

PASSAGE

FRIENDS OF THE MUSEUMS SINGAPORE

ISSUE II
MAY 2025

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無端東下人間去却使君王不信愁

唐寅



Chisel and Ink



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C O N T E N T S



ON THE COVER

The painting depicts a noblewoman delicately inscribing a poem on a crimson leaf, expressing her longing for love. The blending of poetic romance and serene beauty with exquisite brushwork deepens the emotional impact of the scene.

Read about this and more in *Writing a Poem on a Crimson Leaf* (page 3). Image from the Minneapolis Institute of Art.



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PASSAGE

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PRESIDENT'S BLOG



I was able to join in the exuberant end-of-training celebrations along with the trainees of the 2024–2025 National Museum of Singapore Docent Training Programme.

Hello everyone!

'AI' and 'ChatGPT' are common buzzwords in our conversations today. Did we ever think that we'd see the day when artificial intelligence would become a fixture in our daily lives and daily discourse, taking over the writing and drafting of reports, letters, emails, resumes, speeches or essays? The list goes on. Hardly anyone blinks now at the mention of an essay having been written by a virtual robot, or at least whose first-cut was drafted by a machine. And yet it wasn't so long ago that we used to put our thoughts down by putting ink to paper ourselves (ok, we still do but increasingly less so).

With the theme *Chisel and Ink*, this issue of *Passage* looks at records of early writings in the form of books, letters, carvings, cave drawings, even tattoos, that contribute to the foundation of our recorded thoughts, and which also form the basic building blocks of artificial intelligence. Many of us enjoy touching the pages of a book or journal and flipping each page as we read. I hope we never lose the simple pleasure of holding a book or the printed page in our hands.



VP Karen Ng, along with the trainees of the 2024–2025 of the Peranakan Museum Docent Training Programme joyfully mark the conclusion of their training with celebrations.

But one cannot discount the enormous advantage of a space-saving option that cloud computing affords us. I'm referring to the digitization of our hardcopy records. The FOM office has embarked on this task because we have amassed over the decades large amounts of hardcopy records and printed material which are useful for our archives but take up a lot of physical space. Digitizing the hardcopy records and material means saving these to the cloud, for example, and means a reduction in the use of precious physical space. Hence, I would like to put on record our grateful thanks to Gisella Harrold, who had digitized past issues of *Passage* on her own accord and who graciously handed over the memory stick to the *Passage* co-Managing Editors for the archives when she learnt of the digitization endeavour.

By the time you receive this issue of *Passage*, we will have welcomed new cohorts of docents who went through rigorous training ranging in duration from 10 weeks to six months. We applaud their commitment to stay the course and look forward to seeing them at the museums and heritage trails regaling visitors with inspiring stories of Singapore's history and heritage.

We also look forward to celebrating the spirit of volunteerism among our members at Volunteer Appreciation Night on 6 May 2025. I thank our members for giving their time so generously to guiding at the museums and heritage trails, and, to sharing unstintingly their skills and talents at the various interest groups.

Lee Hong Leng
President
president@fom.sg

FROM THE EDITORS

We are excited to present to you our *Chisel and Ink* issue,

a tribute to written expression. Whether wielded as a tool for transactional contracts or harnessed to capture creativity, textual representation has been a mainstay of the human experience for millennia. Much of what we understand about world history is documented through written records. The same is true for FOM history.

We recently trawled through old issues of *PASSAGE* magazine and even older weekly newsletters from which, in 2008, *PASSAGE* evolved.

Scouring these records of FOM's infancy, we were fascinated to learn that FOM began with four women who, in 1978, mailed letters to their friends, inviting them to come along for the first meeting. Within weeks, membership mushroomed to triple digits. Much like today's members who frequent the *Monday Morning Lectures* or *Fridays with Friends*, our founding members enjoyed a weekly event called *Thursdays at My House*. Gatherings were held in the homes of members, suggesting a very intimate and chummy membership. The FOM Library was maintained in the FOM Librarian's home. ("Visitors welcome M-F 9am to noon. Please phone first so I can ensure I am home.") Today, our gatherings are too large to host in any of our homes, but the welcoming and friendly spirit that characterises any FOM get-together remains.

Of course, some things have changed. We gasped when we happened upon a newsletter heading, *Three Missing Persons*. Fortunately, this was not a case of disappearing docents, but rather an exercise to assist members who had lost touch with several other members, reminding us of the ease with which we are able to stay connected in the internet age. We delighted in reading through these time-yellowed newsletters, which tell of a tight-knit group of like-minded people, just like us. We read with interest – and a fair bit of envy – the call-out for volunteers to participate in the 2014 excavation at Empress Place. How lucky our fellow members were to participate in this once-in-a-lifetime event of national importance! No doubt today's members would also leap at the chance of joining such a venture.



Melissa and Darly poring over old newsletters in the FOM office. A special thanks to Katherine Lim for taking the photo (and for graciously sharing her work space)!

It was very special for us to read through decades-old records of FOM history, and it was also timely. This issue, *Chisel and Ink*, celebrates written expression in its many forms. Join us as we chisel our way through Neolithic Niah cave drawings, uncovering the pictographic testament of the funerary rituals of that period immortalized on rock. Carve out time to dive into our article on the rich body inking traditions of Southeast Asia. Follow the brushstrokes of Chinese masters who brought poems on crimson leaves to life through their magnificent paintings. Lastly, journey into the heart of Kampong Gelam's storied past where pioneering printing presses shaped the Malay literary world.

Our third issue, *Red*, is fully mapped so we can shift our focus to our final issue of 2025, *Bits and Baubles*. This issue will explore accessories and the ways in which they conveyed cultural identity, heritage and social roles across the region. From rank badges and their significance in Chinese political culture to hats as a mark of sectoral identification in India, we invite you to explore how these cultural markers impacted our society. Stuck for an idea? Reach out to us for guidance and brainstorming. We invite our readers to sharpen their focus and lend ink to their creativity by contributing articles for Issue III (*Red*) at passage@fom.sg

Darly Furlong & Melissa Nesbitt
Managing Editors, PASSAGE

WRITING A POEM ON A CRIMSON LEAF



QIMIN SHI EXPLORES THE ENIGMATIC WORLD OF CHINESE PAINTINGS WITH LITERARY THEMES

A crimson leaf, a vision of a river goddess, sailing past ten thousand cliffs in a skiff. Each of these subjects made a perfect match between a poetic story and painting.

CRIMSON LEAVES: POETIC ROMANCE

Modern-day women have difficulty finding true love, how much more difficult for women who lived in ancient times? Young noblewomen who were isolated in remote palace courtyards reserved for the royal family resorted to unusual measures to be noticed by the emperor.

Tang Yin (1470–1524) was one of the four great masters of the Ming dynasty; he was an artist and a poet. A talented scholar of Jiangnan; he was an acknowledged master of *Gongbi* (工笔), the demanding realist technique in Chinese painting. In *Portrait of a Noble Woman Writing a Poem on Crimson Leaf*, he invites the viewer to reflect on a young woman of the imperial household sending thoughts of love through poems on a leaf.

A beautiful young woman is seated in front of a robust banana tree, its leaves protecting her delicate frame. Her left hand cradles a crimson-red leaf, her right hand poised to transfer her longing for love onto the leaf. The pen holder of red coral on the desk signifies her royal rank.

The subtle colour palette creates an exquisite, elegant effect. The lines of her gown are rendered with smooth and precise *Iron-wire Strokes* (铁线描). Chinese painting at this stage carries no shadowing, instead, Tang Yin uses the *Three Whites Technique* (三白法) of shading to make her serene face glow. The slight smile on her ethereal face, juxtaposed against the vibrant green of the vegetation and the bright red of the leaf evoke a well of expectation. What is written on the leaf? Her poem is revealed at the top left of the painting.

Lady inscribing a banana leaf in a garden, After Tang Yin, by Hayashi Rōen, ink and colour on silk, late 18th century. Image from the Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minneapolis. This painting was acquired with the assistance of Carol Brooks and Prof. James Cahill.

Written in Tang Yin's hand, the poem explains that the young woman wishes that the leaf could float through the Luo river (洛水) to the west to the emperor. But if the leaf floated to the east, alas, he would not know that she was waiting for him. A heart-wrenching poem and a poignant scene.

LUO RIVER DREAMS: A GODDESS IN ART

The journey of longing continues in the *Ode to the Nymph of the Luo River*, composed by young prince Cao Zhi (192–232) in poem form during the Three Kingdoms period, where poetic emotions shifted to artistic dreams.



Copy of Gu Kaizhi's "Nymph of the Luo River" painting, Ding Guanpeng (1736-1795), ink and color on silk. Image from the National Palace Museum, Taipei.

The poem describes an event in the year 222. Cao Zhi departs from Luoyang to return eastward to his fiefdom after paying homage to the emperor. Camping for the night by the Luo River, he encounters the beautiful and captivating Goddess of the Luo river, Mi Fei, and the two fall in love, expressing mutual admiration. However, due to the inherent divide between mortals and deities, their love ultimately ends in separation, each to their own world. Was it a dream? Did he really meet the river goddess?

Based on the story, Gu Kaizhi (348–409) supposedly produced a masterpiece narrative handscroll, depicting scenes according to the progression of the story, for example, resting, astonished by goddess, hesitation upon meeting; and sorrowful return. The scenes capture the essence and spirit of the literary story, theories of “transcendent imagination” and “depicting spirit through form”. Gu’s narrative scrolls are reputed for their laying the foundation for the development of traditional Chinese landscape painting.

The scenes reproduced here are by Qing dynasty painter Ding Guanpeng (1736–1795), purportedly based on Gu’s masterpiece. Ding’s style and skills were influenced by European techniques, such as those of his teacher Giuseppe Castiglione (1688–1766). Hence, Ding’s scenes incorporate light, shadow and perspective to create depth.

TRAVERSING TEN THOUSAND CLIFFS: TRANSCENDING LIFE’S UPS AND DOWNS

There are many paintings inspired by the poem *Ode to Red Cliff* by Song dynasty polymath Su Shi (1037–1101), also known as Su Dongpo. Su’s Red Cliffs are thought to be the Red Nose Cliffs, north of Huangzhou, not far from the site

of the supposed epic Battle of the Red Cliff of general Cao Cao (155–220). A quintessential masterpiece so inspired was created by Wu Yuanzhi, Jin dynasty (1115–1234).

In this painting, Wu conveys the dramatic sense of towering cliffs and rugged rocks using a *Fu Pi Cun* (斧劈皴 “axe-splitting texture”) technique. Lush vegetation creates an even more sorrowful scene in this rarely visited place, evoking the atmosphere of the tragic battle of centuries past.

Dwarfed by the vast misty waves of the Yangtze River, a little boat carries four passengers, three of them seated, talking. The passenger who wears a tall hat and who faces the viewer is Su Shi; the other passengers are his friends. Su Shi was banished from court at that time, so he tried to find inner peace by sightseeing at the historical site. In contrast to the majesty of the cliffs, all his sorrows and hate seemed to vanish in the river. To this writer, one moral of the painting is, just like the little boat that has passed ten thousand cliffs, battles become history; life is filled with ups and downs, but difficult times shall pass.

These three famous paintings barely scratch the surface in the constellation of Chinese paintings with literary themes. The works astonish us with the beauty they present, imprinting on our minds what the painters tried to praise - love and recovering from life’s ups and downs! 📖

QIMIN SHI is a member of FOM. She is trilingual in Mandarin, English and French, and she relaxes by watching Chinese costume dramas and playing with her cat.



Ode to Red Cliff painting, Wu Yuanzhi (Dates of birth and death unknown), ink and color on silk. Image from the National Palace Museum, Taipei.

THE HIDDEN VOICES: WOMEN'S LEGACY IN ANCIENT WRITING TRADITIONS

MARTA GASPAR TRAVELS BACK THROUGH THE CENTURIES TO DISCOVER SOUTHEAST ASIAN WOMEN'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO PRESERVING AND DEVELOPING WRITTEN KNOWLEDGE

LOOKING FOR WOMEN IN THE MARGINS OF HISTORY

LHistory, as we usually read it, is a narrative built by men – kings, warriors, sages – frequently placing women as secondary figures. Yet a closer examination reveals that women were also active participants in their worlds and made their mark in politics, religion and culture.

The challenge is that women's contributions were often not written; they were lost or intentionally destroyed. The literary traditions of women in Southeast Asia have disappeared to a large degree due to the perishable materials used (palm leaves, bark and paper), which have not lasted as long as stone. Yet inscriptions, temple records and court chronicles offer us a more nuanced picture of women as custodians of knowledge, teachers and even writers.

Examining what remains allows us to paint a more authentic picture of women's legacy and influence in ancient Southeast Asia.

WOMEN'S LITERACY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA: WHAT DO WE KNOW?

Women's literacy was extremely uneven between regions and social strata in Southeast Asia. In Java, Sumatra and Bali, women involved in trade and record-keeping needed literacy. On the mainland, however, education in Buddhist monasteries was largely for males. However, high-ranking women, particularly royalty, were sometimes educated at home, and we know of royal women writing letters.

Epigraphs are some of the most enduring proof of women's administrative and legal writing roles in the region. In Java, during the 10th century, inscriptions pointed out that women in villages were involved in contract negotiations, took on debts and directly took part in land ceremonies.



Three women representing three ethnicities at the West Gopura, Angkor Wat. Photo courtesy of Kent Davis at Devata.org.

For example, the Javanese edict of 907 CE declares that a husband is not responsible for his deceased wife's debts. This implies that women enjoyed some degree of legal and economic autonomy. In Sumatra, Old Malay inscriptions from the 7th century reference women knowing spells, raising questions about their roles in rituals and traditions.

Royal women were central to the keeping of historical records. Genealogies and records of court events were maintained in the women's quarters. Women courtiers were usually the main sources for court chronicles, demonstrating that they possessed the literacy and historical insight to document political events.

We also find women in important roles in royal courts and religious institutions. In Cambodia between the 7th and 12th centuries, some Khmer queens ruled independently, while others wielded influence as royal advisors and benefactors of education.



Education in Bayon bas-relief. The top register shows two queens lecturing a group of boys and girls. Photo courtesy of Phalika Ngin.



Phimeanakas temple, Angkor Thom, Cambodia. Photo courtesy of Rodney Charles LHuillier, helloangkor.com



Example of a palm-leaf manuscript from Indonesia. Photo courtesy of Dick van der Meij.

In fact, it's in Cambodia that we find the best-preserved evidence of Southeast Asian women's contributions to literary tradition, with one marvellous piece of royal poetry.

ANGKOR WAT AND THE KHMER LEGACY: WOMEN'S STORIES IN STONE

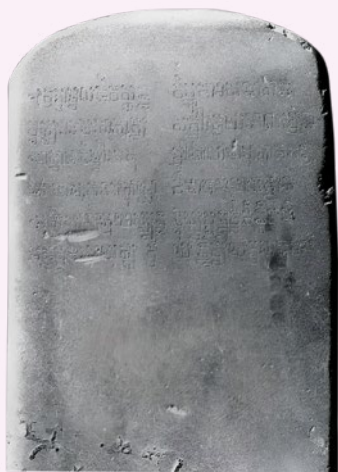
If there is any place where women's contributions to writing are most visible, it is in the inscriptions of Angkor Wat and other Khmer temples. Unlike manuscripts lost over time, stone inscriptions last longer, revealing women's roles in religious, economic and educational life.

Queen Indradevi, a leading figure of the late 12th century Khmer Empire married to Jayavarman VII, left behind one of the few surviving texts attributed to a Southeast Asian woman.

Her Sanskrit inscription at Phimeanakas Temple, written between 1190 and 1200 CE, highlights her role as a patron of Buddhist education and a scholar. Not only was she a royal woman, but she was also a writer in her own right. Indradevi taught at the Narendrasrama Temple College and inherited her sister's schools, indicating that the two women had access to education.



Bas relief of Queen Indradevi at Bayon temple, Cambodia. Photo courtesy of Phalika Ngin.



Stèle inscrite K.484, Example epigraph found in Phimeanakas temple, Angkor Thom. Photo courtesy of Fonds Cambodge, *École française d'Extrême-Orient*.

Besides royalty, Khmer inscriptions reveal that women could be landowners, religious donors and administrators. Some inscriptions document women donating money to temples and controlling property, which points to some economic autonomy. Although Khmer society remained predominantly patriarchal, this confirms that women exercised considerable authority in religious and economic matters.

Not all records were set in stone. We can find women's contributions surviving in a few other mediums.

JAVA AND PALM LEAF MANUSCRIPTS: WOMEN AS RECORD KEEPERS

Lontar, or palm leaf manuscripts, were used in Java, Sumatra and Bali to write down legal codes, religious teachings and folklore. Although the authors often remained anonymous, evidence suggests that women contributed to transmitting this knowledge.

In Sumatra, Old Malay inscriptions from the 7th century reference women who possessed spells, possibly reflecting a literary or ritual tradition.

Women were also engaged in legal and financial affairs. The 10th century Javanese inscriptions revealed women mediating land transactions and handling debts. In the Javanese inscriptions of the Majapahit period, between the 13th and 16th centuries CE, we see women handling temples and engaging in religious rituals.



Column Surround with Pensive Woman, Indonesia (Java), 14th – 15th century. Photo courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

These references go beyond practical matters and into artistic expression. A 16th century Burmese court lady adapted the poetic form known as *edjing* to describe the 55 hairstyles worn by royal maids of honour, illustrating women's engagement in literary arts.

Although few concrete examples of written works by women survive, these references suggest that women were involved in maintaining oral and written traditions.

THE MINANGKABAU TRADITION: WOMEN AS ORAL HISTORIANS

Women's role in the preservation and transmission of knowledge is beyond question. Although written remains are scarce, we find plenty of proof of women involved in oral traditions. They passed down folktales, legal traditions and genealogies. They ensured that family histories, legal customs and cultural values were preserved.

A good example is the Minangkabau people of Sumatra, known for their matrilineal culture and a long tradition in which women held authority over land, property and lineage.

Although most of this tradition was transmitted orally, some of these stories were written down later. These women might not have written texts or manuscripts like their counterparts in Java or Cambodia, but they served as storytellers and keepers of heritage, nonetheless.



Photo of Minangkabau women on the West Coast of Sumatra, c. 1880.
Photo courtesy of PotoLawas, KITLV.



Dancing Apsara at the Museum of Cham Sculpture, DaNang, Vietnam. Photo courtesy of Fred Cherrygarden, an Atlas Obscura user.

CHAM STONE INSCRIPTIONS: ECHOES OF FEMALE AUTHORITY

The ancient Champa people (2nd to the 15th centuries CE) also left inscriptions mentioning women in government and religious positions.

Cham stone carvings show women engaged in the complexities of court life and temple administration, highlighting their role in documented history. The inscriptions offer rare but significant information on women's contributions to written records and administration in ancient Southeast Asia.

Staying true to its matrilineal heritage, Cham society included political authority and control over economic matters for women.

UNCOVERING WOMEN'S PRESENCE IN ANCIENT TEXTS AND INSCRIPTIONS

While direct evidence of women as active writers is limited, the sources reveal a more nuanced understanding of the occasions in which women were involved in writing and record-keeping.

Literate women contributed to trade and administration, while some noblewomen went on to receive education and practice the literary arts. Some women held religious and legal roles involving careful record-keeping, and we owe thanks to the female courtiers who preserved historical memory.

Even if we don't find concrete evidence of women as scribes, their unsung role in Southeast Asia's written past is undeniable. As researchers dig into inscriptions and re-analyse historical documents, we can hope to uncover more stories of the women who played a role in the intellectual and cultural legacy of the region. [P](#)

FOR FURTHER READING

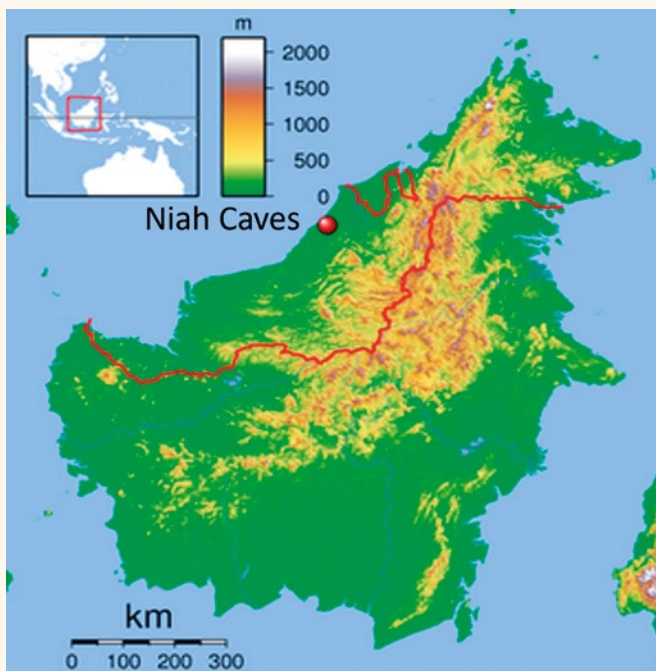
Andaya, B. W. (2008). *The Flaming Womb: Repositioning Women in Early Modern Southeast Asia*. University of Hawai'i Press.

MARTA GASPAR is a FOM member and an archaeologist by training. By day, she works as a marketer, and by night, she is an avid reader of History.

BEFORE THE WRITTEN WORD, HOW DID PREHISTORIC HUMANS COMMUNICATE?

AZRA MOIZ GOES SPELUNKING

Photographs courtesy of Sarawak Trade and Tourism Office Singapore (STATOS) unless otherwise stated.

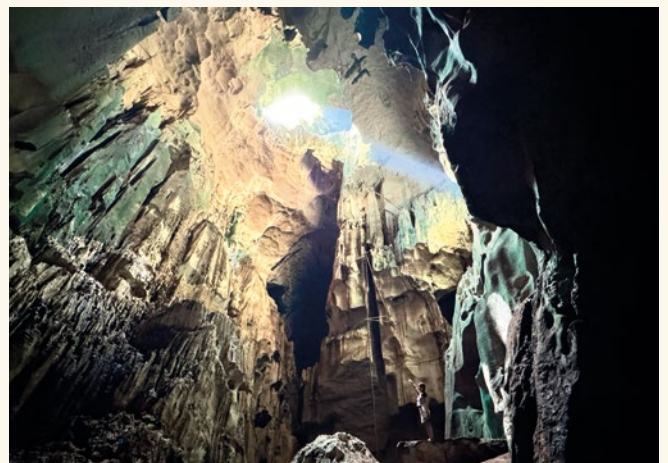


The Niah Caves lie 15 kilometres inland on the northern coast of Borneo in the Malaysian state of Sarawak.

Once upon a time, a very long time ago, there lived a group of people near the northern coast of Borneo who left an extraordinary visual record of their life and death in a place that is today called the Niah Caves of Sarawak. Archaeologists are still exploring and excavating these caves to learn about these ancient peoples, who left relics that date back in time to 40,000 BCE.

Fast forward to modern times...

In 2024, the Niah Caves of Sarawak were thrust into prominence by becoming Malaysia's latest UNESCO World Heritage site. Niah is special for this part of Asia because it is a prehistoric site with an astounding provenance – the remains of a human skull (called Deep Skull) that is 38,000



Inside the Niah Caves.

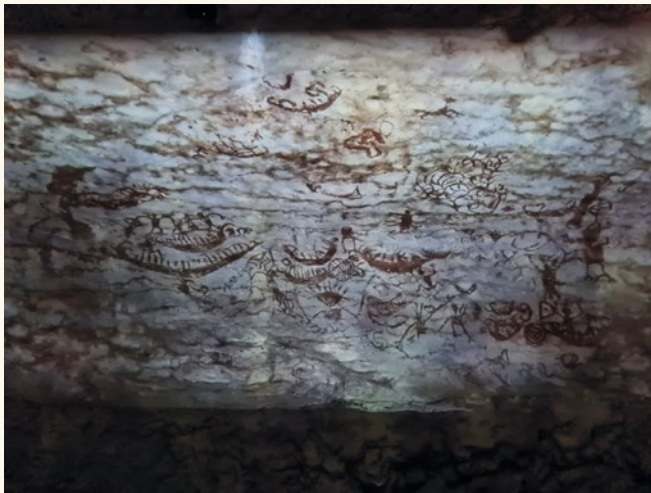
years old were found. The Niah Caves are also known to have been inhabited by a prehistoric people who left a lasting legacy of rock art paintings, which contain a remarkable narrative about the ceremonial rituals of these prehistoric people many centuries ago.

THE PAINTED CAVE PICTOGRAPHS

Buried deep within a limestone massif called Gunung Subis on the island of Borneo and 15 kilometres inland from the South China Sea, the Niah Cave system contains the oldest known human settlement in Southeast Asia. Within the Niah cave complex is *Gua Kain Hitam* (also known as the Painted Cave) where the well-preserved remains of paintings made by humans in the Neolithic era (2,250-6,000 years ago) were found in 1958.

Stretching along a 32-metre stretch of rock wall, the rock paintings or pictographs in the Painted Cave are drawn in red-brown plant and mineral pigments. They portray human figures (possibly representing hunters or warriors), animals, abstract and geometric forms, and also images of boats which are believed to be symbolic of burials and the journey of the soul to the afterlife.

The interpretation of boat paintings is linked to the discovery of wooden coffin "death boats" also found in the Painted Cave – bodies were laid in coffins made out of hollowed logs resembling boats. Other grave goods and burial vessels were also found, leading researchers to believe that the Painted Cave was a Neolithic-era cemetery.



The dimly lit Painted Cave contains drawings of human figures, animals, abstract and geometric forms, and boats which are believed to symbolise burials and the journey of the soul to the afterlife. Photo taken by the author.

Access to the Painted Cave is restricted today due to concerns about environmental and human factors that can cause damage. However, the Borneo Cultures Museum has painstakingly constructed a replica of the paintings that can be viewed in dim lighting that simulates the caves' conditions.

INFOGRAPHICS OF PREHISTORIC MAN

What can we infer from these pictographs in the Painted Cave? Before the advent of writing, it is believed that preliterate humans communicated and expressed themselves in a visual way. In essence, these rock paintings were the Neolithic equivalent of our modern-day infographics.

The paintings showing humans, animals, boats and geometric forms highlight the artistic creativity of prehistoric man, but these go beyond just art. They are an anthropological account of religious/ceremonial rituals in a time when the written word was not existent. Rituals were recorded for future generations by drawings or paintings on rock walls – the wall was their canvas, and plant or mineral pigments were their ink.

The peoples of Sarawak and in fact of all Borneo have been animists for centuries, and Niah's cave paintings reinforce this proposition. The boat paintings record the ceremonial practice of interring a deceased person's body in a boat which was placed in the cave and also depict the journey of the deceased to the afterlife.



The Great Cave at Niah where the Deep Skull was found.



Entry to the Niah Caves requires crossing a crocodile-infested river. Photo taken by the author.

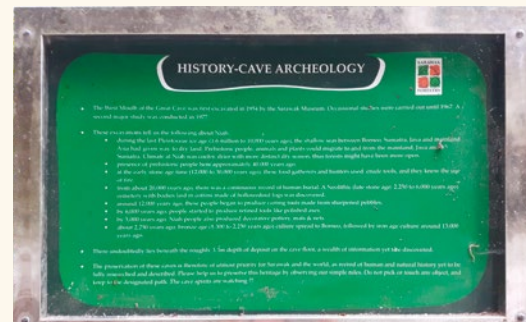
STORYTELLING ON ROCK WALLS

We cannot attribute the paintings to just one person. More likely, the paintings can be collectively attributed to a group of people or a tribe for whom traditions and rituals were important enough to be captured on a rock wall and immortalised. Such rock art is among the earliest known depictions of storytelling and Niah's rock paintings capture the burial narrative of a long-lost civilisation.

The infographics of these prehistoric people served as a means of communicating, expressing and recording the lives of those ancient times. It tells us that this was a society that had rituals and ceremonies around death and burials, and that they passed down stories, traditions and customs through their paintings on rock walls.

NIAH'S PLACE IN HISTORY

Although the Painted Cave's provenance is believed to date to Neolithic times, other parts of Niah have a more ancient past. In the vast yawning expanse of the Great Cave, a human Deep Skull was discovered whose age was revealed by radiocarbon to be around 38,000 years, making it the oldest known *homo sapiens* remains to have been found in all of Southeast Asia. This now has pride of place in the Borneo Cultures Museum in Kuching. **P**



History of Cave Archaeology at Niah. Photo by author.

AZRA MOIZ is a NMS docent, a foodie and organises study tours. She also likes jungles and is not scared of spiders or bats, though leeches really creep her out.

RICH DESCRIPTIONS OF SINGAPORE: LETTERS FROM SINGAPORE'S COLONIAL RESIDENTS

CHARLOTTE DAWSON SHARES THE JOTTINGS OF SEVERAL WESTERNERS LIVING IN SINGAPORE THROUGHOUT THE COLONIAL PERIOD TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THEIR EXPERIENCES AND PERSPECTIVES



Portrait of Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles, by James Lonsdale, c. 1817. Exhibited in the Royal Academy in 1818, this portrait of Raffles shows a youthful and ambitious man on the brink of the historic moment in establishing the EIC trade settlement in Singapore. Image from the public domain, sourced from the Zoological Society of London.



The Rajah of Madras, portrait of Col. William Farquhar, by John Graham Gilbert, c. 1830. Dressed in formal regalia, Farquhar sat for this portrait after he left Singapore, where he served as the EIC's first Resident and Commandant. Image sourced from the public domain. Lithograph replica in the collection of the National Museum of Singapore.

It has only been within the last few decades that communication home has become affordable, accessible and instantaneous. Before smart phones and video chats, people relied on letters to share news with family, friends, business associates and other contacts. Since the very inception of colonial Singapore in 1819, a wealth of these letters has survived, describing life in Singapore through the eyes of western residents.

RAFFLES AND FARQUHAR

As mailing was the only means of communication, both Sir Stamford Raffles and Colonel William Farquhar were prolific writers. Most of the letters from the two founding fathers

of colonial Singapore were business-orientated to their East India Company (EIC) bosses or diplomatic letters to leaders in nearby ports of call. Today, those letters inform us about how they viewed the struggles and successes of the newly formed trade settlement as well as how they presented them.

An example of how Farquhar conveyed Singapore's success as a fledgling settlement comes from a letter written on 31 March 1820 to Raffles: *...a look at our harbour just now, where upon upwards of twenty junks, three of which are from China and two from Cochin China, the rest from Siam and other quarters, are at anchor besides ships, brigs, prows etc., a person would exclaim, surely this cannot be an establishment of only twelve months standing!*

At this time, it took at least six weeks for ships (carrying the communications) to make their way between Singapore and Bencoolen, where Raffles was posted. One can be sure



Portion of the 1825 Survey Map of Singapore, showing the EIC trade settlement as it had developed through the time of Farquhar's leadership. Image from Wikicommons, sourced from the British Library India Office Records.

that Raffles would not have received this progress report before drafting his letter expressing similar sentiments, though perhaps in a more self-aggrandising way, to Lord Landsdowne (dated 15 April 1820). In it, he appears to be taking credit for the growth of Singapore as a bid to convince the EIC of its merit as a trading post: *When I hoisted the British flag the population scarcely amounted to 200 souls, in three months the number was not less than 3,000, and it now exceeds 10,000, principally Chinese. No less than 173 sail of vessels of different descriptions, principally Native, arrived and sailed in the course of the first two months*

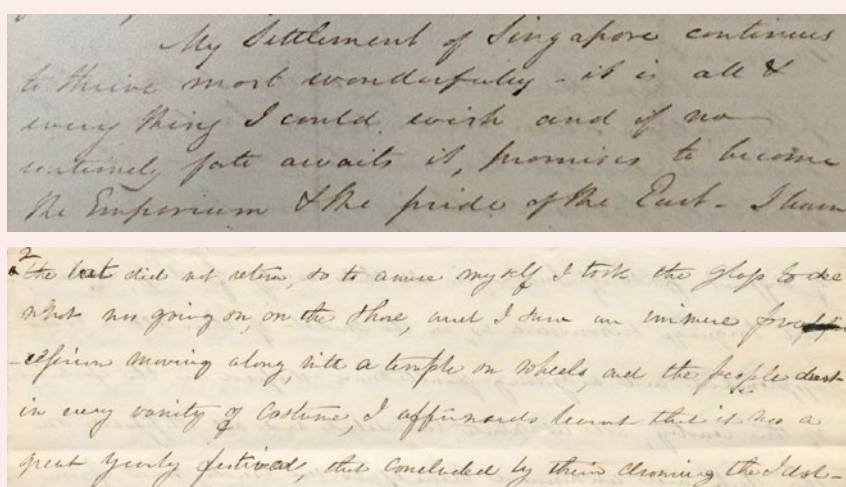
Raffles certainly would have read Farquhar's letter before writing his cousin, Dr Thomas Raffles, that July: *My Settlement of Singapore continues to thrive most wonderfully – it is all and everything I could wish. Although both men described great progress at a rapid pace, Singapore faced many difficulties. However despite those challenges, a letter from Farquhar to Lieutenant Nilson Hull (Raffles' brother-in-law) in November of 1822 gives credit to the success of the fledgling outpost to the people who came to trade there (neither to Raffles nor himself): The new Settlers had to encounter such formidable difficulties that had it not been for the extraordinary energy and enterprise manifested by them individually, the Settlement never would have attained to near its present unrivalled State.*

These are all interesting reads about the birth of the trade post, but the truly rich descriptions of its growth into a colony, the melding of cultures and the lifestyles of the Westerners come from others over the course of the many decades to follow.

MARIA REVERE BALESTIER

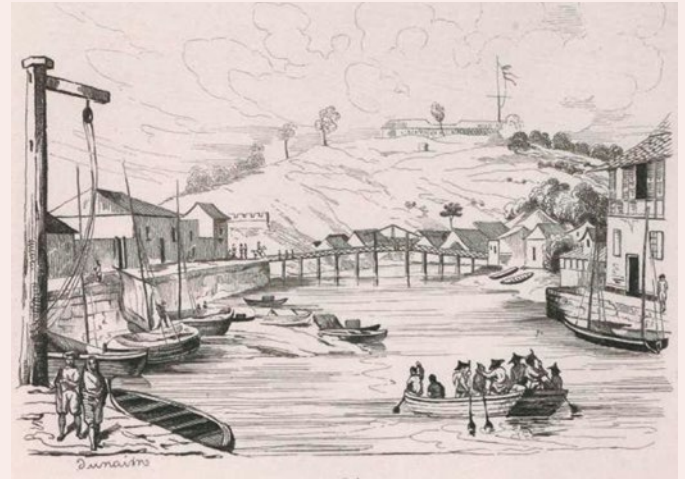
America's first female expat was Maria Revere Balestier. This author wrote about Maria for *PASSAGE* (2023, Issue II) so will share one example of how her open-mindedness and sense of adventure are examples for us all today.

In an 1834 letter to her sister, Maria shares just how culturally rich Singapore was through a moment she witnessed upon her arrival. After many months sailing from Boston to Singapore, Maria writes: *Tuesday morning came and with it preparations for leaving the ship. ... I remained behind to pack up ... all was soon in readiness ... So to amuse myself I took the glass to see what was going on on the shore and saw an immense procession moving along with a temple on wheels,*



(top) Excerpt from a letter by Raffles to his 'dear cousin' Revd. Thomas Raffles, dated 17th July 1820. Image from *Letters and Books of Sir Stamford Raffles and Lady Raffles* by John Bastin, page 134.

(bottom) Excerpt from a letter by Maria to her sister Harriette Revere, dated 29 May 1834. Image sourced from the Massachusetts Historical Society (Ms.N-320).



Sincapour (Boat Quay) and Rode de Sincapour (Singapore River), prints from steel engraving by Auguste de Sainson, c. 1834. These two views of the Singapore River are similar to what Maria would have encountered upon her arrival in the same year. Images from the Collection of the National Museum of Singapore.

all the people dressed in every variety of costume. I afterwards learned that it was a great yearly festival that concluded by their drowning the idol.

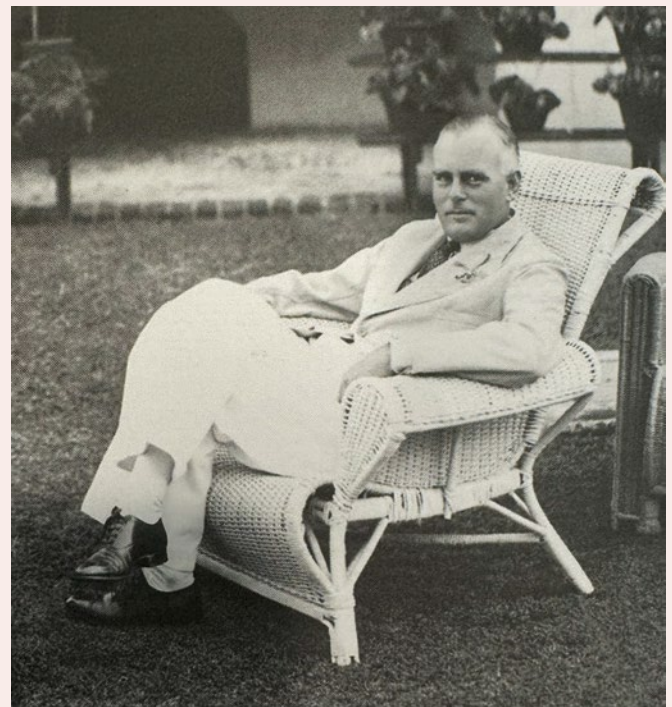
It is quite likely that the scene Maria witnessed through her binoculars was the penultimate moment of the annual Hindu festival of Ganesh Chaturthi (in Tamil: *Vinayaka Chaturthi* or *Pillayar Chaturthi*). As the Remover of Obstacles and the god of success, Ganesh was highly revered by Singapore's Hindu community, many of whom came this way to undertake a new business venture. Though there are four main rituals, it was the final day of the festival that Maria witnessed and aptly described. In this, the Ganesh deity is immersed in water, symbolising his return to his celestial abode of Mt Kailash where Shiva and Parvati (his parents) reside.

BERT THORNLEY-JONES

One hundred years on from Raffles' time marks a milestone of sorts, and we can read descriptions of life and work in Singapore through the love letters from Mr Albert (Bert) Thornley-Jones to his fiancée, Dorothy. At the time of his letters, he was a young clerk for Mansfield & Co., the shipping agents who managed the Blue Funnel Steamships. His letters to her are filled with love and anticipation of her arrival in Singapore for them to be married. They also give glimpses into his work and social life in Singapore as well as what she can expect when she arrives.

Though her letters to him no longer exist, one can assume he is responding to allay her concerns when he wrote: *Your doctor who was here fifteen years ago would not recognise Singapore for much has been done to improve it. I am really very seriously annoyed by the idea of him telling you that everybody gets malaria ... nowadays I don't think one person in ten gets it in Singapore. ... I am not surprised to note your aversion to snakes. There are not a great many to be seen here though occasionally one does run across a dead one in the road but one scarcely ever hears of a case of a snakebite. The snakes there are so scared that they run away.* (20 Nov 1920)

Although his letters only span his early career and a two-year long courtship, his time in Singapore was a successful one. Mr Thornley-Jones rose through the ranks



Mr. Bert Thornley-Jones, taken outside of Glencaird, c. 1934-6. Image from *Letters from Singapore*, page vi.

to become the Director of Mansfield & Co. in 1934. In this role, his family lived in Glencaird.

SSGT CHARLES LAURIE PRICE

During the very traumatic time of the Japanese Occupation of Singapore, Prisoners of War (POW) and civilian internees wrote letters to their loved ones. Unable to send them, most took the form of a diary. Staff Sergeant Charles Laurie Price with the Australian Imperial Forces had access to paper and a typewriter, a rare commodity for the POWs. He typed and saved few letters to his wife Marion.



Photo of Glencaird House in the early 1900s. Built about a decade prior to this photo and designed by Swan and McClaren, this was one of four houses on the Dalvey Road betel nut plantation known as the White House Park estate. It was sold to Mansfield & Co. in 1908 to be the home of the Director of the Company. Soon after Bert's death it was sold again and became the residence of the Italian Consul General then, later, the Australian High Commissioner. Today the house is part of the housing development, Glencaird Residences. Image sourced from the National Library Board.

His two-page letter dated 23rd September 1943 is the first of seven that detail his experience since becoming a POW. This letter focused on sharing with her the illnesses and deaths; entertainments, sports and education; his own well-being (noted as *still remarkably good ... weight still remains around the 11 stone mark and my eyes are still in good trim*); and his work at the POW camp hospital.

The lack of food and the tedium of the days are his biggest complaints. He opined: *Nights are dull and dismal, cards being the most popular form of nightly recreation. On these nights we had a supper of bread, which was baked in the Officers Kitchen and made from a mixture of rice and sago flour, with peanut butter as a spread.* Later in the letter he describes the food rations: *I will never forget those first few months of plain rice. Apart from rice, we have been receiving tau gay [bean sprouts], whitebait, potatoes, lily roots, grass, potato tops and on odd occasions small "fresh" fish.* He goes on to tell Marion how he *thrilled* at receiving six letters from home.

His letters, and those of the tens of thousands of POWs and civilian internees, tell of a Singapore experience that is unlike previous descriptions.

THE LOST JOY OF RECEIVING LETTERS

We live in a time where the written word is far less eloquent, and the art of letter writing is becoming a lost form. There is no longer a need to communicate through letters, expressing feelings or sharing experiences, when we can pick up a handphone and make a video call. Even instances of delayed



Meal time at Changi, by V. Murray Griffin, c. 1943. In this drawing (brown ink wash over pencil on paper) we can see some of the food rations as described by SSgt. Price to his wife, Marion. Another point of note in Griffin's drawing is how the men are dressed. Price wrote of it as well: Clothing, particularly shorts, are presenting a major problem although loin cloths are what the well-dressed Changi men are wearing. Image courtesy of the Australian War Memorial.

gratification are less profound given our communications are both visual and instantaneous. To have the written expressions of the people who lived in Singapore, reading in their own hand how they describe this place contemporary to their time and situation, is a gift to enjoy and cherish. ■

CHARLOTTE DAWSON is a former docent at NMS, CCM and the URA Chinatown Trails. She now lives in the US, following her FOM friends from afar.

SILVER LETTERS OF LOVE

LAETITIA PAOLI TAKES US ON A JOURNEY OF WARM TIDINGS BETWEEN CHINA AND SINGAPORE

Imagine your name is Tan. You have been sailing on a wooden junk for the past two weeks to reach Singapore. You are just 20 years old, and this is the first time you have ventured beyond your village. But you have no choice – terrible floods back home in China devastated the land, leaving it unable to produce enough food to support your family. It is now your duty to find work and send money home. Singapore appears to be full of opportunities. Any job will do. You will send every penny back to your family, accompanied by a simple letter.

These letters are known as *Qiaopi* (money letters) or *Yinxin* (silver letters). They consist of three parts: a *Pikuan*, an envelope indicating the amount of money remitted; a personal letter from the migrant in Singapore to his family in China; and a *Huipi*, a blank return letter to be filled in by the recipient as proof that the money was received. This return letter often included brief news from home. These silver letters were crucial for Tan and his family—not only as financial support to keep his wife, children or parents from falling into misery, but also as emotional lifelines. In an unfamiliar surrounding filled with much toil and hardship, letters from home warmed Tan’s heart and provided a sense of stability. How did this practice begin?

“WATER TRAVELLERS” ARE MODERN-DAY’S POSTMEN

From the 1820s, with the arrival of the first unskilled and impoverished Chinese immigrants – called *coolies* (*coolie* means hard labour in Chinese), “water travellers” transported letters from Singapore to remote towns in

China. They departed in June with the monsoon winds and returned to Singapore in December. News and money were delivered just once a year. These “water travellers,” being the only people to see both sender and recipient, were treated as family in Chinese villages. The families prepared tea and food, and tried to make them stay over in their homes.

From the mid-19th century, small family businesses, divided by dialect groups, organised and structured how migrants would send money back home. Their reputations were built through word-of-mouth, with integrity and trust as their core values. The advent of steamships also changed the pace and regularity of mail transports. In the 1880s, only two parcels per year could be sent, but from the 1920s, monthly letters would be received and took only 16 days to arrive. When wire transfers emerged, headquarters and branches of remittance houses were established in China and in Singapore. Money ceased to be physically carried or exchanged for goods, but the efficiency of financial wires could never replace the personal connection offered by the silver letters.



A Chinese coolie carrying a gunny sack was a common sight in Singapore during the late 19th and early 20th century. Coolies were usually employed as construction workers, port or plantation workers or even rickshaw pullers, performing back-breaking tasks. Photo courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore.



Street mural displaying emotions of Chinese immigrants leaving their families to seek better pastures in Singapore. Mural by Yip Yew Chong. Photo taken by the author.

WHAT'S INSIDE A SILVER LETTER?

Studying these letters is like embarking on a journey through time, history and emotion. Each letter is marked with multiple stamps – signs of the many checkpoints (for example, post offices, maritime customs, etc.) it passed through. These stamps symbolise the struggles of migration, much like the hard and sacrificial lives of these unskilled migrants.

Opening a letter, the first things visible to the eyes are the numerous thumb-sized red imprints on the greetings and the remittance amount. Words such as “as one wishes,” “peace” and “auspicious” appear, often accompanied by floral embellishments. We can imagine these poor migrants – like the *coolies*, *Samsui* women or *majie* – kissing their letters with love before handing them to the remittance house. These letters followed strict traditions. They were always addressed to the eldest family member. After World War II, 13 letters were sent per year – one each month and one for the Lunar New Year. “Letters of peace” reassured



Sister Mei, a majie with a six-month old little boy. A majie is a Cantonese domestic helper, usually from Guangdong in China who has taken a vow of celibacy. Collection of the National Museum of Singapore/ Credit Line Gift of Wu Sijing.



Samsui women were working at a construction yard, carrying rocks and doing menial work. They had very recognisable red headgear and became an iconic representation of a hard but dignified life. Collection of National Museum of Singapore.

families that the sender had arrived safely. Even when no remittance was enclosed, a letter confirming the migrant's health was expected. And when a family received a single dollar without a letter, it was understood that their loved one had passed away.

The content of these letters frequently touched upon religion and ancestral worship. Remittance money could also be used to repair family homes or build ancestral halls to honour family tablets. Filial piety was a dominant theme, with parents emphasising the expectation of financial support and reinforcing the importance of respecting arranged marriages. Letters between husbands and wives revealed the strain of long separations and the difficulties of understanding one another across distances. For example, one letter reads, "You sent two letters in a row to quarrel with me – it really amuses me. I was just being hot-tempered and said a few words that crossed the line." Values such as education, family honour and respect for elders were common themes. Yet, above all, these letters were filled with affection – children expressing love for their parents, husbands and wives longing for each other and families yearning to be reunited.

LETTER WRITERS ARE MODERN-DAY'S AGONY AUNTS

Many migrants were illiterate, so their letters were written by professional letter writers. They operated simple businesses with just a small table, a chair or two, a few brushes, ink and paper. Their clients were not wealthy, and their earnings were modest, but their work held great purpose. They translated emotions into carefully crafted words, turning personal thoughts into eloquent letters filled with longing, warmth and tears. Letter writers were more than scribes – they were confidants, counsellors and mediators. They read letters



Letter writers were typically over 55 years old, were skilled calligraphers and educated individuals who read letters aloud with words of love and sorrows. Courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore.

aloud in their clients' dialects, interpreted messages for the illiterate, and softened harsh words in family disputes. They helped resolve misunderstandings between distant spouses and soothed heartaches, often shedding tears alongside those they served.

FROM BEING ESSENTIAL THEY SLOWLY DISAPPEARED

World War II prevented any communication between Singapore and the migrants' homeland. Following the departure of the Japanese, people flocked to letter writers to send reassuring letters and money to their families. Chinese families back home needed even more support during the extremely poor years of the 1960s. The busy lanes of Chinatown would be crowded with long queues of migrants waiting patiently for their turn to write to their loved ones, adding food, medicine, shoes and clothing to the parcel, which the Chinese communist party didn't provide. With the rise of modern communications like telephones, and widespread education, letter writers gradually disappeared. When their once-beloved clients passed away, only these old letters as records of their sorrow, struggles and love were left behind. The last letter writers could be found in the 1980s, in Chinatown Complex.

AFTERWORD

Personally, I am deeply moved by how these silver letters kept families and Chinese traditions alive across two seas for over 150 years. They reflect the enduring importance of filial piety, marriage, respect for elders and family bond – values that remain relevant in modern Singapore. Reading these letters is a humbling experience, a reminder of the sacrifices made by those who came before us and the ties that continue to bind us to our heritage. **P**



Come sit with a letter writer at Yip Yew Chong's street mural on 336 Smith Street. Mural by Yip Yew Chong. Photo taken by the author.

FOR FURTHER READING

Lo-Ang Siew Ghim and Chua Chee Huan, eds., *Vanishing Trades of Singapore*.

LAETITIA PAOLI is a docent from URA-FOM Chinatown Heritage Trails and can be mostly found moving her hands telling the stories of the early immigrants who lived, played and entertained in the precinct of Telok Ayer.

STONE MESSAGES: ASHOKA'S ANCIENT SOCIAL MEDIA

SONAM KUNDU EXPLORES THE ANCIENT ROCK CARVINGS OF EMPEROR ASHOKA AND THE PHILOSOPHIES BEHIND THEM

Rocks and pillars etched with writings over 2000 years ago are still standing across the Indian subcontinent, from the river Indus in the northwest to the Bay of Bengal in the east. More than thirty inscriptions on pillars and boulders have been found that were inscribed by Emperor Ashoka (r.268 BCE–232 BCE) who ruled over large parts of what are today India, Pakistan and Afghanistan. He is best remembered for his transformation from a ruthless king to a *chakravartin*, an ideal Buddhist ruler.

DECODING THE ROCK MESSAGES

Architecture from antiquity in the Indian subcontinent has left behind little trace. Scholars tend to think this may be because of the materials used – perishables like mud and wood. Ashoka chose to inscribe his edicts on pillars and rocks, perhaps because he wanted his words to be everlasting, reaching future generations.

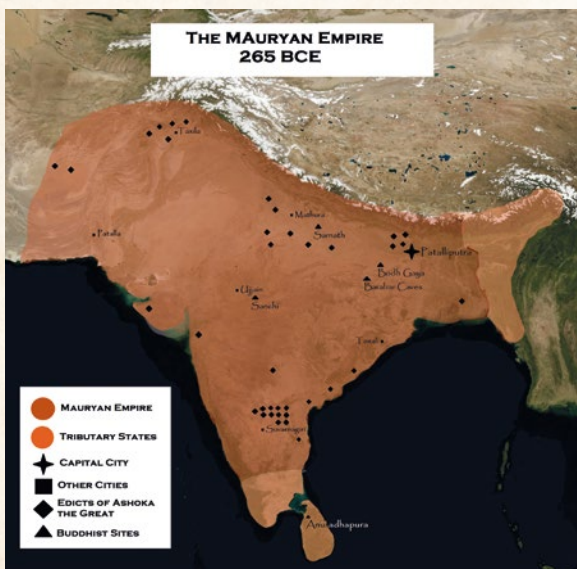
Ironically, these Ashokan messages would have remained unknown to us, had it not been for James Prinsep, a British scholar in the 19th century. A renowned philologist, he had unsuccessfully attempted to decode the script on the Singapore stone – a fragment of which sits in the

National Museum of Singapore today. His efforts were rewarded with Ashoka's edicts, with key breakthroughs in the 1830s to 1840s. He noticed similarities in letter forms and phonetic values from the scripts that had existed in ancient India. This became the basis to understanding the rock inscriptions. Once the script was unlocked, these rocks started to communicate the messages inscribed two millennia ago.

WHAT WAS ASHOKA SAYING?

Not merely decrees of Ashoka's royal authority, these inscriptions were guidelines for good conduct. He encouraged practices such as kindness to animals and community welfare. He set up moral codes of conduct for everyone and proclaimed that "Morality was the only act of fame and glory".

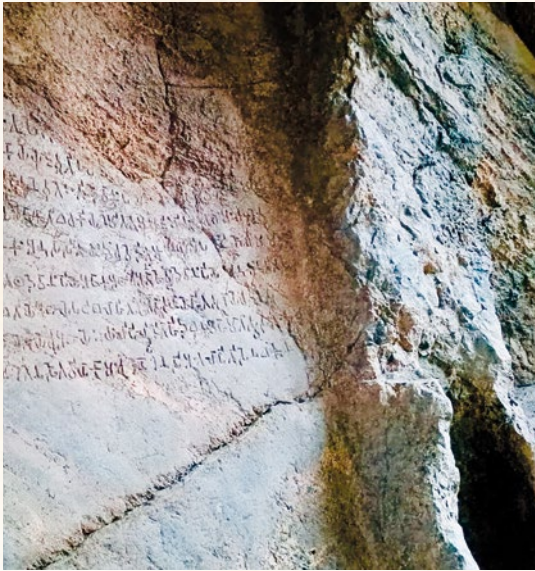
The Dhauli Edict, located on the eastern limits of his empire, marks the site of the Kalinga war which lies in present day Odisha, India. The war resulted in tremendous bloodshed as Ashoka conquered the Kalinga empire. Inscriptions here describe the carnage and misery brought to the people by the war. Traditions say that Ashoka expressed his regret in its aftermath. His proclamations on the rocks point at a ruler who had come to understand the futility of violence. In some writings Ashoka is seen ordering the population of Kalinga to be treated with compassion like



Map of Emperor Ashoka's empire, 3rd century BCE. Image from Wikimedia Commons.



Emperor Ashoka with his queens and attendants, south gate, Sanchi Stupa, 3rd Century BCE. Image from Wikimedia Commons.



Dhaulti Rock Edict, Odisha, 260 BCE. Image by author.



Early Brahmi script, Dhaulti Rock Edict, Odisha, 260 BCE, Image by author.

Ashoka's own children. Postwar Ashoka is said to have turned to Buddhism, and this is reflected in the edict here. Teachings of Buddhism and its way of life – *Dharma* – are frequently seen inscribed on these rocks.

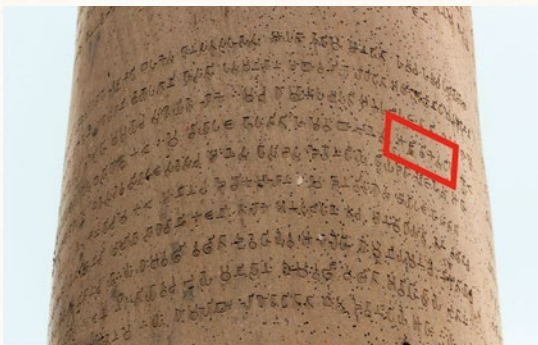
THE MAKERS - EDUCATED AND SKILLED ARTISANS

Ashoka himself ordered the edicts. Prinsep had inferred that Ashoka referred to himself in the third person in these writings as *Piyadasi*, *Devanampiya* – “beloved of the gods.” While specific names are not seen, skilled stone carvers working under royal patronage would have crafted the inscriptions. They might have known various languages and scripts of the time - *Brahmi* and *Kharosthi*. It's also possible that Buddhist monks had a role in overseeing the creation of these edicts as Buddhist messages repeatedly flow down in the form of words from these rocks. The still gleaming pillars made of finely polished sandstone or granite showcase the

advanced stone-working techniques of the time. The pillars, around 50 feet tall, stand with a circular or square base tapering towards the top. These are decorated with intricate carvings such as lotus petals, swans at the base, lion heads at the top and inscribed with messages. They must surely be the works of skilled masons and carvers.

SCRIPTED TO SPREAD OVER ANCIENT TRAVEL ROUTES

In the highly connected northwestern bounds of Ashoka's empire, ancient *Kharosthi* script appears on edicts at Shahbaz Garhi and Mansehra. They are located on the Khyber Pass in today's northwest Pakistan, bordering Afghanistan. The gateway to the Indian subcontinent since 5 BCE, this region was known as Gandhara. Ashoka's rock edicts seem to be deliberately located along trade hubs and routes which were vital links for exchanges. His words travelled with trade. While *Kharosthi* was commonly used in this



Pillar edict with script inset at Feroz Shah Kotla, Delhi, 3rd Century BCE. Image from Pexels.com



Feroz Shah Kotla, Delhi 3rd century BCE. Image from Wikimedia Commons.

region, Gandhara also had a Greek-speaking population. Gandhara region housed the Kandahar edicts – not only was Greek language used in Kandahar edicts, it also contains inscriptions in Aramaic. The scholars date these as Ashoka's first inscriptions highlighting cultural interactions and trade connections with the Greek and the Persian Empires.

"Ten years (of reign) having been completed, King Piodasses ('Piyadasi' in Greek) made known (the doctrine of) piety to men; and from this moment he has made men more pious, and everything thrives throughout the whole world. The king abstains from (killing) living beings, and other men... have desisted from hunting... by so acting... they will live better and more happily." (Excerpt from translation of the Greek edict by G.P. Carratelli)

Ashoka the Great, as he is known today, was then aspiring for an ethical and Buddhist world. In north India lies Sarnath, a sacred site for Buddhists where Buddha gave his first sermon about 400 years before Ashoka's time. The region would have been an important pilgrimage site, as it is even today. The flow of pilgrims from far and beyond made this a strategic location to place his pillar. In the Sarnath pillar inscription, Ashoka expresses his commitment to *dharma* - the Buddhist way of life. He repeatedly encourages people to embrace these Buddhist principles. Real ingenuity and creativity can be seen to cater to populations couldn't read or write. As described on these rocks, Ashoka ordered a government official to routinely gather crowds with drums and gongs and read the rock messages out loud. These stone carvings start to paint a picture of an ancient society and their policies. In Gujarat, located in western India, the Girnar edicts stand on what

was an ancient network that once connected Indian trade along the external sea links to Africa and the Middle East via the Gulf of Aden. Inscriptions were also strategically located in the eastern and southern parts of India, utilising the trade connection to Southeast Asian regions.

THE IMPACT OF THE ROCK EDICTS

Ashoka's words travelled the seas with traders and his emissaries to many parts of Asia. Rock edicts were becoming a trendy means of communication amongst other rulers. For centuries to come, royal declarations were made on pillars and rocks across Asia, and can be seen from Borneo, on a pillar dated from the 5th century, to the 8th century Peace treaty pillar at Lhasa, Tibet. Ashoka's edicts successfully spread his beliefs, his methods and shaped the identities of many future nations. His pillar at Sarnath, complete with the carvings of lion heads and the wheel, a symbol of *dharma*, went on to become the emblem of modern India and it stands for resilience and compassion. 

RECOMMENDATION:

Olivelle, Patrick. *Ashoka, Portrait of a Philosopher King*. Yale University Press, 2024. Learn more about Emperor Ashoka and in-depth translations from his rock inscriptions.

SONAM KUNDU is a FOM docent who has been actively guiding at the Asian Civilisations Museum since 2023.

Pillar, standing at Vaishali, location of the Buddha's last sermon, 3rd century BCE. Image from Wikimedia Commons.



THE ENIGMAS PRESENTED BY THE *BATU BERSURAT* *TERENGGANU*

TANG SIEW NGOH ATTEMPTS TO UNRAVEL SOME POLEMICS RELATING
TO THE ARRIVAL OF ISLAM IN TERENGGANU

All photos are courtesy of Syed Amran, unless otherwise stated.

My encounter in 2015 with the *Batu Bersurat Terengganu* (Terengganu Inscribed Stone), displayed at the Terengganu State Museum as the earliest evidence of Islam's arrival in the Malay Peninsula, is just as serendipitous as its discovery in 1902 at Surau Kampung Buluh in Kuala Berang by an Arab tin-pro prospector Syed Husin Ghulam Al-Bukhari. He deemed it worthy to be presented to Sultan Zainal Abidin III even though the villagers were using it as a platform to wash their feet on before entering the prayer hall. Eventually, the import of the stone's Jawi inscription was recognized by UNESCO who included it in the Memory of the World Programme in 2009. Yet, the *Batu Bersurat Terengganu* (BBT) engenders various discourses about its material composition, dating and interpretation.



Nazli Hamzah's illustration on display at Terengganu State Museum depicting the discovery of the Batu Bersurat Terengganu at Tok Rashid Mosque in Kampung Buluh before it was moved to Surau Kampung Buluh.



Regal display of the Batu Bersurat Terengganu at the Terengganu State Museum.

PROVENANCE AND MATERIAL COMPOSITION

The stone is 84 cm in height, 53 cm in width at the top and weighs 214.8 kilograms. The top part has been broken off, affecting the inscriptions on the lateral sides. The BBT was found half-submerged at the Tersat riverbank in Kuala Berang in 1887, but where was its original location? From 1902–1922 it stood atop Bukit Puteri where the sultan had it displayed. Then it was loaned to Singapore's Raffles Museum from 1923 for further analysis after C.O. Blagden had deciphered its inscriptions. It was relocated to the National History Museum of Malaysia in 1960 before its final repatriation to Terengganu in 1991, attaining its pride of place at the state museum.

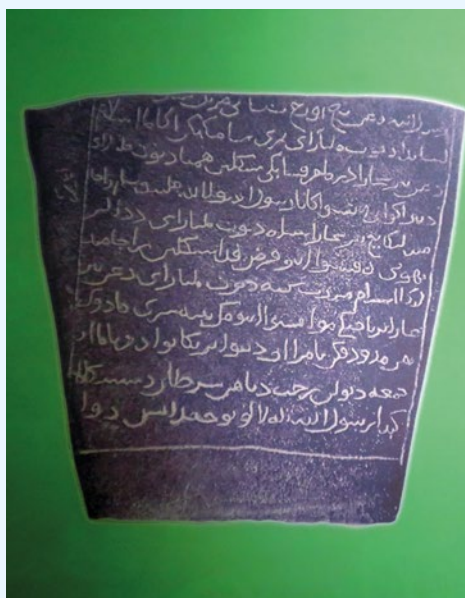
An *in-situ* non-destructive compositional analysis of the BBT using neutron-induced prompt gamma-ray techniques

was done and its 2018 report concluded that the inscriptions could have been chiselled out of dolerite, an even harder stone than granite.

CONTENTIOUS DATING AND CORRESPONDING IMPLICATIONS

The inscribed date is incomplete as the lower left edge of the stone's Face A was damaged. Blagden (1924) postulated a range of dates from 702 to 789 AH (corresponding to February – March 1303 to February 1387 CE). But there were other dates that were deemed to be more accurate which included Friday 4th of Rajab, 702 AH (Friday, 22 February 1303 CE) according to Muhammad Naguib al-Attas (1970) and Friday 6th of Rajab 702 AH according to the Islamic Science University of Malaysia (2019). However, Emeritus Professor Dr Ahmat Adam (2017) proposed 708 AH or 1308 CE instead, arguing that previous scholarship had consistently misdated the stone and misrepresented its true content as the inscription used a unique 14th century calendrical system.

Regardless of which 14th century CE date is accurate, one important implication is that Islam had spread to Terengganu before 1303 or 1387 CE. This assertion challenges the common belief that Islam first came to the Malay Peninsula in the 15th century via Melaka on the west coast rather than directly through its eastern ports like Kuala Berang. In Sung Dynasty records published respectively in 1178 and 1225 CE by Chou Ch'u-fei (a topographer) and Chao Ju-Kua (Commissioner of Foreign Trade), *Foloan* in Terengganu was described as a dependency of the Srivijaya Empire and its northern entrepôt, and was visited by many Arab traders. Details included the merchandise traded and two notable Buddha images to which incense was offered regularly by a Srivijaya ruler. If Kuala Berang were in fact *Foloan*, Wheatley



The name Terengganu and the date 702 AH appear in the last three rows of the inscription on Face A of the Batu Bersurat Terengganu.

Muka A

1. Rasūl Allāh dengan yang orang sa-nabi. Mereka
2. Asa pada Dewata Mulia Raya beri hamba meneguhkan agama Islam
3. dengan benar bicara darma, meraksa bagi sekalian hamba Dewata Mulia Raya
4. dibenuaku ini. Penentu agama Rasūl Allāh, Salla Allāhu 'alayhi wa sallam, Raja
5. Mandalika, yang benar bicara sebelah Dewata Mulia Raya didalam
6. Bhumi dipenentua itu. Fardu pada sekalian Raja Manda
7. Lika Islam menurut setitah Dewata Mulia Raya dengan benar
8. Bicara berbahi benua penentua itu. Maka titah Seri Paduka
9. Tuhan mendudukkan tamra ini dibenua Terengganu adi pertama ada
10. Jum'at dibulan Rajabditahun Sharatān disasanakala
11. Baginda Rasūl Allāh telah lalu tujuh ratus dua.

(1961) argued that the Muslim traders there could have brought about the conversion of Terengganu to Islam.

However, Anthony Reid (1993) suggested that Islam's spread in Southeast Asia was more complex than a direct Arab-to-Malay route as Chinese Muslims, along with Indian traders, played a central role in spreading Islam, particularly in the eastern Malay states. This was corroborated by scholars like Haji Hassan Ahmad (1981) and Wang Gungwu (1981). The fortunes of Chinese Muslims waxed and waned through the different dynasties in China. During times of persecution such as 876 CE at Canton and the 1360s at Quanzhou, Chinese Muslims fleeing to Southeast Asia found Terengganu an attractive refuge where they could settle, spreading their Islamic faith (Zahirwan, et.al., 2012). Consequently, one of the earliest Chinese settlements from the 12th century CE was found at Kuala Bering, where today there stands a huge BBT memorial. Chinese Muslims' linguistic and cultural familiarity with both Chinese and Malay societies made them effective bridges to spread Islam through their mercantile activities and social connections.

This Chinese Muslim connection continued to unfold a century later. According to the History of the Ming (Ming Shi [明史]), the famous Chinese Muslim Admiral Zheng He visited Terengganu in one of his seven voyages to the 'Western Oceans' (1405-1433), inspiring a street art scene in Kuala Terengganu. The Sam Poh Kong Temple or *Cheng Ho Keramat* at Kampong Jeram, Terengganu, where Zheng He is honoured as *Datuk Johan* with offerings of halal food such as nasi kunyit and chicken, which is another testament to his visit.



Batu Bersurat Memorial completed in 1990 at a location near its original founding place of Kampung Buluh, Kuala Berang. Photo courtesy of Discovery Terengganu.

CONFLICTING INTERPRETATIONS OF THE JAWI INSCRIPTIONS

The inscribed text represents the earliest evidence of Jawi writing in the Malay Archipelago. It is also one of the oldest testimonies of Islam's adoption as a state religion by the Malay local elites, attracted by Muslim kingship notion in which the ruler was "God's shadow on earth" conferring them legitimate sovereignty. The inscription was tantamount to an edict issued by a ruler referred to as *Seri Paduka Tuan* of Terengganu, urging his subjects to "extend and uphold" Islam, and providing ten Shariah laws for their guidance. Four of the laws are either missing or illegible. The other six deal with debtors' obligations, the bearing of false witness, types of penalties in default of payment of fines and sexual offences, the elaboration of which makes one wonder if the society then was rather adulterous. What motivated the ruler to issue this edict? While some scholars argue that the inscribed text is a legal document related to Islamic laws, others propose that it represents a symbolic act to formalise the ruler's conversion to Islam in order to establish Islamic authority within his domains.

Complicating the interpretation was the concomitant use of old Malay language, ten Arabic words, and 26-30 Sanskrit terms in the ancient Jawi script carved on all four facades of the BBT. This implies that either local and foreign Muslims could not totally replace the Sanskrit script prevalent during the rule of the Srivijaya and Majapahit empires, or that the text was deliberately crafted to reflect both Islamic and pre-Islamic traditions. Alternatively, can the inscribed text be equated to a Malay *Magna Carta* that formalised limits to a previously absolutist ruler, as proposed by HRH Tunku Zain al-'Abidin ibni Tuanku Muhriz? Failure to obey this edict



Street art at Jalan Kampung Cina depicting Zheng He's Voyages to the Western Oceans. The Chinese characters 丁加下路 within the red oval markup refers to Terengganu. Photo taken by the author.

would result in punishment from a higher authority, even if one is a member of the ruling class. Nonetheless, having a strong rule of law is attractive to foreign traders who favour political stability to run stable businesses.

ENDURING ALLURE OF AN ENIGMATIC ARTEFACT

With unresolved enigmas as outlined above deserving further research, the Terengganu Inscribed Stone at the Terengganu State Museum remains an enigmatic artefact that enamours the ever-curious mind. Moreover, the display of many replicas, in both Terengganu (for example at the Ladang Roundabout) and other museums in Selangor, Penang, Melaka and Negri Sembilan, attests to its historical significance. 

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



Replica of the Batu Bersurat Terengganu at Bulatan Ladang, Kuala Terengganu, built in 2004, replacing the leatherback turtle statue, a tourism icon.

FROM CONTEMPORARY WRITING TO CONTEMPORARY THEATRE

JOIN **GAURAV KRIPALANI** AS HE EXPLORES THE EVOLUTION OF THE THEATRE LANDSCAPE IN SINGAPORE

All images are courtesy of Singapore Repertory Theatre, unless otherwise stated.

The landscape of Singaporean theatre has undergone a profound transformation over the past few decades. Once dominated by imported productions and Western classics, it now boasts a dynamic repertoire of original works that encapsulate the nation's distinct identity, historical trajectory, and socio-political discourse. As Singapore Repertory Theatre (SRT) commemorates three decades of theatrical excellence, it is an opportune moment to critically examine the evolution of Singaporean playwriting and its substantial influence on contemporary theatre.

THE GENESIS OF SINGAPOREAN PLAYWRITING

The nascent stage of Singaporean theatre was characterised by an effort to establish a distinctive narrative voice, separate from the vestiges of colonial influence. Playwrights such as Kuo Pao Kun and Stella Kon were instrumental in pioneering works that engaged deeply with themes of identity, language and multiculturalism. Kuo's seminal plays, including *The Coffin Is Too Big for the Hole* (1984) and *Mama Looking for Her Cat* (1988), interrogated issues of societal conformity and linguistic diversity, while Kon's *Emily of Emerald Hill* (1982) became an enduring classic, offering an intimate portrayal of Peranakan (Straits Chinese) culture. These foundational works set the stage for a burgeoning local theatrical tradition.

SRT'S CONTRIBUTION TO SINGAPOREAN THEATRE

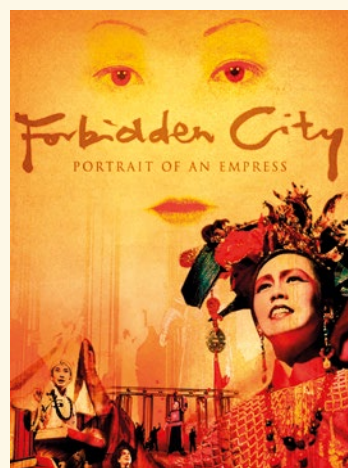
Since its inception in 1993, SRT has played a pivotal role in shaping Singapore's theatrical landscape. While the company is renowned for staging internationally acclaimed productions, it has also been a staunch advocate for original Singaporean narratives.

One of SRT's most significant contributions is *Forbidden City: Portrait of an Empress*, a musical that poignantly depicts the tragic yet compelling story of Empress Dowager Cixi through an intricate blend of music, storytelling and visual spectacle. Commissioned by the Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay for their opening season in 2002, the production's success underscored the potential of Singaporean theatre to

present grand historical narratives with both artistic sophistication and mass appeal.

Another landmark production, *The LKY Musical* (2015), dramatised the political journey and personal life of Singapore's founding Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew. Commissioned by AIWEI (production company) to commemorate Singapore's 50th anniversary since independence, the production demonstrated the theatre's capacity to serve as an engaging platform for revisiting and reinterpreting Singapore's historical milestones.

Beyond these large-scale productions, SRT has also been committed to nurturing emerging playwrights through developmental initiatives, ensuring a continuous pipeline of fresh voices contributing to Singapore's cultural discourse. One key area of investment in new writing has been SRT's The Little Company productions. Each year, SRT commissions at least one new work for children. Over the past 20 years, this has led to a substantial trove of original intellectual property.



Poster of *Forbidden City: Portrait of an Empress*.



Kit Chan, a popular local artiste, in *Forbidden City: Portrait of an Empress*.



LKY Musical performance. Image courtesy of AIWEI.

Another notable work that emerged from SRT's commitment to new writing is Jean Tay's *Boom*. Commissioned by SRT, this poignant and thought-provoking play delves into themes of urban development, filial piety and the clash between progress and tradition. *Boom* has since been recognised as a seminal Singaporean text and is now studied in schools, highlighting the enduring impact of theatre in shaping national discourse and cultural understanding.

THE EVOLUTION OF CONTEMPORARY SINGAPOREAN THEATRE

The themes explored in contemporary Singaporean theatre have diversified considerably, reflecting the evolving concerns of the nation. Issues such as migration, LGBTQ+ rights, intergenerational tensions and urban alienation have emerged as focal points of recent productions. Playwrights like Alfian Sa'at (*Cooling-Off Day*), Faith Ng (*Normal*), and Joel Tan (*Café*) have been instrumental in crafting narratives that not only entertain but also provoke critical discourse and societal introspection.

INNOVATION IN THEATRE DURING THE PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 pandemic not only posed significant challenges for the theatre industry, but it also catalysed innovation in digital storytelling. One such example is *The Pitch*, a first-ever collaboration between SRT and other theatre companies i.e. Wild Rice and Pangdemonium that was conceived as a Zoom-based performance during the height of the pandemic. This satirical play about theatre-makers struggling to stay relevant in a digital world resonated deeply with artists and audiences alike, proving that theatre could thrive even in virtual spaces. The success



Poster of *The Pitch*.



of *The Pitch* led to its sequel, *The Commission*, which was staged as part of the Singapore International Festival of Arts (SIFA) in 2021. *The Commission* expanded on themes of artistic integrity, funding struggles and the role of theatre in a rapidly changing society, reinforcing the continued relevance of Singaporean storytelling.

CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

Despite its evolution, Singaporean theatre continues to grapple with several challenges, including financial constraints, audience development and the need to balance commercial viability with artistic ambition. Government support, particularly through the National Arts Council's funding schemes, has been instrumental in sustaining the industry. However, continued efforts are required to cultivate a new generation of theatregoers who appreciate and support homegrown productions.

Simultaneously, opportunities for Singaporean theatre to gain international recognition are expanding. The growing global interest in Southeast Asian narratives, coupled with advancements in digital platforms, presents new avenues for local productions to reach broader audiences. Cross-border collaborations, touring performances and digital adaptations offer promising prospects for the future.

THE FUTURE OF SINGAPOREAN THEATRE

Looking ahead, the coming years hold immense potential for Singaporean theatre. With dedicated initiatives aimed at nurturing young playwrights and developing original works, the industry is poised for further innovation and creative expansion. SRT remains steadfast in its commitment to amplifying Singaporean voices on stage, ensuring that local stories continue to resonate with audiences both at home and abroad.

As SRT celebrates its 30th anniversary and the broader theatre community reflects on its evolution, it is evident that the power of storytelling remains central to Singapore's cultural identity. From contemporary writing to contemporary theatre, the nation's stage continues to be a dynamic and compelling space for artistic expression and societal engagement. **P**

GAURAV KRIPALANI is the Artistic Director of Singapore Repertory Theatre.

KAMPONG GELAM'S REMARKABLE LITERARY HERITAGE

KARIEN VAN DITZHUIJZEN SHEDS LIGHT ON KAMPONG GELAM'S ILLUSTRIOUS LEGACY AS A CULTURAL & INTELLECTUAL HUB FOR THE MALAY WORLD AND BEYOND

*Hj Muhammad Siraj namanya diri
Di Kampung Gelam Singapura negeri
Mengecap syair demikian peri
Inilah kerja sehari-hari*

My name is Hj Muhammad Siraj
At Kampung Gelam in the state of Singapore
Printing syair is what I do
This is my daily job

Excerpt taken from *Early Malay Printed Books* by Ian Proudfoot (1993)

Many visitors in Kampong Gelam today don't see past its colourful shops and restaurants, but the area has both an illustrious and esteemed past. As the residence of Sultan Hussain of Singapore, it became early Singapore's Islamic quarter, and Muslims from all over the world settled in the neighbourhood to shape its rich cultural heritage. You might be surprised to learn that for over a century, Kampong Gelam was the centre of intellectual life of the Malay World. Kampong Gelam's book printers and sellers were famous in the Islamic world and produced manuscripts that defied the colonial authorities in Southeast Asia.

EARLY KAMPONG GELAM WRITERS

Popular genres in traditional Malay literature are the *hikayat* (prose narrating mythological tales and royal epics) and the *syair* (lyrical Malay poetry). Stories were shared orally, and early manuscripts from the Malay world were mainly written by court scribes. The spread of Islam in the 13th century created a surge in literacy as people were encouraged to read the Quran, and *kitab* (religious texts) became another popular genre.

The oldest texts found that were produced in Kampong Gelam are three *syair* written in the 1820s and 1830s. One of them criticises the Sultan's lack of authority after a scandal at the Istana, where the Sultan's consort was found behaving intimately with another man. The other two texts are protest poems against the colonial administration written by an unknown man using the pen name, Tuan Simi. These poems are remarkable as they depart from the classical themes of the *syair* (philosophy, history and religion) and depict contemporary issues faced by ordinary people. Tuan Simi's *Syair Potong Gaji* (*Ballad of the Wage Cut*) describes how the wages of Malay workers were cut by the colonial government despite an increase in their workload.

A TECHNOLOGICAL REVOLUTION

In the late 16th century Christian missionaries brought the printing press to Southeast Asia to print bible translations. The first Malay language book, a dictionary, was printed in Batavia in 1677. In 1758 a complete bible was published in Malay, but as the Dutch imposed strict controls on publishing, no more Malay books were printed after this period in the Dutch East Indies. In Singapore, missionaries continued to print in Malay until the 1860s, when the first indigenous Malay Muslim printers and publishers began to emerge.

The block printed books made by the Europeans looked different from the florid handwritten Malay manuscripts written in Jawi, a version of Arabic used to write Malay.



Double decorated frontispiece of the *Hikayat Abdullah*, lithographed at the Mission Press in Singapore in 1849. Source: National Library Board, Singapore.



Frontispiece of *Chermin Mata Bagi*, printed in 1859 by Keasberry and Munshi Abdullah. The first to use lithography for printing a Jawi text closely resembling handwritten script. Source: National Library Board, Singapore.

But a new technique called lithography allowed them to produce books that resembled Malay manuscripts. In lithography, a text or image is drawn on a stone which is then used to make multiple prints on paper and this allowed the printing of calligraphy with colourful illustrations in large numbers. The first lithograph-printed Quran was made in Palembang in 1848 by Haji Muhammed Azari bin Kemas, who bought his equipment in Singapore on his return from his Haj pilgrimage.

The pioneer of Malay publishing in Singapore was Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir, commonly known as Munshi Abdullah, a Malay scholar from Melaka. He worked as a scribe and translator for Raffles and learned printing from English missionaries whilst assisting them with

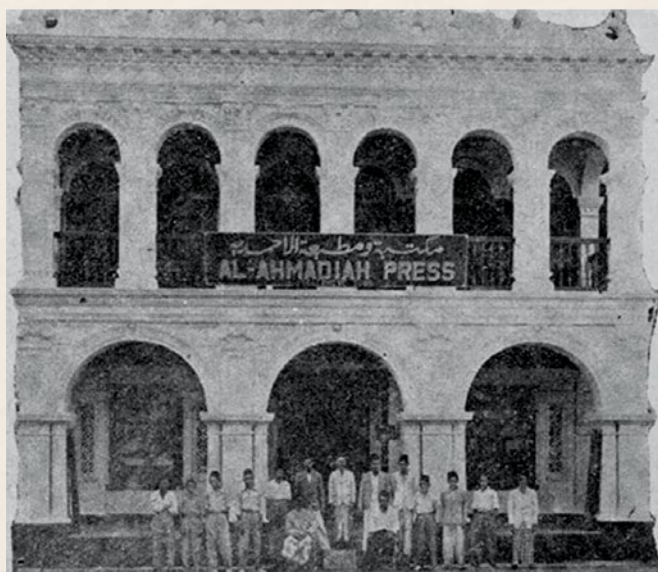
editing and translating. His books were the first by a non-European to be put in print locally, the most famous one being his autobiography *Hikayat Abdullah*. Munshi Abdullah is seen as the father of modern Malay literature but is also criticised by some for being overly influenced by the British colonial view.

THE GOLDEN AGE OF THE BOOK INDUSTRY IN KAMPONG GELAM

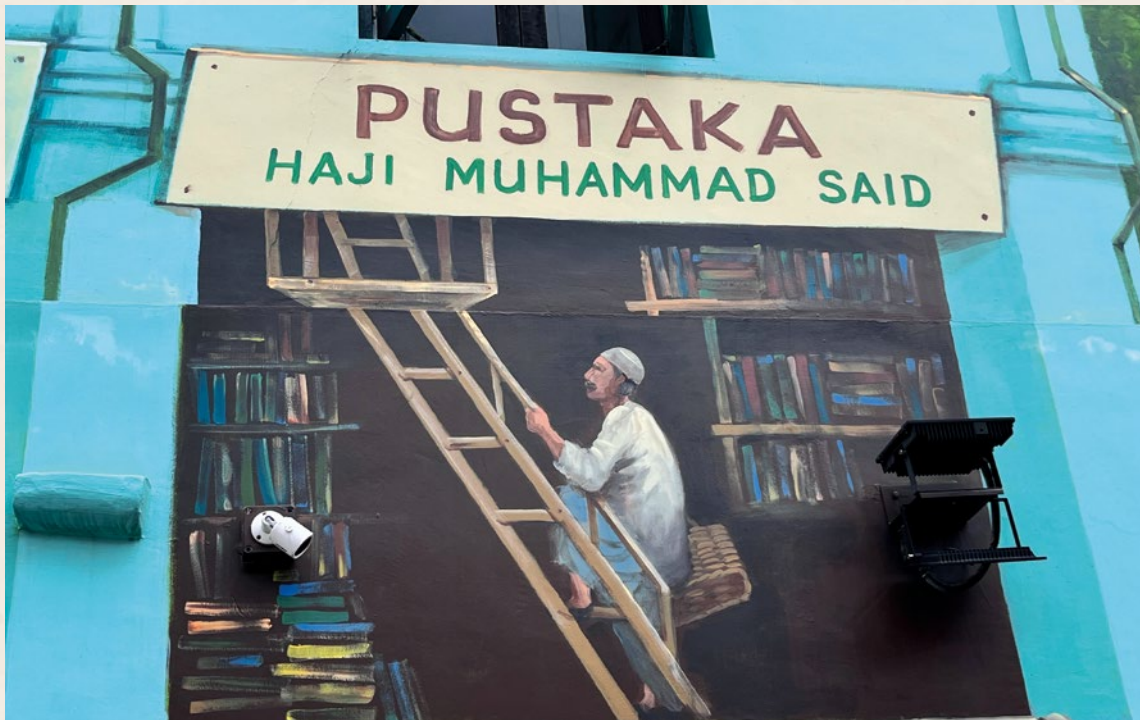
In the second half of the 19th century many immigrants from Java settled in Singapore and established printing presses around Sultan Mosque, where the Muslim community would gather after Friday prayers. They printed various titles, ranging from religious materials, literature and poetry to newspapers and posters. Like the royal scribes before them, the printers copied traditional works onto stones by hand but were now able to reproduce them in large quantities quickly. There was a lot of experimentation, where modern techniques were combined with traditional crafts.

In the 1880s the industry matured, and several large players emerged to dominate the market. Two of the best-known printers were Haji Muhammad Said (HM Said) and Haji Muhammad Siraj (HM Siraj). Together, they published hundreds of titles between 1873 and 1918. In 1890 alone, HM Said printed around 10,000 books, an astonishing number for the era.

In the late 19th century Kampong Gelam's publishing industry peaked as its books were shipped all over the Malay world. Compared to previous oral sharing traditions, the written word could more easily bridge the seas of the outstretched archipelago, and these books were instrumental in shaping a collective consciousness amongst the spread-out Malay diaspora. Books were also imported from other Muslim countries to resell them in one of the area's numerous bookshops.



The building at 101 Jalan Sultan, where HARMY Press and Al-Ahmadiyah Press were based, c. 1950s. Published by Qalam Press. (Source: roots.sg)



Fragment of Mural by Yip Yew Chong in Kampong Gelam showing printer Haji Muhammad Said in his bookstore.
Photo courtesy of the author.

A NEW CENTURY

After 1900, there was a decline in Malay lithographic printing production, as letter printing was much faster and cheaper. Imported, cheaply produced publications took over and many Kampong Gelam printers ceased operations.

The new century also brought social change, with many more people becoming literate. In the following decades, intellectuals and activists started to use print technology to spread modern ideas about issues like women's rights and self-determination.

New businesses came up, printing newspapers and lifestyle magazines for the urban Malays. One of these companies was Al-Ahmadiyah Press, founded in 1911 by aristocrats from Indonesia who fled after the Dutch colonial government dissolved the Riau sultanate. They printed lifestyle magazines and fiction books.

As the century progressed, the wish for independence grew and after the Second World War, it became clear the end of western colonial empires was near. With the newly educated and socially engaged population, two print mediums became increasingly popular: the periodical and the newspaper.



Hikayat Bakhtiar, the legend of the warrior Bakhtiar, printed by Haji Muhammad Siraj in 1888. (Source: National Library Board, Singapore.)

The Malay newspaper, *Utusan Melayu*, established in Queen Street, together with the periodical *Mastika* became the leading voice of the Malays and for independence of Malaya. Other popular magazines were *Hiboran*, published by Royal Press in North Bridge Road, and *Mutiara* magazine, published by HARMY. These periodicals discussed social issues, current affairs, and published short stories.

The period post-independence saw a sharp decline in the printing industry as publishers closed or moved their operations to Malaysia. Printing was phased out in Kampong Gelam in 1990, yet the legacy of the Kampong Gelam printers is very much alive. The Kampong Gelam book industry created a community of intellectuals that not only helped define Malay culture but also raised it to a higher level. Its Malay language stories helped shape a common Malay identity across the archipelago. They advocated for social change and preserved Malay heritage and history for generations to come. P



Cover of Mutiara magazine from the 1960s. (Source: Malay Heritage Centre.)

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

A LEGACY IN INK – THE CALLIGRAPHY OF LIM TZE PENG

HOW DOES A DEEPLY PERSONAL FORM OF EXPRESSION EVOLVE INTO CULTURAL HERITAGE?

MARIE DENEUX PAYS TRIBUTE TO A SINGAPOREAN MASTER OF INK, EXAMINING HIS DISTINCTIVE APPROACH TO CALLIGRAPHY

How many people can claim the title of “National Treasure”? Lim Tze Peng can.

Perhaps best known for his landscapes of the Singapore River, his artistic legacy extends far beyond painting. A Cultural Medallion recipient, he was also a pioneer in calligraphy, pushing its boundaries with his innovative approach. Originally conceived as a tribute to one facet of his artistry, this article takes on new significance in light of his recent passing at the honourable age of 103.



Lim Tze Peng painting in the studio, 2019. Photo courtesy of Lim Tze Peng and Ode To Art gallery.

EARLY LIFE AND JOURNEY

Lim Tze Peng, born in a Pasir Ris kampong in Singapore in 1921 as the eldest of seven children to a family of rubber planters, was not destined for an art career. However, his



From Cursive Script Dictionary by Hong Juntao (proofread by Qigong). Beijing: Cultural Relics Publishing House, 1989. Part of the exhibition Becoming Lim Tze Peng, 25 Oct 2024—23 March 2025, National Gallery Singapore. The artist was using and referencing this dictionary to explore diverse forms of a word in cursive scripts. Photo by author.

talent was recognized at 15 by his art teacher at Chung Cheng High School. Studying the work of the eminent Chinese scholar, political reformer and calligrapher Kang Youwei (1858-1927) encouraged him to veer away from the Tang traditional calligraphic script and to explore other historical styles.

He began his career as an educator rather than an artist, while simultaneously developing a practice focused on landscape painting. He began working in oil, later transitioning to ink, with his work integrating European, Chinese and Southeast Asian influences. Less well-known but equally important was his work in calligraphy.

A DISTINCTIVE STYLE

Lim Tze Peng’s calligraphy is instantly recognisable for its bold strokes and its organic flow. Mastery of Chinese calligraphy can only be achieved by a rigorous discipline, which he followed to the end of his life, visiting his studio daily to practise writing as a form of meditation, exercise and artistic dedication. While he followed tradition in his regimen and in his early studies, the artist is known for pushing traditional boundaries and adopting a more contemporary approach to calligraphy.



(left) Rubbing of a stele with Jurchen text, Stephen Wootton Bushell, 1898.

(right) Lim Tze Peng, Abstract Calligraphy, ca. 2010s, ink and colour on rice paper, 89 x 94 cm. Photo courtesy of Lim Tze Peng and Ode To Art gallery.

His studies led him to explore a variety of calligraphic forms, including the seal script (篆書), clerical script (隸書), and cursive script (草書), styles of writing that have developed over millennia in China. The seal script, the oldest of the three, is recognisable by its symmetry and uniform strokes; the clerical script simplifies these into broader, more organic forms, while cursive script embraces motion and fluidity, with characters written swiftly.

Classical Chinese culture was a major inspiration, which Lim demonstrated by writing poetry from different dynasties and positioning himself in a long lineage of calligraphers.

Lim moreover engaged with other traditional Chinese arts, such as seal-making, or stele rubbing, a practice through which stone steles engraved with Chinese characters are covered with paper and lightly rubbed. The paper appears black and the carved characters, in negative space, are white. Lim developed a series of epigraphic-like “negative space calligraphy,” using black ink, not to paint the characters, but to paint around them, sometimes leaving the words white, sometimes infusing them with colour.

These innovations gave him the confidence to become bolder, to embrace abstraction, and to develop a style called “muddled calligraphy” (糊塗字). This style sees the form become freer and more dynamic, the words being layered on top of one another to become indecipherable, even to calligraphy experts.

While the idea of writing illegible calligraphy may seem paradoxical, it is crucial to understand Lim’s rationale. Despite lacking formal art training, he was a great admirer of French Post-Impressionist painter Paul Cézanne (1839–1906) and of German Cubist



Willi Baumeister, Amenophis, 1950, silkscreen print, 47 x 54 cm © Willi Baumeister Stiftung. A reproduction of this work was kept by Lim Tze Peng in one of his sketchbooks with the annotation “abstract calligraphy,” showing the variety of his calligraphic influences, both Western and Eastern.



Larger Than Life, solo exhibition held at Ode To Art gallery in 2014. Photo courtesy of Lim Tze Peng and Ode To Art gallery.

Willi Baumeister (1889–1955). His newly developed “abstract calligraphy” represented a way of finding a path to the modernity of abstraction through historical scripts.

“The meaning no longer matters” is how he often countered viewers asking what he had written. His written word is not meant to be read: the beauty of the interwoven lines becomes a form of visual poetry that can be appreciated purely for its aesthetic qualities. In his own words, “when ink is used well, the stroke itself can encapsulate the artist’s intention.”

In his profoundly contemporary practice, the triad of writing, painting, and poetry, so dear to Chinese scholars, becomes one unified visual language. Lim’s practice, his painting, calligraphy, poetry and personal philosophy, are all deeply intertwined expressions of his creativity.

CAREER RECOGNITION

Although Lim’s works were innovative, recognition came late in his career. He was invited to hold only three solo exhibitions before turning 80, with more than 20 solo shows occurring between his 80th and 100th birthdays. However, the final two decades of his life were marked by growing acclaim.

In 2021, at the occasion of his 100th birthday and the publication of his biography *Soul of Ink*, then Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong praised the artist and his legacy: “Mr Lim has inspired new generations of local artists, each with their own unique styles, but all distinctively Singaporean. Piece by piece, each new artwork contributes to our collective identity, our sense of national identity and pride.” Institutional recognition culminated in 2024, when the National Gallery hosted *Becoming Lim Tze Peng*, his first major retrospective.

Lim’s contributions to Singapore’s visual identity have been recognised, but his career achieved international recognition too, with his work being shown globally in exhibitions in China, India, France, Russia, the United States, Taiwan, Hong Kong and beyond.

When asked why he continued to paint at such an advanced age, he always had the same answer: “I have more to paint and to discover. I wish only to be reincarnated as an artist to be able to paint more”. We can only hope that his wish may be fulfilled. 



Lim Tze Peng, 水调歌头 — 苏轼
(Thinking of You by Su Shi), ink on Paper, 180 x 97 cm. Photo courtesy of Lim Tze Peng and Ode To Art gallery.
Su Shi (also known as Su Dongpo, 1037-1101), is one of the most significant poets of the Song Dynasty.



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MARIE DENEUX is a FOM docent guiding at ACM and Gillman Barracks. Working in a local art gallery, she co-organised several solo exhibitions by Lim Tze Peng, including *A Century of Memories* (2020) and *From Then To Now: Capturing Life* (2022).

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UNRAVELLING SINGAPORE'S NATURAL TAPESTRY

EVONNE TAY KOH EXPLORES THE HIDDEN WORLD OF TAXONOMIC LITERATURE IN SINGAPORE

The author thanks Dr Timothy Utteridge, Dr Jana Leong-Škorníčková, Dr Chen Jun Hao, and Joseph K. H. Koh for their suggestions. Photographs by the author, unless otherwise specified.



Author with friends trekking through the Central Catchment Nature Reserve, Singapore, 2024.

INTO THE HEART OF NATURE: AN INTRODUCTION TO TAXONOMY

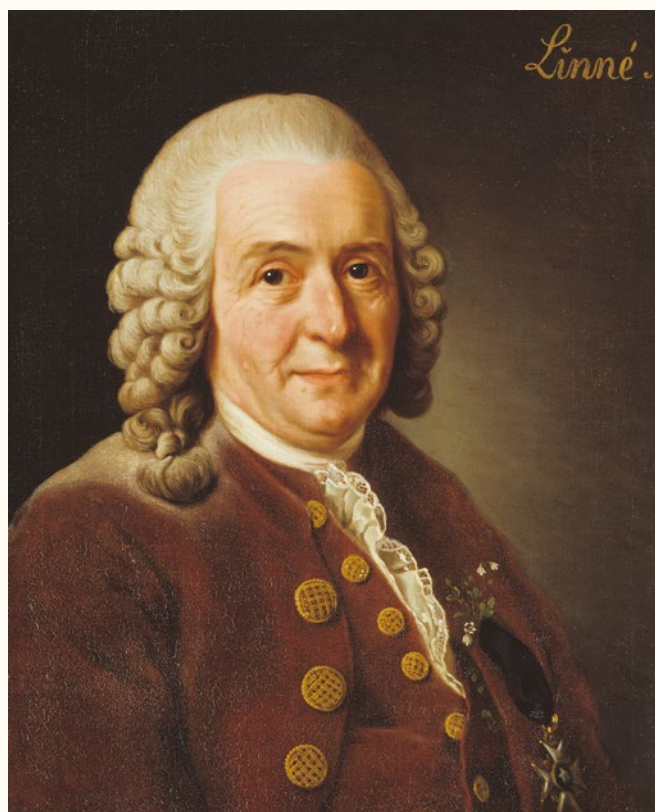
Imagine yourself trekking through the Central Catchment Nature Reserve, under the forest canopy, amidst dangling vines, luxuriant undergrowth, and melodious birdsongs. Would you be able to identify a tree by its fallen leaves, or a spider which spun an intricate web?

To the uninitiated, this ecosystem looks like a bewildering labyrinth. However, to a taxonomist, every species poses a series of questions: what is its name? Is it a new species, or a new record for Singapore? Is it a native, invasive, or cultivated species?

Taxonomy is the science of naming, describing and classifying organisms in the world. It was formalised by Swedish biologist Carl Linnaeus (1707–1778) in 1753, with the introduction of a naming system combining a generic name with the first letter capitalised and a specific epithet in lowercase letters.

Taxonomic studies begin by collecting specimens in the field. These specimens are preserved, examined, and identified. If they are found to be new to science, they are named and described in taxonomic literature. Such literature is the most basic reference material in building an inventory of our biodiversity. Often overlooked and underappreciated, taxonomic literature contains all that is known about the identification and classification of practically every known living species on Earth, even those belonging to the most diverse and understudied groups.

In Singapore, plant taxonomy is undertaken by the botanists of the Singapore Botanic Gardens (SBG) and



Portrait of Carl Linnaeus, Father of Taxonomy. Image from National Gallery of Sweden.



Drawing of the Green Broadbill (*Calyptomena viridis*) which Raffles first described and named in his Descriptive Catalogue of Zoological Collection in 1820. This species has the distinction of being the first bird from Singapore to be given a scientific name. Recorded as locally extinct since 1941, it is a very rare visitor to Singapore and was recently sighted twice in Pulau Ubin in 2021 and once in East Coast Park in 2014. Image from SIGNIFY by LKHNHM and Natural History Museum, UK.

foreign botanists, while taxonomic work on Singapore fauna species is carried out by a large pool of Singaporean and foreign zoologists and citizen scientists; their specimens are mostly deposited at the Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum (LKCNHM).

PIONEERS OF TAXONOMY IN SINGAPORE: RAFFLES, JACK AND RIDLEY

The founder of modern Singapore, Sir Stamford Raffles (1781–1826) was a practitioner in taxonomic research. While working in Singapore and Indonesia as an administrator of the East India Company, he collected specimens himself and co-authored descriptions of several wildlife species. He also sponsored scientific collection expeditions and commissioned other naturalists to help him in pursuing his taxonomic interests. One of the most talented scientists who collaborated with Raffles was surgeon-botanist Dr William Jack (1795–1822).

Jack came to Singapore in 1819. During his four weeks' stay, he collected plant species that led to the description of 16 new species. Jack's publications, such as the *Malayan Miscellanies*, are essential reading for anyone interested in tropical natural history. His works were amongst the earliest and most detailed on the plant species in Singapore, Penang, and Sumatra.

A towering figure in Singapore's botanical research is Henry Nicholas Ridley (1855–1956). Appointed as the first

Scientific Director of SBG in 1888, Ridley collected over 50,000 plant specimens from Singapore, Malaya and the wider region. These specimens are kept in the Singapore Herbarium in SBG till today. Ridley's research output was prodigious, describing over 4,000 new plant species during his career, with over 100 of these new plant species described from Singapore. It is estimated that he published over 500 works and over 10,000 printed pages. Ridley is also best known for his five-volume *Flora of the Malay Peninsula* which remains a cornerstone of plant taxonomy in Southeast Asia today.

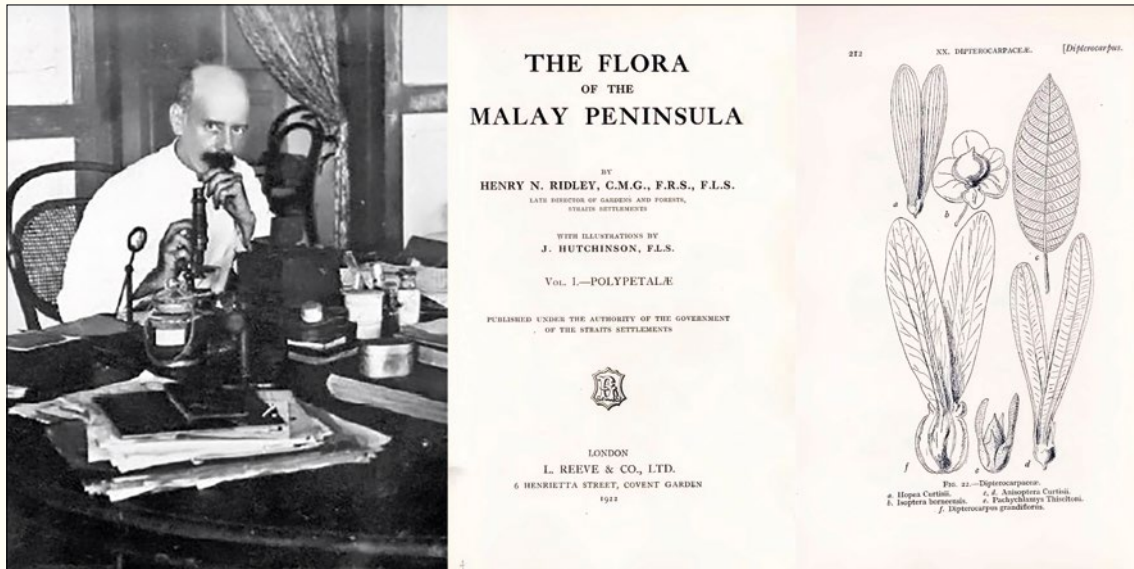
THE SINGAPORE HERBARIUM: A WINDOW TO GLOBAL BIODIVERSITY

Of special mention is the significant role of Singapore as a 'type locality' for numerous plant species. A type locality refers to the original geographical source of a 'type specimen'. A type specimen is a 'preserved specimen designated as the primary reference for a newly described species, genus, or other taxonomic group' and is permanently attached to a name of a species.

The Singapore Herbarium, which is the national herbarium of Singapore, is one of the richest depositories of plant specimens in Southeast Asia. Established in 1875, it currently houses 800,000 plant specimens from Southeast



Drawing of the Raffles' Pitcher Plant (*Nepenthes rafflesiana*), one of the first botanical specimens collected by Raffles when he first visited Singapore in 1819. He passed it to Dr William Jack who named the species after Raffles. It is the largest native *Nepenthes* species, producing large pitchers exceeding 20 cm tall. The genus epithet *Nepenthes* is based on the ancient Greek name for an anti-depressant drug called *Nepenthe* which drives away all sorrows by the means of forgetfulness. Image from SBG/NParks.



(left) Henry Ridley published his magnum opus *Flora of the Malay Peninsula* (centre) after his retirement in 1912. Shown here are illustrations of the *Dipterocarpus*, a native tall tree species. *Dipterocarpus* is from Greek words 'dipteros' which means "two-winged" and 'karpos' which means "fruit" (right). Image from SBG/NParks, Biodiversity Heritage Library.

Asia, New Guinea, East Asia and the Southwest Pacific, including a sizeable collection of 10,000 type specimens. This points to Singapore as a window to a global biodiversity hotspot and is a crucial reference centre for plant taxonomists worldwide who need to compare their plant samples against the original type specimens.

THE ART OF CLASSIFICATION: BRIDGING SCIENCE AND CULTURE

As the saying goes, "we cannot protect what we don't know, and we cannot manage what we cannot measure."

Taxonomic literature contains pertinent information about species diversity, discovery of new native species and identification and rediscovery of extinct or endangered

species. Based on standardised taxonomic framework and using common scientific language, these works help to facilitate communication and collaboration amongst researchers across borders and disciplines.

There is a wide array of resources available to anyone seeking to ascertain the taxonomic status of a plant or animal. They differ significantly in terms of scientific rigour, scope and emphasis, and in their format of presentation (e.g., some are published in peer-reviewed journals while others are not). Therefore, they may or may not qualify as 'taxonomic literature' in the strictest scientific sense. However, a good researcher will always take all such 'resources' into consideration, comprehensively and critically, before making his or her taxonomic judgement. These resources include:



Type specimen of the *Hanguana neglecta* (left) which is kept in one of the compactor units inside the Singapore Herbarium in SBG (right). The specific epithet 'neglecta' reflects that this species was neglected despite first specimens of it being collected already in 1890's and first notions of it representing possibly an undescribed species in 1999. The species description was finally published in a scientific journal 15 years later by Dr Matti Niissalo et al. in an international scientific journal *Phytotaxa* in 2014. Photos taken with permission from Singapore Herbarium.

- **Protologues.** Cited more commonly by plant taxonomists when ascertaining a species, the protologue is the original description of a species, based on the type specimen and 'more correctly everything associated with a name at its valid publication i.e. description or diagnosis, illustrations, synonymy, geographical data, citation of specimens, discussion, and comments.'
- **Reviews** with embedded descriptions of new species. These reviews often critically and analytically examine all the published information on the variety of species related to the newly described ones.
- **Redescriptions.** These papers may involve the re-examination of type specimens, or examination of more material from the type locality and provide additional morphological or genetic data to improve the original description in the protologue.
- **Revisions.** These studies target a group of plants or animals (within a genus or among different genera, within a family and among different families), with refinements in their diagnoses, descriptions, and evolutionary relationships.
- **Monographs.** These are massive works with detailed descriptions of all known and new species within a taxonomic group (e.g., genus, genus group, subfamily, family).
- **Floras and Manuals.** A flora is a comprehensive work that maintains detailed descriptions and an account of the exact habit of all plant species occurring in a defined geographic region. A manual provides a detailed list of species and information for identification of the names of species found in an area.
- **Phylogenetic reviews** of higher taxa. These papers do not contain species descriptions, but study the evolutionary relationships among species, species groups, genera or families.
- **Atlases, catalogues, checklists and field guides.** These are, strictly speaking, not taxonomic literature, as they often do not contain enough

descriptions allowing the reader to identify a species unambiguously. However, they are regarded as indispensable taxonomic resources because they may include photographs and illustrations to facilitate identification, alert readers to the synonyms, indicate where the species are found, and often provide the bibliographic links to the literature allowing the researchers to identify them.

WEAVING THE TAPESTRY OF BIODIVERSITY: RESOURCES AND CONSERVATION

In Singapore today, the principal platforms documenting the diversity and ecology of our flora and fauna include the *Gardens' Bulletin Singapore*, *The Raffles Bulletin of Zoology*, *Nature in Singapore*, *The Singapore Red Data Book* and *The Flora of Singapore*. The 14-volume *Flora of Singapore* is a key project of SBG. Targeted to be completed by 2030, the first three volumes were published in 2019. All these resources, including taxonomic databases, have been digitalised and are available to the public online.

Taxonomic literature and resources allow scientists, policymakers, and weekend naturalists to appreciate the richness of our biodiversity, understand the interdependence among our plants, animals and natural environment, and ensure that our natural heritage is taken into consideration in the policy and decision-making process.

REWRITING NATURE'S MANUSCRIPT: THE ONGOING QUEST FOR KNOWLEDGE

Like nature's manuscript teeming with life, Singapore's taxonomic literature is constantly rewritten and updated.

Such effort requires keen observation, meticulous documentation, and rigorous research. This is the handiwork that will allow us to marvel at the splendour of the tapestry called 'Singapore Biodiversity'. It is the foundation that will help to shape our national environmental policies and reinforce the connection between nature and our future generations. **P**

FOR FURTHER READING

Singapore Biodiversity – An Encyclopaedia of The Natural Environment and Sustainable Development by Peter K.L. Ng, Richard T. Corlett, and Hugh T.W. Tan (2011)

EVONNE TAY KOH is a FOM member and volunteer. Evonne does scientific line drawings for the taxonomists in SBG. She is involved in illustrating *The Flora of Singapore* project.



Flora of Singapore (left) and The Garden's Bulletin Singapore Journal (right).



The Raffles Bulletin of Zoology journal. Image from Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum website.

IMAGES AND THE WORDS – ISLAMIC CALLIGRAPHY AND CALLIGRAMS

PAVITHRA KABIR LOOKS AT ISLAMIC CALLIGRAPHY, PARTICULARLY THE DECORATIVE BLEND OF WORDS AND IMAGES IN CALLIGRAMS

Calligraphy, the art of writing beautifully, has a unique place in Islamic art. While pre-Islamic cultures in West Asia had used some decorative inscriptions on triumphal arches and tombs, writing became the main, and sometimes the only, element of decoration in Islamic art. This is probably because the Islamic holy scripture, the Quran, tells us that the knowledge of writing is what sets apart man from God's other creatures, giving the art of writing greater significance and a pivotal role in Islam.

A SUPREME ART FORM

This importance given to calligraphy in Islam is sometimes compared to its role in the Chinese and Japanese traditions, where calligraphy is considered as a supreme art. However, there are notable differences. East Asian calligraphers' brushstrokes often showcased the artist's personality and individuality: how one wrote was as important as what one wrote. Islamic calligraphers, however, worked with a pen and ink, focusing on unwavering lines and modulated forms. This was meant to reflect not the individual but the transcendence of the Almighty: the substance of what was written transcended the form. Another significant difference is that East Asian calligraphy often seems to be appended to pictorial art, while in the Islamic realm calligraphy is often found alone, as pictorial art is discouraged in most religious or official settings. If found with other decorative elements, calligraphy would nevertheless remain the dominant element.



Folio from the "Blue Qur'an," late-9th to mid-10th century; golden ink on indigo paper. Image from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Nasrid plasterwork with calligraphy; panel from the Alhambra Palace, Granada, Spain. Image from Victoria and Albert Museum, London.



Abkhora with lid, with calligraphy in silver and bidri inlay work. Image from National Museum, New Delhi.



Astrolabe, front and back views. Image from the Trustees of the British Museum, London.

CALLIGRAPHY AS A DECORATIVE ART

Islamic calligraphy was not only used to decorate monuments and manuscripts, but also articles of religion, tradition and trade and the very implements of calligraphy such as pen cases, as illustrated by the images below. Calligraphy found on *abkhoras* (water bowls), *alams* (standards) and astrolabes served varied purposes from the practical to the mystical. While inscriptions on an *alam* or astrolabe were functional, in the *abkhora*, the words are thought to have magical healing properties beneficial to those consuming the water, as the word of God has divine power in Islam.

ISLAMIC CALLIGRAMS

Calligrams are another fascinating form of Islamic calligraphy. They use text to create inanimate forms, like bowls and ships, as well as animate zoomorphic ones. Being a departure from traditional calligraphy, they allowed artists more freedom to let their personality shine through. Calligrams spanned a wide region, from Turkey, across Ottoman territories, through Iran and India to China. The Asian Civilisations Museum in Singapore has a unique 20th century calligram of a stork done by the Chinese calligrapher Yusuf Chen Jinhui, which melds together Arabic letters and Chinese calligraphic skills. This piece sparked my interest in learning more about how calligrams straddle a fine line between images and words and led me to explore older calligrams across the world.

THE LION OF GOD

As early as the 15th century, calligraphers in Turkey were skilful at transforming Quranic words and phrases into the shapes of animals by elongating, wrapping, and rotating letters to create both the outline and the details of the animals. These calligrams could take many forms: they could be in simple black ink, they could be far more elaborate works with expensive pigments such as gold and lapis lazuli or they could even be intricate papercuts done with a fine knife.

One of the most popular animal forms in calligraphy is the lion, a metaphor for Prophet Muhammad's son-in-law Ali, who also bears the name Haydar meaning 'Lion of God.' Some believe that a five-clawed lion's paw signifies God, Muhammad, Ali, and Ali's sons Hasan and Husayn. If the lion had a red tongue, it would signify that Ali was the spokesperson (*natiq*) of Muhammad.



Stork calligram by Yusuf Chen Jinhui. Image from the collection of the Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore.



(left) Calligraphic lion by Mir Ali Haravi, circa 1560; folio in the Shah Mahmud Nishapuri album. Image from the collection of Istanbul University Library.
(top right) Calligraphic lion by Ahmed Hilma, Ottoman Turkey. Image from the collection of Professor Nasser D. Khalili.
(lower right) Paper cut with a calligraphic lion. Image from the David Collection, Copenhagen.



Parrot calligram of the word bismillah. Image from the Cincinnati Art Museum, Cincinnati.



Rooster calligram of Baha'ullah the name of the founder of the Baha'i faith. Image from Harvard Art Museums, Cambridge.



Stork calligram of the words basmala wa bihi by Isma'il Zuhdi. From *Islamic Calligraphy* by Sheila S. Blair.

This lion motif was not just popular in the Shiite practice but also amongst the Bektashi Sufi order, which became widespread in 13th century Turkey. The Sufis had a tremendous impact on Islam in South and Southeast Asia and we see the motif of the lion as a calligram in India and Malaysia. It is interesting to note that as the motif travelled east, the lion began to look more like a tiger, a form that Southeast Asian artists were more familiar with.

BIRDS OF PRAYER

In addition to animals, birds were popular symbols in Quranic calligrams. They took various forms: as talismans containing invocations of faith, inscriptions on standards used in religious processions, and even personal emblems. Baha'allah, the founder of the Baha'i faith had, as his emblem or letterhead, the calligram of a finely drawn rooster that spelled his name. A beautiful nineteenth-century Iranian calligram, in the collection of the Cincinnati Art Museum, uses the form of a parrot to spell the Muslim invocation *bismillah*, "in the name of God." Another popular bird was the stork, symbolic of the pious act of performing the pilgrimage to Mecca, one of the pillars of Islam. The Ottoman calligrapher Isma'il Zuhdi created a beautiful composition of a stork with the image of Mecca beside it.

FANTASTIC FINIALS

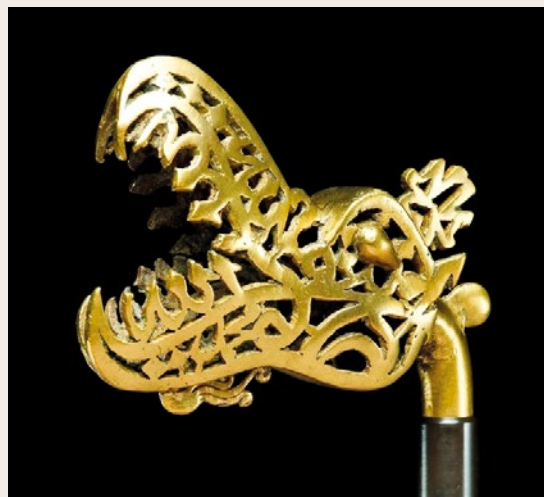
On the Indian subcontinent, Mughals and other Islamic dynasties favoured calligraphic falcons or hawks, made of perforated gilded copper, to decorate the finials of religious processional standards called *alam*s. The falcons contained the *Nad 'Ali*, or "call to Ali" a popular Shi'ite prayer invoking the aid of Ali. Another form found in the calligrams decorating Indian *alam*s is the *makara*, a mythical dragon-like creature. An outstanding example from the Golconda region of India is a finial in exquisite three-dimensional calligraphy in the shape of a *makara*-head. These fantastic beasts make beautiful banners of faith.

From the two-dimensional script on manuscripts and monuments, to the beautiful calligraphy decorating objects, to the three-dimensional lettering wrought into fantastical animals that sets the artist free from the strictures of the page, Islamic calligraphy as a decorative art brings the word of God to life. Calligrams with their need for creativity, perhaps also set free the artistic soul of the calligrapher. **P**

FOR FURTHER READING

Islamic Calligraphy by Sheila S. Blair.

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



(left) Falcon alam, perforated gilded copper, Indian, probably 17th century. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

(right) Makara alam, perforated gilded copper, Golconda, India. Image from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

SACRED INK: RITUAL TATTOOS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

MARIE-AUDE BROCHEC invites you to discover the unique language of two tattooing traditions in our region

All images are from the public domain, unless otherwise specified.

In *The Descent of Man*, 1871, Charles Darwin wrote that, to his knowledge, there was no country in the world that did not practice tattooing or some form of permanent body decoration. Here lies one of the greatest mysteries in the history of tattooing: how did populations so far apart, in some cases very isolated, adopt the technique of drawing a design on the human body using a black pigment? Researchers and specialists are still trying to find the common thread in this fascinating story...

The oldest tattoos we know of were found in the Alps in 1991, on the mummified body of Ötzi the Iceman, who lived 5300 years ago. Researchers found that Ötzi must have had rheumatism issues and the 61 tattoos covering his body likely had some therapeutic function. A common misconception is that tattoos are ornamental. Some tribes use them to enhance their physical appearance but this practice is an exception rather than the rule. When it comes to ritual tattoos, it's actually often a question of (super) powers: the power to protect, the power to heal and the power you gained within your social group. Southeast Asian tattooing traditions are no different.



Sak Yant tattooed men in Bangkok.

SAK YANT

Whether visiting Thailand or Cambodia or watching American actress Angelina Jolie on the red carpet, you may have noticed these mysterious tattoo symbols. Called *Yantra* tattoos or *Sak Yant* in Thailand, they are a holy set of symbols associated with the worship of the deities and designed to aid meditation. They originated in ancient India and hold great importance in Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism.

Yantra tattoos appeared in the Khmer Empire (802–1431 CE) at a time when it was so large that it would cover today's Cambodia, southern Vietnam, Laos and a fairly large part of Thailand. Originally, particularly during the Ayutthaya Kingdom (1351–1767 CE), warriors were tattooed to make their bodies invulnerable to sword blows. If there was not enough time for a tattoo, the warriors would wear a canvas tunic that would act as a suit of armour thanks to these powerful motifs. Then as now, this unique power comes as much from the motifs as from the ritual and the tattoo master himself, namely a Buddhist monk. The tattoo ceremony is held in a temple and the monks trace the motif freehand using a long metal spike, called a *khem sak*.



Hand tattooing ritual performed by Buddhist monks. Image from the website expertvagabond.com.



(left) Example of a tattoo representing Hanuman, the valiant and combative white monkey from the Ramayana or Ramakien (the Thai version of the Indian epic).

(right) Gao Yord, meaning Nine Spears, is the most sacred tattoo in Sak Yant.



A devotee during the Hindu festival of Thaipusam, on 11th February 2025 at Sri Srinivasa Perumal Temple. At the top of his back, is a Gao Yord.

THE MEANING BEHIND SAK YANT

The tattooed symbols of *Sak Yant* tradition reflect the richness of the cultural and religious influences that have shaped Southeast Asia: the Pali language, Hinduism, Animism, Buddhism (Theravāda and Mahāyāna) and of course the great Indian epics such as the *Ramayana*. Hanuman, the famous white monkey who helped Rama in his struggle to find his beloved Sita and triumph over evil, is quite sought-after as a tattoo. In the *Ramakien*, the Thai version of the *Ramayana*, Hanuman takes on special importance and embodies values that are particularly valued in Thai culture: devotion to one's sovereign, and bravery as well as resourcefulness and some mischievousness.

The most sacred tattoo, *Gao Yord*, meaning Nine Spears, is a very important symbol in Hindu-Buddhist culture. It represents Mount Meru, the centre of the universe and holy residence of the gods and supreme beings.

THE ANNUAL SAK YANT CEREMONY

Once a year in March, *Sak Yant* fans get together in Nakhon Pathom, a city located approximately 80 kilometres west of Bangkok for the event they've come to expect: *Wai Kru*, meaning "paying homage to the teacher". During the



Drawing of Dayak betel tattoo motif, Carl Bock, 1881. Image from The Leiden University Libraries.



Drawing of a Dayak man, Heinrich von Gaffron, circa 1850. Image from The Leiden University Libraries.

ceremony held in Wat Bang Phra, people will get new tattoos or recharge the power of the ones they already have, as it's believed that they lose their potency over time. Thousands of devotees wait for hours and sometimes go into violent trances in which they take on the features of the tattoo they have, embodying tigers or Hanuman, the white monkey.

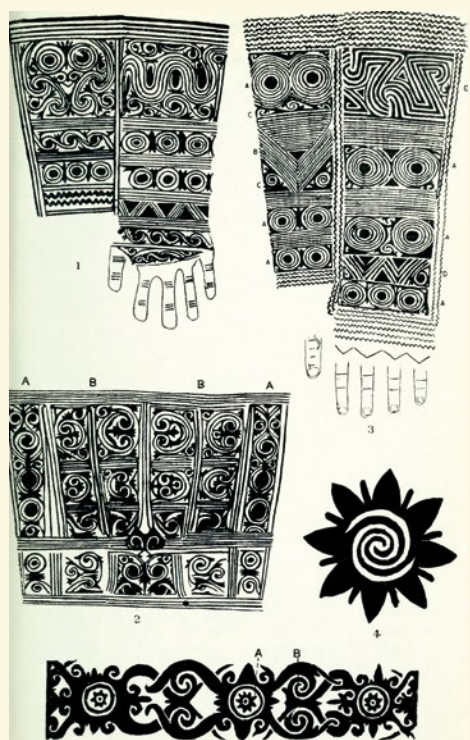
While *Sak Yant* symbols are strongly tied to Hindu-Buddhist culture, other tattoo traditions in Southeast Asia are rooted in ancestral animist beliefs, emphasising the presence of spirits in all living beings and elements of the natural world.

MEETING THE DAYAK PEOPLE

Let's move now toward Borneo. When Europeans first set foot in Borneo, they had a hard time naming the many tribes they encountered so they settled on a generic word: Dayak, which may have meant "those who live in the forest". There are two main sub-groups: the Bidayuh (formerly called Land Dayaks) and the Iban (formerly called Sea Dayaks). For many years, very little was known about Dayak culture. By 1850, however, anthropological interest in Borneo peaked, resulting in several expeditions by the Dutch and British. It became clear that the Dayaks had a rich and diverse cultural heritage, with specific customs and practices. Tattooing is one of them and is considered sacred and closely tied to animist beliefs. An intricate combination of images of plants, animals and geometric forms, Dayak tattoos express the integration of the balance between all living things and spirits in the world.

DOGS AND ROSETTES

In Iban traditions, the most iconic motif is called *Bungai Terung*, which translates to "the eggplant flower". It is the first tattoo a young Iban man would receive as a rite of passage. Located on the front of the shoulder, it is an auspicious and protective symbol to prepare any young man to carry the weight of the adult world. Looking closely at these rosettes, beyond flowers, they could resemble as well the eyes of an animal. Indeed, the Kayan tribes consider them to be dog's eyes. Though not sacred, dogs were greatly respected. Some tribes of the Barito River Basin believed that dogs descended from *Patti Palangkaing*, the king of animals, and even buried them with full honour. Dog motifs also refer to a mythical protective animal in Dayak culture called *aso*, which combines the features of a dog and a serpent or dragon. The hornbill with its distinctive beak is also a recurring motif in Dayak tattoos, marking rank and prestige. It is believed to provide protection to the bearer against evil spirits. The animals depicted in the tattoos are so stylised that it can be hard to identify them. They seem to be interwoven with the luxuriant vegetation that is so characteristic of Borneo, creating a new symbolic image of a perfectly



(left) Drawing of a bungai terung and other motifs, from *The Pagan Tribes of Borneo*, an ethnology book by Hose, McDougall and Haddon, published in London, in 1912.



(right) Stylised dog designs – you may recognise a well-known figure from Southeast Asian art: a makara. Image from *The Pagan Tribes of Borneo*.

balanced world. This creativity is one of the reasons why Dayak tattoos are still so admired today.

Let me conclude with a legend from the Kayan heritage. It's about birds, art and ink... A long time ago, when the plumage of all birds was dull and sober, a pheasant and a crow decided to tattoo each other. The crow started and made a beautiful job of it. The pheasant instead failed miserably. To disguise his bungling, he threw black ink over the crow and quickly flew away. This is why, to this day the pheasant has beautiful markings and the crow is as black as coal.

Let's always take the time to read through the black ink to discover the lives and rituals of tattooed communities. **P**



An Iban couple, the man has a bungai terung tattooed on both shoulders.

MARIE-AUDE BROCHEC is a new FOM docent at the Indian Heritage Centre after years of guiding at National Museum of Bangkok. She doesn't have any tattoos but loves talking to people who do.

SACRED STORIES, LASTING LEGACIES

SEHR KHOSLA EXAMINES THE SHIFT FROM ORAL TO WRITTEN TRADITIONS IN THE PRESERVATION OF INDIAN EPICS



Sukadeva reciting the Bhagavata Purana (Ancient Stories of the Lord) to Savant Singh (r. 1748–1757), by an unknown artist from Kishangarh, Rajasthan. Image from Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

Hands weathered by time resting on her lap, silver grey hair rolled on the tip of her hunched shoulders, an ancient grandmother hums softly but steadily to a dozen children sitting around her. She speaks to them not from a book or scroll but from her memory of listening to these poems from her elders. Though illiterate, every note carries the weight of a thousand tales woven into epic poems that transcend generations. Her storytelling harks back to Narada, the pioneer of storytelling known for his boundless travels in heaven and mastery of passing on stories. Like Narada singing tales, this grandmother becomes the living bridge between the past and future, preserving these narratives, and passing on the cycle of wisdom to her grandchildren and the descendants to come.

It is through these traditions spanning across millennia that intricate tales of heroism, devotion and duty permeated Indian culture through epics such as the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. These revered works have withstood the test of time due to the meticulous oral reciters who initially memorised and performed them with astonishing accuracy. However, the eventual shift to written forms enabled a more structured preservation, leading to broader dissemination and educational commentaries. This article explores the cultural significance of this shift, examining its impact on the transmission, interpretation and continuation of India's literary heritage.

THE FOUNDATION OF INDIAN EPICS

The *Vedas*, which translate to “knowledge”, were among the earliest examples of ancient Indian oral literature. Other than the content, aspects such as phonetic pronunciation, rhythm and repetition have deep ritual significance. Consider the *Gayatri Mantra*, one of the most famous Vedic chants.



Durga slays the Buffalo Demon Mahishasura, *Mahishasuramardini Mandapa, Mamallapuram, Tamil Nadu, India, made of 7th century granite. It depicts a tale from the Markandeya Purana from 5th–6th century CE carved in a cave temple. Image by Arathi Menon.*

*om bhūr bhuvaḥ svaḥ tat saviturvareṇyam
bhargo devasya dhīmahi dhiyo yo naḥ pracodayāt..*

“Om, the Lord, is earth, the space in between and the heavens. That Lord is the one who is the most worshipful. We meditate on that effulgent, all-knowledge Lord. May he set our intellect in the right direction...”

The phonetics are specifically crafted to produce vibrations and a profound impact on the person reciting it. Sacred sounds such as *Om*, considered the sound of the universe are meant to invoke divine energy and the varied pitch of sounds such as the emphasised *svaḥ* affects the rhythm and meaning.

The *Vedas* laid the foundational structure for much of ancient Indian literature, influencing the content and manner in which stories were told.

A FEAR OF LOSS

As expected, storytelling through oral tradition created the risk of losing valued knowledge over generations. There was always a possibility of modification, whether intentional or accidental. At times, contextual details were modified to enable greater relatability among contemporary audiences leading to a multitude of diverse interpretations emerging across regions. Different sects and philosophical schools had varying interpretations of characters and events in sacred stories.

Further, natural disasters such as earthquakes, fires and floods could destroy the physical environments such as temples where these oral texts were memorised. With empires expanding, native traditions and oral texts were often suppressed. Conquerors imposed their languages and cultures as in the case of invasions by the Huns or spread of the Roman empire. There was also a possibility that the storytellers died or moved away leading to cultural memory loss.

ROCK INSCRIPTIONS AND CHISELS

Before the adoption of manuscripts in India, there was an intermediate stage in the preservation of epics – chiselling images of mythological figures such as Rama and Shiva into rocks. This means of narration suggests that visual presentation was integral to reinforcing oral traditions before the use of writing. Moreover, these chiselled inscriptions represent a stage in the evolution of written storytelling, reflecting an increasing desire for preserving revered narratives. Sculptures dating back millennia can be found in Hindu temples as well as carvings and paintings of scenes in Hindu and Buddhist mythology which can be seen in cave temples, thus reiterating the importance of tangible stories.

THE ADVENT OF WRITING

Writing became more accessible in ancient India around the third century BCE with *Brahmi*, thought to be the forerunner of all of the scripts used for writing languages in Southeast Asia. Primarily used for administrative purposes, *Brahmi* inscriptions appear on stone pillars, coins and edicts, with the most notable instance being the rock edicts of Emperor Ashoka. *Brahmi* was closely followed by its descendant scripts such as *Devanagari*, evidenced first from the 1st century (used for Sanskrit, Hindi and other regional languages).

Palm-leaf manuscripts, birch bark scrolls and copper plates using *Devanagari* scripts allowed epics to be recorded systematically in Sanskrit. According to tradition, Sage Vyasa is credited with composing the 100,000-verse (shloka) long *Mahabharata* and dictating it to Lord Ganesha who “wrote” it down. However, this “writing” was symbolic of the transcription of an oral performance, and the first written version of the *Mahabharata* was in Sanskrit, the language of scholars, priests and intellectuals. Over time, different regions of India created their own retellings with the core narrative serving as a unifying force and collective memory among diverse communities.



Mahabharata Manuscript, 17th century, gouache on paper, from Mysore – Seringapattam area. Image from the Collection of the Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore. The image is a rare and early Sanskrit manuscript with an illustration of the Pandavas praying to Devi (Hindu deity).

THE SHIFT TO WRITTEN MANUSCRIPTS

The evolution of written tradition was vastly significant, leading to the epic texts becoming standardised and authoritative editions established to operate as references. Consequently, scholars could now partake in further analysis and discourse, leading to extensive commentaries such as those on the *Vedas* by Adi Shankaracharya. As societies began to value written texts, thinkers sought to move beyond mythological explanations to more rational and systematic enquiry. Similarly, shifting to the written preservation of epics made the development of theological curricula possible in educational centres such as Takshashila, one of the oldest centres of learning in India. Trade routes further facilitated the spread of epic literature. The *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* reached Southeast Asia to countries such as Thailand and Indonesia where they were adapted to local cultures.

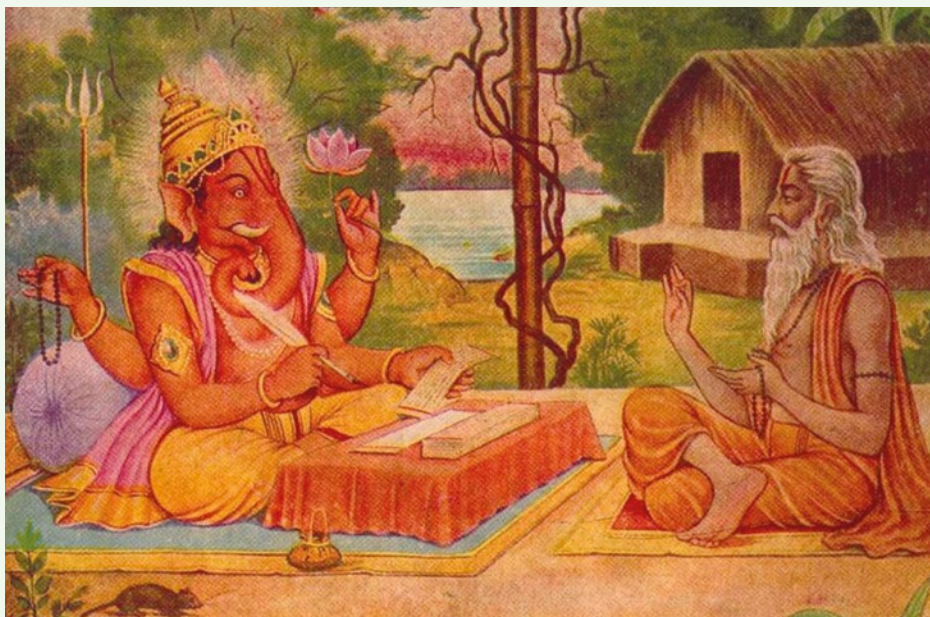
Preservation of oral epics does not end there, instead persisting into contemporary society. Modern technology

has actually revitalised this preservation through interactive digital archives, digital storage and online platforms like YouTube, podcast services that enable greater accessibility to global audiences.

CONCLUSION

Oral traditions continue to remain relevant with *Kathas*, or the art of storytelling, allowing for epics such as the *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana* and *Puranas* being transmitted in the form of performances in temples and festivals. Whether it be through the swish of a stylus writing Sanskrit script or *Kathas* recited in community gatherings, India's literary and cultural landscape continues to be shaped by the coexistence and cooperation between both oral and written conventions. 

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



Sage Vyasa and the Hindu god Ganesha writing manuscripts. Image from Hindu American Foundation Organisation, Philadelphia.

FOM WELCOMES NEW MEMBERS WITH CULTURE, CAMARADERIE & COFFEE

HEIKE BREDENKAMP DISCOVERS HOW THIS VIBRANT MORNING AT ACM BECAME THE PERFECT INTRODUCTION TO A WORLD OF HERITAGE AND FRIENDSHIP

All photographs by Evonne Tay Koh.



ACM welcomes FOM's seasoned and new members in a celebration of culture.

As the Singapore River shimmered along its banks, Paroma Sen's beaming smile set the tone for an engaging morning at the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM). "Congrats on becoming a FOM member – it's the best gift to yourself," she declared, capturing the excitement of embarking on fresh cultural adventures. Paroma, the council representative for Volunteer Appreciation and Membership, together with the fantastic FOM hospitality team, orchestrated a delightful breakfast gathering for new FOM members at ACM – an event perfectly timed to echo the invigorating spirit of the Year of the Snake.

The celebration was far more than just a breakfast; it was an invitation into a vibrant community that lives and breathes a passion for culture, exploration and storytelling. The vice president of FOM, Karen Ng, warmly welcomed the newcomers and spoke about the dynamic spirit of the organisation. "I urge you to sign up for at least one activity that interests you," Karen encouraged, pointing to the extensive range of opportunities available.

Members can immerse themselves in docent training, participate in in-depth guided tours, join dynamic lectures, and become part of engaging study and textile groups, as well as film and book clubs. Garima Lalwani, standing in as the council representative for Activities, added, "You'll make



Benedicte Laurant and Estelle Huang.



Karen Ng and Paroma Sen.

lifelong friends and gain access to places most people wouldn't even dream of exploring." Her insights underscored FOM's commitment to exclusive programmes, including study tours that unearth hidden gems across Asia and behind-the-scenes excursions that reveal the stories of Singapore's rich heritage. And then there are workshops, culinary experiences, theatre shows and more.

Tabitha Manresa, the Council Representative for Museums, painted a vivid picture of how the ten supported institutions contribute to preserving Singapore's cultural narrative. A large part of this success is because of the FOM docents. A fun moment was the "Did You Know?" session, led by the two overall heads of docent training, Andrea Baker and Shradha Nayan. With engaging anecdotes and fascinating trivia, they brought to life the lesser-known histories of Singapore's museums, leaving the audience both informed and entertained.

As the morning unfolded with interactive sessions, engaging tours led by FOM docents Heike Bredenkamp, Sonam Kundu and Vandana Sharma, and plenty of opportunities for questions, new members departed armed with practical ideas and renewed enthusiasm for exploring Singapore's heritage in a more informed and immersive way.



Yann Frejaville and Larissa Wiegele.



Vandana Sharma, Sonam Kundu and Heike Bredenkamp.

HEIKE BREDENKAMP is a FOM docent at the ACM.

THE KEBAYA WINS UNESCO RECOGNITION

DAWN MARIE LEE REPORTS ON THE INSCRIPTION OF THE KEBAYA AS AN INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE OF HUMANITY

Photos courtesy of the National Heritage Board unless otherwise stated.



Kawan Kebaya, a community network of over 50 kebaya stakeholders, promoted the kebaya in Singapore. Left to right: Christine KN Ong, Jaslin Lee, Stella Clare Wee-Goh, Zahra Aljunied, Annie Lee, Juliana Yeo and Dr Noreen Chan.

The kebaya, a traditional garment worn by women across Southeast Asia, has been officially added to the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Announced on 4 December 2024, the inscription follows a joint nomination by five Southeast Asian countries: Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand, recognising the kebaya as a symbol of shared cultural heritage across national borders.

The recognition highlights the kebaya's historical significance and its relevance in modern Southeast Asian societies. The garment remains popular for formal and ceremonial occasions and has gained international recognition. For instance, flight attendants from major Southeast Asian airlines, such as Singapore Airlines, Malaysian Airlines and Garuda Indonesia, wear uniforms inspired by the kebaya, showcasing its lasting influence.

In Singapore, the National Heritage Board (NHB) acknowledged the kebaya's association with the Malay and Peranakan communities and its role in the country's port heritage. NHB led efforts such as the travelling exhibition *Love, Kebaya* and partnered with Nanyang Polytechnic to create kebaya-inspired keychains for youth engagement.

From March 2025, these keychains, featuring cats dressed in different kebaya styles, can be redeemed at public vending machines.

The community played an important role in the nomination process. NHB held a Kebaya Appreciation Party on 10 December 2024 at the Asian Civilisations Museum to thank supporters and Kawan Kebaya, a network of over 50 stakeholders including heritage organisations, designers and kebaya enthusiasts who raised awareness about the garment as a living cultural practice.

HISTORY AND EVOLUTION

The kebaya, a long-sleeved upper garment, has evolved over centuries, influenced by various cultures. Its origins trace back to the 7th century when it was worn by Islamic rulers in the Middle East, Central Asia and northern India. It developed into the *baju*, a tunic worn by men and women across the Nusantara by the 17th century. In the 19th century, it became known as *baju panjang*, worn by



As part of an NHB's youth outreach initiative, Nanyang Polytechnic students designed keychains with cats in different kebaya styles.

women until the early 20th century. The loose garment, fastened with pins or a brooch, was comfortable and practical for tropical climates.

In the early 1900s, younger women began wearing shorter, more form-fitting kebayas to accentuate their figures. By the 1930s, *sulam* (embroidery) became popular on kebayas, and sewing machine companies like Singer offered free sewing and embroidery classes to boost sales. In the 1950s and 60s, actresses such as Saloma and Maria Menado popularised colourful, figure-hugging kebayas made from lace or translucent fabric.

The kebaya has seen many variations, including the *kebaya encim*, *kebaya kota baru*, *kebaya kartini*, *kebaya sunda* and *kebaya janggan*, but its basic structure, a long-sleeved, fitted top worn with a sarong or skirt, has remained constant.

RELEVANCE TODAY

In Singapore, the kebaya lost popularity between the 1970s and 1990s, when Western-style clothing was preferred. Many kebaya shops closed, leaving only a few like Kim Seng Kebaya and Toko Aljunied. However, in 2000s, there was a revival, sparked by the 2008 Mediacorp drama *The Little Nyonya*. More recently, the 2023 Netflix drama *Gadis Kretek (Cigarette Girl)* popularised the *kebaya janggan*, a version with a high neckline and buttoned chest flap.

While the kebaya is still not commonly worn in daily life in Singapore, it is increasingly appreciated, with more women choosing to wear it. Peranakan Museum docent Clara Chan shared, “I love wearing the kebaya because it reminds me of my late mum who wore it often, not just for formal occasions. She was not a Peranakan but wore it because it was fashionable. So, I have never associated the kebaya with only the Peranakans. I see it as a reflection of my Southeast Asian roots.”

Kebaya maker Ratianah Tahir, who has been crafting kebayas for nearly 20 years, believes the garment is constantly evolving. “It’s not stuck in time and is always changing, with many styles and varieties,” she said. Her daughter, Putri Nadirah Hassan, added, “The kebaya is for everyone, for all shapes and sizes. Everyone can look beautiful and feel confident in a kebaya.” Ratianah aims to make the kebaya



Kebaya maker Ratianah Tahir (left) with her daughter, Putri Nadirah Hassan. Ratianah wears a kebaya panjang sulam and Putri wears a kebaya kota baru. Photo courtesy of Ratianah Tahir.



The Bird Seller by colonial Dutch artist, Jan Daniël Beynon, 1875. The women are wearing long, loose, white baju panjang paired with batik sarongs. Image from Wikimedia Commons.

more accessible to younger generations by offering simpler designs for everyday wear. “I want young people to love wearing it. They can wear it creatively, with skirts or jeans, but the key is to honour and elevate it.”

WHAT LIES AHEAD

UNESCO’s recognition of the kebaya marks a significant milestone for its cultural legacy, reflecting Southeast Asia’s multiculturalism, creativity and adaptability. As a living tradition, the kebaya continues to evolve and inspire future generations to appreciate and preserve this rich heritage.

In 2025, Singapore plans to celebrate the kebaya during the Singapore Heritage Fest and develop educational initiatives, including a kebaya-themed digital game for primary school students. By continuing to engage youth and the public, the kebaya’s cultural significance will remain vital to the region.



Peranakan Museum docents in kebaya. Left to right: Susan Fong, Peggy Lee, Clara Chan and Chong Yit Peng. Photo courtesy of Clara Chan.

DAWN MARIE LEE loves wearing the kebaya and is a docent at the NUS Baba House.

TO NEW BEGINNINGS!!!

OVERALL CO-HEADS OF TRAINING **SHRADHA NAYAN** AND **ANDREA BAKER** OVERSEE A NEW CHAPTER, BRINGING TOGETHER OLD AND NEW FACES IN THE GROUP OF VOLUNTEER DOCENTS GUIDING ACROSS DIFFERENT FACETS OF SINGAPORE'S HISTORICAL LANDSCAPE THROUGH ITS MUSEUMS

The 2024–25 docent training year introduced 79 new docents to the FOM guiding community. Trainees were from Asian Civilizations Museums (ACM), National Museum of Singapore (NMS), The Peranakan Museum (TPM), Indian Heritage Centre (IHC), Changi Chapel and Museum (CCM) and the Japanese Docents (JD).

Many faces were new to FOM while some were existing docents making a foray into a new area of heritage and history. Some were completely new to the Singapore landscape, making their training an enriching and diverse

experience. The trainees are introduced to various subject areas through lectures by experts in their field, professors, published authors, museum curators and outreach teams as well as the seasoned docent community at FOM.

Our docent training program is completely volunteer driven, and exemplifies the spirit of giving, cooperation, and community learning. Many amongst the graduating class will have already started guiding the public. Besides, being part of the docent community, they will go on and pay it forward by joining the respective training teams, continuing the legacy that has served FOM docent training and allowed it to prosper.

Please join our wonderful docents as they walk you through the history and heritage of Singapore and the region and hear them bring alive various artefacts and the museum's curatorial narratives.

NATIONAL MUSEUM OF SINGAPORE

"Becoming a docent trainee at NMS was a decision I made long before retirement, aiming to connect more deeply with my heritage and pride as a Singaporean. The training was an eye-opening experience – discovering the rich stories behind the artefacts, hands-on practice, and exciting field trips. Weekly sharing sessions boosted my public speaking confidence, and I've made incredible friends from around the world. A big thank you to the training team for their patience and knowledge-sharing. I highly recommend this program to anyone eager to explore Singapore's rich history and culture."

- Daphne Ho



ASIAN CIVILIZATIONS MUSEUM

"It took living abroad for me to realise how deeply I value multiculturalism in a city. Not just in the variety of the cuisine (the first thing an overseas Singaporean misses!) but in the diversity of regional traditions that make this little red dot so unique. When I returned, I signed up for docent training at the ACM to better understand and appreciate the island's cross-cultural history. What the program actually offered was so much more: lectures by academic luminaries, fascinating field trips, and above all patient mentors who have helped my cohort and I navigate not only the trade routes that crossed our strait, but the histories and influences of the world beyond."

- Emily Loke



THE PERANAKAN MUSEUM

"I've always felt more 'Southeast-Asian' than Chinese. Dad was Chinese and Mum wore *samfu*, but Granny always wore sarong kebaya, buried in it. We made *kueh bolu* on a charcoal stove; sliced and sunned cucumbers, cauliflowers and carrots for weeks, to make *achar*. We trishaw'ed to a house in Geylang where Grand auntie beaded slippers for sale.

Docent training revealed how little I knew about Peranakan culture. It is more than *kueh* and *achar* - altars to home deity, ancestors and kitchen god that I knew nothing of as a Catholic; gorgeous blends of motifs from three cultures on clothing, jewellery and furniture and over 3,000 volumes of Baba Literature!

The learning was intense but well worth the pursuit. TPM training has transformed me. I more fully appreciate my Peranakan identity – a wonderful feeling!"

- Juliana Lim



CHANGI CHAPEL AND MUSEUM

"I have always loved modern and social history, where you can see the faces and sometimes even hear the voices of those involved. The docent training for CCM has been a fascinating journey into a period of Singapore's history that many don't know about. The lectures were outstanding. Experts from all over the world have shared their knowledge and research to enrich our learning. The field trips have added a layer of local perspective and understanding, leaving me wanting to keep finding out more and more. I am excited to start guiding and not only pass on what I have learned to others, but also keep the history alive by learning from the many visitors who come with their own personal family stories."

- Caroline Beaumont





INDIAN HERITAGE CENTRE

"As a museum enthusiast and someone who is fascinated by everything India, the docent training opportunity with IHC was just a perfect match which I could not resist. Through this program, I have enjoyed exploring the rich art, history, religions and culture of the Indian subcontinent and the South East Asia region, as well as meeting like-minded trainees. As a Chinese, I found it particularly intriguing to discover surprise connections between India and China, exchange and connections tracing back to ancient times. This unexpected connection has made the journey enriching on a personal level."

- *Coco Zhao Yu Ping*



JAPANESE DOCENTS

"Going to a museum is like going on a treasure hunt. I love both old and new exhibits – they are all made by human hands and I am captivated by the passion and exceptional craftsmanship embedded in the works. When I develop empathy for an exhibit, it is as if it is my personal 'treasure' within the museum."

Surrounded by knowledgeable seniors and friends, I am filling my mind with knowledge that helps me understand why the exhibits can be so impactful. And soon, I hope to guide visitors on their own 'treasure-hunts' at the museum too."

- *Yukiko Mizoguchi*

DOCENT COHORTS OF 2025

NMS

Maddison Barford
Anu Ghosh
Daphne Ho
Akiko Mankiewicz
Weng Choong Yee
Solongoo Bayantur
Francisca Brito
Marie Fenk
Shachee Jagtap
Siok Hwee Koh
Jeiny Yoon
Yan Bai
Chew Yen Ng
Alice Ong
Felicia Tang

ACM

Robert Collick
Lucile Couturier-Bourdinière
Randeep Kaur
Jeff Kwan
Soo Hyun Kweon
Javier Lim

Jin Lim

FeiFei Liu
Emily Loke
Braema Mathiapparanam
Siaosze Ng
Jochen Nimtschek
Shirley Ong
Francis Ow
Susana Ramos
Krupa Shah
Summer Wei
Shirley Wong

TPM

Sofeene Ang
Cheng Ying Rebecca
Joyce Chew
Evangelyn Foo
Mathilde Fouin
Lim Chiu Fang
Juliana Lim
Green Kang
Marja-Liisa Lieppinen
(Marjukka)

Grace Ong

Rakhi Shankar
Priscylla Shaw
Catherine Thuez
Emily Teo
Teresa Teo
Li Juan Wong
Jennifer Yong
Phoebe Ling Zhang

CCM

Aw Xin Yu
Caroline Beaumont
Elizabeth Mesenas
Helen Ng Chip Noi
Jeremy Joewono
Kim Chorong
Lee Sheng Wei
Roy Kheng
Sara Olivetti Elisabetta
Teo Poh Har Karen
Zhang Xin Xin

IHC

Sarah Pajot
Tina Sim
Ally Sun
Neelika Kachru
Donna Tijo
Coco Zhao
Bala Naidu
Ruchika Kumar

JD

Kashiwakura Mina
Sasaki Tomoko
Suzuki Yuna
Seta Taeko
Mizoguchi Yukiko
Yonekura Mami
Kuramoto Ayako
Goto Eri
Murata Makiko

ASIAN BOOK GROUPS' RECOMMENDATIONS FOR YOUR SUMMER READING LIST

DURRIYA DOHADWALA SHARES SOME OF ASIAN BOOK GROUPS' FAVOURITE 2024 READS

FICTION

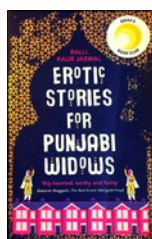
Butter by Asako Yuzuki

An international bestseller based on the real-life case of the "Konkatsu Killer," with themes of fat phobia, misogyny and isolation. It goes beyond the typical crime narratives to offer food for thought on issues of happiness, autonomy, relationships and being female in an increasingly corporatised world.



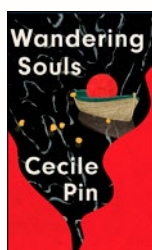
Erotic Stories for Punjabi Widows by Balli Kaur Jaswal

A mix of genres – romance, mystery and "titillating summer beach read" – with lots of laugh-out-loud moments centred on the challenges of integrating into a new culture, while holding on to some of the cultural and community benefits of one's home culture.



Wandering Souls by Cecile Pin

A debut novel about a Vietnamese refugee family's journey adapting to life in England. The author skilfully uses historical documents and a complex narrative style to illustrate trauma experience. Easy to read and, while the events are tragic and sad, there is also healing and hope.



The Island of Sea Women by Lisa See

Set on Jeju Island in South Korea, the novel tells the story of women free-divers and their expertise and skill, supporting their community with their harvests. The interweaving stories of friendships, loss and responsibility during a time of cultural and wartime upheaval give a further glimpse into the events propelling their lives.



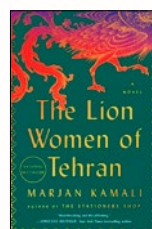
The Great Reclamation by Rachel Heng

A coming-of-age love story and a tale of political turmoil that takes readers through decades of Singaporean history and its pursuit of modernity against the backdrop of British colonialism and the World War II Japanese occupation.



The Lion Women of Tehran by Marjan Kamali

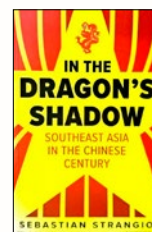
Set in Iran, against the turbulent backdrop of the Iranian Revolution and the decades to follow, this is a story of friendship, courage, betrayal, empathy and acceptance. It examines social class, women's rights, political activism and immigration, as two friends navigate this volatile period.



NON-FICTION

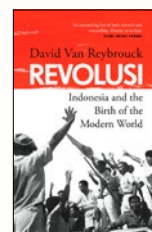
In the Dragon's Shadow: Southeast Asia in the Chinese Century by Sebastian Strangio

A comprehensive study of nine Southeast Asian countries and their relations with China until 2020, Strangio traces the impact of China's fast-growing influence in Southeast Asia, exploring how the latter views and responds to China, and reflects on the implications for the twenty-first century.



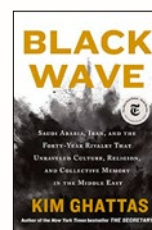
Revolusi Indonesia and the Birth of the Modern World by David van Reybrouck

Authored by a Dutch-speaking Belgian historian who successfully marries historical research with a page-turning narrative. This is the epic story of Indonesia's independence struggle – its four-year fight for freedom from 1945–49 that embroiled British and Dutch troops in fierce fighting and cost 200,000 lives. Totally captivating.



Black Wave: Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the Forty-Year Rivalry That Unraveled Culture, Religion, and Collective Memory in the Middle East by Kim Ghattas

This is an unprecedented and ambitious examination of how the modern Middle East unravelled and why it started with the pivotal year of 1979.



To join one of our book groups, please visit the FOM website or email fombookgroups@gmail.com

ODYSSEY IN ODISHA WITH FRIENDS

INGRID HANSON EXPLORES ODISHA ON FOM'S STUDY TOUR

Odisha, the eighth largest state in India, has almost half of the country's mineral wealth plus a rich ancient history, heritage and tribal culture. Before it becomes a focus on the tourist map, an FOM Study Tour, led by veteran organizer, Abha Kaul, explored the unique state on the Bay of Bengal from Jain caves to a royal palace. The trip was timely as our Singapore president had visited the capital Bhubaneswar the month before. Billboards along the highways announced President Tharman Shanmugaratnam's visit.



Our Singapore president welcomed on a highway billboard. Photo courtesy of Rosalie Kwok.

Over twelve days, seventeen travellers from Singapore, Hong Kong, Dallas, Boston, London, Chennai and Vienna drove over 300 kilometres. We

visited eight temple complexes, an epic battle site of 261 BCE, four museums, three archaeological sites, two Jain caves from the 1st century BCE and craft and artists' villages. We also toured two textile and weaving studios, saw two private dance performances, had bespoke lunches, visited the Mahima Cult where devotees wear only tree bark, and had a two-night homestay in a 19th century Raja's Palace.

KOLKATA, WHERE WE CONVERGED

We gathered in Kolkata, walked through the historic colonial area from where Singapore was governed in its early days as a colony. We lunched in a private foodie's home filled with Bengali art that was for sale, toured the Indian Museum and ended the day with drinks at the Glenburn Penthouse with a night view of the city.

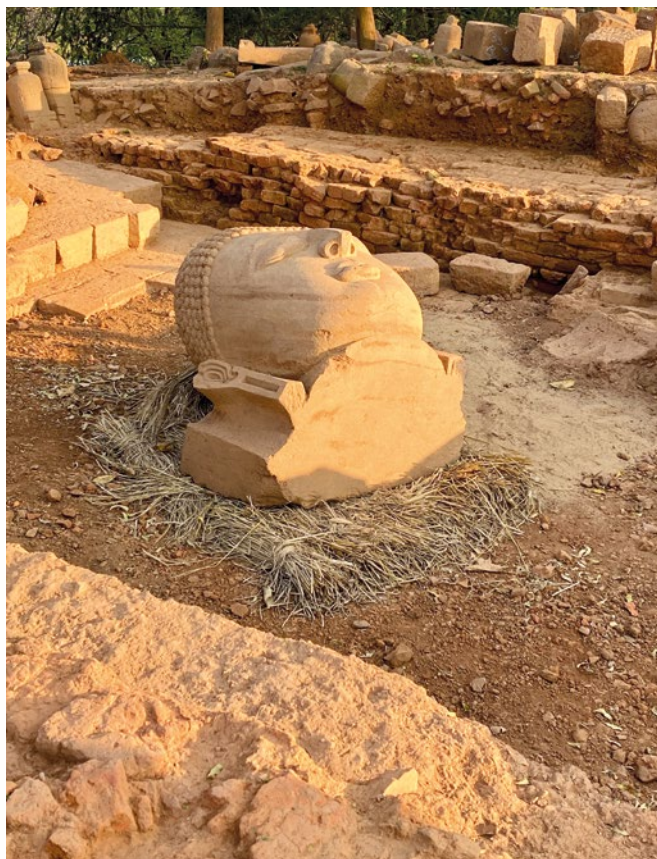
BHUBANESHWAR, HOMEBASE FOR FOUR NIGHTS

In the Odessan capital, Bhubaneswar, we stayed at the well-run Trident Hotel for four nights. We visited Kalinga Hindu temples, Lingaraja from the 11th century, Shakti Temple from the 8th century, the Parshurameshwara Shiva temple from the 7th century, Mukteshwara from the 10th century, and the Raja Tani temple from the 11th century. One was open only to Hindus, others were working temples and one, a State Monument. We had a private evening performance of Odissi dance and learned about sustainable traditional textile art at the studio of Pankaja Sethi whose pieces are currently at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London.

During an annual festival, we walked up to Udayagiri and Khandagiri Jain Caves from the 2nd century that were completely overrun by celebrants of the festival. One full day involved driving to the Diamond Triangle of three Buddhist sites: Lalitgiri,



Abha Kaul in the corridor leading to our private dining feast in Kolkata. Photo courtesy of Ingrid Hanson.

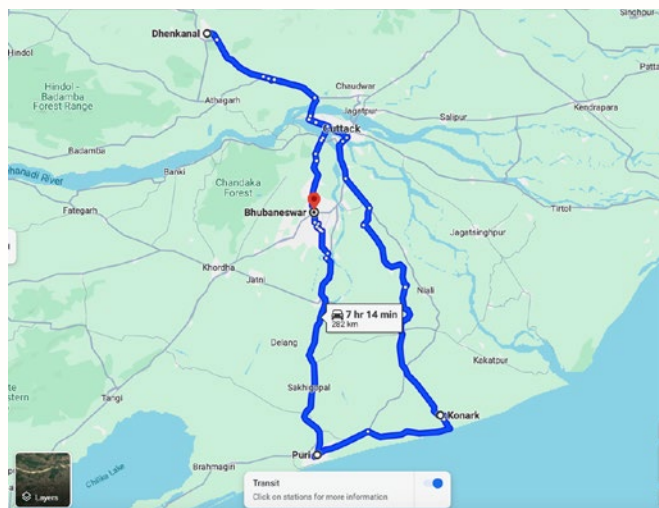


The recently excavated 1.4 metre Buddha's head in Ratnagiri. Photo courtesy of Ingrid Hanson.

Ratnagiri and Udayagiri, where a plucky member of our group introduced themselves to the archaeologist who then described to us the recent unearthing of possibly the largest Buddha's head found in India.

PURI BY THE SEA

On the 7th day, we drove to Puri, on the Bay of Bengal, stopping at the Chausath Yogini temple at Hirapur and the site of Ashokha's defeat of the Kalingas in the 3rd century BCE at Dhauri, where he surveyed the carnage and converted to Buddhism. An edit carved on the side of the boulder is still intact and legible. After a walk on the beach at sunset, we had an early evening for a 5am departure to see the sunrise at Konark over the 13th century Sun Temple built as a



Route map.



Group photo at the Trident Hotel. Photo courtesy of Neetu Aggarwal.

chariot pulled by seven giant horses. In the afternoon, most of the group visited the 11th century Jagannath Temple, an important Hindu pilgrimage site.

DHENKANAL OF THE BHOI DYNASTY

We continued to Dhenkanal the next morning, stopping at Raghurajpur, a heritage crafts village, and small villages creating brass pieces from wax from wild bee hives. The Gotipua dance troupe staged a special performance also enjoyed by the villagers from the road, and lunch was prepared and served under a cloth canopy by the wives of the founders of the dance school. The former Raja-turned-military-officer and government minister, Kamakhya Prasad Singh Deo, received us at his palace along with his wife and his son, who manages the 15-room home.

It was a journey back in time: delicious meals were cooked by the experienced kitchen staff from produce grown in the garden. An evening visit to the Mahima cult, who dress in all-bark body coverings, allowed the group to experience the cult's evening prayers.

After a morning drive back to Bhubaneswar, the group had time to relax at the fabulous Trident Hotel, visit local shops and have a closing round of accolades and highlight-sharing before the flight the next day to Kolkata and on to Singapore. Odisha is a gem to see before crowds of tourists begin to discover the wealth of culture and historical sites.

INGRID HANSON first joined FOM in 1987. She was a docent at SAM and NMS before completing graduate studies in History of Art and Archaeology at SOAS. She enjoys travelling to new and diverse places, and spending time with her grandchildren.

THE FALL OF SINGAPORE WALKING TOUR

ASHA K. KARAN TRAVELS BACK IN TIME TO SINGAPORE'S DARKEST CHAPTER WITH *EXPLORE SINGAPORE!*

Photos are author's own.



In a quiet park, we hear why it is important to remember the WWII and its consequences.

The Fall of Singapore on 15 February 1942 to Japanese forces was described by Winston Churchill (the United Kingdom's wartime prime minister), as the “worst disaster” and “largest capitulation” in British military history.

For Singapore, it marked the beginning of more than three years of harrowing, often brutal, Japanese occupation.

This *Explore Singapore!* walking tour was specifically held on 13 February to mark the week that the Imperial Japanese Army invaded Singapore. Our guide, Dr Johannes Widodo is a professor of architecture at the National University of Singapore. His interests include architectural heritage and urban design. Dr Widodo's intention in conducting this tour was to commemorate those who fought and died in the war. In his words, the walk was on “hallowed ground”.

The tour began in a placid playground at a private housing estate. Eighty-three years ago, it was “Sleepy Valley” where rubber estates used to be. The Japanese troops had crossed the Straits of Johore and landed in Singapore on 8 February 1942. On the night of 10 February 1942, British troops retreated through Sleepy Valley, unaware that the Japanese had already outflanked them. As exhausted soldiers moved through the rubber plantations, they were

ambushed. Trapped, nearly 1,500 men were killed, only 400 managed to flee.

Parts of the abandoned rubber estate have now returned to dense forest. This gives an indication of how difficult it would have been for troops to move through jungle and how easily an ambush could have been set up. Enemy forces high on a ridge could easily shoot down troops moving across a clearing.

For us, in our light T-shirts and sports shoes, it was difficult to imagine how heavily laden foot soldiers coped with the heat, terrain – and the fear of the unknown.



Appreciating how soldiers would have had to negotiate through dense jungle.



FOM Troops marching on hallowed ground.



Our guide, Dr Widodo, recounting the events leading to the surrender.

WHY DID THE JAPANESE ATTACK SINGAPORE?

One view is that the causes go back to 1931, with Japan's invasion of Manchuria, followed by their war against China in 1937, capturing cities such as Beijing, Shanghai and Nanjing. By 1940, Japan occupied parts of French Indochina, escalating tensions with Western powers. The United States, Britain and the Netherlands imposed economic sanctions, cutting off Japan's access to vital resources like oil and rubber. To secure these materials, Japan launched a military campaign across Southeast Asia. Singapore, a key British stronghold, was a prime target.

Our group stopped at another typical playground at the base of Bukit Batok HDB Block 287. In 1990, a land survey uncovered a forgotten Japanese war grave beneath this block – likely one of many burial sites scattered across the island.

The Bukit Batok area saw intense fighting on 10–11 February 1942 as Australian forces tried to delay the Japanese advance. The Australians used a jungle path along Bukit Gombak. This hidden dirt track, Jalan Perang (pronounced “pay-rang,” meaning “brown” in Malay), allowed an escape route to Bukit Batok. Today, it is the site of the Church of St Mary of the Angels.

PRESERVE THE PAST OR SERVE THE PRESENT?

During the walk, discussion turned to the constant debate as to what to conserve and what to build over in our land-scarce, densely populated island. For example, the Syonan Chureito is a forgotten memorial.

After Singapore's fall, the Japanese renamed Singapore, “Syonan”, which means “Light of the South.” To honour their fallen soldiers, the Japanese built a mast-like memorial atop Bukit Batok. The words “chu rei to” inscribed on its side meant “the sacrifice made by fallen soldiers.” Constructed by 500 Australian prisoners of war (POWs), it was unveiled in a solemn ceremony on 10 September 1942. When Japan surrendered in 1945, their retreating forces destroyed the monument to prevent desecration by returning British troops. Only a long flight of 120 steps remains, leading to a Mediaworld transmission tower. Once a site of great significance, it is now a quiet reminder of Singapore's wartime past.

A good example of preserving the past for future generations is the Former Ford Factory where the tour ended.

Originally an automobile assembly plant, the factory was seized by Japanese forces on 13 February 1942 and turned into

their headquarters. It was here, on 15 February 1942 that the British surrendered unconditionally to the Japanese.

After the war, the factory continued to assemble cars until 1980 when operations ceased. The factory was later acquired by Hong Leong Group who realised the significance of the place, and donated part of the property, in the 1990s, to the Government of Singapore. The back section of the old factory was demolished to make way for condominiums.

Today, the Former Ford Factory is a national monument, housing a permanent exhibition titled “Surviving the Japanese Occupation: War and Its Legacies.” Visitors can listen to personal accounts, see wartime artefacts and gain a deeper understanding of Singapore's darkest years.

This walking tour through Bukit Batok and Bukit Timah was a reminder of the tragedies of war. It helped us value the peace we enjoy today and respect the resilience of those who endured immense suffering.

We hope that history's mistakes are not repeated. As philosopher George Santayana wrote, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”



The Former Ford Factory was partially preserved as an exhibition centre. The rest of the factory made way for condominiums. A transmission tower is where a memorial to the war dead used to be.

ASHA K KARAN is a Singaporean happy to learn more about her own country through the half-day tours organised by *Explore Singapore!* of which she is a committee member.

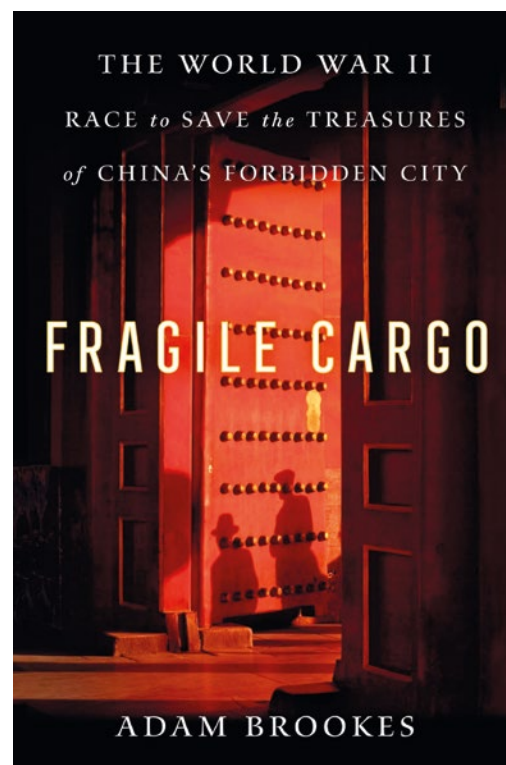
THE FIGHT TO SAVE CHINA'S HERITAGE

RAMYA NARAYANAN IN CONVERSATION WITH ADAM BROOKES ON HIS BOOK *FRAGILE CARGO*

Fragile Cargo by Adam Brookes tells the gripping true story of how China's imperial art collection was secretly evacuated during World War II from Beijing's Forbidden City. The collection was transported thousands of miles across a war-torn nation for sixteen years to protect it from destruction. In this interview, Adam shares insights on his extensive research into this story, where museum curators take on an unexpected role in safeguarding a nation's heritage.

HOW DID YOU COME ACROSS THIS STORY, AND WHAT INSPIRED YOU TO WRITE ABOUT IT?

I first heard about it – actually, my wife did – from curators at the National Palace Museum in Taipei. While well-known in Chinese, it was largely missing from the English-speaking world's understanding of museum history in China. I saw a great opportunity to try and fix that.



Cases awaiting evacuation in the Forbidden City.

WHAT RESOURCES DID YOU FIND WHEN RESEARCHING THIS STORY, AND WHAT CHALLENGES AROSE IN ACCESSING THEM?

I was actually very lucky with sources. There are published memoirs in Chinese that give a great deal of granularity and texture to the story. Also, as I was researching, the Second Historical Archives of China in Nanjing, which holds most World War II related material, began publishing primary sources in their academic journal relating to the story that I was among the first to see. However, the best account of the Imperial art's journey was handwritten by a curator Ouyang Daoda in 1950. His diary was lost and rediscovered in 2006 in the Forbidden City and published in 2010. Again, I was among the first to study it. There is another unpublished diary spanning seven volumes; it remains in a curator's family. There is more to be discovered.

YOUR BOOK'S PRELUDE VIVIDLY PORTRAYS A DAY IN EMPEROR QIANLONG'S (r.1735–1796) LIFE. WHY OPEN WITH THAT IN A NONFICTION WORK ABOUT WORLD WAR II?

I see no reason why historical narratives should be told in dreary, turgid prose. I very much wanted to get across to the reader a sense of the power of these art objects. They are intricately connected to the mystique of monarchy. I thought the best way of doing that would be to portray the Emperor Qianlong in his study looking at these amazing pieces of art and talking about their secrecy and their headiness. I sourced that account from *A Day in the Life of Qianlong*, a fabulously complicated piece of scholarship by a Taiwanese scholar.

WHAT QUALITIES OF THE MUSEUM CURATORS AND ARCHIVISTS, THE CENTRAL FIGURES IN THIS STORY, STAND OUT TO YOU THE MOST?



Ma Heng, Director of The National Palace Museum, Beijing through WWII.

I'm not a fan of the heroic mode of writing or of putting historical figures on a pedestal. What appealed to me about these men was their humanity, and how they navigated their difficult mission, rising to an extraordinary moment. Ma Heng the director of the National Palace Museum, Beijing, never wanted to become a wartime logistics manager. All he ever wanted was to be left alone with his art, his artefacts and his inscriptions. Yet, he ended up giving his life to preserving the imperial collections during that time.

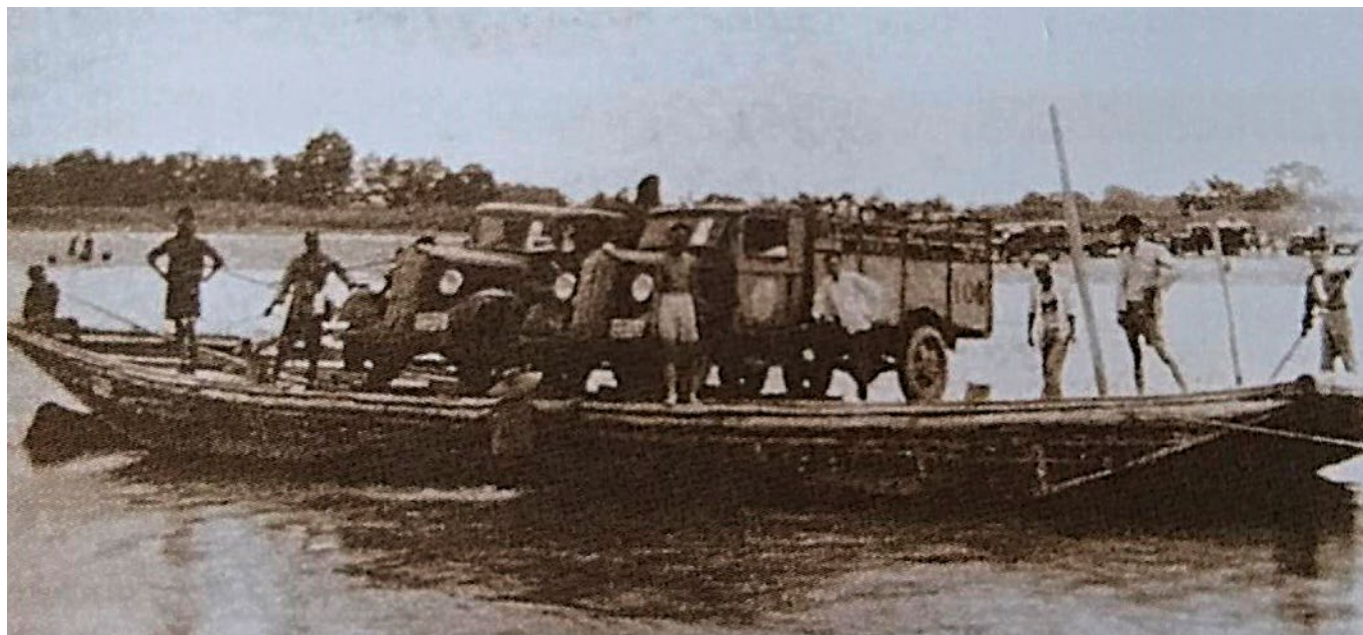
DO YOU THINK THEIR SACRIFICES AND EFFORTS ARE SUFFICIENTLY RECOGNISED IN CHINA TODAY?

In China, this story has gained near-mythological status. While their contributions are absolutely celebrated, making them heroes obscures our understanding of who they were. So, part of my desire in writing *Fragile*

Cargo was to make it human and real, rather than having it elevated into something unrecognisable.

THE CHINESE TODAY CLAIM THAT NOT A SINGLE PIECE WENT MISSING OR WAS DAMAGED. IS THAT TRUE?

As far as I can tell, nothing got lost. They had a fantastic logging system and incredibly meticulous records, and there is no indication that stuff got lost or stolen. However, breakages did occur and were recorded in great detail by the curator Ouyang Daoda.



Trucks, loaded with the imperial collection, cross a river on a bamboo raft circa 1938 CE.



Early Snow on the River, Zhao Gan, circa late 10th century, handscroll, ink and colours on silk. Image from National Palace Museum, Taipei.

WOULD YOU SAY THERE WERE MANY LUCKY ESCAPES?

Several. During one incident, a locomotive crashed into a truck that had just finished unloading crates from a train. The impact shattered the crates, but they only contained glass covers, and no artefacts were damaged.

In Hanzhong, crates were temporarily stored in a temple, which was bombed by the Japanese just two weeks after they were relocated. A similar close call in Changsha saw them relocated from a university library six weeks before the entire University was destroyed by bombing.

Another near disaster occurred when a bamboo raft carrying crates up a river broke free after its ropes snapped and started rushing downstream. Fortunately, a boatman managed to steer it to safety.

It was lucky escape after lucky escape, which even the curators marvelled at in their memoirs saying, “I can’t believe we’ve done it again.”

YOU CHOSE CERTAIN ARTEFACTS TO FOCUS ON THROUGH THE NARRATION. TELL US MORE ABOUT THEM.

I wanted the artefacts to feel like characters in the story, giving readers something to connect with through the journey. I chose them simply because I liked them. One of my favourites is a hand painted scroll called *Early Snow on the River*, which is a fabulous ink on silk study of the lives of fishermen painted during the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period (907–979 CE). Its theme is a river, so it

naturally embodies movement, travel and change – some of the core things the story is about. Another is the *Stone Drums of Qin*, which are these huge lumps of granite that in 500 BCE were inscribed with poetry in a very early and rare transitional script, making them culturally very significant. However, they were also very fragile and very difficult to transport. It made for great story telling.

LASTLY, WHAT DO YOU THINK MODERN MUSEUM PROFESSIONALS AND HISTORIANS CAN LEARN FROM THIS STORY ABOUT SAFEGUARDING CULTURAL HERITAGE?

One part of this is very practical. Transporting art requires extreme care, and the effort put into securing it in packing cases is something art conservators and historians would truly appreciate. But I think the larger story is about the way art becomes entwined with cultural and national identity. Art isn’t just something you hang on a wall—it serves civic, diplomatic and political roles, even symbolising legitimacy for governments. It carries a larger significance, and I think that’s something that the story of *Fragile Cargo* really brings alive, that these pieces of art became an embodiment of a striking survival.

RAMYA NARAYANAN is a docent at the Asian Civilisations Museum and the National Museum of Singapore. She is also currently one of the Co-ordinators for Monday Morning Lectures.

UNTIL EVEN THE ANGELS

A STORY OF SACRIFICE, BETRAYAL AND VENGEANCE, SET IN A DEEPLY DIVIDED SINGAPORE

FIFTEEN YEARS AFTER HEARING HER PROTAGONIST'S VOICE,
SUZANNE SCOTT TOMITA HAS PUBLISHED HER CRIME FICTION DEBUT

Photographs by Rebecca Downie.

ABOUT AUTHOR SUZANNE SCOTT TOMITA

A Suzanne was born in Tunisia and raised in Venezuela, Germany, Indonesia, Canada and Australia. In 2009, she moved to Singapore with her family, where walks around the black and white colonial estates in Goldhill led her to imagine the lives of the people who lived, loved and worked within them. Drawn to the history of the area, she imagined the characters of Mei Mei, Honour and Pash, whose complex relationships drive the heart of the novel. Over the next 15 years, while raising a family and building her fundraising career in Canada and Singapore, Suzanne continued to hear the voice of her protagonist Mei Mei demanding her to tell her story.

Suzanne has a PhD in Education from the University of British Columbia and has worked in academic advancement in Canada and Singapore. Suzanne became a FOM member in 2009 and upon her return to Singapore in 2022, she renewed her FOM membership. Visiting museum exhibitions, attending talks, and soaking in oral histories at the National Archives helped her tap into the richness of Singapore's past.



Photo of the author, Suzanne Scott Tomita.



Suzanne's debut novel, Until Even The Angels.

A MYSTERY WHOSE FRAGRANCE AND INTRIGUE LINGER LONG AFTER THE FINAL PAGE

Set against the backdrop of 1950s Singapore, Suzanne Scott Tomita's debut crime novel, *Until Even the Angels*, follows Isabelle Goh, a London real estate agent left for dead in an assassination attempt. Detective Ayesha Nur is tasked with unraveling Goh's hidden secrets, a journey that leads her to uncover dark truths tied to a disappearance that occurs decades earlier in post-colonial Singapore. This page turner explores themes of class division, lost childhood friendships, and bonds that erode but are never forgotten.

The book weaves historical events with fictional narratives, bringing to life a Singapore at the crossroads of tradition and change. *Until Even the Angels* is a story of sacrifice, betrayal and vengeance, set in a deeply divided Singapore. She hopes readers enjoy this page turner and that it resonates with those who appreciate complex friendships and the ways history shapes our lives.



The author at the Singapore Botanic Gardens Gallop Extension at Athara House – the Forest Discovery Centre.

SUZANNE SCOTT TOMITA is excited to share with fellow members that her debut novel *Until Even the Angels* is available for purchase at Kinokuniya, Book Bar and on Amazon SG, Amazon US, Amazon Canada and Amazon UK. www.suzannescotttomita.com



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Singapore Art Museum *



STPI



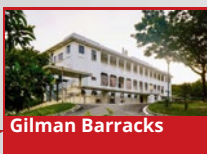
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PUBLIC INFORMATION MEETING

TUESDAY, 27 MAY 2025, 10 AM - 12 PM

Asian Civilisations Museum
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** FOM training will be
conducted on weekdays
in English.*

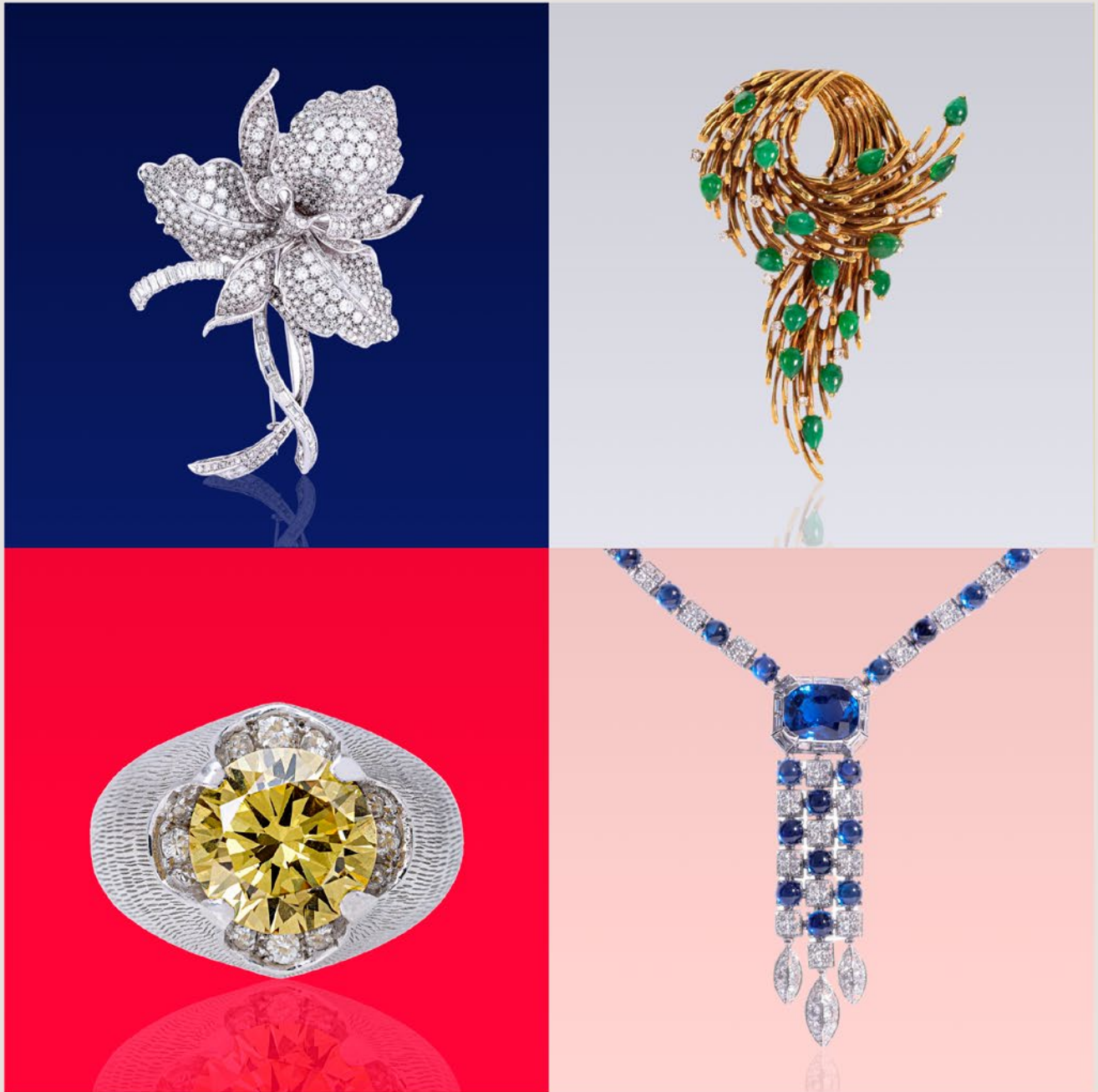
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