

PASSAGE

FRIENDS OF THE MUSEUMS SINGAPORE

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ISSUE II



Mountains and Rivers



ART
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CULTURE
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MONDAY, 9 SEPTEMBER 2024 10 AM - 1 PM

Asian Civilisations Museum - Ngee Ann Auditorium & Foyer, Basement

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Free Entry - Open to the public

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C O N T E N T S



ON THE COVER

What does a screen from Mexico City have to do with Asian art, history and culture? The screen illustrates the 16th century Spanish *Conquest of Mexico* and how Mexico City was made into its grand capital. The city sits in the middle of a lake surrounded by mountains. The screen is an adaptation of the luxurious Japanese screens that arrived at the Mexican port of Acapulco through the Manila Galleon trade. Read about this event in *Aztec City of Dreams* (page 3).

Image courtesy of Museo Nacional de Historia, Castillo de Chapultepec.

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A publication of Friends of the Museums Singapore

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MCI (P) 049/11/2023

ISSN 1793-8619

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PRESIDENT'S BLOG

Hello everyone!

In this issue of *PASSAGE*, we scale mountains and cross rivers. We at FOM love a challenge, don't we? By the time you read this, FOM will have welcomed new cohorts of docents who went through rigorous training ranging in duration from ten weeks to six months. We are grateful to the army of docents who steadfastly walked alongside the trainees on their learning journey. The trainees' commitment to stay the course is worth applauding. We look forward to seeing them at the various museums and heritage trails guiding and regaling visitors with inspiring stories of Singapore's history and heritage.



Lee Hong Leng with the trainees of the URA-FOM Chinatown Heritage Trails docent training programme celebrating the end of training!



Many thanks to Jyoti Ramesh for her contributions as the Data Management Representative on Council. Her behind-the-scenes work supports our various teams, and is essential to the success of our premiere volunteer event, VAN.

We have been busy the first few months of the year, travelling and exploring, reading and learning, turning new knowledge into tales of art, history and culture to connect visitors to the Singapore story. What a privilege!

And we want others to experience this privilege. We embark on recruiting new participants for our docent training programme on 7 May 2024, our Public Information Meeting. Spread the word!

We look forward to celebrating the spirit of volunteerism among our members at Volunteer Appreciation Night (VAN) on 14 May 2024. I thank Paroma Sen, Council Rep for Volunteer and Member Appreciation, and her team for organising VAN. Special thanks go to Jyoti Ramesh, Co-opted Council Member for Volunteer Data Management, for it is her work behind the scenes that makes VAN a success. And most of all, FOM thanks our members for giving their time so generously to guiding at the museums and heritage trails, and, to sharing your skills and talents at the various interest groups.

We look forward to the next half of the year as we organise a fresh slate of activities for everyone and start planning training programmes for the 2024-2025 cycle.

Lee Hong Leng
President
president@fom.sg



Lee Hong Leng with the ACM docents-to-be, joined by Mr Kennie Ting, Director, ACM & TPM.

FROM THE EDITORIAL TEAM

This issue's theme of *Mountains and Rivers* seems to have resonated with our community as our writers went all out in sharing a variety of stories from all over the region. We welcomed several new writers and thank all our contributors for their articles – they are sure to keep you informed, entertained, and perhaps even inspired. We are well underway preparing for the *Fantastic Issue!* Our third issue will introduce readers to mythical animals, fantastic beasts, and more. We invite all our readers to consider article submissions for the fourth issue: *What's in a Feast?* If you have an idea for us to consider about culture, art, food and drink, please email us at passage@fom.sg.

I would like to take the opportunity to announce my departure from *PASSAGE* and from Singapore. From the start, this was always an interim role, and I must admit, though short-lived, it has been a pleasure and joy! It could not have happened without our team of Editors (Features, News, and Art), subeditors and proofreaders, as well as Council, Activity and Museum Coordinators, graphics designers, writers, and so many more. I thank you for your efforts and contributions and know that our new Managing Editor will thrive with your continued support.

FOM gives us all opportunities we may not find anywhere else in the world! In the name of supporting Singapore's museums, heritage institutions and trails, FOM activities and the docent training programmes available each year are so very unique and special. In all my years as an FOM member – from enjoying MMLs to finding new nooks and crannies with *Explore Singapore!*; from participating in several docent



Some of the PASSAGE team enjoying camaraderie at a Pot Luck dinner held this past February. Photo by Julina Khusaini.

training programmes to taking on various roles and responsibilities – I have met many like-minded people from different walks of life. I treasure these connections and friendships. I will hold my friends, as well as FOM, near and dear to my heart as I close the door on my Singapore chapter and begin my family's next one: repatriating after more than 17 years overseas.

And with this, I sign off and hand over to the very capable hands of Darly Furlong! A huge thank you to Darly for taking on this role, and I hope you find as much enjoyment as I have as the Managing Editor for *PASSAGE* Magazine.

Charlotte Dawson
Managing Editor, PASSAGE
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AZTEC CITY OF DREAMS

DARLENE KASTEN EXPLORES THE DREAM-LIKE LANDSCAPE OF MODERN MEXICO CITY'S PREDECESSOR, THE AZTEC CITY OF TENOCHTITLÁN.

When the 16th Spanish conquistadors under the command of leader Hernán Cortés first laid eyes on Tenochtitlán, the capital of the Aztec Empire, they wondered aloud if they were witnessing a dream. Bernal Díaz del Castillo, one of Cortés's soldiers, described the initial encounter in his 1565 account *The Conquest of New Spain*. He wrote, 'When we saw all those cities and villages built on water; and the other great towns on dry land, and that straight and level causeway leading to Mexico, we were astounded.'

THE BIRTH OF THE DREAM

Tenochtitlán – today's Mexico City – was a marvelous sight partly because of its impressive architecture and advanced urban planning, but most assuredly because of its curious location. Entirely surrounded by mountains and volcanoes, it was situated in the land-locked Valley of Mexico on two islands in what used to be Lake Texcoco. According to legend, the Mexica, another name for the Aztecs, founded Tenochtitlán after leaving their homeland of Aztlan at the direction of their god Huitzilopochtli, who directed them to build where they saw an eagle perched on a cactus eating



Mural by Diego Rivera of the Aztec city of Tenochtitlán and life in Aztec times, on display in the Palacio Nacional, Mexico City. Image sourced from the public domain.

a snake. When they saw this exact scene on an island in the middle of a lake, they naturally interpreted it as a sign from their god and founded Tenochtitlán there around 1325 CE. (The name *Tenochtitlán* was thought to come from the Nahuatl language of the Aztecs meaning, 'Among the prickly pears [growing among] rocks'.)



(left) Frontispiece, Codex Mendoza, Viceroyalty of New Spain, c. 1541-1542, showing a schematic diagram of Tenochtitlán, divided into four parts intended to mirror the organization of the universe. Image © Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford.



(right) First European map of Tenochtitlán, capital of the Aztec Empire, published in Nuremberg, 1524 CE. On the left is a representation of the Gulf of Mexico, with Florida on the left and the Yucatan represented as an island. Image sourced from the public domain.



One side of a c. 1690 oil-on-canvas screen which depicts The Conquest of Mexico. It tells the story of the 16th century Spanish conquest of Tenochtitlán. The reverse side of the screen, Very Noble and Loyal City of Mexico, depicts a view of the 17th century capital of New Spain that replaced the Aztec City. It was on display at the ACM special exhibition, Manila Galleons: From Asia to the Americas. Image courtesy of Museo Nacional de Historia, Castillo de Chapultepec.

THE DREAM BECOMES REALITY

The Aztecs engineered a gleaming white metropolis of temples, palaces, and plazas against the backdrop of the green mountains. Moreover, the island city was extended using ingenious small artificial islands of packed mud and reeds called *chinampas*, constructed on freshwater swamps above the waterline providing more land for the Aztecs to live and farm. Later consolidated into the city's footprint, these man-made islands helped Tenochtitlán eventually reach an area of more than 13 square kilometres.

Causeways connected Tenochtitlán to the mainland and doubled as dikes to protect the *chinampas*, and more importantly, separated freshwater from salt water for use in irrigation. Fresh spring water for drinking was transported from the nearby forests of Chapultepec via two aqueducts. Once the water reached the city, it was delivered to small reservoirs and select households through a network of canals that extended in the four cardinal directions and branched off to individual streets. The canals also served to transport barges and canoes throughout the city and made for easy boat travel to the farms of the fertile *chinampas* to the south.

The lake water surrounding the city offered moat-like protection from most would-be invaders but was no match for the Spanish. The conquistadors laid siege to the capital for 93 days, until the Aztecs surrendered in defeat.

THE CONQUISTADORS FACE REALITY

For months after the decisive conquest, the Spaniards debated whether to rebuild. There were good reasons to abandon the Aztec city and build their colonial capital elsewhere. The Spanish were there for maritime trade and Tenochtitlán was inland, far removed from the coasts and

without rivers to connect it to the sea. While the Aztecs had used canoes and barges as transport through the canals of the city, the Spaniards had beasts of burden such as horses, oxen, and wheeled carts, better suited to dry land than to a water-logged island.

Also, much of the sophisticated infrastructure of Tenochtitlán had been destroyed in the siege, including the causeways and the aqueducts supplying freshwater from the mainland. The huge dike built to hold back Lake Texcoco's waters was severely damaged and the city faced the threat of flooding by the briny lake while its surviving habitants were unable to obtain fresh water to drink.

But Cortés finally found a compelling argument in favour of rebuilding Tenochtitlán. The Aztec capital had been the hub of the empire that efficiently funnelled the wealth of the vassals into the coffers of the ruling elite. Cortés wanted the native tribes to understand that the imperial system would be maintained with Tenochtitlán as the seat of power, but with the Spanish in charge and with tribute that had previously flowed into the Aztec Empire's treasury flowing into Spanish coffers.

TENOCHTILÁN REBORN

In rebuilding, Cortés took advantage of what the Aztecs already had put into place, including the symmetrical grid pattern of streets and canals and neighbourhoods dominated by municipal and religious buildings clustered around open squares. Roman Catholic cathedrals and churches were built right on top of the foundations of former Aztec temples and colonial headquarters and mansions were constructed where the empire's former palaces once stood. The aqueducts were rebuilt too, although many of the canals and *chinampas* used by the ancient civilisation were lost as lakes were drained for dry agriculture.

It was about this time that Cortés and other Spaniards started commonly referring to the capital of New Spain as Mexico City, the place of the Mexica, today's capital of Mexico. From the 16th century city of conquistador's dreams, 21st century Mexico City has changed dramatically. Today the city spans almost 1,500 square kilometres and Lake Texcoco – now four kilometres outside the city limits – has been reduced to a small area surrounded by salt marshes. But Mexico City is still a dream destination for many modern travellers, filled with irresistible charm, a vital and growing food and design scene, an abundance of museums, and a rich culture and history. **P**



Aztec creator god Quetzalcoatl (Feathered Serpent), Valley of Mexico, 1350-1521, Basalt, on loan from Mexico City's National Museum of Anthropology and was on display as part of the ACM special exhibition Manila Galleon: From Asia to the Americas. Photo by the author.

DARLENE KASTEN is an FOM docent at MHC, ACM, STPI Creative Workshop & Gallery, and TPM, and was one of the Research Coordinators for the ACM Special Exhibition *Manila Galleon: From Asia to the Americas*.

A FEAST FOR THE SENSES

DARLENE KASTEN REPORTS ON GUIDING VISITORS WITH VISUAL IMPAIRMENT THROUGH ACM'S SPECIAL EXHIBITION *MANILA GALLEON: FROM ASIA TO THE AMERICAS*.

All images courtesy of the Asian Civilisations Museum.



ACM docents and staff gather with visitors from DIDsg in front of the special exhibition's Tree of Life contemporary art installation.

Imagine navigating through the *Manila Galleon: From Asia to the Americas* without the benefit of sight. That was the challenge for the nine docents who volunteered to guide visitors with visual impairment on special Sensory Tours organised by the National Heritage Board (NHB).

Our NHB-sponsored training began with a programme off-site at Dialogue in the Dark Singapore (DIDsg), an exclusive collaboration between Ngee Ann Polytechnic and Dialogue Social Enterprise whose mission is to empower people through transformative learning experiences. There we experienced first-hand what it's like doing normal day-to-day activities with visual limitations. The programme inspired us to consider ways to make our tours more accessible and inclusive for persons with visual impairment. Our second training, a sharing session at the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM), provided us with some guiding tips including how to effectively use specially designed tactile boards installed in the galleries. Afterwards we were able to put what we learned into practice with a walkthrough of the special exhibition space with DIDsg guides role-playing as visitors.

There were five tactile boards in the special exhibition galleries that contained specific highlights for visitors with visual impairment: a board that illustrated the currency that powered global trade; one that featured a galleon ship model; another that introduced Christianity, the faith that spread from Spain with the Manila Galleon; one that showed porcelain, an important trade commodity from China; and

one that highlighted a unique Filipino textile material made from pineapple leaves. We were encouraged to guide other artefacts in the exhibition in addition to those supported by tactile boards, and NHB provided 'sensory bags' with materials such as ceramic sherds and textiles to assist us.

The sense of smell was also incorporated into the contents of the sensory bags which helped illustrate the Manila Galleon's cross-cultural exchange. The scent of chocolate shavings allowed visitors to conjure up one of the most important food products that travelled from the Americas to Asia, cacao. Similarly, the fragrances of cinnamon, pepper and cloves helped to remind our visitors of the spices that travelled back from Asia.

We also took advantage of the ACM-commissioned soundscape composed and arranged for the special exhibition by one of Singapore's most celebrated sound artists, Avik Chari. We encouraged our visitors to activate their sense of hearing and let the music inform their imaginations. For instance, a piece created for a cello duet, choir and orchestra, *What the Galleons Bring Forth*, was written to match the monumental scale of the Manila Galleon journeys across the vast Pacific Ocean. Another musical score featured vibrant guitar music that conjured up the romance of traditional Filipino love songs and helped transport us to the streets of Manila.

All in all, the docents agreed it was a very rewarding experience and we look forward to more opportunities to help NHB make Asian history, arts and culture in Singapore open and accessible for all. **P**



FOM docent Nelly Navarro guides her visitor along the trans-Pacific trade routes of the Manila Galleon using a children's globe she specially fitted with a raised profile.



FOM docent Vandana Sharma uses a tactile board to describe a Manila galleon.

DARLENE KASTEN is an FOM docent at MHC, ACM, STPI Creative Workshop & Gallery, and TPM, and was one of the Research Coordinators for the ACM Special Exhibition *Manila Galleon: From Asia to the Americas*.

THE FOLKLORE AND BELIEFS OF MOUNT KINABALU

CHARLOTTE DAWSON EXPLORES
THE MYSTERIES OF THIS PEAK.

Mount Kinabalu at sunset. Photo by author.

Many FOM members have trekked up the peak of Mount Kinabalu in Sabah, East Malaysia. Rigorous training ahead of time enable one to be physically prepared. But how many climbers take the time to understand the history and what the mountain's folklore signify to the indigenous people of Sabah?



Faïcte a Arqves (Map of the World), Pierres Desceliers, c. 1550. In this snippet of Borneo, Chinabalo is named. Image from the National Archives of Singapore, from the Collection of the British Library.



India Tercera Nuova Tavola (Map of the East Indies), trio of Venetian cartographers, c. 1561. In this close-up, Borneo is labelled as Java Minor and S. Pedro for Mt Kinabalu. From the David Parry Southeast Asian Map Collection held by Yale-NUS.



Indiae Orientalis (East Indies), Abraham Ortelius, c. 1570. On the zoom-in of Borneo we find the peak labeled as Monte de Adas, Mountain of Spirits. From the David Parry Southeast Asian Map Collection held by Yale-NUS.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

The etymology of the name *kinabalu* is one that has several possibilities. However, the earliest documentation of this peak's name has nothing to do with the word we know.

The first known notation for the mountain comes from Magellan's early 16th century journey: Mt San Paulo. Diego Ribero, a Portuguese cartographer, was engaged in 1529 to create a map celebrating Spanish global conquests, labelling this peak as San Pedro. It is noteworthy that near the end of the 16th century, it appears on very few maps as *Monte de Adas* (Mountain of Spirits) or as *Chinabalo*. This was not the cartographic norm. In the writings of Alexander Dalrymple, the first hydrographer of the British Admiralty (c. 1769), we find the first mention of the peak as Mount *Keeney-Baloo*. The more accepted Christianised name (or versions therein) held through the centuries, until about 200 years ago when 'Mt Kinabalu' became the accepted name.

One must wonder: who was the 16th century mariner that spoke of *Chinabalo*? Or why was it labelled *Monte de Adas*? In their own ways both these names align with the local one but they were not adopted for centuries by the western world.

THE CHINESE WIDOW

It is believed that a dragon once lived on top of the scraggly peaks of Mt Kinabalu guarding a precious treasure! Many Chinese adventurers, emboldened by the promise of riches, tried to seize the treasure only to be devoured by the dragon. Hence the mountain was called *Cina/Kina Balu*, or 'Chinese Widow' after the wives left behind.

After a Chinese prince defeated the dragon, he married a beautiful Kadazan maiden, and they lived among her people in Borneo. Alas, the prince was called back to China, leaving his wife behind. She pined for her love to return. Days became months and months became years; the wife was eventually turned into stone by the spirit of the mountain, where she waits, to this day, looking out from the peak across the waters.

This legend of the Chinese Widow as the name for Mt Kinabalu is one that we can debunk! In the simplest of terms, if the mountain was to mean 'Chinese Widow' in Malay, it would be called *balu cina/kina*. More importantly though, this version of the name completely ignores the first known inhabitants of Northern Borneo. It makes more sense that the term *kinabalu* comes from their language. Furthermore, the mountain carries a significance to the indigenous Kadazan-dusun (the unified tribes of Kadazan and Dusun) people that goes beyond a story of a dragon.

AKI NABALU, HOME OF THE DEAD

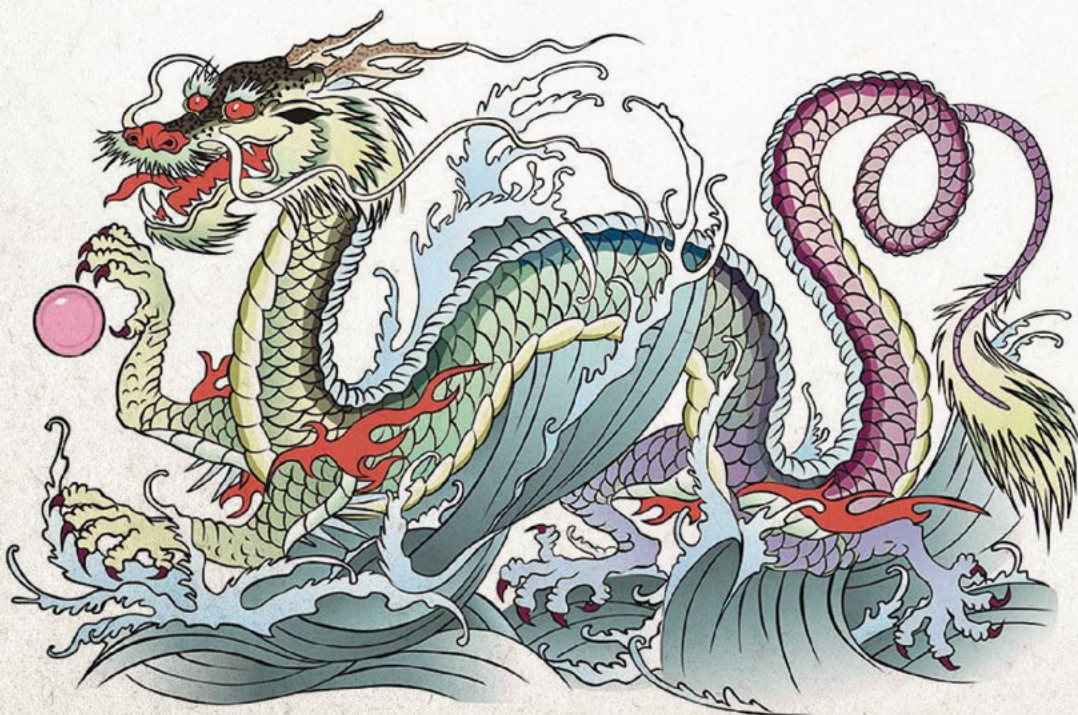
For the Kadazan-dusun, Mt Kinabalu is sacred: the souls of the dead are thought to live in the mountain. In the indigenous language the peak is called *Aki Nabal*. It is an in-between place, where spirits wait emancipation from earth and reunion with the Creator in the heavens. The name *Aki Nabal* comes from an old language and has different interpretations, two of which we will explore here.

In one linguistic study, the etymology of *kinabalu* means 'Boulder of Spirits'. *Ki* refers to boulders and *nabal* is a boulder associated with spirits. This name gives the rocky terrain of the peak a spiritual significance. There is another linguistic possibility. In the death rituals of the Dusun, the deceased is put in ritual clothing and covered by a hut, both of which are referred to as *balu*, a term associated with the dead. Here, *kinabalu* means 'Revered Place of the Dead'. Both interpretations are reinforced by the indigenous reverence for Mt Kinabalu as the resting place for departed souls as they take the final pathway to heaven.

MYTHOLOGY: THE CREATION OF MT KINABALU

For the Kadazan-dusun, the origin story of the mountain involves the Supreme Creators: Kionoingan (god of the sky) and his wife Suminundu (goddess of the earth). Together they create the universe, shaping the sky and moulding the earth.

The eagle, Kondui, was sent on a mission to assess their creations. He returned saying that the clouds were too small in comparison to the land. The sky god's pride was wounded



The Dragon of Kinabalu. Image from World Stories.



St. John's Peak, Mt Kinabalu, is thought to be the Kadazan wife waiting for her husband to return from China. Photo by author.



Nepenthes villosa (pitcher plant), photographed in the Kinabalu National Park. Carnivorous plants like this one spark their own 'mythology' as man-eaters, but the species found on Mt Kinabalu digest insects. They exist in a symbiotic relationship with lizards, frogs and tree shrews. Image from Rogier van Vugt, Head of Horticulture, University of Leiden.

and he set out to make bigger clouds. But earth goddess decided to instead reshape the land to match her husband's sky. In doing so, she created the Mountain of Kinoingan (Mt Kinabalu) and it is the centre of the world.

FOLKLORE: THE SHIPWRECKED PRINCE

There is one tale that blends the indigenous with Chinese stories, showing how oral tradition changes over time. The Murut people lived on the slopes of Mt Kinabalu. Central to this tale is one of the rivers, which began as a waterfall on Mt Kinabalu. Chinese merchants would sail up the river to trade with the Murut people. One day a grand ship came up the river, carrying an outlaw prince from China. After staying with the Murut for a year, he decided it was time to return home.

Suddenly the earth shook, and a huge hurricane-like storm lasting three days fell upon the area. The flooding was so terrible that a lake appeared, with tumultuous waves and whirlpools. The ship lost control and collided with a boulder; all the men aboard died trying to escape. Just as suddenly as it appeared, the storm subsided, and the waters receded.

The Muruts discovered a single man who had survived the storm! Upon bringing his unconscious body back to the village, where he was nursed to health, they discovered he was the Chinese prince. A few feared him as an evil spirit that caused the catastrophe, most thought that he must be a god to have lived through it while all other mortal men perished. Achieving this god-like status, the Chinese prince married two Murut women.

After a long life, when the two women died they were buried at the foot of the mountain. They were the first two Murut to marry outside the tribe, so the mountain was thereafter referred to as the 'Widows of the Chinese Prince', *kina balu*. The Dusun people believe themselves to be the descendants of this plural marriage.

TODAY'S ETHEREAL MOUNTAIN

When you look back at your pictures of orchids and pitcher plants, dense tropical forest, the changing topography, the mysterious ethereal fog, and the summit, consider it through the lens of the oral traditions of the indigenous people.

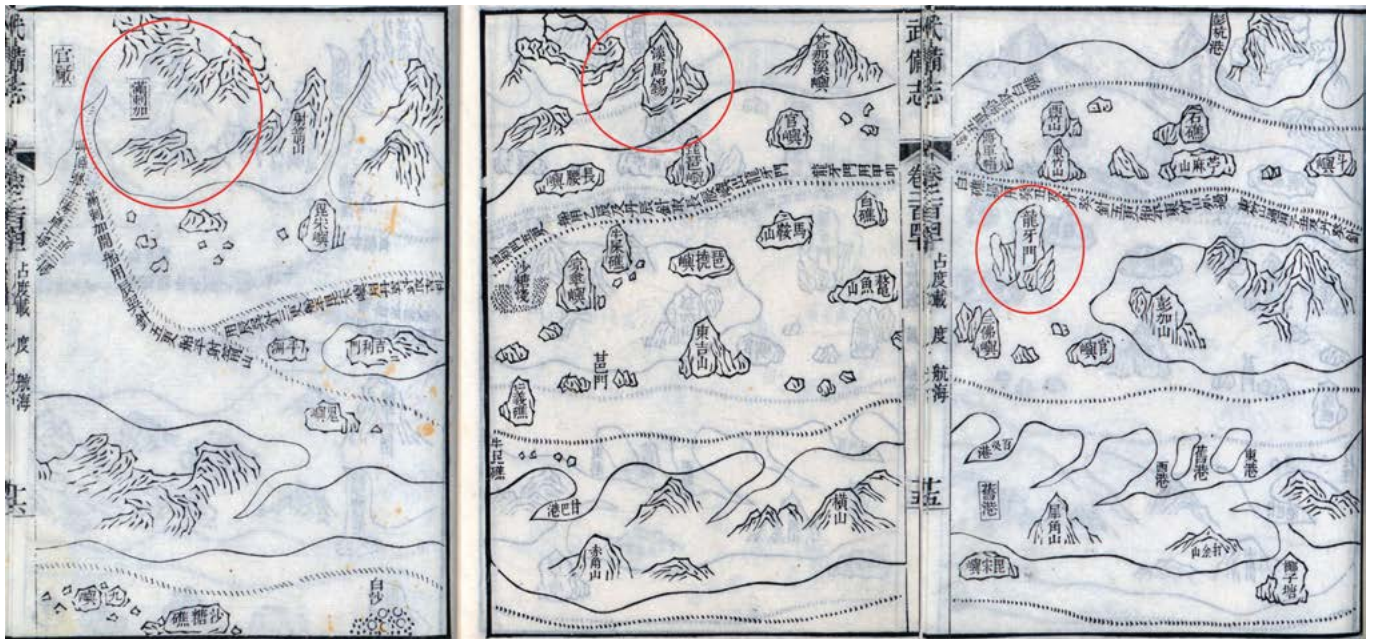
Did you know that your guide likely participated in the *monolob* ritual, done to appease the spirits and ensure a safe journey? Likely not as this is done on an annual basis to protect all who climb the mountain in the coming year. As the high priest chants old Dusun mantras, seven white chickens are slaughtered while offerings of eggs, betelnut and tobacco are made. With their reverence for Mt Kinabalu, you can feel the weight of the indigenous belief that this is the 'Place of the Dead', of their gods and their ancestors' spirits. And for the more whimsical, you can also imagine that dragon, resting on the jagged mountain top, guarding a treasure, and waiting to greet you. **P**

CHARLOTTE DAWSON is a docent at NMS and CCM. Starting her expat life in Brunei, Borneo holds a special place in her heart.

STRANGE TALES OF HILLS AND RIVERS FROM THE *SEJARAH MELAYU**

PRISCILLA TAN TAKES US ON A JOURNEY THROUGH ANCIENT SINGAPURA.

*Source: *Sejarah Melayu* by John Leyden.



Section from the Mao Kun map from Wu Bei Zhi, Juan 240, c. 1644 CE, woodblock print. This is based on the early-15th century voyages of Zheng He, from Nanjing through Southeast Asia and the Persian Gulf. In this segment we can find places from the *Sejarah Melayu*, circled in red from left: Melaka, Dan Ma Xi (Temasek), and Longyamen (aka, The Dragons Teeth Gate). Image from Wikicommons, sourced from the United States Library of Congress.

When we were young, fairy tales like *The Little Red Riding Hood*, *Jack and Beanstalk* and many others filled our time and young imagination. While we consume fairy tales of faraway lands, have we ever wondered if there are any fairy tales from our very own backyard? And the answer is a resounding YES! Certainly, one source of interesting tales is none other than the *Sejarah Melayu*, or the *Malay Annals*.



Manuscript pages from the *Sejarah Melayu*, one of the most important works of Malay literature in this region. From the Collection of the National Museum of Singapore.



(top) 14th century CE figurine of the Headless Horseman excavated in Singapore near Empress Place. From the Collection of the National Museum of Singapore.

(left) Watercolour rendition of Sang Nila Utama, founder of the Kingdom of Singapura according to the *Sejarah Melayu*. Image courtesy of Yusoff Latiff.

According to Dr Azhar Ibrahim, Senior Lecturer from the Department of Malay Studies, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, National University of Singapore, the '*Malay Annals* (*Sejarah Melayu*) is one of the best works in the world of Malay literature and remains relevant to our modern times' (Berita Mediacorp, 24 April 2022). *Sejarah Melayu* is both a historical account of the Malay Sultanate and a collection of stories of kings, royalty and court intrigues. It was passed down orally before it was written down in Jawi text (a modified Arabic script) in 1612 CE. Today, 30 manuscripts are known to exist, and two are in the British Museum.

So, what strange tales open up for us when we delve into its pages?

SINGAPORE RIVER

Centuries before Sir Stamford Raffles landed his ship on the Singapore River, there was a Prince from Palembang called Sang Nila Utama, who set foot here. Palembang was then part of the Srivijaya empire that ruled the area from the 7th century CE. The story goes that he saw an island with glittering white sand, called Temasek, and decided to venture out to it. Before his ship could reach the island, a terrible storm arose that caused the ship to fill with water. Upon the advice of the boatman, Sang Nila Utama threw his crown overboard to calm the storm. The crown went down into the raging water near Telok Blangah. Finally, the entourage docked safely at the Singapore River. Sang Nila Utama spotted a strange animal with red body and black head at 'the plain near the mouth of the river Temasek', i.e. the Padang near the Singapore River. He was told by his

counsellor that the animal was called a *singa* (meaning lion). Sang Nila Utama was so pleased with the name that he called the island *Singa-pura* (Lion City) and decided to build a settlement here. The name stuck and we have been calling it Singapore ever since.

Excavation done in different parts of Singapore in recent decades yielded many interesting finds and artefacts. One of them is a figurine of a Headless Horseman which is showcased in the National Museum of Singapore. The Headless Horseman was uncovered in 1998 on the banks of Singapore River. The horseman is bare-chested from the waist up. He dons some kind of cloth. The horse is fully ornated, and interestingly, has wings on its side. The artefact is made of lead and of Javanese-style. There is no artefact of such material and style found in Southeast Asia and is truly a one-of-its-kind in Singapore.

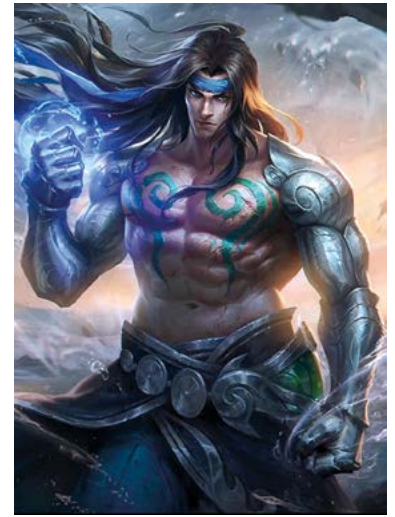
What do the Headless Horseman and the English medieval poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* have in common? For one, both feature a headless horseman. Second, both were products of the 14th century CE. Third, they are associated with tales of folklore.

Many scholars believe that the horseman could be Raja (King in Malay) Chulan, an ancestor of the kings of Singapore. According to the *Sejarah Melayu*, Raja Chulan, the father of Sang Nila Utama, fell in love with a princess who lived under the sea. After spending some time there, Raja Chulan returned to land, riding on a winged horse. Thereafter, Sang Nila Utama was born. Raja Chulan asked his craftsmen to make a statue to commemorate his memorable time spent under the sea with the princess.

FEATURE



(top) Our national treasure, the Singapore Stone. From the Collection of the National Museum of Singapore.



(right) Modern day Badang in Mobile Legends mobile game. Image from Wiki Fandom.

BUKIT LARANGAN

Before Fort Canning Hill was called its current name, it had a more ominous name *Bukit Larangan* (Forbidden Hill in Malay). Why “forbidden”? This is because on the top of hill lived the first kings and royalty of Singapura in the 14th century. The ordinary people were forbidden to set foot on the hill, in part also due their belief that the hill was haunted. It is said that our Prince Sang Nila Utama was buried on *Bukit Larangan*, after ruling Singapura for 48 years.

If DC Comics has their Superman, then Singapore has our very own superman – Badang – taken right off the pages in chapter six of *Sejarah Melayu!* He was a slave from Saluang who possessed supernatural strength. He was summoned by the King of Singapura to test his strength. The King asked Badang to push his 45-foot boat into the sea. Badang could accomplish the task all by himself which normally took 1,000 men to do so. Soon, Badang was challenged to a duel by another strong man from Kalinga. They found a huge boulder on top of *Bukit Larangan*. Despite of his best efforts, strong man Kalinga could not lift the boulder. When it came to Badang’s turn, he effortlessly lifted the boulder and threw it as far away as the mouth of

the Singapore River. Legend has it that a fragment of this same boulder that Badang threw is the famous Singapore Stone at the National Museum of Singapore (NMS). Today there is a very popular video game called *Mobile Legends* that features Singapore’s superman Badang! Interestingly, there is a Singapore Stone look-alike bearing the name Badang Terrace on Fort Canning Hill. You may not touch the real Singapore Stone in NMS, but you can certainly touch and sit on the stone at Badang Terrace while playing *Mobile Legends*.

BUKIT MERAH

In another tale found in chapter ten of the *Sejarah Melayu*, Singapura shores were infested with silver swordfish (or garfish) with its deadly blade. Whenever the local people went out to sea, they would be attacked by this formidable enemy. Fishermen were severely wounded or died from the attack of the swordfish. The locals’ cries for help reached Raja Paduka Sri Maharaja who was ruling Singapura at that time. He commanded his soldiers to form a wall with their legs to stop the swordfish. Unfortunately, the Raja’s army was heavily wounded by the swordfish. A young child came




The danger of swordfish attacking Singapura averted by banana stem barricades. From the National Heritage Board’s book *Attack of the Swordfish and Other Singapore Tales* by Charlotte Lim (Text) and Alicia Tan Yen Ping (Illustration).

up with a great idea to use banana tree stems as barricades. When the swordfish attacked again, their blades got stuck in the stems and they were quickly killed off by the army. Though danger was successfully averted, the Raja became paranoid and feared the young child's intelligence would pose a threat to his throne. Instead of being rewarded for his brilliant idea, the young child was subsequently murdered by the Raja. The young child's blood was spilled all over the ground and coloured the hill red. The hill was named Bukit Merah or the Red Hill. Both names are still in use in Singapore to this day.

PARIT OF SINGAPORE

However, the curse of the blood debt of Raja Paduka Sri Maharaja continued onto his son, Iskandar Shah. As told in the *Sejarah Melayu*, Iskandar Shah married a woman of exquisite beauty. Her name was Putri Camar al Ajayeh, daughter of Sang Ranjuna Tapa, Singapura Bendahara (similar to a role of a Prime Minister). Iskandar Shah's other mistresses were jealous of her and accused her of adultery. Iskandar Shah had her stripped naked in public and executed. Sang Ranjuna Tapa was enraged and sought to avenge his daughter's death. Later, he opened the fort gate to the invading Majapahit army, causing a great massacre and bloodshed in Singapura. There was so much blood that it coloured the plain of Singapura red. Iskandar Shah fled to Melaka and founded a settlement there. What happened to Sang Ranjuna Tapa then? He and his wife did not come to a good end. They were turned into stone, standing beside the moat of Singapura.

You would probably be surprised to learn that this moat of Singapura is called the Parit of Singapore. It was once a freshwater stream on Fort Canning Hill and had since dried up and disappeared. What's more, the story of the sack of Singapura by the invading Majapahit army was told in the 1962 film *Dang Anom*, produced by Cathay-Keris Film Productions and distributed by Shaw Organisation. 

FURTHER READING

Decoding the Hidden History of Ancient Singapore Sejarah Melayu, by Jason Heng.



Malay Heritage Centre docents (from left: Ramlah Tyebally, Hilary White, Julina Khusaini, Sadiyah Shahal) beside a piece of the look-alike Singapore Stone at Badang Terrace on Fort Canning Hill. Image from FOM.

PRISCILLA TAN is a FOM docent at the National Museum of Singapore.



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THE ULTIMATE ROMANCE: SHAH JAHAN'S MOONLIGHT GARDEN

PIA RAMPAL TAKES US ON A JOURNEY TO THE RIVERBANK
OPPOSITE THE TAJ MAHAL IN AGRA.



Portrait of Shah Jahan, 1616, V&A. Mumtaz Mahal, Dara Shikoh Album, British Library.

*The buildings are so lovely.
That the river does not want to pass by.*

- Kalim, Shah Jahan's Court Poet



Shah Jahan on a Terrace, painted by Chitarman, c. 1627–28, ink, opaque watercolour, and gold on paper. Image from The Metropolitan Museum, New York.

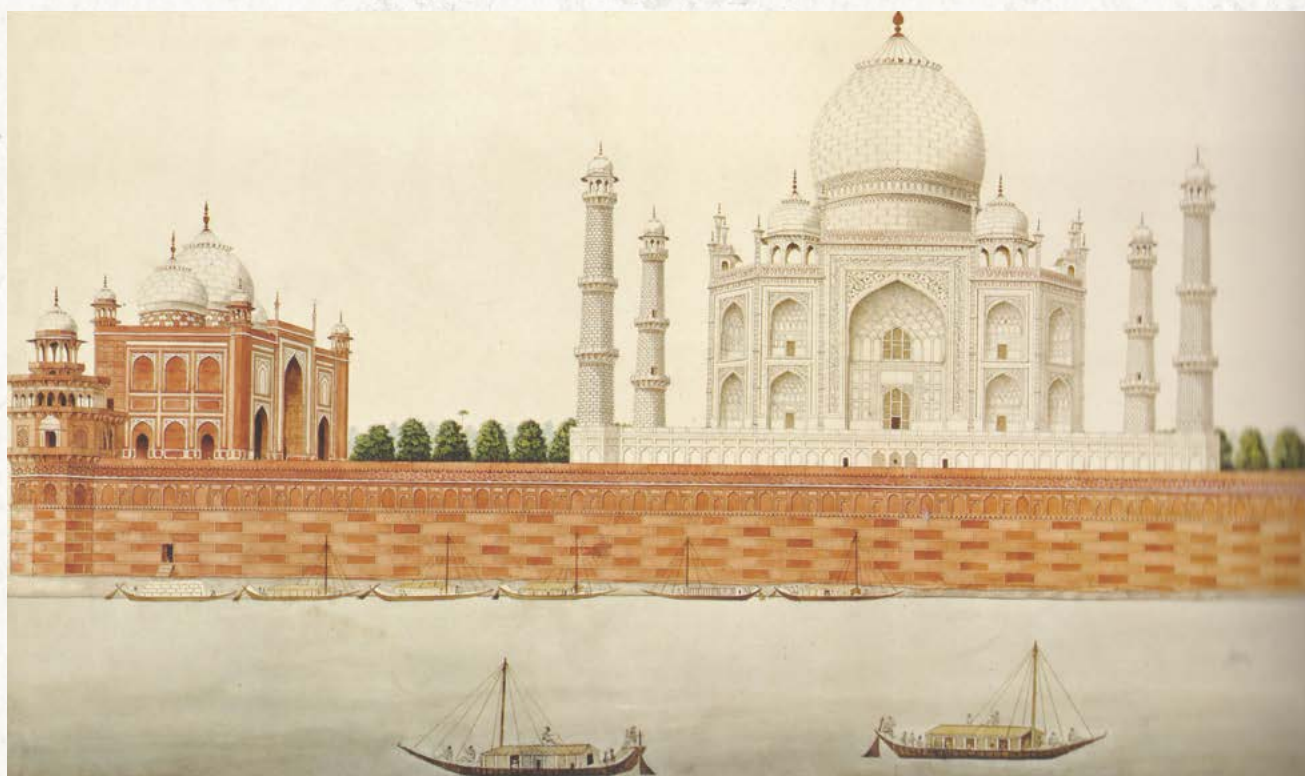
AGRA'S IMPERIAL RIVERFRONT IN THE 17TH CENTURY

A Emperor Shah Jahan's ('King of the World') accession to the Mughal throne in February 1628 took place in Agra, the imperial capital. In this painting (image to the left), we see Shah Jahan as the Lord of the River standing on a terrace. The crystal-clear waters of the Yamuna River rise from the melted glaciers of the Himalayas and flow behind him. On the riverfront are walled gardens, glimpses of a pavilion and barges on the water. During his reign, the Mughal empire would reach its height, everything from a jewel to a building was 'beyond perfection'.

In the 17th century, the Agra riverfront with palaces, walled gardens, mansions, and tombs was one of the spectacular sights of Mughal India. Agra's glitterati lived along its banks; the royal family owned the land which was given to favoured family members and nobles. Shah Jahan with his beloved wife Mumtaz Mahal ('Chosen One of the Palace') lived in palaces he had added to the Agra Fort on the banks of the river. From there the royal family would travel in processional barges, with music and the light of oil lamps; weddings were celebrated along the riverbank with fireworks in the shapes of flowers. The heady fragrance of jasmine and roses filled the air.

THE TAJ MAHAL

On the night of 17th June 1631, Shah Jahan was at Burhanpur fort with his family. Mumtaz Mahal went into labour for her 14th child (of the 14 children, 7 lived). He was playing chess with his eldest daughter Jahanara when a messenger came rushing in from the Empress's chambers. Labour was progressing badly; nothing could be done. Shah Jahan was deeply in love with his wife, apart from her beauty, she could hold her own in conversations with him and was always at his side during military campaigns. Court



Taj View, 19th century. One can see a similar watercolour rendering of this scene (c. 1795-1810) in the Court and Company Gallery at the Asian Civilisations Museum. Image sourced from the public domain.

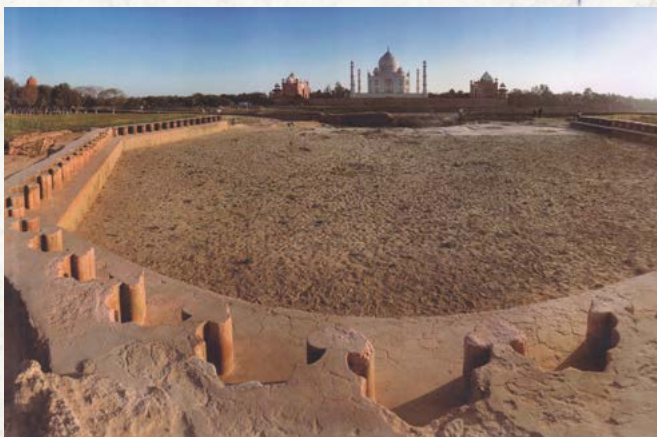
chronicles record that ‘The King lost his senses, crying without restraint. Now the companions of life had become separated’. In her honour, to create *jannat* (paradise) on earth and to proclaim the power and monumentality of his reign, preparations for the great mausoleum began to ‘increase the amazement of all humanity’.

Mumtaz Mahal was temporarily buried in Burhanpur while the perfect plot along the riverbank in Agra was found. The site chosen was after a bend in the Yamuna River, along a north-south axis. Construction began in 1632 and was officially completed in 1643. In Mughal documents, the monument is called the ‘Illumined Tomb’, the term *Taj Mahal* is thought to be derived from her title, Mumtaz Mahal. Unlike earlier Mughal mausoleums which were centred in the middle of a *charbagh* (a garden divided by walkways or water channels into four parts), the Taj Mahal appears to end on a high plinth just before the river. In the book, *Taj Mahal Multiple Narratives*, Amita Baig makes an important point: ‘the Taj Mahal was designed to be accessed by Shah Jahan and the royal family who only approached the mausoleum from his palace in the fort, by barge along the river. So, his vision was circumscribed by this approach’. This painting from the 19th century (previous page, bottom image) shows the existence of openings in the wall to allow direct access from the river (on the lower left side) through chambers, which would have been richly painted, to the tomb.

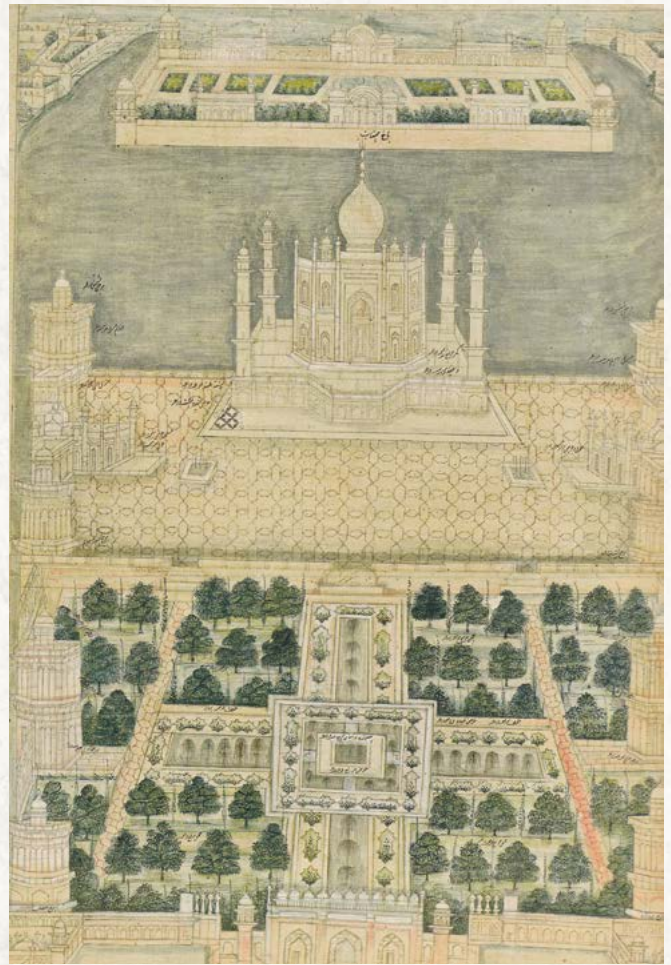
After its completion, Shah Jahan moved to Delhi to build his new capital Shahjahanabad. In 1648, the Mughal capital shifted to Shahjahanabad from Agra. Ten years later, Shah Jahan returned to Agra as a captive of his son, the new Emperor Aurangzeb, and remained imprisoned in the Agra Fort, from where he could gaze at the luminous Taj Mahal in the distance until his death on January 31, 1666. His daughter Jahanara arranged his burial in the Taj Mahal tomb chamber with his cenotaph aligned to Mecca, next to his beloved wife.

RUMOURS OF A BLACK TAJ

Did Shah Jahan plan to build another grand tomb for himself or did he expect his sons to do so? Did he always plan to be buried alongside Mumtaz Mahal? We do not have definitive answers to these questions yet. The riverbank directly opposite the Taj Mahal is on a lower level and prone to flooding, the sight of ruins on this bank gave rise to myths. Rumours of a second tomb, a black marble Taj, directly across the river first appeared in the account of the French traveller and jewel merchant, Jean Baptiste Tavernier who visited Agra in 1640 and 1665. In the 20th century, a well-known British historian Percy Brown published a drawing, which showed the Black and White Taj Mahal’s facing each other



Excavation of the Octagonal tank, 1999. Photo from the Freer Gallery of Art Archives.



Bird's Eye View of the Taj Mahal and Mehtab Bagh, 1790-1810. Image from the Sackler Gallery Washington, sourced from Wikicommons.

across a bridge on the Yamuna, in his treatise on *The History of Architecture*. Records show that Shah Jahan had another magnificent plan.

In 1652, when Prince Aurangzeb visited his mother’s tomb, he wrote a letter to Shah Jahan which made a link between the Taj Mahal and Mehtab Bagh (‘Moonlight Garden’) on the opposite bank. His writes (translated by Wheeler M. Thackston), ‘the Mehtab Bagh was completely inundated, and therefore has lost its charm, but soon it will regain its verdancy. The octagonal pool and the pavilion (*bangla*) around it are in splendid condition’. A map of the Agra Riverfront made for the Maharaja of Jaipur in the



Niches for Oil Lamps, 1999. Photo from the Freer Gallery of Art Archives.



View of the Taj Mahal from Mehtab Bagh. Photo by author.

early 18th century, clearly shows a garden of the same width across the river from the Taj Mahal. The painting, c 1790-1810 (image on opposite page, top right) depicts a bird's eye view of the Taj Mahal and Mehtab Bagh across the Yamuna River. It shows the garden being in perfect alignment with the Taj Mahal as an integral part of its grand design. New questions arose, did Shah Jahan intend the river itself to be part of his plan? Could the Taj Mahal complex be even more ambitious? For answers, we move to the 1990s and the first excavations at Mehtab Bagh.

THE SEARCH FOR THE EMPEROR'S MOONLIGHT GARDEN: BAGH-I-MEHTAB PADSHAHI

The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) had surveyed the site of Mehtab Bagh in 1994 and confirmed extensive Mughal ruins from the 17th century. The next year, the U.S National Park Service concluded its study of Agra with a panel discussion. The ASI took the panel to the banks of the river opposite the Taj Mahal. They were amazed by the stunning view and the fact that the width of the garden and its alignment were the same as the gardens of the Taj Mahal. This was clearly a significant garden, the ASI, and the Smithsonian (represented by garden historian Elizabeth Moynihan) decided to discover what lay beneath the surface.

Mehtab Bagh was built at the same time as the Taj Mahal, it's position along the river led to annual flooding, later it was covered with silt and abandoned. Excavations directly across the river from the Taj Mahal revealed a landing where the emperor would arrive by barge with steps leading to a raised terrace. At the terrace was an 88-foot octagonal pool with lotus foliated edges and 25 fountains. Perfectly positioned to reflect the Taj Mahal on a full moon night. Above the level of the fountain's jets was a pavilion where the emperor would sit and see two views of the Taj Mahal – one across the river as if suspended from the sky, the other in the octagonal pool fragmented by the pearl like water jets from the fountains. Behind the pavilion, were waterfall like niches filled with oil lamps at night.

Shah Jahan would have been surrounded by fragrant night blossoming plants and trees – jasmine, champa, red cedar – and the sound of songbirds like the nightingale.

Excavations at the Mughal layer of planting revealed fragrant flowers with colours of white, yellow, and red at their best at moonlight, and fruit bearing trees and plants like the jujube, which had seeds for birds. A tarpaulin was put into the octagonal pool and filled with water, Elizabeth Moynihan remembers, 'by the light of full moon on October 24, 1999, the Taj was reflected once again in the great pool of the Mehtab Bagh. In the stillness of the night, bathed in moonlight the glory of the garden could be imagined'.

Mehtab Bagh was replanted Mughal style by the ASI and World Monuments Fund in 2000. The garden is generally open from sunrise to sunset, the Taj viewpoint just outside is open till late at night. From there on a full moon night, you can gaze across at the Taj Mahal, the Emperor's View. Amita Baig concludes that 'Mehtab Bagh was lost to floods for centuries. Only in the last 20 years has there been clarity that the emperor did not intend to build the legendary Black Taj for himself on the opposite bank but rather an even grander scheme which included the river as its central axis, with two *charbaghs* on either side – a powerful and symbolically creative design'. **P**



Mehtab Bagh. Photo by author from September 2023.

FURTHER READING

The Moonlight Garden New Discoveries at the Taj Mahal, edited by Elizabeth Moynihan.

Taj Mahal Multiple Narratives, by Amita Baig and Rahul Mehrotra.

PIA RAMPAL is an advertising person, ACM docent, and admirer of Shah Jahan.

EMBRACING THE ENTIRE WORLD: IMAGINARY MOUNTAINS AND RIVERS OF ASIA

ERIC ROSENKRANZ EXPLAINS THE SOURCES OF IMAGINARY MOUNTAINS
AND RIVERS IN ASIA WITH CORRESPONDING REAL LIFE FOLLOWINGS.

All photos sourced from the public domain, unless noted otherwise.

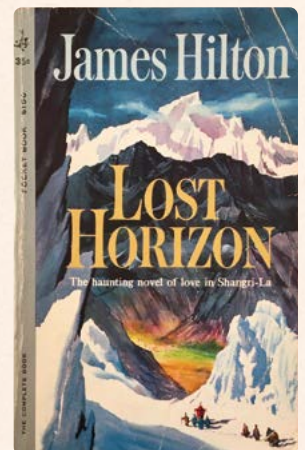
During the third week of May 1931, a small prop plane took off from Baskul in Afghanistan carrying a pilot and four passengers: Roberta Brinklow, Christian missionary Henry Barnard, American businessman Hugh Conway, and British Consul and Vice-Counsel Charles Mallinson.

THE FATEFUL JOURNEY

The plane flew for some distance into what appeared to be the foothills of the Himalayas in Tibet, possibly the Karakorams, far from their intended destination of Peshawar. The plane came in for a landing, a bad landing: one of the tires exploded followed by ten seconds of crashing and swaying. The passengers pulled the pilot out of the wreckage, but he died shortly thereafter. They gazed at the mountain soaring above them at 28,000 feet which they later learned was named Karakal – Blue Moon – Mountain.

Soon they discovered where they were. In Tibetan; *ri* means mountain, *la* means pass and since they were in the Shang region, they found themselves in Shang Mountain Pass or ... Shangri-La.

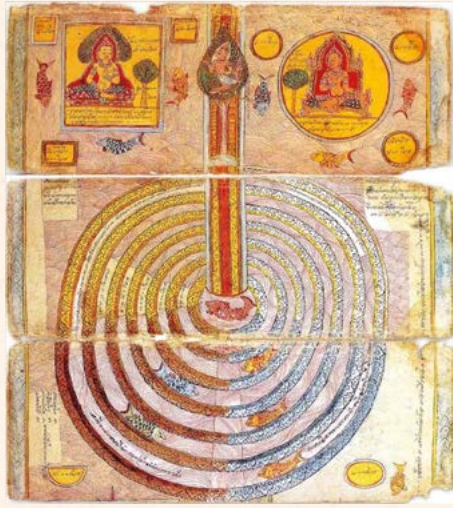
None of the above actually happened. There is no town named Baskul, no 28,000-foot mountain called Karakal, no mystical valley Shangri-La. All of the above comes from the 1933 novel *Lost Horizons* by James Hilton.



Cover of Pocketbook #1, the first mass market paperback.



Zhongdian, now Shangri-La City, northwestern Yunnan Province, China.



Mt Meru surrounded by oceans and peaks. Encircling Mount Meru from the 1776 Manuscript Version of the Traiphum.

SHANGRI-LA OR SHAMBALA?

Imaginary mountains and rivers have long been associated with Asia. There are ancient Chinese texts about mythical geography ('Classic of Mountains and Seas' or *Shanhai Jing*). But in today's world, it is curious to see how keen people are to transform imaginary things into real ones.

We all have heard of the Shangri-La hotel chain, first built in Singapore in 1971. But did you know of a town in Yunnan Province, China, named Zhongdian? In 2001, in order to promote tourism, the name of the city was changed officially to Shangri-La.

There was another "real" Shangri-La, which still exists. The American Presidential compound was named this by Franklin Roosevelt before it was renamed Camp David by Dwight Eisenhower after his grandson, David.

Another interpretation of Shangri-La is that the word comes from the Tibetan Buddhist spiritual kingdom of Shambala (Sanskrit: 'Place of Peace'). Shambala hides in the

altitudes of eight mountains to which the enlightened go at times of world crisis. The Shakyamuni Buddha taught the first king of Shambala, who preserved the teachings so that a future king would emerge to bring about a new age of enlightenment. Mark your calendars now, as this will happen in the year 2424 or 2425 (in the 3304th year after the death of the Buddha).

MOUNT MERU – REAL OR NOT?

Most importantly, for our story, is that at the centre of Shambala lies the mystical (and imaginary) Mount Meru – the most important mountain in the Buddhist cosmology and the one that links earth with heaven. Buddhism, Hinduism and Jainism all refer to Meru as a holy mountain at the centre of the universe. Different religious texts make references to Meru around which the sun and moon revolve, being the residence of kings and being the fixture that nailed the free-floating island of Java in place.

But where is Meru? Being imaginary, it is hard to say (other than being 'at the centre of the universe') but some sources place it in the Pamirs, northwest of Kashmir. Symbolically, we can find it in many temples, from Angkor Wat to Wat Arun to Borobudur – all of which are designed to represent Meru.

Meru Peak (*Meru* in Sanskrit meaning 'Peak') can today be found in reality in the Indian Himalayas, not extremely high at "only" 21,850 ft but quite difficult to ascend. After multiple failed attempts, one trio finally made the summit in 2011. Watch the excellent documentary *Meru* if you want to be enthralled by the determination of others.

THE BRIDGE OVER THE RIVER MAE KLONG?

During World War II, the Japanese took control of Myanmar (Burma). Rather than supply their troops by sea, a route vulnerable to attack by the British Navy, it was decided to build a rail link from Bangkok to then Rangoon.



Wat Arun Temple in Bangkok. Photo by Fokke Baarsen, Adobe Stock.



(left) Meru Peak located in the Garhwal Himalayas, India. The site of the world's highest BASE jump from a location on the surface of the Earth.

(opposite left) Existing stretch of Death Railway near Kanchanburi. Photo by author.

(opposite right) Terza Tavola, Giacomo Gastaldi, c. 1560 CE.

Possibly up to 300,000 Javanese, Malays, Indians, Burmese, Chinese and Thai civilians may have been forcibly employed in the railroad's construction, with an estimated 50% death rate.

A lesser number, perhaps in the tens of thousands, of Australians and British prisoners-of-war were brought from Changi Prison in Singapore to the railway site. Their conditions, while quite harsh, were not as bad of those of the Asians, and the death rate did not reach the same proportion. After the war, the enforced work on this 'Death Railway' was officially designated a War Crime.

There were several bridges to be built over the Mae Klong River in western Thailand, originating in the town of Kanchanaburi. In 1952 Pierre Boulle wrote a novel depicting these events, followed by a Hollywood film *The Bridge over the River Kwai*. As neither the bridge nor the River Kwai existed, after the war the local Thais were confused by the multitudes of tourists coming to the area asking to see both.

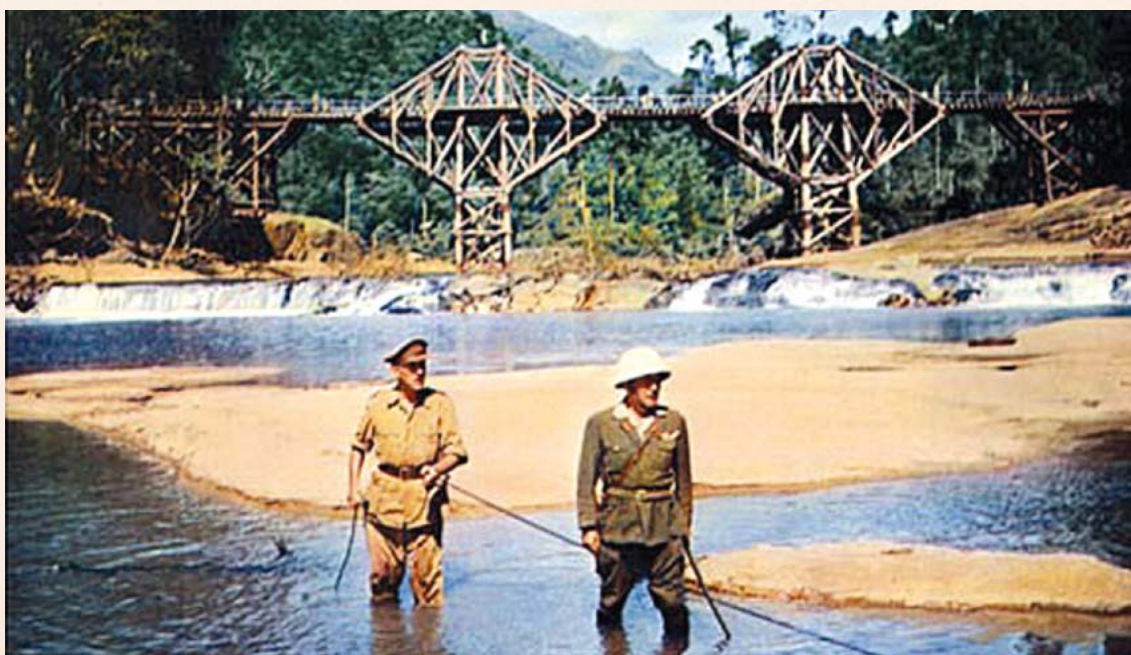
In the 1960's the Mae Klong was renamed the Khwae Yai (Big Kwai) and Khwae Noi (Little Kwai). The bridges that one can see today have nothing to do with the bridges from the war, although sections of the railway still exist.

NONEXISTENT LAKE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

There are five great rivers in Southeast Asia: Chao Phraya, Salween, Irrawaddy, Brahmaputra and the Mekong. Early European geographers were obsessed with finding the source of these rivers, and finally the Portuguese Joan de Barros succeeded. In 1553 he wrote of a Lake Chimay in what is now northwestern Thailand: *'This lake lies 200 leagues north, and...rivers rise from it...form the river Sião [Chao Phraya]. The other three flow into the Gulf of Bengal. One of these three gets its name from the Caor Kingdom [Brahmaputra] ... the second is the river of Pegu [Irrawaddy] ... and the third flows through Martaban [Salween].'*

De Barros account was visualized in a new map of Southeast Asia in 1554 by the Venetian diplomat Giovanni Battista Ramusio. In the map (oriented with south at the top) one can clearly see the Lake with the four rivers emerging from it and flowing to the sea. The fifth river (the Mekong) has a different source.

This lake appeared on maps for the next several hundred years and was found on maps as late as 1783. The Portuguese explorer and writer Fernão Mendes Pinto who travelled in



Screenshot from the 1957 movie *Bridge Over the River Kwai* starring Alec Guinness and Sessue Hayakawa.



Thailand and Burma in the 1540s, described Chiang Mai and its lake as being in the ‘forbidding’ region of the Southeast Asian interior: *‘In the middle of this country...there is a big lake the natives call...the Chiang Mai. That lake empties into this river and three other rivers besides...’*

This lake did not exist. No large lake of any kind exists anywhere near Chiang Mai. It was pure invention that nevertheless was repeated for hundreds of years. This invention was not unknown at the time, as mapmakers abhorred empty spaces and did their best to fill them with geographical wonders, real or not.

Let’s look once again at the map. You will notice that the leftmost river emerging from the lake and disgoring into the Gulf of Thailand near present day Bangkok is named *Menam*. When the first Europeans saw the great river, they asked the locals its name and the Siamese responded, *‘Menam’*. Thus, for hundreds of years after, the great river flowing south to the Gulf was called by Europeans the *Menam*. However, the locals were merely responded accurately, *menam* being the Thai word for river.

If one looks at the peninsula in the map rising up to the equator, one sees the city of Malaca, then an imaginary river cutting thru the peninsula separating the mainland from the province of Muar, then off to the left one sees *C de Cimcapula* (or Cape Singapore). This is further evidence that the name Singapore far preceded the discovery and naming of our home island.



Anavatapta Lake from Buddhist Cosmology (Nihon koku narabini Shumi shoten zu). From the Collection of the Harvard Art Museums/Arthur M. Sackler Museum.

FOUR RIVERS IN CHRISTIANITY AND BUDDHISM


The men of the time were deeply religious, and the Jesuits were among the leaders in Asian exploration. Genesis states that four great rivers flow out of the Garden of Eden, and this was considered factual by many. Even by 1357 CE the Tigris, Euphrates, Nile and Ganges rivers were all stated to come from the Garden. And the 18th century European maps continued to feature Eden as a real place.

But let’s return to Meru. In Buddhist cosmology, at the very top of Meru was a lake, Anavatapta, out of which four great rivers emerged. The idea of a great lake with four rivers was widespread in Southeast Asia. We even see Chinese maps and a Japanese map from 1710 showing Lake Anavatapta and four rivers.

‘IMAGINATION EMBRACES THE ENTIRE WORLD’

Mapmakers of this time had very little data from which to construct their maps and relied on written accounts, which were often not supported by facts. These maps were continually updated and revised as more information came in, but inventions such as Lake Chimay often persisted for years. In the early 20th century, the actual sources of the Southeast Asian rivers were finally identified, and Lake Chimay and its corresponding mythology finally put to rest.

Of the four imaginary places discussed here: Shangri-La, Mt Meru, the River Kwai, and Lake Chimay, the first three have been turned into reality. Only Lake Chimay has disappeared although retaining some existence in the town Chiang Mai.

Albert Einstein said, *‘Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited, whereas imagination embraces the entire world’*. 

FURTHER READING

Lake Chiamay: Asia’s mythical mother of rivers by Michael Pearson, The Globe, Journal of the Australian and New Zealand Map Society.

ERIC ROSENKRANZ is an antique map collector and intrepid discoverer of lands both real and imaginary.

THE BROKPA FOLK, A LIVING LEGACY

VAIJU KHARÉ EXPLORES A LEGACY OF ALEXANDER THE GREAT IN THE HIMALAYA, ALONG THE INDUS.



Plan of the Ruins of Sankissa, *Alexander Cunningham, c1870 CE*. Image from *Wikicommons*.

Once upon an ancient time, not so far away, it was the moment for the Buddha to return to earth from one of the heavenly planes in Buddhist cosmology. Sankissa, in modern-day Uttar Pradesh, was the location of this Descent, one of the unchangeable spots of the world, where all the Buddhas descend to the world of men after preaching the *Abhidhamma* (the scriptural teaching of early Buddhism) in the Tushita heavens.

BUDDHA'S DESCENT FROM THE HEAVENS

Scattered ruins of an old stupa, an Ashokan Pillar, a temple to Buddha, and an old monastery still mark this place, all of which are attributed to the world conquering Emperor Ashoka (r. 272 - 232 BCE). Long centuries later, it was Alexander Cunningham, the first Director-General of the Archaeological Survey of India, who rediscovered Sankissa in 1842. Since then, it is a draw for Buddhist pilgrims and a living city, Sankasya, in present day north India.

It is this moment of Descent that is captured in the

beautiful relief panel fragment at Asian Civilisations Museum in Singapore. This beautiful 55cm of schist, from the 3rd to 4th century CE, evokes the waiting and receiving of the Buddha on his descent. Those in attendance were disciples, like Moggallana, Sariputta and Uppalavana, along with many assembled people who are said to have covered the earth for thirty leagues around Sankissa.

The fragment of sculpture is of the Greco-Buddhist art school, and so brings more echoes: two world conquerors, Emperor Kanishka (r. 129 - 155 CE) of the Yue-Chi tribe and Alexander the Great (r. 336 - 323 BCE) of Macedonia and ancient Gāndhāra.



Relief of Buddha's Descent from the *Trayastrimsha Heaven, 3rd-4th century CE, Gāndhāra*. From the Collection of the Asian Civilisations Museum.

GĀNDHĀRA

Gāndhāra, 'the fragrant land' in Sanskrit, or *Paruparasaenna*, 'land beyond the Hindu Kush', in Persian, was an Asian crossroad of culture, trade, conquests, and civilisations. The region, dating back over four thousand years, comprised the present-day valleys of Peshawar and Swat in Pakistan, Kabul River, city and its surrounds in eastern Afghanistan, southern Uzbekistan, Tarim Basin in Central Asia, and the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of China. More linguistically bound than as a political unit, with *gandhari* as language, *khāroshthi* as script, and Gāndhāra Buddhism as the dominant religion, these were lands that gave the cultural and artistic stimuli to an eclectic Buddhist expression blending Central Asian and Hellenistic ideas and imagery. Even today the word, *Gāndhāra*, evokes mystery, longing, home, love, and loss of a deep ancient time to the people across this highland geography.



The Indus River flows through Dah Hanu, Darchik, and Garkon. Photo by author.



The traditional dress of the Brokpa with iconic floral headgear. Photo sourced from the public domain.



The Dah and Hanu Villages in the Dhahanu Valley. Photo sourced from the public domain.

THE BROKPA

One such people are the Brokpa, or Drokpa, living in the Ladakh of Himalayan India. At an altitude of about 2,440 metres along the banks of the Indus River, a mere 5,000-odd members of this tribe have Dha, Hanu, Darchik, Garkon and Turtuk valley as their home. They share a landscape with Kashmir, Tibet, and the Xinjiang. One could easily saunter into these lands absent-mindedly like the *pashm* shepherds, apricot farmers, yak herders, and other pastoralists of a long-gone transhumant way of life, moving between mountains to lowlands with their herds as the seasons change.

The Brokpa I met were generally tall and slender, fair, with light eyes, brown hair and aquiline noses. Some anthropologists say that they are descendants of the Indo-Aryan migration waves, whilst linguists place them as Indo-European. Folklore tells of Germans arriving to create an Aryan progeny, and legend has it that Brokpa are descendants of Alexander's clansmen from Hellenistic lands, who settled there deep in the Gandhara, upstream along the Indus, during and after the years of Alexander's Asian conquests. Whatever



Summer produce at the markets. Photo by author.

their heritage, their indigenous language is Brokskat, the literacy in which has dwindled to mere two per cent, whereas in a second language, Ladakhi or Hindi, it is as high as 56 per cent, clear evidence of the blending-in over time. Their once beautiful attire of silken, embroidered fabric, high boots, headgear, has changed to the rough-spun robe, Chinese or Indian made clothes. The women still don a headgear of flowers, coins, beads and silver over their long hair braids.

The Brokpa are still largely pastoral: sheep and yak herders; growers of apricots, apples, blueberries, wine-grapes, cherries, walnuts; farmers of barley, buckwheat, potatoes, herbs and seasonal vegetables; and even oil-pressers. These simple, happy, hardworking people keep to themselves wrapped in their animist beliefs, traditional festivals, music, marriage, and death, although the dominant religions of the land, Buddhist, Islam, and Hindu, each claim them to be 'theirs'. Education and vocational training have improved marginally and few venture into nearby lands of Kargil, Leh, Jammu and Kashmir for modern jobs.

The Brokpa engage in wholesale and retail trading of their produce in the marketplaces during the summer seasons of dry fruits, apricot seed oil, saffron, yak cheese, traditional medicine, and herbs.

CHANGING TRENDS

The growing presence of Indian military, insensitive tourism, infrastructure development, and Ladakhi affluence threatens to girdle a once serene habitation with noise, pollution, pervasive social media, shops, and restaurants, and threatens the old Brokpa way of life. Proselytising and conformity are drawing more to Buddhism. All this has changed the way these folk identify and interact with the modern world. When asked of themselves their typical responses: 'We are Aryans', 'We are Buddhists', or even 'Yes, our forefathers came with Sikandar (Alexander) from very far away', reflect the tourist brochure-talk, and that of the many foreign academics, writers, and media. The metal arches marking the entrance to their villages say it all.



The metal arch at the entrance to the village that proclaims their ancestry. Photo by author.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Whether of a Gāndhāra or Alexander Legacy, the reality is that the Brokpa folk are right here, right now. Are they to be a living museum rapidly perishing or a cherished presence? Perhaps it is not a matter of *if* but of *when* the Brokpa people will be forced to adapt to changes in lifestyle, in order to survive the forces of development, religion, nationhood and more. **P**

FURTHER READING

History and Culture of the Dard People of Ladakh, by Tashi Namgail

VAIJU KHARÉ is an FOM member and an independent researcher in international relations, traditions of art, architecture, folk, and comparative religions of Asia.

TRACING THE ANCIENT ETERNAL FLAMES

CANDICE YEO DELVES INTO THE RICH AND LASTING HERITAGE OF ZOROASTRIANISM.

Photos by Author, unless noted otherwise.



The Faravahar, ancient symbol of the Zoroastrian faith, depicts a bearded man who stands above a pair of wings. The wings stretch out from a circle, which represents eternity. Photo from Wikicommons.

For many seasons, fans of the hit series *Game of Thrones* have been gripped by the dramatisation of the relentless pursuit of power in a world teetering on the brink of chaos. But did you know that George R.R. Martin, the author of *A Song of Ice and Fire*, the book series on which *Game of Thrones* is based, drew inspiration from various historical and mythological sources? Of these, Zoroastrianism was a significant influence.

Universally recognised as one of the oldest monotheistic religions, Zoroastrianism is commonly known as an ancient religion, where nature, such as mountains and lakes, is a main feature. The faith still counts more than 100,000 followers globally, spanning from Iran to India and parts of Southeast Asia, including Singapore. While tiny, this close-knit community boasts some notable names such as Freddie Mercury (the lead singer and songwriter of Queen, the wildly successful British rock band), Zubin Mehta (the highly acclaimed conductor), and members of the billionaire Tata family from India.

THE ETERNAL STRUGGLE OF GOOD AND EVIL

What do we really know about this 'fire religion', so referred to by many due to the name of its places of communal worship, the Fire Temples? Zoroastrianism finds its roots in ancient Persia, modern day Iran, between the 18th and 6th centuries BCE. Many scholars today believe that this ancient religion impacted the belief systems of later monotheistic religions such as Islam, Judaism, and Christianity.

It first surfaced in the teachings of the prophet Zoroaster, who is believed to have received a divine revelation from the



Zoroastrian Fire Temple in Yazd, Iran.



Dakhma (Tower of Silence) and rest areas for family members of the deceased near Yazd, Iran.

supreme deity, Ahura Mazda, at the age of 30. Ahura Mazda revealed to him the tenets of a new faith, which embraced the concept of *Asha*, a divine order and truth that adherents are encouraged to uphold in their lives. At the heart of his teachings is the concept of dualism, a belief in the perpetual struggle between the forces of good, Ahura Mazda, and evil, Angra Mainyu. In this cosmic dance, Ahura Mazda, the supreme deity, battles Angra Mainyu, the destructive force, while men are forced ultimately to choose sides. Zoroastrians align themselves with the forces of good through righteous thoughts, words, and deeds, creating a harmonious existence.

According to Zoroastrian belief, the 'First Man' is referred to as *Gayomard*, who arises from *Spandarmat* or Mother Earth, according to Zoroastrian creation belief. His name, *Gaya*, which means life, united to *Maretan*, referring to death, symbolises a mortal being. At a young age, every Zoroastrian child is taught to fill a 'pocket of good deeds' with at least one good deed daily to fellow men or creation.

This is a faith centred on the promise of Ahura Mazda, that the duality struggles in this world will cease when all men ultimately choose wisely, culminating in the final triumph of good over evil, known as the *Frashakereti* ('Renewal of Perfection').



Portrait of the Zoroaster, the spiritual founder of this ancient religion. Depiction located inside the Fire Temple in Yazd, Iran.

WHERE EARTH MEETS THE SKY

Zoroastrians also believe that all of creation, not just man and woman, but animals, plants, the sun, moon, stars, earth, fire and water included, have a divine guardian watching over them. This connection to nature is profound, with a reverence for the elements that determines all its rituals.

While seemingly unconventional to outsiders, the Zoroastrians' death ritual underscores its commitment to maintaining the balance of nature and that the elements should be kept pure and untainted. They regard dead bodies to be *nasu* (unclean) and therefore do not cremate or bury their dead as this would pollute fire and earth. Dead bodies are instead just placed in a *dakhma* also known as a



Burning for over 1,500 years, the Behram Fire in Yazd, Iran.

Tower of Silence. Located on elevated plateaus, these circular structures facilitate the exposure of deceased bodies to scavenging birds. This death ceremony, *Dokhmenashini*, is also known as the 'Last Good Deed' through the offering of one's body as food. Today, you still see these haunting Towers of Silence in Iran and parts of India, but usage is extremely rare.

Contrary to popular belief, Zoroastrians do not actually worship fire, rather revere the element as a symbol of the divine spark or eternal flame



UNESCO World Heritage site: 'brown city' of Yazd, Iran, called as such for its earthen architecture.

of spirituality that exists within each individual. Today, there are around 165 Fire Temples around the world. In the ancient city of Yazd in Iran, sits the *Behram Fire*, known to have burnt continuously for more than 1,500 years, since 470 CE. The oldest in India is the *Iranshah* in Udvada, which started around 741 CE. These *Atash Behrams* (Fire of Victory) are created through elaborate rituals that span many months. The fire is known to have been gathered from 16 sources, including the fire of lightning, fire from a corpse, and from the homes of all professions with a total of 1,128 consecrations being performed.

Zoroastrians, the pioneers of ancient wisdom, also intertwine their beliefs with nature's elements, such as mountains and rivers. Mountains stand as potent symbols of spiritual ascension, reflecting the lofty ideals of their faith. Rivers, essential in Zoroastrian rituals, embody purity and signify life's perpetual flow and cleansing properties. The faith's genesis amidst Persia's rugged landscapes nurtured a reverence for these natural features, shaping Zoroastrian philosophy. Mountains as realms of divine connection and rivers as purifiers illuminate the Zoroastrian ethos.

FROM PERSIA TO THE WORLD

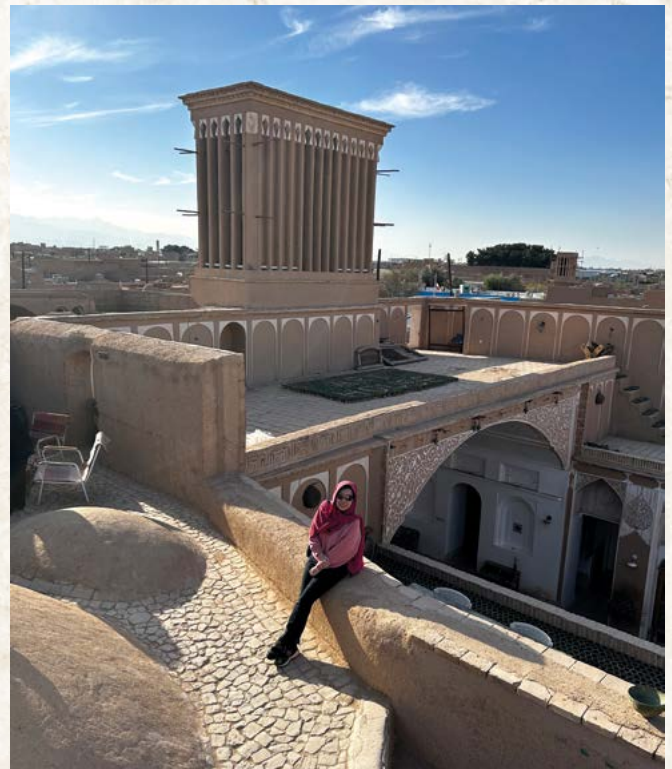
Zoroastrianism grew to dominate Persia in its early years, but fluctuated in popularity as various empires and cultures overtook the region. When the Achaemenid Empire emerged (550 BCE to 330 BCE), Zoroastrianism gained immense prominence, as Cyrus the Great was one of its early fervent followers. The faith became a unifying force in an empire that stretched from the Indus Valley to the Mediterranean.

With the Arab invasions in the 7th century CE, many Zoroastrians faced persecution and sought refuge in India where they became known as the Parsi community. *Parsi*, literally translated, means 'from the land of Par' (Persia). The early Parsis settled as agriculturists and continued their professions of weaving and woodwork, mostly in Gujarat. Without a caste system, the Parsis had no barriers to communications and were soon thriving as local businessmen in many industries.

When trade increased greatly with the advent of colonial

powers during the 16th-17th centuries, the Parsis acted as brokers and agents. Many of them became very wealthy and were great philanthropists, playing a pivotal role in India's economic and cultural development. Mumbai, in particular, became a thriving hub for the Parsis, who contributed significantly to the city's growth.

The city of Yazd in Iran also remains as a living testament to the endurance of the faith. Despite centuries of change, Yazd remains a stronghold for Zoroastrianism with over 30,000 followers, fire temples, and other sacred sites drawing pilgrims and scholars alike.



Wind tower in city of Yazd, Iran. These chimney-like wind catchers harness the cool breezes and channel them down into the home.



The Chao Chu Kang Parsis cemetery. Singapore does not practice sky burials. The deceased may be buried in a concrete coffin, preventing their body from touching the earth. Photo by Charlotte Dawson.

PARSIS IN SINGAPORE

The Parsi diaspora also extended to Singapore where a small but vibrant community has taken root since the early 1820s. The first recorded Parsi in Singapore was Muncherjee, who was believed to have arrived as a convict when Singapore was a British colony. Before long, wealthy Indian Parsi traders who had established a lucrative trading route with China leveraged Singapore as a natural *entrepôt*. Some from this pioneering generation decided to make Singapore home in the 19th century.

‘Parsi thy name is Charity’ is a phrase that goes back to Singapore’s colonial days. Most of you may not be aware that Mistri Road, located at the end of Shenton Way, is actually named after Navroji Mistri, (Dr) (b. 1885, Bombay, d. 29 October 1953, Singapore), who was a well-known Parsi business owner and philanthropist. In the 1950s, he donated close to one million dollars, a significantly substantial sum back then, to build the children’s wing at the Singapore General Hospital. This contribution heralded the start of what is today known as the KK Children’s Hospital.



Bust of Navroji Mistri at Singapore General Hospital. Photo courtesy of Azra Moiz.

Some of us will also remember John Little, which not too long ago was the oldest department store in Singapore. A father and son duo, the Cursetjees, were the original partners of this well-loved store that brought much joy to Singapore shoppers. They were also the first non-Europeans to fund the first public library in Singapore.

Lovers of the popular sitcom *Under One Roof* will certainly recognise Daisy Irani (b. 1960, Mumbai, India), actress, director, and producer for Mediacorp.

The Zoroastrian House, or Fire Temple (at Desker Road, Rochor), was established in Singapore in 2011 and today serves as a spiritual anchor for around 350 followers. Many community members donated and contributed to the upkeep of this place, and a museum hall was officially launched in 2022 to allow more Singaporeans to better understand this community. Limited guided tours offer interested parties a glimpse into this unique and enduring community.

A SYMBOL OF RESILIENCE STILL BURNING BRIGHT

Zoroastrianism has transcended over six millennia and despite their scattered presence. Followers, found in the bustling streets of Mumbai, the diverse neighbourhoods of Singapore, or the ancient alleys of Yazd, continue to uphold their ancient traditions and values, contributing to the cultural diversity of the regions they inhabit. In a world of constant change, the flame of Zoroastrianism burns bright, a symbol of resilience, unity, and the eternal dance between light and darkness. **P**

FURTHER READING

The Parsis of Singapore: History, Culture, Cuisine, by Suna Kanga and Subina Khaneja

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THE ART OF CLASSICAL CHINESE GEOMANCY

LEE SHIN JIE EXPLORES THE BASIS OF THE ART OF CLASSICAL CHINESE GEOMANCY.

Classical Chinese geomancy is an ancient study that embodies various disciplines of science and philosophy, including but not limited to astronomy, astrology, architecture, cosmology, ecology, geography and mathematics. Essentially, studies conducted to answer the age-old existential question of mankind in the universe, assisted by numerous complex systems of categorisation and calculations developed to measure heavenly time and its effect on earthly spatial affairs.



Geomancy Compass, Luo Pan. Magnetic compass containing numerous information and formulas embedded in up to 40 concentric rings on its surface with the needle points towards the south magnetic pole. Photo from Wikicommons.

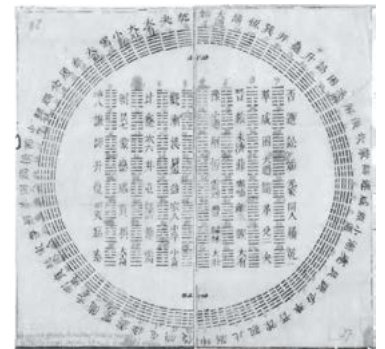
In order to have a clearer comprehension and appreciation of the depth of such ancient knowledge, one has to go back to the very beginning before the formation of the universe itself. The most complete summary of the evolution of early Chinese cosmology is from the mid-2nd century BCE, *Huainanzi*.

ANCIENT CHINESE COSMOGONY HUAINANZI

'In the time before time, before the formation of the world, there was only chaos. The state of the universe is yet to be formed amongst this chaos. This emptiness and void are the basic status of Dao (the way). From this chaos evolved the universe (time and space). This 'universe' formed the vital breath (qi). The vital breath bifurcated; that which is clear and bright arose and formed the heaven first; after which the heavy and muddled condensed into earth. Together, the essence of heaven and earth produced yin and yang. Yin and yang in turn produced the four seasons. The four seasons created all things on earth...'

In this traditional genesis story, the universe is made up of two unique yet inseparable elements of time (heaven) and space (earth), which led to the creation of *yin* and *yang*, vital breaths that manifested in all things in nature. Chinese astrology studies the flow of vital breath in the movement of stars and planets whilst Chinese geomancy examines the flow of vital breath on earth. All in nature, heaven, man and earth ought to coexist in a balanced and harmonious manner to maintain the natural order of the universe.

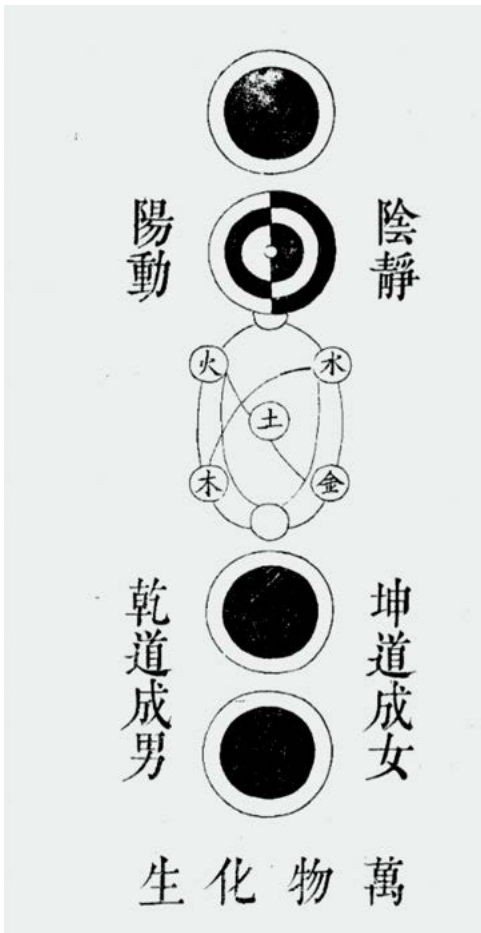
The *yin* (associated with feminine, dark, heavy, motionless, passive, receptive, cold, even numbers etc) is balanced with the *yang* (represents masculine, bright, light, motion, warm, odd numbers etc); bifurcated from the same source but never absolute or complete. These are opposing forces, yet interdependent. Hence,



I Ching Trigrams owned by German mathematician and philosopher Gotfried Wilhelm Leibniz, 1701 CE. Hexagrams are formed by various combinations of the original trigrams in geomancy. These are ancient Chinese divination text used for guidance and decision making. Photo from Wikicommons.



A Thousand Li of Rivers and Mountains, by Wang Ximeng, 1113 CE, Song Dynasty, handscroll painting on silk. Photo from Wikicommons.



Taijitu diagram featuring the wuxing (five elements) in the centre, from the early 16th century Complete Classics Collection of Ancient China by Cheng Menglei. The five processes/elements of wood, fire, earth, metal and water are in a cyclical conceptual scheme used in numerous traditional fields of studies to explain a wide array of phenomena, including usage along with yin and yang principles, topographical, etc., in development of formulaic classical geomancy principles. Photo from Wikicommons.

there is always a bit of the opposite in each other, like the dot in the centre of each half of the black and white symbol of *yin* and *yang*. Even though mankind occupies a pivotal position in the universe and is considered the most important of all things created in nature, our function is to accord with and participate in the cosmic balance; as humans are to live with the consequences of any disruption to the natural order, a rather environmentally conscious theory. Hence the elements of all three realms of heaven, man and earth have to be aligned for events to proceed smoothly.

ELEMENTAL PRINCIPLES OF CLASSICAL GEOMANCY

In essence, ancient Chinese geomancy has its roots in the study of natural and environmental science. But rather than focusing solely on individual physical matters such as categorising and studying the physical traits of plants and animals; principles were developed to also examine the spiritual and metaphysical interconnectivity of all things in existence in the universe. Such principles were designed with the aim of understanding the rules of natural order for mankind to adapt and work with nature to their best advantage. These principals contain a vital notion of living with one's environment instead of exploiting nature to the brink of causing permanent irreversible damage in the course of developing human civilisations.

This is achieved through the management of tangible elements following a series of predictable and consistent rules that were historically derived from mainly mathematics and astrology. If all aspects were managed accordingly, mankind benefits not just physically but also spiritually, leading to progress yet preserving the cosmic equilibrium.

Heaven (time) was formed before earth (space), therefore takes precedence over space in the art of geomancy. The movement of celestial bodies (stars, planets, sun, and moon) were used to derive the appropriate moment for an action, thus the auspicious time for events. Earth (space) and its landscape also play a vital role in dictating man's action leading to the auspicious place for such events.

Naturally, the more well-known aspect of it all, the vital breath from which all in the universe spawned from is at its core. Binding and linking all matters both animate and inanimate. In a dynamic sense, the vital breath in heaven regulates the movements of celestial bodies. And in earth, it is akin to an invisible blood system of a body or a river, coursing through the landscape both near the surface and deep underground.



Hot Pot, Qing Dynasty (Qianlong period, 1736-95), copper, porcelain enamel. A true steamboat broth is said to nourish not just the body but also the soul, and thus it is not unusual to see contemplative inspired landscape used to decorate the pot. From the Collection of the Asian Civilisations Museum.





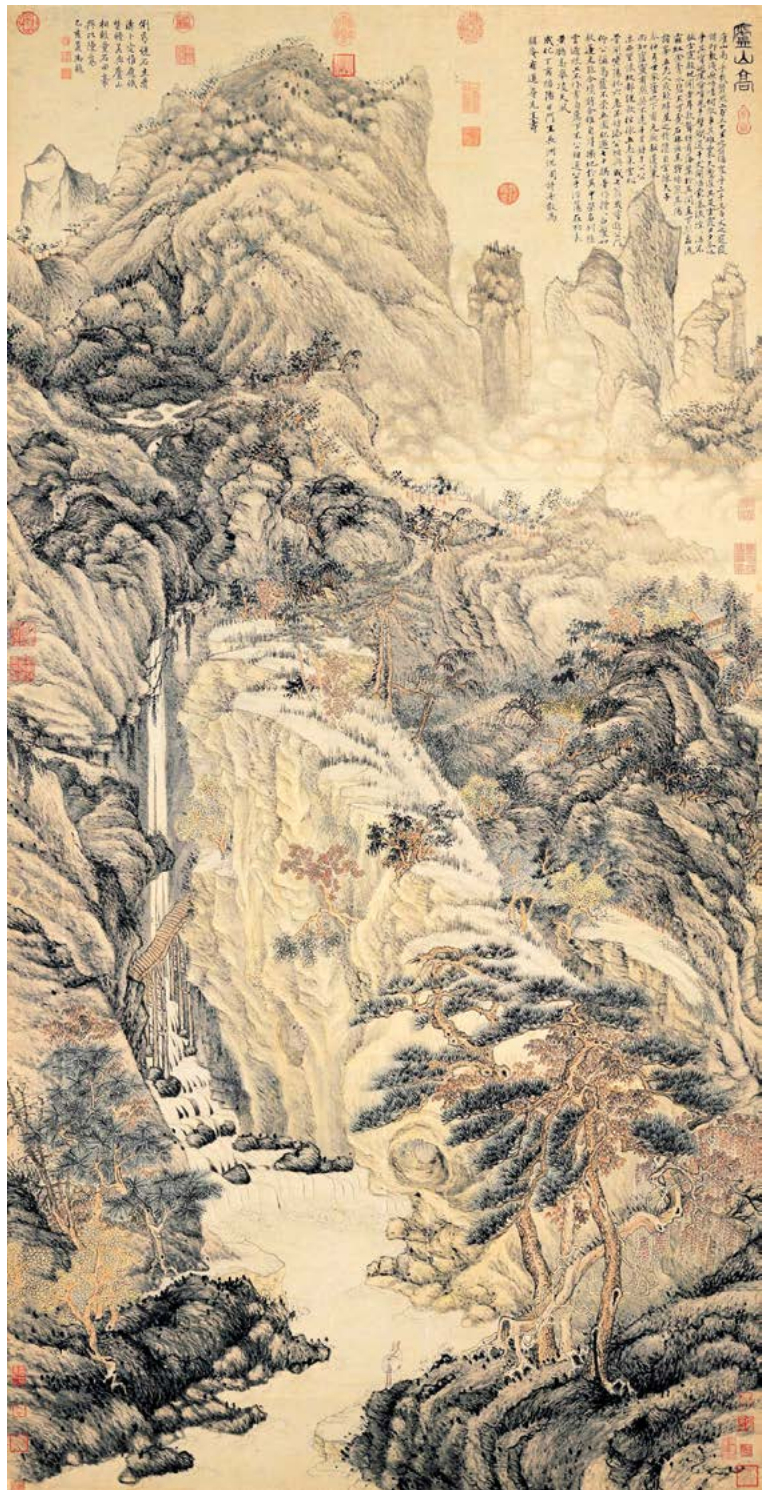
Carpentry's Manual, Lu Ban Jing, recorded in 15th century, based upon of the knowledge of Lu Ban, a master builder, carpenter, architect, engineer and inventor from the Zhou Dynasty. This page enumerates the geomancy of building placement, some examples include topographical form. Photo from PDF version published by Zhu Lin Shui Ju, Taiwan.

SYMBOLISM OF MOUNTAINS AND RIVERS

Mountains and rivers are the two quintessential topographical fundamentals in nature that are thought to direct the flow of *qi*. Naturally, the placement of these two prominent elements is of particular significance in the art of *feng shui*, which forms part of classical Chinese geomancy.

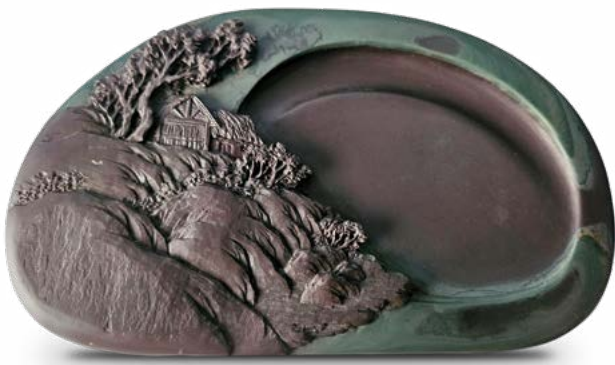
Mountains, being immovable and formidable, are a symbol of refuge, stability, resourcefulness, and vitality with the air of mysticism as the elevation is viewed as the closest point on earth to heaven. Whereas the omnipresence of water (with its adaptable nature of dissolving and solidifying; flowing through or around obstacles; embracing and nourishing all lifeforms; yet always flowing downwards without imposing itself) represents intelligence, wisdom, flexibility, gentleness and humility. Both of which are inseparable from nature as mountains are the bones and water is the blood of nature itself.

By respecting these two elements of nature, humans can thrive. Consequently, stepping out of of line when dealing with mountains and rivers brings forth disastrous repercussions of natural disasters.



Lofty Mountain Lu by Shen Zhou, Ming Dynasty, 1467 CE. Mount Lu is viewed as a classical symbol of eremitism and has spiritual significance, making it a popular subject in Shan Shui paintings. Photo from Wikicommons.





Ubiquitous modern day natural stone carved inkstone. Many inkstones are carved by incorporating the natural colours and contours of the stone to represent mountains whilst the water part is generally symbolised by the ink. Photo by author.

MOUNTAINS, RIVERS AND THE SCHOLARS

For a culture that sees itself as an obedient participant in the natural world, respecting and preserving the core nature of landforms in accordance with the rules of the universe is of utmost importance, particularly in the course of conducting human affairs that alter landscapes, like the building of habitation for both the living and the dead.

Mountains, with their firm and unyielding features, and water, with its contrasting soft and cold nature, are the perfect pair to ensure cosmic balance (among other elements). The *Book of Changes*, a book that contains divination systems and is considered one of the five must-read classics for scholars, explores these concepts; other aspects of classical geomancy are recorded in the other four classics. Consequently, this cultivated scholars' understanding, appreciation, respect and reverence for his natural surroundings.

Nature itself is evidence that there are greater forces at work than the humble humans. In comparison, nature's enduring permanence highlights the insignificance of human: a speck of dust in the grand cosmos, a mere cog in the universal wheel. This concept permeates various aspects of scholarly ideologies.

Moreover, many scholars followed the teachings of Confucius who said, amongst other wise words, 'The wise finds pleasure in water and the virtuous find pleasure in the mountains...' The cultivation of one's spirit and soul to attain harmony with the universe was seen as achieving higher spiritual intellect. The goal of attuning one's energy with that of the cosmos can be achieved through encounters with nature. The state of heightened spiritual awareness is brought about by tranquillity of the soul and the ultimate aim is to be one with the universe.

As such, surrounding oneself with items that replicate nature increases the chances of achieving such enlightenment, which led to *Shan Shui* (mountain and water) paintings. Painting is one of the four pursuits (the other three being music, chess and calligraphy) of Chinese scholars. Unsurprisingly, mountains and bodies of waters featured prominently in scholarly arts.

The essence of landscape paintings of the East seeks to learn and understand from nature. The challenge is to learn

and grasp the underlying spiritual powers of nature that nourishes the spirit and purifies the soul. A superior piece of art is therefore one that possesses the qualities to convey the inherent spirit of nature. A piece that speaks to the mind rather than just to the eyes, to resonate with the soul, to convey or invoke emotions, bringing about the profound underlying meaning of nature.

Thus, man is either missing or occupies a smaller role in *Shan Shui* paintings, blending in instead of taking centre stage. Man is to learn from nature. And when one is too caught up in human affairs, a glance up at the hanging scrolls of *Shan Shui*, a mountain-shaped brush holder or even the waters in the inkstone is meant to reorient one's mind, to remind man of the true value in life, the role and function of man in this grand cosmos. In essence, to know one's place.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The discussion thus far is just barely scratching the surface as it merely introduces some of the most rudimentary principles of classical Chinese geomancy. Hopefully it will entice and inspire one to delve further into this wealth of knowledge that has unfortunately, in modern times, often been reduced to a superstitious fad. Indeed, there is much to learn from studies that demand humans' utmost respect of nature, particularly so in current times where there are many imminent environmental issues that have resulted from humans' exploitation of nature. **P**



Author's amateur attempts at *Shan Shui* painting to invoke a sense of leisure and tranquillity whilst cruising amidst the grandeur of craggy cliffs and gentle flow of the rivers, with the ultimate aim of cleansing and purifying one's soul. Photo by author.

FURTHER READING

The Imperial Guide to Feng-Shui & Chinese Astrology: The Only Authentic Translation from the Original Chinese, by Thomas F Aylward

The Tao of Pooh and the Te of Piglet, by Benjamin Hoff

LEE SHIN JIE practiced briefly as a litigator and is now exploring her true passion in history and art. She guides at the Asian Civilisations Museum.



DRAGONS ON THE MOUNTAINS

FROM THEIR MOUNTAINOUS ORIGINS IN CHINA TO MODERN TRADITIONS HERE IN SINGAPORE, **DARLENE KASTEN** PRESENTS THE DRAGON KILNS.

Photos by author unless noted otherwise.



A dragon kiln featured in the Qing Dynasty porcelain fishbowl depicting the making of porcelain on display at the ACM. From the Collection of the Asian Civilisations Museum.

Over the long history of ceramics production in China, wood-burning kilns have come in many shapes and sizes. Among the ancient kilns are those resembling eggs, mantou buns and gourds, but only one kiln type, the dragon kiln, named for its elongated shape stretching up a slope or hill, makes ingenious use of the natural landscape.



Thow Kwang Dragon Kiln, from the November 2023 firing. You can see the 'body' of the dragon rising up the slope behind its 'face', with the 'mouth' open ready to be fed more wood. Photo by Charlotte Dawson.

HOW DO DRAGON KILNS WORK?

Dragon kilns operate on the simple but extremely effective principle that hot air rises. Made of bricks which resemble 'scales', the kiln is shaped like the long body of a mythical dragon winding tens of metres up a 10- to 20-degree sloping hill. Wood is fed into the 'mouth' in the dragon's 'head' at the bottom of the hill and the rising heated air moves upwards inside the body through the 'belly' of the dragon and pushes smoke out through a chimney in the 'tail' at the top. For longer dragon kilns, side-stoking

ports or 'eyes' along the length of the body are used to add additional fuel to even out the heat along the entire length of the dragon.

Just like a fireplace, the height difference between the front and the end of the dragon kiln creates a draw that pulls air through the fire, which causes the fire to burn hotter, maximising the heat within the kiln. Inside, clay pieces are carefully arranged along the length of the kiln according to their optimal firing temperature. Pottery that can withstand higher temperatures are placed nearer the main fire at the bottom where temperatures can reach 1300°C. Others are placed closer to the top which only reaches about 1000°C.

DRAGON KILNS IN CHINA

Dragon kilns originated in China during the Neolithic Shang Dynasty (approximately 1600-1046 BCE) in the hilly and mountainous Shangyu District in the northeast of Zhejiang province in southern China. Dragon kilns were commonly used after that, and by the Eastern Wu Kingdom (220-280 CE), there were over 60 kilns at Shangyu.

Dragon kilns remained the primary design in southern China for centuries, in areas such as Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Guangdong, Fujian, Hunan, and Jiangxi, the home of the Imperial kilns of Jingdezhen. Early dragon kilns were generally 12 to 20 metres long, and by the Song Dynasty they were as long as 50 to 60 metres, in some areas even reaching 70 to 80 metres. These could fire 20,000 pieces of ceramics at a time, playing a large role in the development of porcelain and other high-fire ceramics into the Ming and Qing dynasties.

DRAGON KILNS IN SINGAPORE

In the Chinese diaspora of the early 1900s, Hokkien and Teochew immigrants from southern China brought ceramic technology to Singapore where more than 20 wood-fired dragon kilns were established. There were at least nine kilns in the Jurong region alone, owing to the area's good quality white clay. The early 20th century was a prolific time for ceramic production in Singapore; commercial products included bowls, latex cups for rubber tapping, roof tiles, flowerpots, crockery and other items. At their peak, dragon kilns were fired once every two weeks, with a few thousand pieces each time, to meet production demand.



Staring into the belly of the beast.

But as demand died down, the dragon kilns were decommissioned one by one. Soon, only two brick-built kilns for wood-firing remained in Singapore, tucked away in Jalan Bahar: the Guan Huat Dragon Kiln, now home to the Jalan Bahar Clay Studios, a private art studio and gallery, and the Thow Kwang Dragon Kiln, now part of the Thow Kwang Pottery Jungle, a family-run pottery store and workshop. Only the Thow Kwang Dragon Kiln is still fully operational.

Thow Kwang's 27m long kiln was built in 1944 by Mr Tan Kin Seh, a third-generation potter who left China in 1936. Mrs Tan Yulianti joined Thow Kwang after she married Mr Tan Kin Seh's son, Mr Tan Teck Yoke, and from her husband and father-in-law, she learned the skills of dragon kiln pottery. By the time Mrs Tan joined the trade though, Thow Kwang was already slowing down its commercial production, which eventually ceased in the late 1980s.



An abandoned Southern Song dragon kiln located in Jiangxi Province, NE of Jingdezhen. Photo by Patricia Welch, taken November 2017.

Importing and selling ceramics from China soon replaced Thow Kwang's former commercial production and the Thow Kwang Pottery Jungle was born.

But what about the dragon kiln? Luckily, Mrs Tan recognised that many pottery artists are drawn to traditional dragon kilns over modern gas and electric kilns because of the unique effects on colour and texture produced by a wood fire. Natural fly ash and volatile salts are produced by the burning wood, and in the extreme temperatures within the kiln, these fuse and melt into the clay, creating an unpredictable, but desirable, effect.

Mrs Tan decided to use the Thow Kwang Dragon Kiln for artistic production and community outreach, and in 2001, Thow Kwang opened its doors to visitors with workshops and programmes in hopes of educating them on the importance of preserving the heritage of the dragon kiln in Singapore. Their efforts were recognised in 2020 when the Thow Kwang Pottery Jungle received Singapore's Stewards of Intangible Cultural Heritage Award.



Thow Kwang Ceramics Artists Goh Shen Tat and Chua Hee Lai loading the pottery into the dragon kiln for firing.


THOW KWANG DRAGON KILN TODAY

Led by Mrs Tan's efforts, the dragon kiln now draws a committed group of local potters, the Thow Kwang Ceramic Artists, who come by the studio almost every weekend, and sometimes on weekdays to work on their crafts. They also drive firings two to three times a year to keep the dragon alive.

In April 2023, Mrs Tan and her ceramic artists organised a private firing of the dragon kiln – the first time the kiln was fired in three years due to the Covid pandemic – and FOM volunteers with the FOM Members Care member activity were invited to join them on this momentous occasion. They were given an overview of the wood-firing process by the Thow Kwang Ceramic Artists, an introduction to the history of the Thow Kwang Pottery Jungle by Mrs Tan, and a chance to 'feed the dragon' themselves.

Seven months later, Thow Kwang had its first public firing post-Covid. Once again, FOM was invited to volunteer, but this time they were asked to be completely responsible for staffing two three-hour shifts! The enthusiastic volunteers who participated were a mix of FOM and Southeast Asian Ceramic Society (SEACS) members, most of whom also spend two days every week assisting marine archaeologist Dr Michael Flecker on another Singapore heritage project cleaning, sorting, and documenting ceramic sherds from two historically significant shipwrecks. As most of the shipwreck sherds come from ceramics fired in ancient Chinese dragon kilns just like Thow Kwang's, it was a great opportunity for the heritage volunteers to experience first-hand both ends of the lifespan of ceramics, 'from cradle to sherd'.

THE FUTURE OF THE DRAGON KILNS IN SINGAPORE

What is the future of wood-burning dragon kilns in Singapore? Thow Kwang's lease at Lorong Tawas in Jurong was supposed to end in December 2017, but thankfully it was extended. However, despite the extension and the kiln's designation as intangible cultural heritage, Thow Kwang's fate is still far from certain. Threats by encroaching industry and a lack of permanent heritage status for protection may mean the end to this rich cultural history in Singapore. Perhaps 2024 really is the year of the Wood Dragon and Singapore's last public dragon kiln may finally get the heritage status it deserves. One can only hope! 

DARLENE KASTEN is an FOM docent at ACM, MHC, TPM and STPI Creative Workshop & Gallery and is a member of the SEACS council.



FOM Members Care members and friends with Mrs Tan (middle row, third from right) at the private Thow Kwang Dragon Kiln firing in April 2023.

FUKUSA: JAPANESE GIFT COVERS FROM THE CHRIS HALL COLLECTION

LOUISE LUI INTRODUCES THE LATEST SPECIAL EXHIBITION AT THE PERANAKAN MUSEUM, ON VIEW UNTIL 25 AUGUST 2024.

The act of gifting is deeply ingrained in human society and takes many forms across histories and cultures. *Fukusa: Japanese Gifts Covers from the Chris Hall Collection* delves into the customs and spectacle of gifting in Edo- and Meiji-period Japan through a group of *fukusa* (gift covers) and related textiles. This exhibition celebrates a major gift of Japanese art from the renowned textile collector Chris Hall to the Asian Civilisations Museum.

WHAT ARE FUKUSA?

The term '*fukusa*' encompasses both cloths used in Japanese tea ceremonies and the textile gift covers (*kake fukusa*). They differ from the utilitarian *furoshiki*, which are used to wrap objects and are typically made of unlined cotton or hemp.

Although largely overlooked in the study of Japanese art today, *fukusa* feature exquisite embroidery, weaving, dyeing, and painting, and are some of the finest examples of Japanese textile artistry. They also played a role in shaping Western perceptions of Japan in the late 19th century, which in turn influenced Japan's understanding of its own heritage.

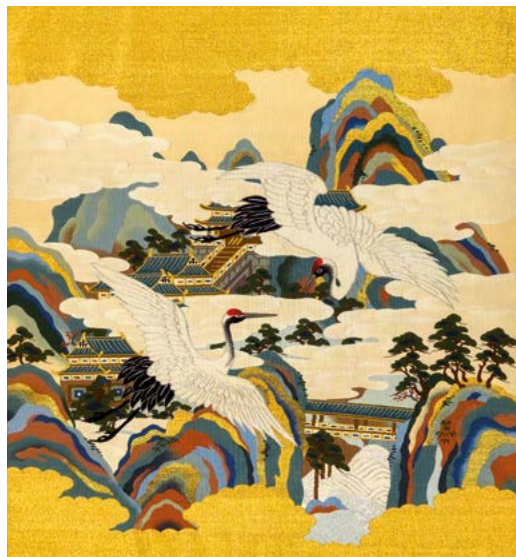
The practice of formally presenting gifts with lined silk covers called *fukusa* began in the late 17th or early 18th century. The gift was usually placed on a lacquer box or tray and covered with a draped or folded *fukusa*. Each *fukusa* was carefully chosen to evoke the occasion and convey a message to the recipient through its design.

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

The exhibition traces the use and changing significance of *fukusa* from the late 18th to early 20th centuries, as Japan transformed from a relatively isolated island nation to a key player on the world stage. The first section, 'The Art of Giving', introduces *fukusa* and explains their use in gifting ceremonies in the Edo (1603–1868) and Meiji (1868–1912) periods. Displays show how they were presented over gifts, for example draped or folded in thirds or quarters.

'*Fukusa* and Fashion' illustrates the relationship between stylish garments like kimonos and gift covers in the late Edo period. As with clothing, many *fukusa* display opulent techniques, materials, or motifs that asserted the identity of their owners. Some designs, like ostentatious 'fawn spot' tie-dye (*kanoko shibori*), are highlighted in this section.

Fukusa were used for all types of occasions that required gifts. 'Journeying Through Life' examines how various sentiments were conveyed on *fukusa* through symbolic motifs and complex pictorial allusions. A



Fukusa with cranes above Mount Hōrai, early 20th century. Silk tapestry (tsuzure-ori), 72 x 68.2 cm. Courtesy of the Asian Civilisations Museum, Gift of Chris Hall.

gift was not considered successful unless the recipient understood the meaning behind the decoration. While deciphering the message behind each design can be difficult for the modern viewer, it would have showcased the erudition and cultural sensitivity of both the giver and recipient in the Edo and Meiji periods.

REPRESENTATIONS OF JAPAN IN FUKUSA

Fukusa were some of the most coveted Japanese objects in Europe and America after Japan opened to global trade in the 1850s. They became highly successful exports and engendered new types of ornamental textiles made for foreign markets. 'Japan on the World Stage', looks at the role *fukusa* and other decorative silks played in shaping perceptions of Japan, both at home and overseas. This section includes *fukusa* that would have been admired and collected in the West, as well as new types of *fukusa* that emerged in this period, such as examples made with cutting-edge weaving and dyeing technologies or imported European cottons.

The exhibition concludes with a display of Peranakan textiles, which illustrate how fine fabrics have been used in Peranakan gifting customs and around the world. This section encourages visitors to reflect upon the act of gifting in our own time and place, as well as the rituals and materials we engage with when we give presents to others. **P**

LOUISE LUI is Assistant Curator, Chinese Art at the Asian Civilisations Museum, and curator of this exhibition.

OF RIVERS AND LEGENDS

CYNTHIA LAU TAKES A DIVE INTO THE RIVERS OF CHINESE MYTHOLOGY.



The Weaver Maiden, Chinese print from the early 20th century. The print depicts the Weaver Maiden and her mortal cowherd reuniting over the River of Heaven, on a living bridge formed by a flock of magpies. By divine decree, the couple may only meet for a single day each year, on the seventh day of the seventh lunar month. The day of their reunion is a popular festival. Image from the collection of the Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg.

Rivers are special to the Chinese. With their fresh water, rushing flow and bounty, they are essential to the sustenance and enhancement of human life. It is small wonder that the importance of earthly rivers is reflected in the realms of Chinese culture and mythology.

THE RIVER OF HEAVEN

Millenia ago, the Chinese looked up at the Milky Way and saw it as a silver river blazing across the night sky. It is said that the River of Heaven was created when the divine Weaver Maiden chose to love, and live on Earth with, a human cowherd. When the Weaver Maiden was forcibly taken back to Heaven (and her mortal lover attempted to pursue her), the mighty Queen Mother of the West used a silver hairpin to scratch a line across the sky, creating

a celestial silver river separating the couple. But Heaven took pity on their sorrow; it permits the lovers to meet on a bridge formed by magpies, on one day every year, throughout eternity.

THE RIVER OF HELL

In the Chinese Eighteen-Chambered Hell, all souls had to cross the Rancid River. This river was a thousand fathoms deep and abounded with ravenous fiends, including, apparently, some with a particular taste for women who criticised their in-laws! Three parallel bridges spanned it. The golden bridge was for purified souls headed for Buddha's western paradise. The silver bridge was for meritorious souls. The last was the rickety Bridge of No Avail, over which the damned had to run barefoot. It had no handrails, was several miles long, and was only as wide as the span between thumb and index finger.



Dragon motif on blue and white porcelain bowls, Qing Dynasty. The beloved dragon has been a popular decorative motif for all Chinese art forms for millennia. Dragons are usually depicted in full flight, amongst the clouds and often with the waters of rivers or seas below. Photo by author from private collection.



Blue and white porcelain dish, Jingdezhen, China, late 16th to early 17th century. The dish exquisitely depicts the Buddhist parable of the rabbit, horse and elephant crossing the river. From the Collection of the Asian Civilisations Museum.

THE RIVERS OF EARTH

On Earth, rivers had divine significance. In the beginning, there existed only Chaos in the form of a dark egg, within which Pangu, a cosmic elemental giant, slumbered. When Pangu awoke, the egg shattered and the fragments formed Heaven and Earth, which Pangu then separated permanently by growing steadily for 18,000 years. When Pangu died, his eyes became the sun and moon, while his torso and limbs became cardinal directions and mountains. And what of his vital life-giving blood? Pangu's blood became the Earth's rivers.

Another legend tells of a period of intense flooding on the Earth. The legendary Yu the Great, directed a huge yellow dragon to drag its tail along the ground, scoring the Earth into lines of watercourses, which drew off the floodwaters. These watercourses became the mighty rivers of China. In

another version, Yu was born in the form of a formidable dragon and carved the great rivers with his own tail.

There is a myth about a time when there were no rivers or lakes on Earth. The Jade Emperor was withholding rain, and the people were dying. Their lamentations reached four dragons who dwelt in the Eastern Sea. Greatly moved, the dragons defied the Jade Emperor, scooping up water from the sea and spraying it into the clouds; the water then fell to Earth as rain. The dragons were imprisoned under mountains as punishment, but still determined to help humankind, they transformed themselves into the four great rivers of China – Heilongjiang (Black Dragon River), Huang He (Yellow River), Yangtze or Changjiang (Long River) and Zhujiang (Pearl River). These four rivers surge eastwards to empty into the Eastern Sea, the dragons' original home.



The Heilongjiang (Black Dragon River) in the northern-most reaches of China is almost 3,000 km long and forms a natural border between China and Russia (historically Inner and Outer Manchuria). This river is so long and coiling, it really looks like a dragon! Image by Dreamstime (Jasnyu).



THE CHINESE ZODIAC

The river is also a key element of a beloved zodiac fable. The Jade Emperor once held a race to choose 12 animals to mark the years and hours. Competing animals had to cross a mighty rushing river. The various ways they crossed reflected their fundamental characters. Determined and hardworking, Ox swam in the lead. However, Rat (a poor swimmer) hid in Ox's ear; at the end, Rat jumped out and landed ahead of Ox, earning first place and a reputation for cunning. Tiger fiercely battled and conquered the currents. Rabbit hopped across some steppingstones, and then floated on a passing log to the riverbank, pushed at the end by a gentle wind from Dragon; rabbits are known for their ability to find elegant solutions, and to attract the generosity of others. The flying Dragon had been expected to win, but, always benevolent, it had detoured to bring rain to a thirsty village; it flew in fifth. Horse had taken the most direct route across, but at the riverbank, the elusive Snake slithered out suddenly from beneath its hooves, startling Horse into seventh place. Sheep, Monkey and Rooster teamed up to build a raft, and row it across the river. Penultimately came Dog; although a good swimmer, it had been distracted by the fresh water and had stopped for a frolic. Finally, there was the ever-lucky Pig, who had stopped to eat and nap, but was still just in time to take last place!



(top) From the *Monkey King and the Journey to the West*. Tripitaka, Monkey King and Pigsy crossing a river on their long journey to the West. Tripitaka rides on a dragon who, to atone for past offences, has transformed himself into a white horse to carry the monk all the way. Illustration courtesy of Doring Kindersley, *The Mythology Book*.

(left) Tripitaka sheds his mortality during the crossing of the final river before reaching the home of Buddha. Tripitaka's mortal body floats past a boat carrying all the pilgrims (including Tripitaka) across the river. The boat is clearly bottomless, with visible waves below the passengers. Illustration by Georgette Boner in *Adventures of the Monkey King* by Alison Waley.

THE RIVER IN BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHY

A Buddhist parable relates how a rabbit, a horse and an elephant cross a river, where the waters of the river represent emptiness. The ways the animals cross the river represent three paths to enlightenment. The rabbit swims at the surface and therefore has the shallowest understanding. The horse also swims, but occasionally touches the riverbed. The elephant crosses the river by treading on the riverbed all the way; it has the most profound understanding, like a compassionate Bodhisattva who guides others.

THE MONKEY KING, THE MONK AND THEIR JOURNEY TO THE WEST

The Chinese epic *Journey to the West* by Wu Cheng'en (16th century CE) chronicles the quest of the Buddhist monk *Xuanzang* (Tripitaka) and his disciples – Monkey King, Pigsy, Sandy and a dragon-turned-horse – to reach the spiritual home of Buddha and collect sacred scriptures to take back to the Tang Emperor Taizong. The travellers had to complete a sequence of 81 trials and calamities across 108,000 miles of treacherous terrain infested with demons. There were many unnatural rivers to cross. One early challenge was the River of Flowing Sand. This river was home to a cannibal water monster and was eight hundred miles wide and three thousand miles deep. No boat could cross it, because the water of the river was Dead Water in which everything - even feathers and petals – sank straight to the bottom.

In another ordeal, the pilgrims tried to walk across the frozen surface of the vast River That Leads to Heaven.

Unbeknownst to them, a monster lurked in the river, eager to taste Tripitaka's holy flesh. When the monster heard footfalls above, it cracked the ice from below and captured Tripitaka, who once again needed to be rescued and set back on his way.

Tripitaka's arduous physical journey across this treacherous landscape mirrored Tripitaka's spiritual journey towards enlightenment. Tripitaka, who represents the limitations of the ordinary mortal, wailed, 'a thousand mountains and myriad rivers lie ahead! How can I go on?' Tripitaka's disciples were immortals who could cloud-travel, but they could not carry their master over the rivers. Monkey King said, 'Tripitaka has to cross all these foreign lands himself if he is to escape the bitter sea of mortality; he has to take every step himself'. Tripitaka was the Buddhist name given to the monk *Xuanzang*, but Tripitaka was also the name of the holy scriptures the pilgrims sought. So, in a way, it could be said that Tripitaka was always on a quest in search of himself.

The pilgrims finally reached a fast-flowing river which they needed to cross to reach Buddha's spiritual home. The river was eight miles wide, and spanned only by a slippery log, slightly wider than a man's palm. Fortunately, they found a boat and a boatman, but the boat was bottomless, and Tripitaka hesitated. Monkey King pushed Tripitaka onto the boat and Tripitaka fell straight into the river, though he was quickly pulled back onboard, still grumbling at Monkey King. As the boatman gently punted the boat, the group noticed a body in the water. It was Tripitaka's corpse that drifted past, moving downstream. 'My best congratulations!' said the boatman, now revealed as the Conductor of Souls, and they all rejoiced that Tripitaka was now free of his mortality and could complete his quest.

LEGENDS IN THE MODERN DAY

The Chinese have inherited a bountiful mythological legacy. Throughout China (and wherever the Chinese diaspora has extended) these legends continue to charm and entertain



Singapore has many temples and shrines to the Monkey King. A glimpse inside Qi Tian Gong, the active and popular Monkey God temple in the heritage enclave of Tiong Bahru, Singapore.

people, and to unite communities in celebration of a common heritage. The Weaver Maiden and the Oxherd story is celebrated by Chinese Communities all over the world as Lover's Day and is one of the most popular Chinese festivals. The Chinese zodiac is still immensely meaningful to many modern Chinese in making life decisions including career paths and partner choices.

It is said that Monkey King (or Monkey God) is the most popular super-hero of all time, loved by entire generations of Chinese for centuries. In Singapore today, there are several active temples and shrines dedicated to him. Monkey King's early adventures and the *Journey to the West* have been retold and reinterpreted in theatre, opera, film, television, books, comics and animation.

Recently, several versions of the legend of Monkey King have been popular with Western audiences, including the Netflix animation *The Monkey King* and the Disney series *American Born Chinese*. The Marvel movie *Shang-Chi and the Ten Rings* introduces the benevolent Chinese dragon to the world. In this way, Chinese mythology can play an important and ongoing role as a cultural diplomat, providing the rest of the world with an access key to the Chinese treasure trove of history, thought and heritage. **P**

FURTHER READING

Monkey King: Journey to the West, as translated by Julia Lovell

CYNTHIA LAU has been an ACM docent since 2008, and her fascination with Asian history, art and mythology: life-long and ardent.

SUBAK IN BALI

KARIEN VAN DITZHUIJZEN ASKS: CAN A THOUSAND-YEAR-OLD COOPERATIVE SYSTEM OF RICE CULTIVATION GUIDE US TO A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE?

Photos by author unless noted otherwise.



The Bali rice terraces at the Jutuluwih UNESCO World Heritage site. Photo from Wikicommons.

The beautiful island of Bali is particularly famous for two things: its lush green rice paddies and the abundance of temples. Few visitors realise how closely interwoven these two are.

THE HOLY RICE CYCLE

Rice is a staple food for most of Asia, but its cultivation is problematic; it not only needs a lot of water, but also produces much more greenhouse gases than grains like maize and wheat. Agricultural researchers worldwide are looking to find ways to solve this issue without jeopardising yields, and some answers might be found in a thousand-year-old cooperative system of rice cultivation called subak. The subak system combines practical water management with religious rituals rooted in Balinese Hinduism. When I lived in Bali, I was keen to learn more about rice cultivation, so I signed up for a rice farming course. We went through several rice cycles, from tilling and preparing the field to sowing, planting, and harvest. What I learned in my time at Subak Uma Lambing would turn out to be much more than simply growing rice.

To the Balinese, rice cultivation is an integral part of their religion, which they also call 'the religion of water'. They follow the philosophy of Tri Hita Karana, which says that everyone should be in harmony with other people, with nature, and with God. The subak system embodies exactly that.

THE SACRED FLOW FROM MOUNTAIN TO SEA

At the centre of the subak system is Mount Batur, an active volcano with a large crater lake that supplies water for much of the rice cultivation in Bali. The lake is believed to be the home of Dewi Danu, the goddess of the lake. Through Dewi Danu's gift of water, rice production is possible on this otherwise quite arid island. The water of the lake flows downhill through an intricate network of canals and tunnels, some of which date back to the 9th century CE. The distribution of the water is organised by a series of water temples, of which the most important one, Pura Ulun Danu Batur, stands on the edge of the Batur crater. The volcanic deposits add minerals to the water,



Ceremonial water offering before rice planting.

making Bali's soil some of the most fertile on earth.

In Balinese Hindu cosmography mountains are sacred places, the homes of the gods, and from their holy lakes the life-giving water flows downwards to the realm of people. At each stage of the way, water temples use ceremonies, prayers, and offerings to distribute the water to fields and villages below. It follows the Hindu principal of ritual purification: as water moves from the mountain to the sea, it

flows from purity to impurity. The lowlands are seen as the realm of humans, the sea as that of chaos and darkness. The flow of water through the subak canals balances these complimentary forces and thus maintains harmony.

It is not only the Balinese that see its value. In 2012 the subak system, its cultural landscapes, and water temples became a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

A THOUSAND-YEAR-OLD SYSTEM

Neighbouring farmers are united in a subak, a democratic cooperative group that shares their allocated water, each with its own water temple. In subak meetings all are equal; Hindu caste rules are set aside. Water is divided in a way that is not only fair to each individual, but also to the whole subak. Decisions on when to plant or what fertilisers and pesticides to use are made collectively. This age-old cooperative system gave Bali some of the highest rice yields in the world.



At Subak Uma Lambing: the map of the subak explained by the subak leader.

With a growing population Indonesia needed to increase its rice production, so in the 1970s the government initiated the Green Revolution, a well-intentioned initiative but one with disastrous results. Farmers were obliged to increase the number of crops per year by using new hybrid rice varieties that required high amounts of chemical fertilisers and pesticides. After a few years of bumper harvests, yields rapidly declined. Without the coordinated planting and flooding schemes, pests started to thrive, and more and more



Procession at the Subak Temple, Grobogan, Bali. Wijnand Otto Jan Nieuwenkamp, c. 1904, graphite, ink and watercolour painting. From the Collection of the National Gallery of Singapore.




Pura Ulun Danu Batur, the water temple on the edge of the Batur crater. Photo from Wikicommons.

pesticides were needed to salvage the rice. The once mineral-rich soil became depleted, and nitrogen from chemical fertilisers leached into the ocean, damaging coral reefs. The intense planting schedule led to water shortages.

The government eventually allowed reinstatement of the subak system, but these days rice production on Bali still has its challenges. Tourism uses up an inordinate amount of water and newly built hotels block traditional waterways. The use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides still causes problems, as does the amount of greenhouse gases released.

Farmers, like those in Subak Uma Lambing, see the value of the old ways and want to combine them with modern developments to make sure we can keep feeding the world whilst staying in harmony with nature. New research shows that adapting flooding patterns of rice crops can greatly reduce the amount of greenhouse gases produced and increase yields at the same time. The subak networks can provide an excellent framework to implement agricultural innovations like these.

The philosophy of Tri Hita Karana teaches us to look at the whole picture, the collective. Let's hope the subaks can lead their island to a sustainable, harmonious future for all. 



Sidemen rice paddies with view of Mount Agung

KARIEN VAN DITZHUIJZEN is a novelist and Kampong Gelam Heritage Trail docent.

WELCOME TO ATTENDEES OF THE NEW MEMBERS' COFFEE MORNING!

欢迎光临! HUĀNYÍNG GUĀNGLÍN!

SRIVALLI SASTRY-KUPPA RECOUNTS THE WARM FOM WELCOME GIVEN TO OUR MEMBERS AT THE RECENT NEW MEMBER COFFEE MORNING.

Photos by Mohamed Ismail.



Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall – or SYSNMH – hosted a wonderful reception for new and old FOM members on 31st January 2024. We had 60 attendees, including 18 new members. A gracious welcome from our new President, Lee Hong Leng, was followed by lively presentations from Council Representatives

Activities Representative on Council, Robin Lloyd, gave us a run down of the wide range of groups and activities available to FOM members, from lectures to discussion groups, travel and exploration. Museums Representative on Council, Tabitha Manresa, provided details about the twelve museums, heritage institutions and heritage trails where FOM docents provide guided tours. Srivalli Sastry-Kuppa, Overall co-Head of Docent Training, followed up with information about FOM's docent training programmes. Marketing Representative on Council, Rupa Tamsitt, welcomed new members to explore volunteering opportunities that will help them to get to know FOM and meet other members across the organisation.



FOM President Lee Hong Leng and Council Representatives Paroma Sen, Rupa Tamsitt, Tabitha Manresa, and Larissa Wiegele.

SYSNMH docents Stephanie Lyser, Karen Ng, and Yuki Chai conducted brief tours of the museum. The rapt attention of the attendees was a testament not only to the absorbing history showcased at SYSNMH but also to the skill of the docents.

Thank you to Paroma Sen, Representative on Council for Volunteer and Member Appreciation, for organising a lovely event. A special thank you to Larissa Wiegele, Representative on Council for Communications, for the smooth running of the presentations, and to our fabulous Hospitality Team for a delicious spread of dishes and drinks.

Please mark your calendars for the Public Information Meeting about docent training opportunities on 7th May 2024 [10am, Asian Civilisations Museum, Basement One Auditorium], and for the FOM Open Morning on 9th September 2024 (details to follow).

We hope to see you there!



SYSNMH Docents Stephanie Lyser, Karen Ng, Yuki Chai welcoming attendees to a tour.



Hospital Team Jutta Schutte, Sim Chong Teck, and Jariyah Yusoff, with Paroma Sen.

SRIVALLI SASTRY-KUPPA is the FOM Overall co-Head of Docent Training, and guides at NMS, URA Chinatown Trails, and Gillman Barracks Heritage Trail.

NEW FACES FOR A NEW SEASON

OVERALL CO-HEADS OF DOCENT TRAINING (OHOT), **LEONG LEE CHIEW** AND **SRIVALLI SASTRY-KUPPA**, WELCOME THE NEWEST COHORTS OF DOCENTS TO GUIDING.

We'd like to welcome the new 2023-24 batch of 115 docents to our community! Completing their training in the Year of the Dragon, they will be bringing their power and strength to the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM), Changi Chapel and Museum (CCM), Indian Heritage Centre (IHC), Kampong Gelam Heritage Trails (KGHT), National Museum of Singapore (NMS), STPI Creative Workshop and Gallery, the URA-Chinatown Heritage Trails (URA-CHT), and the Japanese Docents (JD).



As always, this year's new docents represent a lively mix. Some are new to Singapore, some are old Singapore hands; and some are new to guiding while others are experienced docents. One notable addition to the mix: we have a record number of men joining our community this year!

Many of our new docents will already have begun guiding. By September, they will have chalked up valuable experience which they will be putting to use as members of the training teams for the next cohort of trainees. It is the FOM spirit of dedication, collaboration, generosity, and sharing that keeps our docent training programmes going from strength to strength every year.

We invite everyone to join the tours at our wonderful museums, heritage institutions and heritage trails and to give our docents, old and new, the opportunity to excite and enthuse you with their knowledge and guiding skills!

ASIAN CIVILISATIONS MUSEUM

I joined the docent training only shortly after I moved to Singapore. I am so glad I did! Being passionate about art and culture and lucky to have experienced different cultures over the years, it was easy to quickly fall in love with cultural-hub Singapore as well as with the impressive ACM. Keen to learn more about the unique cross-cultural art and heritage and to give back to my new home Singapore, I dove into the docent training journey where I met many wonderful people who made me feel at home and have become dear friends. The docent training is intense, challenging and very rewarding: I enjoyed every minute of it! When do you get the chance to be tested on your storytelling capabilities by people from so many different cultures; or hear straight from expert-curators who have thought about every inch and corner of the museum?! I am so proud to be part of the FOM-community and can't wait to share the magnificent stories behind the artefacts with visitors from all over the world!

- Myrthe Devillers

CHANGI CHAPEL AND MUSEUM

I joined the CCM training because I wanted to do a deep dive into the museum and to share the amazing stories which I had heard when I had joined the tours as a participant. The training has taught me so much, and then much more! I have enjoyed the in-depth explorations and supportive guidance by the team. Hearing from experts and actual relatives of the POWs has also given me a closer and more personal understanding of what the POWs experienced. While it has been admittedly hard work, I have enjoyed it tremendously and highly recommend it to anyone who is interested in learning and sharing the inspiring stories behind the artefacts in the museum.

- Paul Lim



INDIAN HERITAGE CENTRE

When I arrived, I was fascinated by the richness and diversity of the cultures that make up Singapore. I went on visits to various museums, and my favourite was the Indian heritage Centre. I decided to sign up for the docent training even though English is not my mother tongue. With my fellow trainees, we learn a lot both during the lectures and field trips. We're a close-knit, hard-working group in a friendly, ambitious, and caring atmosphere. I already know that I'll never forget these moments spent together at IHC docent training 2024.

- Marie-Aude Brochec Hintzy



KAMPONG GELAM HERITAGE TRAILS

When I saw the call for docent training for the FOM-Kampong Gelam Heritage Trails, I instantly jumped at it because I was already keen to understand more about my own family history, as both sides of my family have deep roots in Kampong Gelam. My mother's family lived at 27 Bussorah Street, while my father's family lived in a house within the Istana Kampong Gelam compounds. From the context of what being Malay meant to a masterful coverage of all the relevant communities that inhabited and enriched Kampong Gelam, all of the experts that the Co-Heads of Docent Training invited to speak to us were deeply knowledgeable about various topics. The other docent trainees were also an incredibly motivated and knowledgeable group, and we helped each other to understand Kampong Gelam at a very fundamental level. I am sure I have made lifelong friends with each of them. I am forever grateful that my first experience training with FOM was with the KGHT team, and I highly encourage anyone who is keen to share about Singapore's hidden histories to join the next iteration of the course.

- Fuad Johari



NATIONAL MUSEUM OF SINGAPORE

After living in Singapore for a few years, I joined NMS docent training to learn more about my new home and give back to the community. I wanted to overcome my fear of public speaking once and for all. However, I was unaware that my writing, research, and presentation abilities would also develop. The programme was excellently structured, and the lectures by experts helped us unravel the History of Singapore, one chapter at a time. I met wonderful people who shared my curiosity about learning and my foodie passion, and with whom I hope it's only the beginning of a long-lasting friendship. My only regret is that I didn't join the training earlier.

- Luz Esteban



STPI CREATIVE WORKSHOP AND GALLERY

Training to be a docent at STPI was a contemporary art-lover's dream! STPI is unique in its hybrid nature as a creative workshop and gallery / museum, and therefore the training for docents was very hands-on. The training co-heads, together with the STPI Outreach team curated a wonderful curriculum that allowed trainee docents to experiment with printmaking techniques first-hand while also incorporating art history and contemporary art lectures into the programme. Guest speakers engaged were passionate art enthusiasts, collectors and artists themselves and inspired an even greater appreciation for contemporary printmaking. The training also enabled us to sharpen our speaking and guiding skills, allowing us to get comfortable in our roles as docents. It was truly a worthwhile experience!

- Anushka Mangharam



URA CHINATOWN HERITAGE TRAILS

Secret societies. Opium dens. Death houses. Singapore's history is a Sherlock Holmes adventure story with twists and turns, heroes and villains. As an Historic Chinatown docent, you not only investigate the fascinating pre-modern era but also see how it links to the present as the URA is responsible for both preserving history whilst future proofing the city. We have had amazing guest lecturers who explained how migrants negotiated the difficult conditions, how different groups coalesce yet always mixed, and how Singapore transformed from a sleepy fishing village into a world financial centre. And just as interesting are the backgrounds of the other docents: from Brazil, China, and Singapore itself. Everyone - as any reader of Sherlock Holmes knows - has a backstory. Come and write your own adventure, as a URA-FOM Chinatown docent.

- Katherine Davies



JAPANESE DOCENTS

Right after moving to Singapore, I was fascinated by the fabulous artifacts at ACM and its guided tour. I applied to JD training not only because I wanted to pursue my interest in the history and culture of Asia including Singapore, but also to be able to speak in public with confidence. Going through the programme was intense, but more fun and valuable experience. I met passionate fellow trainees, intelligent trainers, and supportive facilitators through this training. They all fueled my passion for learning. Now the training has been completed, but my journey of learning will continue. I'll do my best to conduct an informative and enjoyable guide to our visitors, just like Sempai (my senior docents) do!

- Yumi Yoshii

DOCENT COHORTS 2024

ACM

Laura Bouby
Angela Castano
Monica Chua
Catarina De Cayron
Myrthe Devillers
Jeff Doherty
Julia Jee
Hyemi Jeon
Kamsin Kaneko
Debbie Kobayashi
Mi-Anne Kuetter
Shirley Leo
Lim Tien
Loh Ching Soo
Evelyn Pang
Vanessa Razo
Valerie Samyn
Priya Sen
Christina Siaw
Caroline Sietses
Eunna Song
Shanu Tatiya
Yohali Velazquez

CCM

Rosiah Ahmad
Keith Aldrich
Alvin Chia
Mathilde Fouin
Jason Ho
Garima Lalwani
Eline Leussink

Paul Lim
Michelle Ong

IHC

Sunita Abraham
Marie-Aude Brochec Hintzy
Yam San Cheng
Jeong Ji Young
Pavithra Maryann Kabir
Novy Paulson
Purnima Sharma
Gayatri Shashi Tampi

KG TRAILS

Jumailah Ahmad
Anisha Dutta
Eliza Gleeson
Elsa Gianna
Fuad Johari
Flavia Junqueira
Vidya Khader
Stephanie Lyser
Tina Sim
Karien van Ditzhuijzen

NMS

May Chew
Clarence Chia
Ian Connell
Luz Esteban
Aarti Garde
CJ Han
Azman Jaffar

Anna Kuznetsova
Toni Martinez
Matthias Meienhofer
Sara Elisabetta Olivetti
Sangeetha Pradeep
Jayashree Srinath
Gaëlle Tabart
Edmund Tan
Henry Wong

STPI

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Lucile Couturier Bourdinière
Priscilla Jitab
Sophia Khosla Rao
Hanna Kim
Stephanie Lauren Kolentsis
Akiko Lim Dumas
Anushka Mangharam
Tabitha Manresa
Shradha Nayan
Jacquiline Powers Mui
Vineeta Rupani
Andrew Tan
Susan van der Elst
Sanne van Kordenoordt
Karen Wong Mei Lin

URA

Sofeene Ang
Anne Bacolod
Bai Yan
Chia Chye Teck

Laurence Clements
Guendalina Dainelli
Katherine Davies
Hui Li Kang
Marion Jeanmaire
Brigita Laukeviciute
Cecilia Lee
Michaela Wulff
Suzanne Yamamoto

JD

Yoko Collick
Keiko Fujita
Natsumi Fujiwara
Emiko Hibino
Minae Hijikata
Aya Hoshikawa
Mito Kato
Yuko Kobayashi
Kagari Okamoto
Atsue Parisi
Sana Sato
Utae Sugihara
Naohito Sugioka
Shiori Takahashi
Yumi Terashima
Yoshii Tokiwa
Motoko Ugata (Michalski)
Yumi Yoshii

IN MEMORY OF PHILIPPA JOHNSON FOM MEMBER 1997 - 2024

KHONG SWEE LIN REMEMBERS THE REMARKABLE DOCENT WHO INSPIRED HER.

The ubiquitous tea urn looms large in my mind when I think of Philippa.

I will always remember her for not only being a very dear friend, but for the efforts she made behind the scenes, in myriad ways, I'm sure, to ensure that the wheels of FOM ground smoothly.

Philippa started guiding at a time when I, and probably many others, had not even heard of the organisation that we, including Philippa, would become a part of, namely, FOM, a multicultural organisation comprising enthusiasts sharing a passion for history, arts and cultures of Singapore and Asia.

Tucked away amidst the bowels of old warehouses fronting the Singapore River was the Children's Discovery Gallery where Philippa started her guiding career. She started off as an FOM docent at the National Museum of Singapore (NMS), guiding there from 1997 to 2004. I still remember the location at the River Waterfront at Clarke Quay, and the Gallery itself, fascinating not only for children; I enjoyed visiting it too. And this little Gallery at which she guided became one of the tiny sparks that eventually inspired me to join and thereafter guide under the FOM.

What about the tea urn? Philippa was a member of the Hospitality Team from 2010-2022 and was involved with the preparation of refreshments for certain events. She became its coordinator from 2018-2022. The sturdy tea urn in a way was associated with Philippa, who would undertake what might have been regarded as an onerous task. I remember one instance when Philippa had



Philippa with Yasuko Kuriyama and Swee Lin after TPM docent training. Photo by Yasuko Kuriyama.



Philippa at a 2020 FOM Asian Art and History Course appreciation lunch. Photo by Angela Kek.



Philippa, Ingebord Hartgerink (FOM VP, 2011; President 2012) and Sylvia Khoo at FOM's 40th anniversary celebration in 2018. Photo from Sylvia Khoo.

to pick up and transport the urn between certain locations, certainly not a welcome task. She did it, unobtrusively and efficiently. She'd get the job done. Just one of the qualities of a truly remarkable woman.

It is within an organisation such as the FOM that friendships are forged and bonds developed. This was so true of our friendship as we got to know not only each other but cast our net in a wider circle of friends through our journey at the Peranakan Museum (TPM), starting in 2011. She went on to become a Council Representative of FOM (Membership and Volunteer Appreciation) in 2015.

For us, it was a journey spanning 13 eventful years in which we acquainted ourselves with and enjoyed the hallmarks of Peranakan life and culture – the intricacies and charms of Peranakan dress (the batik sarong and the attendant finely embroidered tunic or *kebaya*), the colourful porcelain-lidded pot for soup or liquids (*kamcheng*), the delicate beaded slippers (*kasut manek*) and much more! TPM training and thereafter docenting was altogether an enriching experience.

Philippa was a thoughtful, encouraging, generous and kind lady. I'm sure those who knew her will concur. She enjoyed and excelled in conducting lively yet succinct tours with a touch of humour! Besides the TPM, she also guided at the Baba House on Neil Road from 2021.

Philippa's life touched many, within and beyond that of the docent community. We remember her with great fondness ... she is very dearly missed.



Philippa on a recent trip to Japan. Photo by Yasuko Kuriyama.

THE ULTIMATE SUMMER READING LIST

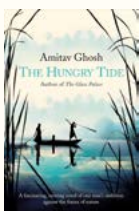
FOM BOOK CLUB MEMBERS RECOMMEND TEN FICTION AND NON-FICTION BOOKS, AS WELL AS A PODCAST, FOR FILLING YOUR SUMMER HOURS!

All book cover art sourced from the public domain.

THE HUNGRY TIDE

BY AMITAV GHOSH

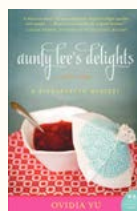
In this beautifully descriptive book, full of adventure, a marine biologist is in the captivating surrounds of the Sundarbans to research the rare river dolphin. She encounters people of the different island communities as they navigate their way through tidal floods.



AUNTY LEE'S DELIGHTS

BY OVIDIA YU

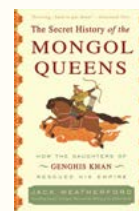
The book presents Auntie Lee, a Peranakan woman renowned for her culinary skills and her talent for solving mysteries. While it serves as an adequate introduction to modern day Singapore, the story attempts to address numerous societal issues within its limited scope.



THE SECRET HISTORY OF THE MONGOL QUEENS: HOW THE DAUGHTERS OF GENGHIS KHAN RESCUED HIS EMPIRE

BY JACK WEATHERFORD

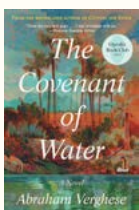
Following his death Genghis Khan's empire was administered by his daughters as his sons were perpetually engaged in wars to extend it. The wars soon turned inward and against the women in power. Weatherford's research resurrects the Mongol queens who were erased from history.



THE COVENANT OF WATER

BY ABRAHAM VERGHESE

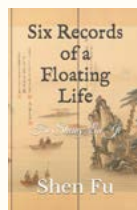
Set in South India in the 1900s, this is a multi-layered book of love and relationships, choices and consequences, and the influences of societal belief and practice. All these intertwine with the secrets and tragedies that move through the generations.



SIX RECORDS OF A FLOATING LIFE

BY SHEN FU

This captivating Chinese autobiographical work delves into the author's 18th century life. The narrative provides a poignant exploration of love, cultural norms, and personal aspirations within a changing historical context.



RED MEMORY: THE AFTERLIVES OF CHINA'S CULTURAL REVOLUTION

BY TANIA BRANIGAN

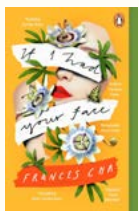
A journalist with The Guardian, Branigan explains the Cultural Revolution, which radiated violently across the country from Red August 1966 to 1976, mixing in personal stories and its relevance to current Chinese politics.



IF I HAD YOUR FACE

BY FRANCES CHA

Cha's debut novel, set in Seoul, is about four young women 'making their way in a world defined by impossible standards of beauty, after-hours room salons catering to wealthy men, ruthless social hierarchies, and K-pop mania'.



WHAT YOU ARE LOOKING FOR IS IN THE LIBRARY

BY MICHIKO AOYAMA

In this book we join five individuals at different life stages, each grappling with a sense of stagnation. It is a heart-warming and incredibly relatable read that embraces the magic of libraries, friendship, and community.



THE MAKING OF MODERN UKRAINE,

A PODCAST BY TIMOTHY SNYDER

Ukraine must have existed as a society and polity on 23 February 2022, else Ukrainians would not have collectively resisted the Russian invasion the next day. What does it mean for a nation to exist? Timothy Snyder explores these and other questions in this podcast.



HOW WE DISAPPEARED

BY JING JING LEE

The book tells the story of a comfort woman during the Japanese Occupation of Singapore. Narrated through multiple perspectives and timelines, it is a novel about resilience, courage to face the past, and family bonds.



THE JAKARTA METHOD

BY VINCENT BEVANS

This devastating exposé takes its name from the USA CIA-sponsored coup and programme of mass killing that occurred in Indonesia in 1965. Buoyed by its success, the CIA coined the term and rolled out the murderous playbook around the globe.



To join one of the FOM Asian Book Groups, please go to the website or email fombookgroups@gmail.com for more information.

CHINGAY! A MOMENTOUS CELEBRATION TO REMEMBER

SUSAN CHONG GIVES US A SNEEK PEAK INTO A MEMORABLE JOURNEY TO JOHOR BAHRU.

Photos by Gisella Harold



The Study Tour group at the Chinese Heritage Museum.

It was truly a dream come true for us: the long-awaited trip to Johor Bahru, which previously got cancelled due to Covid 19 pandemic lockdown, finally happened! It turned out to be a cherished one which will be etched in our memories for a long time to come. A group of nine FOM members of the Study Tour group went to Johor to witness the spectacular Chingay celebrations.

The Chingay Festival started on the 28th of February at the Old Chinese Temple where the Gods were ceremoniously carried to Xin Gong Temple as a part of 'Returning to the Temple' event on the next day. As per local history, this Chingay street parade has been held annually for more than 100 years uninterrupted, except once during the Japanese invasion in World War II. This has become a unique part of the state's history and our group got to witness this excitement.



Pengerang Temple Village.



Devotees carrying the deities during the Chingay Parade.

Xin Gong Temple symbolises unity because it uniquely houses the deities worshipped by the five main Chinese dialect groups: Hokkien, Hakka, Hainanese, Cantonese and Teochew. The excitement levels peaked as devotees thronged this area to worship and enjoy live entertainment presented in traditional Chinese opera and music. The atmosphere across the city was electric and buzzing. The spectacular dragon dances and floats designed with the dragon motifs were a visual treat.

His Majesty, the Regent of Johor, Crown Prince Tunku Ismail, and his two children graced the Chingay Parade this year. There were various cultural and traditional performances for the royal family followed by fireworks,

making the event spectacular. It was a great experience to witness the interaction between the *rakyat* (people) and the Regent of Johor, who was seated on the main stage.

Our brief stay was packed with an exciting itinerary that explored sites in Johor Bahru, with the Johor Chingay as the main highlight of this Study Tour. We also visited places like the Chinese Heritage Museum where we learned about the history of this place. A visit to the traditional bakeries, namely Hiap Joo bakery (famous for its banana cakes and coconut buns) and Salahuddin Bakery (famous for its scrumptious Bengal curry puffs), were a great treat to our taste buds. We saw a few traditional shops like Sin Keng Wah *Kedai Tilam* (mattress-makers) and a tea shop for herbal medicinal tea.

It was brought to our notice that an old Indian temple, Arulmigu Rajamariamman, a Gurdwara (Sikh place of worship), and the old Chinese temple are all situated along the same road. Interestingly, they were built on land gifted by the ruler of Johor.

Our action packed adventure included, enjoying a meal at Desaru fruit farm, which also included a petting zoo, followed by a visit to view the mesmerising beauty of the temples at Pengerang Temple Village. A big thrill for us was visiting the southernmost tip in Asia, Tanjung Piai National Park. This was followed by a trip around the Kukup fishing villages.

On this trip we also discovered two lovely Peranakan cafes and restaurants, Tong Guan Nyonya cafe and Nyonya Dynasty. These are the places which we would definitely want to revisit to try more of the local cuisines!

Overall it was an awesome experience exploring Johor culture and heritage, which has always been in close proximity to Singapore but not ventured frequently. Like all good things, our trip came to an end and we left for Singapore the next afternoon. Along with us, we carried home fresh memories of our wonderful time in Johor.

SUSAN CHONG was the Study Tour Leader for this recent Cultural Johor Road Trip.



Dinner at Century Hawker Centre.



Lunch at Desaru Fruit Farm.

HOUSING SINGAPORE'S POPULATION THE SUCCESS STORY OF THE HDB

ELSA GIANNO SHARES INSIGHTS FROM THE RECENT *EXPLORE SINGAPORE!* TOUR OF THE HDB.

Photos by author, unless noted otherwise.

As one settles down in Singapore, a foreigner might be introduced to the abbreviation 'HDB' for the first time. Its meaning, the Housing and Development Board, does not fully explain the essence of the numbered high-rise blocks and the communities they represent.

Since non-Singaporeans are not able to own these HDB homes, they are curious and somewhat surprised when they learn that the public housing is subsidised, built, and managed by the government of Singapore, and that around 80% of Singapore residents live in HDB apartments.

KAMPONGS IN THE SKY

How did Singapore's government housing programme for its population become one of the nation's great success stories? In February, *Explore Singapore!* organised a tour for FOM members who wanted to find out just that.

Since the 1960s, HDB communities have become a unique part of the Singaporean identity and culture. The HDB towns add-ons and embellishments (in the form of blooming shrubs and majestic trees, revived parks, and mangroves) have made Singapore live up to the title of being a *City in a Garden*. Colourful playgrounds, hawker centres, different markets (either super, wet or uncle's), modern work-out stations, foot massaging paths, and a variety of community initiatives, differentiate the concrete numbered mountains here from any other public housing in the world.



An HDB room with a view.

Public housing in many countries has a negative connotation: it reminds people of families facing financial challenges and hardships. However, in Singapore the HDB estates and town communities foster social bonding and harmony, preventing areas from being neglected or for ethnic enclaves to develop.

FROM FLOODING TO FLOATING

To solve the housing crisis, the hills of Singapore had to be levelled resulting in swampy land and flooding challenges.

Wherever possible, the HDB towns manage excessive rainfall or drought around those high-rise communities by creating lakes with floating islands or by making existing rivers super winding, thus making up a crucial part of Singapore flood management. These waterways also function as a water reservoir.



Typical back alley in Toa Payoh, opposite a multi-storey car park, with facilities (shops, clinics) nearby.

SIT TO HDB

The first public housing estates were built in the 1930s by the Singapore Improvement Trust (SIT), initiated by the British colonial rulers, in the low-lying area of Tiong Bahru. This was a place where the people needed housing. They were bursting out from overcrowded Chinatown, but many could not afford to live in Tiong Bahru because the rents were too high.



Recognisable architecture in Tiong Bahru.



LivingSpace Gallery in Toa Payoh. Photo sourced from the public domain.



Older hawker centres, featuring traditional architecture: a place to connect with neighbours.

From 1959, the early years of self-governance, the Singapore government replaced SIT with the HDB and started working with ambitious five-year plans and 99-year leaseholds to resettle those resisting relocation. Many families were living in unsanitary unmodernised buildings or wooden dwellings at risk of fire.

Once settled, the HDB's focus shifted to the quality of public housing for the rapidly growing population of Singapore. They offered larger flats with more amenities nearby, and in 1965 new towns were built further away from the crowded Central Area. Since independence, HDB has continued in its role of Singapore's public housing authority, working with the Central Provident Fund (CPF) from 1968 to facilitate the use of Singaporeans' CPF funds to purchase public housing.

WIN-WIN

In the Toa Payoh LivingSpace Gallery different floor plans are presented to meet the needs of different people. But touring specific HDB towns helped us to understand, compare, and better imagine how the population of Singapore managed to go from living in rural villages (*kampongs*) to living in high rise apartments while keeping the community spirit intact.

Older Singaporeans recall the earliest draws for appointing an apartment to a family, where one name would be drawn from this basket, and an apartment number from the other basket. A (picky) family could refuse three times and would then have to start a lengthy procedure all over again! However young couples in the '80s could sign up for a starters' apartment under construction; once ready (in about 4 years' time) and if the couple was still together, it meant that a promising future lay ahead that included juggling marriage, family and in-laws.



All participants in the Explore Singapore! HDB tour visited the SkyTerrace@Dawson for a 360-degree panoramic view.

Older HDB communities, like Toa Payoh, Tiong Bahru and Queenstown are today's guardians of heritage and history, featuring specific street names, sacred trees, playgrounds, paintings, shapes and colours, enriched with sustainable amendments and hawker centres mirroring village life in the 1950s.

But as much as we love heritage, the future does not wait! In 2004 a new HDB town called Pinnacle@Duxton was launched, consisting of seven towers 50-storeys high, linked at the 26th and 50th floors by sky gardens. Still today Pinnacle@Duxton residential buildings are the tallest with the longest sky gardens, and thus a plurally awarded HDB town.

Singapore's first experimental eco-friendly public housing was launched in 2007. This eco-precinct is called Treelodge@Punggol, and integrates environmental features that focus on effective energy, water and waste management, green technology, and innovative construction designs. Here we can find plenty of penthouses!



Some of the Explore Singapore! participants on the recent tour of Singapore HDBs, posing in an elevator!

FINAL THOUGHTS

Like many enterprises which former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew kickstarted, this all was achieved in a short time frame. In 2023 the HDB counted 1.13 million apartment units with aggressive plans for many more buildings ahead. The honour of winning the United Nations' World Habitat Award in 1992 reinforces that HDB towns and communities, then and now, are a solid core feature of Singapore's landscape, designed for a community-rich life, secure and full of local amenities, surrounded by greenery and well connected. HDB has become a real Singapore Icon!

[Go to the FOM website to join an Explore Singapore! tour.](#)

ELSA GIANNO is a Committee Member of Explore Singapore!

TRIOLOGIE'S SINGAPORE STORY

CHARLOTTE DAWSON SITS DOWN WITH **SYLVIA LIM** OVER *KUEH* (*CAKES*) TO LEARN ABOUT HER DESIGN INSPIRATIONS FOR SINGAPORE CLOTHING LABEL: **TRIOLOGIE**.

The term *emporium* comes from the ancient Greek for a market of classical antiquity. One would surely agree that Sylvia's modern take on clothing, accessories and home goods at The Emporium befits this meaning! Central to this truly unique fashion lifestyle store is the clothing brand Triologie. Sylvia Lim blends bold colourful fabrics with classic silhouettes and unique details. As a textile designer her fabrics are indeed art.

WHAT INSPIRED YOUR BRAND TRIOLOGIE?

Triologie started in 2012. Why Triologie? It is not really an English word. It is three of us, friends from Tangs department store: the head of design, the head of manufacturing and me, who used to run Tangs big business.

I came out of Tangs first. I was snatched by the government of Singapore to do a Fashion Week. They needed somebody from the trade to put this thing together, run the shows, and create the buzz in Singapore. I did this over three or four years because it was not meant to be a permanent thing. I had the network, the contacts, and was in the perfect position to run my own thing. But you know what? I was so scared to do that.

Before, it was every girl's dream to have their own shop, to do their own thing and design their own stuff. The fun part where you get to design becomes diminished because you have to start paying bills. So I gave it thought over a coffee – it was a very expensive coffee – if I were to do this alone I probably wouldn't do it, but maybe I can start something that belongs to a team. [With my Tang's colleagues, we had] the right mix of people and personalities, three different skill sets, and a history together. Hence, **Triologie!**

WHAT IS THE ORIGIN STORY OF YOUR SHOP THE EMPORIUM?

I like to go to a flea market, an independent store, the V&A shop, a charity shop, and I like to rummage! I like shops that are multi-faceted, multi-category. I thought, if I ever have a shop, it will never be just a dress shop. It will be 'Sylvia's shop' because of how I shop – to be able to buy something else to go on my dress or with it. I believe that fashion ought to be total. I feel that makes shopping a lot more fun!



Sylvia said 'When you design a composition, it is about storytelling'. This Triologie Singapore Story composition is inspired by a kopitiam (coffee shop). The bowls and enamel plates are the ones Sylvia has used since her grandmother's time. The chicken has walked off the bowl and the flowers scattered around come from the plates. The biscuit tins, sitting on the kopitiam table, are named for her label: Triologie.



Sylvia Lim posing with some of her Triologie creations.

I introduced pop-ups (short term leases, concept driven, touch and go) to our shopping malls. I was called a Pop Queen! I could do the trial and error [our new brand needed]. My first shop was located in Millennial Walk. I had a budget and went to a lower footfall place at a less popular mall. I'd chosen a spot but I had a big problem filling it up. I had 10 racks of clothing at most, and they were not ready for me to chop up that space. And so what do I do? I created **Emporium.**

It was like a mini department store, with different categories of things I don't do, and we shared the costs. My goal was always to ask what others had so that I could pick the best thing to sell and make the store look good. You pay your fair share of your expenses on time, and we have a good six months. I will be the constant because I know what I put there.

HOW DID YOUR PASSION FOR TEXTILES AND FASHION DESIGN EVOLVE?

When I was a teenager, I collected buttons. I had biscuit tins of buttons from God knows where! I collected everybody's spare buttons, and I would buy buttons. Liberty buttons – my candy shop! I used to make clothes with different buttons that didn't match but the size fit because it's all I had. If I dropped a button, God forbid, I'll never replace it because I couldn't remember where I got the buttons from!

Later, I designed for Laura Ashley and Liberty [in the UK] and I worked on cotton. I was doing patterns, which have fractions and repeats. I had fun with that, but my eyes did cross! But in *my* prints, my roll of fabric is in panels. It's more than just a floral repeat, it is a composition.

Fabric takes up 80% of the cost of garments. Surely, it is important! Increasingly, people are more conscious of sustainability, wearing organic cotton, and being aware of what you put next to the skin. It's what they *see* first; it's *what* they feel and *how* they feel. Fabric is the most intimate to you, it's next to your skin.



Some of the Singapore Story textiles that have been created for Triologie silhouettes since 2016.



Sylvia Lim and Charlotte Dawson wearing Singapore Story designs from Triologie.

WHAT IS YOUR PROCESS WHEN IT COMES TO DESIGN? IN YOUR MIND'S EYE, DO YOU HAVE A CLOTHING LINE IN MIND AND DESIGN THE FABRIC TO SUIT THE IDEA OR VICE VERSA?

I believe that fashion is a lifestyle. Long gone are the days where people buy just for work or a certain occasion. I think that *one* piece you can wear for multiple occasions. The fun is in the dressing up and the dressing down, in the recreating.

I guess my fabric is really out of this world! Who is the person behind it? I start with fabric first because my forte is textiles, that's how I was trained. I'm a very tactile person. I could knit, weave, and print my own fabric. I used to do dye recipes. My hands were never basically clean, I was always in my overalls coming up with dye recipes, mixing and printing.

I create my fabric then I shape it, I look at the style and the sewing. The history of fashion is a reference. But fabric is something that I can create and recreate. First and foremost, I curate the elements [on each print] so that each piece becomes part and parcel of that whole entire story. And because of the creativity of my fabrics, my silhouette can follow.

HOW DID THE SINGAPORE STORY TEXTILE PRINTS START?

There was a national event called the Exemplary Mother's Award, given by the President to mothers from marginalised backgrounds. In 2016 the panel of judges got three of us Singapore designers to put together a show and we were supposed to dress the nominees. The *Singapore Story* started with that!

What it is that's truly Singaporean? We're very young country with a colonial past and our own migrants. We celebrate our differences, in our food and our heritage, in our architecture, and we only talk about being Singaporeans! So I said to myself: 'you know what?! I will put *kueh kuehs* on my fabric!' Whether you are Malay, Indian or Chinese, you relate; between access to ingredients and exposure to others, it's a Singapore version of the *kueh kueh*!

After this, I started coming out with categories within the things that I eat, the places where I lived, the toys that I played with, the things that I can identify with – a little bit of nostalgia that people could relate to regardless of race or language. I want to celebrate colours and prints. Colour always invites conversation. Now my mantra, and everybody knows, is: *too much is not enough!*

To visit **The Emporium**, head to 55 Lavender Street / 338713!



Goody bag swag from Triologie's 10th Anniversary fashion show at the Botanic Gardens in 2022: tiffin box, Risis orchid earrings, and Triologie Singapore Story post cards.

CHARLOTTE DAWSON is the Managing Editor for *PASSAGE* Magazine and huge fan of Triologie!

THE BOTANICAL ARTIST AND HER SYNERGY WITH NATURE

PARUL MEHRA IN CONVERSATION WITH FOM VOLUNTEER **EVONNE KOH.**

Images by the Singapore Botanic Gardens and Evonne Koh.

My conversation with Evonne was so uniquely inspiring that I went home beaming ear to ear post interview. It was a delightful afternoon accompanied in the neighbourhood where Evonne had spent her childhood. Full of knowledge sharing and interesting stories about her various talents, Evonne was most gracious in describing her botanical artwork process and insights into what motivates her to create this unique art form.

How and when did your journey with FOM start?

I became an FOM member in 1996, when I signed up to train as a docent for the newly established Singapore Art Museum (SAM). After 2 years, I gave up due to pressing work commitments. Over the next 20 years, I was a passive member who enjoyed learning about the arts and culture-related news.

Then at some point in 2022, I expressed an interest in doing graphic design work for FOM. One day I received an email asking if I could help create docent training advertisements for the Overall co-Heads of Training (OHOts). After I did that work, one thing led to another and I received other opportunities to design for various FOM groups.

I met OHOts Lee Chiew and Jyoti and then-FOM President Millie. We chatted about my areas of interest and I expressed that the newsletter volunteer position seemed exciting to me. Millie connected me to Michelle (who was the Communications Representative) who then assembled a small team to run the newsletter. I've been helping with the FOM newsletter since then.



Colour pencil studies of plants in Evonne's neighbourhood.

You are talented in various styles from botanical drawings to drawing people, and graphic design. In which disciplines were you trained?

Since I was a young girl, I loved drawing and was artistically inclined. In school my artworks were frequently displayed. Unfortunately, after my O-levels, I didn't pursue fine arts despite scoring an A1 in arts. My higher studies were in the fields of economics, marketing and business (Bachelor of Economics, post-grad Diploma in Marketing, MBA).

Visual arts came into my life much later, in the early 2000s when I took some time off work to explore my creative interests. I began by taking private classes for learning skills to draw still life, portrait, oil painting, watercolour painting, and pastel art. I also did a 3 month intensive foundational art course at the Julian Ashton School (Australia) which further enhanced my skills. I loved drawing live figures in quick poses and continue to do that practice weekly with a group (SG Live Drawing).

My learning journey also included landmark courses, which helped me to explore various mediums. [First was] a Diploma in Botanical Painting, which was a 2.5 years intensive with the Society of Botanical Artists, UK, followed by botanical painting workshops with established botanical artists. I then completed courses in: western abstract art, printmaking, pottery, and western floral arrangement. I'm currently learning Ikebana. After all these explorations I concluded that I didn't enjoy printmaking and pottery isn't my cup of tea!

The scientific botanical drawings I create are my passion! They require so much precision so when I make those I'm completely immersed and can't work on other projects.



At Open Morning (at ACM), Evonne is holding a poster designed by her.



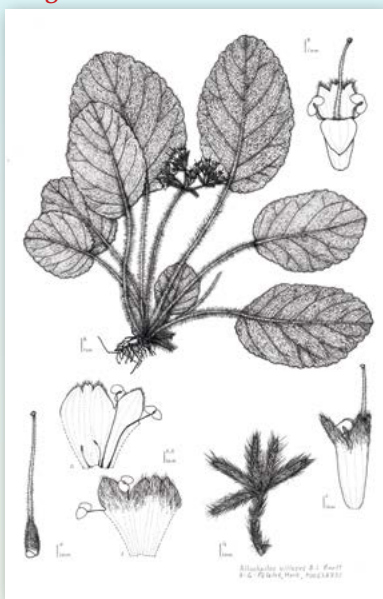
Life sketching by Evonne.

Essentially my botanical art practice is all about service to science through my drawing skills, and that gives me innate satisfaction.

The drawings are done in pen and ink, using linework and stippling techniques. My botanical studies require observational skills and botany knowledge which I learned in my diploma course. In my experience, the actual learning is on the job when I'm doing commission projects, for the Singapore Botanic Gardens, for scientific journals and in collaboration with the botanists. I have learnt and improved my skills with every illustration plate I prepared. The process involves lots of research, observation and learning from other illustrators' works.

Your pen and ink drawings in the Botanical Art Society website are beautiful scientific studies. More than drawing what is observable is that there is a precision to the pieces. What is the process one undertakes to complete one of the drawings?

I work closely with botanists in the herbarium, and this is the summary of the intensive research related process: I receive an illustration assignment from the herbarium manager and a briefing from the researcher, where I take notes and jot down key points. I then observe the specimen (usually dry materials) and will reconstitute and dissect it if necessary. I then take detailed measurements and write down my observations to better understand the plant. I also take many photos for reference.



Allocheilos villosus, 2023
Singapore Botanic Gardens.

In addition to the observations, I research the species to illustrate, finding taxonomic papers on genus/species online. I will also check for previous drawings of the genus/species. If possible, I try to get a live specimen but if there are no fresh specimens I'll check the National Parks flora fauna website, Singapore Biodiversity Online, and other online references for photo images.

Then I am ready to prepare the drawings. I prefer to do preparation drawings on tracing paper. I will adjust and resize the drawings while planning the composition. I will show a draft drawing to the researcher before making necessary amendments to details in the approved final draft. The final drawing for submission is completed in ink.

How many such drawings have you made to date? Any favourites?

I have made more than 80 plant specimen drawings. I don't have any favourite illustration but I'm sharing an image of the most challenging one. After making this work, I realised how much I love doing botanical illustrations!

Are you inspired by any historic artists of this genre?

That's a great question and there are many names which

I would like to mention here! The botanical illustrators who have influenced my work are Joop Wessendorp, Jan Van Os, Claire Banks, Edmundo Saavedra, Esmee Winkel, and Alice Tangerini. My favourite botanical artists are Rory McEwen, Rosie Sanders and Asuka Hishiki. Then there are other pen and ink artists I like such as Xavier Casalta, Manabu Ikeda and Ernesto Caivano.

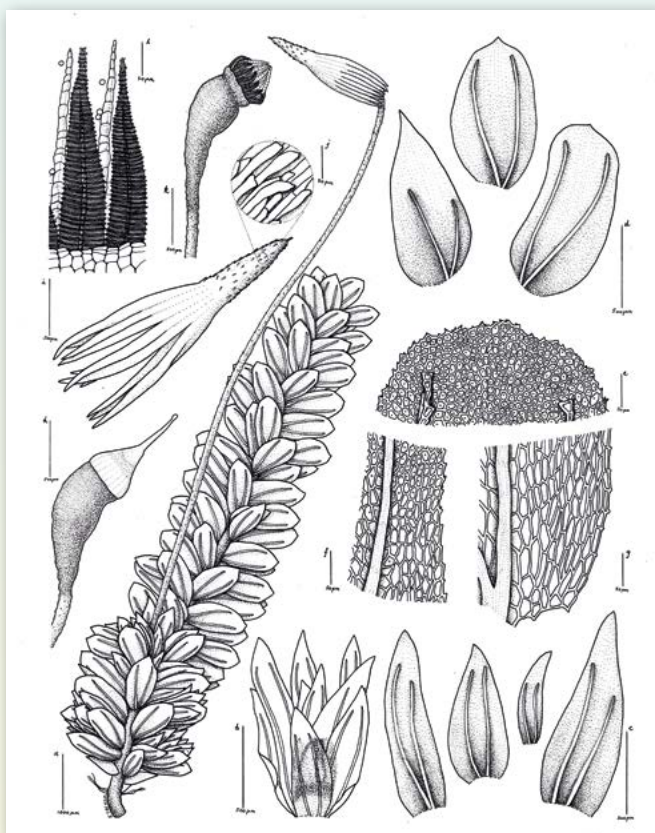
What other hobbies fill your time?

I spend my free time gardening and walking in nature parks, which really helps me connect to the synergy of nature. Travelling is also one passion I indulge in as I love to explore new places. I am a classically trained Grade 8 pianist. Playing the keyboard is very relaxing. I'm also learning song writing and music production, and taking lessons in photography and post-production editing. As an additional hobby, I am learning Japanese via Duolingo.

My love for reading has been kept active by joining FOM non-fiction book group. My graphic design and newsletter volunteer work with FOM keeps me busy and engaged.

Any plans for the future that you would like to share with our readers?

There's a quote by Erma Bombeck which succinctly explains my life philosophy: 'When I stand before God at the end of my life, I would hope that I would not have a single bit of talent left and could say: I used everything you gave me'. I feel that I still have a large reserve of innate creativity and have to expend all my creative energy in whatever seizes my spirit!



Evonne's most challenging botanical artwork: a tiny native moss, Callicostella papillata, 2020, Singapore Botanic Gardens.

PARUL MEHRA is one of the FOM *PASSAGE* News Editors.

WHY BECOMING NONYA?

AS A TRAINEE DOCENT
KATHERINE SEOW
EMBARKED ON AN
UNPLANNED JOURNEY
AT THE PERANAKAN
MUSEUM.

All images by the author.

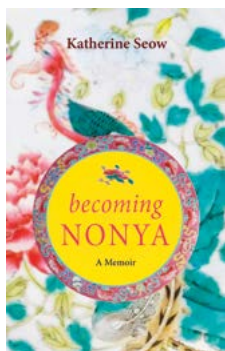


Four generations photo, circa 1909.

But you're a nonya! The title of the book should be *Being Nonya*. You don't need to become one. For those unfamiliar with the Chinese Peranakans or Baba Nonyas, the term *nonya* refers to a Chinese Peranakan female. Peranakan, in turn, is a Malay word meaning 'local born'. Both sides of my family were Peranakan, having lived many generations in Singapore so lineage-wise, I was a nonya.

I wanted to be a docent and picked the Peranakan Museum. It was small, almost niche compared to the National Museum of Singapore. With my background, I didn't expect the training course to be difficult and assumed I could present the exhibits without much slogging.

After two weeks, I realized how presumptuous I had been. I may have grown up in a three-generation Peranakan household, but I couldn't know anything about customs and rituals we didn't practice! In addition, something happened during my training. A comment, picture, or sentence in my reading material surfaced memories. After two sessions, I found myself joining dots, seeing how the past shaped the present and touched my everyday life. I hadn't started docent training to connect with my past. Beginning for one reason



Becoming Nonya cover.

and finding another along the way was serendipity.

These memories and the connections between past and present started my journey to *Becoming Nonya*. When I graduated, the journey continued. Other avenues opened including participating in the Peranakan Genome study and taking Baba Malay language lessons. News that the Peranakan Museum was closing for a revamp prompted me to start guiding at NUS Baba House. This led to a Melaka study trip with fellow docents. Whilst in the city from which most Singapore Baba Nonyas traced their roots, we visited the *Rumah Abu* (Baba Nonya ancestral homes) of the city's oldest families.

Writing *Becoming Nonya* crystallised my memories of the first Peranakan Museum. I wanted those memories because the stories I had told visitors about the artefacts were personal. For example, the Altar Sideboard with the painting of the Christian Holy Family was a springboard to talk about my family's conversion experience. I did not showcase my parents' photographs in the Origins Gallery, but they were recognised by family and friends who visited.

The National Heritage Board awarded me a grant to publish *Becoming Nonya*. This allowed me to celebrate the book's publication with a party at the Peranakan Museum's Ixora Room. Since this was the venue for my docent training, it was the room where *Becoming Nonya* started. Coming full circle was coming home.

Becoming Nonya is available at Kinokuniya, the Book Bar, and through Epigram Bookshop online.

KATHERINE SEOW is an FOM Docent at the Peranakan Museum.



Dad and Mum's portraits at the Peranakan Museum, 2008.



Becoming Nonya book party at TPM, 2023.



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