity of the community.

Many lost their fortunes in the economic depression of the 1930s, followed by the Japanese Occupation. After the war, as Singapore worked its way towards independence, it became unfashionable to be identified as Peranakan. Peranakans were once referred to as the King's Chinese, because they were great supporters and beneficiaries of colonial rule.

NYONYA CULTURE ENJOYS A REVIVAL

During this century we have seen a resurgence of Peranakan pride confirmed by the popular TV series *The Little Nyonya* which was televised in 2008. That same year both the Peranakan Museum and the NUS Baba House opened to celebrate the culture and showcase the memorabilia of its halcyon days.

What makes the Peranakan culture unique is what makes Peranakan ceramics unique. They are both hybrids.



Descended from Chinese merchants who married local women, the Peranakans were spiritually and traditionally very Chinese. Yet their taste was for spicy food and brightly coloured ornamentation. Peranakan porcelain was made in Jingdezhen in China, but it was exclusively designed to delight the nyonias of Penang, Melaka and Singapore. The dazzling and extensive use of vibrant enameling would have been disregarded by the Chinese potters who made nyonyaware, and shunned by Europeans as being too gaudy for their tastes. But to the nyonya who owned it or might have received it as a wedding present, this was a treasured possession.

A complete dinner and tea service might have numbered well over a hundred pieces and would have been considered a luxury item reserved for special occasions. The amount of enameling made it expensive then and even more so now. Indeed recently, one *kamcheng* (lidded pot), decorated inside and out, fetched S\$74,000 at auction in Singapore.



AUSPICIOUS SYMBOLS TO ENHANCE THE NYONYA'S SELF-ESTEEM

Being expensive was not the only reason that such a porcelain gift made a nyonya feel loved and valued. The decoration is full of symbols reminding her of her virtues and reinforcing her importance. The peony is probably the most prolific motif, symbolising feminine beauty, wealth and nobility. It is usually accompanied by the phoenix which represents the Empress and is associated with peace, prosperity, loyalty and benevolence.

Around the rim of plates and many other vessels, you can often find decorative motifs of the eight Buddhist emblems: Wheel of law, Canopy, Fish, Jar, Lotus, Eternity knot, Conch shell and Umbrella. Can you identify them on the plate and the green teapot shown here?

Peranakans historically believed in the power of symbols. If there was a chance that auspicious symbols could bring you joy, then why not bring them on? It was typical for

some Peranakans to be very broadly religious. For example, they were not usually practicing Buddhists, but they believed in hedging their bets. So, Buddhist symbols may have had spiritual as well as decorative value. In some cases, Buddhist monks might even have been invited to preside at a funeral. Just to be on the safe side.

For the collector, the decorative symbols and mystical images are features of fascination and charm. And collectively the porcelain makes a stunning display. Can you imagine the visual feast an entire dinner service would have presented to guests of a Peranakan banquet, even before the food was served? No wonder it made the nyonya hostess puff up with pride.

TIM CLARK, once a compulsive collector of ceramics, is now almost cured. His antidote is spending time in museums enjoying others' collections.



MONDAY MORNING LECTURES (MML)

April - June 2023

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

04 APRIL
PIONEERING RUBBER AND ORCHID CULTIVATION IN SINGAPORE: A LEGACY OF THE SINGAPORE BOTANIC GARDENS AND THE TAN TOCK SENG FAMILY

Zoom Lecture. Speaker: Ratika Shah Singh

Most of us think of the Singapore Botanic Gardens as the green lungs of a concrete metropolis and its botanical legacy is often relegated to the realms of botanists and historians. This talk spotlights the intersection of botanical research at the Gardens and the interests of Tan Tock Seng's descendants that put Singapore on the world map for pioneering the cultivation of two plants – rubber and orchids.



10 APRIL
 No lecture (in lieu of Good Friday)

17 APRIL
WHAT'S YOUR BEEF? A LINGUIST'S ANALYSIS OF THE TALK ABOUT ALTERNATIVE PROTEINS.

In-Person Lecture. Speaker: Dr Keri Matwick

This talk will discuss the emerging trends in global food culture, specifically the trend toward plant-based and lab-produced alternative meat protein sources. An analysis of the conversation produced and circulated in the media will lend insight about the cultural, social, and economic factors influencing consumer behavior and receptivity toward these novel foods.



24 APRIL
 No Lecture (in lieu of Hari Raya Puasa)

01 MAY
 No Lecture (in lieu of Labour Day)

08 MAY
HINDU DEITIES & SANSKRIT IN JAPAN

Zoom Lecture. Speaker: Benoy Behl

Most people are not aware that there are a score of Hindu deities actively worshipped in Japan. In many ways, Japan has preserved very ancient Indian traditions, even when they may have evolved in India. In Japan, Saraswathi is depicted and venerated not only with the Veena, but also remembered for her association with water. The 6th century Siddham Sanskrit script is preserved in Japan and the 'havan' is performed in more than 1,200 Japanese temples, at least once every day, along with Sanskrit chanting with many links in the development of Vajrayana Buddhism can be found in a study of Japanese Buddhism.



15 MAY
THE BLUE MOSQUE OF SINGAPORE AND A PEEK INTO THE MIGRANT MUSLIM COMMUNITY OF KERALA

In-Person Lecture. Speaker: Mohamed Nasim

Mohamed Nasim will speak about the history of Singapore's Malabar Mosque as well as the migrant Malayalee Muslim community. He will also share about the colourful personalities linked to the mosque in the 1950s who strived to promote a vernacular press, took part in national politics and established well-known restaurants, despite being ordinary people.



22 MAY
FROM MIGPANUD TO MIGSOLAT: PRESERVING & TRANSFORMATION OF ORAL TRADITION INTO WRITTEN FORM IN LUMAD MINDANAO

Zoom Lecture. Speaker: Dr Oona Paredes

For the past decade, a small group of Higaunon men have been working hard on transcribing their core oral tradition, known as the Panud, with the goal of producing a book. The Higaunon are an Indigenous or Lumad minority community on the island of Mindanao, in the southern Philippines, and the Panud is the story of their becoming and remaining people since the earliest ancestors. While it can be described loosely as a genealogy, the Panud also contains, among other things, their creation story and a detailed history of their migrations, land claims, wars, rules of etiquette, and last but not least, their religious doctrines and customary laws. The first complete draft was finally presented to the community in November 2022, with a goal of publishing it for distribution in early 2023. This talk will present the history of the Panud project, the challenges (logistical, political, and epistemic) of transforming this unique oral tradition into written form, and what the process thus far has taught us about the preservation of such traditions and the complexities of being a 'culture bearer' in modern Indigenous communities.



29 MAY
FACT TO FANTASY: THE SLIPPERY TASK OF WRITING HISTORICAL FICTION

In-Person Lecture. Speaker: Meira Chand

History is fact and fiction fantasy, and it is easy to think the two might go well together. History gives a good story, and fiction requires writing it up through action and characters. Unfortunately, the reality is very different. Drawing on her two novels of Singapore, A Different Sky and Sacred Waters, Meira Chand illuminates the difficulties inherent in the genre.

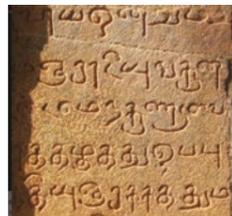


05 JUNE
 No lecture (in lieu of Vesak Day)

12 JUNE
LANGUAGE MATTERS - TAMIL & OTHER SOUTH ASIAN LANGUAGES IN POSTCOLONIAL SINGAPORE

In-Person Lecture. Speaker: Dr Rajesh Rai

Lesser known South Asian communities of Singapore have contributed to the tapestry of Indian culture and heritage of the Indian community. This talk presents the in-depth study of how South Asian languages have evolved alongside Tamil, one of the oldest ancient world languages in the Singapore context.



A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S Dream

Shakespeare in the Park is finally back, with the Bard's most popular romantic comedy - *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Roll out your picnic mat and scrumptious spread under the night sky and be mesmerised by this fun-filled frolic in the park.

From 3 May 2023 | Fort Canning Park

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srt.com.sg





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