

PASSAGE

FRIENDS OF THE MUSEUMS SINGAPORE

2023

ISSUE IV

Celebrations Feasts and Festivals

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YEARS

1978 - 2023

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CONTENTS



ON THE COVER

The marriage procession of Mughal emperor Shah Jahan's eldest son with fireworks lighting up the night sky. Shah Jahan is shown on horseback with a green halo. His son, Dara Shikoh, rides ahead of him. 1750, artist unknown. Painting in the collection of the National Museum, New Delhi. Read about Sky High Celebrations on page 3.

01 **PRESIDENT'S BLOG**

02 **FROM THE EDITORS**

FEATURES

03 **Sky High Celebrations:** How different cultures used fireworks

07 **Tok Panjang:** A dining tradition of the Peranakan Chinese



07



36

11 **Elegant Gatherings:** A look at ancient Chinese garden parties

17 **Hotpot Odyssey:** Discover the enduring popularity of this egalitarian dish

21 **Golden Blessings:** The secrets of a Chettiar wedding necklace

25 **From Silk Balls to Sedan Chairs:** Chinese courtship and wedding fables

29 **How Christmas Cheered up Changi:** Prisoners of war spread Christmas Cheer

33 **How Thais Were Forced to Say Happy New Year:** Insights into the wai greeting, pad thai and Thai way of life

36 **Feasting for Power and Influence:** Nias culture and seats of honour

39 **Festive Fabrics:** Beautiful celebration textiles of the Malay world

43 **Lions, Lunar Pastries and Spirits Let Loose:** An expat's favourite Singaporean traditions



NEWS

45 **Tropical Art**

47 **Celebrating the Spirit of STPI**

49 **Japanese Docents Honoured with Cultural Award**

ACTIVITIES

50 **FOM Choir Brings Cheer to Patients**

51 **A Celebration of Milestone Anniversaries**

53 **Where Europe and Asia Meet**

55 **A Fruitful Learning Journey**

57 **Explore Singapore!**

MUSEUM DIRECTORY

COLLECTORS' CORNER

61 **A Collection for Love and Blessings**

63 **About FOM, FOM Coordinator's Contacts**

64 **MONDAY MORNING LECTURES**

PASSAGE

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The FOM Council 2022-2023.

Hello everyone,

Truly, time flies and we are now into the last issue of PASSAGE for 2023.

The most significant event for FOM in this last quarter was the Open Morning, held on 4 September, which as usual coincided with the first Monday Morning Lecture of the FOM season. (Read about it on page 51.)

It was a very special Open Morning as we marked FOM's 45th and PASSAGE's 15th anniversaries with a celebratory cake. Our special guest Professor Tommy Koh said he loved birthdays and gamely helped us cut the cake. Happy 45th birthday FOM!

Our two Co-Editors-in-Chief, Dawn Marie Lee and Tim Clark will be moving on to other endeavours after this issue. Dawn stepped in at a time of transition and threw herself into refreshing PASSAGE. She was soon joined by Tim and they've done an amazing job despite the challenges. It's our flagship and we are proud of it. Thank you both very much, and to the many other volunteers too.

By the time you read this, Council would be busy preparing for the annual AGM, our 20th this year. A fresh Council for 2023-2024 will take office on 6 of December 2023. Voting will be electronic again, an innovation we introduced last year.

The group photo on this page is of the outgoing Council – each one of them has put in a lot of work behind the scenes to keep FOM running. It has been my pleasure and a dream to have had such a merry band to work with. My deepest gratitude to each and every one of them.

This will also be my last blog as I too will be stepping down as President after two years. I could only have done it because of everyone's dedication and commitment. Thank you for all the support. It has been an incredible journey and it has been my honour to serve. Let us throw our support behind the new Council.

Onward FOM, friends forever.

Millie Phuah
FOM President
president@fom.sg



From the Editors

We hope you enjoy this issue of *PASSAGE* devoted to celebrations, feasts and festivals. This theme is especially apt as FOM celebrates its 45th anniversary, and *PASSAGE*, its 15th in 2023.

We've kicked off with a flash and a bang, with the universal celebratory appeal of fireworks and have focused on how different cultures and communities hold festivities. While many celebrations are associated with boisterous fun, read about the elegant gatherings of ancient Chinese scholars, where poetry was composed to the sound of rippling streams and wine flowed freely under wispy, willow trees.

Feasting is an important part of many celebrations. Learn about the long table banquet of the Peranakan Chinese and a Qing emperor's love of hotpots. Discover how the Nias people held feasts as a show of power, and how a dictator changed the Thai New Year, created *pad thai* and ordered all street vendors to sell it. Read how prisoners of war kept their spirits up with imaginary Christmas feasts while in captivity at Changi Prison.

Weddings are important celebrations in many cultures. Learn about the significance of a Chettair wedding necklace, how silk balls were used to select a spouse, and the importance of textiles in weddings and other festivities in the Malay World.

As Editors-in-Chief for the past two years, we have had the satisfaction of changing *PASSAGE* from being a bi-monthly publication to a quarterly edition that is a more substantial read. We have also tried to make the magazine broader in its scope to appeal to our diverse, multinational audience of intellectually curious FOM members. We have attempted to do what every good docent should do: make education entertaining. It's been challenging but fun. And we couldn't have done it without the support and submissions from our talented readers.

It is with great confidence that we hand over the editorial reins to a new and very able team headed by Charlotte Dawson. We wish them every success. The first issue of 2024 will have the theme of Trade, and the second, Mountains and Rivers. If you have an idea for a story you would like to offer, please pitch a summary to the new team at passage@fom.sg

Cheers!

Tim Clark and Dawn Marie Lee
Co-Editors-in-Chief, *PASSAGE*



Photo of fireworks by FOM member, Niraj Sharma.

Sky High Celebrations

TIM CLARK CONTEMPLATES HOW DIFFERENT CULTURES HAVE USED FIREWORKS TO DRAMATISE IMPORTANT EVENTS

What would a grand outdoor event be without fireworks? Indeed, the absence of fireworks is a metaphor for a poor show. Hence the expression, “a damp squib”, a firecracker that disappoints by failing to produce a bang.

Even during hard times, the Singapore government recognises the importance of fireworks to celebrate National Day and the New Year. The money is well spent if it raises the spirits and inspires optimism for the future.

But where and when did this practice start? Like many great inventions, firecrackers were discovered by accident, and without chemicals. At around 200 BC the Chinese found that putting bamboo poles on a fire produced loud explosions. Perfect for scaring away malignant spirits.



National Day fireworks in Singapore. Photo by Niraj Sharma.



Section of the scroll painting *Ru Bi Tu* (入蹕圖) depicting the Song emperor Shenzong's entourage launching bottle rockets into the sky. Artist unknown.

Some one thousand years later, during the Tang dynasty, Chinese alchemists mixed sulphur, charcoal and potassium nitrate (a food preservative), hoping to discover an elixir for immortality. Instead, they discovered what we now call gunpowder. And when this was stuffed into a bamboo pole or paper tube it produced a spectacular explosion.

Initially the purpose of firecrackers and fireworks was to scare away evil spirits. This would be especially necessary at funerals and occasions when hungry ghosts might be on the prowl, like *Qing Ming* (the Chinese tomb-cleaning festival, similar to the Christian All Souls Day). But increasingly fireworks became associated with occasions of jubilation such as weddings and imperial celebrations before any thought was given to their application in warfare.

STARTING EACH YEAR WITH A BANG

The use of fireworks to usher in the New Year has gained international appeal and generated competitive zeal. Especially as our TV screens can take us on a global tour to compare each country's performance, starting with the first

Opposite page: Painting depicting the marriage procession of the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan's eldest son with fireworks lighting up the night sky. Shah Jahan is shown with on horseback with a green halo. His son, Dara Shikoh, rides ahead of him with his face veiled with strings of pearls. 1750, artist unknown. Painting in the collection of the National Museum, New Delhi.





New Year's Eve fireworks over Sydney Harbour. Photo by Rob Chandler on Wikimedia Commons.

major city to light up its skies: Sydney.

According to Pandatrip.com, the display that illuminates the Sydney harbour bridge is the world's best. Dubai is ranked No. 2 with the world's biggest firework budget of \$6 million. Rio de Janeiro takes third place. And London comes in sixth, despite spending £3 million on the event. Paris scrapes in at No. 10. And although Singapore didn't make the top ten this year, give us time.

REGULATIONS TO CONTROL PYROTECHNICAL EXUBERANCE

The Chinese tradition of celebrating with fireworks in Singapore became a public safety issue in 1968. That's when the general use of rockets and rocket firecrackers was prohibited, as they were blamed for causing fires. While other fireworks were restricted to designated areas, days and times.

In 1970 the indiscriminate use of fireworks during Chinese New Year was blamed for causing six deaths and 25 injuries. Despite further restrictions and tougher penalties, the illegal use of fireworks persisted. In 1972 a further 26 people were reported injured. In 1988, during Year of the Dragon, there was another huge increase in the illegal use of fireworks, so restrictions were tightened again. From that time, anyone found guilty of importing or selling fireworks would be liable for fines, imprisonment and caning. Today, fireworks are still banned for the general public in Singapore, though certain organisations are permitted to employ them on special occasions, such as Chinese New Year. And when the real thing is unobtainable dummy firecrackers made of paper can form a nostalgic part of the festive decorations.

CELEBRATING A FAILED ASSASSINATION WITH FIREWORKS

Every youngster in England knows the date of the Gunpowder Plot. They may not remember the year of 1605, but they will certainly remember the day that the plot to blow up the king of England and Scotland was foiled. The unforgettable 5th of November.

On that day in 1605 a man called Guido Fawkes and his Catholic co-conspirators planned to commit regicide. The highest form of treason. They secretly placed 36 barrels of gunpowder in a cellar under the houses of Parliament with the intention of killing King James I and his entire Protestant inclined government.

On the eve of the intended explosion Guido (also known as Guy) and his associates were apprehended and eventually executed in a most grizzly way.

Remember, remember, the 5th of November
Gunpowder, treason and plot.
I see no reason
Why gunpowder treason
Should ever be forgot.

The anniversary of this event has been celebrated ever since with bonfires to burn an effigy of Guy Fawkes and, of course, with fireworks. Children intent on raising money to buy fireworks would often parade their dressed-up dummy and plead with passers-by to donate "a penny for the Guy". It is the English equivalent of the American "Trick or Treat" routine. And it occurs coincidentally at around the same time of year.

In England in the 1960s a 12-year-old child could go into a sweet shop and buy all the fireworks he could afford with his pocket money. Because of the frequency of accidents and injuries in recent years, there are now controls over the availability of certain fireworks, and there is an age limit preventing the sale to anyone under 18 years old. Anyone who has ever bought fireworks in England will be familiar with the cautionary instruction to 'light the blue touch paper and stand well clear'. Those who fail to do so run the risk of injury.



A Guy Fawkes mask. Photo from Wikimedia Commons.



Procession of a Guy. Image from Wikimedia Commons.



Royals enjoying fireworks. Artist unknown. Image courtesy of Salar Jung Museum, Hyderabad.

A NIGHT SKY ABLAZE

There is nothing to compete with fireworks for turning a night-time event into a jaw-dropping spectacle. It is the ultimate audio visual extravaganza. As fitting for a king's coronation as for a child's birthday party. What could be more appropriate for celebrating the triumph of light over darkness during Deepavali than to set the night sky ablaze with fireworks? Artists have tried to capture its raptures, but there is no substitute for the thrill of a first-hand experience. As long as you don't get too close. 📌

TIM CLARK is Co-Editor-in-Chief of **PASSAGE**.



A hand-coloured etching showing the royal fireworks and illuminations in Whitehall and on the River Thames on 15 May 1749, the occasion for which George Frederic Handel composed his Music for the Royal Fireworks overture. The different types of fireworks used are illustrated on the side panels. Image from Wikimedia Commons.

Tok Panjang

DAWN MARIE LEE LOOKS AT A BELOVED PERANAKAN FEAST

All photos of the Yap Ah Loy dinner service, on loan from the Mariette Collection, on display at the Peranakan Museum, are courtesy of the Peranakan Museum unless otherwise stated.

Food holds great importance for the Peranakan Chinese (also known as the Babas), with specific dishes and meals associated with customs, traditions and rituals. The most iconic feast of them all is the *tok panjang*.



Dinner service with the surname "Yap", China, Guangxu period, mark of De Sheng Gong Si. Photo courtesy of Randall Ee.

"Tok" means "table" in Hokkien, and "panjang" means "long" in Malay. The term *th'ng tok* is also used by Penang Peranakans. "Th'ng" is Hokkien for "long". *Tok panjang* feasts were usually prepared for celebrations such as weddings and milestone birthdays. They were common in the past, but are rare today.

LONG, NOT ROUND

In the past, many Baba families had a long dining table at home instead of a round one, which most Chinese families preferred. This choice reflected the Babas' love of assimilating Western influences into their home interiors and material culture. By the early 1900s, the Babas of the Straits Settlements had shifted their loyalties from the Qing emperor to the king of England and were known as "The King's Chinese". This explained their fondness for Western style furniture which was customised with auspicious Chinese motifs.

Most Baba families ate their daily meals with hands (a Malay custom) or with a fork and spoon instead of chopsticks. However, this practice differed from family to family. While knives were absent from the dining



A 20th century Peranakan wedding portrait. The bride and groom, dressed in traditional wedding attire, are flanked by a page girl and boy. Collection of the Peranakan Museum.



A modern tok panjang feast for two offered by The Peranakan restaurant before it closed in 2021. The restaurant has since re-opened as a social enterprise at Lengkok Bahru. Image © The Peranakan.

table, some families included them in place settings when they entertained European guests.

Dining was communal and fastidious Peranakan matriarchs insisted that every shared dish had a serving spoon, even for simple daily meals. Dipping hands or personal utensils into a common dish was frowned upon and was swiftly met with a painful rap on the knuckles with the matriarch's heavy, solid brass hairpin.

For large celebrations, square or rectangular tables were joined to form a single row, with chairs placed on both sides of the *tok panjang*. The ends of the long table were deliberately left vacant so that extra tables could be added if more guests turned up. A parallel row might be set up if there was no more space to extend the first long table.

Tok panjang feasts were held at home. If the compound could not accommodate all the guests, tables were set up on the road just outside the house. It was also common for neighbours to allow one another to extend wedding feasts into their homes. A red banner hung on a neighbouring home signalled that the tables set up there were also for the wedding feast.

WHAT WAS SERVED?

There were three main categories of dishes served during a *tok panjang* feast: *laok mangkok* (food such as soups served in bowls), *laok pinggan besar* (food presented on large plates), and *laok piring* (side dishes as well as appetisers).

Sets of communal dishes were laid out at intervals along the length of the long table. Typically, six to eight people would share one set, with individual place settings for each guest. Food was constantly replenished throughout the feast. Multiple desserts were served after the savoury dishes were cleared.

In the past, *laok semayang* or dishes offered for ancestral prayers such as *chap chye* (a mixed vegetable dish), *babi pongteh* (a braised pork belly stew) and *mee nyonya* were never served for weddings or joyous occasions as it was considered inauspicious to do so. Black or dark coloured food such as *ayam buah keluak* (chicken stew with pangium nut) was also not served. However, due to the popularity of these dishes, over time, they began to appear at *tok panjang*

feasts. Today, they are staples at Peranakan restaurants that offer modern versions of the *tok panjang* feast.

Sweets included watery desserts such as *chendol* (an iced dessert with coconut milk and palm sugar syrup) and *tai bak* (short noodles in light pandan syrup) and small *cuci mulut* (literally, "mouth washers") like *apom berkuah* (mini fermented rice pancakes with banana sauce) and *ondeh ondeh* (chewy sweet potato balls filled with liquid palm sugar).

SEPARATE FEASTS FOR WOMEN AND MEN

At Baba weddings of the past, the first *tok panjang* feast took place on the eve of the nuptials, usually

at the bride's home. It was held at lunchtime, mainly to thank female relatives and friends who had helped with the wedding preparations. Males from the immediate family, other female friends and children also attended the lunch.

Peranakan weddings lasted 12 days with numerous rites, elaborate ceremonies and feasts. A small army of helpers was needed to complete various tasks leading up to the wedding including *Hari Kupas Bawang* (onion peeling day), *Hari Menyambal* (sambal frying day) and *Hari Tumbok Tepung* (pounding flour day, when rice was milled into flour).

The *Chia Lang Kheh* or wedding banquet in the evening was reserved for male guests. Dinner was served on multiple round tables instead of a *tok panjang*. It was said that generous hosts would hire dancing girls for the evening's entertainment, so it was less awkward if wives and daughters were not present.

Cheo Kim Ban writes in his book, *A Baba Wedding* (1983) that a *seronee* (Chinese flute) band was hired to play at the dinner. Guests took their seats when the band played for the third time. "During the dinner, the band played each time a new course was served and since the menu was generally the same for most wedding dinners, passers-by knew, by listening to the melodies and counting the sequence, what food was being served. When the bandleader observed that the main table had finished dessert, he struck up a special tune that became faster and faster and the drum and gong were beaten louder. Guests recognised this as the signal that the dinner was over and would start leaving..."

THE BEST FOOD COOKED BY NON-PERANAKANS

There were a few hundred guests to feed at a *tok panjang* feast; so most families hired a *chompur* (professional cook) who came with a team of assistants. The *chompors* were usually Hainanese men who had worked as cooks in Peranakan households for many years and had mastered all the favourite dishes. Some left domestic employment to start their own catering businesses. The Baba community came to rely on them for big events. Popular wedding *chompors* like Yap Chee Quee eventually started their own



How the Yap Ah Loy dinner service was formerly displayed at the Peranakan Museum, in a dining room with chairs, tables and sideboards. Photo courtesy of Mrs Betty Mariette.

restaurants. He founded Guan Hoe Soon (named after his three sons) in Joo Chiat Road in 1953 and it is still a family-run business today.

G.T. Lye, 84, doyen of Peranakan theatre and cultural expert, shares his memories of the *tok panjang* wedding feasts of his youth.

“The ladies came dressed in their finery and best jewellery, it was truly a sight to behold.

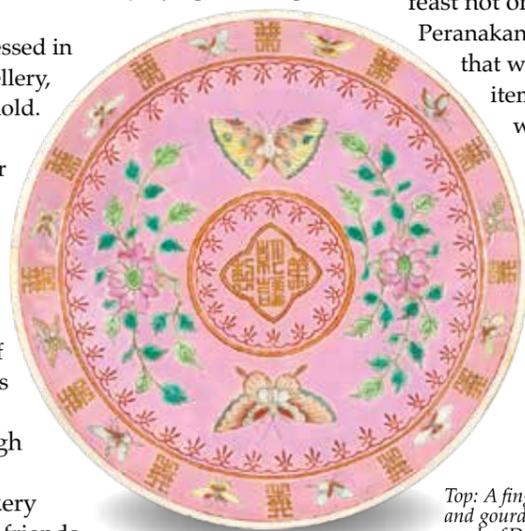
Bibiks (elderly ladies) preferred to eat with their hands while the younger ones preferred using a fork and spoon. If the hosts were rich, they had full sets of crockery, several hundred pieces of beautiful, matching plates and bowls, even dessert spoons with rests, enough for all the guests. Some families borrowed crockery from close relatives and friends living nearby.” Because of this practice, some marked the underside of their pieces to distinguish their sets from others.

“A few *chompors* could supply all the crockery. The very successful ones had the hundreds of plates and bowls required. The meal was noisy with lots of chatting. But the most exciting part came after the meal. Tables were separated and the ladies formed small groups to play *cherki* (a card game). Oh, how they loved to gamble! They chewed *sireh* (betel nut) as they played cards. Coffee, tea, snacks and sometimes even brandy

was served throughout the afternoon.”

OF PRETTY PLATES AND BEAUTIFUL BOWLS

Many have imagined the *tok panjang* to be a sumptuous feast not only for the palate but for the eyes as well. The Peranakans favoured heavily enamelled porcelain ware that was produced largely in Jingdezhen, China. These items were brightly coloured and richly decorated with auspicious motifs such as phoenixes, peonies, cranes, butterflies, crickets,



Top: A fingerbowl with the Buddhist emblems including a dharma wheel and gourd near the rim, butterfly and peony motifs, Guangxu period, mark of De Sheng Gong Si.

Left: A plate from the Yap Ah Loy dinner service, with butterfly and peony motifs and the surname “Yap”, Guangxu period, mark of De Sheng Gong Si.

goldfish, Buddhist emblems and more. In the West, this type of enamelled porcelain is categorised as *famille rose*, but in Singapore and Malaysia, it is commonly known today as Nyonyaware.

The Peranakan Museum’s Ceramics and Food Culture gallery showcases some of the finest examples of Nyonyaware, including a pink ground dining set



The current display of the Yap Ah Loy dinner service in the Ceramics and Food Culture gallery of the Peranakan Museum.

with butterflies commissioned by Yap Ah Loy (1837-1885), *Kapitan China* of Kuala Lumpur. The set bears the “Yap” surname and is on loan from the Mariette Collection. Collectors have speculated that Yap might have commissioned the dinner service for his wedding to Kok Kang Kweon, a nyonya from Melaka. However, even Yap’s descendants cannot be sure, but they do recall that the set was used on special occasions.

There is much debate among collectors as to whether such delicate and beautiful items were used during *tok panjang* wedding feasts. Photographic evidence is scant, and in the handful of black and white photos of *tok panjang* feasts that have survived, it is hard to discern what type of crockery was used. Those who may have attended a *tok panjang* wedding feast would now likely be in their eighties or nineties.

Some collectors insist that families would not use their best crockery for a large feast as things could easily get broken. However, prices of such crockery in the past were nowhere near the astronomical sums they fetch today. One collector recalls that in the 1990s, he was offered pails full of enamelled spoons with phoenix motifs, each spoon going for 50 cents. While the debate rages on, the beauty of Nyonyaware remains undisputed.

FIRST MEAL AT THE SPRING TABLE

Apart from the *tok panjang*, another type of feast held significance in a Peranakan wedding. On the first day, the newlyweds would have a *makan choon tok* or “meal at the Spring table”. Spring symbolised young love, full of promise.

In Singapore, the couple had this meal in the wedding chamber, which was usually in the bride’s home. Peranakan marriages of the past, like Malay marriages, were matrilineal, meaning, the groom moved in with the bride’s family. Some families adhered to this practice only for the duration of the wedding, while others made it a permanent arrangement.

A bride’s dowry included a table and at least two chairs for the *makan choon tok*, the couple’s first meal as husband and wife. A feast of up to 12 dishes was prepared. Most of the food had auspicious meanings related to fertility. The dishes included *bakwan kepiting* (crab meatball soup), *hee ploh* (fish maw) soup and different types of eggs, chicken, duck and quail, for fertility, *mee suah* for longevity, braised chicken feet and pigs trotters, *otak-otak* (spiced fish cake)

and *sambal pisang jantung* (banana heart salad).

At the end of the meal, the couple fed *kueh ee* (glutinous rice balls in light syrup) to each other. The balls were coloured red for good luck and white for purity, their stickiness implies that the couple will always be together and the syrup symbolises a sweet beginning to the marriage. The couple exchanged rings after eating the *kueh ee*. The remaining *kueh ee* were put into a lidded container and placed under the marital bed where it remained until the 12th and final day of the wedding.

ENDING WITH ANOTHER TOK PANJANG

On the last day of the wedding, the bridegroom hosted a *tok panjang* dinner in honour of his in-laws. Close family members and everyone who assisted in the wedding were invited.



On the first day of the 12-day long Peranakan wedding, newlyweds fed each other *kueh ee* before exchanging rings. Photo from A Baba Wedding by Cheo Kim Ban.

In Melaka, *nasi kebuli*, a rice dish with Arab origins was served at this closing feast. The rice was perfumed with cloves, cinnamon sticks and cardamom. While the original dish was cooked with mutton or lamb, the Peranakan version is cooked with pork bone stock. In Singapore, *nasi lemak* (rice steamed with coconut milk and pandan leaves) is served instead. On the 12th day, the groom’s mother would send a platter of *nasi lemak* to the bride’s mother, symbolising that she has been assured of the bride’s purity and accepts her into the family.

Will the *tok panjang* feast ever make a comeback on such a grand scale? We can only hope. 📌

DAWN MARIE LEE is the Co-Editor-in-Chief of PASSAGE and a Peranakan.

Elegant Gatherings

PRISCYLLA SHAW EXAMINES PORTRAITS OF FRIENDS, FEASTS AND FESTIVALS IN ANCIENT CHINA

All images from the collection of National Palace Museum, Taipei unless otherwise stated.



Detail from *Banquet at the Peach and Plum Garden on a Spring Evening*, by Leng Mei, 18th century Qing dynasty court painter. It shows a garden with peach and plum trees in full bloom as scholars drink wine, compose poetry and enjoy a banquet.

People have always been social creatures. In ancient China, scholars, the literati and the elite met at what came to be called *ya-ji* (雅集) or 'elegant gatherings'. Why were the gatherings considered 'elegant'? This can be put down to four main characteristics. Firstly, the attendees were important and educated; secondly, the surroundings were always refined and idyllic; thirdly, the guests would engage in artistic, musical and poetic endeavours which were considered elegant and refined at that time, and lastly, the host would have laid out the finest food, wines and teas for his guests — lavish, but not excessive.



Detail of an ink rubbing of *Orchid Pavilion Preface* by 'Sage Calligrapher' Wang Xizhi (王羲之 307–ca.365), Handscroll created during the Jin dynasty, Song dynasty rubbing (12th century).

MORE THAN JUST A CASUAL GET-TOGETHER

Thus, at these gatherings, guests enjoyed refreshments, networked, competed in artistic and intellectual skills, and discussed current affairs and philosophy. Not only did they enjoy splendid repasts, they also pitted themselves against each other in cultural and intellectual pursuits such as playing the *gu-qin* (Chinese zither), *wei-qi* ('encirclement chess', the strategy game of Go), calligraphy, and viewing paintings — activities collectively called the 'four arts of the scholar'. Elegant gatherings became important drivers of culture and creativity. An individual's skills in the four arts also established their reputation in the realms of art and civil administration.

THE SCENE

Elegant gatherings large and small sprang from occasions like the marking of important holidays, festival days or celebrating promotions. Hosted by the great and good in society, such gatherings were an opportunity for those attending to make new acquaintances and renew old ones. Guests in fine silks enjoyed feasts in beautiful surroundings in nature, under ancient trees or by the riverbank. They would be inspired to compose poems on the spot, or even paint the scene before them. It was considered most refined to recite poetry whilst drinking wine. The scene was one of measured conversation, music at one corner and poetry at the other, attracting both audiences and whispered comment.

CAPTURING THE SCENE

Through the ages, calligraphers and artists, inspired by the beautiful settings, famous personalities and sheer elegance of these get-togethers, captured them in calligraphic works and in 'elegant gathering paintings' known as *ya-ji-tu* (雅集图). The works in turn served as models and ideas for subsequent contemporary elegant gatherings as well as future elegant gatherings. Here are a few of the most well-known records of elegant gatherings:

THE MODEL THAT STARTED THE TREND

A famous calligraphic work in running script, *Orchid Pavilion Preface*, by Wang Xizhi (307-365), is a preface to a famous literary collection. The calligraphic work became renowned as a description of the model for elegant gatherings. The *Orchid Pavilion Preface* is believed to have been composed in 353 at a grand gathering at the calligrapher's Orchid Pavilion in Mount Guiji in Zhejiang, to mark the Spring Purification Festival. It is said that renowned scholars sat at a grand banquet, competed in composing poems, and drank from wine cups floated down the stream when they failed to come up with an appropriate line to follow the preceding line in a poem. The gathering was such a success in refinement and elegance that it became the model for others to emulate. Though the original calligraphic work has long been lost, the National Palace Museum, Taipei has a Dingwu stone ink rubbing of it from the Song dynasty.



Section of a hanging scroll of *Elegant Gathering in the Western Garden*. Artist unknown, Ming dynasty, ink and colours on silk. Gift of DuBois Schanck Morris, class of 1893. Collection of Princeton University Art Museum.

A GATHERING OF THE IMAGINATION

Another meeting, known as the Elegant Gathering in the Western Garden, reportedly took place in 1088, during the Northern Song (960-1127), when the imperial throne was still relatively secure and when arts and culture flourished with the backing of the emperors. Research has shown that this meeting, hosted by imperial son-in-law Wang Shen, and attended by sixteen of the most famous statesmen, literati and artists of the time enjoying the four arts under

beautiful trees, was no more than an imaginary meeting. Nonetheless, this gathering of the imagination has inspired numerous paintings of it.

It was only in the Ming and Qing dynasties that large numbers of paintings of the Orchid Pavilion or other gatherings appeared. Orchid Pavilion paintings were identified by the depiction of groups of scholars and wine cups floating down a stream in front of them. Other paintings featured banquets laid out and guests

participating in one or other of the four arts.

The scenes in elegant gathering paintings all evoked a sublime tranquillity and elegance that drew viewers into them; viewers would feel that they were almost part of the gathering. This would have been the effect especially in the case of hand scrolls, which were usually viewed at close quarters in private in one's study.

Elegant gathering paintings were also characterised by exceptional ink and brushwork, minute attention to detail, poetic inscriptions and subtle symbolism. Does it look like steamed buns being served on the table there?

BIRTHDAY GATHERINGS

Birthday celebrations are common today but they probably only started in China during the Wei or Jin period. Even then, they were rarely held and were organised only for rulers, important individuals and religious figures. It was not until the Qing dynasty that birthdays were celebrated more commonly, for example, to commemorate the birth date of the literary icon, Su Shi (1037-1101). Paintings of the *Gathering on the Birthday of Su Shi* became a model for birthday elegant gatherings, which in turn popularised



Section of a handscroll of *Ablution Ceremony by the Riverbank* by Li Zongmo (16th-17th century) Ming dynasty, ink and colours on silk. Inscriptions on the painting name the figures and the poetry they composed on that occasion.

a trend for celebrating birthdays. At gatherings to commemorate the birthday of Su Shi, naturally the literary arts featured heavily. Guests often prepared symbolic souvenirs in the form of poems or calligraphy.

SERIOUS BUSINESS, HIDDEN MESSAGES

Some elegant gathering paintings might have been more than what met the eye. When gatherings involved senior officials, one would expect conversation to run to the socio-political issues of the day. Might an esteemed artist, invited to record such a gathering, be tempted to make his painting more than just a 'pretty picture'?

One such artist might have been the celebrated Ming artist Xie Huan (active 1426-1452). His handscroll painting, *Elegant Gathering in the Apricot Garden*, captures scenes of

a garden party of nine high-ranking officials hosted by Yang Rong (1371-1440) in his Beijing home. Inscriptions on the scroll date the gathering to 6 April 1437, a public holiday in Beijing. The host is dressed in red robes. To his immediate left is Grand Secretary Yang Shiqi (1365-1444), the oldest of the guests, in blue robes. The third 'Yang' (not shown), Yang Pu (1372-1446), is at a desk, with his brush poised over a clean calligraphy sheet. The three gentlemen were the top three officials in the administration of the Zhengtong boy-emperor who had ascended the throne at eight years old in 1435.

Due to emperor's young age, the 'Three Yang', effectively ran the country. By this time, bureaucracy had also supplanted militaristic rule. It was a time of great possibilities for reforming society. It would have



Section of a hanging scroll, ink and colours on silk, probably Ming dynasty, in the tradition of Eighteen Scholars. Artist unknown. A lavish banquet is laid out under a tree, with guests seated around the table. Note the fine brushwork, exquisite detail and beautiful colours.



Section of a handscroll, *Elegant Gathering in the Apricot Garden* c.1437, after Xie Huan, ink and colours on silk. Collection of Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

been tempting for an artist, commissioned to capture the scene, to give an otherwise innocent painting 'agency' by including subtle details in the painting, especially if the painting would later be viewed by the most powerful officials in the land. Yang Pu gazes out at the viewer. What will be recorded in history? Will life improve for the lower strata in society like the attendant in another section of the scroll (not shown) who is holding up the painting that he can neither see nor understand? Was the artist calling for more enlightened government and modernisation? In another section of the handscroll, a table is laid for a game of *Go*, but no players are seen at the table. Who will be the strategists for weighty national issues?

A FEAST FOR BODY, MIND AND SPIRIT

Getting together in ancient China was a feast for body,

mind and spirit. Hundreds of years later, the settings may not be as idyllic, the mix might be more egalitarian and probably less elegant. We may not have poetry competitions by a riverbank, but we still enjoy outdoor gatherings in gardens; the food and wine are still there, the networking still takes place, and certainly the discussion of arts and politics still continues, captured on our smartphones even if not on handscrolls. We are still social creatures. *Santé!* 🍷

PRISCYLLA SHAW is Features Editor of *PASSAGE*.

Hotpot Odyssey

HEIKE BREDEKAMP IS ENCHANTED BY A TIMELESS EPIC OF FLAVOURFUL FEASTS

Hotpot transcends mere cuisine; it transforms a simple cooking vessel into a powerful catalyst for forging camaraderie over a feast, sparking conversations that bridge diverse cultures and backgrounds.

HELMET SOUP?

In the realm of culinary folklore, a tantalising myth has long lingered – a tale of Mongol warriors using their helmets as makeshift hotpot vessels during their legendary conquests. While the image of steaming helmets over open flames captures the imagination, historical facts reveal a different story.

Hotpot, a cherished communal feast, finds its roots in the annals of ancient China, where shared cooking in a simmering broth has a rich and intricate history. The myth of Mongol helmets serving as cooking pots, while captivating, lacks the concrete historical evidence needed to cement its place in the sizzling narrative of hotpot's evolution. The true origins of hotpot are a testament to China's culinary heritage, where the art of communal dining has thrived for centuries. It is a tradition that has evolved over time, embracing influences from various Chinese regions and cultures.

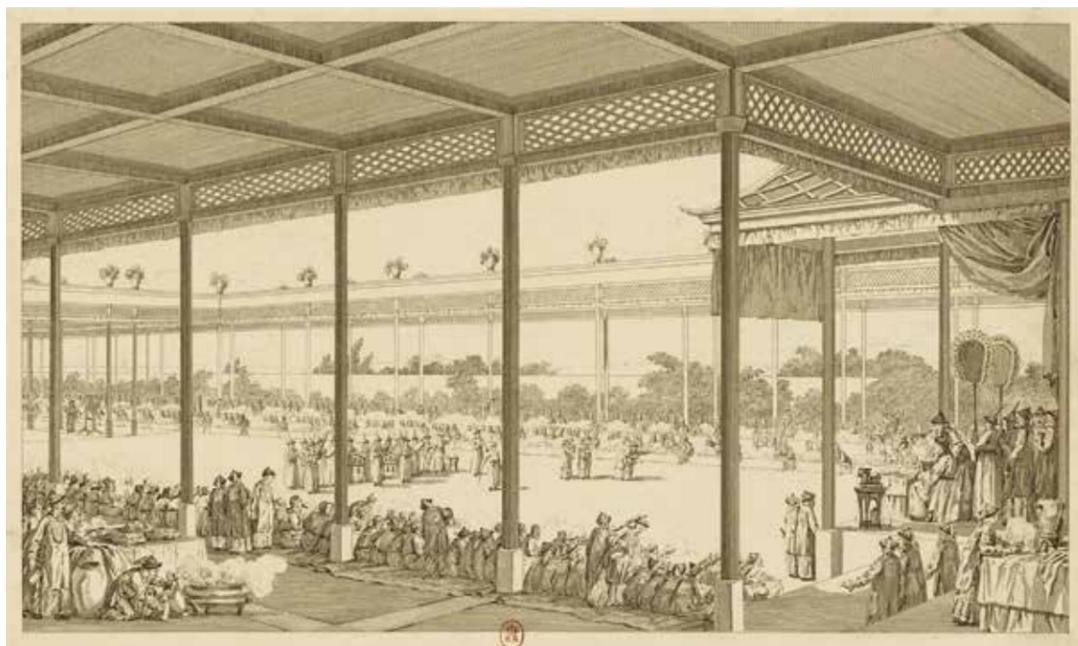
HOTPOT'S MAJESTIC ORIGINS

Hotpot's roots stretch back through the centuries, offering a glimpse into a world where emperors and nobles revelled in extravagant feasts.

One such fervent enthusiast was the Qianlong Emperor (r.1735 – 1796) of the Qing Dynasty. Legend has it that he was smitten with the notion of simmering an assortment of meats and vegetables in a communal pot, conjuring a culinary spectacle worthy of his imperial court's grandeur.

It is said that he arranged grand banquets with over 500 tables featuring hotpots. These feasts included not only mutton which was a staple meat, but also game like pheasant and deer. Historical records reveal that in February 1785, Qianlong hosted a hotpot banquet at the Forbidden City for over 3,000 men, all aged over 60. At the Feast of the Thousand Old Men (千叟宴 *Qian Sou Yan*) 1,550 hotpots were served, marking it as the grandest hotpot feast in history.

In the 19th century, hotpot transcended palace walls and was embraced by the masses. It was made popular by the influential Empress Dowager Cixi, renowned for her discerning palate. She adored this delectable dish. Her passion for hotpot ignited a culinary revolution, elevating it from a noble pastime to a beloved cultural phenomenon, relished by people from all walks of life.



Engraving of Emperor Qianlong's Feast of the Thousand Old Men where hotpots were served to 3,000 guests. (Fête donnée aux Vieillards par l'Empereur Kien-Long, le 14 Février 1785). Collection of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris

Opposite page: Hotpot at home. Photo courtesy of The Woks of Life blog at thewoksoflife.com





An 18th century enameled hotpot with motifs of stylised chrysanthemums. Collection of the Palace Museum, Beijing.

safeguard against the corrosive touch of copper upon certain ingredients, preserving the purity of flavours, but they also celebrated the harmonious union of art and functionality, an innovation that outlasted its time.

While the Qing Dynasty recedes into the annals of history, the legacy of its enamel hotpots persists. Marvel at the splendid Qing Dynasty enamel hotpot at the Asian Civilisations Museum, offering glimpses into the sumptuous feasts of emperors and nobility. These pots also serve as a poignant reminder that, in the very act of cooking, beauty can be unearthed; an invitation to relish not only the flavours but also the artistic spirit that elevates the dining experience.



A Qing enamel hotpot decorated with polychrome enamels on a white ground. Painted flowers, including peonies, morning glory, and camellias, adorn the body. Each side is painted with a different Chinese landscape scene. This colour palette was especially popular during the reign of the Qianlong emperor. Collection of the Asian Civilisations Museum.

THE ART OF COMMUNAL DINING

Hotpot transcends mere sustenance; it's a sensory voyage that brings people together. Today, across China and Southeast Asia, festivals and gatherings are incomplete without the bubbling cauldron of broth at the heart of the table. Families and friends convene, casting aside the distractions of modernity to immerse themselves in a shared experience that bridges generations.

Communal dining takes on new dimensions with hotpot. The circular pot, sometimes partitioned to cater to diverse tastes, sets the stage for a delectable culinary symphony. Each participant becomes a conductor, dipping an array of ingredients into the simmering broth – delicate meat slices, vibrant vegetables, and handcrafted dumplings – enhancing the broth's complexity with each addition.

The choreography of ingredients in the simmering pot is an art form, orchestrated meticulously to ensure optimal flavour infusion. Thinly sliced meats gracefully sway in and out, attaining a tender texture while absorbing the essence of the broth. Vegetables are introduced strategically, maintaining their crispness while imparting their vivid hues to the broth. As for the dumplings, they burst with flavour encased in a delicate dough pocket.

SOUTHEAST ASIA'S HOTPOT ADVENTURE

Hotpot's popularity extended beyond China's borders, finding a new home in the lively streets and diverse cultures of Southeast Asia. From the fragrant alleys of Thailand to the bustling hawker centres of Singapore, hotpot transformed into a cultural phenomenon that mirrored the region's

Of all the broth variations, Cixi held a particular fondness for chrysanthemum broth. This unique concoction paid homage to her refined tastes and creative spirit. The chrysanthemum, symbolising nobility and longevity, imparted a delicate aroma to the broth, infusing it with a rich depth of flavour. This choice of broth was more than culinary; it carried symbolic weight, reflecting Cixi's longing for a harmonious and enduring reign.



The Empress Dowager Cixi's favourite hotpot broth featured chrysanthemums for their delicate fragrance. Photo from Pixabay.

THE ELEGANCE OF QING DYNASTY ENAMEL

Central to the hotpot experience is the vessel that cradles the essence of the meal: the pot itself. The exquisite enamel hotpots of the Qing Dynasty not only elevated dining to new heights of elegance but also transformed cooking into an art form. These vessels, often hewn from copper and adorned with exquisite enamel, bore testament to an era's unwavering devotion to the trinity of beauty, craftsmanship, and culinary excellence.

They were vibrant declarations of opulence and refinement that transcended the realm of utilitarian kitchen utensils. Elaborate designs, replete with intricate floral motifs, auspicious symbols, and a palette of vibrant hues, transformed the act of cooking into a grand visual spectacle. As these majestic pots graced dining tables, they ensnared the gaze of diners, igniting conversations that flowed as naturally as the broth within.

Yet, the enchantment of these enamel vessels went far beyond aesthetics. Their enamel linings, a masterstroke of practicality, served a dual purpose. Not only did they



A 1967 print advertisement for an electric steamboat. Image from The Advertising Archive Singapore.

affection for communal dining.

In Southeast Asia, where food is often the heart of social gatherings, hotpot seamlessly wove itself into the fabric of celebrations. Ingredients might have taken on local flavors, but the essence of togetherness remained unwavering.

What sets Southeast Asian hotpot feasts apart is the kaleidoscope of flavours emerging from the communal pots. In Thailand, fiery tom yum broth infuses the air with its enticing aroma, while in Vietnam, a delicate pho-based broth is savoured for its beefy goodness. Malaysia and Indonesia contribute their signature spice blends, crafting broths that dance on the taste buds with every sip.

Local ingredients that find their way into the pot add an enchanting twist to the hotpot tradition. Fresh herbs,

exotic vegetables, and succulent seafood – each bite tells a story of the region's rich culinary heritage. Hotpot's voyage through Southeast Asia attests to its adaptability and timeless allure.

SINGAPORE'S MODERN TRADITION

Singapore has embraced hotpot culture with fervour. The city-state's contemporary interpretation of the tradition has given rise to hotpot havens which see hour-long queues, especially over the weekend. These establishments present an immersive dining experience where singing, complimentary birthday cakes and manicures are just some of the perks offered to diners. They are destinations where families, friends, and culinary enthusiasts converge to celebrate the art of dining.

In Singapore, the steamboat, a form of hotpot, has been the meal of choice for many families for the Reunion Dinner eaten on the eve of the Chinese New Year because the round pot symbolises togetherness and harmony. Sliced fish, symbolising wealth and noodles for longevity are two of the popular ingredients in steamboat. In Singapore's hawker centres and food courts, hotpot stalls beckon passersby with the fragrance of simmering broths and the vibrant colours of fresh ingredients. Nowadays, hotpots are even available in single servings for lone diners.

BROTH BLISS: SAVOUR THE FLAVOUR

Hotpot enthusiasts will tell you that the broth is the heart and soul of hotpot. There is something for everyone – from the fiery, mouth numbing Sichuan mala broth to broths infused with Chinese medicinal herbs for health benefits. Pork bone broth adds a hearty depth to Taiwanese "lu wei", while closer to home, satay and laksa flavoured broths lend a delightful twist. Each broth tells a unique tale. So, dear reader, as you embark on your next hotpot adventure, ask yourself: Are you ready to dive in, one bubbling broth at a time? 🍲



A common sight in modern hotpot restaurants – hot pots with two different types of broth to offer diners more variety in the same meal. Photo from Unsplash.

HEIKE BREDEKAMP is an ACM docent.

Golden Blessings

ANNE-KRISTIN VAUDOUR REVEALS THE SECRETS OF A CHETTIAR WEDDING NECKLACE

All photos by the author unless otherwise stated.

“Jewels are not merely gems and metal. They are carriers of memory, keepers of identity, and markers of life’s most cherished moments.”

– Shoba Narayan, writer.

Indian weddings are renowned for their opulence and a profusion of rituals. Extending over several days or even weeks, these celebrations offer families and friends the opportunity to unite, relish one another’s companionship and create lasting memories.

In the Jewellery Gallery of the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM), a remarkable, large wedding necklace or *thali*, pays homage to one of the earliest communities to settle in Singapore. This necklace was used exclusively by the Nagarathar Chettiar community from Tamil Nadu, India. Crafted from gold, it carries profound importance as it symbolises wealth, family legacy, and blessings, rendering it indispensable in Chettiar wedding traditions.

THE GOLDSMITH AND HIS SACRED TASK

Crafting the necklace is a sacred task. It is symbolic of a holy union that is sanctified before a sacred fire. The family of the groom typically invites a goldsmith to their home on an auspicious day. They offer him good food and hand over up to two kilogrammes of gold that will become the necklace. It takes about one and a half months to produce, during which the goldsmith purifies himself with regular holy baths.

When his work is done, the goldsmith carefully lays out the various parts of the necklace on a tray, each having a specific place and meaning. The necklace is assembled during the wedding ceremony or on the night before. Assembling the necklace involves family members and elders, who offer blessings as they participate in this important ritual. This is believed to impart positive energy to the bride’s imminent married life. The process of putting together the necklace represents the coming together of the bride’s past, present, and future, marking a significant rite of passage.

LACED WITH TURMERIC

A typical Chettiar wedding necklace comprises 35 pieces that are strung with 21 strands of twisted strings that are covered with turmeric. Turmeric holds spiritual significance in Hinduism and is associated with various deities and rituals. But apart from that, it is known for its antimicrobial and antiseptic properties. The application of turmeric paste on the necklace strings is a form of protection against negative energies or influences that might affect the wearer. During the ceremony, the gold pieces will be first assembled on a yellow thread. Later, some families may fasten them permanently on a gold chain, thick enough to withstand the weight.

After the necklace is blessed by family elders, it is traditionally presented to the bride by the groom or the groom’s maternal uncle, who holds a special role in the Chettiar community. This significant gesture symbolises the groom’s family welcoming the bride into their fold and bestowing their blessings upon her.

This ceremonial necklace is worn only once or twice at most during a lifetime. Besides the wedding day, the ceremonial necklace is also worn during a ceremony called *shahstiabdapurti*, during the husband’s 60th birthday. This is also when a second wedding ceremony is conducted.



The ethanam (central pendant) of the ACM Chettiar wedding necklace. Subrahmanya is shown with his parents, Shiva and Parvati, who are seated on a sacred bull. The divine family are often depicted in a form of Hindu iconography called *Somaskanda*.

ABUNDANT IN SYMBOLISM AND IMBUED WITH SPIRITUAL SIGNIFICANCE

The ACM Chettiar wedding necklace is especially large and has intricate patterns. The *ethanam* (central pendant) has four sharp spikes representing the four *vedas*, which symbolise knowledge. The spikes echo the ancient custom of a woman of tying strips of palm leaf around her neck to indicate her married status. Some interpretations even



Somaskanda at the ACM.

The Chettiar wedding necklace, called *kazhuththu uru* in Sanskrit, is considered a ritualistic piece of jewellery. While Northern Indian brides prefer heavy chokers set with precious gemstones, inspired by their Mughal and Rajput legacy, in Central and Southern India, wedding jewellery features deities and reflects temple architecture.

THE BRIDE'S FINANCIAL ANCHOR

The heavy necklace made of pure gold serves as financial security for the bride in times of need. Not all families can afford them, especially not one as large and as finely crafted as the ACM necklace. Gold has always been highly valued in Indian culture, symbolising wealth, prosperity and purity. The Chettiar community, known for their

successful trading and business ventures, traditionally used gold as a form of investment. Gold's enduring value and historical significance make it a natural choice for crafting heirloom jewellery like the Chettiar wedding necklace.

THE CHETTIARS IN MARKET STREET

Delving into the necklace's origins unveils a profound link to the heritage of the Chettiars, an esteemed community of traders and merchants who arrived in Singapore during the 1820s. In those early years, they positioned themselves as moneylenders, filling a crucial void within the financial landscape.

At the time, established banks did not lend to small business owners. The Chettiars were quick to fill this void by providing loans, which in today's terms, we know as microfinancing. They made loans accessible and affordable for small business and shop owners, labourers, hawkers

transformation involved shifting their small wooden table and unfurling a mattress. This lifestyle was emblematic of the hardworking spirit that defined the community.

During the 19th and early 20th centuries, there were many more Chettiars moneylending than banks in Singapore. However, by the 1930s, the Great Depression triggered a decline, which was accelerated during the Japanese Occupation (1942–1945) due to currency instability and inflation. Post-war regulations in Singapore mandated registration and licensing, effectively curtailing the moneylending activities of the Chettiars. Industrial growth and the development of the banking sector led to further decline. By 1981, only seven Chettiar moneylending firms remained. The Chettiars turned to gold as a strategic means to preserve their resources and financial standing.

The necklace served as a conduit to identity and emotion. Intricate cultural and historical narratives are

speak of stylised crab claws, making reference to the Chettiars' historical involvement in trade and their connection to maritime activities.

Typically, the pendant of a wedding necklace features Mahalakshmi, the goddess of wealth and prosperity. However, on the ACM necklace, Subrahmanya is shown standing alongside his parents, Shiva and Parvati, who are seated on a *nandi*, the divine guardian of Shiva in the form of a bull.

The Chettiar community are known to have deep devotion for Subrahmanya. This motif represents the ideal divine family and embodies the qualities of wisdom and beauty. It is repeated on the four pendants on both sides of the chain. These pendants symbolise the hands of the bride and groom. Additionally, they carry blessings for the couple's future, encompassing wealth, health, fame, progeny, knowledge, beauty, youthfulness, courage, and longevity.

The detailed design and artistry of this piece result from the fusion of various techniques such as repoussé, carving, chasing, granulation and filigree. The little spaces between the pieces are filled with lac to keep the segments apart. A remarkable feature of the finely crafted pendant is that the moulded image of the deities is meticulously welded onto a pink backing, creating an enchanting three-dimensional effect.



A Chettiar moneylender, c. 1890. Photo in the collection of the National Museum of Singapore.



From Chettiars to Financiers (2002), by sculptor Chern Lian Shan, in front of the ACM along the Singapore River. Photo from Wikimedia Commons.

and small plantation owners who were all essential in building Singapore. The Chettiars played a significant role in propelling Singapore's economic growth, infusing capital into small-scale enterprises and contributing substantially to the expansion of the vibrant settlement.

Many Chettiar moneylenders operated in what is now known as the Market Street area, a central hub of the present-day Central Business District. Typically, multiple moneylenders would share a single shophouse, known as a *kittangi*. Each had their designated workspace, which transformed into a sleeping area after hours. This

concealed within the folds of the Chettiar necklace. Crafted from gold, it encapsulates Chettiar values: opulence, investment, family traditions and prosperity. It links to their past, rooted in trade and finance. Its gleam carries the Chettiars' heritage, values, and aspirations, uniting tradition with the pursuit of a better life in a distant land. **P**

ANNE-KRISTIN VAUDOUR is an ACM docent.

FROM SILK BALLS TO SEDAN CHAIRS



TINA TAN HIGHLIGHTS SOME ANCIENT CHINESE COURTSHIP AND WEDDING CUSTOMS

A wedding procession of an upper class family. The bride is being carried in a sedan chair to the bridegroom's house, escorted by guards and horsemen. Mounted drawing on pith paper. Image from the Wellcome Collection, London.

Traditional families in ancient China believed that apart from passing the imperial examinations, the other significant events in a man's life were his wedding and the birth of his sons. For women, they were totally dependent on their husbands, and so a good match was essential to happiness. However, as in the West, courtship in China then was far more restrictive. Most womenfolk stayed at home and were not allowed to socialise with members of the opposite sex. So, when girls or boys attained marriageable age, at about 15 (for the girls) or 19 or 20 (for the boys), how did they find their lifelong partners? Here are some of the ways.

TEAMWORK AND A SILK BALL

In Guangxi in Southern China, families threw a silk ball to find a match for their daughters. An auspicious date in the lunar calendar would be selected and the daughter to be wed would throw a silk ball to find her husband. Standing on an upper floor, she could throw her silk ball towards any particular young man who had caught her eye, out of a group of prospective candidates gathered below. Her future would be decided by the accuracy of her throw and the catching skills of the young man! This practice disappeared during the Cultural Revolution, and was only revived later as a show for tourists.



Modern examples of xiuqiu (silk balls) thrown to find a spouse.

LOOKING FOR THE MOST POWERFUL

According to Mengzi (孟子 c.372–289 BC), a Confucian scholar, marriages were best arranged by parents as they had wisdom and knew best. And so, together with matchmakers, parents carefully deliberated a prospective groom's suitability based on their social status – family background, reputation, financial standing and social circles. The aim was to marry a daughter off to a family of equal societal standing, or even, to a more powerful family. One fable, relating to marrying 'up' and often captured in woodblock prints displayed during the Lunar New Year, involved a rat family who were seeking the most advantageous match for their daughter. The fable went like this:

Once, there was a rat family where the parents were determined to find the most powerful suitor for their beloved daughter. They first

approached the Sun, thinking that he was the most powerful, since his rays covered the land. But the Sun said that Black Cloud was more powerful as it could cover the Sun. When the rat parents approached Black Cloud, it said that it could be blown away by Great Wind. But Great Wind said no, for the Wall was more powerful as it could block Great Wind. However, the Wall also declined to marry the rat daughter, because it was afraid of Gnawing Rats who could gnaw holes in the Wall. Alas, the rat parents were getting nowhere and resigned themselves to looking for someone within their own. But Rat would not marry their daughter either, because he was afraid of Cat who was more powerful. And so, after some effort, rat daughter was finally married off to the most powerful suitor, Cat.



Rat Marrying Off Daughter, woodblock print produced by artisans Dong Ho village in North Vietnam. Image from Wikimedia Commons.

Readers, you can guess how that match ended! Parents of today who try to find the most 'powerful' suitor for their daughter would do well to ponder on the moral of this fable.

IT IS ALL PREDESTINED

Others in search of a good match believed in fate, and turned to Yue Lao (Old Moon 月老), the God of Love and Marriage. He is depicted in literature as an old man reading the *Book of Marriages*. According to Yue Lao, couples have been predestined long before they have met; it is not a matter of chance.

The earliest stories about Yue Lao originated in the Tang Dynasty. A young man, Wei Gu (韦固) was in search of a wife. One day, he encountered an old man reading under the moon. He asked what he was reading. The old man replied that it was the *Book of Marriages*, and that his job was to tie a red thread around the ankles of couples destined for each other. Wei Gu asked if he could know who his future wife was. The old man showed him a poor old woman, blind in one eye, carrying a three-year old child. He said, "This child will eventually be your wife." Wei Gu was astonished; he did not want to marry someone from this poor family, so he ordered his servant to kill the child. However, the servant only managed to injure the girl and she survived. Some years later, Wei Gu secured the hand in marriage of the daughter of a high-ranking official. On their wedding night, Wei Gu noticed a scar on his new bride and asked her how she came about it. She revealed that her scar was the result of an attack by a stranger when she was three and that she was actually the niece of the official, not his daughter. The old woman was a servant who had been taking care of her when her parents died. Wei Gu's new bride was the little girl that he had tried to have killed, years ago. Wei Gu's story spread far and



Yue Lao, the Chinese god of love and marriage. It is said that he carries a red silk cord to bind lovers together. Image from Wikimedia Commons.

wide, and since no one knew the old man's name, he was simply called Yue Lao.

To this day, the most traditional Chinese wedding custom has the bride and bridegroom taking a ceremonial walk together, each holding the opposite ends of a red ribbon in the middle of which is a red cloth rosette, symbolising a match made by Yue Lao that is unassailable.

A MATCH IS FOUND, WHAT NEXT?

As early as the Han Dynasty in 202 BCE, there were six etiquettes in wedding preparations. The betrothal was the grandest etiquette, when the prospective groom presented betrothal gifts to the bride's family. The value of the gifts reflected the financial standing of the groom and his ability to provide a good life for the bride. Gifts symbolising prosperity and good fortune ranged from gold jewelry, cloths, silks, dragon and phoenix wax candles, tea leaves and sesame seeds, wine and money wrapped in red cloths.

DRESSING UP

On the wedding day, every step and action taken for the bride was governed by auspiciousness and good luck. The bride's hair was washed and combed by a woman of good fortune, passing the bride some of her good luck, as it were. The hair-combing symbolised the bride's transition to her new role as a married woman. The bride was dressed in a red bridal gown, red being the most auspicious colour. Motifs embroidered onto the dress included the dragon and the phoenix, symbolising the groom and his wife. Although these were emblems for royalty, they were popularly used in weddings as symbols of the perfect balance of male and female energies.



Woman's bridal dress, Qing dynasty, late 19th century. Collection of Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland.

AND OFF WE GO!

Upon leaving the house, it was customary for the bride to shed tears of reluctance to leave her home, her parents, and her village, even if she did not feel sad to leave!

The bride's mode of transport was the sedan chair. These came in two models. The more elaborate one was a wooden rectangular enclosure topped with a pagoda with auspicious symbols, legendary stories, mythical creatures. The other, plainer model was simpler in design, a frame covered with coloured embroidered silks. Sedans were painted in red lacquer. Fancier sedans would be accented with glittering gold leaves. Depending on their design, sedans could take months to make.

As they headed to the groom's house, the bridal sedan would be carried by four or eight persons in a wedding procession comprising a musical band with gongs, drums and other instruments, and the bride's dowry. A long procession of dowries signified wealth in her family. For a high-born daughter, there would also be flags and banners. Dowries could range from furniture to utensils, vases, ceremonial vessels, brocade clothes, even scissors (symbolising two butterflies that could never separate). Dowries represented the bride's family's contribution to the new household.

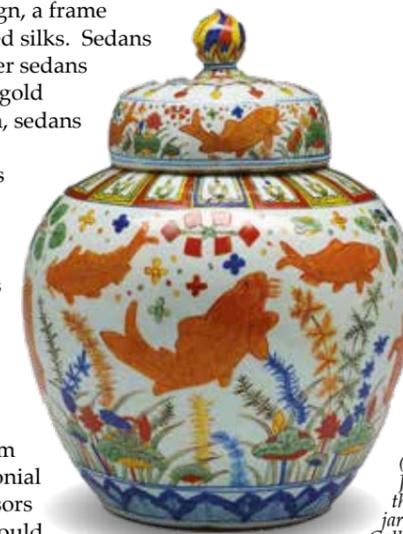
Upon arrival at the groom's house, firecrackers were set off to ward off evil influences and bring good luck. The sedan was placed on a red carpet onto which the bride dismounted, ensuring that her feet did not touch bare earth. At the threshold in the front of the house, she would walk over a small flaming stove to rid herself of any evil spirits.

WELCOME TO THE FAMILY

Tea ceremonies are still observed today, as the formal introduction of the bride to the groom's family. The couple kneels and offers tea to family members according to their pecking order, starting with the groom's parents. After sipping



A bridal sedan used by the upper class, decorated from top to bottom with auspicious scenes from Beijing opera. Collection of Zhejiang Provincial Museum, Hangzhou.



(Left): Chinese Lidded jar, Jingdezhen, made during the reign of the Jiajing emperor (1522-1566). Motifs of golden carp and lotuses and their associations with fertility and good fortune suggest that this jar was made for a young, affluent couple to celebrate their marriage. Collection of Walters Art Museum, Baltimore.



A 20th century Chinese marital bed. The motifs on the bed relate to happiness, harmony and fertility to bless the newlyweds. Collection of Asia and Pacific Museum, Warsaw.

their tea, the seniors place red packets containing money or jewellery on the tea tray. A lavish feast would follow.

HAPPILY EVER AFTER

Brides are no longer conveyed to the groom's house in a sedan chair, but certainly the tea ceremony is a custom that is witnessed and even captured on video these days. And for sure, grand wedding dinners are still enjoyed by friends and family. 🍵

TINA TAN is a docent at Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall.



The Nativity. Reproduction at Changi Chapel and Museum, original art by Stanley Warren. Photo by the author.

How Christmas Cheered Up Changi

Towards the end of 1942, the first year of the Japanese Occupation of Singapore, the Prisoners of War (POW) and civilian internees of European descent were being held in the Changi garrison and the Changi Gaol, respectively. With hope of rescue waning, the men and women were coming to accept that they would not be returning home anytime soon.

The vast majority of those interned were Christians, for whom Christmas is a most important and holy holiday. And for many, it was their first time celebrating away from home, not to mention in such grim circumstances. Breaking the grin-and-bear-it mould of “Keep Calm and Carry On”, the emotionally charged holiday was met, not with stoicism, but with ingenuity, creativity, and enthusiasm.

The Japanese guards recognised the importance of Christmas for the morale of POWs and civilian internees, and so gave them time off from work duties as well as

permission to host seasonal entertainments. They donated nearly 1,000 tins of pineapple and 76 bottles of brandy, both of which were sure to have contributed to the jovial spirit of their celebrations throughout the festive period. Ever the industrious group, the POWs and civilian internees found amazing ways to enjoy that first Christmas in captivity, working harder than ever to mask the dismal reality of their situation.

FAITH AND FELLOWSHIP

For the devout, the Christmas season is full of religious rituals and traditions. From the four weeks of Advent culminating in celebrating the birth of Jesus, through to Epiphany (the 12th night after Christmas, when the three wise men visited the Baby Jesus), one would normally attend mass, light candles, sing carols, and make merry. At Changi they had to improvise.

3,000 men gathered on Christmas Eve to watch a very special concert involving quite a few professional musicians. There was a choir of 100 men accompanied by a pianist and violinist, and an orchestra with soloists

(both vocal and instrumental). After the full repertoire of religious seasonal songs (like Handel’s *Messiah*) concluded, there was a reading of the Christmas story from the Gospels, the sharing of a special Christmas message by leaders in their community, and prayers and a final blessing by Rev. Eric Cordingly. Diary entries indicate that this special concert was nothing short of inspiring, and it truly must have been because 800 of the faithful then flocked to the improvised chapel that served as their church.

With some forethought, Rev. Cordingly was given permission by the Japanese guards to hold midnight services, long after the regular lights-out time. He recounted that the highlight for him was officiating this mass at St George’s (the “cathedral” of the Changi camps). The men were greeted by a Christmas tree, “a local fir-like tree” as he described it, decorated with little coconut husk lamps and handmade tin foil ornaments. The church was decorated in green ferns, which led one’s gaze to the altar which was also adorned with a row of candles and flowers. Celebrating the eucharist and singing *O Come Let Us Adore Him* as Christmas day was dawning lifted the men’s spirits and left them with the mindful message: “Peace on earth, goodwill toward men.”

FEASTING ON FANTASY

Regardless of how devout one might be, many people relish the Christmas season simply for how it brings loved ones together over traditions and food. Does thinking about your seasonal favourite treats make you smile and your mouth water a bit? There are many drawings made by



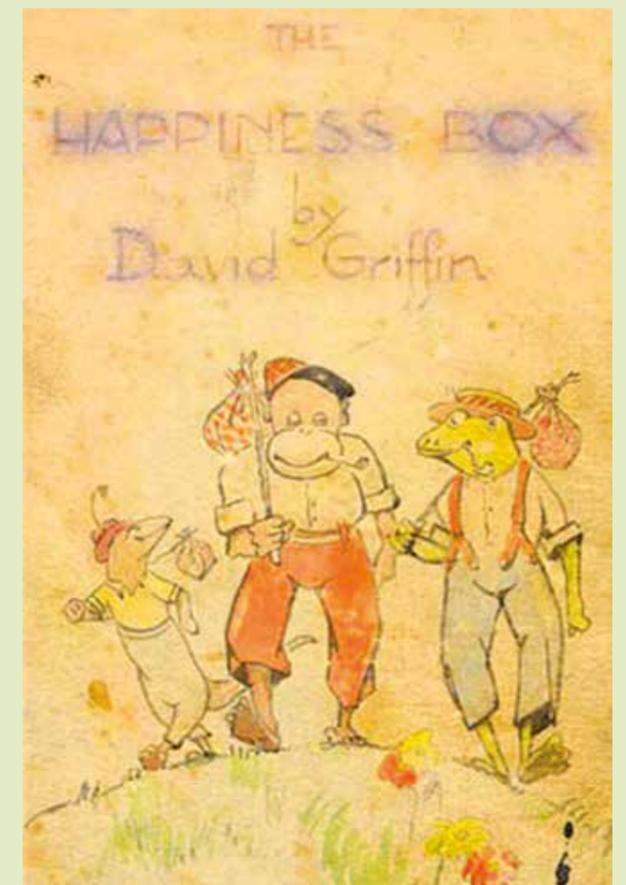
Christmas menu by Des Bettany from changipowart.com

Changi artists that shared the Christmas Day menu, and the feast was quite extravagant! Given the tens of thousands of men living on limited rice rations, how was this possible? Simply put: it wasn’t.

These menus were the artist’s dream of a mouthwatering Christmas dinner, meant to raise morale, garner a chuckle, or start a chat about traditions back home. Though efforts were made across all the camps to give the men, women and children the best Christmas dinner

possible, this elaborate menu was not achievable. It was an amusing fantasy. In their situation boiled rice was still rice, dried fish was no fancy *poisson*, and grass did not french beans make. But dreaming of this menu whilst eating the fare on offer made it so much more delectable, even if only for a day.

What we do know from diaries and memoirs is that the POWs and civilian internees alike saved special food items they acquired for big events, like Christmas or birthdays. Close friends pooled their treats and made the most of whatever they had in order to celebrate together. Perhaps a mangy cockerel was nursed for months to “fatten” it up for the meal, dates were saved to be used in a pudding, or the last of one’s coffee, hidden away for weeks, was enjoyed at the celebratory meal. The camp-published



Cover of *The Happiness Box* by David Griffin. Image from New South Wales State Library.

newspapers reported that “a good time was had by all”.

FATHER CHRISTMAS APPEARS IN SPIRIT

The men of the Australian Imperial Forces (AIF) were in the Selarang Barracks area of the Changi garrison. They were horrified when they came to realise that there were children in the Changi Gaol, and asked the Japanese guards if they could make toys for them, subject to their inspection and approval of course. They put the call out to all soldiers, channeled their various skill sets, and discovered their inner “Santa’s elf” to make toys for the children as they knew Father Christmas would not be coming this year.



An inside page of *The Happiness Box* by David Griffin. Image from New South Wales State Library.

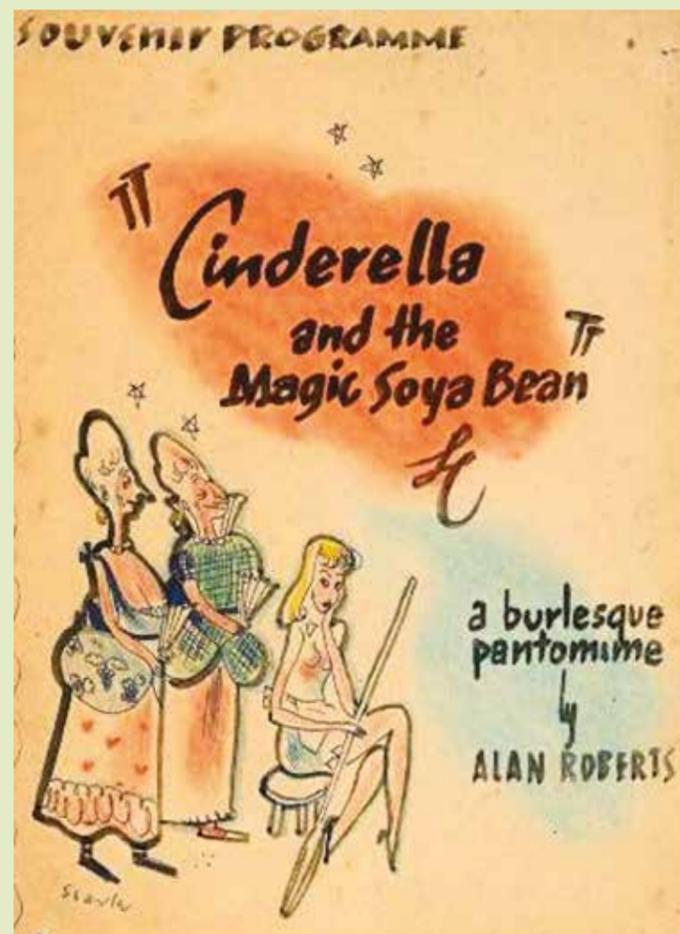
The handwritten text at the bottom of the page reads: "In the middle of the flower sat Bumble, the bee who knew everything."

I won't tell you the ending, you can read it for yourself. But this story of friendship and hope was almost destroyed by the Japanese general upon inspection. In 1942 there was only one Winston, and he was convinced that the book was filled with coded messages for the civilians. This was not the case. It was simply an unfortunate name choice for his character. A savvy Major Philip Head took the book with the feigned intention to destroy it. Instead, he hid it until it could be recovered after Liberation.

FAIRY TALES COME TO LIFE ON STAGE

Pantomime is an old British Christmas tradition that is easy to stage and riotous fun to perform. These theatrical productions are often a spin on fairy tales, complete with slapstick humour, topical jokes, and audience engagement. Men dress as the dame, baddies fill the audience in on their dastardly plans (to which the audience helps out the protagonist by yelling out helpful directions like, "He's behind you!"), and ribald jokes steal the scene.

When the Christmas season rolled around, entertainment shifted to pantomimes. *Cinderella*



Cinderella and the Magic Soya Bean by Ronald Searle. Collection of the National Museum of Singapore.



Coconut husk bowl. Collection of the National Museum of Singapore. This bowl was made by hand from a coconut husk and belonged to Mrs Elizabeth Mary Uniacke who was interned in Changi Prison and Sime Road along with her son and daughter. The underside is inscribed with Mrs Uniacke's name, as well as the date (Xmas 1942) and location (Changi internment camp).

Scooters, dolls, prams, rocking horses, and engines were amongst the variety of toys the men made for the children. One of the AIF leaders, Sgt. Charles David Griffin, spoke about this special project in an oral history interview.

Griffin was not handy in making toys, but he had the idea to write a book. To keep it interesting for the children a book needs illustrations so he brought in his friend Captain Leslie Greener to draw scenes on the pages. A third man, Bruce Blakey, was enlisted to type the pages. And so *The Happiness Box* came to be.

In this fairytale, three animal friends, a *cicak* (house gecko), a monkey, and a frog (named Winston, Martin, and Wobbly), live together deep in the jungle. Winston is very clever, Martin is generous and looks after the three, and Wobbly is very good in his gardens. One day, whilst working in the garden, Wobbly discovers a box. Once he gets it home, the three decide to seek advice on whether or not to open it! They go on adventures, seeking the answer to their quest from a wise tortoise, the king of the birds, and ultimately ending up with Bumble the Bee. He recommends that they open the box as it may contain the secret to happiness. Upon arriving home again, they do so and

was one of the first ones in 1942, performed by the men of the AIF. With a theme of good-versus-evil and a story centered on a captive girl, it was both situationally relatable and evocative of fond childhood memories. This particular story resonated with the men, so versions of *Cinderella* were repeated often throughout the internment which lasted three and a half years. Of course, in the many POW versions of *Cinderella* the female lead and her stepsisters were played by men. They hammed it up, wearing anything from curvaceous to ridiculous costumes, their movements and antics brought the characters to life and left everyone in fits of laughter. The comedy was filled with *double entendres* and covert jokes aimed at their Japanese guards.

Initially, in 1942, the men were given permission to go to the Changi Gaol and entertain the children, but just as they were gathering their costumes and props for transport the permission was rescinded. It was a great disappointment, though the men surely consoled themselves knowing that they had at least ensured Father Christmas would visit the children that year.

FOND FAREWELL TO '42

Anxiety was high this first Christmas season in captivity.

The cooks and entertainers endeavoured to make this one extra special! The men put on pantomimes, musical concerts, and recitals. The cooks prepared a veritable feast. Though humble by today's standards when living in deprivation such food was certainly considered decadent. Fellowship was strong through the masses held by the army chaplains. Friends gathered together, sharing saved treats and dancing to music played on gramophones or personal instruments. Decorations were strung around rooms and common spaces, and handmade cards and gifts were passed to those one held dear.

Indeed, Christmas of 1942 was quite a different one for all those living in captivity. Though the separation from family and home (and from news of both) undermined the festivities, the spirit of the holiday prevailed, kept vibrant and alive through the ingenuity, creativity, and enthusiasm of the internees. **P**

CHARLOTTE DAWSON is a docent at the Changi Chapel and Museum.

How THAIS WERE FORCED TO SAY HAPPY NEW YEAR

ERIC ROSENKRANZ DISCOVERS THE REASONS BEHIND SOME THAI CUSTOMS

All photos from Wikimedia Commons unless otherwise stated.

Come the stroke of midnight on December 31st in Thailand, millions of Thais will shout *Sawatdii pee mai!*, perhaps offer respect with the traditional *wai* and dig into that quintessential dish Pad Thai. But did you know that this practice only began in the last century and was imposed by a ruthless military dictator who also declared war on the US and the UK? This is the story of Field Marshal Plaek Phibunsongkhram (1897-1964) who dictated when Thais should bathe, how to eat, what to wear and how to say “Hello!”

A TIME OF CHANGE

The Chakri dynasty was founded in 1782 and currently has had 10 rulers (the present king being referred to as Rama X). Whereas the much-loved King Chulalongkorn, Rama V (1869-1910) continued his predecessor's tradition of reform, abolishing slavery, improving public welfare and the

administrative system, King Vajiravudh, Rama VI (1910-1925) introduced compulsory education and other educational reforms. However, during the turbulent global depression of the 1930s, the politics of Thailand took a significant turn, during the reign of Rama VI's brother, King Prajadhipok (Rama VII). On 24 June 1932, a group of young intellectuals, educated abroad and imbued with the concept of Western democracy,



Field Marshal Plaek Phibunsongkhram, also known as Phibun, took power in 1938 and introduced a series of mandates that had a lasting effect on the Thai people.



Songkran was traditionally celebrated as the Thai New Year in April, but Phibun changed the New Year to 1 January.

staged a bloodless coup, and demanded a change from absolute to constitutional monarchy.

On 10 December 1932, King Prajadhipok signed Thailand's first constitution, thus ending 700 years of Thai absolute monarchy.

He abdicated in 1935 and spent the rest of his life in England. His successor being only nine years old at the time, set the stage for the Field Marshal, who was one of the instigators of the 1932 revolution and became Siam's third Prime Minister in 1938.

Field Marshal Plaek Phibunsongkhram, also known as Marshal P or Phibun, was apparently inspired by nationalist movements in Italy and Japan.

He began a campaign of Sinophobia in order to promote what he felt were Thai values and culture.

GOOD MORNING!

The traditional Thai greeting was “Have you eaten yet?”, but Thais at this time were also using a direct translation of “good morning” and “good evening” which Phibun did not feel was “Thai” enough. A Thai language professor had coined a new phrase, *Sawatdii*, from the Sanskrit word *svasti* meaning “blessing” or “well-being”. It shares a root with *swastika*, from Sanskrit *svastik* “auspicious thing”. In Thailand, this word did not have the same abhorrent connotations that it eventually did in Europe. In 1943, Phibun issued a directive ordering all Thais to only say *Sawatdii* when greeting each other. As *pee mai* means “new year”, *Sawatdii Pee Mai* became the New Year's greeting.

BUT WHEN, EXACTLY, WAS THE NEW YEAR?

Thais, along with Cambodians, Laotians and Myanmarese, traditionally celebrated New Year in April, with the Thais having Songkran, a water festival to promote the coming of rains to end the dry hot season.

But Phibun was having none of that, so he officially changed the start of the new year to January 1. Thais to this day celebrate both days as the New Year.

But wait! Why do we call the country “Thailand”? Wasn't its name “Siam”? Well, yes and no. Phibun didn't

like the name “Siam” which meant “dark” in Sanskrit, so in 1939 he changed the country's name to Thailand (*Muang Thai*), meaning “Land of the Free”. Subsequently, in 1946 the country's name reverted to Siam, only to return once again to Thailand in 1948.

DON'T EAT RICE! NOODLE IS YOUR LUNCH

Phibun's focus was the “Thaification” of the country, especially in the face of massive waves of Chinese immigrants in the preceding decades. When faced with a rice shortage, he announced that rice was Chinese (despite Thais having eaten it for centuries) and decreed that Thais should only eat noodles (even though they were rice noodles). One story has it that his cook (Chinese, as it happens) produced a noodle dish that Phibun loved so much he named it



Pad Thai, the quintessential tourist dish.

Pad Thai and ordered street vendors throughout the country to produce it (with no pork, since pork was a “Chinese meat”). He also banned eating with hands to get Thais to use more “civilised” utensils like the fork and spoon.

As part of a national campaign called “Noodle is Your Lunch,” the Public Welfare Department gave Thais free noodle carts and distributed recipes for this new national dish.

THE TWELVE CULTURAL MANDATES

From 1939-1942, during the early years of World War II, Phibun was mostly focused on his campaign to make the country more Thai. One third of Bangkok at the time was populated by Chinese.

The first of Phibun's Mandates changed the name of not only the country, but any company with Siam in its name. So Siam Commercial Bank and Siam Cement ceased to exist (although both changed their names back after Phibun's fall).

Mandate Four commanded the honoring of the Thai flag and National Anthem (which, according to Mandate Six, was to be written by the Army). Later decrees ordered everyone to stop whatever they were doing during the playing of the National Anthem, which was done every day at 8am and 6pm. I can personally recall being on the public transit system when trains and all commuters stopped



A propaganda poster on honouring the Thai flag. Collection of the Thai National Archives.

Thai people should carry out their normal personal activities as follows:
 Eat meals at set times, no more than four daily.
 Sleep approximately six to eight hours a day.
 Thai people should faithfully perform work duties without discouragement or shirking. The midday rest and lunch period should be no longer than one hour. At the end of the working day, exercise by playing sports for at least one hour, or other activities such as gardening, caring for pets, or planting trees. Then, after showering, eat dinner.
 Thai people should use their free time at night to complete necessary work, converse with family and friends, seek knowledge by listening to radio news or reading, or



Propaganda poster trying to get Thais to dress like Westerners.

in their tracks without moving while the music played on loudspeakers. (The music played at the cinemas in Thailand is not the National Anthem, but a song to honour the current King.)

Mandate Five ordered the support of only Thai products, eating only food and wearing only clothing made from Thai products. This was the mandate that enforced eating *Pad Thai*.

Mandate Seven dictated, "Every able bodied person must work at a stable career. Any person without a career is unhelpful to the nation and is not deserving of respect from the Thai people." If only the solution to unemployment was so easy!

Mandate Nine spoke of the honour of reading, writing and speaking Thai.

Mandate Ten was an attempt to get Thais to dress as Westerners... "Thai people should not appear at public gatherings, in public places, or in city limits without being appropriately dressed. Inappropriate dress includes wearing only underpants, wearing no shirt, or wearing a wraparound cloth."

At the time, both women as well as men would often go about without a shirt, and often with just a wraparound sarong. In Myanmar today one can still see most people wearing a *longyi*, but this was banned in Thailand. Magazines were issued showing inappropriate dress. Subsequent proclamations ordered men to wear Western hats at all times.

Mandate 11 instructed Thais how to lead their daily lives.

"Thai people should divide their time into three portions. One for work, one for personal activities, and one for rest and sleeping. This should be orderly and follow a schedule until it becomes habitual.



The omnipresent wai in Thailand. Photo from Unsplash.

other entertainment or arts, as opportunity permits.
 Thai people should use days off to benefit their bodies and minds by participating in religious activities, listening to sermons, making merit, seeking knowledge, traveling, playing sports or resting."

Mandate 11 was further expanded to require women to kiss their husbands goodbye every morning when leaving for work.

In 1946, Phibun was ousted from power and all of his mandates were abolished, along with the name Thailand and January 1st as New Year's Day. The *wai* was brought back, although *sawatdii* continued to be used as a greeting. Phibun went into exile in Japan where he died in 1964.

So shout *Sawatdii pee mai* on whichever New Year you wish to celebrate, and enjoy your *Pad Thai* from your local street vendor. Field Marshal Phibun will be very glad you did. 

ERIC ROSENKRANZ is an FOM Member.

FEATURE

FEASTING FOR POWER AND INFLUENCE

ANNE-KRISTIN VAUDOUR DISCOVERS NIAS CULTURE AND THEIR SEATS OF HONOUR

In the Ancestors and Rituals gallery on the second floor of the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM) there is a charming stone bench. At first glance, it looks rather curious – it has four legs but bears resemblance to a duck-like bird. Don't be deceived by its unassuming appearance. It is a seat known as *osa osa* that is exclusively reserved for the most esteemed individuals in the Nias community.



Osa osa seat at ACM. Photo by the author



Nias Island is located close to Sumatra.

WHO ARE THE NIAS?

Nias Island, located off Sumatra's west coast in Indonesia, boasts a distinctive civilisation celebrated for its unique architecture, wooden and stone statuary and impressive weaponry. Its relative geographic isolation has contributed to a culture that continues to captivate historians and anthropologists.

While debates persist over its classification as one of the last megalithic cultures, characterised by the use of large stones for various purposes, including religious, funerary, and ceremonial, Nias undeniably possesses a rich cultural tapestry.

The *ono nias*, the island's indigenous inhabitants, are known for their formidable warrior culture and elaborate ceremonial feasts. Historically, they practiced headhunting and engaged in inter-klan warfare. Their boys underwent rigorous training to master the art of leaping over stone structures exceeding two metres in height. The population fiercely resisted foreign influence. In contrast to the rest of Indonesia, Dutch control over Nias Island was only established in the 1950s, coinciding with the introduction of Christianity.

Nias society exhibits social stratification, with distinct hereditary classes (nobles and commoners) in the southern regions. In the northern and central areas, class distinctions

are more fluid, permitting some mobility between classes. Village leadership typically rests with chiefs and noble village elders, whose positions are showcased through the hosting of merit-based feasts. Commoners may enhance their social status by hosting such feasts.

Feasts are associated with various occasions, including rites of passage, weddings, funerals, house completions, successful raids, or simply as landmarks within the community. These events result in the creation of vertical stone ornaments, gold jewelry, or grand houses that reflect the achieved status of the feast giver. The two free classes continually validate and improve their social positions



A Nias priestess headdress at ACM. Photo by the author.



A Nias village.

by crafting and dedicating artistically designed objects in gold and stone.

A PIG FOR A PIG

In Nias culture, feasts are not just occasions for celebration; they also serve as intricate political stages where social exchanges play a pivotal role. The *owasa*, a ceremonial cycle of pig trading within villages, is central to understanding this dynamic. In the absence of regular markets, feasts historically served as the primary means of acquiring pig meat. The number of pigs slaughtered, the quantity given to guests, and the resulting indebtedness all translate into influence and power of the feast giver within the community.

Accumulating wealth in Nias is viewed as risky due to its potential to attract envy and sorcery. To make wealth less conspicuous, families invest it back into the community. Pigs are raised not only for personal benefit but also as contributions to others' feasts. Once a family has more than three or four pigs, they willingly donate them, ensuring wealth redistribution, future investments, and social cohesion.

Feasting in Nias follows a hierarchical process. The sharing, serving, and consumption of pork adhere to a strict cultural protocol. Respectable community members handle the pork cutting, closely observed by many. Receiving a pig's jaw at a wedding is a significant honour, with close relatives and the wife's parents receiving larger portions. The host's chief receives the most substantial share and elders also receive based on their feasting history.

The exchange of prestige gifts is essentially symmetrical, with the expectation of equal returns. Every portion is carefully weighed and remembered, serving as a visible sign of recognition and worth. Guests are sensitive to even minor reductions in their due, and disputes over portion size can turn violent. To overlook someone is a significant offence.

However, it's inevitable that some may fall short or be omitted, leading to shame and anger.

Non-repayment of feast debts, within a specific time frame, is considered a cardinal sin. Those with debts lose favour and prestige. Accusing someone publicly of not repaying their *owasa* debts results in humiliation and potential violence. Therefore, the initial motivation for hosting an *owasa* is often a negative one - the inability to postpone it any longer, leading to pressure and vulnerability. Supernatural signs, such as sudden illness or misfortune, signal that the *owasa* cannot be delayed further.

In the central region, where social ranks are more fluid and competition for higher status is common, hosting the most substantial feast often leads to victory in this pursuit. Villagers' support, acting as "sponsors," is crucial, as they generously provide pig meat to the preferred host. Since pig meat quantity directly correlates with influence and power, the host of a more extensive *owasa* ascends to a higher rank. This dynamic can be likened to a form of voting system seen in modern societies.

However, it is essential to avoid overextending resources and secure sponsor support merely to surpass a rival. Debts incurred during this process must be repaid promptly. There is no value in accumulating excessive debt that one cannot repay, as this undermines the perception of long-term influence and power. True influence, in this cultural context, depends on a sustainable foundation of wealth and prudent debt management, rather than solely relying on sponsor support.

While the spiritual components of an *owasa* have declined after the introduction of Christianity, feasting remains a central aspect of Nias culture, reflecting complex social and political dynamics within the community. It's a multifaceted system where wealth, prestige, and power are intricately intertwined.

THE SEAT OF HONOUR

What role does the *osa osa* seat play within the context of an *owasa* feast? These remarkable stone sculptures are crafted to pay homage to those who host these festive gatherings. The most prestigious seat, akin to a royal throne, is reserved for the chief. During the *owasa* festivities, the chief, often



Stone jumping (*hombu batu*) over 2 metre stone structures was originally an initiation rite for young men to be accepted as adults and warriors. It was used in warfare to jump over walls to invade villages. Photo from Nias Heritage Museum, North Sumatra, museum-nias.org.

adorned with intricate gold jewelry, is carried through the village while seated upon this esteemed *osa osa*, earning admiration from all who witness the procession.

Many *osa osa* sculptures feature depictions of the *lasara*, a mythical creature exclusive to Nias. The *lasara* is a fantastical amalgamation, characterised by a dragon-like head, a deer's body, and a bird-like tail. In Nias cosmogenic myths, the *lasara* symbolises the underworld dragon that bears the weight of the earth upon its back. The presence of a necklace on these sculptures shows that this *osa osa* belongs to a male feast giver. If the *osa osa* bears two ear ornaments, it was intended for a woman. The fleshy mouth and the tongue hanging out is a widespread motif for averting evil in many regions in Indonesia. Beyond their aesthetic appeal, *lasara*

sculptures are believed to hold a protective role and reinforce the authority of the nobility.

MORE HEADS, MORE POWER

Osa osa seats are categorised based on the number of heads they possess. Those with three heads are typically reserved for clan elders, while those with a single head commemorate individuals who have hosted significant feasts. *Osa osas* with two heads are less common and fall somewhere between the recognition levels of the one and three-headed seats. These intricately carved seats are used only once during a consecration ceremony and are integral to the large megalithic plazas at the heart of Nias' communal rituals.

The *osa osa* seats are celebrated not only for their cultural significance but also for their imaginative designs and meticulous craftsmanship. They often incorporate traditional Nias jewelry, such as the *kalabubu*, symbolising valor and triumph in warfare, as ornate embellishments.

In addition to the *lasara*, *osa osa* seats may also feature symbols like hornbills and stags, closely associated with the veneration of ancestral spirits. Smaller *osa osa* pieces find their place atop large ancestral pillars known as *behu* during ceremonies honoring the founding ancestors of the village.

A TROPHY OF PRESTIGE

As the vibrant feast draws to a close, the *osa osa* seat finds its permanent place in front of the host's house, as a lasting emblem of respect and influence within the community. These stone seats are not lifeless artefacts but living expressions of Nias Island's cultural richness, embodying honour, prestige, and a deep sense of community. They serve as a reminder that art and tradition thrive in even the most remote corners of our world, connecting us to the enduring fabric of human culture.

Nias Island stands apart from its neighboring islands with its preserved and unique traditions. While some have faded into obscurity, especially

after the introduction of Christianity, others endure, including stone jumping and elaborate feasts, defining its deep cultural identity. The island's rich heritage continues to flourish, fostering a sense of pride and unity among its people. ■



A three-headed *osa osa* exhibited at Nias Tribal Treasures : Cosmic Reflections in Stone, Wood and Gold (1990) at the Volkenkundig Museum Nisantara, Delft.

ANNE-KRISTIN VAUDOUR is an ACM docent.



A rare silk weft ikat piece featuring supplementary gold thread decoration at the end panels, 1850-1900, Komerling, South Sumatra, 75 x 250 cm.

Festive Fabrics

JOHN ANG PRESENTS TEXTILES OF CELEBRATION FROM THE MALAY WORLD

Songkets are the most well-known and festive fabrics of the Malay world, worn by the Malay people in various regions such as South Thailand, Cambodia, South Philippines, North and South Sumatra, the Malay Peninsular, coastal Borneo, South Sulawesi, Sumbawa and West Flores. They are reserved for

the most special occasions and ceremonies.

However, *songkets* are not the only remarkable textiles that the Malay culture has to offer. In this article, we will explore some other exquisite and rare fabrics that are also highly valued and celebrated. These textiles are often less discussed because they are very exclusive, difficult to produce and expensive to acquire.



An assemblage of various velvet textiles adorned with glass beads used for wedding bed decoration, 1936, Bengkulu, Southwest Sumatra, 350 x 350 cm.



A silk ikat loseng sarong with a wave pattern, 1920s, Pontianak, West Kalimantan, 98 x 82cm.

THE SYMBOLIC BRIDGE

One of the most exquisite textiles in the Malay world is the *limar songket*, a fabric that combines the techniques of *limar* and *songket*. *Songket* is a form of supplementary weft weaving using gold, silver or coloured threads, while *limar* is a type of weft ikat. The complexity and skill required to create such a textile make it extremely rare and valuable.

This piece is especially remarkable because it bears the name *kain songket limar corak Gajah Mada jambatan pengantin*, which translates to a cloth with gold thread decoration and weft ikat with the repeat pattern of Gaja Mada's fan-shape symbol. Gaja Mada (c. 1290-1364) was the legendary prime minister of the Majapahit Empire, and his emblem represents power and authority.

This long cloth, measuring almost three metres, was used as a symbolic bridge for wedding ceremonies among some Malay communities in South Sumatra. From its measurements and unusual patterns of the *limar* and *songket* or birds perched on flower stalks, bees and fish, it is believed to have originated from Komerling, an ancient river town south of Palembang and north of Lampung in South Sumatra. Komerling, however, has since declined in prominence due to the silting of the river. During weddings, this cloth would be laid on the floor and the bride and groom would sit on one end of it. The parents of the couple would stand next to them and sprinkle rose water and fragrant flowers on their heads, blessing them with good fortune for their marriage. After receiving their blessings, the couple would stand up and walk barefoot along the cloth towards their bridal chamber or their

pelamin, a wedding platform. This ceremony signifies that the couple has crossed the bridge from singlehood to married life.

WEDDING BED ADORNMENTS

Valances and curtains with exquisite adornments grace the wedding beds or ceremonial platforms, known as *pelamin pengantin*. Typically, these textiles are embroidered with opulent gold threads. However, a distinctive example diverges from the norm, embellished with glass beads, possibly imported from India and Eastern Europe. This style of beaded decoration, known as *sulam manik manik*, or embroidered beads, is often attributed to the Peranakan Chinese. Remarkably, this particular set hails from a Malay family in Bengkulu, a region renowned for its beadwork since the 18th century. The year "1936" is couched in white glass beads at the centre of the topmost dark green velvet valence. It took over a year of searching and visiting families in Bengkulu to acquire all the components in this set. For example, the right curtain panel was found only eight months after the left curtain panel was discovered. It had exactly the same pattern and size but with the central bird flying in the reverse direction. Evidently, this hints at the dispersion of family heirlooms during economically challenging times.

Notably, despite being discovered in the homes of Malay Muslim families, the motifs

on these textiles, such as phoenixes and swastikas, reflect Chinese influences. Moreover, the utilisation of these cloths as valances or *tirai* may draw inspiration from Indian *toran* (ceremonial banners). This amalgamation of textiles bearing diverse influences mirrors the rich, blended, and synthesised nature of Malay culture.

DISTANT ORIGINS?

Colorful sarongs held a special place in the wedding celebrations of West Kalimantan. An exceptional example, discovered in Pontianak, sets itself apart from the commonly seen *ikat loseng corak insang* or warp ikat sarongs with fish gill patterns. This particular sarong boasts a repetitive, multicoloured wave pattern, akin to the ikats found on Uzbekistan's *kaftans*. The origin of this pattern raises intriguing questions, as it could either be a generic occurrence in warp ikats or possibly influenced by neighboring or distant cultures.

Two plausible sources emerge. First, it may have been adopted from the Ibans, known for their centuries-long practice of warp ikat *pua kumbu*. However, the dissimilarity in patterns challenges this hypothesis. Alternatively, the influence could have stemmed from the Cham people, who also produced warp ikats of almost identical patterns. The Chams, renowned for their seafaring prowess, resided in the region for centuries, particularly in the Riau islands of Tembalan, Anambas, and Natuna. Their historical connection with Muslim scholars from Persia, notably Samarkand, presents a plausible avenue for Uzbekistani influence on the Chams. Nevertheless, further research is required to substantiate this theory.



A rare hand-painted batik silk shawl, 1920s-1940s, Ketapang, West Kalimantan, 143 x 205 cm.

ROYAL BATIK

Silk with batik with vibrant hand-painted patterns represents another unique celebratory textile from West Kalimantan. The crafting process involves waxing the areas designated for painting. This is followed by dyeing the background colour, usually yellow, then washing the wax off. The empty waxed areas will then be meticulously painted with colors mixed with a special mordant to prevent running. This distinctive technique, characterised by intricate patterns and vivid color combinations, is exclusive to Ketapang, a city south of Pontianak on the west coast of Kalimantan. Notably, the Palace

of Matan in Ketapang houses artefacts, including ceremonial outfits of former sultans that utilise this technique. Nevertheless, modern imitations of these patterns abound, created through silk screen printing.

From the old photographs and garments displayed in the Matan Palace, we can deduce that these cloths served diverse purposes, such as adorning wedding attire, as well as featuring in ceremonies like circumcisions, receiving of foreign guests, and coronations. Today, this technique of batik and painting is practiced on rare occasions by the sister of Prince Gusti Kaboja, the head of the Matan Sultanate.



A 19th century selendang telepuk from a royal family in Terengganu, 101 x 203 cm.

GOLD LEAF SHAWLS

The *selendang telepuk*, or shawl with gold leaf application, stands as another esteemed celebratory textile. This technique, though found throughout the Malay Peninsula, primarily prevails in the states of Selangor, Johor, Terengganu, Kelantan (Malaysia), and Riau-Lingga (Indonesia). Compared to the more common *limar bersongket*, *kain telepuk* holds the highest regard among Malay textiles in the Malay Peninsula. While today it adorns the wedding attire of affluent couples, in the past, it was reserved exclusively for royalty. These shawls played a role not only in weddings but also in coronations, circumcision ceremonies, hair-cutting ceremonies, and birthday celebrations.

Crafting *kain telepuk* involves a meticulous process. The base cloth undergoes a series of treatments, including burnishing with beeswax. This burnishing or calendering technique, known as *gerus*, entails soaking the fabric in starch, drying it, and then rubbing it entirely with beeswax. The cloth is draped over a wooden beam and rubbed with the rounded top of a cowrie shell until it glistens. A smooth surface is prepared for the application of specially prepared gum Arabic. This gum, applied using a wooden chop carved with desired patterns, is stamped onto the cloth. Gold leaf is quickly applied to the glue before drying, and any unattached gold leaf is brushed away. Remarkably, *telepuk* pieces in the Malay Peninsula are typically re-burnished with beeswax after applying the gold leaf, giving the gold a more refined and muted appearance. This technique of gold adhesion is also practiced in South Sumatra, where it is known as *prada*.

Kain telepuk holds a special place among the royalty and wealthy Bugis of Riau-Lingga. Even today, it decorates the dark blue check sarongs used in Bugis weddings in Riau-Lingga. This close connection with the Bugis may explain the prevalence of *telepuk* in states closely associated with them. These are Selangor, Johor, Pahang, and Terengganu. Notably, the wooden chops for this particular *telepuk* example are housed in the Terengganu State Museum.

TO CELEBRATE THE AFTERLIFE

Lastly, we encounter a remarkable textile utilised for funerals, marking the end of life's journey, an observance that can also be viewed as a celebration of one's life. This textile is known as *kain limar berayat*, featuring weft ikat decoration with Quranic scriptures. It presents an extraordinary challenge to weavers, as any error in tying or weaving threads results in illegible characters, deemed an insult to Allah.

A striking example of this textile, boasting bright green and red silk, was woven in Kelantan. Kelantan is renowned for its preference for vibrant colors, in contrast to Terengganu, another region where such cloths are woven. Additionally, the twill weave employed in Kelantan's textiles, creating a geometric pattern of diagonal lines forming tiny squares known as *pantat sipuk* (snail's rear end), is characteristic of both Kelantan and Southern Thailand, particularly among Pattani's cloths.

In the Islamic tradition, burial occurs promptly upon a person's death, eschewing the use of coffins in favor of a funeral bier called *janaazah*. Over this bier, a cloth adorned with Quranic inscriptions, similar to the *limar berayat*, is placed. This suggests that the *limar berayat* may have also been used as funeral bier covers. Incidentally, this technique



A silk kain limar berayat, featuring weft ikat woven with Arabic script, Kelantan, 1920-40s, East Malay Peninsula, 78 x 220 cm.

of *limar* decorated with inscriptions created by weft ikat, though extremely rare, extends to Kelantan, Terengganu, Thailand, and Cambodia.

In conclusion, these celebratory textiles, though often unique to their regions, were embraced across the diverse countries of the Malay world. Their transcultural appeal underscores the interconnectedness of these regions, despite geographical distance, they are a testament to the rich cultural tapestry of Malay culture which we should all applaud and celebrate. **P**

JOHN ANG is an avid collector and researcher of textiles from the Malay World. He has mounted numerous exhibitions and served as a consultant to museums in Asia. John has given talks for FOM's Textile Enthusiasts Group.

Lions, Lunar Pastries, and Spirits Let Loose

JOYCE JENKINS REFLECTS ON SOME UNIQUE ASPECTS OF CELEBRATIONS IN SINGAPORE

All photos by the author unless otherwise stated.



Lion dances are believed to bring prosperity and good luck. Watercolour painting by artist Yusoff Abdul Latiff. Instagram: @yusofflatiff

When I arrived in Singapore as a child of four in early 1965, it was still part of Malaysia. From the deck of our ship, I saw a huge lion dancing on shore in the distance. I learned later that these were Lion Dancers. Returning to Singapore in 2000 as an expat, it was evident from the impressive urban skyline and Changi Airport that the Singapore I remembered as a child had transformed. Happily, I have discovered that Singapore has retained its multiculturalism, and that lion dancers are still very much in evidence, along with some rather unique foods and festivals. Here are some of my favourites.

LION DANCES

Lion dances are common sight in Chinese communities across the world during the Chinese New Year season. In Singapore, lorries carrying lion dance troupes (usually all male) are a common sight on the roads. You can usually hear them before you see them – loud drums, cymbals and gongs are all part of the performance. Lion dances are thought to bring luck and prosperity when ushering in the new year. Typically, there

are specific times and dates according to the Chinese almanac when the dance has the most effect.

LO HEI FISH TOSS

Lo Hei is both a dish and a celebratory routine at Chinese New Year. It means “tossing up” in Cantonese, and is another way of ushering in prosperity and good luck. The dish consists of a large plate of colourful, shredded vegetables topped with sliced raw fish. As seasonings like oil, plum sauce, fragrant pepper and crisps are added, good wishes in propitious phrases are recited by the host. Everyone at the (round) table joins in the toss with their chopsticks. The ingredients are tossed as high as possible as it is believed that the higher the toss the greater the fortune. It can be a messy and rowdy affair! The salad (whatever of it is left on the plate) is then eaten by everyone gathered. I particularly enjoy *lo hei* as it is a joyful way of sharing food and good wishes.

There is some rivalry over the origin of the dish, with both Singapore and Malaysia claiming credit for the recipe known as *Qi Cai Yusheng* (“Seven-Coloured Yusheng”). It made its debut in Singapore in 1964. True to multicultural Singapore, even though it is a Chinese tradition, the dish is



Lo Hei – a toss for good fortune can be messy and rowdy!

also enjoyed by the Malay, Indian and other communities of Singapore in different variations such as vegetarian and halal versions. During Covid-19 restrictions, face masks had to be worn and reciting the auspicious phrases was not allowed, so most diners played recordings on their phones!

MOONCAKE FESTIVAL

Singapore does not have the four seasons, but here, the mid-Autumn or Mooncake festival is celebrated with much enthusiasm. Mooncakes are a delicious part of the festival and are enjoyed as snacks and presented as gifts. Pastry shops across the island outdo themselves each year with beautifully-designed gift boxes. Traditional egg yolk and lotus seed paste fillings have also given way to snowskin versions with chocolate and even champagne truffle fillings.

HUNGRY GHOSTS FESTIVAL

Preceding the mid-Autumn Festival is the fascinating Hungry Ghosts Festival which is significant for Taoists and Buddhists in Singapore. During this month it is believed that the gates of the underworld are opened, allowing restless, hungry spirits to roam in search of offerings and attention. Altars with offerings of food, incense and candles to honour the deceased appear everywhere – from entrances of glitzy, luxury condominiums to the carparks of housing estates across Singapore. Paper money and symbolic paper effigies of material objects such as houses, cars, watches and mobile phones are burned at designated areas to pacify the spirits and make their afterlives more comfortable. Temporary performance stages are set up particularly around Chinatown



Concerts and performances are staged during the Hungry Ghost Festival to entertain the spirits. Front row seats are usually left empty for the spirit guests. Photo from roots.sg



Lanterns in a park during the mid-Autumn Festival.

to provide entertainment for these ‘hungry ghosts’. Front row seats are usually left empty for the spirit guests.

THAIPUSAM

Lastly, one of the most intriguing festivals in Singapore is Thaipusam, a Tamil festival celebrated in honour of Lord Subramaniam (also known as Lord Murugan), who represents virtue, youth and power and destroys evil.

In Singapore, devotees show penitence by walking four kilometres from Sri Srinivasa Perumal Temple in Serangoon Road to the Sri Thendayuthapani Temple in Tank Road, some carrying spiked *kavadis* (altars decorated with flowers and peacock feathers) that pierce their torso, others carrying offerings of pots of milk symbolising abundance and fertility to Hindus. The celebration continues for two days and thousands of devotees take part. To onlookers, the piercings look terribly painful but devotees seem to be able to practice mind over matter.

MODERN, YET TRADITIONAL

As Singapore continues to become ever more sophisticated and modern, events like the Formula One races attract tourists from all over the world. But to me Singapore’s most enjoyable events are still the traditional celebrations and festivals. **P**

JOYCE JENKINS was a docent at ACM and the Peranakan Museum from 2005-2009. She is a current member of FOM Membership Committee and Hospitality Committee.



Piercings on a Hindu devotee carrying a kavadi during Thaipusam.

Tropical Art

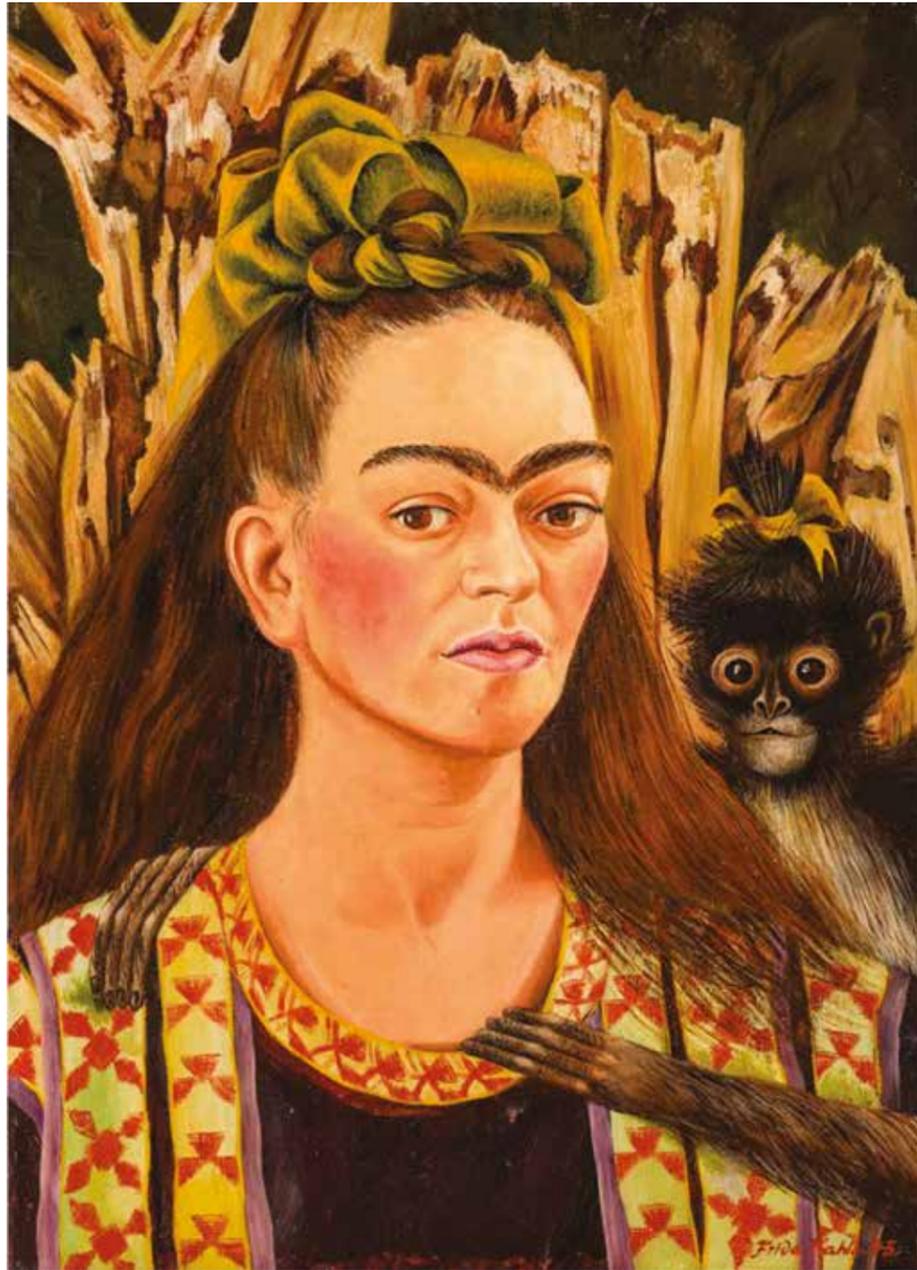
PASSAGE EDITORS

PREVIEW THE NATIONAL GALLERY SINGAPORE'S SHOW OF THE YEAR

With mounting excitement, National Gallery Singapore opens its exhibition entitled: *Tropical Stories from Southeast Asia and Latin America*.

From 18 November 2023 till 24 March 2024, you will see how artists in tropical regions, both east and west, wrestled with similar issues in the post-colonial era of the twentieth century.

Over 200 works of art will be exhibited featuring over 70 renowned artists, some for the first time in Singapore. These include David Medalla, Diego Rivera, Emiria, Sunassa, Frida Kahlo, Helio Qiticica, Latif Mohidin, Patrick Ng Kah Onn, Paul Gaugin, Tan Oe Pang and Tarsila do Amaral. Here are some highlights:



Frida Kahlo (1907 – 1954)

One of Mexico's most celebrated modern artists, Frida Kahlo, had a short and tragic life. At the age of six she contracted the crippling disease polio. Then at the age of 18 she was very seriously injured in a bus accident, which left her in pain for the rest of her life. For three months after the accident, she was forced to remain immobile in bed. It was during this period, out of boredom, that she began to paint.

After the revolution that deposed the dictatorship in 1910, Mexico went through tumultuous social, artistic and political turns. Kahlo was motivated by her communist sympathies and concern for the working classes and marginalised communities. Her paintings were also inspired by her interest in collecting ancient pre-colonial artefacts.

She is perhaps best known for her self-portraits many of which feature her favourite pet spider monkey called Fulang-Chang. Her adoration of this creature provided a surrogate for the children that she knew she could never have.

Frida Kahlo, Self-portrait with Monkey, 1945, oil on masonite. Collection of Robert Brady Museum.

Patrick Ng Kah Onn (1932 – 1989)

Ng lived through challenging times in Malaysia as the country progressed from colonial rule to a decolonising period. This caused social transformation and provoked a search for a new cultural identity.

His daring self-portrait, yes, self-portrait, tackles the issue of identity head on. By presenting himself as a woman in a batik blouse he is subverting the notion of gender as well as racial appearance. In so doing he sets the stage for artists in newly formed Malaysia to challenge established conventions and to explore modern ways to express cultural identity.



Patrick Ng Kah Onn, Self-Portrait, 1958, oil on paper. Collection of National Gallery Singapore.



Latiff Mohidin, Tumbuhan Tropika (Tropical Growth), 1968, oil on canvas. Private collection.

Latiff Mohidin (born 1941)

Latiff Mohidin is Malaysia's most celebrated modernist painter and poet. Born in rural Seremban he went to school in Singapore and studied art in Berlin, where he became inspired by European modernist art movements. He also travelled a great deal in Europe and in Southeast Asia. He coined the phrase "Pago Pago" to describe the aesthetic consciousness that was evoked by these travels.

As Malaysia emerged from its colonial past and set about decolonising its culture Latiff Mohidin played a role by challenging the romantic, pastoral interpretation of landscapes, with his own locally rooted version of modernism. His painting, *Tropical Growth*, exemplifies his rejection of traditional treatments of tropical vegetation.

Paul Gaugin (1848 – 1903)

Gauguin chose the tropical island of Tahiti to escape from the materialism and constraints of life in Europe. He sought spiritual enlightenment in the purity of paradise. However, he became disgusted by the effects of French colonisation so he moved to a more remote island where he could "go native" and immerse himself in the local culture.

He was constantly experimenting, and his work took on a poetic, primitive quality to depict idyllic scenes inspired by his erotic, exotic fantasies. His paintings greatly influenced the 20th century artists who followed him. And it led to a revival of pastoralism as artists in Europe sought to reconnect with idealised rural landscapes. 

Celebrating the Spirit of STPI

SWAPNA MIRASHI MARKS THE INSTITUTE'S 21 YEARS OF BREAKING BOUNDARIES THROUGH COLLABORATION

Photos courtesy of STPI Creative Workshop & Gallery.

STPI Creative Workshop & Gallery celebrates its 21st anniversary this year. Its anniversary exhibition titled *21 Years: A Story in Multiple Parts* showcased a selection from its iconic collection of artworks, created in-house by the technical team with some of the most notable contemporary artists who did their residency with STPI's Visiting Artist Program. The exhibition concluded on 15 October 2023.

Part of the exhibition revisited STPI's rich history and its journey through the years, celebrating several milestones along the way. The other part highlighted a value that is the heart and soul of STPI, but often stays behind the scenes: collaboration.

The anniversary exhibition puts 'behind the scenes' front and centre underlining that the relationships built are the most important part of an STPI residency and an intangible aspect that is rarely seen by gallery visitors. A photo wall dedicated to the collaboration with visiting artists over the years highlighted the people-centric nature of STPI's residencies.

"... printmaking is a collaborative thing. You need an artist, but you also need a group of printers and papermakers to work with you.... It's a very niche and rich medium, even within the arts practice."

- EMI EU, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, STPI

In the STPI story, 'multiple' is a recurring theme. 'Multiple' refers to the multiple editions of a print artwork. In the STPI world, it also denotes multiplicity – diversity in artist selection, in the approaches to creating art and subsequently the artworks created.

Artists from all over the world, from all mediums, at different stages of their careers are invited to STPI for a residency. STPI has a creative workshop where boundary-pushing art is created through a long collaboration between the visiting artists-in-residence and the technical team of STPI. The results of these collaborations are exhibited at the STPI gallery four to six times a year.

"... the artists bring with them the 'what', the Creative Workshop provides the 'how'. The manner in which this collaboration exists naturally paves the way for ideas to grow and evolve organically without any constraints and parameters. This in itself creates a shared space of possibilities, allowing for creativity and innovation to flourish between the artists and the workshop... We have basically abandoned the mindset that we are printmakers or papermakers. We are now collaborators."

- OH THIAM GUAN, DIRECTOR (WORKSHOP), STPI



Love, Ego, Money by Eko Nugroho

This broader outlook to art at STPI has led to multiple boundary-pushing works like a ten-color lithograph, *Horizon - The Energy of Singapore* (2005) by Indonesian artist Srihadi Soedarsono. Or Berlin-based, South Korean installation artist Haegue Yang's *Spice Sheets* (2013). Yang's works were inspired by her exploration of Singapore during her residency and her visits to Tekka Market. Her artwork is made via spice screen print on STPI handmade 'spices paper' which has 20 different spices and herbs.

The exhibition also featured some unexpected works, especially coming from a print workshop, like a wearable full face cast paper mask with screen print and marbling, titled *Love, Ego, Money* (2013) by internationally-renowned contemporary artist Eko Nugroho.

During his residency, Nugroho produced over 70 works, many of which were sculptural, essentially costumes and masks based on the *hijab*, inspired by the paper that STPI's team had developed from banana trees that was even stronger than cloth. Interestingly, these decorative masks caused quite a stir when STPI staff appeared on the streets wearing them, resulting in some absurd situations that were captured in large photographs, one of which was also on show.

The works in the exhibition, although produced by the same team with similar resources, showed remarkable diversity in style, sensibility and materiality, much as the artists who helmed the creations. A delicate embedded-thread drawing, *Small Gate* (2016) by Do Ho Suh which brings three dimensional form into two dimensional, inhabited the same space as Genevieve Chua's two and a half dimensional work, *Apex and Depressions* (2022) of handmade paper cast with cement mixture.

"Apart from the world-class facility, there is the mindset of the STPI team when taking on projects; they are able to execute and expand. They never say no."

- PINAREE SANPITAK, THAILAND. STPI ARTIST IN RESIDENCE 2018

Each artwork in the exhibition had an interesting story that was illustrated by videos playing on a loop. A remarkable story was the one behind the artwork from STPI's



Horizon - The Energy of Singapore by Srihadi Soedarsono.



The collaborative process of printmaking with Srihadi Soedarsono.

15th anniversary exhibition, *Exquisite Trust (Blindly Collective Collaborations)*, by a group of four artists in residency at STPI: Carsten Höller, Tobias Rehberger, Anri Sala and Rirkrit Tiravanija. The luminary artist quartet, each with vastly different artistic sensibilities, used the game of Exquisite Corpse in creating fantastic composite works. The process required the artists to completely surrender their individual artistic control. An artist starts a work and the next one, who is given only a hint of what has been created, picks up where the previous artist left off.

Art is about questioning norms, breaking boundaries, tearing up the rulebook. Only imagination, dedication and collaboration. The result – unlimited possibilities. And that is exactly the Spirit of STPI. 📍



Team STPI.

Visit STPI's new exhibition from 3 November – 24 December featuring internationally recognised installation artist, Lee Bul. FOM guided tours every Thursday at 11:30am and on Saturdays and Sundays at 2pm.



H.E. Ambassador Hiroshi Ishikawa (centre, in suit and red tie) and Gerald Wee, Director of the Education and Community Outreach, National Heritage Board (in white shirt, next to the Ambassador), with members of the Japanese Docent group, FOM Council and representatives from various museums.

Japanese Docents Honoured with Cultural Award

IKUMI FUSHIMI APPLAUDS THE JDs RECEIVING THE AMBASSADOR'S COMMENDATION AWARD

Photos courtesy of the Japanese Docent group.

In a ceremony presided over by the Japanese Ambassador, H.E. Hiroshi Ishikawa, on 25 September 2023, the Japanese Docent (JD) group received the Ambassador's Commendation Award. This award is presented to organisations and individuals based outside Japan who have made significant contributions toward cultural exchange and mutual understanding between the host country and Japan.

The event was attended by members of the JD group, FOM council members, representatives from Ministry of Culture, Community & Youth (MCCY), National Heritage Board (NHB) and the museums.

The history of the JD group extends back more than four decades. Two pioneer members of FOM, Fumi Nagae and Kuniko Hasegawa, set forth making Singapore museums more accessible to the Japanese visitors.



JD coordinator Ikumi Fushimi giving a speech during the ceremony.

Their early work consisted of compiling translations of museum exhibit labels and writing Japanese language articles about museum artefacts and their background stories. These articles were published in the Southern Cross (the publication of the Japan Association) and helped greatly to raise awareness and interest in Singapore museums among the local Japanese speaking population. As Nagae and Hasegawa were joined by more volunteers, the JD group began to take shape. Official Japanese language tours of the museums commenced on 7 September 1982 at the National Museum of Singapore. Operations steadily expanded to include tours of the Singapore Art Museum (1996), Asian Civilisations Museum (1997) and The Peranakan Museum (2008). Today the group comprises of 50 active members and the JD group is happy to announce that 19 new trainees joined this October.

"The Ambassador's commendation award ceremony is

the biggest event in our 42-year history. We are very fortunate to participate in this event" says Toshiko Kujime, one of two coordinators of the Japanese Docent group. "This award is in recognition of a group effort. All members, present and past have contributed so much." Kujime expressed her profound admiration and gratitude to pioneers Nagae and Hasegawa. "They probably never imagined that their humble work would bear such fruit, that the embassy would confer such a prestigious award on the group. We hope this award inspires more people to join us."

Fellow JD coordinator, Ikumi Fushimi, observed that most Japanese visitors who come to Singapore often struggle to understand the English labels in the museums.

"Our Japanese language tours bring Singapore history and culture to visitors from Japan in a way that is accessible and easily comprehensible." In addition, Fushimi emphasised that providing mere translations of the exhibits is not what JD as a group does. "We strive to offer tours that are interesting, personal and authentic. We want to bring the real Singapore to our visitors."

The JD group conducts regular tours at four museums: National Museum of Singapore, Singapore Art Museum, Asian Civilisations Museum and the Peranakan Museum. The group welcomes over 7,000 visitors per year. 

More information on the Japanese language tours can be found on the JD group's official blog on <https://jdguides.exblog.jp>



JD coordinator Toshiko Kujime receiving the award from the Japanese ambassador.

FOM Choir Brings Cheer to Patients

NILOFAR IYER REPORTS ON A MUSICAL INITIATIVE BY FOM MEMBERS CARE

All photos by Joyce Lim.

FOM MEMBERS CARE (FOMMC) is an initiative that began in 2019. Group members organise activities to give back to the community in meaningful ways. Some events in the past include participation in Walk For Rice and tree planting at public locations around Singapore.

Recently FOMMC formed a choir, the Treble Makers (not Trouble Makers!). Currently, the choir is made up of a group of 15 docents from the Peranakan Museum and Malay Heritage Centre. Any FOM member is welcome to join us. None of us are professional singers but we diligently attended rehearsals every few weeks to ensure that we sang in unison. We had lots of fun and came up with a repertoire of songs.

On 18 August 2023, we had our first performance for the residents of the Kwong Wai Shu Hospital (KWSH). The hospital was founded in 1910 by a group of Cantonese merchants who wanted to provide poor immigrants with free medical services. Today, most of the hospital's patients are elderly and come from low-income families. Their medical care is subsidised by donations that the hospital receives.

For this visit, we all wore red and white outfits to represent FOM and also because Singapore's National Day is in August. We brought along handheld musical instruments like tambourines and an *ipu* (Hawaiian gourd drum) and toured various wards. We sang a repertoire of classic songs including *Getting to Know You* and *What a Wonderful World*. The song that melted the hearts of our choir members and the patients was the Chinese classic, *Yue Liang Dai Biao Wo De Xin* (*The Moon Represents My Heart*) by the late Taiwanese songbird, Teresa Teng. This melodious tune was definitely the crowd favourite. We concluded with a medley of popular Malay songs such as *Di Tanjong Katong* and *Chan Mali Chan*.

After our performance, hospital liaison, Joyce Lim, gave us a tour of the heritage centre. KWSH is one of Singapore's oldest charitable healthcare institutions. In 1911, the British



The FOM Treble Makers. From left: Pauline Choe, Michelle Foo, Darlene Kasten, Garima Lalwani, Mae Chong, Tang Siew Ngoh, Nilofar Iyer, Chong Yit Peng, Angela Kek, Peggy Lee and Florence Phua.

colonial government transferred a six-acre piece of land (about the size of three soccer fields) with three colonial buildings to KWSH. The land and buildings were once part of the Tan Tock Seng Hospital grounds.

It is noteworthy that in the last century, KWSH has continued the strong tradition of community service, having cared for many generations of Singaporeans. Our performance was a rewarding and meaningful experience that was truly enjoyed by our volunteers and the patients at KWSH. 

If you would like to find out more about the Treble Makers or join us for our upcoming festive performance in December 2023, please write to FOMMC coordinator Nilofar Iyer at: fommemberscare@gmail.com



In front of an iconic pavilion at the hospital named 霍然 (Huò Rán, which means "speedy recovery" in Chinese).



Patients enjoyed singing along and playing some of the handheld instruments.

A Celebration of Milestone Anniversaries



VIDHYA NAIR REPORTS ON THE FOM OPEN MORNING HELD AT ACM

Photos by Mohamed Ismail.

Open Morning was held this year on Monday, 4 September. The annual event is an opportunity for the public, new FOM members and guests to discover the wide range of activities and docent training opportunities that FOM offers.



Guest-of-Honour Professor Tommy Koh joins FOM president Millie Phuah in cake-cutting. Council members, ACM Director Kennie Ting (in batik shirt), PASSAGE Co-Editor-in-Chief Dawn Marie Lee (in pink) and members of hospitality team look on.



Millie: "From that very first great leap in 1978, taking on challenges with foresight and dedication, made possible by the FOM spirit."

This year's event began with an auspicious start as FOM commemorated its 45th anniversary, and *PASSAGE* magazine turned 15. This milestone celebrates our members who have, over the decades, come together with a shared interest in art, history and heritage as they forged lasting friendships.

Founded by a small group of women in 1978, FOM's membership has grown to over 1,500 strong. A registered society since 2003, FOM is recognised for its commitment and contributions to the heritage and museum landscape in Singapore, especially through its comprehensive docent training program. FOM docents give back to the community by taking thousands of visitors each year on free guided public tours of museums, heritage institutions and trails. *PASSAGE* was first published in 2008 and is produced by a volunteer editorial team who shape contributions by FOM members into a beautiful and noteworthy magazine.

The Open Morning was graced by the Professor Tommy Koh, ambassador-at-large at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, a position he has held since 1990, and professor of law at the National University of Singapore. He was present at



ACM docents and Friday with Friends.



Kampong Gelam Heritage Trail docents in full force.



Join us, the Asian Book Group.



STPI woos the crowds.



The over 200-strong Open Morning and MML audience.



Professor Koh speaking again to FOM as he did 20 years ago.

FOM's 25th anniversary celebrations in 2003 when he was Chairman of the National Heritage Board.

In his speech, he congratulated FOM on this milestone and shared his admiration for the sense of community and kinship forged. He acknowledged FOM's past presidents who made meaningful contributions, nurtured the pay-it-forward culture of the society and welcomed members of all nationalities. He also urged FOM to continue serving both young and elderly visitors in museum spaces and find cohesive ways to integrate new arrivals into Singapore society.

FOM president, Millie Phuah, thanked members for coming forward with new ideas and taking on challenges with a positive spirit of volunteerism. ACM director, Kennie Ting was also present on this joyous occasion. The event was commemorated with a gorgeous cake which was shared with all present. The celebrations were followed by the first Monday Morning Lecture of the new FOM season. Artist Kanchana Gupta spoke about her visual arts journey of negotiating and subverting the politics of materials. **P**



ACM's basement turned into a marketplace of people and FOM offerings.

EXPLORING WHERE EUROPE AND ASIA MEET

GISELLA HARROLD REPORTS ON THE FOM STUDY TOUR TO GEORGIA AND ARMENIA

All photos by the author.

In June 2023, 16 FOM members embarked on a study tour to the historical lands of Georgia and Armenia. Travelling both countries is like delving into a treasure trove of history, culture, and natural beauty. These two nations, nestled between Europe and Asia, have witnessed the ebb and flow of civilisations for centuries. A study tour offers an opportunity to explore into the rich past, diverse cultures, and stunning landscapes, creating an unforgettable learning experience.

Georgia and Armenia boast a historical tapestry that weaves together ancient civilisations, kingdoms, and empires. This study tour provided a unique chance to explore architectural marvels like Georgia's ancient cave cities of Vardzia, which showcased intricate rock-cut dwellings and churches. In Armenia, the spellbinding Geghard Monastery, carved into the cliffs, and the iconic Temple of Garni testify to the enduring spirit of these nations.

A TASTE OF CULTURE

We immersed ourselves in the local culture. Georgia and Armenia offer a captivating blend of traditions, languages, and cuisines. The Georgian Khinkali, a soup dumpling similar to the *xiao long bao*, might be a reminder of the Silk Road past. While the *churchkhela* (a candy made of grapes and nuts) relate to the age-old wine culture. Meat served on sticks, cooked over an open flame is an all time favourite of both nations. There were always plenty of options for the vegetarians, since historically meat was reserved for special occasions, and vegetables, nuts and fruits were available in abundance.



Our group at the David Gareja monastery, Georgia. Participants (not in order): Sim Sock Yan, Robert David Mann, Esmé Mary Ann Parish, Martin Nigel Edwards, Seema Mohanka Nim, Jayashree Mohanka, Veronique Brenninkmeijer-de Winter, Michael Brenninkmeijer, Shiv Kumar Dewan, Roopa Dewan, Garima Lalwani, Hermanjit Deol, Andra Leo, Claire Elizabeth Robinson, Pramila Chanrai and Gisella Harrold.



Traditional winemaking in Georgia.

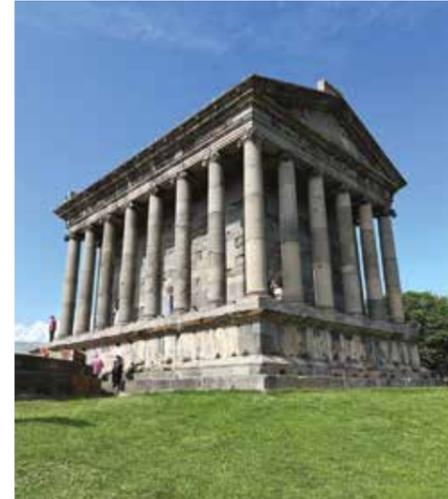


Meat cooked the traditional way.

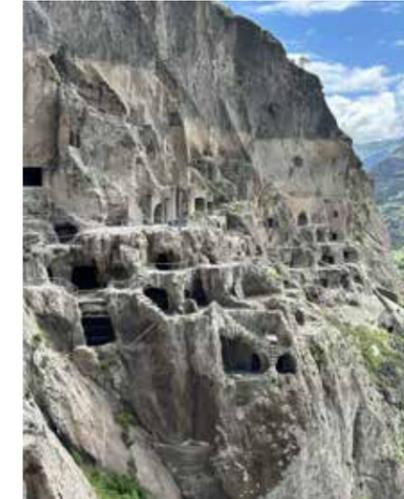
SERENITY IN DRAMATIC LANDSCAPES

Religion has played an important role in shaping the identities of Georgia and Armenia, from the Georgian Orthodox monasteries to the Armenian Apostolic churches perched atop lush hills. Armenia was the first state to adopt Christianity as a state religion in 301CE. Many churches go back to these early times, although most were constructed later. We saw some outstanding examples such as the Cathedral of the Living Pillar, the Armenian Haghpat Monastery Complex, one of the many UNESCO World Heritage, Tatev Monastery which housed a university.

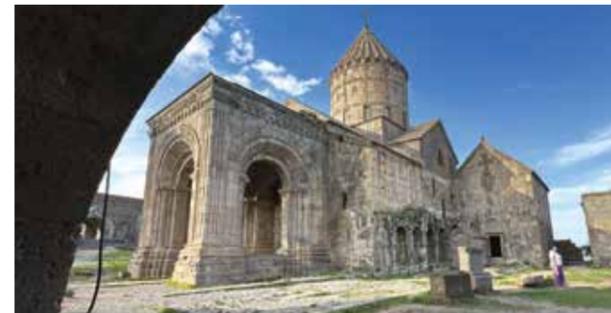
Nature enthusiasts will find solace in the varied landscapes of both countries. The lush valleys of the Georgian wine region of Kakheti or the serene waters of



Temple Garni, Armenia.



Vardzia Cavetown, Georgia.



Tatev Monastery, Armenia.



Stepantsminda with view onto Mount Kazbek, Georgia.



Stalin's train at the Stalin Museum, Gori, Georgia.

Lake Sevan in Armenia offer a soothing respite from our exhausting travel and sightseeing schedule.

Our study tour provided an opportunity to engage with the resilience of these nations particularly Armenia, which still struggles to overcome numerous devastating historical catastrophes. Exploring the impact of the Soviet era on both countries offers a deeper understanding of their struggles as independent states. A particular favourite was Stalin's hometown, Gori, the museum and the somewhat small house he grew up in.

While enjoying the beauty of these nations, it is crucial to consider the impact of tourism. Study tours can emphasise responsible and sustainable travel practices by staying in local country-oriented hotels, which might not provide the usual five-star comfort but make it up in hospitality and uniqueness. This ensures that the journey not only benefits the travellers but also contributes positively to the local communities.

Our FOM study tour to Georgia and Armenia was an exploration of the cradle of civilisation, where the threads of history, culture, and nature are intricately woven together. From the awe-inspiring landscapes to the vibrant cultures, every facet of this journey contributed to a holistic learning experience. As participants return with a treasure trove of memories and newfound knowledge, they also become ambassadors of these remarkable nations, sharing their stories and insights with the world. 

Shang Antique

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



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 E: shangantique@singnet.com.sg
 www.shangantique.com.sg

A FRUITFUL LEARNING JOURNEY

SUSAN CHONG REPORTS ON A RESEARCH TRIP FOR KAMPONG GLAM HERITAGE TRAIL DOCENTS TO JOHOR BAHRU

Photos by Ratika Singh, Susan Chong and Robyn Lloyd.

In the early morning hours of 2 September 2023, a group of us embarked on a weekend journey to Johor Bahru as part of the Kampong Gelam Heritage trail DOT (Docent On-going Training). There was excitement in the air as we boarded the coach with our guide Ms Maria Ithnin and driver Baskaran.



Admiring the *kiswah* textiles at Aura Islam Gallery Iskandar Puteri. From left: Robyn Lloyd, our guide Maria, Susan Chong, Uma Subramaniam, gallery owner Datuk Hj Anuar Hassan, Julina Khusaini, Aarti Yayaraman, Yenping Yeo and Ratika Singh.

The first stop on our packed itinerary was to meet *Orang Laut* and *Orang Seletar*, people who had migrated to Kampong Sungai Temon in Johor. We met Batin Salim and his son Jeffrey. They maintain a small gallery in the village where we viewed many old photographs of their community. It gave us a glimpse into the lives of these maritime folk who had lived by the sea.

Our next stop was Aura Islam Gallery Iskandar Puteri where over 200 artefacts from the Muslim world were displayed. They are from the personal collection of Datuk Hj Anuar Hassan from the empire of Uthmaniyyah and Abbasid.

We saw an incredible array of black brocade cloths that once covered the most sacred shrine of Islam, the Kaaba in Mecca. This brocade is named *kiswah*. Some cloths decorated with ancient handwritten text were used on a palanquin that carried a sultan of the Ottoman Empire.

There were also gigantic astrolabes used by Ibn Sina, (commonly known in the West as Avicenna) the pre-eminent philosopher and physician of the Muslim world.



Enjoying a Johor style home cooked lunch.

We enjoyed a delicious home cooked lunch hosted by a local Johorean, Abu Bakar and his wife. Before the meal, we washed our hands with a *kendi basuh tangan*, a small pot and tray set. After lunch we had a great time playing *congkak* and five stones.

After lunch, we visited Kampong Makam, the resting place of Sultan Mahmud, who was last in line of a dynasty of the Sultanate of Johor. This dynasty had been founded by his grandfather, Sultan Alauddin Ri'ayat Shah II.

We learnt that Kota Johor Lama, built in 1540, had the best defence among all the forts built on the Johor River. It had the natural advantage of being able to guard against the invading vessels of the Acehnese and Portuguese. The fort eventually fell into the hands of the Portuguese in 1587 and was burnt down after all the assets and weapons were confiscated.



Trying out batik painting.

Our last stop was the Malay cultural village where we enjoyed a batik painting. This was followed by learning to "pull" the tea for *teh tarik* and flipping *roti canai* (known as *roti prata* in Singapore). We had another scrumptious meal of Johor laksa with fish-based gravy.

We also watched a pewter casting demonstration and cultural dance performances accompanied by gamelan music.

We learnt so much from our guide Maria about varied topics such as the construction of traditional Malay homes, *wayang kulit* (shadow puppets) and local wedding customs in Malaysia. It was a short but fabulous trip. **P**



Julina masters roti canai preparation.

FOM Activity Groups

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

ASIAN BOOK GROUPS

FOM Book Groups meet monthly focusing on books with Asian subjects, fiction/non-fiction. The aim is to familiarise members with this region through reading. Also exchange views within a small group setting. Non-native English speakers are welcome to join. Our members come from diverse backgrounds. Though the topics are Asian, all viewpoints are global and our discussions are very lively.

Coordinator: Durriya Dohadwala
fombookgroups@gmail.com

CURIO

Uncover the rare and intriguing delights of Singapore with FOM members. Curio offers a range of events from an evening at the theatre to sampling local cuisines with our Foodie Groups. We also have workshops for photography, drawing & culinary skills. Follow us on Instagram #fomcurio

Coordinator: Gisella Harrold
fomcurio@gmail.com

ASIAN STUDY GROUP

This group has 10-16 members who meet weekly to gain knowledge on specific themes. Weekly, we have two 40-minute presentations. This is by a member, who chooses his/her own topic of interest within the theme. If English isn't your first language that wouldn't be of any consequence. As we appreciate viewpoints of all members from all over the world.

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

STUDY TOURS

FOM's study tours are educational. They offer a range of travel experiences to expand members' understanding of Asian culture. Each itinerary is meticulously planned by an FOM member who leads the tour. Each participant is expected to do preparatory reading on any topic related to the country they are visiting. This is required to make a presentation at the pre-trip meeting or during the trip.

Coordinator: Abha Kaul
abhadkaul@gmail.com

FOM MEMBERS CARE

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

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

ASIAN FILM STUDY GROUP

The Asian Film Study Group is on an extended break until a new coordinator is found. If you would like to volunteer, please email: activities@fom.sg

TEXTILE ENTHUSIASTS GROUP

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

Coordinators: Dobrina Boneva & Jyotsna Mishra
fomtegsingapore@gmail.com

FRIDAY WITH FRIENDS

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

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

MONDAY MORNING LECTURES (MML)

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

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

EXPLORE SINGAPORE!

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

Coordinator: Chey Cheng Lim
limcheycheng@gmail.com

Explore Singapore!

FULLERTON HOTEL AND CLIFFORD PIER: WHERE THE PAST MEETS THE PRESENT

Thursday, 18 January 2024
10:00 am – 12:00 noon
Fee \$25, Guest \$35

Immerse yourself in the exciting history of Fullerton Hotel and Clifford Pier.

Hear about the bustling activities along the Singapore River and how the brisk trade there led to the construction of Fullerton Building which became a hotel only at the turn of this century. Did you know that it was once Singapore's General Post Office? Find out what other government departments were there and which of Singapore's prominent leaders worked here. Also how the building was used during World War II.

This walking tour will also cover the area around the Fullerton Bay Hotel and Clifford Pier. Hear captivating stories of how the forefathers of this country first stepped ashore via this pier. Learn more about events such as speedboat chases at Customs House, along with a visit to the iconic Fullerton Waterboat House, which used to provide water to big ships anchored offshore.



CHINESE NEW YEAR WALK IN CHINATOWN

Thursday 25 January 2024
10:00 am – 12:30 pm
Fee: \$30, Guest \$40

Chinese New Year is the most important festival globally for Chinese people all over the world. In Singapore, it is the most widely celebrated festival, which is evident everywhere during that time of the year, from the street decorations and special goods available in markets. Immersion in Singapore's multi-racial culture is incomplete without an experience of walking in Chinatown during this period. The area turns into a lively and colourful hub.

This tour will enlighten you about the customs associated with Chinese New Year. For example, why do people exchange mandarin oranges and give *hong baos* (red packets). What's the significance of all the decorations and why is the colour red so dominant? You will also learn about the importance and symbolic meanings of the special foods and culinary delicacies and have an opportunity to taste some of them.



KAMPONGS IN THE SKY

Thursday 22 February 2024
9:00 am – 12:30 pm
Fee \$60 Guest \$70

Singapore government's housing programme for its population is one of the nation's great success stories. Housing Development Board (HDB) estates are all around us but how much do you know about them? How did Singaporeans transition from living in villages to highrise apartments, keeping the community spirit intact?

Discover how this was achieved in a relatively short time and how HDB clinched the United Nations' World Habitat Award.

There will be a visit to the HDB Living Space Gallery where you will learn about the philosophy that shapes HDB's policies and development.

Following this will be a walking tour of a few distinctive HDB towns and neighbourhoods, including one of the earliest built in 1966 – Toa Payoh Town. Learn what makes a lively, self-contained hub which is the nucleus of every HDB estate. A highlight here is a specially arranged visit to a family home.



DOVER FOREST: HISTORY AND NATURE WALK

Thursday 7 March 2024
8:00 am – 11:00 am
Fee: \$30, Guest \$40

This tour promises to transport you to a different world for a magical and nature-friendly experience. We will take you to Dover Forest, where a conflict involving man and nature was recently resolved. The eastern half of the forest will make way for public housing next to Dover MRT, while the western part will remain a forest. An ecological impact study noted that there are 120 flora species, of which one-eighth is threatened, and amongst which are 27 large trees of significance.

This patch of forest provides habitat and connectivity between Clementi Forest and the Southern Ridges and includes 158 species of fauna, seven of which are endangered or vulnerable.

Our guide lives in the neighbourhood and recently witnessed a pair of hawk-eagles raise their young in this forest over two breeding cycles. His other connection to this venue runs deeper, three generations of his father's family having lived in the area since 1905. Their kampung was cleared in the 1970s to become what is now Dover Forest and the private housing estates of Holland Grove and Mount Sinai. Amidst these estates only the kampung temple remains, a relic reminding us of bygone years, dating back more than a century.

The boundary between the urban and the wild in our city state is a few measured steps away. Come and cross over this boundary with our guide, to witness a 50 year old urban forest. One wonders what mysteries are hidden in this territory waiting to be discovered?

Singapore's fragments of wild forests are rapidly being lost to development. We hope that this experience will highlight their important role.



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

MUSEUM DIRECTORY

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

MUSEUMS WITH FOM GUIDED TOURS

ASIAN CIVILISATIONS MUSEUM

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



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

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

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

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

GILLMAN BARRACKS

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

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

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

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

CHANGI CHAPEL AND MUSEUM

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



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

Guided tours:
Fridays at 11am

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

INDIAN HERITAGE CENTRE

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



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

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

The Indian Heritage Centre (IHC) celebrates the history and heritage of the Indian diaspora in Singapore and the Southeast Asian region. From early contacts between the Indian subcontinent and this region, the culture and social history of the community after the arrival of the British, through to the early stirrings of nationalism and political

identity and the contributions of Singapore's Indian community – the five galleries take visitors on a fascinating journey through the Indian diaspora. Located in Singapore's colourful and vibrant Little India precinct, the center opened in May 2015 and is our only purpose-built museum.

MALAY HERITAGE CENTRE

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



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

NATIONAL MUSEUM OF SINGAPORE

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



Opening hours:
Daily: 10am - 7pm

FOM guided tours:
Check museum website for updated tours.

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

THE PERANAKAN MUSEUM

39 Armenian Street, Singapore 179941
Tel: 6332 7591
www.peranakanmuseum.sg
Opening hours:
Daily: 10am - 7pm
Fridays: 10am - 9pm

Guided tours:
Check museum and FOM website for updates.

Peranakan Museum presents the cross-



STPI CREATIVE WORKSHOP AND GALLERY

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



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

FOM guided tours:
Check updates on website.

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

SUN YAT SEN NANYANG MEMORIAL HALL

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



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

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

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

SINGAPORE ART MUSEUM

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



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

SAM AT TANJONG PAGAR DISTRI PARK

39 Keppel Road, #01-02, Singapore 089065
Tel: 6697 9730
singaporeartmuseum.sg

Opening hours:
Daily: 10am - 7pm

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

This new space opened in January 2022 presents multiple art presentations by Southeast Asian artists and interactive programmes for the public. There are two climate-controlled galleries that host large scale exhibitions, workshops and talks sparking collaborations between artists and audiences.

OTHER MUSEUMS

NATIONAL GALLERY SINGAPORE

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

Opening hours:
Daily: 10am - 7pm

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

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



NUS MUSEUM

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

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

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

NUS BABA HOUSE

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

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

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

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



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

A Collection for Love and Blessings

PRISCYLLA SHAW INVITES *PASSAGE* READERS INTO THE ART-FILLED HOME OF MR AND MRS P. SELVADURAI

All photos by the author.

Coming from a family steeped in traditional Indian art and culture, senior lawyer Pathmanabhan Selvadurai was not only familiar with Indian art, he also took on the presidency of the Singapore Indian Fine Arts Society (SIFAS) for more than two decades, promoting Singapore through SIFAS productions and showcasing Singapore as a regional centre for the performance and display of Indian fine arts. On the home front, however, it is his wife, Vimala, a General Practitioner and a veritable chef, who is the collector. Here, she shares how they came to acquire some of their favourite sculptures.



View of entrance vestibule and dining room.

PRISCYLLA (P): Vimala, whenever we are invited over for one of your amazing feasts, there is always such a sense of occasion when we step across the threshold of your hefty front door. How did you come to acquire this beautiful old door?

VIMALA (V): Let me go back a bit. When our son was born, I felt that we needed more space and I persuaded Pathma to look for a house. We spotted a 'land for sale' advertisement in the newspaper and decided to have a look at the site. It was a unique plot of land, as the ground was on several levels.

Pathma and I fell in love with the piece of land immediately. We were fortunate that Pathma was friends with an architect who loved a challenge, and to this day, after 40 years,

we remain in love with the house. Whilst it was under construction, we were visiting New York and of course I went to the Metropolitan Museum. There, I spotted the most beautiful Indian door. I was determined that we should have one for our house too! I rang a friend in India for help to have a replica made. Instead, my dear friend introduced me to an antique dealer who told me that he had an old door, in solid Burmese teak, in good condition. I did not waste

another minute. The door was shipped to us from Chennai, the architect altered the doorway to accommodate it, and it has been a joy to us ever since. It's a strong, solid door, protecting all of us inside. The outside-facing lintel of the door depicts a Ganesha, the remover of all obstacles. It is wonderful to think that all obstacles have been removed by dear Ganesha each morning, as one leaves the house to start one's day. The lintel facing the inside of the house depicts Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth according to the *shastras* (precepts). Lakshmi should always face inwards, so



Ganesha, remover of obstacles.



An impressive Chettinad door was altered to serve as the entrance to the house.



Krishna (not) playing his flute.

wealth would also fly out of the house! We are grateful for such wealth tips (smiles). We already had Krishna when we built the house. I knew where I wanted to place him and the architect designed the waterfall and pond for him. Sitting beside Krishna, I have two little wooden Ganeshas, playing musical instruments. It is ok if they play the flute, but not Krishna!

P: You and Pathma have a beautiful Buddha collection. Do tell us about this one that seems to light up the sitting room here.

V: This Buddha came with the cabinet, you see. I was staying with a friend in their holiday home in Coonor, a hillstation town in south India. One day, I popped into an antique shop and I saw the cupboard with Buddha in it. It was so serene, so peaceful. I had to have it. I bought it and shipped it to Singapore. When it arrived, the cupboard doors were closed. Pathma could not understand why I had gone to such trouble to bring a set of cupboard doors home. But when I opened the doors to reveal the Buddha, Pathma was also stunned by its beauty. I constructed a false wall in which to fit the cupboard and Buddha. I'd like to think that everyone who sits with us in the room is blessed by Buddha.

P: This graceful golden Saraswati must be one of your favourites; it is well-known that you love music.

V: I love Saraswati, goddess of learning, wisdom and knowledge. Pathma is my

that wealth remains in the house.

P: And when we step in, whom do we see? It is Krishna playing his flute. What an uplifting sight he is! But where is his flute?

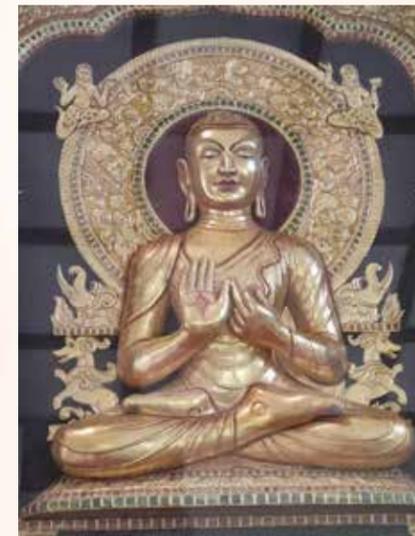
V: All my visitors are welcomed by Krishna! I placed Krishna in front of my little garden waterfall as that is how he is traditionally portrayed, playing the flute in front of water. But my mother-in-law said that I should not give him his flute, for as he plays,

go-to person for wisdom but I pray that she too, gives me wisdom, and a continuing love for learning. I used to play the vena, and I love to sing! I am originally from Kedah, Malaysia, but my formative years were spent in a Catholic boarding school in Penang. I come from a family of doctors. We are seven children — six girls and a boy and we are all doctors. My father was a doctor and he was very liberal and believed in education for all of us equally.

Pathma is Jaffna Tamil, Sri Lankan. For a girl from a Brahmin family from Mangalore, Mysore, I did not have much knowledge about Indian culture or the Hindu faith when I was little. It was only when I attended medical school in India that it struck me how much there was about Indian culture, and it grew on me, opened my eyes. I joined SIFAS to catch up on Indian culture. I learned Indian dance, then the vena, but I'll say this, it was tough having to keep my knees bent all the time during Indian dance.

Many of my acquisitions are from Chennai. I bought Saraswati from a rather well-known shop called Pumpppuhar, in Chennai. Saraswati was originally a bronze, but she was turning green so I had her gilded, here in Singapore.

P: Your beautiful garden has seen many happy get-togethers on festivals, birthdays and special occasions. But your garden statue with the lantern, he must be modelled after an ancient Chinese gilt-bronze lamp dated to 172 BC from the Western Han dynasty, known as the Changxin Palace Lamp. That bronze, about 48 centimetres tall, was of a maidservant holding an oil lamp. It was excavated from one of the most fabulous Royal Tombs of the Han dynasty, the tomb of Dou



A golden Buddha sits in a special cabinet.



Saraswati, goddess of learning, wisdom and knowledge, gilt-bronze.

Wan, in the Hebei province of China. The ingenuity of the design of that lamp allowed for adjustments as to direction and brightness of the light and to trap smoke in the body. Where did you find your garden statue?

V: I saw the garden statue in the office of a designer friend one day and I thought it would be a charming addition for my garden. The statues were made in Thailand. She kindly ordered one for me and had it shipped to Singapore. When I hold parties in my garden, I place a candle in the lantern. **P**



Garden statue modelled after an ancient Chinese gilt-bronze lamp dated to 172 BC from the Western Han dynasty, known as the Changxin Palace Lamp.

About FOM



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

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

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

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

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

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



FOM Coordinators Contacts

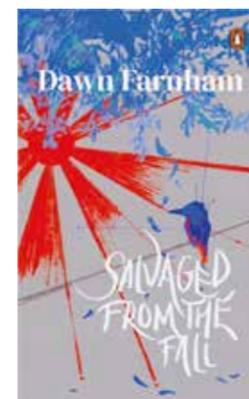
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Friends of the Museum Singapore

MONDAY MORNING LECTURES

November and Dec 2023

As per FOM Council decision, the Winter-Spring 2023 MML lectures will be held both in-person (1st, 3rd and 5th Mondays of the month) and on Zoom (2nd and 4th Mondays of the month). The in-person lectures are open to the public. Zoom Lectures are open to the FOM members only. Visit the Community Events page on the FOM website to sign up. Lectures will begin promptly at 11:00 am.



20 November 2023
Writing into Silence - Beyond pale, male and stale
In person Lecture by Dawn Farnham

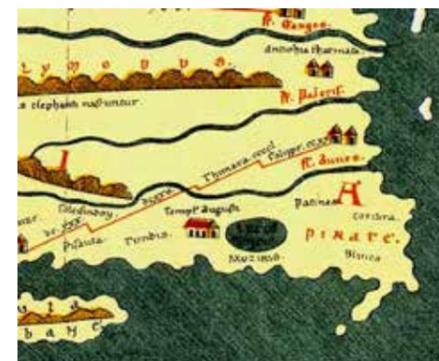
In her new book, historical novelist, Dawn Farnham, discusses her new book *Salvaged from the Fall*, a feminist narrative of war, the 1942 Fall of Singapore and the four-and-a-half years of the Japanese Occupation, and argues that the ethical historical novel has a decisive role to play in going beyond the white male canon to give voice to the silenced.



4 December 2023
Origami: Art through Engineering
In-person Lecture by Jason S Ku

Origami is the ancient Japanese art of paper folding, stemming from two Japanese words, "Oru" (to fold) and "Kami" (paper). This lecture will discuss how this art form, which largely stagnated for hundreds of years, has grown exponentially during the last century, thanks in part to the application of mathematics. Conversely, the

growth of origami as an art has in turn informed and inspired many interdisciplinary applications in engineering, sparking innovations in fields as diverse as architecture, biology, robotics, and aerospace.



27 November 2023
The heritage of Muziris - rediscovering the ancient port of Kerala
Zoom Lecture by Marina Thayil

Recent archaeological excavations and research suggest that the Red Sea trading route between Europe and Asia was historically and economically more significant than the romanticised overland silk route. Along this maritime route, with the traders came new religions, cultures and changes in society. In this lecture, we look at the area where the ancient port of Muziris existed on the southwestern coast of India and the continuing influences on the people of Kerala.



11 December 2023
Colonial Footprints: the Lepo' Tau Kenyah Murals of the Sarawak Museum
Zoom Lecture by Louise Macul

From 1958-1960, six Lepo' Tau Kenyah men from Long Nawang (Kalimantan) were commissioned by the colonial curator of the Sarawak Museum, Tom Harrisson, to paint four traditional murals inside the Museum. The murals have unquestionable significance not only as a traditional artform, but in their historicity and narratives. This talk will cover three areas of significance. Historically, they are part of several narratives including that of the Sarawak Museum during its colonial period of 1946-1963 and are remaining evidence of the migration of Kenyah economic refugees of the Konfrontasi. Ethnographically, they contribute to the understanding of former beliefs and traditions. As museum objects, their biography holds a rich source of enquiry and inspiration, the least of which is the unique way the paintings were painted in relief.

For queries, please contact MML coordinators: Vidhya Nair and Yenping Yeo: mmlcoordinators@gmail.com

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