

PASSAGE

FRIENDS OF THE MUSEUMS SINGAPORE

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ISSUE IV



What's in a Feast?



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C O N T E N T S



ON THE COVER

A rambutan by any other name would be as hairy. Rambut means "hair" in Malay. In Vietnam, the fruit is called chom chom or "messy hair". Its Chinese name, 红毛丹, literally means "red-haired pellet". This drawing of the sea-urchin-lookalike fruit is one of hundreds of other delightful renderings of flora and fauna featured in William Farquhar's Natural History Drawings, The Complete William Farquhar Collection, Malay Peninsula 1803-1818.

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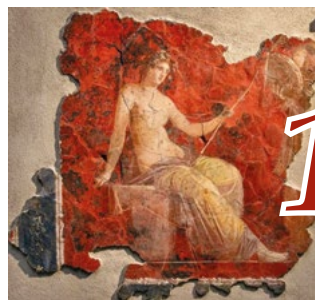
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PRESIDENT'S BLOG

Hello everyone!

And here we are, wrapping up another beautiful year of FOM activities and events with this year's fourth issue of *Passage* centred around the theme *What's in a feast?*

I hope we have given our members a veritable feast, a memorable spread of excitement and action to keep the community engaged and active this year. We began the fourth quarter with Open Morning held on 9 September, 2024. As usual our leaders from the Museums, Heritage Trails, Activities, and others rose to the occasion by setting up beautifully decorated tables to engage the visitors. See page 43 for a detailed account of the gathering. It was a great success thanks to our FOM members' participation. The cherry on top was 32 new members signing up to join FOM!



Buzz at the Open Morning.

The visitor turnout at Open Morning boosted interest in FOM's 2024-2025 docent training programmes. These programmes have now commenced at Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM), The Peranakan Museum (TPM), and National Museum of Singapore (NMS). We are excited for the 70 trainees who have chosen to participate in the rigorous training which promises to open new vistas of history, culture and heritage to them. My heartfelt thanks to the co-heads and members of the training teams who generously give their time to ensure that trainees receive the best possible training.



Start of docent training programme at NMS.



First day of TPM docent training programme.



First day of docent training at ACM.

FOM was, of course, chuffed to have received the annual Patron of Heritage Award from the National Heritage Board (NHB). It is an affirmation of our role in supporting NHB's mission of safeguarding and promoting Singapore's heritage.

We'll close the year with our 21st AGM scheduled for 4 December, 2024. Look out for the invitation in your inbox to cast your e-vote. We look forward to the appointment of new Council members and are grateful that several incumbent members will seek re-election to continue for another year of self-less work.

Hip Hip Hooray!

Lee Hong Leng
President
president@fom.sg



FOM President receiving NHB's Patron of Heritage Award from Mr Edwin Tong, Minister for Culture, Community and Youth; Second Minister for Law.

FROM THE EDITORS

This time of year, many of us are elbows-deep in planning and preparing for big, celebratory feasts. For some, the feasts are religious in nature, such as Diwali, Hanukkah, or Christmas. For some, the feasts are cultural observances of national significance, such as Thanksgiving. For others, the feasts are end-of-year gatherings with colleagues or friends and represent a wrapping up of one year and a toast to the next one.



Melissa Nesbitt and Darly Furlong

Coming together over a feast is a timeless hallmark of the human experience. It's easy to imagine a scene where our earliest ancestors collected around an open fire, sharing a meal and stories. We don't know how they referred to this practice of gathering together to share food, but the word feast entered circulation in the English language as a derivation of the Latin *festivus*, from which we also have 'fete', 'fiesta', and 'festive'. And what are feasts, if not festive? Historically, feasts were often at the heart of celebrations. Today, they are equally central to the marking of occasions. As such, feasts are often associated with times of abundant joy. Feasts represent community and fellowship, and they also represent gratitude.

So, it is with a visual and intellectual feast of articles that we wish to express our gratitude for the FOM community and our abundant joy at being part of the PASSAGE team. From Japan, savour the elegance of kimonos worn during milestone celebrations like *Omiyamairi* – a newborn's first

shrine visit. Then, sip from the *meiping* – a humble vessel with a grand role in Chinese feasts. Need an appetizer? Try *sireh* – a palate cleanser from ancient Asian life. Our main course features coconuts and pineapples – Southeast Asia's culinary staples. And for dessert, a tribute to William Farquhar and his collection of botanical illustrations in Singapore. *Bon appetit!*

It's Elemental! our first issue of 2025 is already underway, and we turn our attention to the next. *Chisel and Ink*, our second issue of 2025, will delve into the region's legacy of written expression. As always, we encourage interested writers to take a broad approach to the theme. From exploring ancient inscriptions on stones and scrolls to examining the instruments used (such as ink pots, chisels, calligraphy brushes, etc), we invite you to explore how the written word has shaped the rich cultural and religious tapestry of this region. Stuck for an idea? Reach out for some guidance and brainstorming. We welcome all our readers to consider submitting articles for this exciting issue at passage@fom.sg

Darly Furlong & Melissa Nesbitt
Managing Editors, PASSAGE



A FEAST FOR THE EYES

PRISCILLA TAN TAKES YOU ON A JOURNEY INTO WILLIAM FARQUHAR'S DRAWINGS OF FRUIT TREES

All images by the author, who would like to thank EVONNE TAY for her help.

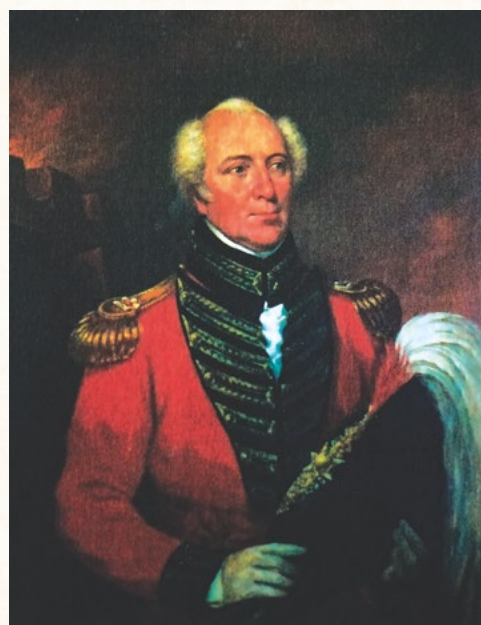


Pineapple, *Nanas, Ananas comosus*. The pineapple is actually a composite or collective fruit, developing from a cluster of flowers. Pineapples are either eaten raw or preserved in cans or as jams. It is an important ingredient in the local salad rojak. **

Mention the name William Farquhar in Singapore and you will most likely draw a blank stare or a quizzical look. At best, some faces will light up and ask, “Farquhar from *Shrek*?” Colonel William Farquhar definitely deserves more celebrity than merely having a namesake in *Shrek*, the movie, writes Priscilla.

FARQUHAR – THE RESIDENT AND COMMANDANT

So, who is this man who somehow got lost in the historical narrative of Singapore? Before Colonel William Farquhar came to Singapore, he was already the Resident and Commandant of Melaka from 1795 to 1818. In 1819, he came with Sir Stamford Raffles to Singapore to search for a suitable trading post for the British East India Company. Farquhar was with Raffles when the latter signed a treaty with the local Malay rulers, allowing the British East India Company to set up a trading post here. Raffles left Singapore the very next day and delegated the running of the infant port by assigning Farquhar as the Resident and Commandant of Singapore. With limited resources at his disposal, Farquhar faced a tremendous uphill task of developing Singapore. But he got down to work immediately – he cleared jungle and swamp, built roads and a reservoir, and set up the first police force. Hearing of the good work that Farquhar was doing in Singapore, many of his supporters from Melaka came down to



Colonel William Farquhar's portrait can be found in the National Museum of Singapore.



Horse Mango, Bachang, *Mangifera foetida*. The plant has strong smelling fruits, which are almost turpentine-scented. With its bright flowering stalks, this is possibly one of the most beautiful mango-related trees. The fruit is either eaten fresh, or used for flavourings and chutneys. There are not many wild trees in Singapore, making it a vulnerable species.



Watermelon, Tembikai, *Citrullus lanatus*. This popular plant is now widely cultivated for its fruit in the tropics and subtropics. An ancient food source that was known even in ancient Egypt, the juicy fruits have sweet, red or yellow flesh. The edible seeds are dried and sold in many Asian markets as kuachi.

settle in Singapore. After all, Farquhar was their favourite Resident known for his reliability and trustworthiness. He was so well-liked by the people of Melaka that they called him *Raja Melaka* (King of Melaka). Under Farquhar's capable leadership, Singapore's population grew, and the new port flourished.

Unfortunately, Farquhar had a run-in with Raffles when he returned. Raffles was unhappy with Farquhar for selling licenses for gambling, opium, and liquor, three vices that he strongly opposed. Farquhar's rebuttal was that he needed to raise funds to keep Singapore running. The rift between the two men was so bad that Raffles finally sacked Farquhar.

When the news of Farquhar's departure was made known, the locals were very sad. The Chinese community gave him a special parting gift – a silver Epergne – to show their appreciation.

FARQUHAR – THE NATURALIST

Even though Raffles and Farquhar disagreed on how to run Singapore, the two men shared a similar passion for the natural world they encountered around them. Like Raffles, Farquhar was a keen naturalist. While in Melaka, he commissioned 477 watercolour drawings of indigenous plants and animals.

Farquhar was also an animal-lover. It was said that his house in Melaka resembled a mini zoo, as he kept many wild and exotic animals there, such as a leopard, a porcupine, a cassowary, and a variety of monkeys. Farquhar is credited as the man who discovered the black hornbill, the binturong (bearcat), the malkoha (a kind of bird), and the Malayan Tapir.



Durian, Durian, *Durio zibethinus*. Durian is native to Southeast Asia and widely cultivated throughout the region for its fruits. Besides the distinctive large, thorny, strong-smelling fruits, the tree can also be recognised by its leaves, which have a coppery scaly layer on their undersides. Durian is touted as the king of fruits, though there are many who stay away from its foul smell.



Red Banana, Pisang Raja Udang, *Musa acuminata*. Bananas are the largest known herbaceous plant. The banana in this drawing turns a red colour when ripe, unlike most common bananas, which turn green to yellow. Some traditional cultures in Malaysia believe that they are forbidden to eat this variety.

FARQUHAR – THE BOTANIST

Of his 477 drawings, a total of 251 drawings are of plants, and of that, 109 are trees. These plants were collected and cultivated for illustration as they were considered economically valuable as food (for example, as vegetables, fruits, and spices) or even as ornaments. Many plants were first introduced to Peninsular Malaysia and Singapore by early settlers and past colonial powers like Spain. Such plants included nutmeg, peppercorn, and clove from other parts of Asia, whereas cocoa, chilli pepper, and maize were originally from Mexico.

FARQUHAR – THE COMMISSIONER

Farquhar commissioned Chinese painters from Guangdong to carry out all 477 drawings. He probably employed two or possibly three painters. These Chinese artists had their own studios in Guangdong, and they were experts in producing portraits on glass and canvas, as well as street scenes and landscapes, especially of ports and other scenes. Such paintings were in great demand among Europeans and American traders.

Unfortunately, we do not know the names of the painters whom Farquhar employed as the flora and fauna drawings were not signed. But certainly, we can infer that there were at least two painters from the stylistic differences in the drawings.

FEATURES OF DRAWINGS

What are the stylistic differences then? We notice that some paintings have a border, and some have not. So having a border is one key distinguishing stylistic feature.

As noted by Kwa Chong Guan in his essay *Drawing Nature in the East Indies, Framing Farquhar's Natural History Drawings*, the painter created a "squash-top effect" with the border. That means that the leaves of trees tended to be crowded to the top of the trees, which "appeared more angular and stumpy." In some instances, the very stylised rocks looked more like fungi.

Those drawings without a border tended to have trees with spread-out leaves and the rocks were more natural looking.

Check out the differences between the red and yellow rambutan drawings.

Due to the watermarks found on 165 drawings, we can tell that the paper they were drawn on was from Europe. The artists started by sketching the outline of the drawings using pencil, before applying the watercolours. In many cases, traces of the pencil outline can still be seen under the watercolour. No one knows why the artists traced with pencil



Jackfruit, Nangka, *Artocarpus heterophyllus*. Jackfruits are known to have the largest and heaviest fruits in the plant kingdom, weighing up to 50 kilogrammes. The fruits have a warty and spiny skin, turning from light green to golden yellow when ripe. They emit a strong scent, and the flesh is sweet and tasty.



(left) Rambutan, Rambutan, *Nephelium lappaceum*. The rambutan originates from the tropical lowlands of Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore. Its common name references its hairy fruits – rambut means "hair" in Malay. The white, succulent pulp found within the spiky red skin makes it one of the best-known trees from Southeast Asia. It is, however, said to be a critically endangered species in Singapore.

(right) Rambutan, Rambutan, *Nephelium lappaceum*. This plate depicts a variety of the rambutan that produces yellow fruits. The flowers are usually greenish white and fragrant. For connoisseurs of the tasty fruit, the ease with which the flesh is separated from the seed determines the quality of the fruit.

first. It is possible that Farquhar had requested to see a sketch of the drawing before it was painted.

Once the drawing was completed, a Malay scribe would write the Malay name of the plant in small Jawi letters in a corner of the paper. An English transliteration of the Jawi name together with the common English and Latin names of the plants were written down in pencil.

ACQUISITION OF THE DRAWINGS

The story of how Singapore came to possess the beautiful collection is nothing short of a remarkable turn of events.

After Farquhar was dismissed by Raffles in 1823, he left Singapore to go back home to England. He took the entire collection of the beautiful drawings with him. Three years later, he donated it to the Museum of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, of which he was a member. The drawings were kept with the Society until 1937 when six out of eight volumes of the collection were loaned out to the Library of the British Museum (Natural History). In 1991, the six volumes were finally returned to the Society. Financially strapped, the Society decided to sell the entire collection, via Sotheby's London, in 1993. The original plan was to sell the collection in eight lots, but preference would be given to any purchaser who could buy the entire collection at a higher price than the combined price of the eight lots. The entire collection was awarded to an unknown bidder. Fortunately for Singapore, the potential buyer later withdrew his intention to buy. Sotheby's then reached out Mr Goh Geok Khim, of Singapore, founder of GK Goh Holdings, who bought the collection at \$3M and later gifted it to the National Heritage Board in 1996.



Wild Nutmeg, Penarahan, *Gymnacranthera farquhariana*. A wide-ranging species found from Peninsular Malaysia to Papua New Guinea, this tree grows to a height of more than 30 metres. It has thick leaves of about 17 centimetres long. Flowers and fruits are formed in loose clusters, and have fine hairs on them. This species is especially significant as it is named after Farquhar.



Pomegranate, Delima, *Punica granatum*. Known since ancient times, pomegranate is now a widely cultivated plant throughout the tropical regions of the world. The juicy fruits are eaten fresh or made into drinks. In Chinese culture, the fruit is a symbol of fertility due to the numerous seeds produced.

FARQUHAR – THE FORGOTTEN AND REMEMBERED

It may seem to some that Singapore has forgotten its second founder. There is no street or building named after Farquhar. The only place where we can find his name is a small garden on Fort Canning Hill, where we can learn more about some species of plants that Farquhar was especially interested in, like guava, jujube, taro, gambier.

Thankfully, for a man who did so much good in Singapore in its early days, Farquhar's legacy lives on in the 477 watercolour drawings of indigenous plants and animals, which Singapore is most fortunate to possess. Best of all, there is a type of wild nutmeg named after Farquhar, and the name is: *Gymnacranthera farquhariana*. The tree can grow up to a maximum of 30 metres and is native to Singapore. The National Parks Board has classified it as critically endangered in the wild, but efforts have been taken to preserve it. Today, local botanists have located the trees in Nee Soon Swamp Forest, Bukit Timah Nature Reserve, and north of Mandai Lake Road. While this species of wild nutmeg is not suitable for human consumption, it continues to provide a feast for our eyes, and bears testament to Farquhar's long-lasting legacy in Singapore. 

FOR FURTHER READING:

Natural History Drawings: The Complete William Farquhar Collection, Malay Peninsula 1803-1818

**** Captions for all images, except the portrait of William Farquhar, are taken from *Natural History Drawings, The Complete William Farquhar Collection, Malay Peninsula 1803-1818*. Both the English and the Malay name of the species are retained.**

PRISCILLA TAN is a FOM docent at the National Museum of Singapore. Her favourite local fruit is the durian, and she is most delighted to find a drawing of the durian in Farquhar's collections.

HAREGI – FESTIVE KIMONOS

IKUMI FUSHIMI TAKES US ON A JOURNEY OF OLD-WORLD CHARMS OF JAPANESE KIMONOS

Hare to Ke (*Hare* and *Ke*) is the Japanese concept of distinguishing Extraordinary (*Hare*) days from Ordinary (*Ke*) days. This idea was first introduced and formulated by the Japanese folklorist, Kunio Yanagita. The term *Hare* literally means sunny day and can refer to both festival days as well as days marking various rites of passage in life.

For *Hare* days, special decorations unique to a particular celebration are set up. Festive food and drinks such as *mochi* (rice cakes), *sekihan* (red bean glutinous rice), *sake*, and other seasonal delicacies conveying the meanings of religious origins and auspiciousness are prepared for different *Hare* occasions. A feast is not complete without lavish attires. People don *Haregi* – ceremonial kimonos – for special occasions.

KIMONOS AND THE RITES OF PASSAGE

The kimono is the quintessential Japanese traditional costume. While no longer regularly used in everyday life, kimonos are worn on special occasions such as *Omiyamairi* (the newborn's first shrine visit), *Shichigosan* (milestone celebrations for children at seven, five, and three years old) and *Seijinshiki* (twenty-year-old's coming-of-age celebration). These traditional rites mark important milestones in life – celebration and



A ceremonial kimono draped over an infant for *Omiyamairi* – the newborn's first shrine visit. Photo credit: Victoria and Albert Museum, London.



Felicitations to Genji on the Occasion of the Shichigosan Celebration by Utagawa Kunisada II, 1867. Photo credit: Museum of Fine Arts Boston.



Seijinshiki –Twenty-year-old's coming-of-age celebration. Photo credit: Web Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan.

thanksgiving for children's good health and are occasions for family reunion.

There are various kinds of kimono. These are categorised strictly according to the formality of the occasion in which they are worn, in keeping with the hallmark rigidity of Japanese etiquette. Kimono selection follows a rigorous protocol which takes its guidance from the Japanese dressing code – Time, Place, and Occasion known as TPO.

FURISODE AND THE YOUNG

Among the formal kimonos, the long-sleeved *Furisode* stands out because of its distinctive cut, featuring elongated, flowing sleeves. *Furisode* means swinging sleeves in Japanese. *Furisode* is the formal attire of young, unmarried women and features vibrant and colourful designs which reflect the youth and vivacity of the wearers.

Furisode originated from children's kimonos during the Edo period (1603–1868). Children's kimonos had wide openings at sides and open sleeves for keeping cool. In an evolution of design, the sleeves for female kimonos were further elongated to become the *Furisode* of today. The length of *Furisode* sleeves nowadays can be around 100 centimetres and this can be adjusted according to the wearer's height.

Young women were not supposed to directly express their affection in Edo Japan. As a result, they developed a system to covertly communicate their romantic feelings through gestures and stylised movements of their elongated *Furisode* sleeves. Thus, a swinging of the long sleeve from side to side signified a romantic interest, while a swinging of the sleeve back and forth would signal rejection. Through this sleeve swinging gesture, the verb *furu* (to swing, one of the root words for *Furisode*) began to be used as a term to denote romantic rejection. Needless to say, married women had no need for such expressions of love and their sleeves are cut short. According to



Beauty Looking Back by Hishikawa Moronobu, Edo period, 17th Century. Photo Credit: Tokyo National Museum.



Furisode with traditional auspicious motifs. Photo credit: Victoria and Albert Museum, London.



Furisode with traditional auspicious motifs. Photo credit: Asian Art Museum.



Kurotomesode – the most formal kimono for married women. Photo Credit: Edo Tokyo Museum.

traditions, the verb *kiru* (to cut) is considered inauspicious in marriage and so *tomeru* (to keep, stop) is used instead, resulting in the short sleeved *Tomesode*. Today, *Kurotomesode* (black *Tomesode*) is the most formal kimono worn by married women, often worn at weddings by the proud mothers of the bride and bridegroom.

FURISODE AND THE COMING-OF-AGE

The most significant *Hare* associated with *Furisode* is the coming-of-age ceremony – the *Seijinshiki*. This happens at the age of 20 and takes place on the second Monday of the new year throughout Japan. While it is not compulsory to wear kimono at *Seijinshiki*, *Furisode* is by far the most popular choice of attire for young women. Indeed, the latest fashion trends of *Seijinshiki*, *Furisode* are a frequent subject in Japanese local news reports. Young eligible men also participate in *Seijinshiki*, with most men choosing to wear more conservative and practical western-style suits. Clearly, for colour, panache, and sheer sleeve-swinging action, such suits are no match for the chic *Furisode* that the young ladies get to wear.

While *Furisode* may be gifted by proud parents and grandparents, many young women prefer to select their own *Furisode* to reflect their own tastes and personality. The cost of buying a *Furisode* is often prohibitive, and many prefer to rent. Rental kimono salons offer a wide selection of *Furisode*. While contemporary designs are popular, traditional motifs such as *shochikubai*

(pine, bamboo, and prunus), *kikko* (turtle shell), or chrysanthemum retain lasting appeal, symbolising resilience, longevity, and purity.

The process of wearing a *Furisode* is arduous. Tying the *Obi* (the broad sash at the kimono waist) requires sophisticated origami skills in order to depict recognisable auspicious motifs. *Furisode* involves many must-have accessories in addition to the elaborate *obi* tying and professionals are often called in to dress a *Furisode*. On the day of *Seijinshiki*, the kimono dressing salons are fully booked. Operations start as early as three o'clock in the morning to meet the demands of dressing up all the young ladies lined up for *Seijinshiki*.



Fukurasuzume obi tying depicting a plump sparrow in winter symbolising prosperity. Photo Credit: Author.



Tateyamusubi is another variation of *Furisode* obi tying depicting an arrow. Photo Credit: Wikicommons.

KIMONOS AND THE DECLINING DEMAND

In a rapidly evolving society, where comfort and convenience are of ever-increasing importance in everyday (*Ke*) casual wear, it is not surprising that the iconic kimono is playing an ever-diminishing role in Japanese fashion. The kimono that now occupies a space of *Hare* or traditional festivals is tinged with nostalgia. In the eyes of Japanese people, kimonos carry with them the beauty charms of old-world Japan, with its colour, formality, and symbolism.

The diminishing demand for intricate and elaborate kimono hastens the decline of the kimono manufacturing industry, a mutually dependent ecosystem of artisanal craftsmen from dyers to weavers and embroiderers. The demanding and exacting process of producing kimonos of high quality attracts

few among the young in modern Japan. Thus, kimonos, together with the artisans that make them, will continue to wane with the passing of time and we are at risk of losing the craft, folklore, and magic of kimonos. It would be a great loss if this were to happen, and efforts should be made to preserve our understanding and appreciation of this intangible but central pillar of Japanese culture. 

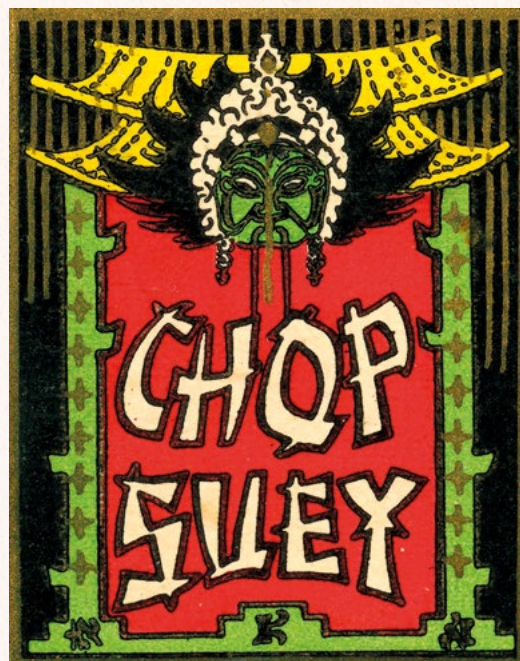
IKUMI FUSHIMI is a docent guiding at many museums including ACM, TPM and NUS Baba House. She guides in Japanese and English.

CHINESE *CHOP SUEY*, AS AMERICAN AS APPLE PIE

DARLENE KASTEN TRACES THE POPULARITY OF CHINESE AMERICAN CUISINE TO THE 1915 PANAMA PACIFIC INTERNATIONAL EXPOSITION IN SAN FRANCISCO

Images sourced from public domain, unless otherwise stated.

Chop suey - a Chinese-style dish of meat stewed and fried with bean sprouts, bamboo shoots, and onions, and served with rice - rose from obscurity in the late 1800's to become one of America's most crowd-pleasing dishes by the mid-twentieth century. Economical, filling and delicious, *chop suey* sustained Americans through the Great Depression and was a family favourite in restaurants and as take-away well past World War II. So, how is this delectable dish connected to an ongoing exhibition at the Asian Civilisations Museum of Singapore?



Chop suey matchbox artwork, c.1935.

THE MYTHICAL ORIGINS OF *CHOP SUEY*

The origins of *Chop suey* are surprisingly hard to pin down, and the stories are more mythical than historical. One claim is that the 1848 Gold Rush brought Chinese manual labourers to North America, giving Americans their first direct experience with large numbers of Chinese. Chinese cooks in the California mining and railroad camps prepared quick and cheap food using whatever materials were available. Another claim associates the dish with the 1896 visit to America of Li Hongzhang, China's then leading diplomat and most powerful official. Hosting American delegates for dinner, Hongzhang asked his personal chef to invent a dish that would appeal to both Chinese and American palates.



Chinese Restaurant; Palace of Food Products S.F. Fairs-P.P.I.E.- Palace of Food Products-Interiors. Photo credit: San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library.

According to anthropologist E.N. Anderson though, the most likely story is that Chinese American restaurateurs based their *chop suey* recipes on *tsap seui*, a Cantonese dish that translates to miscellaneous leftovers. Regardless of its actual origin, Americans had limited appetite for *chop suey*, and American Chinese food in general, until the 1915 Panama Pacific International Exposition (PPIE) launched in San Francisco.

CHINESE AMERICAN CUISINE AT THE PPIE

Today it is hard to imagine a visit to San Francisco without a stop in its famous Chinatown to eat in a Chinese restaurant, but this wasn't always the case. Chinese food was certainly available in Chinatown before the PPIE, but most non-Chinese San Franciscans were afraid to go there, much less dine there.

The area had a reputation for crime, vermin, opium-smoking, and gang violence, the food itself was unfamiliar and the menu was indecipherable for most Americans.

But at the PPIE where food products and cuisines from around the world were introduced to more than 19 million visitors over nine months in the exposition's Palaces of Agriculture and Food Products, Chinese food was served in hygienic and well-lit dining halls to Americans. Thousands of San Francisco residents sampled American Chinese dishes like *chop suey* and *chow mein* for the first time, and they fell in love with them!

CHINATOWN TRANSFORMS AFTER THE EARTHQUAKE

But to attract visitors after the exposition closed, San Francisco's Chinatown needed to overcome its image problem. The massive earthquake and consuming fire of 1906 that preceded the PPIE and destroyed San Francisco became a watershed moment not only in the city's history, but also for its Chinatown. Despite the challenges of reconstruction, as well as already looming threats from city leaders to relocate the previous occupants to south of the city centre, Chinatown was successfully rebuilt in its original location. Moreover, the city's Chinese American community took the opportunity to create a new image for itself and established a strong tourism economy that laid the foundation for today's Chinatown.



Cathay House in San Francisco, originally the Sing Chong Building.



Chinatown before and after the 1906 Earthquake and Fire. Photo credit: picture_©tripsavvy.com.



Exhibit with various pagodas. [1915] Edward A. Rogers Panama-Pacific International Exposition photograph collection. Photo credit: UC Berkeley, Bancroft Library.

Look Tin Eli, a Chinese American businessman, is credited with creating the pseudo-Chinese façade that would become Chinatown's distinctive trademark. He obtained a loan from Hong Kong and hired a local architectural firm to build the Sing Chong Bazaar at the northeast corner of Grant Avenue and California Street, instructing them to make it look 'emphatically Oriental' by featuring 'Chinese-looking' architectural elements. They did this by placing a pagoda on top of the four-story building to draw tourists to its Oriental Emporium which carried curios, silks, and art goods from China and Japan.

More and more buildings in Chinatown began to feature pagodas, but unlike China, where the pagoda primarily served as a religious structure, buildings in Chinatown used them as decorative embellishments. Other design elements, such as curved gates and canopies that resembled Chinese rooflines, dragon motifs, lanterns, and red, green, and gold accents, were used to create Chinese flair.

'ORIENTALIST ARCHITECTURE' INSPIRATION?

There may even be a direct connection between Chinatown's architectural style and the pagodas exhibited in the PPIE's Palace of Education which are currently on display in the Asian Civilisation Museum (ACM) special exhibition *Pagoda Odyssey 1915: From Shanghai to San Francisco*.

As noted by Museum of Chinese in America (New York) curator Kerri Culhane, "[t]he Chinese style of the 1920s and 30s descended, ironically, from a picturesque Oriental revivalism promoted by American and European missionary architects in China in the late 19th and early 20th century." Perhaps that included architectural elements from pagoda models built by the young woodworking artists from Shanghai's Jesuit-run Tushanwan Orphanage, as seen in the PPIE's Palace of Education and Social Economics or described by St. Ignatius College (San Francisco) Jesuit D.J. Kavanagh, S.J. in his circa 1915 textbook, *The Pagoda: Type of Chinese Architecture*.

Regardless of where Look Tin Eli and his fellow business owners took their inspiration, San Francisco's Chinatown, rebuilt in the wake of the earthquake and exposition, was the first in the country to display this pseudo-Chinese neighbourhood aesthetic. 'Orientalist' or 'Chinese adaptive' architecture (referring to the practice of applying Chinese architectural motifs to Western buildings) was soon replicated in Chinatowns across North America.

In the 1920s, Chinese restaurants in San Francisco, Chicago, New York, and other major cities were built in the same architectural style. Americans flocked to Chinese restaurants, and menus were redesigned to match their taste. By 1980, Chinese food had become the country's most popular ethnic cuisine.

THE DECLINE OF CHOP SUEY

The 1972 diplomatic visit by American President Richard Nixon to China further transformed American Chinese restaurants. The extravagant banquets the president attended in China were broadcast on television to millions of American homes. Before Nixon's visit, American Chinese food leaned heavily towards the 'American' part of its name, but once Americans realised that people in China weren't actually eating *chop suey*, its popularity waned. Americans' tastes changed to demand authentic Chinese cuisine, and though *chop suey* can still be found in some American Chinese restaurants today, its heyday as the paradigm of Chinese food is long past. 📖

DARLENE KASTEN is an FOM docent at several museums in Singapore. An American who grew up eating Chinese food, including an occasional bowl of *chop suey*, she recommends the fried dumplings at Brandy Ho's in San Francisco and the soup dumplings at Joe's Shanghai in New York City.

WHERE THE JUNGLE IS THE ULTIMATE KITCHEN: TRIBAL FOODS OF SARAWAK

AZRA MOIZ DISCOVERS A FEAST OF TRIBAL CUISINE FROM SARAWAK

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When we think of Sarawakian food, the usual culinary suspects are Sarawak Laksa or Kolo Mee. But the East Malaysian state of Sarawak has a gastronomic trump card – its unique and flavourful tribal foods, sometimes called “Dayak” food.

The largest of all the Malaysian states in geographic size (it’s bigger than all of Peninsular Malaysia), Sarawak is the fourth most populous state. Besides the usual ethnic makeup that characterises this region, Sarawak’s uniqueness lies in the many “Dayak” tribes that make up its population. “Dayak” was the generic word used by early Europeans who didn’t know how to classify the more than 40 ethnic tribes that exist in Sarawak, speaking over 150 languages.

Today we know more about these fascinating tribes and their distinctive cuisine, culture, and lifestyle.

The Ibans or Sea Dayaks make up the largest of the tribes accounting for over 30 per cent of its population. The Melanau were traditionally fishing people who settled along rivers. The Bidayuh are the Land Dayaks mainly found in the western regions. Other tribes include the Kenyah, the Kayan, and the Penan who live deep in the forest and are the last of the nomadic hunter gatherers who still hunt with spears and blowpipes. The smallest tribe are the Kelabit with a population of 6,600 living on the remote Bario plateau bordering Kalimantan, who are famous for rice farming and their production of salt.

FEAST FROM THE JUNGLE

Living on the fringe of an abundant rainforest, these tribes developed cuisines based on locally sourced ingredients, using implements and cooking methods crafted from nature.

The jungle is not only a food source, but provides tools for cooking, such as the bamboo used as a cooking vessel and as jug or cup. *Isip* leaves can be used as plates and the sago tree bark is used to make bowls.

Ingredients have been foraged from the jungle and rivers for centuries and are usually cooked simply – for example, by roasting or boiling over an open fire in bamboo vessels, stir frying, or by fermentation.

Many of these dishes have evolved over centuries, passed down within families over generations, and today make up Sarawak’s distinctive culinary heritage, also preserving a unique tribal culture.



The colourful and diverse tribal cultures of Sarawak.



Sarawak’s tribal food is less spicy than other Malaysian foods with the main spices being ginger, lemongrass, lime and turmeric.

AYAM PANSOH

The star of Sarawak's tribal cuisine is *ayam* or chicken cooked in a bamboo tube. The chicken is mixed with garlic, ginger, torch ginger, lemongrass, tapioca leaves, and salt, and stuffed into a bamboo tube, then sealed and cooked over a wood fire. Cooking in bamboo is a distinctive and time-honoured method that persists today, creating a fragrant broth with tender juicy chicken. Regional and tribal variations of *Ayam Pansoh* do exist, for example the Bidayuh use cucumber leaves instead of tapioca leaves which give it a different flavour.



Ayam Pansoh cooked in bamboo over an open fire with fresh herbs and leafy vegetables.

MIDIN

A wild fern that is only foraged, not farmed, the leafy and curly *Midin* is abundant in forests and along riverbanks. Stir fried with garlic and chilli or *belacan*, it remains crunchy even after cooking.



Midin, an edible fern that grows wild and is always foraged before cooking.

UMAI

Umai is a raw fish salad that is prepared by Melanau fishermen who are at sea for days and have limited cooking resources – thin slices of fish are mixed with onions, chilli, salt, and then “cooked” in the acidity of lime or *assam paya* (a sour wild plum). It is usually eaten with sago balls. *Umai* is the “sashimi” of the Melanau tribe who are traditionally “people of the river” for whom fish is an important food source.



Umai, Sarawak's answer to sashimi.



Sap from the nipah palm in Sarawak's mangrove forests is cooked to form the sweet Gula Apong.

GULA APONG

Sarawak's version of *gula melaka*, this is made from sap harvested from the *nipah* palm that grows in mangrove forests. The Rajang River provides much of this *nipah* source, which is why *Apong* is a speciality of the Rajang River catchment. Traditionally the *nipah* sap is boiled for hours over a wood fire and stirred continuously until it reduces to a thick caramel-like paste. *Gula Apong* is sweet but has a slight saline note, reflecting its mangrove *terroir*, and stays in liquid form (unlike *gula melaka* which is solid and has a sweeter butterscotch flavour).

TUAK

A rice wine that is made for festivals like *Gawai Dayak* (harvest or thanksgiving festival), this is made from fermented glutinous rice with sugar and yeast called *ragi* added. *Tuak* is deeply connected to ritual and social ceremonies among all the tribes, and it is usually women who make *Tuak* for their family and communities. Sweet and dry versions are made, and it takes months to mature. *Tuak* is made among all the tribes of Borneo, though the Bidayuh in particular are noted for their expertise in brewing it.

NUBA LAYA RICE

Mashed rice wrapped in *isip* leaves, this is commonly made by the Iban and Kelabit tribes. The rice is cooked until it becomes mash, then is wrapped while hot in *isip* leaves, which preserves it and ensures that the rice does not spoil for at least four days. This becomes a portable dish so is commonly prepared for travellers who have to be away from home for days. *Isip* leaves can also function as plates.

JUNGLE CUISINE CAPTURES URBAN ADMIRERS

In the past, the only way to taste a tribal Sarawakian feast was to be invited to homes. But today, new awareness of this gastronomic experience has led to restaurants and food stalls serving tribal food and gaining a mainstream audience of admirers. The ultimate jungle kitchen and cuisine of Borneo is raising its profile, and winning over stomachs and palates! 

FOR FURTHER READING

Introducing Sarawak Jungle Food, <https://sarawaktourism.com/blog/introducing-sarawak-jungle-food>.

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THE ROLE OF DIVINE IMAGERY IN FEASTS

SEHR KHOSLA EXAMINES THE ROLE OF DIVINE IMAGERY IN FEASTING ACROSS CULTURES

What connects the ancient Romans, Hindus, and Japanese? Feasts! More specifically...the influence of divinity in these feasts. Examining the role of divine imagery in feasts reveals how various cultures use religious symbols to express their beliefs, uphold social structures, and maintain a connection with the spiritual realm. Divine imagery is the use of visual, symbolic or descriptive language including depicting gods, goddesses, angels or other celestial elements that are associated with the spiritual world. In essence, these depictions help to invoke a sense of reverence or awe and have prevailed across civilisations in distinct ways that reflect their unique religious and cultural values.



Celebration of Cerealia festival in ancient. Rome. Image from Flickr.



Fresco of Bacchus from the triclinium (dining room) ceiling of an ancient Roman home. Photo from Wikimedia Commons.

DIVINE IMAGERY IN ROMAN BANQUETS

In ancient Rome, banquets were more than mere celebrations of abundance; they served as opportunities to display religious devotion and social status. Known as *convivia*, these feasts often coincided with festivals dedicated to specific gods, with divine imagery playing a central role.

Feast settings often featured statues or altars dedicated to household gods, the Lares and Penates, who were believed to protect the home and family. Their presence at the feast emphasized the sacredness of the household and the importance of maintaining a harmonious relationship with the divine.

Roman banquets typically began with libation: ritual pouring of wine or other liquids as an offering to symbolically invite the gods to partake in the feast, establishing a connection between the participants and the divine. Bacchus, the god



Typical Navratri Thali (platter) with buckwheat roti bread, potato vegetable, curd and salad.
Photo source: India Today.

of wine, frequently appeared in these settings, as depicted in frescoes and mosaics. As the deity of wine, revelry, and ecstasy, Bacchus represented the pleasures of the feast while also reminding attendees of the importance of moderation - a key virtue in Roman moral philosophy.

Other gods also played significant roles in the imagery of these banquets. Ceres, the goddess of agriculture, symbolized the earth's bounty. Feasts held in her honour, especially during the Cerealia festival, provided Romans an opportunity to express gratitude for the harvest. Feasts included freshly harvested grain and bread; participants would adorn themselves and altars with garlands made from wheat and flowers to visually align themselves with the divine blessings of the goddess.

NINE-DAY HINDU FESTIVAL - NAVRATRI

Navratri, a significant Hindu festival, consists of a series of feasts and rituals dedicated to the goddess Durga in her various forms. Celebrated over nine nights, Navratri honours the divine feminine and the triumph of good over evil. Each night is dedicated to a divine quality of Durga, with its associated divine imagery.

Navratri feasting extends beyond the physical act of eating; it is a spiritual ritual with divine imagery connecting devotees with the sacred aspects of the festival. This includes consuming *sattvic* foods that are considered pure and

spiritually uplifting such as fruits, dairy, nuts, and grains like buckwheat. The colours of food also reflect divine imagery honouring different aspects of the goddess; yellow, red, and white foods represent knowledge, power, and purity respectively. Food prepared during the nine days is offered to the goddess as *prasad* (offering) before being consumed as a gesture of gratitude and devotion to the divine.

On the first day, devotees worship Shailaputri, the daughter of the mountains, who is depicted riding a bull and holding a trident - symbols of strength and determination. The foods prepared on this day, often simple dishes like boiled potatoes, reflect the values of simplicity and purity associated with Shailaputri. They serve as a reminder of the virtues embodied by the goddess and their importance in overcoming life's challenges. As the festival progresses, different forms of Goddess Durga are honoured, each with unique imagery and symbolism. On the seventh day, for example, devotees worship Kalaratri, the fiercest aspect of the feminine divine her dark, wild incarnation represents vanquishing evil and gives devotees strength. The corresponding feast is typically more austere, reflecting the serious nature of Kalaratri's role as the destroyer of darkness.

Navratri feasts are communal events, bringing families and communities together in worship and shared meals. The divine imagery during these feasts serves as a focal point for collective devotion, strengthening communal bonds, and transforming the feast into a sacred ritual.



Celebrating the Female Divine - Durga Puja celebration in Singapore. Photo source: Times of India.



Shinsen on Shinto shrine with Torii gate symbolism. Image from Koichi Barrish - Tsubaki Grand Shrine of America.

KAMI SYMBOLS IN SHINTO FEASTS

In Shinto, the indigenous religion of Japan, divine imagery is associated with Kami, the spirits or deities believed to inhabit natural elements, objects, and ancestors. Feasts and rituals, particularly during festivals known as Matsuri, often involve offerings to the Kami.

Kami are often symbolised by elements like the Torii gate, which marks the entrance to a sacred space, or specific natural features like rocks, trees, or bodies of water believed to house a Kami. During Shinto feasts, these symbols are treated with great respect, and offerings of food, sake, and other items are made to honour and appease the Kami, ensuring harmony between humans and the natural world.

Unlike the more anthropomorphic representations in Roman and Hindu traditions, Shinto divine imagery is closely tied to nature and is often abstract. The focus is on recognizing the presence of Kami in the natural world and living in harmony with these spirits. To honour this, participants first purify themselves by periods of abstinence varying from a few hours to days and by bathing, preferably in salt water. The Kami is then requested to descend through an invocatory rite involving opening



Kagura dance performance. Image from Dive! Hiroshima: Introduction to Kagura.

inner doors of the shrine, beating a drum, and ringing bells. Shinto feasts are not just celebrations of abundance, but also expressions of gratitude and reaffirmations of the bond between the community and nature. The preparation and consumption of rice during these feasts are acts of reverence, wherein the rice itself symbolizes blessings of the divine Kami. Rituals like the Kagura dance, performed during or after these feasts are intended to entertain the Kami and secure their continued protection.

DIFFERENT PATHS... SIMILAR DEVOTION

The use of divine imagery in feasts across societies serves to connect humans with the divine, yet the ways these cultures employ such imagery differ significantly. In Roman banquets, divine imagery is closely linked to social order and the relationship between the gods and the state. The imagery in feasts is often elaborate, reflecting the wealth and status of the host and the importance of the gods in maintaining societal order. In contrast, divine imagery in Navratri feasts emphasizes personal devotion and the embodiment of divine virtues. The focus of rituals and food preparation is on individual relationships with the goddess, expressed through communal worship and shared meals. Shinto feasts, on the other hand, use more abstract divine imagery that is closely linked to nature. The presence of Kami is symbolised through natural objects and rituals, rather than detailed visual representations, and feasts emphasize the importance of living in harmony with the natural world.

Feasts in different civilisations incorporate sacred symbols in ways that embody their distinct cultural and religious contexts. Despite their differences, the use of divine imagery in feasts across cultures underscores a universal human desire to connect with the divine, reinforcing community identities and expressing religious devotion. **P**

SEHR KHOSLA is a budding classicist from Tanglin Trust School and member of Friends of the Museum Singapore.



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JAPANESE TEA BOWLS – THE ART OF IMPERFECTION

AN EMPTY CUP OF TEA HOLDS MANY LESSONS – **PAVITHRA KABIR**, EXPLORES JAPANESE TEA CULTURE AND INVESTIGATES THE PERFECTION FOUND IN THE SEEMINGLY IMPERFECT



Tea Ceremony (Chanoyu no zu), from the series Etiquette for Ladies (Onna reishiki no uchi). Boston MFA, woodblock print, triptych, 1888.

“It (Teaism) insulates purity and harmony, the mystery of mutual charity, the romanticism of the social order. It is essentially a worship of the Imperfect, as it is a tender attempt to accomplish something possible in this impossible thing we know as life.”

— Okakura Kakuzo ('The Book of Tea')

THE JAPANESE TEA CEREMONY

THE JAPANESE TEA CEREMONY, *Chanoyu*, the Japanese word for a tea ceremony or gathering, means 'hot water for tea', however this simple name does not cover the fascinating, complex, and centuries old ritualised ceremony in which *matcha* or green tea is prepared and enjoyed in a tearoom.

The tradition of drinking powdered green tea was introduced to Japan in the 12th century CE by Zen Buddhist priests who had travelled to China to study scriptures and returned with a new custom. The tea helped the monks stay alert during meditation and became a monastic tradition, which was later adopted by the ruling elite. The imperial court and the *shogun* treated



Portrait of Sen no Rikyū. Image courtesy Kyoto National Museum.

chanoyu as entertainment, but by the 15th and 16th centuries CE, a succession of tea masters such as Sen no Rikyū 1521–1591 CE reformed the concept and formalised the tradition of *chanoyu*.

THE WAY OF TEA

Sen Rikyū's version of the ceremony became known as *wabichado* meaning 'the way of tea'. Rikyū believed that to truly understand tea, you must also study poetry, art, literature, architecture, legacy, and history. Tea practitioners were accomplished in the arts of flowers, fine cuisine, and *sarei* (manners or etiquette) and the ceremony itself was viewed as a meditative experience. The participants sought an emptiness or tranquillity where less was more and you got back to the fundamentals of what is really important in life – fellowship with one another. Some of the guiding principles of *chanoyu* as expressed by Rikyū were: harmony, respect, purity and tranquillity. Harmony (*Wa*): a harmony between guests, hosts, nature, and setting of the ceremony. Respect (*Kei*): sincerity and respect toward another, regardless of rank or status. Purity (*Sei*): spiritual cleansing of oneself—to come to the gathering with a pure heart and mind. Tranquillity (*Jaku*): the inner peace that comes from realising the first three principles that allows one to truly share.

Further the essence of *chanoyu* is embodied in the concept of *ichi-go ichi-e*, which translates to 'one time, one meeting'. This is a sense of awareness that each tea gathering is a once in a lifetime event never to occur again, for neither the tea nor the people would be the same should they meet again. This concept permeates the tea ceremony and brings heightened awareness, respect, and reverence to every aspect of it. This respect and attention to detail can be seen in the decoration of the room, the manners and dress of the participants, and in the instruments used to prepare the tea – the kettle, the scoop, the whisk, the spoon, and the bowl.



The Tea Ceremony, by Kitagawa Kikumaro or Tsukimaro (active 1789–1829). Woodblock print. Japan, 18th–19th century. Victoria and Albert Museum, London.



Tea bowl, clay covered with glaze (*Amayaki Raku*), Japan, ca. 1550. Image from Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

THE CHAWAN

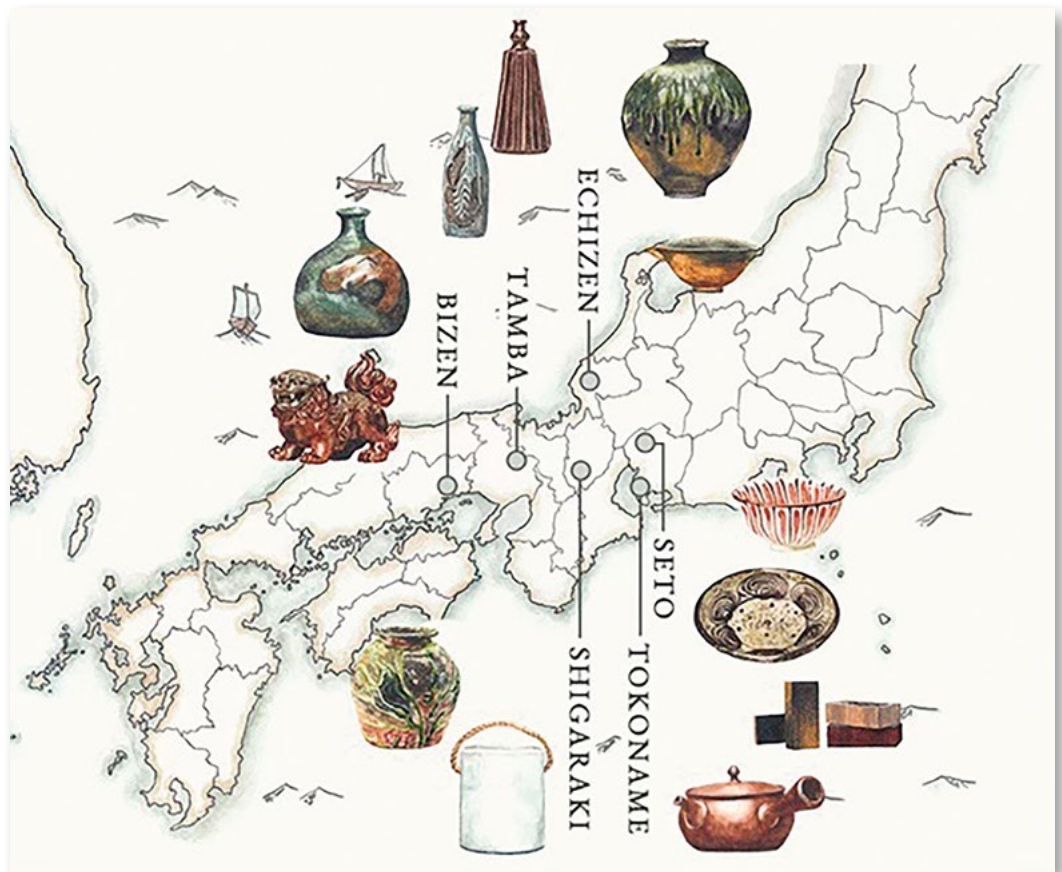
The most important instrument of the tea ceremony is arguably the *chawan*, or tea bowl, which is the only instrument that passes from the host's hand to that of the guest and back again. There are many types of tea bowls, and they vary in thickness depending on whether they are used for thick or thin tea. There are also varied degrees of decoration on the tea bowls, corresponding with the season and the type of tea being served. Bowls were originally brought to Japan from China or Korea, but then Japanese artisans learned how to craft the bowls. Several popular bowl kilns came into business with each kiln developing its own style of bowl with slightly different shapes for the different types of teas to be served.

THE NIHON ROKKOYO

The *Nihon Rokkoyo* or ‘Six Ancient Kilns’ is a term coined by historic ceramics scholar, Fujio Koyama, and refers collectively to the six distinct ceramic production areas of Echizen, Seto, Tokoname, Shigaraki, Tamba, and Bizen. The kilns in these areas have produced pottery from the Middle Ages until the present day and were designated as Japan Heritage sites in 2017.

Seto Ware is the oldest pottery in the history of Japanese ceramic and is different from the other five kilns in that it is characterised by glazed pottery using the white clay and glaze material found in the Aichi Prefecture. Ko-Seto (old Seto) was characterized not just by glazed pottery but also by simple but gorgeous styles, decorated with seal flowers with coloured glazes.

The remaining five kilns are distinguished by their unglazed, *yaki-shime* (high-fired) pottery style, which requires them to be fired at a high temperature of 1300°C (2372°F). Of the five kilns, the Shigaraki and Bizen are the most interesting and popular in tea ceremonies due to their aesthetics. Shigaraki ware is stoneware produced in Shiga Prefecture and is characterised by rough clay and natural ash glaze, which is like soil; Bizen ware evolved from Sueki, a type of hard, blue-grey shaded earthenware from the 7th Century CE, and is traditionally an unglazed high fired stoneware made by firing the ceramic piece over long periods of time ranging from three days to one week. It has finer clay than Shigaraki ware and a bold and warm style with distinctive patterns. Both styles were loved by tea masters and are an essential part of Japanese culture, embodying the beauty of *wabi-sabi* with their rustic and simple texture.



Map of the six ancient kilns of Japan. Image taken from *The Thousand-Year Legacy and Evolution of the ‘Six Ancient Kilns’*.

A PERFECT IMPERFECTION

The Japanese savour both the craft and its imperfections. *wabi-sabi* is an aesthetic principle that embraces imperfection, simplicity, and a connection to nature: the idea that nothing is perfect without having some imperfection or happy fault. The irregularities found in tea bowls are celebrated as a reflection of the natural world and the transient nature of life, for nothing in nature is symmetric, but it is nevertheless perfect and beautiful. The word *wabi-sabi* can also be understood by its two components: ‘*wabi*’, embodying beauty in asymmetric and unbalanced items, and ‘*sabi*’, celebrating the aging process and the impermanence of life.

wabi-sabi draws inspiration from the three marks of existence—impermanence (*mujō*), suffering or damage (*ku*), and non-self (*kū*). Cups or items that display the



(left) Black Raku Tea Bowl, early 17th century, Japan. Image from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. This tea bowl is tentatively attributed to the sixteenth-century tile maker who is believed to be the founder of Raku ware, known as Chojirō. According to legend, Chojirō’s production of tea bowls was stimulated and supervised by Rikyū himself.

(right) Shino Tea bowl with Bridge and House, known as “Bridge of the Gods” (Shinkyō), late 16th century, Japan, Image from Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Clog-shaped tea bowl (kutsu-gata chawan) with plum blossoms and geometric patterns, Oribe type, 17th century, Japan. Image from Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Kintsugi. Image from Encyclopaedia Britannica.

three are considered more desirable and worthy, as they have withstood life and aged, thereby showcasing the profound beauty that can only be found in the fragile, broken, and individual.

IMPERFECT POTTERY

The *wabi-sabi* principles also led to the creation of Raku, Shino, and Oribe pottery. For instance, in the pursuit of perfect imperfection, Sen no Rikyu, had Choujiro, the head of the Raku family, a great tile maker and ceramics craftsman of the Momoyama period (1568 CE–1603 CE), create hand-moulded tea bowls that looked broken or worn. This gave birth to a Raku ware style of pottery in which a bowl was more likely shaped by hand than thrown on a potter's wheel. The resulting bowl was more valued as it was more likely to reflect the spirit of the maker. Further, the lightweight hand-moulded bowls required a high level of skill to produce compared to bowls with walls of even thickness. These bowls would be asymmetric and uneven, but also unique and one of a kind, as the process put an emphasis on the potter's role in the creation. The imperfections could be spontaneous, created during the making of the object, or carefully planned to create a certain harmony or balance and a more natural aesthetic.

Shino and Oribe ware, produced by the kilns in Mino province, emerged slightly later than Raku ware. Oribe ware was named for Furuta Oribe (1543/44–1615), a tea

master and disciple of Rikyū, and encapsulated his well-known preference for warped or seemingly flawed wares. Oribe ware are also distinctive for their eye-catching glazes in colours such as copper green. Shino ware, also favoured by Furuta, is identifiable by the milky white glaze typically applied to the surface. Shino ware is also the first variety of Japanese pottery to which pictorial designs of simple motifs from the natural world were applied with an unrestrained hand.

KINTSUGI – BEAUTY IN IMPERFECTIONS

While creating natural, earthy, asymmetric pottery embraces imperfection, the most striking example of *wabi-sabi* is undoubtedly the Japanese art form of *kintsugi*. *Kintsugi* means 'golden joinery' and is a ceramic repair technique where broken objects are repaired using gold lacquer. The artisan pieces together the broken cup using a binding agent and applies gold on the break – thus simultaneously highlighting the beauty of the objects' flaws and emphasising its fractures instead of concealing them. So, if your favourite cup or *chawan* is broken, do not throw it away! Instead, embrace its flaws and nurture it back to life like the Japanese. In a world where we often reject things that are broken or flawed, we can all benefit from adopting a perspective or way of life that celebrates the imperfect and the transient. **P**



Kintsugi. Image from Kawamura Noriko article titled 'My journey with Kintsugi'.



PAVITHRA KABIR is a FOM Docent at the Indian Heritage Center.

A PINEAPPLE ODYSSEY

TALIA WEBB EXPLORES THE JOURNEY THAT BROUGHT PINEAPPLES TO SOUTHEAST ASIA AND THEIR POPULARITY AS AN INGREDIENT IN DISHES AROUND THE REGION



The Cabinet Dinner, a caricature by Charles Williams, published June 12, 1804. Eight men (including the Prince of Wales, centre) asleep at a dinner table. Dessert (pineapple) sits on the serving platter. Collection of the Victoria & Albert Museum.

The native South American tropical fruit has travelled across continents and oceans to become a beloved ingredient in many Asian dishes.

While the versatile pineapple is ubiquitous in Southeast Asia it was not originally grown here. The pineapple's journey into our hearts and stomachs starts half a world away and spans centuries of exploration, trade, culinary innovation, and cultural amalgamation.

SOUTH AMERICAN ORIGINS AND INTRODUCTION TO THE WORLD

The pineapple, or *ananas comosus*, is native to the region between southern Brazil and Paraguay. Indigenous peoples in these areas cultivated and revered the pineapple for its sweet, tangy flavour and medicinal properties. Christopher Columbus first encountered the pineapple during his second voyage to the New World (1493), bringing the fruit back to Europe. Its exotic appeal quickly spread across the continent where in Britain it was seen as a status symbol for prestige and luxury. They were so rare that a single pineapple could be worth thousands of pounds, often being paraded around from social event to dinner party until it was eventually rotten, sadly too precious to eat.



Charles II Presented with a Pineapple, artist unknown. This portrait of King Charles II (circa 1677) depicts a scene of opulence and extravagance. In the foreground, a gardener presents the monarch with a pineapple. Ham House, The Dysart Collection (purchased by HM Government in 1948 and transferred to the National Trust in 2002).

While pineapples fascinated the people of Europe, the fruit could not be successfully cultivated there. It is from here that the stage was set for its journey to Asia through colonisation.

EARLY CULTIVATION AND CULTURAL INTEGRATION

Pineapples were introduced to Asia in the 16th century, initially reaching the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia through Portuguese and Spanish maritime trade routes. Pineapples were embraced in Asia for their sweet, unique taste as well as their versatility.

In the Indian subcontinent, the fruit began appearing in gardens and local markets. Its popularity grew as it was incorporated into traditional dishes, both savoury and sweet. Similarly, in Southeast Asia, pineapples were adapted into local culinary practices. Today, for instance, in Thailand, they are used in dishes like "pineapple fried rice" and "moo pad prik", showcasing their integration into regional cuisines.

One of the most notable contributions came from the Philippines. The fruit thrived in the tropical environment, leading to its widespread cultivation. The Philippines became a significant producer of pineapples, and the fruit became a key part of the local diet, as well as the fibre from the stems being used to create the cloth pina, contributing to the national dress.

THE SINGAPORE PINEAPPLE KINGS

Southeast Asia, with its tropical climate, proved to be an ideal environment for pineapple cultivation. By the 19th century, joining the Philippines, pineapples were now widely grown in Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore. Different varieties of pineapples were being developed, suitable for both eating fresh as well as being ideal for canning. Some notable examples are the Singapore Spanish, the Singapore Queen, and Singapore Canning varieties.

In Singapore pineapples were grown as a "catch crop", meaning they could grow quickly on the slow producing rubber plantations. These helped a few prominent Singapore pioneers to make their fortunes in pineapple canning at



Two children harvesting pineapples in Singapore, 1910. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Clarke Quay and were known as the Pineapple Kings.

One of Singapore's most well-known Pineapple Kings was Lim Nee Soon, an entrepreneur and agricultural pioneer in the early 20th century. He initially worked in the rubber industry before shifting to pineapple cultivation and founding the Nee Soon Pineapple Company. Along with Tan Kah Kee he founded the Chinese High School, and the town Yishun is named after him.

AN ICON OF LUNAR NEW YEAR

Pineapple tarts, a beloved pastry during Chinese New Year, boast a rich history rooted in tradition and cultural evolution. Originating from Southeast Asia, particularly Malaysia and Singapore, these tarts reflect the region's diverse culinary influences. The pastry's significance during Lunar New Year is tied to its symbolism and its appealing flavour.

In Chinese, pineapple is pronounced *ong lai*, a popular saying for "good fortune is coming". This phonetic similarity imbues the pastry with auspicious connotations, making it a favoured treat during Lunar New Year celebrations, a time when families wish for good fortune and prosperity.

The tart's origin can be traced back to the early 20th century when Chinese immigrants in Southeast Asia began incorporating local ingredients into their traditional recipes. Pineapple tarts are not only a culinary delight but also a symbol of cultural heritage. They represent the blend of traditional Chinese values with local ingredients and culinary practices. As Lunar New Year approaches, these tarts become a staple in homes and gift boxes, symbolizing the hope for a prosperous and sweet year ahead. **P**



Singapore's Pineapple King, Lim Nee Soon, standing (centre) in front of a Lim Nee Soon Rubber Factory truck, heaving with pineapples, 1916. From the Lim Chong Hsien Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



A pair of palitera, a Filipino toothpick stand, featuring pineapples. 19th century. Sourced from Flickr.



TALIA WEBB (when not eating pineapple tarts) can be found as a docent at Asian Civilisations Museum, Changi Chapel & Museum, and The Peranakan Museum.

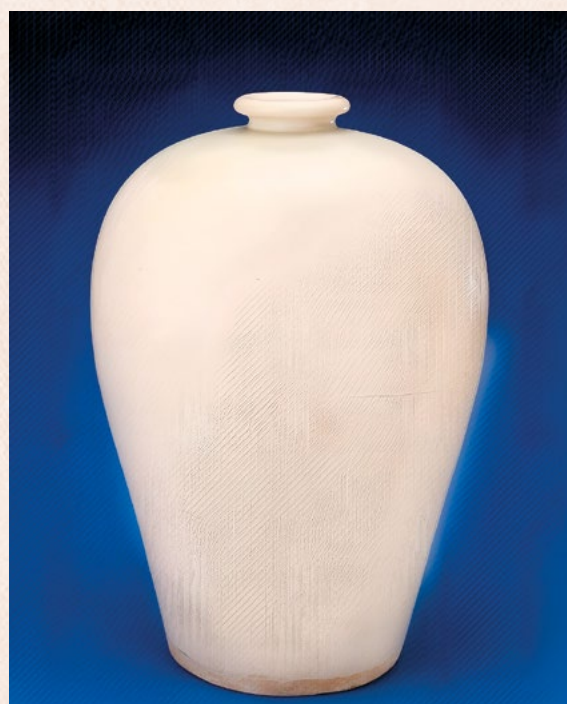
EVOLVING ROLES, ENDURING GRACE: THE STORY OF *MEIPING*

QIMIN SHI TRACES THE *MEIPING*'S JOURNEY, FROM WINE BOTTLE TO FLORAL MASTERPIECE

Based on documentary records, 'small, out-curved mouth, short, narrow neck, broad shoulders, long, slender abdomen, the shape of the *meiping* (梅瓶, plum blossom vase) makes itself an ideal vase for complimenting the skeletal form of the plum blossom. Amongst various names it has been given, *meiping* is the name that has endured since the late Qing dynasty (1644–1911). But the shape of the *meiping* also made it the perfect container for wine, and thus, in earlier times, *meiping* were a constant feature at banquets and feasts.



Glazed stoneware, Northern Song dynasty (960–1127),
ht. 37.5 cm, British Museum, London.



White-glazed *meiping*, Tang Dynasty (618–907), ht. 42.5 cm,
mouth diam. 9 cm, base diameter 17.5 cm, Palace Museum, Beijing.

THE *MEIPING*'S SOUTH ORIGIN THEORY

It seems that *meiping* were a creation of the Tang dynasty (618–907), when more delicate white spirits became the popular drink. As to its evolution practically, two mainstream theories are the South Origin theory, related to the Song dynasty (960–1279), and the North Origin theory, related to the slightly earlier Liao (907–1125) and Jurchen Jin (1115–1234) dynasties.

According to the South Origin theory, *meiping* really grew in popularity from the Song dynasty onwards. The second Song emperor Taizong (r.976–997) initiated the *jingyan* (经筵) system to increase officials' knowledge and strengthen their management ability. *Hanlin* (翰林) court academicians were engaged to instruct officials in Confucian classics and history. After each teaching session, a banquet would be set up for the academicians and officials. *Meiping* were routinely used as wine or water storage containers. Thus, *meiping* were also called *jingping* (经瓶) (Confucian classics container), or *jiuping* (酒瓶) – simply, wine container. The bottle left, from Cizhou, Henan, is an example of popular wine-container wares made in the northern kilns for non-court customers. It is dated to the Northern Song period (960–1127).

A *meiping* is also clearly depicted in a hanging scroll painting, *A Literary Gathering*, one of the most famous paintings of the Song dynasty, dated to the era of the eighth Song emperor Huizong (r.1082–1135), a renowned patron of art. The emperor is hosting a small banquet for scholar-officials in a beautiful courtyard garden. Under a group of magnificent trees, he and his guests sit around a large square table on which has been set the most exquisite utensils and decorations. Everything has been carefully selected and arranged for refinement and elegance. A group of attendants in the foreground are busy preparing tea, wine and food for the gathering. A large porcelain *meiping* of wine rests on the ground, as part of the carefully selected refreshments to be served.

HOW ABOUT ITS NORTH ORIGIN THEORY?

Northern nomadic pastoralists lived far away from the centre, in deserted areas that were not ideal for living. During cold winters, a flask of warm wine would have been much desired, whether at feasts in camp, or on the move. According to this theory, the Khitans created the *jitui ping* (鸡腿瓶; chicken drumstick container), a form of *meiping*, for their water and wine.

The *jitui ping*'s shape and design made it a highly practical container for liquids. Slender and tall like a chicken leg, *jitui ping* has the typical *meiping* long body and small mouth to avoid the liquid inside spilling or evaporating. The body is typically adorned with multiple string patterns, glazed with a brown, sauce-coloured glaze except for a band on the shoulder left unglazed, revealing the clay. The slender shape made it space efficient, and they could be arranged upright in the corner of a tent. The surface and decoration made it easy to tie up and fasten onto a horse's back, hung on the wall of a yurt, or inserted into a saddle pouch on a horse's back. Additionally, its slender body allowed it to be strapped to one's back between the neck groove and the heel of the *jitui ping*. The tapering curve from top to bottom aligned well with the curve of the human back, making it easy to carry directly - a swig of wine being just the thing needed during nomadic migration!



(top) A literary gathering *Wenhui Diagram Axis*, Southern Song dynasty (1127–1279), 184.4 x 123.9 cm, National Palace Museum, Taipei.

(left) *Jitui ping*, vase, glazed stoneware, Liao dynasty (907–1125), ht. 36.7 cm, mouth diam. 5.3 cm, base diam. 8.1 cm, Shenzhen Museum, Shenzhen.

MEIPING AT SOCIAL GATHERINGS

The popularity of *meiping* during the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) escalated. They were appreciated as everyday wine containers, as well as highly-prized, highly-valuable objects in themselves. They were decorated in diverse themes, and today they are important pieces of cultural significance. The famous blue-and-white *meiping* unearthed in 1972 from the joint tomb of Prince Ansu of Jingjiang and his wife is such an example. The mid-15th century blue-and-white *meiping* illustrates *Searching for Fragrance with Fine Wine* (*Visiting a Friend with Zither*), an ancient literati scene of a scholar visiting a friend for a feast with wine, and to seek plum blossoms together. The vase and the painting on it is a masterpiece that vividly portrays and reflects the ancient Chinese culture and literati themes of feasting with friends, plum blossoms and wine. The *meiping*, with its robust body, exquisite porcelain quality and uniformly lustrous white glaze, features an exquisite painting in four registers: the main body shows an official on his horse, with a servant carrying a *zither* in front of him, and another servant carrying wine and food behind him, set against a backdrop of lush mountains and flowing waters. The servant carries a lidded *meiping* and a large three-tiered food box on opposite ends of a shoulder pole. Notice that to avoid the rope securing the bottle affecting the lid, the rim of the lid does not extend beyond the mouth of the vase. Some *meiping* even have a

specially designed mouth rim where the inner part of the mouth is stepped to limit the extent of the lid. The method of tying a rope around the neck of the *meiping* was also practical and feasible. We can only imagine that this visit actually happened, and that the friends enjoyed a discussion of the painting on the *meiping*, and the fine wine poured from it!

Meiping were also used as funerary objects for royal families and nobles, to ensure a continuation of excellent banquets in the afterlife. The walls of the Liao dynasty Zhang Shiqing tomb in Xuanhua, Hebei are decorated with a colourful mural. One section of it shows men preparing a feast, and *meiping* being used for storage and for serving. Several large bottles, with covers still on, are neatly placed on a wooden low table ready to be opened. The mouths remain sealed and shown on the lids, a red *Zhang* seal announces the household. From the dirt on them, it appears that the storage jars had been buried up to their necks in the ground, presumably to lower the temperature of the contents and to preserve their quality. A fine porcelain wine vase for serving stands on the table next to wine cups.

MEIPING BECOMES A FLORAL MASTERPIECE

During the Qing Dynasty, the practical use of the *meiping* as a wine storage container and its ritual value as a burial object gradually faded away. Instead, its function as a flower vase was greatly emphasised, eventually evolving



Searching for Fragrance with Fine Wine (*Visiting Friends with a Zither*), vase, mid-15th century, porcelain with cobalt decoration, ht.38.2 cm., diam. at rim 6 cm., diam. at base 11 cm., Guilin Museum, Guilin



Zhang Shiqing tomb mural, Liao Dynasty (907-1125), Xuanhua city, Hebei Province, China.



Wu Rui Tu by G. Castiglione, 1732, hanging scroll, ink and colours on silk, 140 x 84 cm, The Palace Museum, Beijing.

into an ornamental craft item. To cater to this demand from the elite, *meiping* were not only crafted more exquisitely and elegantly, with innovations in shapes and glaze colors, there was also wide imitation of the forms of previous dynasties. Since *meiping* had by then become a tool for flower arrangement, they were all lidless. In the famous *Wu Rui* painting by Giuseppe Castiglione (1688–1766), a Jesuit priest who served as an artist at the Imperial court of three Qing emperors in China, a *meiping* is used as vase for holding cattail leaves, pomegranate flowers, and hollyhock flowers. A tray contains plums and cherries, with a few *zongzi* scattered to the side. The *zongzi*, cattails, and other items in the painting suggest that it was created for the traditional Chinese Dragon Boat Festival. In this instance, the *meiping* even played an important role in enhancing the festival vibe!

A PLACE IN HISTORY

The *meiping* symbolises both practicality and grace. Whilst its place at feasts throughout Chinese history is clear, whether in humble stoneware or exquisite porcelain, its enduring shape has seen it taking on different roles that have evolved with time. Today, the sight of a *meiping* at table still means that a good meal with wine can be anticipated! 🍷

Qinghua Maotai Baijiu, (2020), 7.5L, priced at around 135,000 SGD-200,000 SGD per bottle, Guizhou, China.



QIMIN SHI is a member of FOM. Her interests are cultural exchange by content creation and event organization.

WHEN NO CELEBRATION WAS COMPLETE WITHOUT *SIREH*

SONAM KUNDU AND MARIE DENEUX

TAKE READERS ON A JOURNEY THROUGH THE REGIONS WHERE LOCAL TRADITIONS OF CONSUMING BETEL LEAF WITH ARECA NUT WERE PRACTISED. KNOWN BY MANY NAMES, SIREH PLAYED AN INTEGRAL ROLE IN COMMUNAL CELEBRATIONS AND FEASTING

"...courtiers and women sat across draped in gold and pearls - each [necklace] half a yard long...water pitchers, jewelled drinking vessels of pure gold, silver betel boxes and long neck porcelain wine bottles were laid out...."

(Vagabond princess, Ruby Lal)

Princess Gulbadan (1523 -1603), aunt and advisor to the Mughal Emperor Akbar, describing the royals, dressed and seated for a Mughal feast she attended as a child.

Feasting and sharing food have not only been one of the earliest forms of entertainment humans would indulge in, they have also been occasions to display status, wealth and hospitality. Early Mughal period writings from India shed a light on the luxurious heights such banquets could reach in the 1500s. Princess Gulbadan describes, amongst the Mughal opulence, the presence of silver betel boxes. These boxes would hold all the ingredients to make a betel quid, or *paan*, as it is known in the Indian subcontinent. The betel box would hold trimmed betel leaves, slaked lime, *catechu* (a red herb), and areca nut shavings.

Paan would be offered to guests as they entered grand feasts. A betel-quid maker would wrap each guest's portion based on their preference, and the wrapping itself was a spectacle, a ritualised art form. A guest would start by choosing the right leaf. A dash of chalk-like lime paste was then sprinkled on the heart-shaped leaf, laid flat on the maker's palm. Areca nut was cut using special scissors and the shavings were added to this base. To add to the sensory experience, spices were sometimes added according to the guest's taste. Lastly, the leaf was rolled up into a cone and the betel quid was ready to chew!



Betel leaves and condiments laid out at a banquet given to Mughal Emperor Babur by the Mirzas (1507), 16th Century, British Library Archives.



A prince, fanned by an attendant, is taking paan, a refreshing and slightly narcotic mixture of betel nut and condiments wrapped in a leaf. 17th Century, Metropolitan Museum, New York.

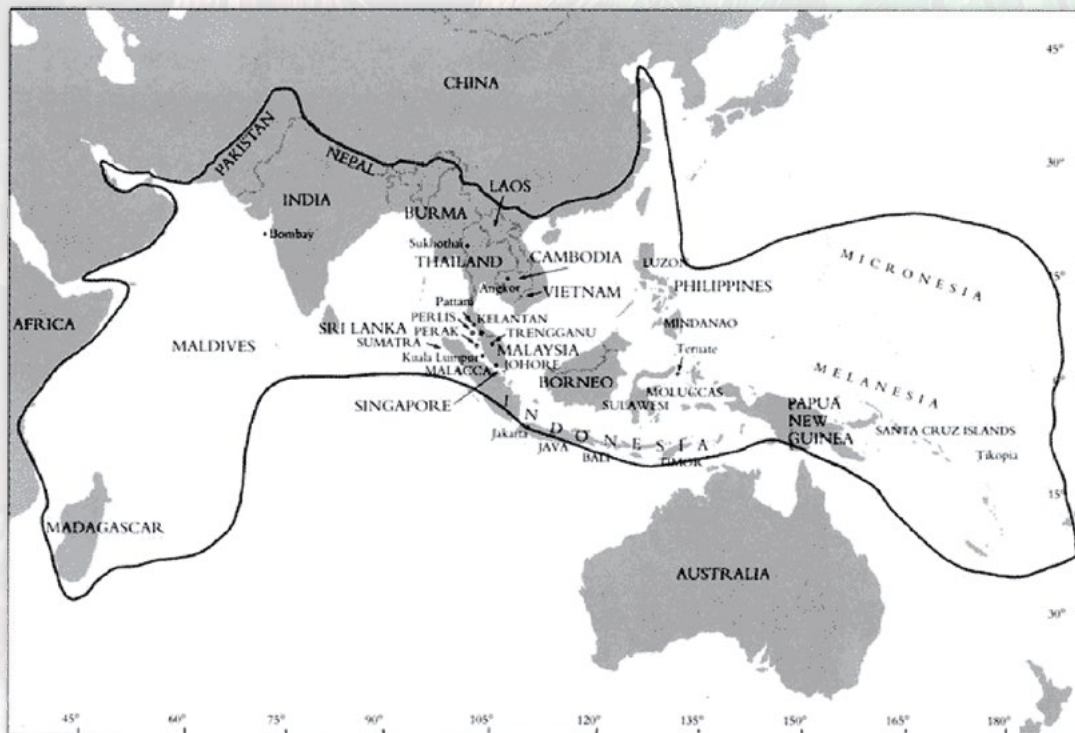
What would a feast be without betel chewing? Incomplete. *Paan* was a welcome gift, an appetite enhancer, a palate cleanser and a digestive – both preceding and following meals. Abu Fazal, historian and biographer of the Emperor Akbar, wrote: ‘eating of *paan* renders the breath agreeable’. *Paan*, he said, could both ‘make the hungry satisfied, and the satisfied, hungry.’ What he did not mention is that *paan* is a habit-forming stimulant and often becomes a necessity if regularly consumed.

Deeply associated with the display of friendship, *paan* was widely consumed by all social classes. Journal descriptions penned by Western travellers highlight peculiar sights they witnessed in the east. In the 1650s, Venetian traveller Niccolò Manucci (1638–1717) related his shock at the sight of the spit coming out of red-stained mouths – people regularly spit out the excessive red saliva produced due to chewing of a betel quid, but he thought they were spitting blood! French traveller Jean-Baptiste Travenier (1605–1689) made similar observations on his second voyage East, but he noted that ladies were especially in the habit of chewing betel leaf throughout the day, perhaps to achieve a reddish tint on their lips for a fashionable look.

FROM MADAGASCAR TO MICRONESIA

Even though Varanasi, India, one of the world's oldest cities, has been associated with the consumption of betel leaves for centuries, the practice may not have originated in India. According to historians, archaeological, botanical, and linguistic clues indicate that betel chewing may have arrived from Southeast Asia, probably from Indonesian islands, through the ancient trade links with the Kingdom of Kalinga (today's state of Odisha) in eastern India. The *pipper betel* plant is native to Southeast Asia, and archaeological evidence from ancient Duyong caves in the Philippines suggests its use in the region dates back to 2600 BCE. Written records hint at its use in festivities, feasting and celebrations. Sukhothai records from mediaeval Thailand describe celebrations with heaps of areca nuts.

The word ‘betel’ owes its origins to the Malayalam word *vettel*, ‘areca’ perhaps to *adakka*. The Malaysian island of Penang (also known as Pinang) literally translates to ‘the isle of areca nut’. In Malay-speaking regions, betel is widely known as *sireh*, or *sirih*, but it goes by many other names in Southeast Asia, like *bunga* in the Philippines or *kun-ya* in Myanmar. No matter what one likes to call it, betel is chewed across cultural divides in a vast area from Africa to Micronesia.



The areas where the practice of betel quid chewing was prevalent, Betel Chewing Traditions in Southeast Asia, Dawn Rooney.

BETEL AS A BEAUTIFUL BEGINNING

According to an ancient Khmer legend, the marriage alliance between a *naga* (sacred mythical snake) princess and an Indian King was sealed over a *sireh* quid. Their union is said to have given birth to the people of Cambodia, and traditional Khmer weddings mirror the legend: the celebrations cannot start until the couple-to-be has presented the elders in their families with betel quids, a custom known as *Pak Paeuk Pisa Sla*.

Weddings and betel go hand-in-hand across Asian communities, transcending both geographical and religious boundaries, from Buddhist traditions in Cambodia to Hindu ones in India and Muslim weddings in Malay communities. *Sireh* is a strong symbol of love in Malay societies: the areca nut and betel leaf, the main ingredients in a quid, are said to represent the bride and groom, and their coming together represents the balance of a harmonious marriage. The Malay words for proposal (*meminang*) and betrothal (*pinangan*) can be directly traced to the word *pinang* (areca nut). *Sireh* sets and containers of utmost opulence are still exchanged between families to introduce betrothal and wedding ceremonies.

To witness an example of their splendour, make your way to Singapore's Asian Civilisations Museum's Ancestors and Rituals gallery. There sits a stunning red leather and lacquer box with embroidery-like gold decoration running along all sides. Known as a *kotah sireh* (sireh box) in Malay, this red sireh container can be traced to a princess of the Johor-Riau-Lingga royal family, who lived in Singapore in the 1930s. Perhaps having received it as part of her wedding ceremony, she continued to use it for her personal or court use.



Young Javanese woman prepares betel quid, ca 1880. Image courtesy: Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies and Leiden University Library/Wikimedia Commons.



Betel box, Riau-Lingga archipelago, mid-19th century, leather, lacquer, gold. Image courtesy: Collection of the Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore.

More than simple gifts, betel quids were used in courts of the region as an icebreaker, for diplomatic purposes, and for deal-making. In Singapore, Malay, Indian, and Peranakan communities indulged in *sireh* for ceremonies, feasts and daily use. *Sireh* sets were prized possessions and functional accessories in feasts and gatherings. They were put on view and were seen as a status symbol that merged essential habits with a display of wealth. They were made of a range of materials: exotic shells to humble rattan, lacquer and enamel boxes. For the wealthy, no expense was spared - *sireh* sets were made of silver and even gold!

ISLAND FEASTING WITH SIREH: OWASA AND MANAFO

Communal feasting in Southeast Asia is a cultural and spiritual practice that transcends mere dining - it is a significant event that strengthens bonds within communities. In regions where indigenous communities revere their ancestors, rice and betel quids are popular offerings to kick off lively celebrations.

Owasa, the feast of merit, is the most important one on the island of Nias, one of the westernmost islands of the Indonesian archipelago. *Owasa* celebrations, which include an entire village, accompany many important life events and rites of passage, such as weddings, the construction of new houses, the erection of megalith stone structures, the acquisition of gold jewellery, or even celebrations of old age. Throwing these feasts elevates the host's rank in the social hierarchy of the village and gains them respect amongst their peers. *Manafu*, the tradition of chewing a betel quid, is part of these feasts. For important guests, the ingredients for betel chewing are packaged in bags called *bola nafa*. These bags, woven in dried and dyed grass, display the social status of the guest through the patterns woven on them. The practice of including betel in hospitality and feasting rituals is very much alive on Nias today.

5,000 kilometres away from Nias, at the easternmost point of the archipelago, lies the world's second largest island, Papua New Guinea – which remains to this day the highest daily consumer of betel quids. However, in many other parts of Asia, people have moved away from its everyday use owing to public health concerns. These range from public spitting, to addiction, to mouth and oesophageal cancers resulting from long-term use. Still, *sireh* continues to endure as a ritual practice and is relished as an occasional indulgence every now and then. 



Sireh set, stoneware, Vietnam, 15th or 16th century; metal mounts, Sulawesi, 19th century. Image courtesy: Collection of the Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore.

MARIE DENEUX AND SONAM KUNDU are both FOM docents enthusiastically guiding at ACM since 2023.

A VISIT TO A SPICE MARKET IN SINGAPORE

FROM THE EARLY SPICE PLANTATIONS TO MARKETS TODAY, **PEI SHYUAN YEO** GIVES THE READER AN INTRIGUING LOOK AT HOW SINGAPORE HAS PLAYED A VITAL ROLE IN THE GLOBAL SPICE TRADE FOR HUNDREDS OF YEARS

All photos are taken by the author, unless stated otherwise.



Nutmeg at Fort Canning Park.

In a city better known for its futuristic skyscrapers, it's hard to imagine Singapore as a naturalist's playground, home to fruits, spices, and nature's riches, unlike the concrete jungle that we think of today. However, this was the backdrop to Singapore in 1819 when the British East India Company established a trading settlement in Singapore. It was just a mere 3 years later that the first botanical garden was set up at Fort Canning.

SPICE EMPORIUM OF THE PAST

While the city was laying the groundwork for growing spices, it also served as a distribution node for edible products and ingredients from around the world, and as a collection centre for various regional ingredients from the Malay Archipelago, like nutmeg from the Maluku or Spice Islands, pepper from Sumatra, etc. Think of Singapore as a food emporium from which sought-after spices, like nutmeg, clove, and pepper would be shipped to Europe where the demand for medicinal and culinary uses meant that they could be traded for up to ten times the original value.

Not content with just the import and export of spices, Sir Stamford Raffles – founder of colonial Singapore – envisioned developing the settlement into a haven where spices could be grown and subsequently traded. In 1822, he established Singapore's first botanical and experimental garden with 125 nutmeg trees, 1000 nutmeg seeds, and 450 clove trees. This was the first attempt to establish a spice industry in Singapore.

Spice plantations initially turned in sizable profits, in particular those cultivating nutmeg, and 'nutmeg mania' swept across the island. However, just as quickly as the spice industry began, a beetle infestation meant that the plantation and dreams of the cultivators were quickly wiped out. Other plantations' cash crops also ended in misfortune, some reasons cited being the poor quality of soil and lack of seasonal variation.



Dried nutmeg.

SPICE MARKETS OF THE PRESENT

Fast forwarding 200 years to the present day, there is nowhere better to learn the story of spices in Singapore than at the Malay cultural heartland of the Geylang Serai market. *Serai* refers to lemongrass in the Malay language, which gives a clue to the historical origins of the neighbourhood. These came from the Yemeni-Arab families who owned large plots of land where lemongrass and citronella were cultivated in the area.



Dried spices in containers at Siti Flower Power.



Assortment of gingers and flowers at Siti Flower Power.



Madam Siti and her ready-to-drink jamu.

The market has its origins in several make-shift markets in the Geylang Serai area that go back to pre-World War II. It wasn't until the urban plan of 1962 that the Geylang Serai Development Scheme included the building of a proper market. Over the years, the market has undergone several upgrades and expansions.

The design of the current market, upgraded in 2009, draws inspiration from the architecture of a traditional Malay kampung (village) house with its high-sloping roofs, timber panels, woven panels, and motifs. As one of the city's oldest settlements, Geylang Serai has been a focal point for the Malay community, particularly during the fasting month of Ramadan, where it hosts a festive bazaar with clothes, food, and festive items for the Hari Raya celebrations.

There are three parts to the Geylang Serai market - consisting of the 'wet market' on the ground level, and the cooked food market and textile market on the upper floor. With 63 cooked food stalls and 302 market stalls, this is the third-largest hawker market in Singapore.

The term 'wet market' is derived from the wet floors caused by the melting of ice from the seafood. The wet market is divided into the 'wet' section where fresh produce, meat, and fish are sold and the 'dry' section where hard to find Malay herbs and spices, dried seafood, beans, and noodles are sold.

Madam Siti Nurhuda Binte Saleh, owner of Siti Flower Power is one of the many vendors at the Geylang Serai wet market. As the name of the shop suggests, she sells an assortment of flowers, generally used for *bunga rampai* (Malay potpourri). It is usually made from pandan leaf strips and an assortment of fragrant flowers.

Look a little closer and you will see that she also sells medicinal plants and ingredients of various sizes, shapes, and forms that are used for *jamu* – an ancient system of herbal healing that has its roots in Indonesia. *Jamu* collectively refers to herbal tonics, and the spices that are used for this medicinal brew are the ones that are also



Main façade of Geylang Serai Market.

found in Malay kitchens such as ginger, turmeric, tamarind, chilis, etc. *Jamu* is based on the concept that food is medicine, not unlike the famous quote from Hippocrates : "Let food be thy medicine and medicine be thy food"

Madam Siti concocts ready-to-drink jamu from the dried ingredients that she sells for added convenience. Her brew is made primarily from *ibu kunyit*, loosely translated to 'mother turmeric'. This is the main rhizome of the turmeric and is highly prized for its medicinal properties which are used in traditional Malay healing.

Madam Siti shared that she started selling jamu approximately 7 years ago after taking over the business from her late mother. The motivation for selling this herbal drink came from having to work long hours at the market. Falling sick would be tricky because it would mean a loss of income. As she did not

want to have an over-reliance on Western medicine, she started looking at natural remedies of the Orang Asli, the indigenous community of the region.

Beyond seeing food as medicine, the Malays also display an intimate understanding of ingredients and their culinary use. Garlic and ginger are not just flavour enhancers but also used as natural tenderisers and natural preservatives, for example, garlic and ginger are ingredients used in the marination of a local kebab known as *satay*. This marinade enables the meat to be more easily digestible and also sustains for longer hours in the open without refrigeration, which is important in the hot and humid climate of Southeast Asia.

Spices are something that we take for granted. The next time you see spices at the market or supermarket, think about their long and varied history and how they have come so far to reach you at your kitchen table. **P**

PEI SHUYUAN YEO is an ACM-trained docent with a passion for the history of Singapore and Southeast Asia.

COCONUTS: THE GLOBAL JOURNEY FROM TREE TO TABLE

LEE SHIN JIE EXPLORES THE HISTORY OF COCONUTS, THEIR MANY USES AND POPULARITY IN DISHES ALL OVER THE WORLD

The mention of coconut will invariably conjure up the image of an idyllic sandy beach, a gentle breeze, and the soothing sound of waves.

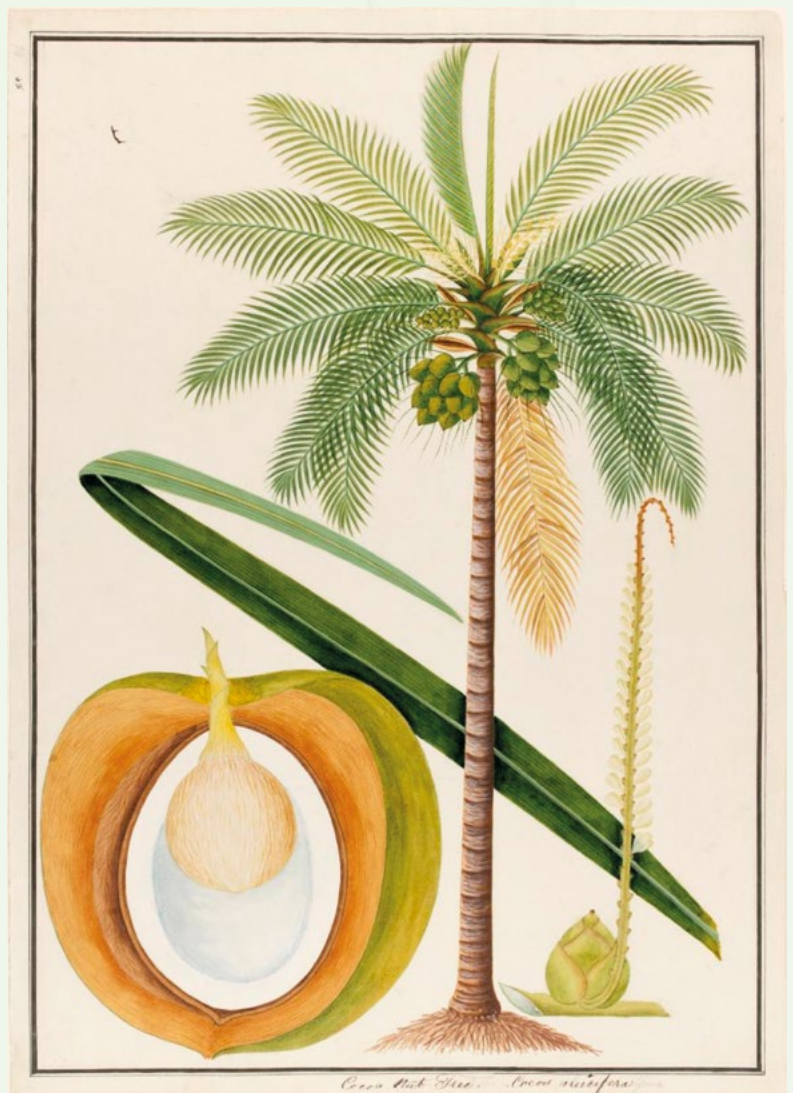
In recent years, there has been a boom in the coconut industry when it made the list of superfoods. However, it is not a newcomer. Coconut is a ubiquitous item that has been around for centuries and for Asia, since antiquity.

For us Southeast Asians, this palm even made it into our school curriculum where the multi-uses of the whole tree were taught and its praises were literally sung (in children's songs). Since the whole tree is useable, it was dubbed the Swiss army knife of the plant kingdom.

ORIGIN

In the botanical sense, coconut is neither a fruit, nor a nut, but rather, possesses qualities of both. The name is derived from the palm *cocos nucifera*. Whilst the origin of the word *cocos* is unclear, *nucifera* means nut-bearing. Out of the over 1,500 species of palm trees in the world, *cocos nucifera* is the only one that produces coconuts. The two largest coconut bearing palm varieties are the 'tall' and 'dwarf' palms. The tall variety takes longer than the dwarf palms to bear fruit – eight to ten years as opposed to three years. Not to mention, the coconut water from the dwarf palm is sweeter and more flavoursome. Furthermore, shorter trees mean ease and efficiency of harvesting. The downside is that they are less robust and disease resistant.

In order to produce coconuts, the palms have to grow along the equator – 23 degrees in both directions from the equator to be exact – in tropical hot and humid climates. Recent genetics studies of these palms suggest that they were likely first cultivated in South and Southeast Asia then spread across the Indian-Pacific region following the Polynesian migration.



Coconut Palm from vol 1 of Natural History Drawings, The Complete William Farquhar Collection, Malay Peninsula 1803-1818.



Ketupat, rice steamed in coconut leaves woven pouch, a dish that has traditional, religious, as well as cultural significance. The crossed weaves are seen as representing one's mistakes and sins, with the white rice cake representing purity and deliverance from sins after observing one's religious obligations. (Image from Wikipedia by Sakurai Midori.)

THE COCONUT MYTH

In Malay, the word for coconut is *kelapa*, not to be confused with *kepala*, which means head. There is a running joke in the region where non-native speakers would often cause alarm or even altercations by mixing up the two vocabularies in a conversation. Having said that, the myths surrounding the creation of coconut, more often than not, involved a human head. To be fair, the three natural marks on a coconut do bear a remarkable resemblance to the empty eye sockets and nostril of a human skull which no doubt stirred the imagination of people in more ancient times.

THE TRAVELS OF COCONUT AROUND THE WORLD

Even as early as the 6th century, there were records of Arab traders on the spice route picking up coconuts as they went.

Coconut was a vital and valued commodity during thriving times of wind-powered maritime trade. It was a useful source of both food and water during long voyages. It was also used as ballast, dunnage and even trade currencies. And coir (coconut husk fibre) was especially essential as cordage for sailing ships. By the 16th century,



Ondeh-ondoh and Kuih Lapis. Ondeh-ondoh is stuffed with Gula Malacca, coconut palm sugar, and rolled in grated coconut. Kuih Lapis is made with coconut milk and brushed with coconut oil. (Image by author.)

the long-recognised trade value of coconut was noticed by the royalties of Spain and Portugal, which led to the Portuguese establishing their own coconut plantations in their colonies in the Cabo Verde archipelago, West and East African coasts, the Caribbean, and Brazil. The Spanish also established plantations in their New World colonies by the 1670s.

The value of coconut in the maritime world was obvious in a 1789 incident where the theft of a single coconut from Captain William Bligh's private larder resulted in cutting half the rum ration of the entire crew as punishment.

COCONUT IN CUISINES

In Asia, coconut has a long history in culinary usage, both in sweet and savoury form, especially in South and Southeast Asian cuisines resulting in festive must-haves such as various forms of curries, coconut *burfi* (Indian sweets), *rendang*, *khanom thuai* (Thai dessert), amongst others.

The trade relations with the Arabian Peninsula, led to the incorporation of coconut in Middle Eastern cuisine such as the Egyptian *sobia* drink enjoyed during Ramadan, festive favourite semolina cake mixed with grated coconut, known as *hareesh* or *basbousa*, just to name a few.

Even though Africa had pre-colonial encounters with coconut via Arab traders, many coconut-related dishes were developed during colonial times, such as coconut crab curry, *qumbe* (coconut candy), *peri-peri* sauce (of Portuguese influence), and many others. The wine produced from the Spanish coconuts in Mexico likely made use of processes developed in Spain's Philippines colonies where there is a pre-colonial tradition of making a coconut alcoholic beverage known as *tuba*.

During colonial times in America, both dried and fresh coconut were widely used in various recipes, often in desserts. The practice of using coconut to make sweets was also found in various other western colonies and Europe following the boom in maritime trade. This brought about culinary delights of mixed cultural origins such as the famous Australian lamington cake (traditional Victorian sponge cake dipped in chocolate from the New World, covered in grated coconut), and coconut macaroons with a French or Italian link.

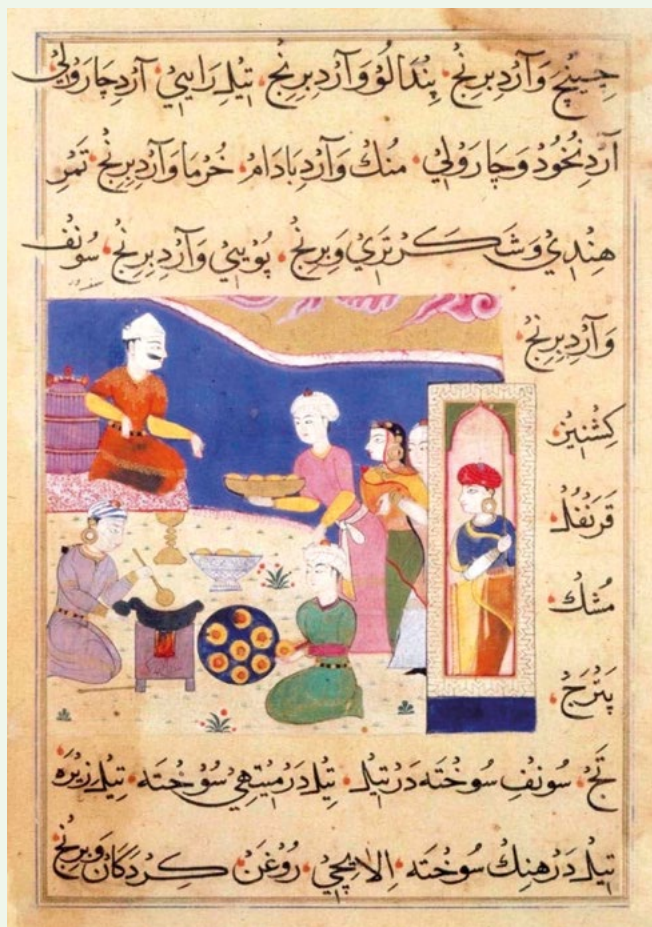
After the invention of refining coconut oil to make it palatable, it found its way into margarine. In late 19th century England, small businesses started using coconut oil to fry fish and chips, and even to-date, coconut oil is said to be the healthiest option for deep-frying fish.



Nasi Lemak served on Singapore Airlines. Popular dish of the region with rice cooked in coconut milk. Once a cheap, ubiquitous breakfast option, wrapped with banana leaves and newspaper into a pyramid shaped packet, that can now be found even on fine dining tables. (Image by author's family member.)



Noix de Coco for Puddings, Pies and Pastry, circa 1870-1900. 19th century American trade card with controversial illustrations. During their heyday between 1876-1904, these trade cards were a cheap yet effective way of advertising commercial products. Coconut product related trade cards of the 19th century often include controversial or racist caricature portrayals of African characters as viewed in modern times. These illustrations are valuable evidence of the abhorrent conditions and treatment of people or slaves at plantations of that time. (Image from digitalcommonwealth.org)



Nī'matnāmah Naṣir al-Dīn Shāhī, a page on fried delights. A medieval Indian cookbook written in Persian with recipes using coconuts as ingredients in various recipes, including a sweet version of samosa stuffed with spiced cream and coconut, and a sherbet recipe that calls for coconut milk. (Image from Wikipedia.)

OTHER COCONUT PRODUCTS

As noted in the early 16th century by Antonio Pigafetta, a Venetian nobleman, other coconut products such as oil and vinegar were also on the market at that time. Whilst in the homes of European elites, coconut shells were fashioned into goblets of gold and silver, some embellished with precious gems, a practice that pre-dates the Age of Exploration. Coconuts were also used medicinally in parts of medieval Europe.

Industrial coconut oil, made from copra, the dried meat of the coconut, was used to make soap and candles. The usage was so widespread that by 1892, the Portuguese developed the largest company-owned coconut plantations in their Mozambique colony. This is an industrial product that continues today.

MODERN COCONUT SUPERFOOD

The rise of consumerism in superfoods resulted in new and inventive ways to adapt the usage of coconut as an edible ingredient. Coconut flour being naturally gluten free became a good substitute in baked goods for those with such dietary restrictions. The natural sweetness and creaminess of coconut cream or milk became perfect for desserts, cutting down on the consumption of sugar.

The creation and adaptation of coconut food products in a myriad of delightful new dishes might just be the healthier option to satisfy our sweet tooth, especially during a feast! 🍫

FOR FURTHER READING:

Coconut: A Global History by Constance Kirker and Mary Newman

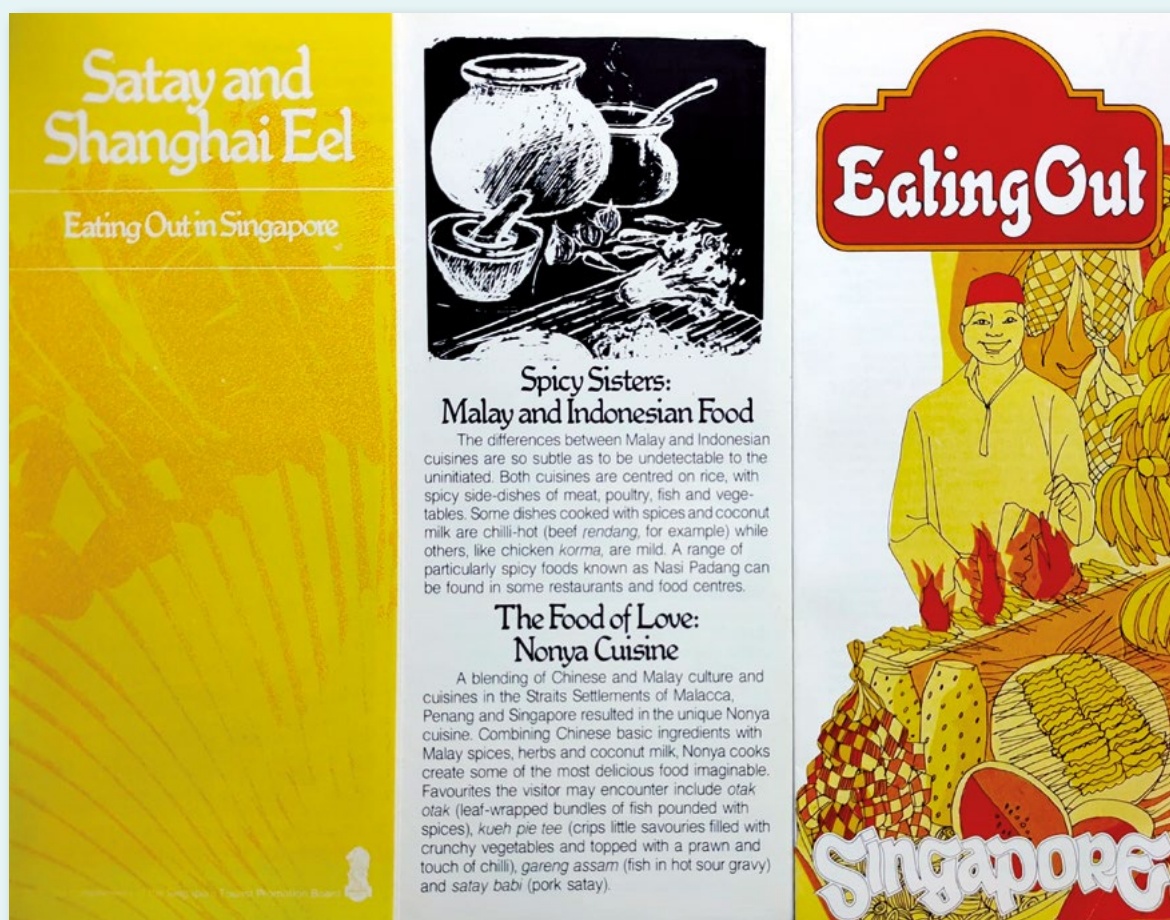
LEE SHIN JIE guides at Asian Civilisations Museum.

SAVOURING SINGAPORE: GASTRO TOURISM IN RETROSPECT (1964-2009)

TANG SIEW NGOH RETRACED SINGAPORE'S JOURNEY TO BECOMING A GOURMET PARADISE

Photos by the author from her collection of marketing collaterals published by the Singapore Tourism Board.

Feasting while holidaying is more than just eating for sustenance. It's about embracing new experiences, understanding different cultures, and creating lasting memories. These elements constitute what tourism academics termed as 'Gastro Tourism' since 2003. Pre-dating this classification, the Singapore Tourism Board (STB) has been promoting gastro tourism since its first establishment as the Singapore Tourist Promotion Board (STPB) in 1964. Employing five evolving destinations branding from 1964-2009, STB collaborated with the public and private sectors, as well as the community, to establish Singapore as a premier gourmet destination, complementing its other positioning of Singapore as an ideal location for meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions (MICE), educational and medical tourism.



"Satay and Shanghai Eel: Eating Out in Singapore." (A collage of STPB's Surprising Singapore marketing collateral).



"In Singapore where 30 culinary worlds come together, every meal is a feast." (STPB's Surprising Singapore marketing collateral).

With limited natural scenic resources and built attractions in the 1960s, STB leveraged on Singapore's strategic location in Asia and her multi-racial population to offer visitors, particularly non-Asians, an 'exotic' *Instant Asia* cultural and dining experience, reflective of the country's diverse ethnic tapestry – Chinese, Malay, Indian, and others (CMIO). STPB's marketing collaterals invariably featured 'must-try' street food like satay, roti prata, laksa, chilli crab and Hainanese chicken rice from the staples of Singapore's 'hawker culture'. To enable visitors to savour at one single venue the best of hawker food, STPB launched the Rasa Singapura Food Centre (1978-89) with 29 hawkers selected from 700 applicants to promote their cuisines. Hawker culture with its bustling atmosphere and array of affordable, delicious dishes became a unique selling point after the National Environment Agency resettled 18,000 street hawkers by 1986 into purpose-built hawker centres with proper sanitation and amenities.

EVOLUTION OF THE DESTINATION BRANDS AND GASTRONOMY PRODUCT

Capitalising on Singapore's changing tourism landscape in the first four decades (1970s-2009), STB refined Singapore's destination branding. New festivals, tourist attractions, hotels, food and beverage (F&B) establishments in settings ranging from air-conditioned food courts to alfresco dining at the Singapore River added new ingredients to the gastro tourism product. Spicing up the culinary offerings too were local food ambassadors cum consultants who started restaurants, wrote cookbooks/guides, conducted cooking classes, trained chefs from around the world, hosted television shows and curated culinary events locally and abroad. Illustrious examples included firstly Seetoh Kok Fye who created Makansutra in 1997, a food consultancy company that produces a food guide, television series and organises food events. He documented and promoted Singapore's street food culture and his food guide (first published

in 1998) used a novel chopstick rating system whereby the maximum score of three pairs of chopsticks carried the now-famous catchphrase, 'Die, die must try!' While Violet Oon championed Peranakan cuisines, Aziza Ali opened Singapore's first Malay fine dining restaurant, Aziza's at Emerald Hill in 1979, to showcase Malay cuisines accompanied by traditional Malay dances. Finally, Devagi Sanmugam, the 'Spice Queen of Singapore' produced numerous cookbooks such as *Banana Leaf Temptations* (1985) and the award-winning self-deprecatory title, *I Am A Rice Cooker!* (2005), enriching the Indian culinary heritage.

New elements infused into Singapore's multi-cultural culinary heritage were featured in the evolving destination branding from *Instant Asia* to *Surprising Singapore* (1977-1985) with the marketing image expanded to include *A Magic Place of Many Worlds* (1986-1994), followed by *New Asia – Singapore: So easy to enjoy, so hard to forget* (1995-2003) and *Uniquely Singapore* (2004-2009) where visitors could experience beyond words the city's blend of the best of the modern world and rich cultures.

While the marketing media and platforms expanded, Singapore remained positioned as a *Gourmet Centre* or a *City of feasts*, having no rivals in terms of sheer variety which was not limited to *101 Meals* (title of a STPB mailer). Visitors could have *Breakfast with Ah Meng* (Singapore Zoo's iconic orang utan), a unique experience available from 1982 -2008 or enjoy "eatertainment" at the Rainforest Café at Liang Court (1998-2011) with animatronics in a simulated jungle setting. Alternatively, visitors at the Alkaff Mansion could savour the lavish Rijstaffel (a spicy and aromatic combination of Indonesian/Dutch cuisines) announced with a regal gong followed by a procession of waiters and waitresses bringing in the assortment of dishes.

Two award-winning culinary events which became annual events in Singapore were the highly successful Singapore Food Festival (SFF), and the globally-recognized World Gourmet Summit (WGS) inaugurated in 1994 and 1997 respectively. WGS diners would enjoy the finest cuisine and wines in exciting programmes like 'Masterclasses, Masterchef safaris, epicurean delights and vintner's dinner'. From its early days of featuring local delicacies and culinary traditions, carnival-style food events, cooking



Great food comes together to create the face of new Asia cuisine. (Text along the hair). (A collage of STB's New Asia Singapore marketing collaterals).

demonstrations by renowned chefs, food-related trails and record-breaking feats, the SFF had evolved to showcase also unique dining experiences such as the 'New Asia Cuisine' involving local chefs reinterpreting traditional dishes, combining European culinary techniques with Asian flavours, or fusing Western ingredients with Asian preparation techniques. This innovation appealed to a global audience interested in fusion and experimental cuisine.

APPRECIATING DIFFERENT CULTURES

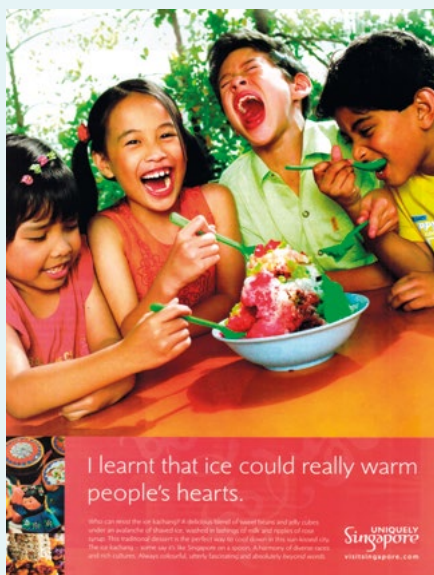
The SFF also aimed to educate tourists about local dining etiquette and the cuisines' cultural and religious significance. For example, it is considered inappropriate to use one's bare left hand to eat or to gesticulate with chopsticks or leave them standing upright in a bowl of food. While 'Have you eaten yet?' is a familiar Chinese greeting akin to asking, 'How are you?', the Malay word *rojak* (a salad drenched with peanut sauce) is frequently used in local parlance to describe any kind of mix, such as the ethnic mix of Singapore's population.

The refreshing *ice kacang* symbolizes "A harmony of diverse races and rich cultures" as embodied in its ingredients: the *gula melaka* (palm sugar) and *attap-chee* (mangrove palm seeds) are Malay favourites, the colourful syrups reflect Indian predilections while the red beans are considered a 'warming' food by the Chinese. Laksa, chicken rice, and mee goreng exhibit culinary borrowing and hybridization too. But locals, regardless of their cultural identity, have one common *Uniquely Singapore* trait which is 'Reserving Seats with Tissue Packs', a quintessential way of *chope-ing* a seat at hawker centres. The preparation of iconic food items also became the subject of playful copy-writing like the technique of making the favourite Indian *roti prata*. Likewise, *teh tarik* is tea that is 'pulled and not stirred'.

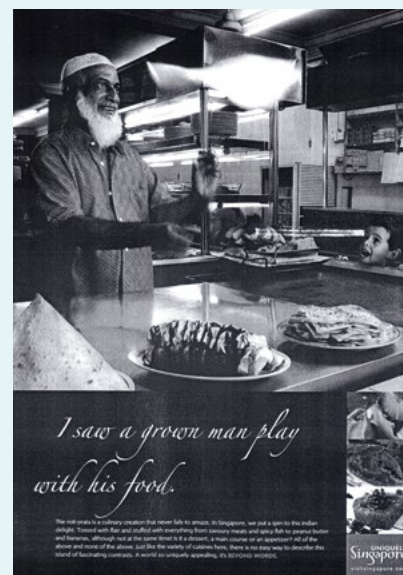
Since the 1970s, less adventurous visitors could easily find their 'comfort' food from home as Singapore began to host western fast-food joints offering them familiar burgers, pizzas, pasta besides local adaptations like McSpicy burgers.



"It's easy to see why diet books seldom make it to Singapore bestseller list." From scrumptious cuisine to pampering herbal spas, always pack an appetite for pleasure when heading for Singapore. It's a world of hedonistic temptations that are sinfully beyond words. (STB's Uniquely Singapore free postcard).



"I learnt that ice could really warm people's hearts." (STB's Uniquely Singapore marketing collateral).



"I saw a grown man play with his food." (STB's Uniquely Singapore marketing collateral).

Specialty restaurants offering East Asian, European and even South American cuisines mushroomed to serve a large expatriate community, migrants, and locals with a penchant for foreign food, in keeping with Singapore's broader economic strategy since 1972 to be a global city.

In the reverse direction, tourists in their own countries and Singapore's own diaspora abroad could enjoy Singapore's culinary delights at restaurants or bakeries set up by enterprising Singaporeans like KF Seetoh. They could also find Singapore food products like kaya, popiah skin, and mixes for laksa, chicken rice, etc. in retail outlets and supermarkets overseas. Besides STB's culinary promotions abroad with food ambassadors, agencies like the International Enterprise Singapore and Singapore food manufacturers helped in the export of Singapore's culinary products.

CONCLUSION

From humble beginnings in the 1960s to becoming a gourmet capital by 2009, Singapore's journey in promoting gastro tourism is a testament to the effective collaboration between STB, other public and private sector agencies and individuals, and partnerships with international food networks including Michelin Guide, and participation in global culinary events. Whether dining at a bustling hawker center or a chic Michelin-starred restaurant, there's something for every palate and budget to experience beyond words Singapore's gastro tourism product. It is thus no surprise that Singapore's Hawker Culture achieved UNESCO's inscription as an intangible cultural heritage in December 2020. ^P

FOR FURTHER READING:

From Sushi in Singapore to Laksa in London: Globalising Foodways and the Production of Economy and Identity by Lily Kong, *Cultural Connections*, Volume 4.

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

REVEL IN NATEE UTARIT'S EXPLORATION OF CYCLICAL TIME

DURRIYA DOHADWALA EXPLORES STPI'S LATEST EXHIBITION, *DÉJÀ VU: BUDDHA IS HIDING*

Unless otherwise noted, all photos courtesy of the artist and STPI – Creative Workshop & Gallery, Singapore.

The first time I saw Natee Utarit's (b.1970) artworks was at his maiden museum retrospective at the Singapore Art Museum in 2010 (*After Painting*). As a newly minted docent of contemporary Asian art, his style disoriented me. The monumental works in the classical style of western painting appeared to be a medley of East and West. Portraits, still lifes, landscapes, and photographs intermingling with familiar motifs and symbols suggested meanings deeper than what the eyes could see.

DÉJÀ VU

14 years on, Utarit's work is still a pleasure to navigate both as a viewer and docent. His work has opened new ways of looking and thinking about Western influences on Thailand's art and culture through the medium of painting and photography. In 2019 Utarit began a new series titled *Déjà vu* that, rather than examining the effects of one culture on another, shifted the emphasis to the meeting of two cultures. It began in the National Archaeological Museum of Naples where Utarit observed something familiar in the stance of



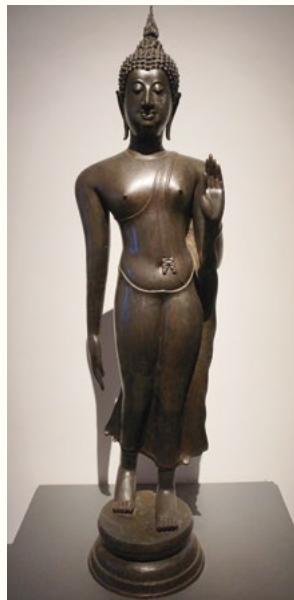
Natee Utarit in the STPI artist studio.

the Roman copies of Greek statues. In particular, the copy of Doryphoros' image by the fifth century Greek sculptor Polykleitos, brought about a sense of *déjà vu* of the image of the walking Buddha (Sukhothai era – 14th century) which was very familiar to him. The more than two metres tall Roman statue shows the warrior stepping out with his right foot and with his left arm extended to carry a spear. For Utarit, the stance was evocative of what is known in Thailand as Buddha's walking pose or Leela attitude. Thus began the series of artworks that imagined Buddha's hypothetical journey to Naples.

Utarit explains that "according to the version of history that was taught to us, people from other cultures were enemies or rivals, we think our culture was created exclusively by our ancestors. We have never been courageous enough to accept that our customs and traditions might have been influenced or moulded by other cultural powers."

DÉJÀ VU: BUDDHA IS HIDING

The artworks in the *Déjà vu* series speculate on the possibility of an alternative and more plural art history where Southeast Asian Buddhism encounters Greco-Roman culture and opens a place of constructive interchange. Utarit's third and final exhibition of the series is at STPI Creative Workshop & Gallery. *Déjà vu: Buddha is Hiding* showcases more than



(left) Polykleitos's Doryphoros, Roman marble copy in the National Archaeological Museum, Naples, via Wikimedia Commons.

(right) Walking Buddha, 14th century Sukhothai, National Museum, Bangkok, via Wikimedia Commons.



(left) Natee Utarit, *HEAVEN*, 2024, Etching on paper, 96 x 89 cm.

(right) Natee Utarit, *HEAVEN* (detail), 2024, Etching on paper, 96 x 89 cm.

40 artworks in print and paper pulp that juxtapose Eastern and Western imagery, including Buddhist symbols and Greco-Roman architecture, in a feast where past and present, East and West collide. While works in earlier exhibitions of the series have ranged from sculptures, paintings, photographs, and woodcuts, the 40 artworks in this exhibition contains works made solely in the STPI print workshop. Screen printing, etching, woodblocks, moulded paper pulp, embossing, and flocking are some of the print techniques used. While each work has veiled perspectives, three sets of artworks encapsulate the essence of the exhibition for me.

The first set – *Torso* (2024), *Utopia* (2024), *Archetype* (2024), *Apollo 14* (2024), etc. – are fragments of anatomical forms and shapes of clothing that allude to ancient Buddha statues. Sculpted from paper that was cast and hand-painted in STPI's own paper mill, some have touches of graffiti embedded in them which hint at illicit erasure as seen through the lens of European colonialism. Utarit has deliberately left out the head, hands, and fingers from these fragments to leave it unclear whom the fragments belong to. The disjointed statues also allude to the illegal trafficking of important historical artefacts across time, a phenomenon that occurs across both Eastern and Western geographies.



(top) Natee Utarit, *TORSO*, 2024, Painted STPI handmade cast paper, dimensions variable.

(bottom) Natee Utarit, *APOLLO 14*, 2024, Painted STPI handmade cast paper, dimensions variable.



Natee Utarit, *THE VERSE (BLACK)*, 2024, Debossing and gold pigment on STPI handmade paper, 59 x 39 x 1 cm each (12 panels).

At first glance, *Heaven* (2024) appears to be a highly detailed etching of an impressive Western cathedral. However, a closer examination reveals Buddha himself peeking out among the columns of this Western facade. Both the statues and the etching call to mind how certain aspects of history are left forgotten or overlooked as dominant narratives are written by the powerful.

Verse (2024) are two sets of 12 tablets each that have been produced through the process of debossing (depressed from original surface) on STPI handmade paper to create a surface that mimics an aged, tablet-like object.

The debossed text comes from a booklet titled *Khandha Vimutti and Samangidhamma* (c. 1930) by Phra Bhūridatta (Mun) of Wat Srpratumwan. It is a semi-poetical text in Thai on the teachings of Buddha, written in an unusual and refreshing way.

The other works in the exhibition are equally captivating. Each has a story that becomes apparent on closer examination. Together, they challenge us to imagine a hybrid place and time in which the Greco-Roman culture and Buddhist Southeast Asia encounter and interact in a constructive exchange where a new understanding of the overlooked stories and histories of the East can be forged.

The exhibition runs at STPI until 1 December 2024. FOM guided tours are on Thursday (11 a.m.) and Sat and Sun (2 p.m.) More information can be found on STPI's website.



Natee Utarit, *THE VERSE (BLACK)*, 2024, Debossing and gold pigment on STPI handmade paper, 59 x 39 x 1 cm each (12 panels).

DURRIYA DOHADWALA is an independent arts writer and a FOM Docent at SAM and STPI.



The buzz of the morning is in full swing.



Dedicated FOM team members always ready to meet and greet you.



Auditorium packed; audience captivated.



Baba Cedric Tan wows the crowd with his Sarong Kebaya stories.

RISE AND SHINE, OPEN MORNING TIME!

TABITHA MANRESA ON THE ANNUAL CELEBRATION OF ALL THINGS FOM AND A CHANCE TO GATHER WITH NEW AND SEASONED MEMBERS AND FRIENDS AT FOM'S OPEN MORNING

When I was a child, fall meant the onset of a new school year, shorter days, and crisp cool evenings that lead toward colder winter months. New shoes and stationery items, crisp notebooks full of empty pages waiting for scribbles of newfound information and doodles of boredom as the school day slugged on. Fall for some of our members is no less exciting as trainees begin heading into our docent training programmes. Training programmes and FOM activities galore were all on beautiful display, attracting the attention of the public invitees and FOM members looking for clever ways to fill their fall diary. And thanks to our amazing hospitality team, a stunning array of delectable treats and teas were available to lend pep to the step.

Nearly 20 per cent of our active membership are docents, many of whom guide at more than one of our twelve museums, heritage institutions, and heritage trails. Training programmes for Asian Civilisations Museum, National Museum of Singapore, The Peranakan Museum, and our Japanese docent programme are currently in full swing. Programmes with January start dates are now recruiting, namely the Changi Chapel and Museum, Indian Heritage Centre, and Kampong Gelam Heritage Trail.

I asked one newly minted docent what she thought of her recent training with the Indian Heritage Centre. She admitted that she had a preconceived idea of what she was going to learn about, and what she walked away with was a wider understanding of the story of Southeast Asia as a whole, not just Indian culture and history in Singapore. She's excited to give you a tour so check the FOM web site for timings of tours at IHC and for all our museums, institutions, and heritage trails.



Japanese docents bring cheer to the morning.

But what are the remaining 80 per cent of members doing to fill their blank calendar spaces? Singing for seniors, digging their noses into novels, trotting around the globe, watching films, talking textiles, exploring Singapore, checking out the latest theatre production, deep diving into history, Monday Morning Lectures, and Friday with Friends? It might be easier to say what they aren't doing. If the September 9th Open Morning gave us any insight, they are definitely not staring at blank diary pages.

A SPECIAL GUEST

On this bright Monday Morning, special guest Baba Cedric Tan was the only person in the room able to settle this active bunch into their seats and quiet the lively cacophony of chatter. His captivating talk, *The Melakan Nyonya Sarong Kebaya*, stitched together hundreds of years of the fashion tradition of the sarong kebaya, tracing its early roots and drawing on Portuguese inspirations. We learned that the Peranakan way is "improve upon it and make it yours." Indeed, the women did and through time we saw the complexity, colour, and culture emerge before our eyes.

Dangling earrings for unmarried women only, elaborately hand-knitted camisoles peeking out through delicate and translucent fine fabrics, scalloped edges, lace edges, bright colours of celebration, and dark colours of mourning, how to wear, where to wear, pinning from the front and pinning to the side, and all the precious glittery gems to match. It was a whirlwind of beauty through the years woven together with lovely personal stories of Baba Tan's family photos and stories. His passion for fashion shone through and reminds us of why we all gather through FOM: to celebrate history, art, and culture together.

With so much to look forward to in the coming months of FOM activities and events, it's difficult to decide what to put into the calendar pages. But one thing is for sure, if there are doodles in the border, they are not done out of boredom. Happy exploring FOM Singapore, we look forward to seeing you out and about!

TABITHA MANRESA is a docent at URA/FOM Chinatown Heritage Trails, Gillman Barracks, and STPI Creative Workshop & Gallery. She enjoys travel and torturing her pipa instructor on a weekly basis.



It's not an FOM event without a table full of tasty treats. PASSAGE magazine covers are the icing on the cake.



The Peranakan Museum team's top stitched, top-notch docents at the ready.



Kampong Gelam Heritage Trails ready to take you for a walk and talk.



Indian Heritage Centre docents ready to sign-up the curious minds.

JOURNEY OF A HUNDRED YEARS

MADE IN SHANGHAI BUT DISPLAYED IN SAN FRANCISCO AND SINGAPORE, **ALPANA SINGH** DISCOVERS WHY THESE ICONIC PAGODA MODELS HAD SUCH AN INCREDIBLE JOURNEY SPANNING A CENTURY

Photos by Aman John.



The exhibition (*Pagoda Odyssey 1915: From Shanghai to San Francisco*), currently on display at the Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore showcases eighty-four delightful, hand-crafted wooden pagoda models for visitors and enthusiasts to admire. The models are replicas of some of China's iconic pagodas, made at a scale of 1:50.

When you visit the exhibition, not only will you view the pieces, but also learn about their incredible journey, that took place more than 100 years ago. You will meet the young artists at the Tushanwan Orphanage, who painstakingly crafted them, and find out why the models were finally displayed at the *Panama Pacific International Exposition*, in San Francisco, almost 10,000 kms away from Shanghai.

THE INDIAN CONNECTION

Pagodas trace their origins to Indian Buddhist *stupas*, which house the relics of the Buddha and revered monks. The religion reached China around the 1st century CE, and eventually the pagoda developed into its current Chinese version. It is a tower-like, multi-storied structure, with Chinese elements and architecture. Pagodas are used not only to store relics, but also religious texts and artefacts. They may also function as prayer centers, and Buddhist monuments, and many times are built to honour somebody.



The Dragon Flower Pagoda.

GENESIS OF THE PAGODA MODELS

This exhibition transports you to 20th century Shanghai, China, where the journey of the pagoda models began. Shanghai, at the time, was an emerging, important metropolis, growing into a financial, and cultural hub. For historical context, China had lost both *Opium Wars* to the British and French and the city and its port were forcibly opened to foreigners in the late 19th century.

To show what life was like in early 20th century Shanghai, the exhibit features an exquisite display of 104 wooden human miniatures, depicting daily life, such as playing mahjong, undergoing punishment, as well as farming.



Wooden figurines depicted playing Mahjong. These 104 figurines pieces were made at Tushanwan as a gift for a French General, in the 1930s.

TUSHANWAN AND THE JESUITS

The Tushanwan Orphanage was founded in Shanghai, by the Jesuits in 1864. The aftermath of wars and famine had led to social instability, and as a result many young children lost their parents.

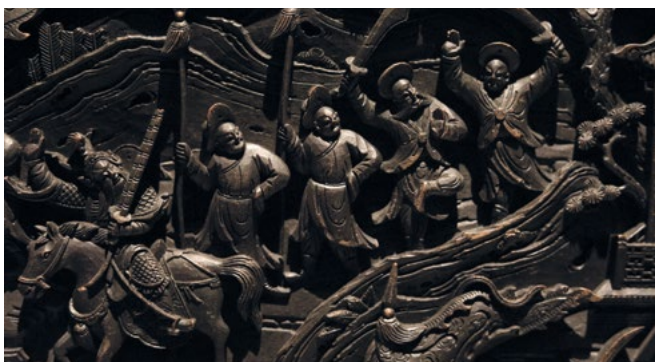
Besides nourishment and a home, the children at Tushanwan, were provided with a basic introductory Catholic education. At age 10-12, the boys learned a skill that could support them as adults, such as painting, woodworking, stained glass glazing, or lithography.

PAGODAS AND A SPECIAL COMMISSION

Woodworking was a very important workshop at Tushanwan, and the young boys under the tutelage of German Jesuit Brother Aloysius Beck made remarkable pieces of work. At first, they started with religious sculptures, and soon transitioned to artefacts such as furniture. At the exhibition, you can see an exquisite, large wooden Western-style chest that was gifted by the Tushanwan Orphanage to the Vatican in 1925.

The young artistes also made wooden Pagoda models, which were very popular gifts or souvenirs in the early 20th century. Sometime between 1910-1912, the orphanage received a commission from a group of German professors. The project was to showcase China's most iconic pagodas, in the form of wooden replicas.

Around 300 young artistes started intently on this project, receiving details of far-off pagodas via photographs and letters via the Jesuits' vast network in China, and even across borders in Korea and Tibet.



Intricate details from a large, wooden, Western-style chest, hand carved by the young Tushanwan artistes, depicting popular Chinese symbolism and stories. This chest was gifted to the Vatican in 1925.

Unfortunately, in 1914, they received news that the commission had been cancelled, perhaps because of the outbreak of World War I. Despite this major setback, the creation of the pagoda models continued at the orphanage. Aloysius Beck, through his own contacts, was able to snag a contract, so that the pagoda replicas would be displayed at a prestigious exhibition in San Francisco and be up for sale.

PAGODAS AMERICA BOUND

The exhibition in San Francisco was called the *Panama-Pacific International Exposition*. The pagoda models were packed in newspapers, and shipped off from Shanghai to San Francisco on a 21-day voyage. Conservators in Singapore have found bits of newspaper still stuck inside the pagoda models.



The Great Wild Goose Pagoda, was built in the 7th Century, to house sacred texts from India. Candidates who passed the imperial exams, visited this pagoda to write their names on the walls.

THE GARDEN OF PAGODAS

The young artistes made the models of pagodas from different areas and different time periods.

On display is a model of one of Shanghai's oldest and most famous pagodas, the Dragon Flower Pagoda (*Longhua Ta*), which can still be seen today. Built in the 10th century, this pagoda was conveniently located near the orphanage, so the young boys were able to visit it for viewing and research. Many of the details they captured can no longer be observed on the Pagoda due to 20th century restoration.

The Pagoda of Great Wild Goose, built in the 7th century, serves as a great example of Tang pagodas, with its squarish base, and the usage of an architectural style called *louge*, consisting of a tower tapered pavilions, diminishing in size. This pagoda is said to have been commissioned by the Tang ruler at the behest of



The Pagoda of Kaiyuan Monastery is the tallest Pagoda in China.



Scenes from *Journey to West*, were painted onto the base of the pagoda.

the famous Chinese Buddhist monk and traveler Xuanzang, on whose life *Journey to the West* is based. Xuanzang, wanted the Pagoda to store the relics and scriptures he had brought from India, and be similar in design to the Mahabodhi temple in Bodh Gaya. Unfortunately, Chinese builders were not familiar with Indian architecture.

Journey to the West, being a popular subject, scenes from the story were painted onto some of the models, such as the Pagoda of Kaiyuan Monastery. The actual pagoda was built in the 11th century, in Hebei province. It did not have these images, letting us know that the artistes at Tushanwan, did take some artistic liberties while designing the models. The model in the exhibition is rugged in appearance similar to the real pagoda, which was used as a watchtower to look out for approaching enemies because of its great height and many doors for easy movement.

The exhibition also showcases pagodas that no longer exist or are completely different now. One such is the model of the Colour-Glazed Pagoda of the Monastery of Great Kindness, which was built in Nanjing, Jiangsu province in China, in the mid-15th century. The actual pagoda was very popular, especially with the westerners who referred to it as the porcelain pagoda, though it did not have any porcelain on it. It was made out of a glasslike material called *liu li* which in the sunlight would reflect a myriad of colours. At night, the pagoda would be illuminated with 128 hanging lamps, which the Tushanwan artistes have showcased on their model. The pagoda underwent restoration a number of times, and was finally destroyed during the Taiping Rebellion, in the 19th century. The Tushanwan workshop followed a print that contained important information made right after restoration work, before the pagoda was completely destroyed.

REUNITED IN SINGAPORE

In 1915, *The Panama-Pacific International Exhibition*, was a huge success, with 18 million visitors, many of who got a glimpse of Chinese culture, and architecture for the first time, as it was the first time China and America had initiated an exchange. The pagoda models were first purchased by the Field Museum, followed by a private collector, and finally by the National Heritage Board. After more than a hundred years, the pagodas have finally been reunited in Singapore in 2024. The exhibition takes us across the world and offers a glimpse into the past, to see pagodas that were built in another time and era.

The Pagoda Odyssey Exhibition at the Asian Civilisations Museum till June 1st, 2025. You can catch a guided tour by FOM docents on weekdays at 3 pm.



The Colour-glazed Pagoda of the Monastery of Great Kindness, The pagoda model is on loan for the exhibition, from the Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago.

Alpana Singh is a docent at the Asian Civilisations Museum. She enjoys writing about food and culture, and is enjoying learning about and guiding the pagodas currently on display.



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SPREADING HAPPINESS, ONE SONG AT A TIME

CLAIRE JONES FONDLY RECOUNTS SOME OF HER RECENT EXPERIENCES WITH FOM MEMBERS CARE



Happy faces of the Treble Makers, FOM Members Care. Photo by Rebecca Chan.



The Treble Makers with our wonderful guitarist. Photo by Florence Phuah.

"Tian mi mi, Ni xiao de tian mi mi!"

I had never heard of this song a year ago, never mind knowing how to sing it, but I do now! That is, thanks to my joining FOM Members Care (FOMMC) singing group, the Treble Makers. Nowadays, I find myself humming Teresa Teng's classic from the late 1970s from time to time. More importantly, it has proven to be very popular with our audiences.

CARING THROUGH SONG

The Treble Makers are a key branch of FOMMC. We have held two performances recently. The Christmas themed visit to Kwong Wai Shiu Hospital in Potong Pasir in December 2023, where we visited the patients in the wards, singing for them and delivering 'care package' gifts, was very special for us. More recently, we sang at the Lions Home for the Elders in Bishan in May, performing songs in Mandarin, Malay, and English in the open-air space where the residents have their lunch.



Christmas-themed visit to Kwong Wai Shiu Hospital. Photo by Florence Phuah.

Our singing sessions benefit the residents and patients in various ways. For some, our singing may just remain in the background of their day, but it's clear that for others, they genuinely appreciate the musical interlude that we offer. It's so wonderful to see residents and patients singing along. It's like we are spreading happiness one song at a time!

None of this would be possible without the musical guidance of Florence Phuah, our inspirational founder, sometime FOM guide, and retired teacher/school administrator. We are also indebted to Chia Chye Teck, who accompanies us on his guitar.

A LITERARY NOTE

Another branch of FOM Members Care is more literary in nature. Back in May, we held a successful book swap in ACM. This was a team effort with Chong Teck and our co-ordinator Nilofar Iyer. It felt great to make even just a small contribution to the circular economy, finding new homes for books ranging from classics and contemporary fiction to cookbooks and art history.



Giving books a new home. Photo by Nilofar Iyer.

CLAIRE JONES is an academic working remotely for a UK university. She is a mother of two grown-up sons and owner of a fluffy German Shepherd. She loves learning language, music, and hiking.

MONDAY MORNING LECTURES - GATEWAY TO FOM

VIDYA KHADER ELABORATES ON MONDAY MORNING LECTURE'S ROLE IN
FOM ENGAGING WITH THE GENERAL PUBLIC

Photos provided by the author, unless otherwise stated.

In early 2024, there was a frenzy of activities for the Monday Morning Lectures (MML) team. A query about Professor Elizabeth Moore led to the discovery of an article in the Straits Times of 2 February 1980. The article noted that Prof. Moore, then FOM member, had given a lecture on Indonesian and Khmer art in 1980. This was part of FOM's *Southeast Asian Art Lecture series* which was open to the public. This series was one of the earliest public interactions FOM had, which continues for decades until today. It also underscores the vast array of topics covered by scholars through the public lectures offered by MML. This 'Feast of Knowledge' is offered now on Monday mornings at 11:00 am, usually at the Ngee Ann Auditorium, Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM).



Theresa Devasahayam (left), with Saraswathi Soma (centre) and Susan Sarkies (right) during their talk *Little Drops: Cherished Children of Singapore's Past* delved into their happy and complex memories in the inter-ethnic families who adopted them.

In 2024, there were as many as 33 free public lectures on Monday mornings for FOM members and the general public on Asian art, history, religion, philosophy, and culture. The various study and interest groups in FOM play a significant role in influencing the choice of speakers.

MML covers more than just the nuanced aspects of history, such as the one by Dr Sudeep Chakravarti on the Battle of Plassey that changed the course of South Asian History. It also navigates nuanced human relations, such as the session on 3 June 2024 by anthropologist Theresa Devasahayam, when she took us on a journey with adopted children in Singapore, especially inter-ethnic adoptees in the mid-20th century.



Theresa Devasahayam signing a copy of her book for an audience member.

She came with two contributors to her book, *Little Drops: Cherished Children of Singapore's Past*, to discuss this unspoken or unknown aspect of Singapore's social fabric.

Moving forward, MML has arranged another set of curated sessions in 2025 to satisfy and match the expectations of FOM and the general public. As we usher in the Chinese New Year, Patricia Welch will, on 20 January 2025, explain what the Year of the Snake means. After Patricia left her position as Lecturer of Chinese history and religion at Boston University, she worked in corporate and marketing jobs. Upon moving to Singapore in 1994, she volunteered in museum guiding, docent training and FOM leadership roles.

On a different note, we shall also hear a personal take from someone whose family lived in the royal compounds of Singapore, that is in Istana Kampong Gelam! On 7 April 2025, we shall listen to Fuad Johari and explore, through his vast collection of photographs, life in and around the Istana in a bygone era.

Do join us and feast with MML for a well-rounded platter of knowledge such as the intriguing Year of the Snake and the fascinating palace in Kampong Gelam.



Fuad Johari (yellow shirt) with his grandmother in their home in the compound of Istana Kampong Gelam. Photo credit: Fuad Johari



Patricia Welch is an FOM heritage volunteer for 30 years (tune in to her upcoming MML). Photo credit: Roots, National Heritage Board.

VADYA KHADER is a docent with the Indian Heritage Centre and Kampong Gelam Heritage Trail.

FASCINATING FRIDAY WITH FRIENDS

GISELLA HARROLD HIGHLIGHTS AN IDEAL START TO YOUR WEEKEND

Friday is often a day for relaxation and socialising with friends after a long workweek. Many people look forward to this day as a time to unwind, enjoy leisure activities or catch up with loved ones. To start your weekend, FOM hosts Friday with Friends (FwF), a lecture series open to members of the public as well as FOM members.



Carmen Frings, then FOM President, welcomes the audience of the first FEL in September 2011.

Usually held on the last Friday of the month at 7:00 pm, these hour-long lectures are organised by the FwF coordinators in collaboration with the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM).

FwF was brought to life under a different name - Friday Evening Lectures (FEL). The idea was to offer a lecture in the evening, inspired by the very popular Monday Morning Lectures. The first lecture was held in September 2011 in the River Room, ACM, where the then FOM President Carmen Frings welcomed a large crowd. At its creation, FwF was very well received and, to celebrate the new activity, wine and snacks were served.

Over the years we had many speakers on a variety of subjects, such as Nor Wang who gave a lecture on *Searching Shakti in Art: An Ancient Fortress, Tartric Temple, & Museums*, and Pia Rampal who spoke on *Shah Jahan's Moonlight*



FwF Coordinators, Priya Seshadri (left) and Mathangi Venkatesh (right) with speaker Nor Wang (centre).

Garden. Non-FOM members such as Dr Samir Puri and Tim Winter have also spoken at FwF.

Occasionally we have relaxed 'in conversation' events such as the *Fireside Chat with Artist Yip Yew Chong*, where we encourage the audience to participate by asking questions.

The next talk will be on Friday, 27 November 2024, by ACM curator Kevin Lam. He will examine and explore the *Pagoda Odyssey, 1915 - From Shanghai to San Francisco* exhibition, being held at ACM until 1 June 2025.

This talk is a perfect way to discover fascinating facts about the 84 pagodas on display, get insights into the curation of this special exhibition and perhaps be inspired to join an FOM docent-led tour of the exhibition.

If you would like to find out more about the upcoming lectures in 2025 and beyond, visit the Public Events page on the FOM website. All lectures are open to the public and FOM members, with no registration required.

We look forward to seeing you there!



Artist Yip Yew Chong signing his books after the 'Fireside Chat'.



Be fascinated by pagodas in the forthcoming FwF talk by curator Kevin Lam.

GISELLA HARROLD has been a member of FOM since 1995. Travelling, photography and guiding are only some of her hobbies. After many different roles at FOM, she is now the coordinator of Curio.

EXPLORE SINGAPORE! THERE'S ALWAYS SOMETHING TO DISCOVER

LIM CHEY CHENG TAKES FOM MEMBERS INTO THE WILDERNESS OF A NATURAL FOREST, THE CONCRETE JUNGLES OF HDB ESTATES, AND THE PRAYER HALL OF A SIKH GURDWARA, AS WELL AS INTRODUCES THEM TO GAMELAN MUSIC



Magnificent towering Ficus Virens.
Photo by Brice Li, Hi Footprints Pte Ltd.



Wading through the wild. A little muddy water is not stopping us.
Photo by author.



The brave FOM members, marvelling at the secrets of the forest.
Photo by Samuel Wang.

Explore Singapore! (ES!) is one of FOM's oldest members' activities, having its beginnings in 1996. Each year it conducts an average of 18 to 20 events and tours for its members. Here is a glimpse of 2023/2024's popular events:

DOVER FOREST – THE WILD SIDE OF SINGAPORE

One sunny March morning, a group of intrepid FOM members entered a different world which seems unimaginable in a highly urbanised Singapore. With sticks and bare hands, they beat a path through forest undergrowth, brushing aside lalang, creepers, and other vegetation. Suddenly someone let out a squeal – muddy water had just flooded her shoes and socks, more than ankle deep, it reached up to her pants.

"You will be rewarded for this," our guide, a passionate activist for the conservation of this forest, told the group.

True enough, soon after we crossed to dry ground, we found ourselves looking up in awe at the most memorable sight of the trek – a towering *Ficus virens*, commonly called a banyan tree, all of 25 metres tall and 11 metres in girth. This majestic denizen, over a hundred years old, held us spellbound.

There were also other secrets for us to marvel at, such as a tarantula's nest and magical luminescent mushrooms.

This tour of Dover Forest made us experience the wild side of nature in Singapore, unlike the prevalent managed and curated versions, and that too, right next to housing estates.

KAMPONGS IN THE SKY

Instead of a real jungle, another tour took members to the concrete jungles of the iconic Housing Development Board (HDB) blocks, for which Singapore is world famous.



Poster in the HDB Hub's Living Space Gallery showing Singapore's kampongs in the sky. Photo by Elsa Gianno.



Traditional Sikh musical instruments. Photo by Elsa Gianno.



FOM members at the Gurdwara. Photo by Elsa Gianno.

Participants learnt how Singapore's post independent housing problems were solved through moving people from traditional kampongs to "kampongs in the sky" – government built, highly subsidised HDB flats.

In the HDB Hub's Living Space Gallery, we saw and had a feel of the latest versions of these flats, wandering through mock ups of different types and sizes. A walk through Toa Payoh town centre informed us about how the centres of all major estates are planned to serve almost every need of residents. We experienced one of the latest amenities flat dwellers enjoy at the Sky Garden at Dawson. At 27 storeys high (not the roof), residents can enjoy a garden with panoramic views.

The tour's highlight was a visit to a resident's flat where participants wandered around freely, getting an experience of a lived-in flat, as well as the opportunity to interact with the owner-occupant to find out first-hand about life in a HDB flat.

THE CENTRAL SIKH GURDWARA

The Sikhs in Singapore are a minority group of around 15,000. Their religion is Sikhism, and they worship at gurdwaras, of which there are seven in Singapore. Our visit to the Central Sikh Gurdwara provided an insight into the religion, including an opportunity to observe the worship rituals. We also watched demonstrations of traditional Sikh musical instruments, and some participants even had a hand at playing them.

THE JOY AND FUN OF GAMELAN

In Indonesia, melodic tinkling music welcoming and entertaining guests is prevalent everywhere. This gamelan music is often played live. One of our most fun events was a gamelan workshop with musicians and instruments from a professional orchestra.

The musicians enlightened us about the gamelan's history, traditions and related cultural activities like *wayang kulit* (Indonesian shadow puppetry) and dance, as well as the instruments in the three different types of orchestras – Javanese, Balinese and Sundanese. By the end of the session, our delighted participants had also learnt to play a simple tune in harmony with each other!

ALWAYS SOMETHING TO DISCOVER

These are but a few of the wide-ranging events ES! organises to enable FOM members to discover, learn, and experience aspects of Singapore beneath its veneer and beyond the common and well-trodden paths.

In the 2024/2025 season, in addition to perennial favourites, members can look forward to exciting new tours – discovering the heritage and hidden gems along a familiar road, a beach walk with a difference, and a visit to a specific ethnic-orientated market. You can also get close to aspects of nature you may not know about. There is always more to discover!

We hope to see you at some of these tours.



FOM members trying their hand with gamelan instruments. Photo by author.

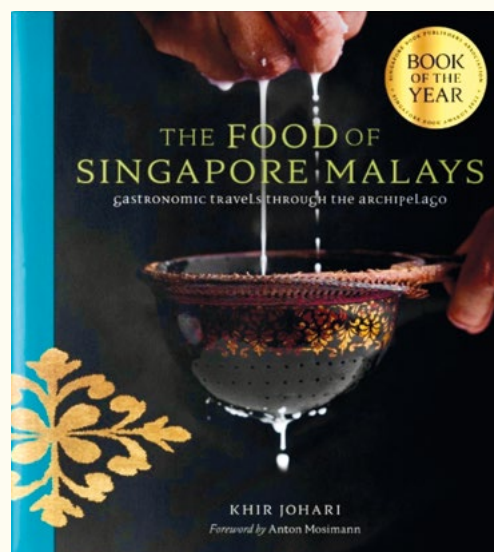
LIM CHEY CHENG is an FOM member since 1996, a docent at NMS, TPM and SYSNMH, and Co-ordinator of the Explore Singapore! Committee.

A NUSANTARA KITCHEN

PRISCYLLA SHAW HAS A HEART TO HEART CHAT WITH **KHIR JOHARI** ABOUT WHAT THE UNIQUE CUISINE OF THE SINGAPORE MALAYS MEANS FOR SINGAPORE AND THE MALAY ARCHIPELAGO

All images courtesy of Khir Johari unless otherwise stated.

In September 2022, *The Food of the Singapore Malays: Gastronomic Travels Through the Archipelago* (2021) by mathematician, food historian, and award-winning educator, Singaporean Khir Johari, was awarded Book of the Year and Best Illustrated Non-Fiction Book Awards at the Singapore Book Awards. In May 2023, Khir put Singapore on the international publishing map when his book topped the 28th Gourmand World Cookbook Awards in Sweden. Founded in 1995 by Edward Cointreau, the Awards “honour the best food and wine books in printed or digital format as well as food television”. According to the organisers, “the Gourmand Awards is a unique opportunity to build the image of the food culture of a country, show the world its spirit.” I sat down with Khir over chin-chow and a lime soda to delve into the messages he sends to readers of his book.



Cover, *The Food of the Singapore Malays: Gastronomic Travels Through the Archipelago*, Singapore, Marshall Cavendish Editions, 2021.

Khir, food culture has been on your mind ever since you lived in Silicon Valley in the 1990s and founded the first Culinary Club there. Your intention was to give young people an early appreciation of different cuisines and their cultures. Upon your return to Singapore, you focused on researching the food cultures of maritime South-East Asia, and *voilà*, the idea for your book was born! Although the book contains 32 recipes within its 624 pages, essays outnumber recipes, and there are more than 400 photographs. It is clearly much more than a cookbook. Toh Puan Noor Aishah, the inaugural First Lady of Singapore (1959–1970) has called it “an education about Malay culture”, whilst others have called it “a gateway to Malay culture and heritage through a gastronomical lens”. How would you describe your book?



Khir Johari



An iconic Malay dish that many Singaporeans will recognise, Nasi Minyak (literal translation: oily rice). According to Khir Johari, this dish is “nearly synonymous with Malay weddings and other special occasions”. It was a favourite post-Friday prayers lunch dish of his family. Despite its name, the dish is not made with cooking oil but with clarified butter. It has its origins in pilaf, which in turn, might have originated in the kitchens of Abbasid caliphs.



A kenduri, a term generally covering gatherings involving communal eating and observance of prayers. Its etymology is Indo-Persian. The word *kandur* means a large table or a tablecloth. (Photo of back cover, *Mastika* magazine, November 1964 issue).



An improvised stove (*tungku*) for large parties. Rocks are used to support and hold the pot steady.

Indeed, I do not think of my book as a typical cookbook. With my book, I wanted to explain a nation, a people, through food. I had planned it for seven, but ended up spending eleven years on it. It just grew into a comprehensive documentary. I did not write for Singaporeans only, my book was for an international audience. Food is of course a focal point of the book, but I also wanted to analyse everything surrounding it – the people who prepare and consume it, what it symbolises, and the cultural value that our Malay food holds. The title of the book encapsulates this challenge – who are the Singapore Malays? What is the significance of Nusantara, the Malay Archipelago, to Singapore? How does Singapore Malay food reflect this significance?

Those are big questions, how do you answer them?

I decided to grasp the nettle and address the issue of “Malayness” from the start. I unpacked several elements. For instance, what does it mean to be Malay? What is the Malay world? I discussed this in the first section of my book – *People, Space and Place*. I argue that the Malay identity has undergone transformation and constant redefinition over the course of centuries. Malay heritage is multi-ethnic, colourful and diverse, due to cross-influences from Nusantara. I’d like to direct you to the excellent poem of Usman Awang (1929–2001) which I have translated for readers. He is often considered to be the greatest 20th century Malay poet. He came from Johor and worked in Singapore from 1951 to



Something smells good in that kawah! (traditional cast-iron pot with its characteristic shape). *Kawah* also means the crater of a volcano – perhaps its shape comes from them?

1957, when he moved to Kuala Lumpur. He sums up his idea of who the Malays are: a diverse mix of peoples participating in a common cultural identity.

Melayu

Being Malay on the Peninsula holds meanings vast

The Javanese is Malay, the Bugis is Malay

The Minangkabau are certainly Malay

Those descended of Aceh are Malay

Jakun and Sakai are aboriginal Malays

Arabs and Pakistanis, all Malay

The Mamak and Malbaris have become Malays

Even the newly converted are deemed Malay.

How does Singapore Malay food reflect the heritage of the Singapore Malay?

Singapore Malays are part of the larger Archipelago. We are blessed with this geography that has provided us with the food, we are also blessed with the confluence of many civilisations.

Singapore Malay food is what it is because Singapore is a Nusantara city and an entrepôt port. Singapore absorbed and adapted the diverse cuisines of the Nusantara, frequently, in combination with exports traded from the East and the West. This is what makes the food of Singapore Malays distinctly eclectic. That is what my book is about. Stop for a moment to notice the names of food we enjoy today: *gula Melaka* (Melaka sugar) used in



Pulut Kunyit, glutinous rice yellowed with turmeric. Yellow is the most royal of colours. At weddings, the bride and groom are queen and king for the day, hence they are served this yellow dish. Other significant occasions where one might see this being served would be at the first haircut of an infant, circumcision ceremony, thanksgivings, and completion of Qur'an reading.

many cakes and desserts, *asam Jawa* (tamarind) used in *pulut kunyit* which is distributed to friends and family to announce a birth. The food names belie their origin, but these ingredients are ubiquitous in Singapore Malay dishes.

So, in a Malay feast, we would definitely experience elements of Sumatran, Javanese, Sulawesi, even Filipino food culture?

The short answer is, yes. Malay feasts are intrinsically multicultural feasts. I try to convey this in my book. Many ingredients in the recipes tell a story about their Archipelagic origins. Please do not be daunted by the number of pages. My book is designed such that one can dip in and out of it. If you want to find a recipe, just go to it. If you want to read a longer essay, they are there.

Got it – Singapore Malay food is the material product of wider Malay world culture. What are some essentials of a Malay feast?

Feasts are gatherings for a meal of a higher order. They carry a sense of deep social and cultural significance. For example, at birth and marriage feasts, we give thanks for new beginnings. At Hari Raya feasts, we give thanks for spiritual renewal. The food is more lavish, table settings are more meticulously chosen and arranged, and there is a higher degree of decorum. Obviously, not all feasts and traditions are associated with Islam, but feasts are part of rituals and observances and I have devoted a chapter in my book to this. Food is sacred; it gives life. The Malays celebrate birthdays as an occasion for thanksgiving, for the life you have been given. One dish I love to make for birthdays is *Bubor Puteh Bubor Merah*, a rice dish. This delicious sweet uses not white rice but glutinous rice. It is a lovingly prepared dish incorporating gula Melaka. I have a story about it: Gautama (Buddha), after he left his palace, led the life of an ascetic. One day, he was so weak that he



Nasi Padang from Warung Nasi Pariaman, now at Kandahar Street. The proprietors are Minangkabau, and the dishes are characteristic of that city in West Sumatra.



Bubor Puteh Bubor Merah, a favourite dessert of Khir Johari. Glutinous rice is sticky; it symbolises bringing people together.

was near the end. Sujata revived him with rice porridge with milk. After that, he was able to reach his *bodhi* tree, under which he ultimately attained *nirvana*. The dish has evolved, with coconut milk as the topping now.

Thank you Khir, for sharing some personal insights about your book with our readers. We have barely scratched the surface of your *magnum opus*. I can only urge our readers to run to the nearest bookshop to grab a copy to explore for themselves.

It has been a pleasure for me to talk about my book and its messages. I hope your readers will see Singapore Malay food through new lens now, and even try some of the dishes themselves!

PRISCYLLA SHAW is Features Editor of PASSAGE.



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