

PASSAGE

FRIENDS OF THE MUSEUMS SINGAPORE

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RED



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C O N T E N T S



ON THE COVER

This octagonal tray by Yang Mao portrays a scholar and his attendants admiring a waterfall, showcasing the mastery of Yuan-era *Tihong* (剔红) craftsmanship. The intricate carving of landscapes and figures reveals the depth and sophistication of this exquisite art form.

Read about this masterpiece in *Sixty Layers of Cinnabar* on page 3. Image courtesy of the Palace Museum, Beijing.



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PRESIDENT'S BLOG

Hello everyone!

Here We Are, this year's National Day song, is playing in the background as I pen my thoughts for this issue of *PASSAGE*. While Singapore celebrates 60 years as a nation, FOM and its members are also proud to commemorate Singapore's progress.

We celebrate the colour red in this issue as a nod to Singapore's 60th year of independence. The colour Red is associated with passion, love, fervour, energy, good fortune, joy and life. It signals progress and growth.

Like the Singapore flag, it's propitious that the FOM logo is red and white. We have come a long way since 1978 when a group of women decided to form a volunteer organisation for the National Museum to offer many different programmes to its members.



FOM Logo

For an organisation run by volunteers, we are proud that FOM is still going strong more than four decades on. Interest in FOM shows no signs of waning as 265 new members have joined since January. We are steadfast and committed to our mission of enhancing knowledge of Asia's history, culture and art. We continue to be diverse as our members represent nearly 50 nationalities.

At the Public Information Meeting (PIM) held in May, I was happy to see a good turnout of 105 people who came to find out more about FOM and how they could contribute to FOM's efforts. I thank Shradha Nayan and Andrea Baker for organising a successful PIM.

Along our journey of volunteerism, we have garnered accolades such as this year's Patron of Heritage Award from the National Heritage Board and recognition, from various quarters of the arts and history sector, of our rigorous docent training programmes and of our members' enthusiasm in

stepping up to increase awareness of Singapore's history and its cultural heritage by offering guiding services or giving talks and lectures. To paraphrase the song: here we are, look how far we have come, living our hopes and dreams.

By the time this issue of *PASSAGE* reaches you, many of you will have returned or will be making your way back from your summer break to these shores while several more stayed put to enjoy the pause. I hope the break has refreshed and re-energised you all.

I look forward to seeing you at the various activities, programmes and events lined up for our members. In the meantime, we take this opportunity to wish Singapore a wonderful 60th birthday and wish its people many more good years to come.

Lee Hong Leng
President
president@fom.sg



Sharing a moment of camaraderie with Shradha Nayan and Andrea Baker at the PIM.

FROM THE EDITORS

The Little Red Dot: small in size but vast in story. As Singapore turns 60 this month, we celebrate not only a nation but an idea: that something small can grow into something extraordinary. From the start, Singapore defied expectations, hoisting the red of its flag as a visual symbol of the fledgling nation's commitment to championing universal brotherhood and equality. Ambitious, inventive and deeply rooted in many of the cultures that shape Asia, Singapore has matured into a vibrant crossroads of heritage and innovation. Echoing Singapore's growth arc, *PASSAGE* continues to expand, recently welcoming several editors and proofreaders to strengthen the editorial core and marking a new milestone of 25 volunteers on board. Many hands, indeed, make light work.

In this *Red* issue, we look at the colour not just as a pigment or symbol, but as a pulse. Red runs through our shared stories – across Asia, yes, but also here at home. In Singapore, it's a colour that has followed this city-state from its earliest moments. From the iconic 'blood and bandage' brickwork of the historic Central Fire Station to the red fish head curry steaming in



Enjoying a cuppa or two with some members of the PASSAGE editorial team.

bowls beneath red hawker stall signs, red is stitched into Singapore's past, a hue of legacy and heritage.

The content line-up in this issue invites you to explore the colour red as it is embraced across the region, honouring ancestral craftsmanship and symbolising cultural continuity. From the cinnabar infused lacquerware of China to Borneo's Dragon's Blood pigment, from the Sappanwood red-dyed, Pekalongan-style batiks to the red-bearded Chuvanna Thadi characters of *Kathakali*. You'll meet performers who dazzle in red, capturing the energy of a region in motion, and you'll discover artisans who weave red into the fabric of the region's culture.

Our article line-up for the final issue of 2025 is fully slated, so we invite FOM members to contribute articles to the first issue of 2026 – *Lost Kingdoms, Lost Treasures* (working title). Help us to open doors to fascinating explorations like the Majapahit expansion of its maritime influence into Southeast Asia evidenced by gold finds at Fort Canning. If India calls, follow the trail of the magnificent Mughal Peacock throne looted by an invader and eventually lost to time. The stories of every kingdom and their treasured legacies wait to be told. We invite members to submit a 100-word pitch for this issue, accompanied by two high-resolution images by 1st September 2025. Trouble landing on a subject? Email us for guidance or brainstorming at passage@fom.sg.



Melissa Nesbitt and Darly Furlong outside the Indian Heritage Centre.

Darly Furlong & Melissa Nesbitt
Managing Editors, PASSAGE

SIXTY LAYERS OF CINNABAR: THE CHINESE CRAFT OF *TIHONG*

QIMIN SHI UNVEILS THE HISTORY, PRODUCTION AND ENDURING LEGACY OF
CHINA'S CENTURIES-OLD ART OF CARVED RED LACQUER



Covered box with lychees, wood and lacquer. Made in the Renwu year of Jiajing, Ming dynasty (1522).
Image courtesy of the Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore.

T*ihong* (剔红, literally, 'picked-out red') is the art of relief carving of red lacquer of a requisite thickness. It enjoys the honour of being recognised in China as Intangible Cultural Heritage. The skill embodies an old Chinese saying: 'A hundred miles walked, a thousand cuts made, for just one pound of lacquer', reflecting the extraordinary effort behind each masterpiece of *tihong*. Lacquer is brittle and carving it is more difficult than carving wood. A savant of *tihong* would typically have more than ten years' experience in carving lacquer, working on lacquer from a *Rhus verniciflua* tree of over 16 years whose lacquer is harder and denser compared to lacquer from young trees. Only a single piece of *tihong* would be produced after more than a year's work.

RED: CULTURAL DNA OF *TIHONG*

The colour red, '*hong*' in Chinese, symbolises happiness, good luck, fortune and royal power. The Chinese worship red as much as they respect life, and objects in red, ranging from red ritual vessels to red lacquered coffins, denote a high level of esteem due to their colour. Just as the colour red occupies a unique, singular position in Chinese civilisation so much so that it has become a cultural symbol associated with China, *tihong* too, is inextricably Chinese.

East Asian artisans used lacquer sap from a tree native to the area. Layer upon layer of red-coloured lacquer was applied to a wood or metal armature selected as the object's base. In the Ming dynasty, layers ranged from a minimum of 60 to as many as one or two hundred, each layer no more than 0.3 mm in thickness to facilitate drying (each layer taking possibly 48 hours to dry). When the lacquer reached sufficient thickness and achieved a semi-dry state, the carving process began. Technical skill and artistic vision were essential for a pleasing finished object. As can be seen from the example, the layers of



Octagonal tray with a landscape of watching a waterfall. Signed by Yang Mao, Yuan dynasty (960–1368).
Image courtesy of the Palace Museum, Beijing.

lacquer provide a skilful carver the possibility of achieving a visual and tactile three-dimensional effect, each cut revealing the layered meaning of red. *Tihong*, in which an object was produced by carving layers of material away, reflects the subtle beauty of Eastern art, where meaning often lies in what is hidden as much as what is shown.

MASTERPIECES THROUGH DYNASTIES: *TIHONG* ARTWORK FROM YUAN TO QING

Though some western experts use a later date, according to *Xiū Qī Lù* (髹漆录, *The Classic of Lacquerwork*), *tihong* originated in the Tang dynasty (618–907). Regardless, by the Southern Song (1129–1279) and Yuan dynasties (1279–1368), the art had matured, and it flourished during the Ming (1644–1911) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties.

Yang Mao and Zhang Cheng, both active during the Yuan, are two major names in *tihong* art. They represent the pinnacle of lacquer carving artistry during the Yuan. Inheriting the style of the Southern Song, their works are characterised by thick lacquer layers and meticulously concealed knife marks, demonstrating their mastery of *tihong* technique. Featuring a wide range of subjects, from figures and landscapes to flowers and birds, *tihong* artworks by these two masters are rare treasures.

An octagonal tray by Yang Mao depicts a scholar and his attendants watching a waterfall. The setting is a beautiful scenic spot. A dignified scholar stands by the railing watching the waterfall in front of him whilst his attendant behind him looks on. Another attendant remains in the grand pavilion behind them but is also transfixed by the waterfall. The tree in the foreground draws the viewer's eye diagonally across the tray from left to right, whilst three different carved grounds representing the different realms of sky, river, and earth give depth. The continuous border of flowers continues the scenic theme. The design balances open, layered landscapes with vivid human figures, captured in meticulous, delicate detail.

A dish attributed to Zhang Cheng typifies the Yuan style. The central motif comprises two long-tailed birds, whose name in Mandarin is a homonym of *shou dai* (寿带), 'bringing longevity'. The birds are enjoying the fragrance of

the five-petaled hollyhock flowers which symbolise 'chastity', a popular motif in Yuan literati paintings. Lacquer layers of 0.5–1.0 cm thick have been masterfully carved with rounded edges on petals, representing 'hidden blade' technique.

Such was the reverence for the Yuan style that lacquer pieces made during the Ming up to the middle of the Qing retained the style of the Yuan masters.

A highly decorative style, a departure from the Yuan, was characteristic of the Qianlong era. Thus, in the Qianlong period (1736–1796), *tihong* took on more vibrant and diverse themes and patterns, like auspicious motifs and characters and literati subjects. In turn, *tihong* objects themselves were featured in visual art.



Round dish with long-tailed birds and hibiscuses. Attributed to Zhang Cheng, Yuan dynasty (1271–1368). Image courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Hanging scroll, Emperor Qianlong's New Year's Celebration. Ink and colours on silk, artist unknown, reign of Emperor Qianlong (1736–1795). Image courtesy of the Palace Museum, Beijing.

In this painting depicting the Emperor Qianlong's New Year's Celebration, servants are holding a round *tihong* box and a *tihong* table. What were they used for? On the first day of every year, Qianlong would gather with his family in the palace gardens to light bamboo firecrackers, pray for peace and good fortune and eat *jiaozi* (饺子, dumpling). The round box is a banquet box, carved with a flying dragon and the character 'Sheng' (圣, imperial) and used for storing *jiaozi*. The box would have been placed on the *tihong* table, resting on the carved characters 'Da Ji' (大吉, great auspice) a wish for good luck in the new year.

BEYOND TRADITION: PRESERVATION THROUGH INNOVATION

Each *tihong* masterpiece is the result of hundreds of painstaking and costly steps which contemporary practice cannot sustain. Hence, the impetus to search for a balance between tradition and innovation, to retain the craft. As always, advances in technology provide breakthroughs – from increases in the choice of lacquer type to digitalised assistance. Processes currently incorporate technologies like laser engraving and 3D-printing to improve efficiency,

whilst essential 'hand-carving' skills for final touches are still preserved. Low-VOC (volatile organic compound) water-based lacquers reduce allergenic risks and comply with modern environmental standards. In education, AR (augmented reality) technology is used to invite viewers to 'virtually carve' artworks, encouraging their immersive engagement.

Artistic expressions are also transforming. They are integrated with fashion, installation art and other fields such as NFT to attract young art collectors and metaverse fans.

Tihong, like Asian baroque, has been the most luxurious red through centuries. Preserving the art of *tihong* is not just about safeguarding a skill — it is about protecting a living dialogue between the past and future, where every carved red layer whispers centuries of cultural wisdom to generations yet to come. 

QIMIN SHI is a member of FOM. Her cat approves of her trilingual Mandarin–English–French cheers for Singapore's 60th anniversary of independence, yet remains unimpressed with her article celebrating the colour red.



(top) Banquet box with flying dragon. Made in the reign of Emperor Qianlong (1736–1795). Image courtesy of the Palace Museum, Beijing.



(Middle and right) Daji imperial table. Made during the reign of Emperor Qianlong (1736–1795). Image courtesy of the Palace Museum, Beijing.



THE VIVACITY OF SAPPANWOOD

TONY SUGIARTA SHARES THE UNTOLD STORY OF SAPPANWOOD TEXTILE DYES AND HERBAL TEAS

“**D**eep red, rich crimson, maroon, false purple – sappan shows many faces, depending on the mordant. It is the changing form of woman herself, from harlot to saint. Not for nothing do I call sappan red the irresistible colour.” – Textile artist, Shimura Fukumi, *The Music of Colour*, translated by Matt Treyvaud.

Red is revered as a sacred colour across many Southeast Asian cultures. From the *Mangkok Merah* (red bowl) ritual of the Dayak tribes enacted to seek guidance from ancestors during inter-tribal conflict to the thread representing the god Brahma, in the *tridatu* (tri-coloured) Balinese bracelets, red symbolises courage, passion and life.

With many rituals grounded in the rhythms of nature, it is not surprising that the use of botanical dyes is integral to indigenous cultures in the region. Besides common red natural dye sources like the bark of *Morinda citrifolia* roots, madder roots and cochineal, the heartwood of sappan (*Caesalpinia sappan* L.) is another source, providing hues from sweet pinks to deep crimson for cotton, silk and wool. Although no longer a strategic commodity, sappan red is still used as a dye base. Sappan is also a traditional herbal remedy in Asia.

INTRODUCING SAPPANWOOD TO THE WORLD

Sappanwood is a small, leguminous tree that grows to up to ten metres in height, with a trunk of up to 20 centimetres in diameter. Although it can be propagated by seed or stem cuttings, it often grows wild on rocky, hilly terrain in tropical climates. The orange-red wood core of its branches, rich in brazilin pigment, is the part of the tree most sought after for dyes. The rest of the tree is also usable: its thorny trunk is suitable for fences, its fine-grained and hardy wood is used for firewood and timber, and its roots produce yellow dye.



Pekalongan-style batik with pink flowers dyed with sappan in Jombang, East Java Indonesia. Photo by the author.

Native to South China, Indochina and the Malaysian region, sappanwood was actively traded to Europe in the 17th century by the Dutch East India Company (VOC). With high demand for dyes and low transport costs, sappanwood yielded attractive profit margins. Further afield, sappanwood was even sold to Japan, in return for copper. Though not a major product, it also played another role in VOC trade – as ballast for their ships.



A botanical drawing of sappanwood from the book *Flora de Filipinas*.
Image from Wikimedia Commons.



Split branches of sappanwood exposing the orange-red wood core. Image from Wikimedia Commons.

In China, textile dyeing with sappanwood dates from the Ming Dynasty. The encyclopaedia *Tiangong Kaiwu*, compiled by scientist Song Yingxing and released in 1637, documents botanical dyeing techniques using safflower, pagoda tree buds, turmeric, indigo and sappanwood. This compendium became a reference for dye houses in Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces. Records of the Imperial Household Department (*Nei Wu Fu*) in the Qing Dynasty show sappanwood's continued importance in the textile industry south of the Yangtze River.

DYEING WITH SAPPAN

The extraction of the brazilin compound in sappanwood involves several steps. Chips or thin shavings of sappanwood are soaked overnight and then boiled in plain water for several hours. Some artisans add alum or lye during this step to enhance the colour. Once cooled, the extract is filtered and

the filtrate is ready for dyeing.

Sappan red is a mordant or adjective dye – it requires a fixative (a mordant), such as alum or iron, to bind the dye to the cloth fibres. The textile itself requires pre-treatment depending on fibre type and final colour desired.

On its own, sappan can yield peach, pink, terracotta and crimson, depending on the types and amount of mordant used. In Indonesia, where cotton is prevalent, pre- or post-treatment with tannin-rich mordants like symlocos leaves or candlenut oil helps to improve the dye uptake. For Javanese batik, common mordants and fixers are alum salt, quicklime (calcium oxide) and iron sulphate. These salts and crystals modify the pH and the metal content of the dye baths, resulting in a wide spectrum of colours. Alum retains the original colour, quicklime lightens the shade whilst iron sulphate yields darker tones.

Sappan is challenging to use due to its pH sensitivity, yet it is a favourite of textile artists like Novieta Tourisia from Cinta Bumi Artisans in Bali, who specialises in eco-print and bark cloths.

Artisans may layer sappanwood dyes with other plant dyes to complement or enhance colours. In *soga Jawa*, a classic



Ecoprint textile with sappanwood dye extract base. Photo courtesy of Cinta Bumi Artisans.



Coasters made of textile dyed with sappanwood. Two different mordants, alum and iron sulphate, resulted in original and darker hues, respectively. Photo courtesy of Cinta Bumi Artisans.

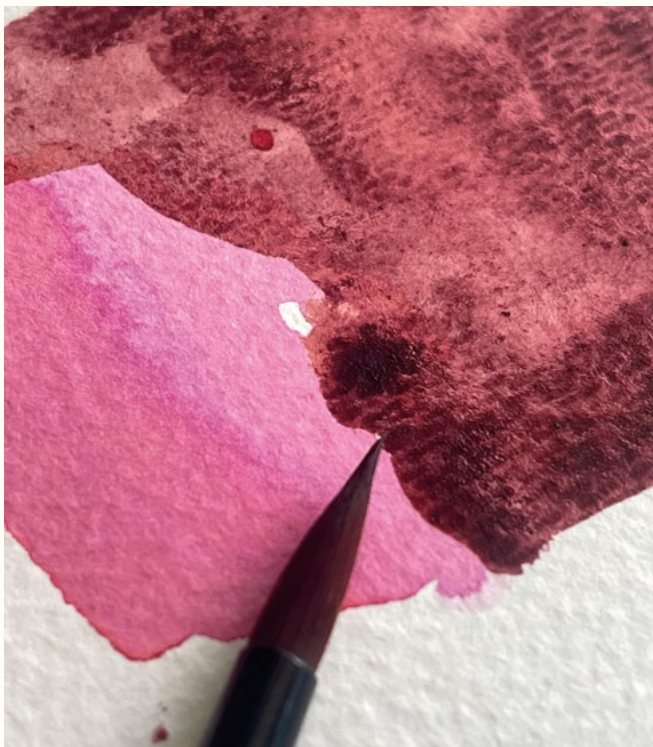


A tray of whole herbs and spices of Javanese *wedang uwuh* herbal drinks. Image from Wikimedia Commons.

brown associated with batik in royal palaces of Yogyakarta and Surakarta, sappanwood is used alongside other barks. At Batik Marenggo, Yogyakarta, which specialises in natural-dye batik, *tritik* (stitch resist dye) and *jumputan* (tie dye), Nuri NH experiments and overdyes with other materials to stabilise and highlight the colours of sappan.

Many practitioners share Tourisia's enthusiasm for the vibrancy and versatility of sappanwood dyes. The pigments work beyond textiles, including on paper, wood, and even in beverages like *bir pletok*, a spiced drink from Betawi culture.

When Liz Liu and Shirin Rafie of Wild Dot, a Singapore nature-guided studio specialising in natural pigments, bring sappanwood ink to classes, people are often surprised by how vibrant the dye is, even with minimal heat during extraction. Moreover, the wood makes a fragrant drink, providing another sensory layer.



Sappanwood colours obtained from different extraction techniques, modifiers and ageing. Photo courtesy of Wild Dot.

THE WOOD IN A ROYAL BEVERAGE

Sappanwood is common in traditional Chinese, Indian and Javanese medicine practice. The wood contains many bioactive compounds responsible for various biological effects, including antimicrobial, anti-inflammatory and antioxidant actions.

Due to its rejuvenating properties, legend has it that it was once a favourite of Sultan Agung, King of Mataram. On a cold night, the king requested a warming herbal drink. As a servant presented a concoction of spices, a gust of wind blew leaves and wood fragments - believed to be from a sappan tree - into the cup. Unperturbed, the king drank the concoction and felt warm and invigorated. It was so delightful that he requested it often and called it *wedang uwuh*, literally, 'herbal drink made of trash', referring to its rustic presentation of smashed whole herbs like ginger, cardamom, nutmeg, cloves, cinnamon, lemongrass, and, of course, sappanwood. Today, *wedang uwuh* remains a beloved immunity-boosting beverage in Javanese households.

In Traditional Chinese Medicine, sappanwood is listed in the Chinese Pharmacopeia and prescribed to relieve pain, inflammation, bruises and menstrual discomfort. Due to its red colour, it is often associated with blood-related symptoms and treatments. This observation is also noted in Ayurvedic healing traditions.

PLAYFUL, ACCESSIBLE AND ENDURING

As noted by textile artist, Shimura Fukumi, sappanwood has its own quiet allure. It is playful – the spectrum of colours shifts with pH. It is accessible – dye extraction and fibre treatment steps are simple with no complex rituals. Looking like just another piece of wood, it is unassuming...until its medicinal and dyeing powers are extracted. From textiles to tea, sappanwood remains modest and enduring, linking generations through craft, colour and care. 

TONY SUGIARTA is an FOM member and founder and curator of aNERDgallery, a specialist Indonesian textile boutique which aims to introduce discussions around heritage, arts and culture through contemporary and engaging experiences.

BONDING OVER A CUP OF RED (TEA)

JULINA KHUSAINI TREKS THE STREETS AND BACK ALLEYS OF KAMPONG GELAM AND CHINATOWN NEIGHBOURHOODS TO GET THE LOW DOWN ON WHAT CONNECTS THESE CUPPAS OF RED BREWS – CHINESE TEA AND TEH TARIK – TOGETHER

All photos are the writer's own unless otherwise stated.

Chinese tea and teh tarik – never the twain shall meet... or should they? At first glance, the two seem quite different from each other. Drinking Chinese tea is often associated with a sense of ritual and served during formal occasions. In contrast, the teh tarik drinking culture seems more casual, informal, relaxed and laidback in nature. Interestingly, they actually share a common origin.



The art of pulling tea. It requires skill and mastery to pull the tea at more than an arm's length and just above the head, to cool it just right, and to create that slim row of froth at the top of the brew. A teh tarik mural, one of the latest additions of street art adding colour at Haji Lane.



Oxidised loose tea leaves producing the signature reddish amber brew of Chinese tea.

COMMON ORIGIN

At the starting point, both types of brews are made by pouring boiled hot water over loose tea leaves or tea dust, producing a reddish-amber brew, which explains why it is also referred to as 'red' tea. The 'redness' is a result of the oxidation of the tea leaves during the production process. In China, the term *hong cha* (red tea) is used to refer to fully oxidised tea to differentiate it from green tea (*matcha*) and the dark teas (*heicha*).

For teh tarik (literally translated, it means 'pulled tea'), condensed or evaporated milk is added to the red brew and repeatedly poured between two cups to create a frothy milky drink. Spices such as cardamom, cloves and ginger are sometimes added for a warm and spicy taste. The act of pouring or being 'pulled' between the two cups is what gives the tea its name.

THE ART OF CHINESE TEA

So, how should one enjoy Chinese tea? My curiosity led me to Mosque Street in the heart of Singapore's Chinatown to track down a 100-year-old tea shop known as Pek Sin Choon, which has been importing tea from the Fujian province in China since 1925.

The six categories of Chinese tea are colourful indeed – white, green, yellow, blue or oolong, black and post-fermented. How to brew it depends on the kind of tea, the purpose of drinking and the formality of the occasion. The most popular method to prepare tea is known as *gongfu* tea, which means 'to make tea with skill'. According to Mr Kenry Peh, a fourth-generation tea connoisseur from Pek Sin Choon, "Tea tasting is similar to wine tasting." Who

would have thought that this humble brew would have such an *atas* (high class) connection? But then again, it shouldn't be surprising given its royal connection as imperial tributes as far back as the Song dynasty (960-1279 CE), gaining presence among the aristocratic classes until around the 1850s.

"For the Chinese, tea is really held in high regard, admired as a drink that is pure in content and consisting of elegant qualities. That is why the Chinese prefer the natural taste of the tea, without adding any sugar or milk, because they want to absorb the nutrients and experience the goodness of what nature has provided in its purest form as much as possible," explains Kenry further.

TEH TARIK - THE COLONIAL CONNECTION

The art of pulling tea or making teh tarik is believed to be a craft developed by South Indian street cooks after 1850, in India. This craft eventually spread to the other colonial territories, including the Malay Peninsula, of which Singapore was a part. Its origin can be attributed to Indian Muslim migrants who set up stalls serving *masala chai* (milk tea with spices) as early as the 1870s. They would usually be found at the entrance of rubber plantations to serve workers there. After World War II, these vendors switched to using tea dust, which had a more bitter taste. So, condensed milk was added to mask the bitterness.

As drinking tea, especially those from Assam, Darjeeling and Ceylon, gained in popularity, many tea brands began to dominate the market. One brand which gained popularity in Singapore was the *Teh Cap Pokok Kelapa* (Coconut Tree Brand), a tea blend brought in by an Indian tea merchant from Gogha named Haroon Bin Ali.

"My late husband shared that his grandfather used to peddle the tea on his bicycle to many coffee shops in Bedok and Changi. We had many competitors, but our tea remained popular because people liked its aroma and the pure blend of tea from Ceylon and Indonesia without any artificial colouring," shared Mdm Shaeeda Ismail, the founder's granddaughter-in-law. This tea brand, with its distinctive red packaging, became a popular ingredient for teh tarik, particularly those sold in the coffee shops and *sarabat* stalls (push cart stalls) in the Kampong Gelam neighbourhood.

Unlike Chinese tea, enjoying a cup of teh tarik is more egalitarian in nature. It can be enjoyed at both formal occasions and while hanging out with your friends or watching a football match at the local kopitiam (coffeeshop)



(On the left) Tea merchant, Haroon bin Ali's office at 29 Haji Lane in the 1960s. (On the right) Special merchandise, a table place mat featuring the original red packaging of the Teh Cap Pokok Kelapa.

with a bunch of strangers. Teh tarik also became a symbol of youth culture when the Taiwanese started to add boba (bead-like pearls made from tapioca) to milk tea, giving rise to the trending 'bubble tea' wave worldwide.



A Group of Chinese Men Enjoying Tea by By Lai Afong (1839-1890). Image sourced from Wikimedia Commons.

COMMON GROUND

Despite these differences, both red brews share a common socio-cultural significance – as a 'facilitator' to mediate and reconcile disputes and as a social glue that helps bring disparate groups together.

Mr Kenry Peh explains, "Often, after mediation and terms of reconciliation were agreed upon, the party who committed the offence would brew tea and offer it to the aggrieved party as a symbol of his apology and sincerity. This allows both parties to 'save face' and maintain a harmonious relationship."

Such significance has merited the brews' recognition on the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage List of Humanity in 2022 for the Chinese tea ceremony, and a nomination in 2024 for teh tarik. **P**

FOR FURTHER READING

The Chinese Art of Tea by John Blofeld

The Ancient Art of Tea: Wisdom from the Old Chinese Tea Masters by Warren Peltier



Mr Kenry Peh, fourth-generation owner Pek Sin Choon, demonstrating the gongfu method of brewing tea. This 100-year-old tea merchant which specialises in the Nanyang tea tradition has recently been awarded the Steward of Intangible Cultural Heritage 2024 Award.

JULINA KHUSAINI has been a docent with the Malay Heritage Centre and Kampong Gelam Heritage Trail for more than a decade.

THE SCARLET HIGHWAY

MELISSA NESBITT TRAVELS THE SILK ROAD IN SEARCH OF ITS SURPRISING CURRENCY: NOT SILK, BUT STONES



This lithograph depicts a typical caravanserai scene. The word caravanserai is the marriage of two Persian words: kāravan (a group of travellers) and sara (an enclosed building). Lithograph of Caravân-Sérail-i-Châh, Casbin, by Eugène Flandin, 1840, from Voyage en Perse, avec Flandin, éd. Gide et Baudry, 1851. Image sourced from Wikimedia Commons.

Journey with me to 9th century Kashgar where we arrive at a bustling *caravanserai*, a large guesthouse, one of hundreds dotting the well-trodden trade routes, heaving with nomads and traders, like us, travel-weary and thirsty. In the expansive courtyard, we instruct the youngest of our party to mind the camels. Eager for an hour or two – or three or four, who can say? – of rest, we venture toward the welcome shade of the arcade. A shimmery finger of dusty sunlight points through the nearest archway and we follow it inside and find a table with benches beside to sit upon. The table is already occupied, but we are invited to share it with a bearded man and his fidgeting apprentice. The din from without – the approaching jangle of caravan bells and the strike of hooves against stone – fades as our new companion shares his tale. We learn he has travelled from Persia. Perhaps he carries lapis, turquoise or agate, we think. Although he does not admit to carrying gems, as gem merchants ourselves, we recognize the proprietary patting of his pocket: the subconscious reassurance that one’s pouch of treasures has not fallen into the hands of thieves.

He murmurs to his apprentice and the boy runs off, returning after a short while with copper mugs of steaming tea, spiced with cardamom. The tea is bitter, but it cuts through the sand-grit in our throats. Our Persian friend fumbles in the folds of his cloak and produces a leather pouch from which he pulls a large lapis. The finest quality. I want to trade, but I tell him I am not impressed by a single lapis. I draw out my own pouch and upend it, allowing a ruby the size of a camel’s tooth to tumble into my palm.

THE JOURNEY OF A STONE

It’s easy to imagine the above scene unfolding tens of thousands of times across centuries, along the Silk Road, a 6500 kilometres network of routes travelled by merchants for over a thousand years. The Silk Road was named for the popular commodity of the time, silk, which was first produced in China around 3000 BCE. Lightweight, highly favoured and produced uniquely in the Orient, silk was an ideal product for traders to pack. Princeton University professor Xin Wen explains, “Your carrying capacity was very limited, so you brought whatever was most valuable, but also the lightest...Not only does silk fit these characteristics exactly—high value, low weight—but it’s also extremely versatile.” However, after silk-making technology was adopted in the Mediterranean, the Chinese-produced silks no longer captured the market. Paper had



The Silk Routes at their height in the late 8th century. Image sourced from the World History Encyclopedia.

a similar story. It was first produced in China around the 3rd century and enjoyed its time in the Silk Road spotlight, but it only took a few hundred years for paper-making techniques to spread along the same route, reducing the demand for paper trade.

Today we refer to the Silk Road more broadly as the Silk Routes. The Northern route linked China to Europe via the Gobi Desert, Persia and the Middle East. The Southern route, also known as the Maritime Silk Road, bridged the ports between the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean, and it is along this route that many gems, such as rubies and pearls, were mined and harvested. Unlike silk and paper, which remained in high demand only until Europeans were able to produce their own, the gem market wasn't subject to advancing technology elsewhere. Gem mines couldn't be reproduced. You either had them or you didn't. Gems were steady business, ensuring their popularity along the trade routes linking Asia to Europe, overland and by sea.

While many jewels, from pearls to diamonds, travelled along these ancient Silk Routes, some of the most valuable gems were red: rubies and spinels. These dazzling flecks of vermeil peppered the Silk Routes, playing a significant role in shaping various facets of society across the region. It's fascinating to consider how these little scarlet rocks influenced cultural beliefs as the gems became symbols of divinity, power and protection along Asia's ancient trade routes.

THE KING OF GEMS

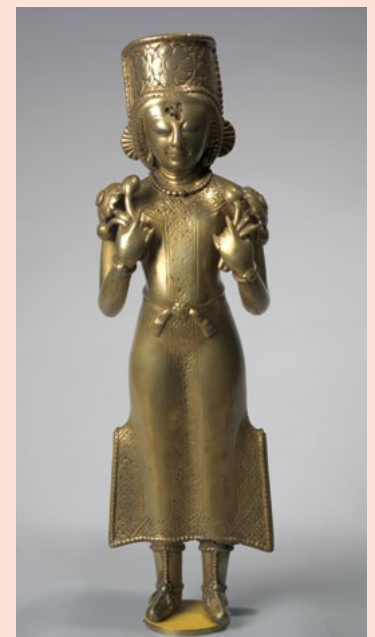
The Sanskrit word for ruby, *ratnaraj*, means *the king of gems* – and for good reason. Rubies, plentiful in ancient Burma and Ceylon, have been treasured for millennia, not only for their beauty but for their mystical, spiritual and political power across various Asian cultures. Since 2500 BCE many of the world's finest rubies have been mined in north-central Burma's Mogok Valley. In fact, Stone Age



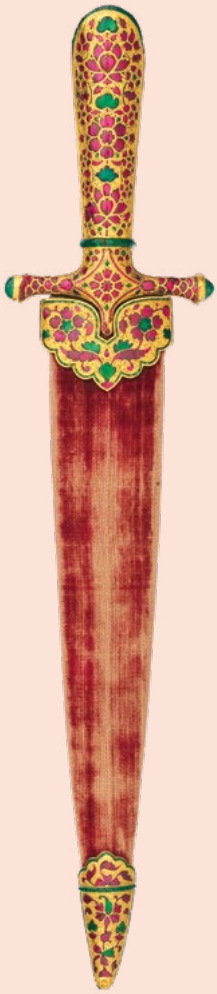
This 19th century, South Indian Pendant with Lingam and Yoni is a beautiful example of how rubies were used to embellish decorative religious items. Image courtesy of the Collection of Indian Heritage Centre, Singapore.



This bejewelled pendant from Nepal, c. 17th century, was made to hang on a sculpture of a deity. Surya's image, flanked by attendants, is carved in the centre of the pendant. Image courtesy of The Cleveland Museum of Art.



Brass statue of the Surya c. 8th century. Surya is worshipped throughout the Indian subcontinent and the Himalayas, alongside other Hindu and Buddhist deities. Image courtesy of The Cleveland Museum of Art.



Dagger with scabbard. 17th century, Indian, Mughal. This dagger might not be optimal in a blade fight, but in a contest of pretty blades, it would present strong competition. Image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

An archer's ring featuring dozens of beautiful, tiny rubies. India, c. 17th – 18th centuries. Image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art.



tools such as hammerstones have been discovered in the valley, underscoring the antiquity of humankind's fascination with these gems. In Burma, the pull of rubies was centred in mysticism and lore. Warriors believed that rubies, with their blood-coloured hue, held protective powers, granting their wearers invulnerability in battle. Some of the warriors not only wore these jewel talismans on their person, but they went so far as to embed the gems directly under their skin, especially in vulnerable-to-battle-wounds areas such as the chest and shoulders. They believed this ritual would invoke total immunity from spears or blades.

Rubies held similar mystic qualities in India, where they were believed to be powerful against bleeding disorders and inflammation. But beyond mysticism, they also held religious significance in Hindu traditions and were considered a suitable offering to the god Krishna, with his appreciation proportionate to the size of the oblation. As declared in the religious text, the *Harita Smriti*, "He who worships Krishna with rubies will be reborn as a powerful emperor. If with a small ruby, he will be born a king." But Krishna was not the only god swayed by rubies.

According to Vedic scriptures, the Sun God, Surya, creator of the material universe, is also especially pleased by rubies. While rubies were often seen embellishing decorative religious items, they were equally popular outside the spiritual sphere, where they were often found in jewellery, trinkets and even weapons.

Archery was a popular sport in 17th century India (which was both a consumer and a distributor of rubies coming from Ceylon and Burma), where participants drew the bowstring using their thumbs. To prevent chafing or injury from the bow, archers wore rings. But beyond serving a functional purpose, these rings were also worn for ornamental adornment, as statement pieces, with the more elaborately decorated pieces signifying the wearer's greater rank and social status.

IMPOSTER RUBIES

Highly sought after from ancient royal courts to Buddhist temples, the ruby was seen not just as a gemstone, but as a symbol of divine energy, protection and power. But rubies weren't the only red gems associated with influence. Historically, spinels and rubies were thought to be one and the same. It wasn't until the 18th century when advancements in the field of mineralogy led to the understanding that rubies and spinels were in fact two different gems, earning members of the latter category the nickname 'imposter ruby'.

Many of the largest red gems sold as rubies in ancient *caravanserais* are today classified as spinels. Consider, for example, *The Timur Ruby*. Mammoth in size at 361 carats, this famous gem was named after Timur, ruler of the Timurid Empire, who is believed to have acquired the ruby during his 1398 invasion of Delhi, an epic siege known as the Sack of Delhi. Centuries later this same gem, this sparkling, blood-red 'spoils of war', was snatched up by the British East India Company and presented to Queen Victoria, who wore it set in an elaborate necklace designed to allow its wearer to swap out the centrepiece. (This way the Queen could wear *The Timur Ruby* to one engagement and swap the jewel



In ancient times, spinels were mined throughout central and southeast Asia, and they were sold as rubies along the Silk Routes. The spinels in these 17th century earrings (top image) crafted in Nepal would have been sold as rubies. Likewise, it's very possible that the red gems strung around Emperor Jahangir's neck in this posthumous Mughal portrait (bottom image) were spinels sold as rubies. Both images courtesy of The Cleveland Museum of Art.



The world's second largest (known) spinel, Catherine the Great's Ruby, sits prominently atop her crown in this portrait. Catherine II (1729-96), Empress of Russia, c.1765 by Vigilius Eriksen. Image courtesy of Royal Collection Enterprises Limited, 2025, Royal Collection Trust.

out for the *Koh-i-nûr* diamond for another event.) Today the piece remains part of the British royal collection. Interestingly, *The Timur Ruby* is actually a spinel and not a ruby, despite its long-held moniker suggesting the contrary. *The Timur Ruby's* mineralogical makeup may have been misrepresented, but its provenance is hard to argue. Like any treasured personal effects, its owners labelled it over the years, and it bears an impressive list of Mughal Emperors and Persian Shahs etched into its facets.

Even larger than Timur's spinel is *Catherine the Great's Ruby*, today on display at the Moscow Kremlin Armory State Diamond Fund. It attended its final coronation ceremony atop the head of the ill-fated Nicholas II in 1896.

YOU SAY RUBY, I SAY SPINEL

Certainly, it seems rubies were popular talismans and offerings amongst mystics and the devout. Rubies were a symbol of affluence and influence amongst the rich and powerful. But it appears the stratospheric rich and powerful gravitated toward spinels...even if they believed at the time that these 'imposter' jewels were rubies.

ONE FOR ME, ONE FOR YOU

Sipping our cardamom tea at our rough-worn table inside the Kashgari *caravanserais*, we are tempted to trade our ruby for some lapis and jade. But I glance again at the plump pebble, the colour of pigeon blood, almost blue it's so red. The afternoon sunlight meanders lazily through the open arcade and catches on the gem. Resplendent, it blushes in my palm as though flirting with us. I return it to its pouch, and that to the safety of the folds of my cloak. This ruby, or spinel – who can say for another thousand years? – can travel with us further. And so, our powerful red rock journeys on, moving across empires, from ancient royal courts to sacred temples, perhaps even to the end of the Silk Road. 📌



Baba Junayd Is Rude to Umar and Turns Him Away from the Caravanserai, from the *Hamzanama*. India, c. 1570. Image courtesy of Freer Gallery of Art, National Museum of Asian Art.

MELISSA NESBITT is a docent at the National Museum of Singapore. She has always been partial to sapphires, but she will be paying closer attention to rubies and spinels moving forward.

CRIMSON FURY – UNMASKING THE CHUVANNA THADI CHARACTERS IN KATHAKALI

GAYATRI SASI TAMPI STEPS INTO THE BLAZING WORLD OF THESE RED BEARDED DANCERS

The author would like to thank Mr Kalamandalam Biju Vanamali of Bhaskar's Arts Academy for his assistance with the technical aspects of the article.

Amidst the warm glow of temple lamps, the music swings to a menacing beat. A visceral, piercing scream cuts through the night. The colourful curtain is pushed down by an ominous, fierce figure in red. Children cover their faces. The audience is spellbound...

This marks the entry of the *Chuvanna Thadi*, the aggressive and villainous character in *Kathakali*, the illustrious 17th century classical art form of Kerala. A rich tapestry of dance, drama and music, *Kathakali* narrates stories, mostly from the Indian epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharatha*. In Malayalam, *Katha* means 'story' and *Kali* means 'play,' so *Kathakali* incorporates storytelling – predominantly through gods and demons. Characters from this highly systematised art form include the noble *Pacha* (green), the arrogant *Kathi* (knife), the fierce *Chuvanna Thadi* (red beard), the demonic *Kari* (soot) and the gentle *Minukku* (sparkle).

CHUVANNA THADI

More than just fiery villains, *Chuvanna Thadi* characters internalise darkness and are personifications of obscurity. By exploding on to the stage with their red beards, brute force and thunderous percussion, they signal the arrival of destruction and inner turmoil.

Symbolically, red stands for fury. The bold red makeup



A defiant Dakshan faces the fuming Veerabhadran and the ferocious Bhadrakali as they unleash their divine wrath on him (left to right). Photo taken by Rajeev Warriar. Image courtesy of Bhaskar's Arts Academy, Singapore.

and the vibrant costumes reflect characters consumed by primal rage. *Chuvanna Thadi* characters often wield positions of power but get caught in the trappings of arrogance and cruelty, thus reinforcing the cycle of unrighteousness and ultimately, downfall.

CRAFTING THE DEMON

Kathakali performers spend hours transforming into gods and demons. The natural red pigment of their makeup is made by crushing *Chayilyam* (a type of stone) and emulsifying it with coconut oil. It signifies rage. Then comes a defining element, the *Chutti*, which is made of thin white paper strips, rice paste and calcium carbonate. It is white and ornate and outlines the *Chuvanna Thadi* character's nose and cheeks.

To add menace, performers apply a tiny seed of turkey berry to the lower eyelid. The result is bloodshot eyes. Charcoal soot collected from oil lamps is creamed with coconut oil and used for the dramatic eye make-up.

Their costumes are equally spectacular. The upper garment is heavy and furry, symbolising their wild, uncivilised spirit. The striking, red-rimmed crown, the *Kuttichaamaram*, is larger than the regular crown of the other characters, asserting the *Chuvanna Thadi*'s imposing presence.



Veerabhadran – a tempest of rage and righteous destruction. Photo taken by Rajeev Warriar. Image courtesy of Bhaskar's Arts Academy, Singapore.

NOTES OF MAYHEM

Rhythmic intensity is integral to these characters. Their introduction on stage as well as their movements are set to powerful beats on percussion instruments like *Chenda*, *Maddalam*, *Chengila* and *Ilathalam*.

The vocal performances are set to the *sopanam* style – a traditional form of sacred, temple music from Kerala. Two



Pictured here are the majestic Lord Sriraman, his brother, Lakshmanan, and the monkey king, Sugreevan, from the Kathakali play Bali Vadham (The Slaying of Bali). Image courtesy of Paramount Photographers, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala.

singers – the lead, *Ponnani* and the assistant, the *Shingidi* – sing verses from the Kathakali plays in *Manipravalam*, a blend of Sanskrit and Malayalam.

The music shifts dramatically with the entry of the red bearded character. It is ominous and follows a rapid, thunderous pattern. Guttural tones from the singers and visceral screams and utterances from the performers heighten the tension.

EXPRESSIONS OF FURY

These characters embody the emotion of fury. Secondary expressions like disgust and mockery accompany them. Intense facial expressions and eye movements display wrath, arrogance, sarcasm, disgust and inner turmoil.

Unlike the other characters, *Chuvanna Thadi* characters enjoy freedom of movement in their gestures. Their movements as well as hand gestures are exaggerated to match their arresting personalities. In contrast to the more noble characters, they stomp, leap and use wide stances to dominate the stage – especially in combat.



Drums of dread – The Maddalam and Chengila (in picture) in combination with others like the Chenda and Ilathalam, fuel the fury of the characters. Photo taken by Rajeev Warriar. Image courtesy of Bhaskar's Arts Academy, Singapore.

LEGENDS IN RED: FEW ICONIC CHUVANNA THADI CHARACTERS

Veerabhadran was created by Lord Shiva to destroy Daksha when he insulted him and his wife, Sati. He carries out Shiva's command to kill Daksha. Though righteous in intent,



The Chuvanna Thadi in quiet surrender to the Chutti artist who paints him into being. Photo taken by Rajeev Warriar. Image courtesy of Bhaskar's Arts Academy, Singapore.

his terrifying presence and enraged energy makes him a powerful *Chuvanna Thadi* character.

Dushasan, the villainous brother of Duryodhanan in Mahabharatha, is notorious for disrobing Draupadi. He not only delights in her humiliation, but is also conceived and cruel. He meets a violent, theatrical death at the hands of Bhima.

The monkey king, Sugreevan, though loyal to Lord Rama, is of a fiery temperament. He is exiled by his brother, Bali and seeks Rama's help to defeat him. His character arc is complex, and he evolves when guided by virtue.

Bakan, a demon who terrorises and devours humans, Bakan symbolises unchecked evil. He is also slain by Bhima. His depiction invokes fear and excitement and reinforces the triumph of virtue.

REVELATIONS IN CRIMSON

These characters challenge audience perceptions and evoke profound emotions in them. Red serves as a visual cue for danger. Arrogance, cruelty and demonic power are central to these characters, but their defeat brings moral order. Often holding positions of power, they symbolise corruption and the consequences of unrighteousness. These performances evoke fear, fascination and finally relief. Their defeats are cathartic and affirms the triumph of righteousness. *Chuvanna Thadi* characters mirror societal values – misuse of authority, however powerful, is destined for doom.

ECHOES OF DIVINE ORDER

Despite evolving tastes and performance styles, *Chuvanna Thadi* characters remain as gripping as ever. They test the performers' prowess and entrance the audiences with their energy. Growling, leaping and throwing fiery glances, they are archetypes of cosmic balance. They remind us that when artfully portrayed, evil also plays a pertinent role in reflection, transformation and powerful storytelling. 

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JADE, TEARS, AND FANFIC: APPRECIATING AND REIMAGINING 'RED MANSIONS' AESTHETICS

REBECCA YING CHENG REVISITS THE MULTI-DIMENSIONAL *DREAM OF THE RED MANSIONS*
AND RELIVES ITS ICONIC MOMENTS



Rebecca Cheng's collection of different versions of *Dream of the Red Mansions*. She gifted some other versions to friends before moving to Singapore. Photo taken by Rebecca Cheng.

The colour red represents passion, prosperity and celebration and is deeply rooted in Chinese tradition as an auspicious shade. In the profound narrative of *Dream of the Red Mansions* (红楼梦), also translated as *Dream of the Red Chamber* – a world-renowned 18th-century novel by Cao Xueqin (曹雪芹, 1715–1763) and one of the great classics in Chinese literature, red also uniquely unveils layers of sorrow and philosophical contemplation, creating a rich tapestry of meaning.

A LIFE WOVEN INTO FICTION

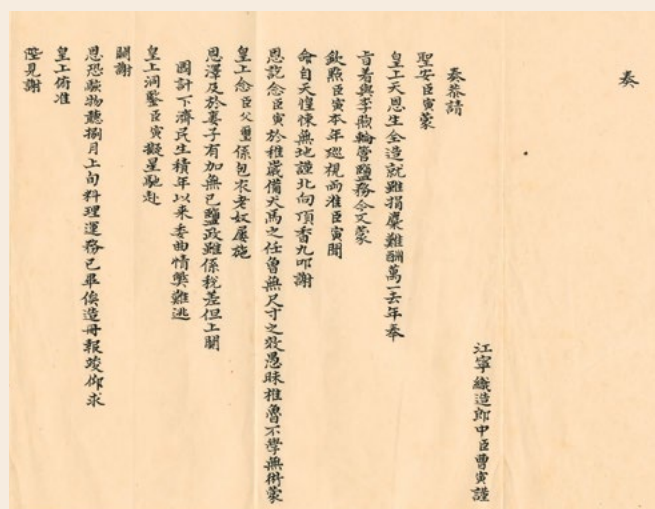
The book is believed to be partly autobiographical and reflects the rise and fall of the author's once eminent and wealthy family.

Dream of the Red Mansions opens with a leftover stone from the goddess Nüwa. Having gained sentience, this stone transforms into the Spirit Stone. It enters the mortal realm, descending to the Jia family alongside Jia Baoyu. Favoured by his grandmother from a young age, Baoyu detests the traditional pursuit of officialdom. Baoyu prefers the company of his cousins Lin Daiyu and Xue Baochai and other young women in the inner quarters and enjoys poetry, flowers and tea.

Daiyu – a girl whose name contains the character 'jade' (玉) – embodies the purity and nobility of the gemstone, resonating with her life's motto: "As pure as I came, so pure shall I depart." Her eyes, often described as "mist-traced eyebrows" and "hills painted with distant dusk (远山含黛)," however, perpetually glisten with unshed tears, symbolising constant sorrow from love's torments and fate's oppression.

Baoyu and Daiyu are soulmates and they pledge their hearts to each other. Meanwhile, Baochai, whose golden locket is believed to be a symbol of couple pairing with Baoyu's jade, is entangled in the relationship.

However, along with the Jia family's downfall, Daiyu dies, with her tears exhausted, and the rest of the young women also meet tragic fates. Ultimately, Baoyu sees through the illusions of the mortal world, casts aside the Spirit Stone, leaving behind only "a vast expanse of white, truly clean."



A letter from the book's author's grandfather to the emperor, written in August of 1704. He respectfully greeted the emperor and requested permission to journey to the capital to express gratitude. It shows the position of power that the family once held. Image courtesy of the Digital Archive from National Palace Museum of Taiwan.



Jinling Twelve Beauties: Lin Daiyu Burying Flowers, painting (on silk) by Fei Daxnu (1801-1850) Lin Daiyu Burying Flowers (黛玉葬花) is one of the most iconic and poignant scenes from *Dream of the Red Mansions*. The scene depicts Daiyu tenderly interring fallen blossoms even as she is overwhelmed by sorrow for her own delicate fate. Ode to the Burial of Flowers (葬花吟), the poem Daiyu recites, is one of the book's most beloved poems. Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

The stone, having witnessed a human dream interwoven with prosperity and disillusionment, inscribes its experiences upon itself, transcribed as “*The Story of the Stone*”, another name for “*Dream of the Red Mansions*.”

A LIFETIME WITH THE DREAM: FROM ROMANCE TO AESTHETICS

I can trace my connection with *Dream of the Red Mansions* back to preschool, with the illustrated comic strip of the book. Later, we studied excerpts of it in secondary school Chinese textbooks. Under the teacher's patient analysis and explanations, I tasted the charm of this classic and began to read the original book. Of course, I was also glued to the 1987 TV series that brought the characters to life. Today, the book remains a recurring read, revisited every few years.

My enduring personal journey with this book naturally leads to a fundamental question: what is the enduring magic of this Qing dynasty (1644–1911) fiction that still captivates readers like me in the 21st century, bridging the gap of generations?

Beyond its beautifully described emotional narrative and pervasive sense of ‘unfulfilled longing’, *Dream of the Red Mansions* also constructs an exquisitely refined spiritual world of the literati.



Promotional poster from the TV show *Dream of the Red Mansions* (1987 TV series). Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

THE ULTIMATE SPIRITUAL AESTHETICS OF LITERATI

The premodern Chinese social hierarchy of “scholars, farmers, artisans, and merchants” (士农工商) saw the literati-official class monopolise political and cultural authority, thereby establishing their aesthetic preferences as the dominant and legitimised norm.

Throughout the novel, Cao exquisitely details the refined pursuits of Baoyu, Daiyu and the women of the Jia household. It describes their mastery of the conventional scholarly arts – *qin* (zither), *go*, calligraphy and painting.

Take for example Baoyu's elder sister, Yuanchun. Upon her return as an imperial consort to visit her family, she inscribes plaques for the garden villas. Calligraphy is more than skill; it embodies scholarly spirit – each stroke revealing character and temperament. When the young women gather, they engage in *go* matches or discuss painting techniques.

Poetry and painting go hand in hand.

Their witty repartees during poetry gatherings and quick-wittedness in solving lantern riddles and playing drinking games showcase traditional noble ladies' cultural refinement.

Characters are portrayed through poetry, and emotions are conveyed through music. Daiyu explains the principles of the zither to Baoyu: “The ancients originally played the



A late 19th-century painting from a series of brush paintings by Qing Dynasty artist Sun Wen (孙温 1818-1904), depicting scenes from the novel *Dream of the Red Mansions*. This painting illustrates a day during the flower-sending festival within Grand View Garden. Baoyu and Baochai are seen observing cranes dancing. In the distance Daiyu is shown burying flowers.

zither to cultivate virtue and nourish their nature. To play, one must have a righteous heart and proper appearance and wait for a time when heaven and earth are clear and harmonious." Miao Yu, a Buddhist nun, overhearing Daiyu's performance, discerns from the sound, "The resonance is too intense – it may not last." True enough, months later, Daiyu passes away in tears.

Such a poetic life could not be complete without the elegance of tea. Emphasising mindfulness and the appreciation of subtle flavours, the tea ceremony further distinguishes the literati's refined sensibilities.



Poetry Wine Game Token made of ivory, likely from the qing dynasty (1644-1912). Participants in wine games had to recite poetry, lyrics, songs, essays, idioms or common sayings according to the game master's instructions. Those who made a mistake would be fined a cup. Wine games could both enliven the atmosphere of a banquet and showcase the clever wit of scholars. Image courtesy of the Collection of the National Museum of China (<http://www.chnmuseum.cn>).

This aesthetic heritage continues to be seen as indicators of intellectual refinement and artistic appreciation in mainstream Chinese cultural tastes. It explains the enduring influence of *Dream of the Red Mansions*.

DIGITAL ECHOES OF A CLASSIC: HONOURING AND REWRITING

Contemporary readers of the classic pay homage by rereading, discussing and researching it. On the Douyin platform (China's TikTok), the hashtag #DreamOfTheRedMansions has gathered millions of users, generating an astonishing 41.1 billion views, with content ranging from serious textual analysis to creative reinterpretations.

Readers also resolve the unfulfilled longing through reconstruction. On the biggest online literature platform in China, over 3,000 fan fiction novels are reimagining the narrative space of *Dream of the Red Mansions*, with both major and supporting characters receiving new interpretations and storylines. On the international fan fiction platform *Achieve Of Our Own*, innovative settings like *Lin Daiyu Uproots the Willow Tree* have sparked widespread discussion.

As a loyal reader, I look forward to witnessing the classic's new transformations in our era. Everyone who loves it will continue writing their new 'Red Mansions' chapters. 

FOR FURTHER READING

Cao Zhan, *Britannica* <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Cao-Zhan>

REBECCA YING CHENG is an FOM Member, a newly-minted docent of the Peranakan Museum, and co-head of docent training for the Peranakan Museum for 2025/26.

KEONG SAIK ROAD: THERE AND BACK AGAIN

KATHERINE DAVIES EXPLORES THE RED LIGHTS OF BUKIT PASOH

Keong Saik Road began as a prestigious address, home to exclusive gentlemen's clubs and then later, the residences of their concubines. It had a certain cachet. However, in the 1950s and 1960s, it became a place of seedy disrepute. Now it is back, filled with boutique hotels and trendy eateries in charming, colourful shop houses. Yet if one looks hard enough, its past is clear to see and should be remembered.



Keong Saik Road's beautiful shophouses still hold their own against the dramatic skyscrapers. Photo taken by the author.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

It's one of history's crueller twists that a road named for a champion of women's rights became infamous for their exploitation. The street was named after Tan Keong Saik (陈恭锡). Born in Malacca, Tan came to Singapore in 1890 and worked first as a clerk before co-founding the Straits Steamship Company, and also sitting on the board of the Tanjong Pagar Dock Company. The honour of having



Pipa tsai are the young girls who provide music to entertain the businessmen who frequented the tea houses. Photo courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore.

a road named after him was due to his commitment to female education and protection. He arranged for his three daughters to be taught English by Miss Sophia Blackmore, founder of the Methodist Girls' School of Singapore. Tan was also one of the first members of both the Chinese Advisory Board and the Po Leung Kuk, a society that rescued women and girls from both brothels and domestic bondage. The society focused on giving the girls real life skills that would make them desirable wives. Further protection was afforded to the girls by the strict vetting process of potential husbands with each successful applicant posting a bond guaranteeing good behaviour.

So how did a road named after someone who believed in female empowerment become part of the so called 'blue triangle' of brothels?



Zhun Ti Gong or Cundhi Gong Temple where the majie would hold the sor hei ceremony. Photo courtesy of @Chinatown Business Association.

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

In the 1930s Keong Saik Road was a place of clan associations and commerce. However, due to this concentration of businessmen there developed a secondary requirement for post-meeting entertainment. This led to the creation of luxury teahouses where women trained in almost geisha-esque skills, equipped with amusing stories interwoven with poems and songs for scintillating conversations, entertained businessmen. Music was often provided by *pipa tsai* (琵琶仔), usually young girls, who played the pipa, a short necked wooden lute, whilst the clients indulged in food, wine, gambling and the dreaded colonial vice of opium.

It was in these opulent settings that the wealthy businessmen would find their mistresses. Having paid off the girl's 'owner', the new patron would often house the *Yi Nai* ('second milk' in Cantonese, meaning second wife) in the surrounding neighbourhood. In fact, there were so many housed in Keong Saik Road that it became known as Mistress Street.

By the 1950s the area had transformed, with entertainment venues gradually sinking into vice, and its proximity to Smith Street sealed its reputation. Smith Street was a 'fleshpot' with over twenty brothels crammed into shop houses serving the ever-growing immigrant population. Keong Saik Road on the other hand, even as it fell, still maintained a thin veneer of glamour, as it was then known as the location of high-class brothels.

By the 1970s, however, even this facade had vanished. In her book *17A Keong Saik Road*, Charmaine Leung recounts the discomfort of walking past the men who loitered in the street waiting to glimpse the painted *ayam* (Malay for 'chicken'). She recalls that clients would come and go swiftly, but the men who would not or could not pay for services would stay, making comments and harassing any female in the area. They were the ones who gave the women the derogatory label of 'chickens'.

AND AT THE OTHER END OF THE SCALE...

The irony of Keong Saik Road becoming a notorious den of vice was not limited to the contradictory ambitions of its namesake. Located at number 13 is the Chinese temple of Zhun Ti Gong dedicated to Guanyin, the Goddess of Mercy. It is here that the *majie* (妈姐, meaning 'mother and sister') undertook their vows of chastity during the *sor hei* (梳起 in Cantonese, meaning combing up ceremony). The

majority of the *majie* were originally from the Shunde district of China, an area famous for its silk production. As women usually had smaller hands, they were the preferred workers in this industry, giving them a choice besides marriage. Thus, in the 18th and 19th centuries a group of women known as *zhishu nü* (自梳女, self-combing women) arose. These women 'dressed their own hair' by choosing not to marry. By undergoing the *sor hei* ritual not only did these women declare that they would remain celibate, but also by taking vows in front of a Buddhist priest, they were – unlike unmarried women of the time – then

considered adults. The enterprising Keong Siak Bakery in Keong Saik Road honours the past with 'sor hei' buns.

With the Great Depression severely disrupting the silk trade, thousands of these intrepid women chose to leave their country, travelling to Malaysia, Hong Kong and Singapore. Many became *amahs*, and while not all *amahs* were *majie*, the *majie* – though wearing the same black-and-white uniform – could always be distinguished by their distinctive hairstyle.

INDEPENDENCE

Once Singapore achieved its independence in 1965, prostitution was dealt with the same practical approach to which the new government tackled all social issues. Dr Liu Thai Ker, Chief Planner created carefully zoned areas in which prostitution would be contained based on two main justifications. Firstly, a clearly defined red-light district gave the government a certain amount of control. Secondly, as prostitution is the oldest profession in the world, the new government acknowledged that it was unstoppable. Licensing at least allowed for regular health screenings and some level of protection for the women involved.

Keong Saik Road under this original zoning plan was once again to be an area of high-end prostitution.

A NEW FACE

The latest iteration of Keong Saik Road began in the early 1990s when the URA (Urban Redevelopment Authority) decided to sell several of the shophouses that line the street.



The Keong Saik Road Bakery honoured the history of the street by making Sor Hei buns. Photo courtesy of www.KeongSaikBakery.com



Gentrification has led to tourism of a different kind. Photo taken by the author.

They were quickly purchased, restored to their former glory and repurposed as boutique hotels, upmarket restaurants and bars, giving Keong Saik a new gentrified image. With the higher rents, by 2013 there were only ten brothels left with the last one allegedly closing in 2023.

This new feeling of respectability was further enhanced in 2017 when the road was voted number four in the top ten list of places to visit in the whole of Asia by the Lonely Planet. Now, tourists come to take pictures of the beautifully coloured shop houses rather than to steal a glimpse of the forbidden.

LET US NOT FORGET

The last red and white light box that once enticed clients in has gone dark. The Japanese restaurant now in that building has removed the box, and with it, the last quiet acknowledgment to the past. The women who worked in Keong Saik Road rarely left written records. They were usually from impoverished backgrounds, tricked by an acquaintance or forced by desperation into the dangerous trade. These working ladies unlike the lionised *samsui* women of red hat fame are not held up for praise. Their lives are not considered worthy of statues. Yet they, too, helped to shape Singapore. Whilst their stories might not be considered conventional heroic, they are important, and they should be remembered. 



17A Keong Saik Road looks different today from its 1970s notoriety without the red and white light box. Photo taken by the author.

KATHERINE DAVIES is a URA Chinatown Heritage Trails docent. She can be found in various coffee shops in her unending search for the perfect blueberry muffin.



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ANG KU KUEH – CELEBRATING THE 60TH ANNIVERSARY OF SINGAPORE WITH PERANAKAN BIRTHDAY CAKES

MARJUKKA LIEPPINEN IS FEASTING ON CAKES



Ang Ku Kueh, also known as kueh ku merah. The plate represents typical Peranakan Chinese nyonyaware: porcelain painted with bright, colourful enamel, often using contrasting colours and featuring auspicious motifs such as the phoenix and peony here. Photo courtesy of David Martin.

Ang Ku Kueh, red tortoise cake, is a pastry full of Chinese symbolism. Auspicious red colour, *ang*, symbolises joy and happiness while tortoises, *ku*, signify longevity and wealth. The word *kueh* can refer to either sweet or savoury cakes. It is also a collective term for Peranakan desserts.



Moulds for Ang Ku Kueh in the NUS Baba House, among them a mould which belonged to a famous kueh-maker Tan Dang Neo (1895-1974), also known as Bibik Kueh Ku. Photo taken by the author, courtesy of the NUS Baba House.

STEAMED RICE CAKES

These lovely little pastries are made of glutinous rice flour, which makes their skin soft and sticky, comparable to Japanese mochi cakes. The dough is dyed red. Before artificial colourings, one of the possible colourants was red yeast rice. Many recipes use sweet potato, which already gives the skin an orange-red tint. The Peranakan-style turtle cakes usually also have coconut milk and oil in the dough, making the final product moist. The sweet filling is often made of mung beans, with pandan leaves adding local flavour. Other options include ground peanuts, coconut or even yam paste. The filling is rolled into a small ball, covered with dough and pressed into a mould dusted with rice flour. Once moulded, they are steamed on a banana leaf and finally brushed with oil.

ORIGINS IN FUJIAN

Turtle cakes are believed to originate from the Chinese province of Fujian. This was the ancestral home of Singapore's Hokkien community. Their forefathers took along the tradition of this delightful treat when they immigrated to various settlements in Southeast Asian port cities. Even if the cake looks innocent, there might be a somewhat gruesome history behind it: tortoise shells had a role in divine purposes in ancient China, one of which may have been sacrificing them for good fortune and longevity. Since living turtles weren't always easy to get, replacements in turtle-shape, such as *Ang Ku Kueh*, were created for offerings.



Quantung e Fokien, Provincie della China, map from 1696, drawn by Vincenzo Maria Coronelli. Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

CELEBRATING THE FIRST FULL MOON OF NEWBORNS

Auspicious cakes symbolising longevity were made for birthday parties. Just as in most Chinese communities, the very first opportunity in Peranakan Chinese homes arose with babies' one lunar month celebrations, *muah guek*, during which the baby would be shaven clean, bathed and dressed to receive guests. One month was probably an important milestone in the old days, when infant mortality was high. This timeframe coincided also with the end of mothers' postpartum confinement, after which the mother took a medicinal bath and was again allowed to resume normal family life.

During the full moon ceremony, offerings like *Ang Ku Kueh* were laid on the family altar. Ancestors were informed about the new family member via similar offerings on the ancestral altar. Living family members and close friends got the information from the baby's father, who personally distributed them various food items, among them *Ang Ku Kueh*. Guests visiting the newborn were also given these cakes, since eating and gifting them represented blessings for the baby.

The full moon celebration is still in use in various forms, also among families with differing Chinese ancestry. Some use turtle-shaped cakes only to announce baby boys, whereas peach-shaped *kueh* means baby girl, others announce girls with turtle-shaped cakes and boys with cone-shaped cakes.

BIRTHDAY TREATS

If the infant mortality was higher before, the life expectancy was correspondingly lower and the age of 60 felt like an achievement to many. Peranakan Chinese families didn't often celebrate in grandeur the birthdays between one month and 60 years of age. Once this critical threshold had been passed, there was a grand birthday, *tua seh jit*, usually at 60 and every decade thereafter, although starting the banquets at 50 was possible, too. For these special occasions, a long table, *tok panjang*, along with the best dinnerware was used. The celebrant was traditionally given various food items and a pair of red candles wrapped in red paper, whereas guests received a large pair of *Ang Ku Kueh* as a symbol of longevity.

Similarly, the birthday of the Jade Emperor, known as well as the Ruler of Heaven, *Ti Kong* and Heavenly Grandfather, was commemorated with red tortoise cakes. His celebration, *Ti Kong Seh*, was on the ninth day of the first lunar month. *Ang Ku Kueh* also has an important role in many religious festivals and celebrations like the Lunar New Year. For those occasions, they are often purchased in sets of 12 as it's considered auspicious.



Ancestral altar in the Peranakan Mansion by Straits Enclave. Photo taken by the author.

KITCHEN GOD GIVES HIS REPORT

A Peranakan Chinese home was overseen by the Kitchen god, *Zao Jun*. Right before the Lunar New Year he would leave his altar high on the kitchen wall and go to heaven. There he would give his annual report of the household and reveal to the Jade Emperor who had been naughty and who had been nice. By giving the Kitchen God sweet offerings like *Ang Ku Kueh* before the departure, the hope was that it would sweeten his mouth to secure the blessings for the family for the coming year. Or maybe the *kueh* would make his mouth so sticky that it didn't open at all! The main offering, though, was usually *Kueh Bakol*, likewise sweet and sticky treat, so the strategy was the same.



The altar of the Kitchen God in the NUS Baba House, a heritage house contextualising Peranakan Chinese material culture within a domestic setting. Photo taken by the author, courtesy of the NUS Baba House.

EVOLVING TRADITIONS

In Peranakan culture, different types of *kuehs* were meant for sombre and festive occasions. A differentiation between altar offerings for the deceased and for the gods was made too. Another distinction was colour. Whereas red *ku kueh* was served at birthdays, black cakes could be used for ancestral worship, white or blue for funerals, and green for other offerings.

Nowadays, literally all colours of the rainbow as well as new flavours are available. At the same time, *Ang Ku Kueh* has become a more common snack for wider audiences without the original symbolism. Nevertheless, it still maintains the Peranakan Chinese traditions and hopefully this newfound popularity will keep it alive to the next generations and the next grand birthdays of Singapore! 🇸🇬



These days Ang Ku Kueh is a popular snack, and these turtle shaped cakes come in many colours and tastes. Photo courtesy of David Martin.

FOR FURTHER READING

The Way of Kueh: Savouring & Saving Singapore's Heritage Desserts by Christopher Tan.

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DRAGON'S BLOOD

LOUISE M. MACUL EXAMINES THE VANISHING TRADITIONS OF BORNEO'S DRAGON BLOOD AND THE ENDURING CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE COLOUR RED



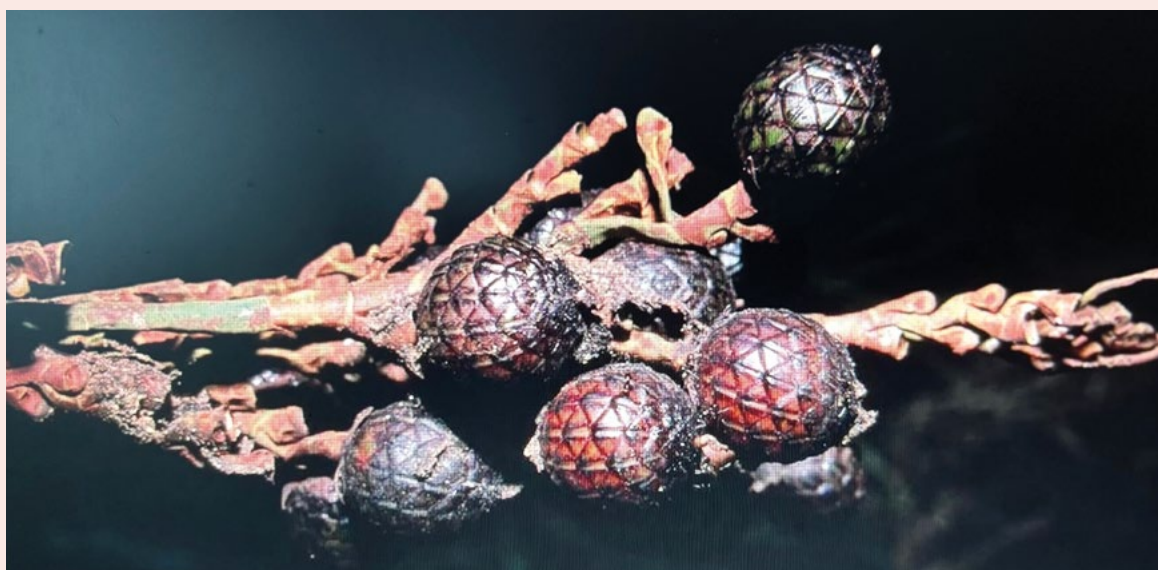
This painting of the giant Ukun Jun was created by the ethnic group Berawan of Long Jegan, Tinjar River, Sarawak. According to oral tradition, this ogre will snatch and eat the hearts of people, hence his blood-red eyes. Image from the Sarawak Museum collection. Photo taken by the author.

In small amounts and often just as a subtle accent, the red colour derived from Dragon's Blood can be found in various ritual and everyday objects of the nearly one hundred different ethnic groups across Borneo. Although the use of a red hue from something called Dragon's Blood can be found worldwide – from South America to South Korea – the botanical origins of the pigment in Borneo are as distinct as the objects they embellish. Beyond

its striking colour, Dragon's Blood carries a wealth of narratives that reflect the tangible and intangible heritage of Borneo.

THE BLOOD'S SOURCE

In the context of Borneo, Dragon's Blood refers to a pigment, known locally as *jernang*. This vibrant red substance is derived from specific rattan palms, including *Daemonorops didymophylla*, of the *Arecaceae* family. The genus *Daemonorops* translates to 'demon-possessed' and was first described in



Dragon's Blood (Daemonorops didymophylla) is locally called jernang. This fruit holds the red coloured resin used to make the coveted red pigment. Image courtesy of Palmweb.org. Photo taken by John Dransfield.



Daemonorops didymorphylla is a thorny, creeping rattan palm that clings to large trees. Image courtesy of Plantsystematics.org.

1830 by the German-Dutch botanist Carl Blume during his exploration of Sulawesi.

However, it was the renowned Italian botanist Odoardo Beccari who, during his visit to Borneo from 1865 to 1868, named the rattan species *Daemonorops draconcellus*; *dracon* meaning 'dragon'. He did this to distinguish it from similar species in the Malay Archipelago. Although Beccari noted the colour of the fruit, he primarily noted its medicinal properties, suggesting that it may have been used as *ubat* (traditional medicine) to treat digestive issues and provide anti-inflammatory benefits.

The creeping rattan palm features large, sharp thorns that enable it to cling to host trees, allowing it to ascend into the forest canopy in search of sunlight. While it is not classified as a protected species, *jernang*'s growth is inextricably linked to the health of the forest ecosystem. Unfortunately, extensive deforestation across Borneo has made it increasingly challenging for *jernang* to thrive. Like other rattan species, its reliance on larger trees for support makes *jernang* difficult to cultivate commercially, leading to its rarity in Borneo today.

HOW IS THE COLOUR OBTAINED?

The scales of the *jernang* fruit are coated with a red resin that can be processed in one of two primary methods. The first method involves scraping the resin off the fruit, then pounding it into a paste while mixing it with a small amount of water to facilitate easy application. The second method is a 'dry and shake' method that entails drying the fruit, then placing it into a large bamboo pole. The bamboo is shaken until the resin separates from the fruit, and then hand-pressed into a ball. Once formed, the paste from this ball of red resin is warmed to achieve a smooth consistency, making it easier to apply to surfaces. The processing allowed traditional crafters to effectively utilise Dragon's Blood pigment as a varnish or paint for decorative and practical purposes in crafts.

The red hue from Dragon's Blood is notable in museums and private collections. This pigment has been traditionally used on various hard and smooth surfaces, such as rattan, wood, and other organic materials. When considering the significance of the colour red in the



This Dragon's Blood pigment sample is wrapped in a palm leaf for transport and storage. It was donated by Lady Margaret Brooke to the British Museum in 1896. Image courtesy of the British Museum, London.



This soul ship, *banama tingang*, was painted on a board by the Ngaju people in the 19th century. It carries the soul of a deceased person to the soul village. The ship was painted on softwood with natural pigments, including Dragon's Blood. Image courtesy of International Foundation of Indonesian Culture and Asian Heritage, Hollenstedt, Germany,

material culture of Borneo, one might immediately think of the renowned *ikat* textiles, particularly the *Iban pua kumbu*, celebrated for their rich red hues as a background to complex patterns. However, it is essential to note that these textiles are not made using *jernang*, which serves as a pigment rather than a dye. The reds seen in Borneo's textiles derive from various natural dye sources that differ among ethnic groups. The intricate process of creating these textiles, combined with the diverse sources of red dyes, reflects the rich heritage and craftsmanship found within Borneo's cultural landscape.

DRAGON'S BLOOD AS A JUNGLE PRODUCT

Whether referred to as Dragon's Blood or *jernang*, historically, the vibrant red hue of this resin was highly sought after, not only by the indigenous people of Borneo who engaged in barter trade among themselves, but also by foreign traders. The Sarawak Gazette, the local newspaper under the Rajah Brooke dynasty, included a monthly 'Market Report' authored by the registrar of trade. This report lists various exported products

from Sarawak, reflecting both the economy and the interests of European and Chinese traders. Among the items categorised as 'jungle products'—encompassing a wide range of goods harvested from the rainforest—were items like birds' nests, *gutta percha*, *damar*, rattan, beeswax, sago and Dragon's Blood.

A resin sample in its indigenous product packaging is in the British Museum's collection. The specimen is carefully wrapped in a palm leaf and comes with a small stick dipped in the rich red resin to showcase its hue, akin to modern-day paint samples. This set was donated to the British Museum in 1896 by Rane Margaret Brooke, who contributed many such samples of jungle products, likely aiming to draw attention to the abundant resources of commercial value from Sarawak.

Dragon's Blood is a historical natural resource exchanged locally and internationally and embodies a significant cultural value. The resin's red hue and various applications underscore its importance within the material culture of Borneo, illustrating the interconnectedness of trade, tradition and artistry.



This hat, made by the Bidayuh ethnic group, is painted with Dragon's Blood. Dated 1880 from the Sadong River, Sarawak. Hats similar to this were worn by mothers to protect the souls of babies they were carrying. This hat belonged to Edward Gerrard, the British-based taxidermist for the Sarawak Museum when it was founded in 1886. He later sold it to the British Museum. Image courtesy of the British Museum, London.



A patterned basket with a wooden rim plaited by Iban women. Photo by Blehaut – a private collection in Kuching.



A Pinayawa (Bidayuh) man of northwest Borneo prepares his offerings to the spirits in a juah bireh (basket). This basket is used for rituals associated with planting paddy and harvesting rice. It is also featured in weddings and as an 'offertory basket' during a Catholic mass. Image courtesy of the Lontar Foundation, Jakarta.



The Lun Daye group of Sabah and Sarawak make this harvest basket with rattan supports covered with Dragon's Blood. The men of southwestern Borneo plait a similar basket named a kindai, with the rim also painted in Dragon's Blood or red colour. Image courtesy of the Lontar Foundation, Jakarta.

TINGED RED

In Borneo, often termed the 'Land of the Head Hunters,' the colour red carries a visceral quality, resonating with the region's rich history and cultural complexities. While the specific reasons for the varied uses of red among these groups may not be definitively understood, it is worth considering the significance of its prominent yet sparse use in traditional practices.

In many cultures, red is often associated with power and courage. The flags of Borneo, which incorporate red and represent Sarawak, Sabah, Brunei and Kalimantan, reflect this interpretation through a contemporary political lens, reflecting modern nationalistic sentiments and the aspirations of these states.

However, one might also contemplate whether this interpretation of red as a symbol of courage is rooted in a more collective unconscious. Carl Jung's concept of the collective unconscious suggests that certain themes and symbols are universally shared among cultures, influencing their values and beliefs. In this regard, the prominence of red in the traditional objects and political iconography of Borneo may echo deeper, enduring cultural narratives surrounding bravery, resilience and identity.

Ultimately, the use of red, whether seen in the context of traditional attire or the vibrant flags representing modern political entities, speaks to a shared heritage that transcends time. It serves as a visual reminder of the rich histories and values held by Borneo's diverse ethnic groups, while also adapting to contemporary meanings in the evolving landscapes of identity and nationhood.

THE ENDURING LEGACY OF COLOUR

Once a prized material in the region's arts and crafts, the use of Dragon's Blood today has dwindled significantly, primarily due to its rarity and the labour-intensive process

required for its production. This decline threatens the traditional ecological knowledge surrounding its collection and manufacture, which risks fading into obscurity.

Despite the reduced use of *jernang*, red plays a significant role in Bornean culture, embellishing many tangible cultural objects. Red's enduring presence creates a thread that connects the ancestors of Borneo's diverse ethnic groups to the present, acting as a living link to their history and identity. When queried about the significance of the colour, many individuals might simply respond, 'It is tradition.' This acknowledgement reflects a deep-rooted respect for cultural heritage, even if the original meanings associated with the colour have evolved or become obscured over time. What once may have symbolised specific historical or spiritual concepts now perhaps resonates with contemporary interpretations of identity, community and continuity.

In recognising that the meaning of colour is both fluid and deeply personal, we understand that the significance of red in Borneo today remains just as valuable as it was hundreds of years ago. It serves as a testament to the resilience and adaptability of cultural practices, ensuring that while specific elements may change, the essence of tradition endures. Consequently, the authenticity of colour, in the context of Borneo, is not merely rooted in its original form but in its ongoing relevance, narratives and the connections it fosters between generations. P

FOR FURTHER READING

Plaited Arts from the Borneo Rainforest, edited by Bernard Sellato.

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FISH HEAD CURRY: THE REAL SINGAPOREAN NATIONAL DISH CELEBRATES ITS 76TH BIRTHDAY

JOHN KOMAR ATTEMPTS TO DIG INTO THE MULTICULTURAL ORIGIN OF SINGAPORE FISH HEAD CURRY



The New York Times article from 1979 titled: "Singapore Special: Fish Head Curry", presenting the search of the author to the best fish head curry in Singapore. Images courtesy of the author.

From the popular song from the early 20th century, 'Won't You Come Home) Bill Bailey' (originally titled, 'Bill Bailey, Won't You Please Come Home?'), a somehow obscure theory advances that Bill Bailey did not want to come home as he had become addicted to Marian Jacob Gomez's fish head curry while in Singapore (article from James P. Sterna, the New York Times, 28 March 1979).

Apart from the joke, two reasons make fish head curry a significant representative of Singapore's culture: its bright red colour that originated from the spicy Kerala curry, and the red snapper's head used to cook it. But more than that is its multicultural origin which probably represents Singapore the best. This article proposes to dive into the birth of fish head curry and its popularisation, making it a real Singaporean dish.

A SINGAPOREAN DELICACY

In 1998 (10 April), *The Straits Times* described Fish Head Curry as a "proud Singapore invention", mentioning that the love of Singaporeans for fish head curry is the "real" explanation why the Merlion got a lion's head on a fish body (because the fish head had been used for curry). This satirical twist to the official Merlion narrative (with the fish symbolising Singapore's origins as a fishing village historically known as Temasek, and the lion's head recalling the legend of Sang Nila Utama spotting a lion when he landed in Singapore) that reflects an affectionate nod to both heritage and food. Indeed, multiple documents mention how foreign visitors in Singapore usually are amazed by local gourmets eating the entire fish head, the lips, the cheeks and up to the eyeballs. While it seems possible to date the birth of the fish head curry, it is impossible nowadays to count the number of places, from hawker stalls to high class restaurants, that offer this dish on their menu – the number is probably in the hundreds. For sure, everyone in Singapore has its own best spot for it.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF FISH HEAD CURRY

It is commonly accepted today that fish head curry was invented on Sophia Road by M. J. Gomez, no later than 1949, which makes the dish older than modern Singapore. Although Gomez himself arrived in Singapore in 1928 from Trivandrum (capital of Kerala, India), it is only by 1949 in Singapore that he merged the south Indian curry with the head of the fish. Originally, only the red bream fish was used in Gomez's restaurant, a fish known for its big teeth and bulging eyeballs (that never stops staring at you even once cooked). Later, Gomez's restaurant began using Ikan Merah (red snapper) for the recipe, and as the dish gained in popularity, Ikan Merah became the preferred fish for cooking. Most likely the reason for this switch was that red



Traditional fish head curry (most likely a red snapper) in its red coloured Tekala curry sauce. Photo sourced from the public domain.



Fishmonger selling the head of the fish (on the central section of the picture). Chua Mia Tee. KK Fresh Food Market (Kandang Kerbau/Tekka Market), 1979. Image courtesy of National Heritage Board (Roots.gov.sg).

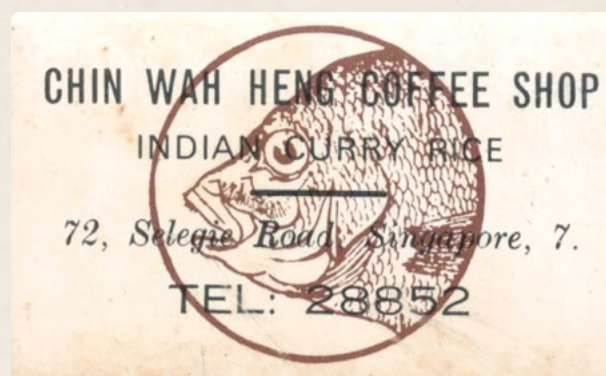


Family sharing a fish head curry during a gathering, eating on banana leaves as in the original Gomez restaurant; Eating on Banana Leaves, painted in 1979 by renowned Singapore artist Chua Mia Tee. Collection of National Gallery Singapore. Image courtesy of National Gallery Singapore.

snapper, with its bony oversized head, has never been a very popular fish among locals as the fish is considered too big for many dishes. Undeniably, this increase in demand resulted in a very affordable price, specifically as it opened a new opportunity for fishmongers who were able to sell the red snapper's head on its own as well as the body.

A SIGNATURE OF SINGAPORE MULTICULTURALITY

Interestingly, traditional fish curry using mackerel steaks was already on Gomez's menu from the beginning (in the late 1920s), but apparently the switch from the steak to the head of the fish really made a difference and started to attract attention. This switch from Gomez is sometimes described as a suggestion from customers, specifically from the many Chinese customers who were regulars in his restaurant (eating fish head – such as Song fish – was already a Chinese tradition). It is indeed not a secret that Chinese would find the flesh from the fish head and cheek delectably sweet. In fact, Indian cuisine is not really known to cook the head of the fish at all, which strengthens the idea that Gomez fish head curry has somehow benefited from a Chinese influence in Singapore. Anyway, this resulted in a perfect harmony as the fish heads went perfectly with Gomez's curry of grated coconut flesh, coconut milk, tamarind juice, fresh red chilies, ginger, onion, garlic, turmeric powder, fennel, curry leaves, tomatoes, eggplants, etc.



A pioneering eatery that helped popularise fish head curry as a Singaporean delicacy. Chef Hoong Ah Kong was one of the first Chinese chefs to experiment with this dish and it became a hit at his restaurant Chin Wah Heng in 1951. Image courtesy of graphic.sg.

FROM HAWKER CENTRES' POPULARITY TO MICHELIN GUIDE TABLES

Gomez's restaurant was described in a 1979 article in *The New York Times* as a "dirt-floor establishment in the musty old colonial shed on Mount Sophia Road." But in the meantime, it was "perpetually packed", selling 40 to 50 fish head curry dishes every day. Obviously, it was not about the place but rather about the dish. Very soon, many other stalls would sell fish head curry. One of the early competitors of the Gomez restaurant was Chin Wah Heng restaurant (situated on Selegie Road, where Gomez had moved from Sophia Road around 1950) which started selling fish head curry in 1951. Fish head curry rapidly became a marketing strategy for some restaurants. A key factor in the democratisation of fish head curry was the appropriation of the original Gomez recipe by those newcomers. For example, in Chin Wah Heng the fish head was steamed before being cooked in the curry, which helped to keep the meat juicy and to get rid of unwanted fishy odors. This Cantonese cooking technique, known as blanching (or 飞水 in Cantonese), again deepened the cultural mix that can be found in this Singaporean Dish. Today, fish head curry is a popular family dish and can be found in many hawker centres from Singapore to Malaysia as well as in pricy Peranakan restaurants and Michelin guide referenced institutions such as Muthu's Curry located on Race Course Road and Zai Shun Curry Fish Head located on Jurong East Street 24.

FISH HEAD CURRY: FROM SINGAPORE, FOR SINGAPORE

While Gomez retired and went back to India in 1961, fish head curry remained a dish much more revered in Singapore than it was in his native country. The history and rich mix of cooking culture that leads to today's fish head curry makes it highly representative of Singapore history and a real Singapore 'national dish'. 

FOR FURTHER READING

Tony Khoo and Leslie Tay, *The Singapore Heritage Cookbook: Past, Present, Future*. James P. Sterba, "Singapore Special: Fish Head Curry" in *The New York Times*, March 28, 1979, pp. 49, 54.

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THE RED CLIFFS OF TANAH MERAH

The red earth of Singapore is the stuff of legends, writes **RAKHI SHANKAR**

ORIGINS AND BEGINNINGS
The *Sejarah Melayu* (Malay Annals) tells us that Bukit Merah (Red Hill in Malay) was named so because of its red soil. According to legend, there was a garfish or swordfish attack in Singapore in the 1300s. The

King of Singapore had ordered men to form a barricade with their thighs but the swordfish killed the men. A boy suggested that Singapore defend itself with a barricade made of thick banana stems. This strategy worked as the long snouts of the swordfish got stuck in the banana stems. However, feeling threatened by the boy's potential rise, the King executed the boy and the blood of the boy is said to have flowed down the hill and made the soil red!

However, Bukit Merah was not the only area in Singapore with red earth. Red cliffs once overlooked the sea in Tanah Merah, which lies on the south-eastern coast of Singapore. The rough area on a present-day map of Singapore can be seen below. It covers the Bedok, Tampines and Changi coastal areas.



Map of the Tanah Merah Region in Singapore. Image from Wikipedia Commons.



Map of Singapore. Image from World Atlas website.



Erédia's 1604 map of Singapore. Image courtesy of SG101, Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth.

THE PORTUGUESE CONNECTION

In the earliest maps, this area was marked as Tanamera. It was first recorded by the Malay-Portuguese explorer and cartographer Manuel Godinho de Erédia in his map of 1604. Erédia was born in Melaka to a Bugis princess and a Portuguese missionary. Melaka had been colonised by the Portuguese in 1511. Erédia had studied in Melaka and Goa, India, which was, at the time, also a Portuguese colony. The Portuguese government in Goa had commissioned him to set out and find the Land of Gold mentioned in legends. Although he did not find this Land of Gold, he did find the island of Singapura during his travels and he also identified an area on this island as Tanamera which can be seen on his map.

Tanah Merah means red land in Malay and the area was likely named Tanamera for the red laterite cliffs that faced the southern coast. These cliffs could be seen by sailors navigating the region and they served as a prominent landmark, a visible marker for ships sailing in the region. Today, Changi Airport Terminal 3 is located where these cliffs once were.

The cliffs got their red color from the laterite soil, which is rich in iron and aluminium oxides. Such cliffs are typically found in tropical areas and are a result of weathering of the rocks where the soluble minerals are leached away by the flowing water, leaving behind the iron and aluminium oxides. The hot and humid climate in



View of South Cliff in Varkala, Kerala. Image from Wikimedia Commons.

tropical regions leads to accumulation of these to form the red cliffs. A famous example of red cliffs are the Varkala Cliffs of Kerala. Perhaps the red cliffs of Tanah Merah may have looked like the photo above.

THE SANTA CATARINA EPISODE

The red cliffs of Singapore bore witness to an incident in the 1600s that led to the development of key concepts in international maritime law, including freedom of navigation.

It was here, in the waters off Tanah Merah, that the Dutch seized the Portuguese merchant ship, the *Santa Catarina*, on February 25, 1605, helping them gain control of the Straits of Malacca. The ship was carrying precious goods, amounting to the princely sum of three million Dutch guilders, from Macao and China and was on the way to Malacca. The attack could have been seen as an act of piracy since the fleet of the Dutch Admiral, Jacob van Heemskerck, was not commissioned by the Dutch Republic. Heemskerck had established diplomatic relations between the Dutch East India Company and the Sultan of Johor and had acted in this capacity. The Dutch East Company engaged Hugo Grotius as its lawyer to justify this raid. Grotius wrote treatises on international law known as *Mare Liberum* (The Free Sea) and *De Jure Praedae* (On the Law of Prize and Booty), which became the foundation for maritime law governing international waters.

HISTORY AND STORIES

In the early maps of Singapore, two areas called Tanah Merah can be seen, namely, Tanah Merah Kechil and Tanah Merah Besar. *Kechil* means small and *besar* means big in Malay. So, the two areas are the Small Red Cliffs and the Big Red Cliffs.

This area used to have a number of seaside towns or kampongs lining a natural shoreline. One of these kampongs was called Kampong Ayer Gumurah, which means ‘roaring



Map of the Island of Singapore and its Dependencies. Surveyor General, Straits Settlements. (1873). Historical Maps of Singapore, digitised by Department of Geography, National University of Singapore. Image courtesy of NUS Libraries.



A kolek race at Bedok, 1963. Image courtesy of the National Heritage Board, Singapore.



An aerial view of the seafront bungalows along Upper East Coast area in Siglap, 1958. Image courtesy of the National Heritage Board, Singapore.



A painting featuring a pillbox entitled 'Fort', by Chen Chong Swee, 1946. Image courtesy of the National Heritage Board, Singapore.

waters' and was probably named after the sound of waves crashing against the rocks and cliffs in the area. The beaches on the east coast at that time were popular holiday spots for vacationing families. There were many coconut plantations in the east. Villagers staying in these kampongs were mostly fishermen or farmers but some also engaged in piracy off the coasts. The area was often pictured with wooden fishing boats called *koleks*. *Kolek* races were held during festive times, such as Hari Raya, and were highly competitive events watched by keen spectators.

The Tanah Merah Besar area had beachfront bungalows during the colonial period. Many of these bungalows were government-owned and served as holiday retreats for civil servants. Among its prominent residents was David Marshall, the first Chief Minister of Singapore.

During British colonial rule in Singapore, the British built significant defence structures along the eastern coast, including the Tanah Merah area. Army structures such as pillboxes, artillery installations and bunkers were constructed to protect the coast from attacks, mainly from pirates, but also from other invading forces which the British expected to come from the sea. A gunpowder magazine to store gunpowder, with a nearby jetty to bring in supplies on boats, was also set up in this area.

A LIFE IN THE RED HILLS

Yeo Hong Eng describes his life in the kampongs of Tanah Merah Kechil in his book *The Little Red Cliff*. There was a red road that led to Tanah Merah Kechil and it was called *Ung Tor Lor* in Hokkien, which means Red Earth Road. Today, Temasek Primary School stands where Tanah Merah Kechil once was.

After World War II, there was a boom in construction and quarrying was carried out at Tanah Merah Kechil; the earth was dug from the hills, loaded onto lorries and carted off. The soil was used to reclaim land from the sea and move the coastline outwards.

Yeo Hong Eng describes seeing samsui women working at the sand quarries, scooping up the sand onto their wicker baskets. Samsui women were female immigrants from mainly the Samsui district in Guangdong, China, who came to Singapore between the 1920s and 1940s and worked primarily as labourers on construction sites. They wore

trademark red headscarves, a colour which matched the red earth they quarried!

HOW THE LAND CHANGED

Land reclamation projects in the 1960s and 1970s led to the levelling of hills and coastal cliffs. The soil of the Tanah Merah cliffs was used to create new land, housing estates, East Coast Park, Marine Parade and a part of Changi Airport. In his book, Yeo Hong Eng writes, "On hot sunny days, the movements of the lorries laden with red earth from the interior of Tanah Merah Kechil had kicked up clouds of red dust when they sped past by."

Even though today the red cliffs have disappeared under layers of reclaimed land, the history and legacy of these red cliffs endures and reflects Singapore's journey from a small trading post to a global port city, and are a reminder of Singapore's rich maritime and cultural heritage. 



Samsui women, 1986. Image courtesy of National Library Board, Singapore.

FOR FURTHER READING

The Little Red Cliff by Yeo, H.E. (2013).

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WRITTEN IN BLOOD

MANY CONSIDER THE *PACTO DE SANGRE* THE MOST IMPORTANT EVENT IN THE HISTORY OF THE PHILIPPINES. **IAN CASH** INVESTIGATES WHAT REALLY HAPPENED THAT DAY

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



Fig. 1 The author's own cheesy tourist picture at the blood compact site.

On a not-so-lonely stretch of road on the island of Bohol sits a statue. It depicts a group of men gathered at a table. Two of them raise a toast, red rivulets of blood still running down their forearms. Tour bus after tour bus disgorges its passengers nearby, allowing each visitor the opportunity to solemnise their visit to this sacred spot with a cheesy photo.

As the nearby sign intones, this is the site of the *Pacto de Sangre* or blood compact. This is the place where the Philippine nation was born. Or at least that's how the story goes.



Fig. 3 A native noble couple. Depicted in the Boxer Codex. They wear red, the colour of nobility. Image courtesy of the Internet archive (archive.org).



Fig. 2 Reception of the Manila Galleon by the Chamorro in the Ladrone Islands, ca. 1590. Taken from the Boxer Codex – an illustrated manuscript depicting Spain's early encounters with Asian peoples and places. Its author remains unknown. Image courtesy of the Internet archive (archive.org).

FORGED IN BLOOD AND IRON

It is March 1565 CE and Miguel Lopez de Legaspi is in dire straits – literally.

Forty years prior, Ferdinand Magellan was the first European to arrive in these islands. Magellan unceremoniously grouped together what had previously been a constellation of independent polities and peoples and claimed them on behalf of the far-off king of Castile. Eventually this diverse collective would come to carry the name of the king of that country: *Las Islas Filipinas*, after Phillip II.

But on the shores of the island of Mactan, local ruler Lapu Lapu revealed Magellan's hubris, sending him to a watery grave and his eponymous expedition limping home without him, his grandiose pretension still unrealised.

So now it fell to Legaspi to fulfill Magellan's ambitions. Arriving at the same island, Legaspi found no warmer a welcome there than his predecessor. Bad weather kicking up, he sailed south to the straits between the islands of Cebu and Bohol to seek refuge. The fate of the voyage seemed to hang in the balance.

There, however, Legaspi's luck turned. On Bohol the Spaniards encountered a local chief, Sikatuna, who agreed to form an alliance with Legaspi to be sealed through the sacred rite of *Sandugo* – one blood.

The rest, as they say, is history. Replenished, Legaspi returned north and succeeded where Magellan had failed, defeating the native armies and creating the first permanent Spanish settlement in the Philippines. Spain

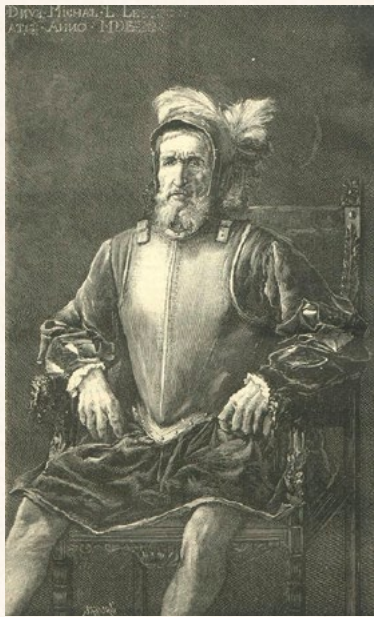


Fig. 4 Miguel Lopez de Legaspi.

would not leave again for more than 300 years. A new nation had indeed been forged from the blood of Legaspi and Sikatuna.

A BLOODY AFFAIR

Blood compacts like the *Sandugo* were a widespread cultural phenomenon in the pre-colonial Philippines. No textual evidence exists to illuminate their origin, but early Spanish accounts indicate that they were already widely adopted throughout the archipelago and practised similarly throughout.

In a report to the King of Spain, Legaspi recounts:

"One from each party must draw two to three drops of blood from his arm or breast and mix them, in the same cup, with water or wine. Then the mixture must be divided equally between two cups, and neither person may depart until both cups are alike drained."

The resulting agreement, he notes, "is considered inviolable".

In a similar vein, Antonio Pigafetta, a member of the earlier Magellan expedition, relates that on the island of Mindanao in the southern Philippines they encountered a king who, "In order to make peace with us, drew blood from his left hand marking his body, face, and the tip of his tongue with it as a token of the closest friendship, and we did the same."

Though the substance of the ritual varied little, the reasons behind it ranged widely. The most common, as noted in Boxer Codex p 233 (see fig 2,3), was to "make friends with those whom they are at war" but a blood compact could also serve to honour an existing friendship, confirming that such "peace and friendship are made perfectly" and "would not break." In other words, through *Sandugo* two individuals could become blood brothers.

ROSE TINTED GLASSES

No sooner had the blood compact between Legaspi and Sikatuna been concluded than differences of opinion about its significance began to emerge. Each successive generation of observers viewed the *Pacto* through the lens of their own biases and circumstances, twisting events to fit their own purposes.

Spanish writers in the early colonial period interpreted the event as a moment of conquest, acting as if Sikatuna had



Fig. 5 El Pacto de Sangre by Juan Luna. Image courtesy of the Presidential Museum and library, Philippines, via flickr.



Fig. 6 The blood red first flag of the Kataastaasang Kagalanggalangang Katipunan ng mga Anak ng Bayan or Highest and Most Venerable Association of the Children of the Nation. Often called just 'Katipunan' or KKK.

effectively ceded control over the entire archipelago to Spain. From this vantage point, if Legaspi and Sikatuna had become one blood through *Sandugo*, then it was Spanish blood and the Filipinos were expected to adopt Spanish religion, obey Spanish laws, and adhere to Spanish economic structures.

As centuries passed and the Spanish imperial edifice began to crumble, new interpretations of the *Pacto de Sangre* emerged. Active in the 1880s CE, the *Ilustrados*, energetic young Filipino reformers and intellectuals, portrayed the *Pacto* in a new light. They agreed that it represented a treaty but viewed it as an agreement between equals rather than a capitulation.

One of them, Juan Luna, captured this sentiment through art. In *El Pacto de Sangre* (The Blood Compact), Luna places Sikatuna with his back to the viewer, allowing every Filipino to take in the scene through his eyes. Sikatuna looms large compared to Legaspi, in the centre. His armour and weaponry match the Spaniards in sophistication and splendour. Fellow *ilustrado*, Marcelo del Pilar, translated the message into words: the blood compact “unite[d] into a single ideal the aspiration of Spain and the Philippines.” But an equal treaty connoted equal obligations: “Spain cannot and should not perjure itself.”¹ It owed its colony reform and equal rights of citizenship.

Ten years on, however, the appetite for patient progress gave way to the thirst for blood. In his manifesto, *Ang Dapat Mabait ng mga Tagalog* (What the Tagalog Should Know), Andres Bonifacio, co-founder of the revolutionary *Katipunan* movement, portrays the *Pacto de Sangre* as a literal deal with the devil. Like Eve tempted by the serpent, Sikatuna yielded to “the sweetness of [Legaspi’s] tempting words”. Though he, and by extension the Filipinos, had given a “whole-hearted pledge”, “nothing but treachery is the reward for

our favours and our abiding by the agreement.”² The violent overthrow of the regime was therefore justified. Wanting to create a new national compact, the *Katipunan* required recruits to sign the roster with their own blood.

A CRIMSON COMPACT

Today, the independent, post-colonial Philippines has reclaimed the *Pacto de Sangre* for itself. Bohol commemorates it annually with the *Sandugo* festival, complete with dramatic reenactment, and the Philippine Government honours its most accomplished diplomats with the Order of Sikatuna.

The irony of its present celebration, however, is that the original blood compact wasn’t considered particularly significant by its participants. It’s just one such agreement among many noted in Spanish colonial chronicles.

But this one, for whatever reason, became a convenient focal point on which subsequent generations fixated as they negotiated the meaning of Filipino nationhood. As such, the *Pacto de Sangre* has become a Filipino Magna Carta or Declaration of Independence – a microcosm representing the birth of a nation. If this is the Philippines’ genesis though, it contains an original sin, for the *Pacto de Sangre* highlights a fundamental, if somewhat uncomfortable truth: the experience of colonialism made the Philippines what it is. For better or worse, the modern Philippines carries both the blood of its precolonial predecessors and the Spanish conquistadors in its veins. And as the saying goes, blood runs thicker than water. P

SOURCES:

¹ Aguilar, Filomeno. (2010). *The Pacto de Sangre in the Late Nineteenth-Century Nationalist Emplotment of Philippine History. Philippine Studies Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints*, 58(1). PP 93–95.

² Aguilar, Filomeno. (2010). *The Pacto de Sangre in the Late Nineteenth-Century Nationalist Emplotment of Philippine History. Philippine Studies Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints*, 58(1). PP 100–1.

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Fig. 7 Badge of the Order of Sikatuna.



Fig. 8 A reenactment of the blood compact from the annual *Sandugo* festival in Bohol.

FIRE, FIRE, BURNING BRIGHT... THE DUALITY OF THE 1961 BUKIT HO SWEE FIRE

TANG SIEW NGOH ATTEMPTS TO REEXAMINE THE LEGACY OF SINGAPORE'S WORST FIRE

Echoing the duality expressed in William Blake's famous line "Tyger! Tyger! burning bright ..." on the coexistence of creation and destruction, this SG60 reflection explores the duality of the 1961 Bukit Ho Swee (BHS) fire's impact and the state narrative versus the citizens' perspectives on this pivotal event in Singapore's history.

CRISIS: A NATION'S STRUGGLES LAID BARE

Kampong BHS, majorly comprising wooden houses, was densely populated. Fire hazards were embedded in its everyday life, from negligence to childish pranks like lighting firecrackers tied to rats, which scrambled onto *attap* roofs, setting them alight.

It was 2:50 p.m. on Thursday, May 25, 1961 that the fire started. 22 fire engines were deployed and off-duty firefighters were recalled from their Hari Raya Haji public holiday break to fight the fire. Fanned by strong winds, the fire spread rapidly down a seemingly arbitrary path, cited later as evidence for arson. Due to low water pressure, narrow lanes, high population density and poor crowd control, the firemen and BHS volunteers managed to contain the inferno only by 10 p.m.

The fire destroyed around 2,200 dwellings, leaving some 16,000 people homeless, four dead and 86 persons injured. It also devoured a public school, temples, workshops and a sauce factory. To add to the disaster, warehouses of oil mills, sawmills and those storing sulfuric acid and paint were also involved and caused a series of explosions. Some 250 acres of land and property worth an estimated \$2 million were reduced to ashes, among which were also carcasses

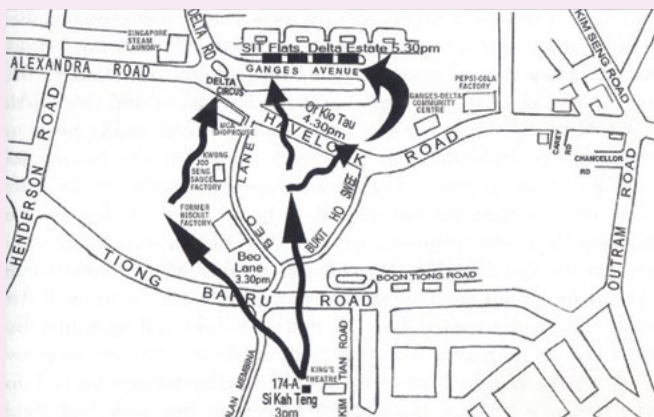
of livestock. The kampong economy lay in ruins with thousands losing their livelihoods. It exposed the precarious living conditions of the kampong dwellers, most of whom had limited access to formal employment, education, and healthcare, let alone the means to purchase any fire insurance.

The fire's immediate aftermath presented significant challenges, requiring government intervention to provide necessities such as food, water, medical aid and shelter.

Many homeless victims took refuge in makeshift shelters in five assigned schools, moved into relatives' homes or rented emergency housing comprising one-room flats with communal toilets. Resourceful residents rebuilt 'huts and shacks' in two weeks on the charred grounds but the government foiled such rebuilding and embarked instead on large-scale public housing initiatives.



The cover story of *The Straits Times* newspaper on May 27, 1961 reported on financial assistance to fire victims besides land acquisition for housing in the aftermath of the fire that occurred on May 25, 1961. Image taken from Wikimedia Commons.



The seemingly arbitrary path of the 1961 Bukit Ho Swee fire which started at 174A Kampong Tiong Bahru. Image courtesy of Loh Kah Seng.

CATALYST: URBAN PLANNING AND EMERGENCY SERVICES TRANSFORMED

The fire also served as a catalyst for change. The government embarked on a comprehensive review of its urban planning and housing policies, fire safety regulations and emergency services. Prime Minister of the day, Lee Kuan Yew, promised to re-house the displaced in a year, but the Housing and Development Board (HDB) fulfilled the promise within nine months. With HDB's accelerated public housing initiatives, BHS was transformed into one of Singapore's first high-rise housing estates with better amenities within just four years.

The Singapore Fire Brigade also underwent significant transformations. It established the Civil Defence Corps, which later became the Singapore Civil Defence Force



The directional sign 'Bukit Ho Sweet' (left) stood amidst the ruins at the devastated kampong in May 1961, while the proverbial phoenix rose from the ashes with flats at Bukit Ho Swee (right) presently commanding high resale prices. Photo on the left taken by author at the Civil Defence Heritage Gallery and photo on the right taken from Wikimedia Commons.

(SCDF). It is now renowned for its expertise in emergency response and disaster management. Among the iconic red fire engines on display at the historic Central Fire Station on Hill Street, one can nowadays observe the Dennis Fire Tender which was deployed from this very station to put out the BHS fire.

COMMUNITY: RESILIENCE AND TRUST

Beyond BHS's physical redevelopment, the fire also impacted the community profoundly. While the fire severed the links to known ways of life such as rearing poultry and pigs or dress-making to supplement income, it also brought solidarity and resilience, fostering a sense of unity in adversity. The disaster saw various community groups, government agencies and individuals coming together to support the displaced. The best and the worst in men were also revealed during this tragedy. Goh Sin Tub, then Deputy Director of the Social Work Department recounted his surprise seeing the philanthropist Lee Kong Chian, "a familiar figure, dressed in his usual humble style, crumpled white shirt and baggy white pants" waiting patiently for his turn in the queue among the fire victims to present "a six-figure donation, a magnificent sum in those days when you could buy a bungalow for \$30,000" (Lee's donation was officially reported as \$25,000). Sadly, fires are also often occasions for thieves to target unguarded properties.



The Central Fire Station with its iconic 'blood and bandage' architectural design has a watchtower that served as a lookout point for detecting fires prior to the introduction of fire alarms in 1915. Postcard produced in the 1950s-60s by S. C. Chang, the author's father-in-law.

One shop owner found his shop standing but no goods left, all uninsured: canned food, drinks, rice, sweets, etc. There were also opportunistic peddlers who sold water by the glass while the slums burned.

CONTROVERSY: A BLESSING IN DISGUISE OR ARSON?

It was a blessing in disguise that the fire occurred on a public holiday, adding no further pandemonium to the chaotic situation as no parents had to look for their children in schools. But the fire sparked the controversial

allegation that arson was committed to clear the slums for urban redevelopment while simultaneously dispersing resident gangsters and their triad activities. Arson was not an uncommon solution then for landowners to evict tenants upon purchase of land by burning down their dwellings despite setting up watchful volunteer firefighting squads in troubled areas to prevent arson.

Officially, investigations at the time attributed the blaze to an electrical fault or an accident. However, the controversy surrounding the 1961 fire's origins has continued to simmer. According to Loh Kah Seng (2009), "Statements on the rumours of government-inspired arson in the 1961 calamity, however, constitute a significant counter-myth in contemporary society, revealing a more critical side to the social memory." In fact, social memories of this tragedy are kept alive by citizens interested in Singapore's complex history through social media, such as James Seah's blog and Facebook Group labeled as *I grew up in Bukit Ho Swee* with 7,000 members.

CONCLUSION: A LEGACY OF TRANSFORMATION

The 1961 BHS fire was both destructive and yet transformative, spurring significant changes in the country's urban planning, emergency services and community resilience. It has left such an indelible mark on Singapore's history that it is often recounted through exhibitions, public talks, documentaries, and school textbooks, etc. 

FOR FURTHER READING

Squatters Into Citizens: The 1961 Bukit Ho Swee Fire and the Making of Modern Singapore by Loh Kah Seng (2013).

James Seah's blog and video footages of documentaries on the 1961 Bukit Ho Swee Fire.

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The Dennis Fire Tender (top photo), also known as Major Pump III had only two front seats for the driver and an officer while other firemen had to cling on to the vehicle's sides, risking their lives. The subsequent Dennis F12 model (bottom) had cabin space for firefighters who were also better equipped. Photo taken by the author at the Civil Defence Heritage Gallery.

TRACING SINGAPORE'S JOURNEY THROUGH SHADES OF RED

FROM LANTERN-LIT HERITAGE STREETS TO THE GLEAM OF MODERN SKYLINES, **AAKANKSHA JAIN** EXPLORES HOW THE COLOUR RED WEAVES THROUGH SINGAPORE'S CULTURE, ARCHITECTURE AND MEMORIES

All photographs were taken by the author.

Some evenings after work, I find myself walking along Marina Bay just as the sun begins to dip behind the skyline. The light stretches softly across the water, and I often pause, not for any reason, but simply to take it in. There's something grounding in those moments. As someone who began as an architect and evolved into an urban planner, I've come to see cities not just through buildings or plans, but through fleeting details: the way lanterns sway gently above a quiet street or how colour breathes life into everyday spaces. In Singapore, the colour red does that. It lingers across time, across cultures, quietly stitching together stories of who we are and how we've come to be.

THE TIMELESS POWER OF RED

This year marks the 60th anniversary of Singapore's independence; an apt moment to reflect on the many layers of meaning held by this 'little red dot'.

Red is a powerful, auspicious colour, deeply rooted in many Asian cultures, especially in the three main ethnic traditions of Chinese, Malay and Indian. In Chinese culture, red symbolises good fortune, prosperity and happiness. For the Malay community, red is found in many traditional symbols, often representing strength and courage, and in the Indian culture, red is associated with purity, devotion and celebration. So, red, as a colour, resonates across communities and stands out as a unifying symbol for Singapore, a nation that embodies the spirit of a cultural melting pot.

For Singapore, red has a particularly rich narrative. For a city that seamlessly blends tradition and culture with futuristic modernity, red is a colour that seamlessly transitions from



National Day Parade, 2022.

day to night, and past to present. Whether it is the glow of traditional red lanterns in Chinatown or the pulsating red neon lights of the city's nightlife or modern bars, red remains a thread that connects Singapore's diverse cultural fabric.

HERITAGE COLOUR OF CHINATOWN – RED AT DAWN

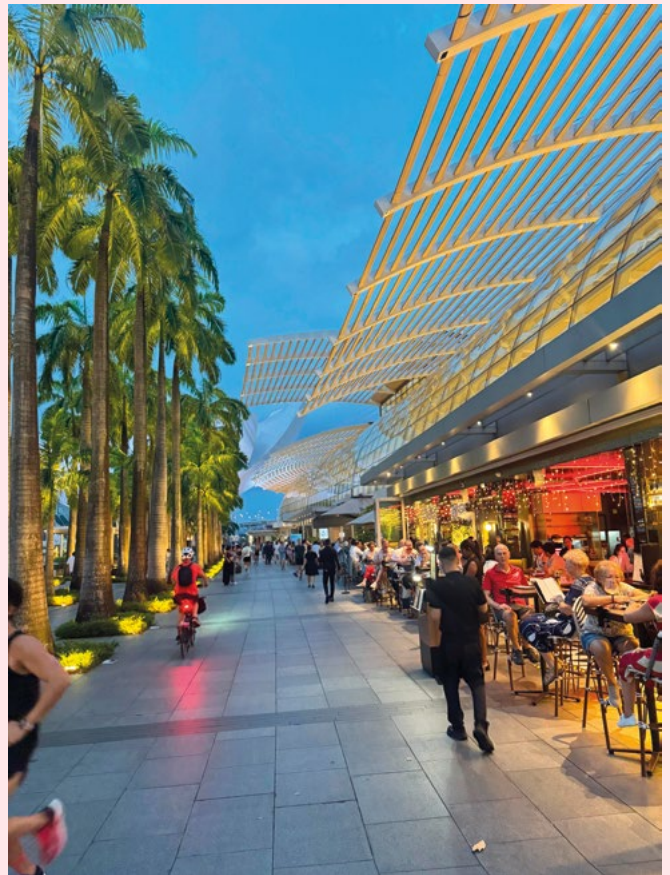
As the first rays of sunlight bathe the city in a warm embrace, Chinatown slowly stirs to life under a canopy of red lanterns. Strung like jewels over shophouses and temple gates, gently swaying in the morning breeze, these lanterns are more than decorations; they are the vessels of memory and culture. For the early Chinese immigrants, these lanterns were a symbol of hope, protection and a safe passage across the land. Their glow marked not just festivities but in general, the soft glow offered comfort and a sense of connection to the home that they had left behind. It was representative of community, continuity and resilience. Years ago, Clifford pier was also called the 'Red lantern pier', with its red lamps guiding ships to the port.

In today's Chinatown, these red lanterns are ever-present, woven into the changing landscape of the neighbourhood. They hang in the modern setting of tourist spots and artisanal cafes blending old traditions with new world energy. Their symbolism has endured even as their context has changed – from lighting paths to now lighting up the Instagram feeds. Once a practical source of light in a pre-electricity era, they are now a symbol of heritage and cultural identity.

On a hot day, they cast dappled shadows on the pavement, offering brief respite to those wandering below. Especially during the Lunar New Year and Mid-Autumn festivals, they line many streets, threading through narrow lanes, blooming across smaller neighbourhoods, plazas and walkways, casting a nostalgic image that bridges generations.



Buddha Tooth Relic Temple, Chinatown.



Promenade along the Bayfront.

THE URBAN HEARTBEAT OF RED – RED IN THE TWILIGHT HOUR

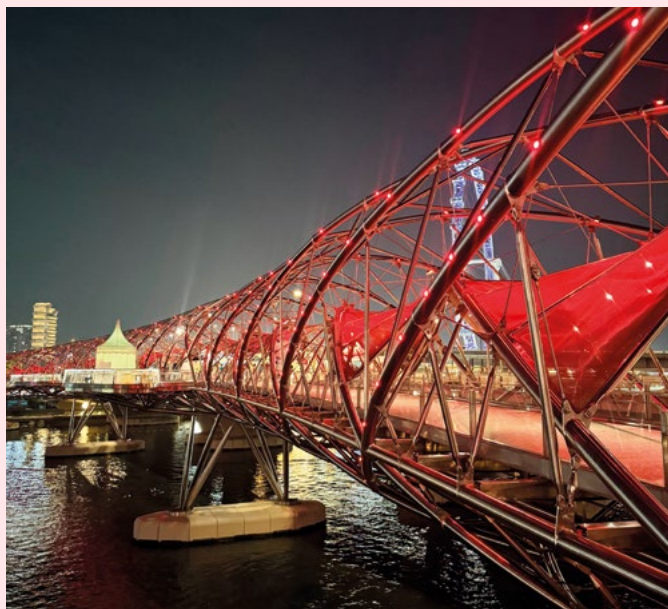
As the sun dips behind the skyline, and dusk descends, the colour red subtly shifts its charm. The soft glow of the red lanterns gives way to a more vibrant and electrifying red that flows through the pulsating veins of the city.

Red in Singapore is not limited to one place: its glory is visible in heartland corridors, in the floors of hawker centres and in festive banners during holidays. It is also visible in Little India, along Campbell lane with its glowing oil lamps, garlands and temple offerings, bleeding into the warm light of spice shops and saree boutiques. Red also finds its way into the everyday, subtly guiding movement through the city. In urban design, red is often used to highlight public space and draw attention, marking entrances and guiding human flow. It appears in wayfinding systems, safety signage, public art, and community spaces — acting as a visual anchor in the city's layered landscape.

THE NEON LIGHTS OF MODERN NIGHTLIFE- RED IN THE AFTERGLOW

The colour red, once a gentle flicker by the day, a steady pulse by twilight, now transforms into a bold and unwavering character. From Clarke Quay's riverfront bars to the vibrant streets along Ann Siang Hill and the rooftop bars at Orchard Road, red becomes the language of the night, ushering in intimacy and allure with a hint of mischief.

There is something magnetic about the way red lights up Singapore's streets after dark. It plays along the city's skyline, dancing across the structures' facades along Marina Bay, and reflecting off the waters of the Bay. At night, the red light



The Helix Bridge radiates red over the waters of Marina Bay.



Lanterns hanging in a bar at Emerald Hill, Orchard Road.

illuminates the Helix bridge, making it look like strands of DNA molecules across the bay. On closer look, the bridge is almost like a 21st century lantern trail, guiding pedestrians and cyclists across the bay.

In the nightlife districts, red beckons from doorways and flickers across dance floors. In the setting of a more rustic bar, red lanterns hang from the ceilings, more for ambience than ceremony, making this a space where tradition meets design, where memory is reimagined in contemporary hues.

The urban interplay of red, from signages to skylines, from temples to trendy rooftops speaks volumes about Singapore. Red has evolved from its ceremonial roots. Today, it paints the night with vibrancy and character, celebrating a city that honours its past even as it lights up the way forward to the future.

A CONSTANT THREAD IN A CHANGING LANDSCAPE

Across six decades of Singapore's evolution and urban transformation, the significance of the colour red remains

unchanged. It remains the symbol of passion and prosperity, a colour that represents energy, community and a shared spirit. Red is the colour that has the power to evoke both tradition and modernity, bridging gaps between different eras, spaces and cultures. Red is not just a colour in Singapore:

It is its Heritage,

its Modernity,

its Heartbeat.

It is a story which is still unfolding. **P**

AAKANKSHA JAIN (FOM Member) is an Urban Planner who's passionate about designing cities and sometimes even 3D-printing chocolates to celebrate them. When she's not busy shaping skylines, she's perfecting her chocolate-making skills because good design should delight all the senses.



I Light SG reimagines Singapore's skyline with the vibrancy of light.



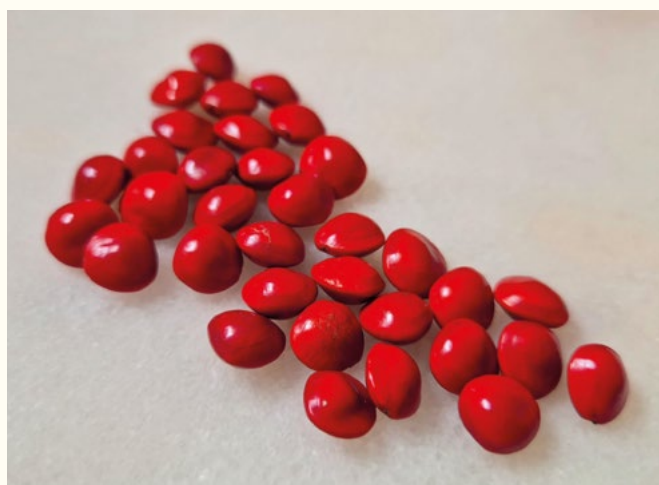
Elgin bridge at night, across Singapore river.

A SAGA: RED SEEDS OF RESONANCE AND REMEMBRANCE

ISABEL TAN LOOKS AT HOW A TINY SEED CARRIES GENERATIONS' WORTH OF MEMORY, MYTH AND MEANING

All photographs taken by the author.

What do we think of when we see a saga seed? Hard, glossy and heart-shaped, the saga seed is a symbol of love in many Asian countries, aptly coined as *xiang si dou* (相思豆) 'longing peas' - within the Chinese community. To older Singaporeans, the saga seed is perceived as holding great sentimental value and meaning. As we approach Singapore's 60th year, this seed remains persistent in its status as a cultural and ecological icon in Singapore's history, holding wistful memories of play and pastime.



A close-up of vibrant red saga seeds, traditionally associated with love and remembrance in many Asian cultures.

THE SAGA'S BIOLOGY AND ORIGINS

The classic saga tree - more specifically the *Adenanthera pavonina* - is one out of the 13 accepted species of the genus *Adenanthera*, native to India and Southern China. This species has been naturalised in tropical regions such as Sri Lanka, the Caribbean Islands, and of course, Singapore. In relation to the history of Singapore Botanic Gardens, the saga species was first introduced to Singapore's landscape by superintendent Nathaniel Cantley (1883–1885) to suppress the tall lallang weed. Director Henry Nicholas Ridley later planted this species in greater numbers to surpass lallang and shade nutmeg trees.



A twisted saga pod revealing its signature scarlet seeds, dispersed by birds who mistake them for fruit.

Unlike its botanical relatives, the soybean and peanut, the saga tree has the unique ability to grow up to 40 metres, making it a striking member of the legume family. Despite its towering stature, however, this tree is considered relatively easy to grow and care for. Not only does it thrive in diverse environments – ranging from forests to roadsides – it can exist harmoniously with other species in surrounding areas.

The saga tree can be characterised by its large spreading crown, which forms a dense canopy that provides ample shade. Creamy-yellow and orange, its flowers emerge after a seasonal shedding of saga leaves. This attracts pollinators such as butterflies, leading to the growth of seeds within straight, green fruit pods. With time, the pods curl and twist, losing their bright hue to a woody brown as the iconic scarlet seeds emerge from the husks. Birds, mistaking these colourful seeds for fruits, ingest and disperse them across the land.

A GLOBAL PRESENCE

The word 'saga' has roots in the Arabic word 'goldsmith', representative of the seed's historical function as a measurement device. Saga seeds were thought to be uniform in weight, with four seeds making up approximately one

gram. Thus, in regions such as India and Sri Lanka, people used saga seeds to measure gold and silver for centuries. Today, we know that this estimation is inaccurate, as saga seeds do deviate slightly in weight.

Additionally, saga seeds were consumed for their medicinal properties in the past. Though toxic in their raw form, these seeds once acted as intoxicants. Ground up and cooked thoroughly, however, they could relieve headaches, rheumatism, and treat boils.

Those with a more creative eye used saga seeds to make jewellery, ornaments and rosaries. In modern times, Saga seeds are viewed as alternatives to precious stones, infusing necklaces and earrings with local flair and elegance.

FROM BOTANICAL STRATEGY TO BELOVED PASTIME

During the 1970s and 1980s in Singapore, saga trees populated roadsides, parks and playgrounds, becoming a familiar sight to locals. They also started to grow along the shores of Sentosa and Berlayer Creek, as well as the Sungei Buloh Wetland Reserve. Young Singaporeans began to view saga seeds as more than just byproducts of their tree. They became a staple of childhood games and tradition.

Children would spend hours crouching beneath saga trees to collect their seeds, treating them as precious collectibles akin to marbles and postcards. Some would use saga seeds to fill the tetrahedral bags of the traditional Five Stones game, while others would participate in seed-picking races. Used as an escape from boredom, a conduit of creativity, as well as a means of healthy competition between friends and family, saga seeds became limitless in their potential to spark joy and bring people together.

Additionally, Singaporeans would also accumulate saga seeds to pour them into glass jars and bottles, utilising their vibrancy to brighten the home. Otherwise, seeds were diligently collected and presented as tokens of affection between loved ones, representing promises of memory and intimate bonds. The testimonies of many have hence proved that saga seeds are important symbols of nostalgia and community in Singapore's cultural history.



Two *Adenanthera pavonina* trees flank a singular *Adenanthera malayana* tree at Singapore Botanic Gardens' Gallop Extension. *Adenanthera pavonina* is a rare subspecies of the Saga family.

PUBLIC ART AS LIVING TRIBUTE

Regretfully, in our modern society, saga trees have been deemed unsafe to grow along roadsides due to the excessive amount of leaf litter they produce. Thus, the number of saga trees have dwindled over the years, sparking critical response through public installations.

One local artist who has consistently and profoundly responded to the cultural value of saga seeds in Singapore is Kumari Nahappan, best known for her larger-than-life sculptures of natural elements. She has crafted and exhibited numerous saga seed collections across the country, one of which currently lies alongside the cluster of saga trees in Singapore Botanic Gardens, named *Biji Sayang*. The title is a Malay phrase which literally means 'seed of love' or 'beloved seed', paying poetic tribute to the emotional symbolism of the seed in the Singaporean context. A plaque positioned at the base of the seed sculptures emphasises the promise of life, a testament to the potential that a singular seed holds



Kumari Nahappan's *Biji Sayang* installation at the Singapore Botanic Gardens, celebrating the saga seed as a 'beloved seed'.



The Saga Seed Playground in Ang Mo Kio, designed to revive memories of childhood games with the seeds.

to sustain its species. This message is especially pertinent in the face of vanishing saga trees from our communal spaces, urging us to ponder the urban planning decisions that have led to their quiet removal.

PLAYGROUNDS OF THE PAST, REIMAGINED

Much like how the saga tree has become a rare sight today, the practice of collecting and treasuring saga seeds seems to be on the brink of disappearing. However, all is not as gloomy as it seems, thankfully. The construction of saga seed-themed playgrounds in neighbourhoods has been a clever intervention to bring the history and shared value of the saga seed back into our civic spaces. For instance, the Ang Mo Kio Town Council has installed a Saga Seed Playground near Jubilee Square, where children occasionally sit on the giant saga seeds or play within the intricate tunnels and slides.

Singapore Botanic Gardens' COMO Adventure Grove also features similar saga seed structures. Through these playful landscapes, modern art and architecture remind us - and our future generations - of the heartfelt relationships Singaporeans once had with these tiny, yet significant seeds of our past. The way we approach saga seeds today may not be as simple or direct as before, but these efforts to preserve their presence are likely to cement their status as symbols of kinship and camaraderie in Singapore's history. 



COMO Adventure Grove's giant saga seed structures, a contemporary reimagining of nature play in Singapore Botanic Gardens.

ISABEL TAN is a new FOM member currently pursuing a Double Major in English Literature and Art History at Nanyang Technological University.

PRESIDENT'S CHALLENGE Art Exhibition 2025

This is the **SECOND EDITION**
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All artworks will be available at
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Date: 1st -10th August 2025

Venue: TAG @ TPD 39 Keppel Road
#02-01B Lobby A
Tanjong Pagar Distripark
Singapore 089065

Time: 12pm - 6pm daily

Enquiries: 9638 5958 or hello@artualize.com.sg

In Support of:



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Organised by:



The 'red wall' community mural at the Singapore Red Cross is a symbol of the organisation's commitment to providing aid to vulnerable communities. But the movement's history had a grave beginning 166 years ago on shores far away from here.

In 1859, during the Second Italian War of Independence, Swiss national Henri Dunant mobilised the local population in northern Italy to help wounded soldiers on the battlefield of Solferino. Shocked by the aftermath of the battle and lack of medical care, he later returned home and wrote a book about this experience. With the aim of instituting change, he travelled through Europe to promote his book and ideas. The Geneva Society for Public Welfare studied Dunant's suggestions, subsequently organising a conference to discuss implementation of these ideas (renaming themselves in the process: The International Committee for Relief to the Wounded). Following this success, the Swiss government held a diplomatic conference in 1864 – the First Geneva Convention – where 12 countries signed articles, officially creating the first Red Cross societies.

Prior to World War II, the Australian Red Cross had an informal presence in Singapore. It was not until 1949 that the Singapore branch of the British Red Cross was established. At this time, Sir Franklin Charles Gimson served as the Governor of Singapore and his wife, Lady Dorothy Gimson, was a major patron of the Singapore Branch of the British Red Cross. Although she was involved for a short stint of three years, under her support the Red Cross hospital car service was established, a precursor to an ambulance service that came into existence several years later. She also started a class for deaf children, launched a uniformed volunteer force of 40 nurses and first aiders to serve the general public, and established the first unit of the Junior Red Cross out of Raffles Girls School. With these early successes, the public embraced the Red Cross.

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Photo of a Red Cross Ambulance, 1963. The SRC realised a need for an ambulance service ten years after the hospital car service was started. At the time this photo was taken, the service had expanded into a night service. In addition, more first aid posts had access to these life-saving vehicles. Photo sourced from The Singapore Red Cross.

SRC THROUGH NATION BUILDING TO RECENT TIMES

Two major shifts happened to the identity of the Red Cross as Singapore became independent. The first change came in 1965 when the Singapore branch fell under the auspices of the Malaysian Red Cross. The second came in 1973 when the Singapore Red Cross Society Act was passed and the branch was fully incorporated and admitted as the 120th member of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. The patronage established by the first governor in 1949 extends until today, where the President is charged with appointing the chairman of the organisation. Prior to this, the President was the patron of the SRC, and often his wife was its president.

As access to government-provided health and welfare services increased with the growing nation, so too did the SRC's ability to help greater groups of people. The Welfare Division was formed, providing social support to Singapore's most vulnerable (including the elderly, disabled, and those in need) and first aid services. The many programmes established in the 1960s and 1970s have morphed and grown to continue to help people today. This was also the time when the SRC started to organise blood drives, events that are still held to this very day, instrumental in saving lives. Welfare, education and outreach programmes, many of which were focused on teaching first aid to people of all ages, were developed to garner more community support.

The SRC outreach also extended to provide relief and resources through disasters, domestically and regionally. Instances of SRC relief efforts include helping families that suffered during the Potong Pasir floods in 1966 and 1978, being available for aid during the Cable Car accident in 1983,



Red Cross Youth stamp, 2007. Junior Red Cross membership was expanded to include secondary-aged children, and the name changed to the Red Cross Youth in 1972. The division was one of three formalised a year later, along with the Volunteer Aid Detachments and the Welfare Division. Image courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore.

giving aid to Vietnamese refugees on the Thai-Kampuchean border in 1980, and providing disaster response teams to help the survivors of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami.

THE LEGACY OF THE SRC

Given that it is a volunteer-based organisation, one has to marvel at the accomplishments of the SRC in developing humanitarian assistance programmes to meet the needs of people in Singapore, and beyond, over its 76 years. Too many to note. Suffice to say, the organisation continues to evolve to meet the current needs of the community through its profound services.

As a tribute to its founder, the logo of the Red Cross was inspired by inverting the Swiss flag. It is a neutral and universal one for identifying medical personnel. The Red Cross works together with the Red Crescent, a sister organisation that was established during the time of the Ottoman Empire when the government thought the cross shape might alienate Muslim soldiers. In Asia, one cannot help but think the auspicious nature of the emblem's red colour brings the SRC good fortune in the form of volunteerism while it wards off evil spirits, protecting SRC workers and the people served by them. 🇸🇬



Flood at Potong Pasir, woodblock print by Koeh Sia Yong, 1954. Potong Pasir was a farming area vulnerable to flooding by the Kallang River. In this image we see a once-familiar scene: a family losing their home to floodwaters. The Singapore Red Cross Voluntary Aid Detachments were deployed several times over the years to aid the community after major floods. Image courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore.

CHARLOTTE DAWSON was a docent at the National Museum of Singapore and the Changi Chapel and Museum (CCM), as well as a URA Chinatown Heritage Trails guide. Having learned a bit about the Red Cross with CCM, it was a pleasure to learn more.



DANIEL THAM AND RUCHI MITTAL REFLECT ON CURATING SINGAPORE'S JOURNEY FROM SETTLEMENT TO GLOBAL CITY

Photographs are courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore.

SG60, Singapore's 60th anniversary of independence, is a timely milestone for us as the National Museum to reflect upon the path Singapore has taken to where it is today. To do this, we put together a commemorative exhibition that guides our visitors in looking back at Singapore's journey, drawing connections to the present, and contemplating its future.

From an early stage in curating this exhibition, we wanted to emphasise how Singapore's global status has historical roots of being connected to the region and world, through flows of people, ideas and goods. This brought us to the idea of the Singapore River – the connecting point between Singapore and the world from as early as the 14th century – becoming the central feature of the exhibition. From the visitor's perspective, the exhibition journey thus became a voyage, approaching Singapore from afar in search of its origins, sailing through the river to witness Singapore's transformation, and setting out to the open sea to celebrate how Singapore has made waves beyond its shores.

The exhibition's title, *Once Upon a Tide*, captures this journey and Singapore's island identity, while also referencing the museum's own identity as a people's museum with storytelling as our primary means of connecting with our audiences. The visitor experience is personalised through a wristband that allows visitors to respond to the exhibition's content from a contemporary viewpoint, culminating in a final experience that consolidates their personal and collective aspirations for Singapore's future.

ALWAYS ON THE MAP

As the exhibition's introduction, 'Always on the Map' invites visitors to locate Singapore amidst a sea of maps that predate 1819. These maps are presented somewhat chronologically,

reflecting an increasing clarity with which Singapore is mapped and known.

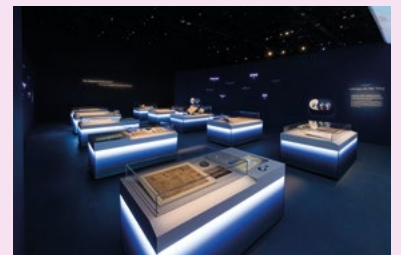
The maps illustrate the diversity and evolution of Singapore's identity, both in the different names that Singapore has been known by and the different places 'Singapore' could have referred to. In surveying these maps, visitors encounter variant spellings of 'Singapore', which variably identify Singapore as the larger southern tip of the Malay Peninsula, the waterways south of it, or the island we know today.

Exploring these maps allows the story to unfold – of Singapore's enduring maritime position garnering increasing colonial and commercial interest, and leading to the point of arrival of the British in 1819.

THE RIVER ROAD

The Singapore River takes centre stage in the exhibition, reflecting its pivotal role in the nation's history. From its early significance in trade routes along the Maritime Silk Road to its influence on Sir Stamford Raffles' choice of Singapore as a British seaport, the river has been instrumental in shaping the country's destiny.

After Raffles and William Farquhar landed on its banks in



Section One: Always on the Map.



Section Two: The River Road.

1819, the river became the heart of trading activities until the mid-20th century. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 further cemented Singapore's position as a crucial crossroads between East and West, leading to a sharp increase in trade value and volume.

Throughout the 20th century, the river underwent dramatic transformations, from a bustling trade artery crowded with bumboats to its current incarnation as a vibrant lifestyle destination. The 1977 clean-up operation marked a turning point, paving the way for the river's evolution into the sparkling tourist attraction we know today. This narrative forms the basis of structuring the exhibition's central pathway in terms of the story of the river and of Singapore itself.



Daguerreotype of Boat Quay and Singapore River from Government Hill (now Fort Canning Hill). Image from the Collection of National Museum of Singapore.

EXPANDING HORIZONS

Singapore's physical growth – achieved through the reclamation of land from colonial times – is explored in 'Expanding Horizons'. This begins with the colonial exercise in surveying, which in turn made possible the plans surrounding the expansion of Singapore's coastlines.

The origins of Singapore's land reclamation are traced to 1822, with the building of an embankment at the Singapore River by a multi-ethnic group of labourers levelling a nearby hill. This 'flattening and expanding' approach extends to the reclamation of Telok Ayer, highlighted through maps and photographs which illustrate the extent of Singapore's central business district being founded on reclaimed land.

The story continues through Singapore's post-independence period, focusing on how Singapore makes best use of its land through careful planning, reclamation and redevelopment. The contemporary case study of the ongoing building of Tuas Port spotlights alternative reclamation methods that point the way forward to more sustainable development.

FLOWS OF PEOPLE

'Flows of People' examines the crucial role of migration in Singapore's development, highlighting how the nation has been shaped by diverse waves of newcomers joining existing local communities. From the 19th century, Singapore's strategic location and prosperity drew people from across the globe.



Section Three: Expanding Horizons.



Diorama depicting a coolie room in the 1900s.

Through personal stories and historical records, the exhibition reveals both the vibrant diversity of Singapore's society and the challenging conditions early migrants faced, from cramped quarters to backbreaking work. While many built the nation's infrastructure through physical labour, others contributed by defending it, providing transport services or undertaking caregiving roles.

Drawing parallels between past and present, the exhibition shows how contemporary migrants often face similar challenges of starting anew far from home. With over 40 per cent of today's population born overseas, Singapore's progress and prosperity remain intrinsically linked to its openness to migrants and their contributions across all sectors of society.

MAKING WAVES



Section Five: Making Waves.

'Making Waves' shifts the attention to Singapore's impact beyond its shores. This includes its position as a leader in global diplomacy, humanitarian efforts, research and innovation, as well as the increasing globalisation of Singaporean food and language.

One highlight feature is the showcase of 'Wave Makers' – Singaporeans who have flown the flag internationally in their respective fields, with a focus on the road less trodden, from sport to music to fashion. This selection was very much guided by significant artefacts contributed more recently to the museum's Collecting Contemporary Singapore initiative, which has allowed us to collect objects related to contemporary events and themes.

LOOKING BEYOND SG60

While much of the exhibition charts Singapore's historical journey, links to the contemporary have been made where relevant. With the exhibition's final installation, these threads are tied together through a conclusion of the visitors' wristband experience. With a tap, visitors uncover the avatar that best describes their hopes for Singapore, aggregated from their responses throughout the exhibition. Avatars standing for economic competitiveness, care and compassion, preservation of culture and heritage, and sustainable development are released towards a cityscape being built in real time based on these priorities, serving as an impactful visualisation of visitors' personal and collective aspirations for Singapore's future.

What does Singapore's future hold? This question is posed at the concluding section of *Once Upon a Tide*. It is our sincere hope that the journey that we have taken our visitors through will provide sufficient reason for the confidence that Singapore has what it takes to face the uncertain future.

Exhibition Duration: 24 May 2025 to 9 October 2026.

FOM offers guided tours of this exhibition.

For updated tour timings, please refer to the FOM website.

DANIEL THAM and **RUCHI MITTAL** are curators of this exhibition at the National Museum of Singapore.

PIM 2025

THIS YEAR THE ANNUAL PIM ORGANISED BY THE OVERALL HEADS OF TRAINING (OHOTS) TO DISSEMINATE INFORMATION REGARDING UPCOMING DOCENT TRAINING PROGRAMMES WAS HELD IN THE RIVER ROOM AT ASIAN CIVILISATIONS MUSEUM (ACM) ON 27TH MAY, 2025

All photographs are taken by Cecilia Lee and Kersten Kiesselbach.



At the registration desk – Heike and Yan Bai.



Attendees in animated conversation before the commencement of PIM.

What is PIM? No, not Pimm's (a fruity summer punch with lemonade, fresh mint leaves, cucumber, orange slices and strawberries) although at the end of docent training you will have earned one!

PIM is FOM's annual Public Information Meeting (PIM). It is organised by the OHOTs to highlight the programmes being offered for docent training across our various museums, heritage institutions and heritage trails. An event that allows our new Co-Heads of training and their teams to share what they have to offer potential trainees. It's a friendly competition to gather as many sign-ups as possible, with some teams often resorting to bribery in the form of food and maybe that Pimm's!

FOM currently covers 12 venues. Even though some are undergoing major renovations, we still have an exciting range of training opportunities to choose from in the next 12 months.

- A total of five training programmes, with the ACM and The Peranakan Museum (TPM) starting on Tuesday, 16th September, 2025.
- The other three training programmes at Changi Chapel Museum (CCM), the Urban Redevelopment Authority China Town Heritage Trail (URA CHT) and Kampong Gelam Heritage Trail (KGHT) will start in January 2026.
- The last URA training was in 2024 and KGHT was in 2023. They are back by popular demand!

Planning for PIM begins many months in advance and we are grateful to ACM for the use of their wonderful River Room.



At the F&B table – Moushomi, Priyanka and Joyce.



At the membership table – Rupa, Smitha, Vanessa, Charu and Jessica.



At the ACM table – Co-Heads Susana, Robert and team.



At the CCM table – Co-Heads Caroline, Roy and team.



At the KGHT table – Co-Head Karien and a team member.



At the TPM table – Co-Heads Marjukka, Rachel and team.

This year's PIM poster showcases the museums, trails and art institutions where we guide. And it was designed by FOM volunteer and graphic designer, Evonne Tay-Koh. If you saw our adverts on social media, then that is due to our wonderful communications team, thank you! New docents, fresh from completing their training shared their experiences using three words to describe their training and to highlight their most memorable moment.

PIM 2025 saw 105 attendees and presentations from each team extolling the very best of what they had to offer. The teams did an excellent job and were rewarded with many sign-ups of interest on training sheets.

Using different materials and artefacts through various themes, regions and periods, the ACM presentation showcased how the past holds powerful stories and the future needs people to share them.

CCM shared how Changi Chapel Museum may be one of the smallest museums in Singapore but that it commemorates real stories and lives that continue to inspire today. This is especially significant, as 2025 marks 80 years since the end of World War II.

KGHT reminded us that Kampong Gelam is a living area where history is still being made today. It's the spiritual centre for Singapore's Muslims and is home to many immigrants from the Malay Archipelago who brought many skills and trades – the art of masonry, coppersmithing and book printing to name a few.

TPM asked us, who are the Peranakans? Centuries ago, foreign traders from different countries came to this region and some of these traders married local women. Their children were the first Peranakans. So 'cross-cultural' is the key word! Peranakan culture is a beautiful fusion – evident in everything from the food, clothing, architecture, music and literature to the language and celebrations!

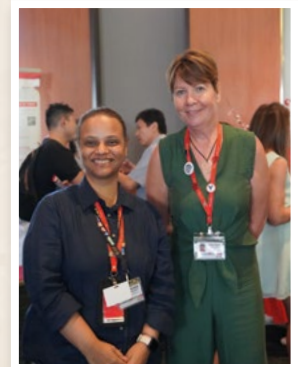
URA Chinatown training team focused on the perilous journeys the early migrants made to colonial Singapore and their lives during that time as represented by the various landmarks in the four districts of Telok Ayer, Kreta Ayer, Bukit Pasoh and Tanjong Pagar. The enthusiasm of the team while presenting was palpable and showcased the fun elements of training to be an outdoor volunteer guide.

We also had nearly 30 sign-ups for our 20 minute taster tours at ACM. Thank you to the ACM Co-Coordinator, Shriya and Alpana and their fellow docents, Ching Soo, Catarina and Angela for leading the tours.

An event this big cannot be carried out without help from the FOM community and we owe thanks to many - Heike and Yan Bai for manning the registration desk, the F&B team, the membership team and last but not least, Cecilia and Kersten (photographers) without whom there would be no pictures to share.



The PASSAGE table drew a steady stream of attendees.



OHOTs: Shradha and Andrea.

ANDREA BAKER and SHRADHA NAYAN OHOTs 2024-25.



At the URA table – Co-Heads Hui Li, Chye Teck and team, with our President, Lee Hong Leng.



Signing up for a docent training programme.

VOLUNTEER APPRECIATION NIGHT 2025

LEONG LEE CHIEW RECOUNTS A NIGHT OF SWINGIN' SIXTIES

All photos are courtesy of FOM volunteer Isabel Tan, unless otherwise stated.

As early as mid-March, Friends of the Museums (FOM) volunteers received a Save-the-Date email. The date to save was 6 May 2025, for one of FOM's largest annual events, the Volunteer Appreciation Night (VAN). It would be an evening of fun and awards for dedicated FOM volunteers. When asked how she decided on the theme, Paroma Sen, FOM Council Representative for Volunteer and Member Appreciation said, "We wanted to celebrate Singapore's 60th birthday and a unique era of love, peace and nostalgia. So, *Swingin' Sixties* it was to be."

The extravaganza officially kicked off with a speech from FOM President Lee Hong Leng thanking all volunteers: "It's always good to come together and celebrate our community of volunteers – who generously give their time, talents and skills. It is our volunteers' unstinting, wholehearted commitment to enhancing the knowledge of Asia's art, history and culture that keeps FOM going and growing."

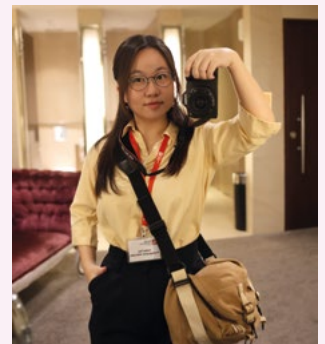
Hong Leng also acknowledged FOM's special partnership with the National Heritage Board and thanked Chief Executive Officer Ms Chang Hwee Nee, Director of Education and Community Outreach Mr Gerald Wee, Deputy Director of Education, Heritage Cares & Volunteer Engagement Ms Karen Goh, and Ms Nurliyana Abdul Halid, a member of Karen's team, for joining FOM that evening.



From left: Robyn Lloyd, Lee Hong Leng and Paroma Sen.



Seated: Susan Fong and Gwen Ong. Standing: Wong Li Juan and Kalyani Kausikan helping at the registration table.



Official photographer Isabel Tan.



Jeffrey Tan, Gill Cruikshank, Tabitha Manresa, Lena Koh, Sapna Walia and Laetitia Paoli.



Back: Maxine Palmer, Myrthe Devillers, Priya Sen, Song Eunna and Laura Bouby. Front: Mi-Anne Kuetter, Shanu Tatiya, Yohali Velazquez, Heike Bredenkamp and Valerie Guibert.



Gerald Wee, Karen Goh, Paroma Sen, Chang Hwee Nee, Lee Hong Leng, Karen Ng and Nurliyana Abdul Halid.



Aya Hoshikawa, Yumi Yoshii, Yoshii Tokiwa, Motoko Ugata, Miho Tajimi and Yoko Collick.



(Left) Susan Fong, Sylvia Khoo, Chen Liu, Sadiyah Shahal, Lam Min Yee, Leong Lee Chiew, Shia Ai Lee, Tina Tan, Millie Phuah and Caroline Oh. Photo taken by Sadiyah Shahal.

Ms Chang congratulated FOM on this joyous occasion and thanked FOM for its unwavering support: "I want to express my gratitude to each and every one of you for your support for the museums, institutions and various programmes. Your dedication certainly enriches Singapore's cultural landscape. And the impact of your work speaks volumes. In 2024, 4500 guided tours reached more than 40,000 visitors!"

Japanese Docent Aya Hoshikawa likened FOM to a kaleidoscope: "FOM gives me plenty of chances to learn interesting things and connect with amazing people, which has helped me see the world from a fresh and broader perspective."

RECOGNISING THREE, FIVE, TEN, FIFTEEN AND TWENTY YEARS OF VOLUNTARY SERVICE

A highlight of VAN is to recognise volunteers who have devoted three, five, ten, fifteen and twenty years of voluntary service with FOM.



Congratulations to all 3-year pin recipients.



Congratulations to all 5-year pin recipients.

"Over the past three years of guiding, I have had the privilege of meeting many fascinating visitors whose perspectives have enriched my journey and made it all the more memorable," said Tina Tan, a 3-year-pin recipient, appreciating the leaders, mentors and friends who made this possible.

To 5-year pin recipient Laetitia Paoli, the FOM pin is more than a pin: "I thought it would be a non-event – just a simple pin I'd tuck away in a drawer. But receiving my 5-year pin turned out to be something entirely different.

It wasn't just a milestone; it was a celebration of friendship, shared growth and relentless curiosity. It was an experience I wish everyone could have."

Wong Li Juan, a 10-year pin recipient, is happy to make like-minded friends: "What started as a way to keep busy, turned into 10 years of sharing stories, sparking curiosity and watching history come alive in the eyes of visitors. I found a warm, witty tribe of fellow docents, whom I am lucky to call friends."



Congratulations to all 10-year pin recipients.



15-year pin recipients Jacqueline Thng (left) and Rosalind Tan (centre) with Lee Hong Leng.



Ikumi Fushimi receiving the Salome De Decker award from Lee Hong Leng.



MC Darlene Kasten, Talia Webb, Tina Nixon, Jeffrey Tan and Chang Hwee Nee.



The four-member band Groove Music Therapy.

For 15-year pin recipient Rosalind Tan, learning never stops. She sums up in six words, "Learning is but a lifelong journey..."

This year, there was one 20-year pin recipient, Mary Rajkumar, who unfortunately was unable to join the celebration. Mary came to Singapore 26 years ago and found companionship in FOM: "The unwavering support and encouragement from FOM's leadership have been a continuous source of motivation, and I am thankful for the opportunity to be part of such a meaningful and enduring experience."

THE 2025 SALOME DE DECKER AWARD

The loudest cheer of the evening went to Izumi Fushimi, the recipient of FOM's highest honour, the Salome De Decker award, for 2025. Ikumi guides in both English and Japanese. MC Darlene Kasten sang her praises: "Ikumi has done so much to support and integrate the Japanese docents into the larger FOM docent community."

BEST OUTFIT AWARDS

The last presentation was the best outfit awards. Talia Webb, looking regal in her grandmother's bronze dress, was the judge who secretly took notes as she mingled with the volunteers. This year, the awards went to Mary Jane, Tina Nixon and Jeffrey Tan. Tina did not expect to be called on stage: "I was so surprised to win best dressed as there were so many groovy outfits in the evening – everyone had really gone back in time!" Tina, you deserve the award.

The evening ended on a high note with volunteers dancing to retro hits like *La Bamba*, *Sweet Caroline*, *I Feel Good*.

Purnima Sharma, feeling good, is already looking forward to next year's VAN: "Joining FOM and becoming a docent was something I had been wanting to do for a while, and the experience was all that I had hoped for."

LEONG LEE CHIEW is an FOM docent at the National Museum of Singapore, the Peranakan Museum and Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall.



FOM volunteers dancing away.



Cheng Yam San, Gayatri Sasi Tampi, Pavithra Kabir, Purnima Sharma and Novy Paulson.

THE SALOME DE DECKER AWARD

HEIKE BREDEKAMP LEARNS WHAT DRIVES IKUMI FUSHIMI,
RECIPIENT OF THE 2025 SALOME DE DECKER AWARD

Each year, FOM honours a volunteer whose quiet dedication and humility enrich the visitor experience. The 2025 Salome de Decker Award goes to **Ikumi Fushimi**, a docent whose commitment has spanned multiple institutions and two languages over more than a decade.

Ikumi's FOM journey began in 2011, after relocating from the UK with her Singaporean husband. His family's warmth and love for Singapore's heritage led Ikumi to FOM: "My aunt-in-law, a founding FOM docent at the Peranakan Museum, gave me a tour and shared her colourful family history. She also brought my parents on a Japanese-language tour. I immediately joined FOM and enrolled in the Japanese Docent Training Programme in 2012." Ikumi later completed English-language training and began guiding at the ACM and STPI. Her first special exhibition was *Kindred Spirits: Dr Sun Yat Sen, Singapore and Japan* at Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall: "It even revealed my husband's great-grandfather's name in the Tong Meng Hui membership list!"

Among Ikumi's many projects, ACM's *Christianity in Asia: Sacred Art and Visual Splendour* stands out: "As a Catholic convert, I'd never fully understood Japan's Christian history; this exhibition reinvigorated my faith journey." It inspired her to visit heritage sites in Japan, including the Goto Islands in Nagasaki, where hidden Christians once sought refuge. Ikumi also fell in love with Japanese woodblock prints after guiding STPI's *Edo Pop – The Graphical Impact of Japanese Prints* in 2014: "I'd never studied the art form's history or techniques before." Years later, she co-coordinated the training for ACM's *Life in Edo | Russell Wong in Kyoto*, which sparked a deep interest in kimono. "Planning study groups for that show was so much fun, and it even sparked my love of kimono."

A HIDDEN WORLD INSIDE A JAR

In 2023, Ikumi helped the Japanese Docent Group prepare for the Japanese Ambassador's Commendation Award: "Working on that project made me realise how many individuals have selflessly contributed to our group's success." Despite long hours writing scripts and preparing tours, she's never lost motivation: "Docenting demands time, effort, and commitment, but it's also enriching. It gave me a fresh opportunity to learn and share as an adult. There's a Japanese idiom, *kochū no tenchi*, which means 'a different world inside a jar' – you only discover its wonders by entering."



The 2025 Salome De Decker Award recipient, Ikumi Fushimi.
Photo courtesy of Isabel Tan.

Ikumi remains humbled by the recognition: "I'm deeply honoured to receive this award, yet I feel unworthy. This recognition motivates me to work harder and to weave those values into every aspect of my volunteering." For newcomers to museum guiding, her advice is simple: "Pace yourself according to your lifestyle and family commitments. Over time, I learned you can't do everything at once; building knowledge takes time."

If Ikumi could curate her own show? "I'd choose kimono. Once you master the basics, wearing kimono becomes a liberating form of self-expression. You tell a story through motifs and symbolism."

One tour that's stayed with her was entirely unscripted: "Four young Japanese mothers with prams turned up. The babies slept through the entire tour, yet the mothers and I had a great time. That experience taught me to focus on what visitors need rather than what I want to present." Ikumi's dedication to learning and sharing remains constant. Her story is a reminder that museums are not just places of objects and labels, but of people. People like Ikumi, who open the door to hidden worlds, one tour at a time.

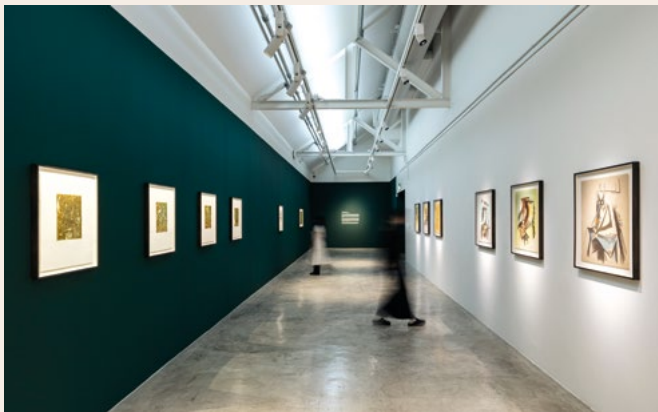
HEIKE BREDEKAMP is an Asian Civilisations Museum docent.

OUTSIDE IN: REFRAMING MODERN ART THROUGH WIFREDO LAM'S EYES

STEPHANIE KOLENTSIS VISITS THE FIRST SOLO EXHIBITION IN SOUTHEAST ASIA
DEDICATED TO CUBAN ARTIST WIFREDO LAM

All images are courtesy of STPI.

Stepping into the gallery, I'm surrounded by surreal, hybrid creatures that seem to leap off the stark white walls. With their elongated limbs, mask-like faces and spirit-animal forms, Wifredo Lam's figures merge myth and modernity. This is *Outside In*, the first solo exhibition in Southeast Asia dedicated to the renowned Cuban artist Wifredo Lam (1902–1982). It features over 60 works on paper from the Wifredo Lam estate, including etchings, aquatints and lithographs, created between 1963 and 1982.



An installation view of Wifredo Lam: Outside In including works from Verticale Carîbe (1979–1980) and Regard Verticale (1973) at STPI – Creative Workshop & Gallery.

Drawing from Afro-Cuban imagery, Lam's figures present an alternative worldview that is both otherworldly and outside the confines of a Western perspective. Lam's iconic jungle motifs are echoed throughout the works on display, particularly in *Untitled* (1980). The etching evokes dense, lush foliage interspersed with hybrid human, animal, vegetal and spiritual forms. Tobacco leaves and sugarcane stalks are incorporated into the vegetation, symbols of Cuba's exploitation under colonialism, which was an area of passionate artistic exploration throughout Lam's life.



Wifredo Lam. Untitled. 1980. Etching with aquatint in colours on Sicars paper. Edition 124. Image from Wifredo Lam Estate, Paris.

A CROSS-CULTURAL HERITAGE SHAPED HIS CAREER

Wifredo Lam was born in 1902 in Cuba to a Cantonese immigrant father and a mother of Afro-Spanish descent. In 1923, he moved to Madrid to study art, where he would spend the next 15 years. When the Spanish Civil War erupted in 1936, he fought alongside the Republicans. Two years later, he arrived in Paris with a letter of introduction to none other than Pablo Picasso, who took Lam under his wing. Lam was later introduced to André Breton, the co-founder of Surrealism, and the movement had a great influence on his work.

LAM AND CESAIRE: CENTRING AFRO-CARIBBEAN PERSPECTIVES

In 1941, Lam set sail for Martinique, where he met the poet, author and politician Aimé Césaire, co-founder of the Négritude movement. The two formed a lifelong friendship and collaborated on *Annonciation*, published in 1982. For this *livre d'artiste* (artist's book), Lam showed Césaire a suite of etchings he had created in 1969, and Césaire, deeply inspired



Wifredo Lam in front of *The Jungle* (1943) and *Le Matin Vert* (1943) in his Havana studio, 1943.



Wifredo Lam. *Que l'on Présente Son Cœur au Soleil, Annonciation Planche IV*. 1969. Etching with aquatint in colours on Velin Arches. Edition of 125. Image from the Wifredo Lam Estate, Paris.

by the images, wrote ten poems in response. The result pairs Césaire's poetic patchwork of Afro-Caribbean myths and cosmology with Lam's hybrid creatures. The centring of Afro-Caribbean beliefs and imagery serves as a powerful resistance to colonial narratives, which historically privileged Eurocentric perspectives.

APOSTROPH'APOCALYPSE AND THE ART OF RESISTANCE

Apostroph'Apocalypse (1967), created with Romanian poet Gherasim Luca, is another *livre d'artiste* (artist's book), which chronicles an apostrophe that explodes language into atomic particles, leading to apocalyptic destruction. Created against the backdrop of the Cuban Missile Crisis, Lam and Luca were in direct dialogue with the question of nuclear armament and its existential threat. The fourteen images in the book depict explosive figures against a clay-coloured backdrop with missile-like objects protruding from the mouths of several figures.

In 1961, Lam settled in the Italian coastal town of Albisola. He would frequently travel to visit his friend, Italian master printer Giorgio Upiglio, at his studio in Milan, immersing himself in printmaking towards the end of his career. This sustained engagement with printmaking reflects Lam's enduring commitment to the medium as a powerful vehicle for colonial and political resistance, and as a means of expressing a visual language that imagines alternative ways of being.

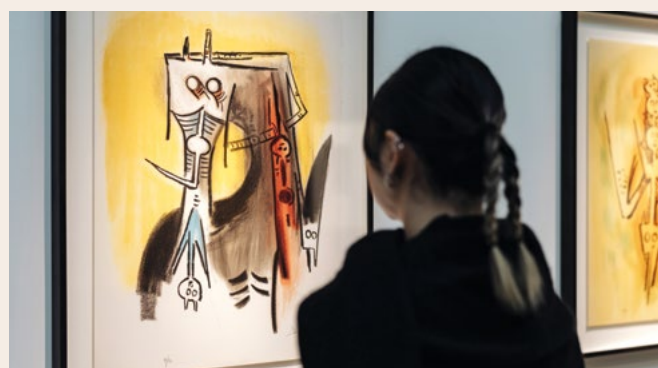


The threat of nuclear armament is explored in *Apostroph'Apocalypse* (1966).

RE-EVALUATING WIFREDO LAM

While Lam's contribution to twentieth-century art was long overlooked, he has since gained recognition as a key figure in modern art whose work will be celebrated and critically re-evaluated in several major exhibitions this year. *Outside In* coincides with the National Gallery of Singapore's *City of Others: Asian Artists in Paris, 1920s–1940s* (April 2 to August 17, 2025), where Lam's work is also featured. It also comes ahead of a major retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, opening in November 2025.

My visit to *Outside In* urged me to reflect on the way modern art has too often privileged a Western vantage point. Lam's work invites us to consider a more expansive gaze—one that makes space for hybrid identities and alternative ways of seeing the world. *Outside In* reminded me that art history is not a fixed canon, but an evolving conversation where we can reconsider the histories we inherit and the narratives we continue to shape.



Wifredo Lam's lithograph, *Aïzan, Ils Ont Les Jambes de Secrétaires, Regard Vertical Plate II* (1973), centres an Afro-Cuban worldview.

Upcoming Exhibition:

Material Moves: Revisiting Print and Paper through Han Sai Por, Goh Beng Kwan, Ong Kim Seng and Chua Ek Kay. Open to the public from 16 August to 5 October, 2025 at STPI – Creative Workshop & Gallery. FOM guided tours from 28 August onwards; check tour timings on the STPI website.

STEPHANIE KOLENTSIS is a FOM docent at STPI gallery and creative workshop.

CURIO ACTIVITIES: A JOURNEY THROUGH CREATIVITY AND COMMUNITY

GISELLA HARROLD STEPS INTO THE EXCITING WORLD OF CURIO, WHERE ART, CULTURE, FOOD AND FRIENDSHIP COME TOGETHER IN A SERIES OF HANDS-ON ACTIVITIES DESIGNED TO SPARK CURIOSITY AND CREATIVITY

All photos are taken by the author unless otherwise noted.

The Friends of the Museums (FOM) Curio activities are an opportunity to explore art, culture, food and camaraderie, woven together by a shared curiosity and a love for learning. Each activity is more than just a class or a workshop – our goal is to find activities to discover, try out new things and be creative, while connecting with other FOM members.

A COMMUNITY ROOTED IN CURIOSITY

I think FOM's Curio is aptly named: it is all about uncovering the rare, the unusual and the intriguing.

Whether you are a seasoned FOM member or a newcomer you might want to try new and exciting activities, but don't know how to go about it or do not want to commit to weeks of classes. And that's what we do for you. We find exciting activities for you to try out in the comfort of FOM activities and often find a fresh perspective on art and culture.

SINGLISHLAH: CELEBRATING LOCAL LINGUISTICS

This year Curio worked together with SingaporeandYou, a local company which offered a variety of very successful workshops. One was called *SinglishLah*. Here we could explore Singapore's unique linguistic heritage – Singlish. In a room buzzing with laughter, Jamal Ismail, the speaker, explained how to use our favourite local expressions in Singlish the right way to be used in the wet market, as well as understand more when we explore local theatre



*Steady pom pipi with SinglishLah.
Photo courtesy of SingaporeandYou.*

plays such as productions from Wild Rice or Sing'Theatre (we do offer outings to various theatre performances). And maybe as an idea we could use some of our favourite local expressions and create new and exciting workshops such as decorating tote bags or writing cards? We would love to hear from you with suggestions.



Curious about learning new recipes? Join our Curio Cooking Class!

COOKING CLASS: DISCOVER THE DELICIOUS WORLD OF QUICHES

Food and cooking are two of Singapore's national pastimes, so we put our aprons on for this special cooking class, *Discover the Delicious World of Quiches*. For years I have been baking quiches for all sorts of FOM events and consequently have been told that I should conduct a class. The kitchen was alive with the aromas of buttery pastry and savoury fillings, from Quiche Lorraine to a delicious Salmon quiche. We learned the secrets behind making a perfect quiche as well as short cuts to facilitate the modern need for a quick homemade quiche. At the end, we savoured five quiches with a glass of wine. Even today I receive photos of quiches which have been baked at the participants' homes, so this one truly has been a long-lasting workshop.

RESIN ART WORKSHOP: UNLEASHING CREATIVITY

The Resin Art Workshop was a highlight for those eager to experiment with a new medium. Under the guidance of a skilled artist, we delved into the world of resin, learning techniques like pouring, mixing and embedding decorative elements into our creations.

The workshop was beginner-friendly yet offered enough depth to challenge even seasoned crafters. As we worked, conversations flowed about art, guiding at the museums, life and the things that inspire us. By the end of the session, each participant left with a unique piece of resin art and a newfound appreciation for the creative process.



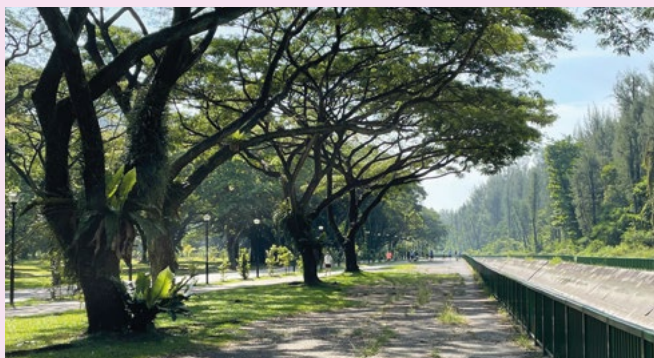
Curio members proudly displaying their resin art at The Resin Art Workshop. Photo courtesy of Charu Shahani.



Enjoying our culinary creations.

LOOKING AHEAD: FOM CURIO IS GEARING UP FOR AN EXCITING AUTUMN SESSION

By popular demand, the quiche cooking class will return, giving both new and returning members another chance to master classic and modern quiches. But that's just the beginning. Another much anticipated activity is a drawing class, where we will learn how to capture the charm of Singapore's shophouses in watercolour. These architectural gems are a beloved part of Singapore, and the class promises to be creative and whether you are a seasoned artist or a complete beginner, the class is designed for all skill levels.



FOM activity groups unite: Curio will be exploring Singapore's East Coast with the ES! group.

A SPECIAL COLLABORATION: EXPLORE SINGAPORE! TREE WALK MEETS CURIO FOODIES

Perhaps the most unique offering this season is our collaboration with Explore Singapore! (ES!) We will be walking along the East Coast and exploring the fauna and flora. This will be followed by a very special Foodie outing to one of the legendary local restaurants. We will meet the owner of the place who will tell us all about the discovery of one of Singapore's national dishes, the Chilli Crab. This activity embodies the spirit of Curio: curiosity, connection and discovery.

JOIN THE ADVENTURE

What sets FOM Curio apart is not just the diversity of activities, but the sense of belonging that Curio fosters. Each session is an opportunity to learn, to create and to connect – not just with art or culture, but with fellow FOM members. The friendships forged over shared experiences are as enduring as the skills we acquire. In a fast-paced city like Singapore, Curio offers a welcome pause – a chance to slow down, savour the moment and rediscover the magic in the everyday.

For more information on upcoming Curio activities check out our page on www.fom.sg. We are always on the lookout for new ideas.



Curio offers more than incredible activities – it's a place of belonging where members can create and connect and enjoy each other's company.

GISELLA HARROLD has been a member of FOM since 1995 when she arrived in Singapore. Travelling, photography and guiding are only some of her hobbies. She is currently the coordinator of Curio.

WEAVING FRIENDSHIPS

THE TEXTILE ENTHUSIASTS GROUP ROLLS OUT THEIR FINERY TO CELEBRATE THEIR SHARED PASSION FOR FASHION



Gifting a tote bag of FOM mementos to Garima Lalwani, so she remembers us when she moves to the US. Photo courtesy of Mirlani Budisetia.



TEG Co-coordinator, Dobrina Boneva, with Vineeta Rupani. Photo courtesy of Miho Tajimi.



TEG committee members, Garima Lalwani and Kshama Joglekar. Photo courtesy of Miho Tajimi.



Chey Cheng Lim opening the prize she won for Best Traditional Textile, with Mei Li Chan assisting. Photo courtesy of Mirlani Budisetia.



Miho Tajimi, Garima Lalwani, Mirlani Budisetia and Thet Thet Han. Photo courtesy of Kshama Joglekar.

The Textile Enthusiasts Group (TEG) closed the 2024-25 Season with textiles and style! They held their annual Drinks & Dresses social event in the gorgeous art-filled home of committee member, Janet Stride. Sartorial splendour is always encouraged at this event and TEG members did not disappoint! Everyone dressed up for the occasion, showing off both traditional and contemporary textile craftsmanship. The room was buzzing with excitement while everyone shared information and stories about their dresses and travel adventures.

TEG supports regional textile artisans whenever possible, so the prizes awarded for the best outfits were handwoven textiles and gifts. This year there were prizes for the Best Traditional Outfit, the Most Dramatic Outfit and the Best Fusion Outfit. Charming, embroidered sachets, commissioned to aid Myanmar refugees, were given as



The TEG committee: (clockwise from upper left) Lynelle Barrett, Dobrina Boneva, Shernaz Varia, Kshama Joglekar, Miho Tajimi, Thet Thet Han, Jyotsna Mishra and Garima Lalwani. Photo courtesy of Mirlani Budisetia.



The prize winners: Talia Webb in a fusion dress combining an aboriginal screen print from Arnhem land with motifs of Makassan trebang fisherman, and Cheongsam tailoring; Paviethra Kabir in an eye-catching modern interpretation of the sari, utilising appliqué; Chey Cheng Lim in a beautifully embroidered Qing dynasty wrap skirt. Photo courtesy of Lynelle Barrett.



Our hostess Janet Stride (middle) with her sister Lois Ephraim and Co-coordinator Lynelle Barrett. Photo courtesy of Kshama Joglekar.



Detail of some of the embroidered sachets handed out as party favours. Photo courtesy of Lynelle Barrett.



Sampling all the delicious snacks. Photo courtesy of Miho Tajimi.

party favours to each guest. Drinks & Dresses is a potluck event, so in addition to all the scrumptious textiles, there was a delicious assortment of snacks and sweets from around the world.

Registration for the Textile Enthusiasts Group 2025-26 Season is open on the FOM website. If you would like to participate in the textile fun, they would love to have you join them!

LYNELLE BARRETT is a textile artist and co-coordinator of the Textile Enthusiasts Group. You can contact her at fomtegsingapore@gmail.com and find her online [@lynelle.of.the.ooms](https://www.lynelle.of.the.ooms.com)

BLOOD AND BANDAGES

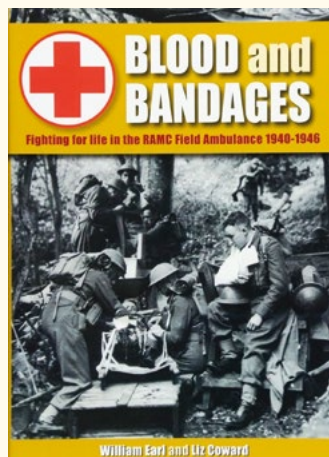
LIZ COWARD SHARES HER EXPERIENCE OF WRITING HER FIRST BOOK

All photos were taken by the author.

Blood and Bandages is the unique and moving memoir of Private William Earl, a Second World War Nursing Orderly in the Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC). He saw action on the frontline in North Africa and Italy with the British Eighth and American Fifth armies between 1943 and 1945.

Blood and Bandages sprang from a chance encounter with William Earl, an alert, passionate but lonely 94-year-old. It developed into a seven-year project and a deep friendship.

William (Bill) was a clear, articulate and detailed witness. Whilst I trusted the accuracy of his words, they had to be verified. Verification was provided by the war diaries of the 214th and 167th Field Ambulances and other relevant documents held at the National Archives in London. I photographed each document and there were over a thousand of them. This was problematic. The photographs were only useful if properly catalogued. Therefore I decided to split the war into manageable three-monthly sections. Each document within that section was read, summarised and cross-referenced with Bill's own photographs, letters home and associated war diaries. This took a year, but the system was so effective that I could identify and locate any document within minutes. This enabled me to rely heavily on original material when writing the book.

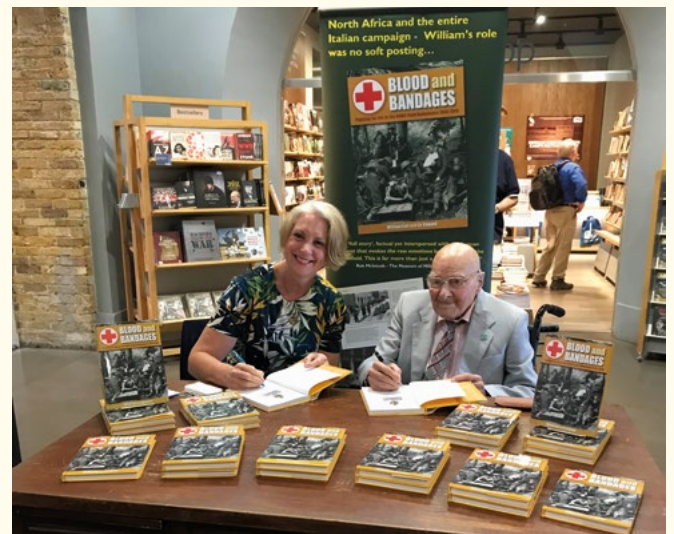


Bill and I filming in Italy with TV personality, Gary Lineker.

Bill's story had to make sense, so I needed to give it enough context without losing his voice. I studied the North African and Italian campaigns and the RAMC, blissfully unaware that research should come with a health warning. It invites you to skip down rabbit holes then over-share. Luckily, my brilliant feedback partner kept reminding me that 'not every fact is fascinating.'

At the heart of Bill's memoir, was a love story between him and Mary Standen. Yet, apart from love letters, she was absent for most of the book. Mary prevented Bill's story from becoming 'just another' war memoir so she had to be present throughout. You can see how I established this in the book's foreword.

In 2016, I decided to be bold and took my best chapter and book summary to the London Book Fair. Despite it being unfinished and me being a first-time writer, I had faith in the power of Bill's story. I met with the smaller independent publishers and received an offer immediately.



Bill and I signing books at the Imperial War Museum, London.

Blood and Bandages was launched in 2017 amidst a flurry of media interest. Two years later, Bill and I were invited to Italy to contribute to a BBC documentary on the RAMC with TV personality, Gary Lineker.

Bill was then 104 years young and, as always, rose to the occasion.

I am now back at the research stage for my next book. It's a huge project. One in which I will employ all the experience I gained on *Blood and Bandages*. It's about the Prisoners of War who stayed in Changi from 1942 to 1945.

LIZ COWARD is an FOM docent at Changi Chapel Museum.

TALKING SHARP WITH THE KASTENS

MADDIE THAM CHATS WITH DARLENE AND VINCE ABOUT THEIR COLLECTION OF KRIS DAGGERS

Photographs by Darlene and Vince Kasten.

Kris or sometimes spelt *keris* refers to an asymmetrical, double-edged dagger thought to have originated in Indonesia, and which later spread to other parts of Southeast Asia. *Kris* making is centuries old and the few *kris* makers still practicing today in Java, known as ‘*Empu*’ still observe centuries-old rituals into their creations which are said to imbue them with spirit essence. This makes the *kris* both a weapon and a spiritual object. Let’s learn more about the fascinating *kris* as we chat with collectors Darlene and Vince Kasten who have collected *kris* for a decade.

THANKS DARLENE AND VINCE FOR TALKING WITH ME ABOUT YOUR KRIS COLLECTION. LET’S BEGIN WITH WHAT PROMPTED YOU TO START COLLECTING KRIS?

Vince: My interest in knives was sparked at 12 years old, when I received a gift of a Camillus pocketknife from my uncle. From then on, I was a casual collector of folding blade pocketknives as well as fixed blade hunting knives. I have an engineer’s interest in knives – how they are made, the metallurgy, the craftsmanship – I am not a born collector.

I became specifically interested in the *kris* in my mid-teens from a strange source: in Frank Herbert’s novel *Dune* there is mention of ‘crysknives.’ After which I learned of an Asian dagger called the ‘*kris*’ which bore similarities – a dagger-like weapon with mystic force. Information about *kris* then was sparse in the USA and it was just filed in my memory as a mysterious thing. Fast forward 45 years when we moved to Singapore and Darlene started guiding at the Malay Heritage Centre (MHC). After attending an event at



Kris Bugis from the 1840s: the low contrast pamor (the pattern on the blade) is typical of kris made with Sulawesi iron, which has a low nickel content.



Darlene and Vince Kasten, in Indonesian batik with some of their kris collection.

MHC where *kris* experts demonstrated a ritual cleaning of *kris*, we visited a nearby curio shop in Kampong Glam to learn more. It was at this shop that I bought my first *kris* - a Bugis Kris from the mid-19th century.

Darlene: In the interests of full disclosure, I cannot call myself a collector of *kris* and I only own one *kris* with a beautiful red lacquer sheath. However, since training to be a docent at MHC, I have become a collector of stories and legends associated with the *kris*. I am much more interested in their history and role in Malay culture. I usually tag along on these (*kris* hunting) trips to indulge my collection of textiles. A week-long trip in 2022 across the north coast of Java from Cirebon to Madura for instance included as many stops for Batik cloth workshops as it did for *kris*-makers!

AS YOU JUST MENTIONED, SOME OF YOUR KRIS PURCHASES WERE MADE DURING TRAVEL. WHAT WAS YOUR MOST INTERESTING OR CHALLENGING PURCHASE?

Vince: We’ve made several trips to Indonesia primarily for *kris*s. The first trip was perhaps the most challenging as we first had to find a places with *empu* actively making

*kris*s. *Kris* makers are a dying breed, and such places are not exactly to be found among Tripadvisor's top ten list of tourist attractions. Next, was securing a guide who knew the local language and had knowledge of *kris*. It took us several months of research. In 2016, our first *kris* hunt took us to Aeng Tong Tong Village in Madura. Practically everyone in the village was engaged in some aspect of *kris* making including the Village Headman, Empu Taufik Rahman.

Darlene: Even when our trips to Indonesia are not for *kris* hunting, we always seem to end up coming back with one or two. For example, on a recent trip to the highlands of Sumatra, Vince found some old *kris* daggers with hilts and sheaths made from buffalo horn while we were searching for antique Toba Batak wood carvings.

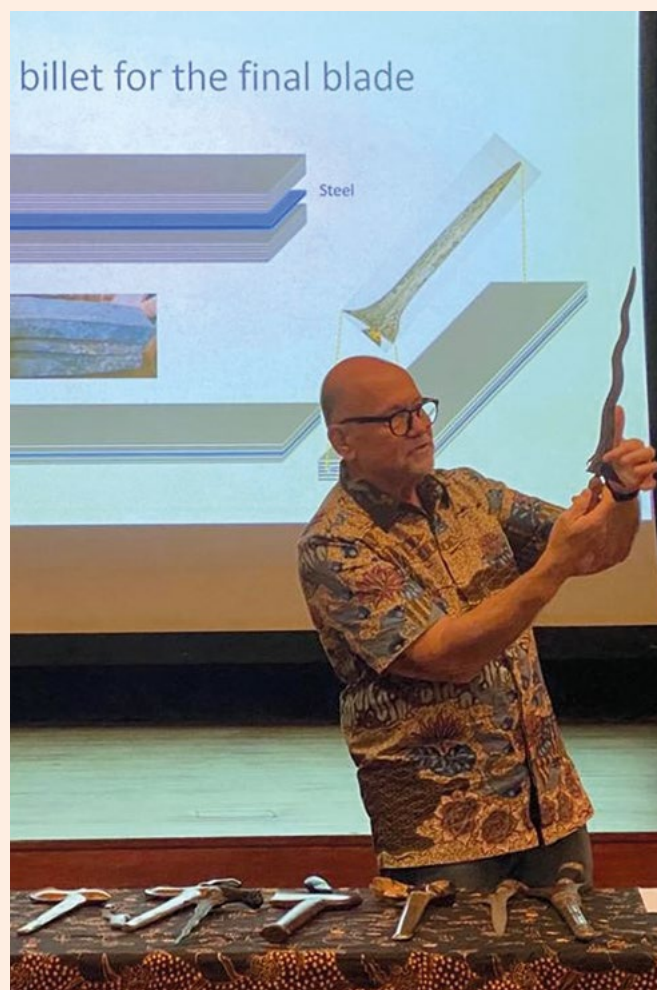
FROM WHAT I UNDERSTAND, YOU HAVE COLLECTED SOME 25 KRIS DAGGERS IN THE PAST 10 YEARS. TELL US A LITTLE ABOUT YOUR COLLECTION IN TERMS OF AGE AND RANGE.

Vince: The oldest *kris* and my favourite is a small Majapahit-era spatulate *kris*, and the newest being a *kris* made by a smith called Ah Lai in Johor Bahru – an oddity as he is a Chinese *kris* maker in Malaysia, while currently *kris* making activity is concentrated, I believe in Java. The collection is mostly Javanese *kris*s, with notable examples from Empu Harumbrojo in Yogyakarta and Empu Taufik Rahman of Aeng Tong Tong Village. There are also two Balinese *kris*s, notable by their large size.

It's a relatively small collection, so we've tried to make it reasonably balanced and representative of old/new, *Kris Luk* (wavy) of various *luk* count and *Kris Lurus* (straight), of different styles (*dhapur*) and forged blade patterns (*pamor*). Also, the *kris* sarong – the sheath and hilt are a consideration; there are some truly beautiful woods that



Majapahit kris from Mojokerto: on the left, a rare 16th century spatulate kris, on the right an 18th century three-luk Kris Luk, with distinctive Ladrang-style perabot (the wide area at the base of the blade) typical of the Majapahit era.



Asian Civilisations Museum Docent Training: describing how the distinctive light and dark pamor on a kris blade is made by folding and forging multiple layers of iron with different nickel content.

go into the *kris*'s sheath - yellow spalted timoho (*Kleinhovia hospita*), iridescent kemuning (*Murraya paniculata*), etc. and we've tried to get a cross section.

FINALLY, HOW DO YOU CARE FOR YOUR KRIS COLLECTION?

Vince: They are prone to rust if left neglected. Since we are not Indonesian, we don't go through the annual ritual cleaning that occurs in the Islamic month of Muharram, and because the *kris* are fairly protected there have only been one or two that have needed a *Merawat Pusaka* – a ritualised heirloom preservation cleaning. I regularly unsheath each one, use a stiff brush to sweep away any accumulated dust, and brush on a fine coat of pure sandalwood oil, the traditional protective oil for a kris ... and it makes the flat smell great for a few days.

I have been lucky to attend one of your talks in recent years on the Kris in Southeast Asia. The kris is a fascinating subject in art, historical and cultural aspects. Thank you, Darlene and Vince, for so generously sharing your kris collection adventures and ownership experience!

MADDIE THAM has been a docent at the Peranakan Museum since 2009 and the Malay Heritage Centre since 2019.



Friends
of the Museums
Singapore

Friends of the Museums Singapore (*FOM*) is a non-profit, volunteer-run organisation providing a rich journey of discovery into Singapore and Asian art, history and culture to our thousands of members for over 45 years.

We're a diverse community enjoying learning, growing and having fun, joining study groups, book clubs, film clubs and attending our flagship lectures. We participate in cultural and culinary events, volunteering, immersing ourselves in the world of Asian textiles, and more. Our members can join guided tours in Singapore and journey abroad on study tours for unforgettable travel experiences

Discovering the rare, unusual and intriguing in Singapore, and across Asia, is what we do!

FOM members can train to become a volunteer Docent guide, sharing their knowledge and passion by guiding visitors in Singapore's world class museums, heritage institutions and trails.

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