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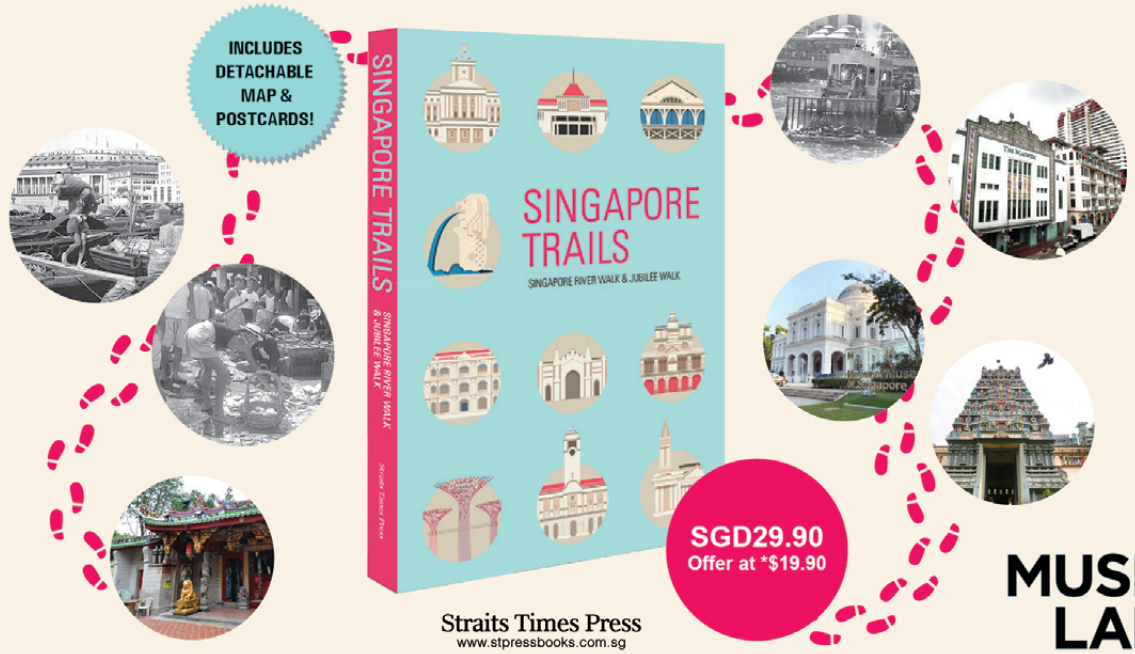

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FOREWORD

Welcome to the third edition of our special four-part bicentennial commemorative series of MUSE SG, which showcases the rich and diverse stories behind Singapore's place history. In this issue, we continue to uncover the history of another eight towns through the research efforts of contributors from Malay Heritage Centre and National University of Singapore's History Society.

In our article on Serangoon Gardens, we learn how interactions between local Singaporeans and Europeans have, over the course of time, shaped the estate's unique multicultural identity. This multicultural theme is further explored in our feature on Balestier, whose place and street names provide insight into the precinct's diverse communities.

Yet, while much of Singapore's estates reflect a multiracial make-up, there are also others that possess distinctive associations to specific ethnic groups. We see this in our feature on Geylang Serai and its unique Malay and Muslim heritage, and again in our story on Kreta Ayer and its links with the early Cantonese community in Singapore.

Besides ethnic and cultural make-up, physical geography also plays an important role in contributing to place history. In our article on Bukit Timah, we see how the locale has retained its identity as a green haven since its beginnings as an undeveloped forested area and its current status as a nature reserve that people flock to for respite. This theme is repeated in our feature on Telok Blangah, which, for centuries, owed its development and identity to its natural harbour and proximity to Singapore's southern waterways.

From one sea-fronting locale to another, we also unearth the stories behind Joo Chiat and Marine Parade. On the surface, both towns are located on the eastern coast of Singapore, but dig deeper and you will find that these two towns serve as showcases of different aspects of Singapore's historical development. For instance, Joo Chiat represents the cosmopolitan nature of early Singapore through its Peranakan, European, American and Vietnamese influences, while Marine Parade represents modern Singapore's innovative and resilient spirit.

We hope that you will find the above-mentioned stories as informative and fascinating as we did, and we hope that through these stories, you will come to realize that despite our relatively young age as a nation, we too have much heritage that is worth discovering and preserving.

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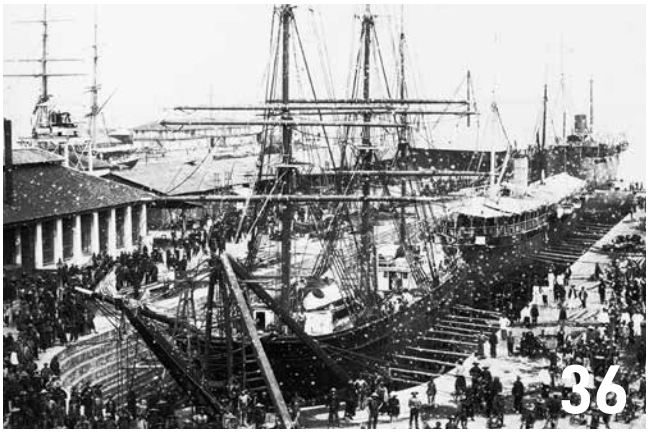

SERANGOON GARDENS:
LIVING SIDE BY SIDE WITH THE EUROPEANS

Text by James Mah Yi Hong

01

Mention Serangoon Gardens today and the conversation would likely find its way readily to the delectable sambal stingray or fragrant Hokkien *mee* at Chomp Chomp.[1] Alternatively, you might also hear the words "*ang sar lee*", a Hokkien phrase used by older Singaporeans to refer to the sea of red zinc roofs that used to pervade the rows of low-lying, densely-packed semi-detached houses up until the 1980s. The recent influx of French expatriates, however, has given rise to a wholly different notion of Serangoon Gardens.[2] Rather than just a food haven, the Gardens has also been portrayed by *The Straits Times* as a private housing estate associated with the British, as hinted by the intricate network of road names, including Kensington, Portchester and Lichfield, denoting places and cities in Britain.[3] One article even opined that the estate was developed with the British in mind, and only became "solidly Singaporean middle-class" in subsequent years.[4] All these contrasting associations of Serangoon Gardens seem to suggest therefore that there is more to the Gardens than meets the eye. As you read on, you will discover that it was neither built for the British, nor devoid of a local presence from the outset.

Before the advent of British road names, the area where Serangoon Gardens stands today was just part of a rubber plantation belonging to the Chinese-owned Singapore United Rubber Plantations Limited.[5] It was located a few miles north of the intersection between Yio Chu Kang Road and Upper Serangoon Road, right outside the municipal boundary of Singapore's city centre during the 1920s and 1930s.[6] While the plantation was left mostly untouched by city developments, it did serve as a football field in 1934 for residents who had established themselves along Upper Serangoon Road, near the present-day Kovan Estate.[7] Also in the vicinity of the area was Chia Keng Village, near where Serangoon Stadium sits today.[8]

02

03

01 Serangoon Garden Circus, 2019
Image courtesy of National Heritage Board

02 Private houses along Portchester Avenue in Serangoon Gardens, 2019
Image courtesy of National Heritage Board

03 Chia Keng Village, 1957
Derek Lehrle, Image courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Following the Japanese Occupation, the plantation remained sparsely inhabited, though one would be hard-pressed not to marvel at the sight of "one of the most picturesque and greenest valleys in Singapore", as described by the *Singapore Standard* in 1952.[9] With the plantation paralysed by a post-war shortfall in manpower and slump in rubber prices, squatters in the area made the most of the wide expanse of land at their disposal through flower and vegetable farming.[10] The Chinese, especially, learnt the art of planting tulip bulbs originally imported from Holland. They were so successful in their experiments with growing the flower that vegetable gardening eventually became just a sideline. Eventually, locals began to refer to the now-defunct plantation as "Tulip Valley", or "Holland Kiam Lan" in Hokkien.[11] Tulip Valley's garden-like charms, however, was a double-edged sword of sorts for its occupants: it made them owners of a locale that was faintly reminiscent of Holland but also attracted the attention of housing developers, such as the Serangoon Garden Estate Limited, who wanted to benefit the people of Singapore by housing them in "happy and healthy surroundings".[12]

The Serangoon Gardens that many are familiar with today is a direct product of a post-war movement to earmark affordable houses for locally-domiciled government servants. This was done in a bid to defuse the problem of housing shortages in the early 1950s.[13] The estate's developer, the Serangoon Garden Estate Limited, had purchased a 300-acre plot of land at Tulip Valley in 1952 to build houses that, over the next few years, were sold to "clerks, technical assistants, doctors [and] interpreters".[14] Advertisements in the English newspapers touted the estate's middle-class character, which appealed to life in a "healthy Serangoon". Accessibility in the form of a premium bus service – Singapore Traction

04

TYPE	PRICE	DEPOSIT	LOAN	MONTHLY REPAYMENT		
				15 yrs.	10 yrs.	5 yrs.
"M"	$11,900	$ 3,000	$ 8,900	$ 81.50	$105.65	$181.15
"L"	12,900	3,300	9,600	87.90	114.—	195.40
"F"	18,000	4,500	13,500	123.55	160.20	274.75
"G"	18,150	4,650	13,500	123.55	160.20	274.75
"H"	19,000	5,000	14,000	128.10	166.15	284.90
"E"	19,000	5,000	14,000	128.10	166.15	284.90
"N"	21,000	6,250	14,750	135.00	168.10	300.20

05

04 An aerial photograph of Serangoon Garden Estate taken by the British Royal Airforce, 1963
Collection held by National Archives of Singapore, Crown copyright

05 An advertisement of houses on sale at Serangoon Garden Estate, 1950s
Image courtesy of Josephine Ong

06 Shops at Serangoon Garden Circus, 1995
Lee Kip Lin Collection, Image courtesy of National Library Board, Singapore

Company No. 18A – which would bring residents "direct into the estate" [sic] was yet another one of the estate developer's major marketing messages.[15] One leaflet circulated by the developer to prospective buyers even came printed with a monthly repayment table, no doubt aimed squarely at the aforementioned, locally-domiciled salaried workers.[16] There might have been some British elites in the mix, but Serangoon Gardens was certainly from the outset, prescribed for post-war Singapore's emerging middle class.

However, it was not long before the British registered a more notable presence at Serangoon Gardens. While the British military had some accommodation in-camp, the majority of servicemen and their families had to apply for houses outside the camp.[17] For airmen based at Royal Air Force (RAF) Seletar, this meant either a home at nearby Seletar Hills Estate – already oversubscribed by 1955 – or further down Yio Chu Kang Road, at the then newly-developed Serangoon Gardens.[18] Seeing the opportunity to earn a quick buck, enterprising homeowners at the Gardens rented out houses and rooms specifically to "service couple", "army personnel" and "RAF married couple" [sic] – colloquial shorthands for British servicemen and their spouses.[19] One former resident, for example, did not even get to see his British military tenants because he moved to a cheaper locale to profit fully from the rental![20]

The British and their military credentials certainly ensured that their presence would be keenly felt in Serangoon Gardens. Chocolate-coloured trucks, for example, were a routine sight at the Gardens, shuttling servicemen back and forth from their base in Seletar.[21] Santa Claus even descended on a Christmas party in 1960 at the old Serangoon Gardens Sports Club (now the Serangoon Gardens Country Club) on a military helicopter that servicemen had generously lent to the organisers.[22] Such occurrences left an indelible impression on the local residents, including those living outside the estate. Augustine Liew, a former resident of Serangoon Gardens during the 1950s and 1960s, can still vividly recall his excitement at identifying the many planes that streaked across the skies of the estate as they departed from nearby RAF Seletar.[23] Unsurprisingly, kampong dwellers in the vicinity referred to these semi-detached houses at the Gardens as *ang moh chu* (Hokkien for "Caucasian houses").[24]

The disproportionate influence of the British could also be felt at the Serangoon Gardens Circus – the estate's food and entertainment centre – where Chomp Chomp and some of the most buzzworthy nightspots in Singapore are located today.[25] Save for a cluster of hawker shacks, the majority of the food and entertainment joints there, most notably the locally-owned Captain's Cabin, served Western cuisine and

06

07

07 Hawker carts at Serangoon Garden Circus, undated
Image courtesy of Wendy Marsden

catered mostly to British clients.[26] On Thursday evenings, which were pay-days for the servicemen, British families would gather at the cafés to indulge in merriment, and sometimes the occasional brawl whenever someone went a cup too far.[27] That said, British pre-eminence at the Circus was not necessarily to the detriment of the locals, given that they had their own preferred spaces for food and recreation. According to Francois Dumont, who has lived at Serangoon Gardens since 1958, dining at the Circus was too expensive for locals – a luxury that few local households could afford when they were saddled with home mortgages.[28] By making do with less, such as a makeshift, open-air cinema at the Sports Club or having house parties within the comfort of their homes, local residents were still largely contented.[29]

It would probably be easy to assume that the British and the locals at Serangoon Gardens did not mix, given that they were two groups with very disparate backgrounds and purchasing power. Yet, more often than not, they crossed boundaries precisely because the other offered something out of the ordinary. Among the places in Serangoon Gardens that Rich Davies recalls fondly from his time as a 16-year old British boy who followed his parents to Singapore in 1967, were the local, hawker shacks around the Circus and its cascade of "warm smells".[30] This was in spite of the fact that British families had their very own modern, self-service supermarket run by the Navy, Army and Air Force Institutes (NAAFI), located at one of the shophouses along Penshurst Place.[31] Jim Symcox's appreciation for *getai* (makeshift Chinese theatre), as a British boy who lived near the Circus where the Neighbourhood Police Post stands today, was also possible because a *getai* stage was frequently set up opposite his house.[32] Cohabiting the same, common space, therefore, did result in intermingling that enhanced the lives of both local residents and the British.

This was especially true for residents of Serangoon Gardens on what Symcox described as the "real multicultural roads", where local residents and the British lived side by side with one another.[33] However, despite spending most of her teenage years in the Gardens during the 1950s, Lee Geok Boi never went beyond mere smiling terms with her British neighbour. To her, the colonial divide then was too far to be bridged. Yet, that did not stop her neighbour from gifting her generous copies of the *Guardian* magazine – a gesture that she still remembers warmly today.[34] Dumont also recalls with a chuckle how his British-Cypriot neighbour invited him and his family over for meals because he first broke the ice by accidentally kicking a football into the latter's courtyard. He even became friendly with his neighbour's dog, no doubt because of the countless more times he had to go over to recover his errant ball![35]

By the late 1960s, the days of the British at Serangoon Gardens were starting to be numbered. Unable to shoulder the burden of defence spending in

its overseas possessions any longer, the British government announced the military's pull-out from Singapore in 1967.[36] This effectively spelled the end of the tenure of British servicemen and their families at the Gardens.[37] Local forces adapted swiftly to new social and economic realities. Just as landlords sold their properties to aspiring homeowners after discerning that they could no longer profit from their British tenants, Paramount Theatre (now myVillage, Serangoon Gardens) gradually phased out English films in favour of Chinese ones in the 1970s.[38] Pubs and restaurants at the Circus also reoriented themselves around the local community.[39] Existing grassroots organisations like the Serangoon Gardens Citizens' Consultative Committee also introduced a slew of initiatives – a cleanest-garden competition, for example – to engage local residents and mitigate any possible loss of the estate's dynamism.[40]

Regardless, as Joanne Aston, daughter of a British airman who spent a good portion of her adolescent years at the Gardens between 1964 and 1968, emphatically puts it: "The memories never go away." She still reminisces with photographs that her father – a "real camera nut", she adds jokingly – took of Serangoon Gardens. Hinting at the estate's multicultural legacy, these photos include candid moments of Chinese opera actors preparing for their next performance, in a place where the locals and the British once lived in close proximity, and likely intermixed.[41]

Today, it remains to be seen if the more recent arrival of French expatriates in Serangoon Gardens can reproduce the palpable influence that the British once wielded in the estate. Originally lured in by Lycée Français Singapour, a French school that established itself on the swathe of land where Serangoon Garden North School and South School used to sit, the community is represented by a couple of French eateries at a vibrant Circus already teeming with an assortment of local and foreign offerings.[42] While the pool at the Country Club is said to be akin to a French beachside on weekdays, that scene lies behind guarded fences, away from the public glare.[43] What is certain, however, is that local residents are bound to interact and mingle with these Europeans, simply by virtue of living side by side with them, just like their forerunners did during the 1950s and 1960s. Indeed, Serangoon Gardens' European affiliation is not a facet of its past, far removed from the present, but part of an ongoing story extending into the future.

08 Photographs of Chinese opera actors at Serangoon Gardens, taken by Dennis Hall, undated
Image courtesy of Joanne Aston

09 Residents of Serangoon Gardens Estate attending a ballroom dancing event at Serangoon Gardens Community Centre, 1985
Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, Image courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

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10 myVillage at Serangoon Gardens, 2019
Image courtesy of National Heritage Board

11 Chomp Chomp Food Centre, 2019
Image courtesy of National Heritage Board

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GEYLANG SERAI: CROSSROADS OF HISTORY AND MEMORY

Text by Maisarah Abdul Malek and Ho Chi Tim

01

Today, whenever Geylang Serai is mentioned, we immediately think of the place commonly seen as the social and cultural centre of Singapore's Malay/Muslim community. Beginning as an agricultural estate, Geylang Serai mirrored Singapore's broader development, evolving into a residential suburb, a modern satellite town, and presently, a culturally distinctive precinct defined by iconic landmarks and popular events such as Geylang Serai Market and the annual Ramadan bazaar. These landmarks came about purposefully to support the communities who called Geylang Serai home. Although agricultural activities gave Geylang Serai its name, it was the communities' experiences and memories which have and continue to make Geylang Serai more than a mere place name on a map. This article will first give a historical overview of Geylang Serai and then discuss how Geylang Serai is remembered through its famous landmarks and institutions.

Origins of a Name

"Geylang" is likely derived from earlier etymological versions such as "Gellang", "Gelang" and "Gaylang", which were names that were used to refer to Geylang River and Geylang District.[1] The common understanding of Geylang's early history is that it was settled by *Orang Laut* communities that relocated from the Singapore River as the British began developing its trade settlement from 1819.[2] Phonetic similarities posit a possible connection between these early communities of Geylang and Kallang Rivers to the *Orang Laut* sub-groups of *suku Gelang* and *suku Galang*.[3]

Serai (Malay for "lemongrass") refers to the large lemongrass and citronella estate that eventually became part of the Alsagoff family's Perseverance Estate.[4] For much of the 19th century and early 20th century, the estate was accessible only via Geylang Road. Agricultural activities on Perseverance Estate

02

01 Geylang Serai Market & Food Centre, 2019
Image courtesy of National Heritage Board

02 Note the "young coconut plantations" south of Gaylang Road [sic] and "Malay Burying Ground" at the junction of Paya Lebar Road. Plan of Singapore Town and Adjoining Districts from Actual Survey by John Turnbull Thomson, Government Surveyor, 1846
Image courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

perhaps also live on in another possible origin of Geylang's name, which could have also been derived from the Malay word for estate-factory, *"kilang"*.

From Agricultural Estate to Residential Suburb

In 1930, the Municipal Board named the "area north of Geylang Road, between Paya Lebar Road and Jalan Eunos" as "Geylang Serai".[5] This official act reified what was by then an emerging sense of place. As early as 1914, the name "Geylang Serai" was mentioned in newspaper articles as a place where social and recreational events were held.[6] In 1927, a couple of Joo Chiat residents described Geylang Serai as a place either full of illegal *chup jee kee* (Hokkien for "12 Cards") gamblers and runners who disturbed the peace late into the night, or where a row of "shabby-looking attap stalls" sold various wares.[7]

By 1935, Geylang Serai was leaving its agricultural origins and shaping up to become an urban locale. The area's population swelled from those who moved out from the city and into Geylang Serai looking for cheaper accommodations, and from communities that relocated from Kallang Basin in preparation for the building of the Civil Aerodrome.[8] The *Malaya Tribune* described Geylang Serai as a "very thickly populated urban area", and anecdotal accounts indicate a pre-war population of at least 3,000 persons living in roughly 500 huts.[9]

Necessary amenities were consequently developed to keep pace with the increase in population. These developments included the laying down of Sims Avenue in the 1920s, electric trams being replaced by trolley buses to improve the accessibility to and from Singapore Town, and markets being built at Changi and Joo Chiat in 1938 to replace older versions that had served the community since the turn of the 20th century. Still, itinerant hawkers persisted in plying a variety of wares near the markets along Geylang and Changi Roads, indicating a demand that the new markets were unable to meet. In terms of entertainment, the advent of "talkies" (films with sound) from the late 1920s led to the establishment of cinemas in and around Geylang Serai, such as Queens Theatre (originally known as the Wembley and then the Ritz), the Apollo (changed to the Regal in 1935 and then the Garrick in 1938), and several open-air cinemas.[10]

Mohamad Ibrahim, a clerk in the British military headquarters at Tank Road and a violin player in a *bangsawan* (Malay operatic theatre) troupe, stayed in Geylang Serai before World War II. He remembers that his village in pre-war Geylang Serai had hundreds of attap houses, mostly occupied by Malays and often flooded when it rained:

> There was a stream, you know, when it rains, it was flooded… At that point when you want to come out to go to work you have to take out

03

04

03 Billboards advertising films screening at Queens Theatre in Geylang Serai, 1962
Image courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

04 A flood in Geylang Serai, 1928
Image courtesy of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board

05 Geylang Serai Market, 2018
Image courtesy of National Heritage Board

> your shoes, go to the coffee-shop and put on your shoes and go to work. When you come back it's the same thing. You have to take off your shoes. Sometimes water up to your knees when it is heavy rain. But luckily the soil was sandy, not muddy. On the left side as you go into Geylang Serai it was sandy. But on the right side muddy. I was staying on the left side.[11]

Floods were a recurring theme throughout Geylang Serai's history as the low-lying area experienced some of the highest rainfall in Singapore. In 1928, it was reported that floods in the area were "waist-deep", and in 1939, residents were apparently able to catch fish in the flood waters outside their homes.[12]

From Suburb to Modern Satellite Complex

Pre-war Geylang Serai was closely associated with the Malay/Muslim community. The presence of this community, however, was further emphasised in 1943 during the Japanese Occupation, when over 100 acres in Geylang Serai were converted from a rubber plantation into a "Malai Farm" ("Taman Kebajikan" in Malay). It was reported in the Japanese wartime newspaper *Syonan Shimbun* that the Syonan Malai Welfare Association opened a clubhouse, a destitute home and a free dispensary to service the "Malai kampong at Geylang Serai".[13] After the war, the 1947 census confirmed that the majority of Geylang Serai residents were Malay.[14]

The 1947 census also confirmed Geylang Serai as one of the more densely populated residential areas in post-war Singapore – about 30,000 persons per square mile (1 square mile is roughly equivalent to 2.59 square kilometres). Efforts to improve living conditions, such as better drainage for flood-prone areas, and roads and water supply, were complicated by the constitutional struggle for independence as well as the fact that large parts of Geylang Serai were privately owned.[15]

The subsequent development of Geylang Serai into a modern satellite complex can be organised into two major phases. The first phase was announced in 1962. It included a brand-new Geylang Serai Market (opened in 1964) and three new Housing & Development Board (HDB) blocks (the former Blocks 1, 2 and 3).[16] The new structures were constructed on the grounds of the former Great Eastern Trade Fair, a concept

combining leisure and commercial activities.[17] Among all the elements of the fair, the famous Taj Cinema was the only one to survive the development plan. Opened in 1952 as the New City Cinema, it was renamed the Taj in 1954 and then again to Singapura in 1971. Next to the cinema, the Geylang Serai Vocational Institute was opened along Jalan Turi in 1967.

The second redevelopment phase started in 1970 and was completed in the 1980s. This phase included the resettlement of an estimated 100,000 residents into new homes, the construction of light-industry factories in Eunos Industrial Estate and the building of new housing estates such as Eunos Crescent, Eunosville and Haig Road Estate.[18] Accessibility was improved to ensure the success of the new satellite town. In 1981, the Pan-Island Expressway (PIE) was completed to the north of Paya Lebar Road while Sims Avenue was extended and connected to Jalan Eunos.[19] In 1989, the East-West line of the Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) system arrived in Geylang Serai in the form of Paya Lebar Station.[20]

Amenities were also developed and improved. Joo Chiat Complex and over 200 HDB apartments were built opposite Geylang Serai Market on the site of the former Changi and Joo Chiat Markets which had been demolished in 1979.[21] Mrs Wee Gek Suan, a former Joo Chiat resident, recalled that the vendors of both markets provided a convenient delivery service, serving freshly cooked food right to people's doorsteps.[22]

Further down Geylang Road, a new market and food centre were constructed to support the new housing estate located along Haig Road. Additionally, there were also other developments such as the Lion City Hotel and Tanjong Katong Complex. Opened in 1968, the hotel hosted Singapore's national footballers on regular occasions as they prepared for the Malaysia Cup matches.[23] Tanjong Katong Complex was completed in the 1980s, and was HDB's first fully air-conditioned shopping mall. It housed Yokoso, Singapore's first 24-hour departmental store.[24]

The Making of a "Culturally Distinctive" Geylang Serai

The physical landscape of Geylang Serai altered considerably from the 1970s. The densely populated kampongs were replaced by Tanjong Katong Complex, Paya Lebar MRT Station and Eunos Industrial Estate. Nevertheless, the precinct's distinctive identity continues to live on through new iconic landmarks such as Geylang Serai Market, the annual Ramadan bazaar and the former Malay Village. Moreover,

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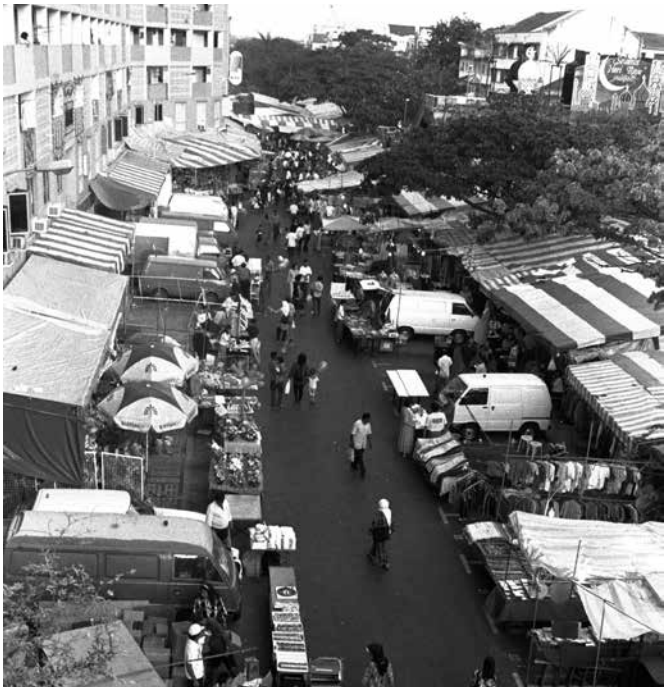
the memories and activities of former residents and visitors ensure that Geylang Serai continues to remain significant, especially to Singapore's Malay/ Muslim community.

Geylang Serai Market

Geylang Serai Market was known colloquially as "Pasar Baru" (new market), in reference to the older Changi and Joo Chiat Markets. It was divided into three sections: the market proper, a cooked food section that boasted one of the "largest varieties of Muslim food in Singapore", and a section selling textiles and sundries.[25] Over time, Geylang Serai Market gained the reputation of a "Malay Emporium", where Singaporeans and visitors could find food, clothing, and other household or festive products commonly used by the Malay community.[26] The market temporarily closed in 2006 to be rebuilt and was reopened in 2009.

A 1975 newspaper report observed the effects of the resettlement programme on the market as regular customers who once lived nearby moved out. Still, many former residents from all over Singapore would return to the market every weekend, as prices of rice, meat and vegetables there remained well below the market average.[27] Roskhaider Saat, a Geylang Serai resident during the early 1970s, remembered returning to the market after he moved out, accompanying his father every weekend to buy groceries for the week.[28] As day turned to night, the hive of activity transferred from the market to the cooked food stalls. This was especially true during the weekends, as the older crowd met up with friends and chatted over dinner, while the younger crowd watched movies at the Singapura or the Galaxy with their dates and ate a late supper after.[29]

The backdrop described above inspired Ahmad Jaafar to compose the jaunty *Kisah Geylang Serai* (The Story of Geylang Serai), also known as *Di waktu petang di Geylang Serai* (Geylang Serai in the Evening).[30] The lyrics vividly capture a place that comes to life in the evening – where hawkers go to peddle all manner of wares, where the latest-design shoes and clothes can be found, and where people from all ages, socio-economic status and communities gather to enjoy a movie and a meal. Similarly, the redevelopment of Geylang Serai during the 1970s and the feelings of dislocation inadvertently caused were also captured in a 1982 song, *Bas No. 13* (Bus Number 13).[31] Composed by musician M. Nasir, the lyrics describe a longing to meet up with old friends in Geylang Serai. When he gets there, however, he discovers that the stall and the people he is looking for are no longer there. The lyrics are emotive, but they preserve particular memories of Geylang Serai, and ensure that they are remembered long after.



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06 Geylang Serai Market on its opening day, 1964
Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, Image courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

07 Crowds at the Foundation Stone Laying Ceremony for the Geylang Serai Redevelopment Project, 1963
Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, Image courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

08 Ramadan Bazaar in front of Block 2, Jalan Pasar Baru, 1997
Image courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

09 Patrons having their meals at the Ramadan Bazaar, 2018
Image courtesy of National Heritage Board

Ramadan Bazaar

The annual Ramadan bazaar creates and sustains a variety of memories and connections to Geylang Serai. Before 1985, during the fasting month, hawkers and vendors converged on Geylang Serai to sell a variety of street food, household wares and festive clothing in preparation for Hari Raya Puasa.[32] From 1985 onwards, the bazaar introduced new elements that would become integral to the Geylang Serai Ramadan bazaar. These included the street light-up, fairground rides and attractions, and an expo showcasing Malay arts and culture.[33]

The character of the bazaar changed over time and unavoidably disappointed certain expectations. Older folks remember (and prefer) the earlier open-air and less crowded bazaar, while the younger generation look forward to Instagram-able hipster foods, such as Thai iced tea, edible balloons, churros, not-your-usual Ramly gourmet burgers and Raclette.[34] Comments about the bazaar's authenticity have become perennial, accompanied by a yearning for a traditional bazaar. Still, this has not deterred Singaporeans from visiting the bazaar in large numbers every night during the festive period to experience Geylang Serai's Malay/Muslim culture within Singapore's multiracial society.

Malay Village

The former Malay Village accentuates the cultural distinctiveness of Geylang Serai. Located next to Geylang Serai Market, the Malay Village was designed to replicate various aspects of a Malay kampong with the objective of showcasing Malay culture and heritage.[35] Geylang Serai was selected as it was perceived as the "traditional hub of Malay life and known throughout the region".[36] The Malay Village opened in late 1989, but struggled to achieve commercial stability.

Nevertheless, by the time it was demolished in 2012, it was seen by residents and visitors alike as a "focal point for Malay activities", and a home to performing arts and cultural groups, including the artist/ensemble-in-residence, Kesian Tedja Timur.[37] The troupe's leader, Iswandiarjo Wismodiarjo, worked in the Malay Village from 1992 until its closing. He recalled how weekend cultural performances sustained a core following throughout the Malay Village's tenure. The weekend performances, usually the *kuda kepang* (a traditional Javanese dance) performance, began after evening prayers. This would then be followed with audiences adjourning to the restaurant that had a karaoke section, to sing their hearts out late into the night.[38]

Geylang Serai for the 21st Century

As this article illustrates, the pull of Geylang Serai remains strong despite the changes to its physical landscape. This bodes well for the precinct, which, as part of the larger Paya Lebar Central District

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that includes Wisma Geylang Serai (a civic centre constructed on the former site of the Malay Village), has been undergoing another stage of redevelopment since 2018.[39] Wisma Geylang Serai is part of an initiative to make the precinct "culturally distinctive", with plans to use the nearby open spaces and street junctions for cultural activities and to create a "distinctive feel and sense of arrival".[40] The new memories created will add to the existing ones of Geylang Serai, especially those centred on the market, the bazaar and the former Malay Village, to ensure Geylang Serai's continued significance to the Malay/ Muslim community in multiracial Singapore.

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[3] Leonard Y. Andaya, *Leaves of the same tree: trade and ethnicity in the Straits of Melaka* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008), 181. The suku galang was regarded as pre-eminent within the orang laut community, and its members usually in charge of the seas and waterways. The suku gelang was smaller and its members were boat builders, woodcutters and fighters. Information taken from L. C. Graaf von Ranzow, "Genealogie van de Vorstlijke Familie van Djohor," Hs 369, 1827. Western Manuscript Collection, Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde (KITLV = The Royal Institute for Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies), Leiden, The Netherlands.

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[5] "Municipal Action," *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, June 14, 1930, 12. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

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June 1937.

[9] "Meeting of Singapore Municipal Commissioners," *Malaya Tribune*, August 31, 1935, 11. Retrieved from NewspaperSG. This statistic referred only to the area under Municipality oversight, and did not include the broader area popularly known as Geylang Serai.

[10] Information taken from a brief survey of newspaper ads by searching cinema names in NewspaperSG.

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[15] "Geylang Serai shocks Amy," *The Singapore Free Press*, January 10, 1950, 5. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

[16] "$3.7 Million Scheme to Develop a Singapore Area," *The Straits Times*, February 27, 1962, 1. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

[17] The fair had over 100 commercial stalls, a couple of eateries, two cinemas (one open-air), and sufficient space to host regular expos, local and overseas traders, merchants and manufacturers for 3,000 visitors. "Trade Fair to Have 2 Cinemas, 100 Stalls," *The Straits Times*, November 11, 1951, 11. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

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[20] "Add soul to the steel," *The Straits Times*, November 4, 1989, 32. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

[21] "Joo Chiat Complex to include 218 HDB flats," *The Straits Times*, April 12, 1984, 7. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

[22] Wee Gek Suan, Focus Group Discussion at the Malay Heritage Centre, January 2018.

[23] Roskhaider Saat stayed directly opposite along Lorong Engku Aman during the 1970s as a young boy. He recounted how he and his friends tried to catch glimpses of the footballers whenever they heard they were staying in the hotel. Personal interview, August 7, 2018.

[24] "24-hour store opens for business," *The Straits Times*, January 22, 1983, 10. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

[25] "The old 'new market'...," *New Nation*, February 1, 1975, 7. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

[26] Personal interview with Anwardeen Sulaiman, Geylang Serai Market stallholder and Treasurer, Pasar Geylang Serai Merchants' Association, September 2, 2018.

[27] "The old 'new market'..."

[28] Personal interview with Roskhaider Saat, former Geylang Serai resident, August 7, 2018.

[29] "The old 'new market'..."

[30] Known as the father of modern Malay Pop, Ahmad Jaafar is a composer, long-time conductor of the former Singapore Broadcasting Corporation Orchestra and 1981 Cultural Medallion winner. "Ahmad Ja'afar," TributeSG, Esplanade, accessed September 6, 2018, https://www.esplanade.com/tributesg/performing-arts/ahmad-jaafar; "Ahmad Jaafar," NLB Music SG, accessed September 6, 2018, http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/music/music/artist/14064.

[31] Born in Singapore in 1957 and a graduate of the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, Mohd Nasir bin Mohamed formed the folk-rock band Kembara in 1979. Composed by M. Nasir, Bas No. 13 is a song from the band's 1982 album, *Perjuangan*.

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[34] During the focus group discussion, thirteen-year-old Khai interjected during a discussion on the bazaar, saying: "I love visiting the bazaar because there's always so much food to choose from! I look forward to my favourite ayam percik every Ramadan."

[35] "Malay cultural village to open soon," *The Straits Times*, November 22, 1989, 25. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

[36] "A cultural centre for future generations," *The Straits Times*, December 31, 1985, 28. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

[37] Quote by Mr Rahmie Sawie in "New Geylang Serai Hub to Open in May," The Straits Times, April 9, 2018; Kesian Tedja Timur is a gamelan troupe first established in 1948 and originally based in Pondok Jawa, a Javanese community lodging located in Sultan Gate. Personal interview with Iswandiarjo Wismodiarjo, July 19, 2018.

[38] After the Malay Village was demolished, regular patrons shifted their karaoke nights to the nearby Kampong Ubi Community Centre. Personal interview with Iswandiarjo Wismodiarjo, July 19, 2018.

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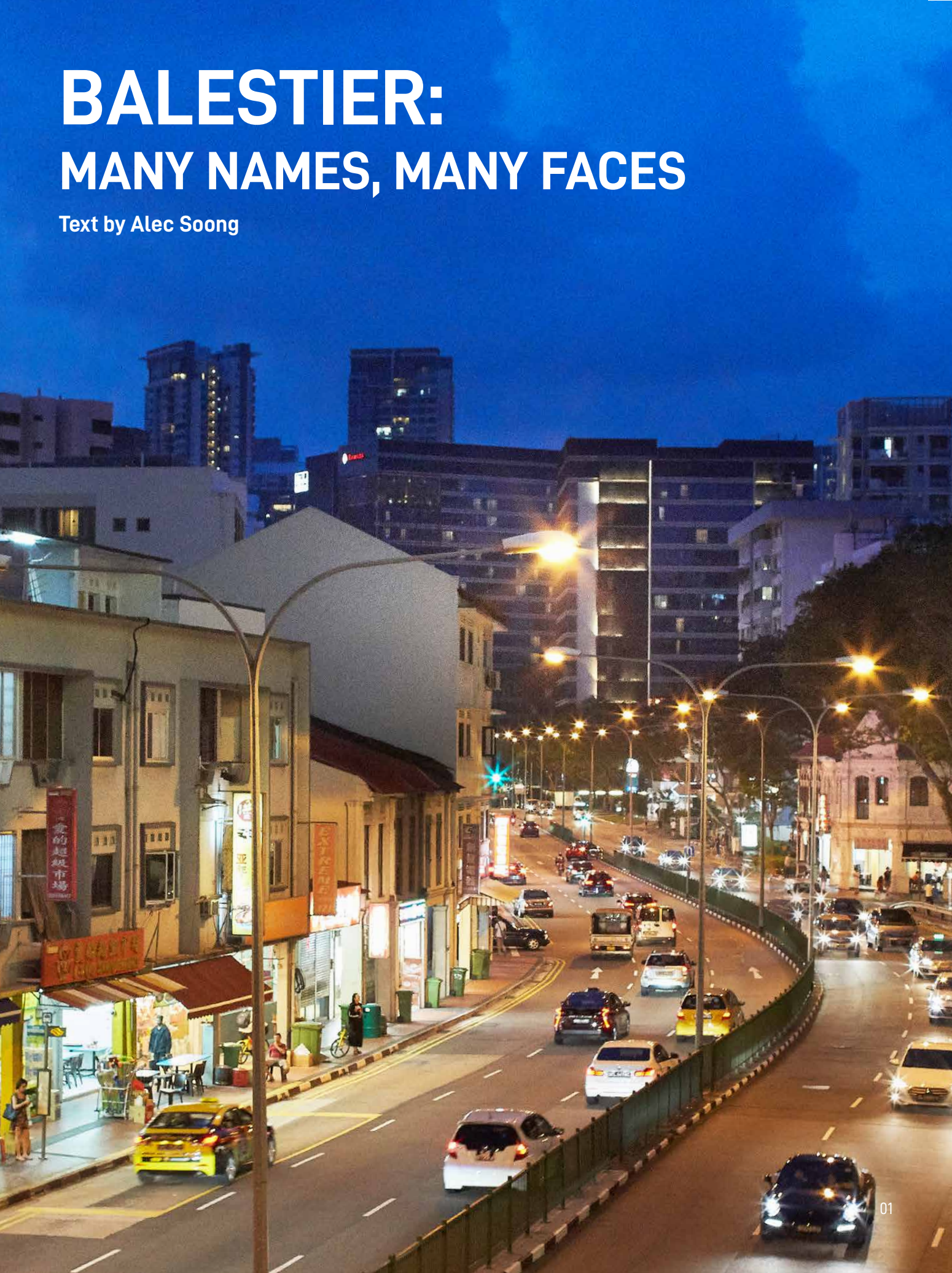
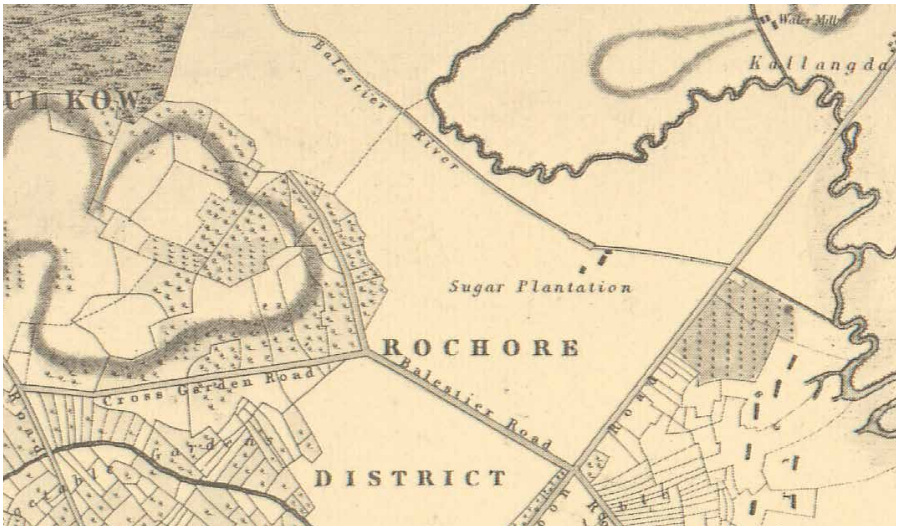
BALESTIER:
MANY NAMES, MANY FACES

Text by Alec Soong





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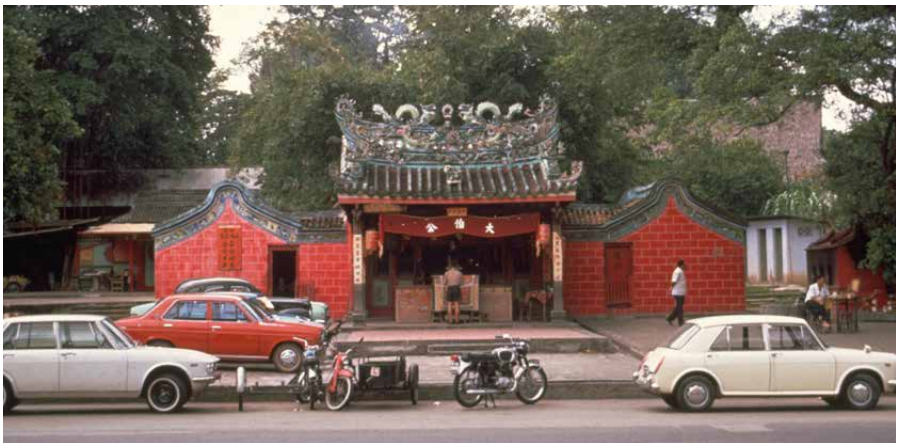

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01 Balestier Road, 2018
Image courtesy of National Heritage Board

02 Balestier Road and Balestier River (now Sungei Whampoa) within the former Rochore District, as indicated in the Plan of Singapore Town and its Adjoining Districts by John Turnbull Thomson, 1846
Image courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

03 Goh Chor Tua Pek Kong Temple, 1971
Paul Piollet Collection, Image courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

While researching for this article, I discovered that Balestier, like many other places in Singapore, has had numerous names over the course of its history. While most of these colloquial names have since fallen out of use, they are essential in helping provide a more complete picture of Balestier's heritage. As a place-name, "Balestier" only speaks to its brief tenure as a sugarcane plantation in the 1830s-40s under American consul and merchant, Joseph Balestier. On the other hand, its lesser known colloquial names – from the Hokkien "Goh Chor" to the Malay "Rumah Miskin" – all provide different perspectives from the various communities that have at different times inhabited Balestier, complete with their respective associations and preoccupations with the area. Today, most of these colloquialisms remain in a vestigial, albeit tangible form through the various institution names that dot the Balestier area. This article will explore Balestier's many names, piecing together its diverse heritage as it transformed from agricultural hinterland into a unique urban tapestry of vintage shophouses, condominiums, and world-class medical facilities.

Rochore, Goh Chor and Balestier

Before the Balestier area got its current name, the precinct was part of the larger district of "Rochore", which covered the area surrounding Balestier Road and Serangoon Road.[1] This part of Balestier's pre-plantation legacy is reflected in the area's oldest remaining religious institution – Goh Chor Tua Pek Kong Temple at 249 Balestier Road, wherein its name "Goh Chor" means Rochore in Hokkien.[2] The temple was founded in 1847 by the Hokkien community, a large number of whom were workers at Joseph Balestier's sugarcane plantation.[3]

The precinct's subsequent emergence as a distinct location can be traced to its namesake, Joseph Balestier, an American merchant of French origin, who was initially appointed as the United States consul

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to Riau (Bintan, Indonesia today).[4] Upon arriving at Riau in 1834, it became apparent that the port had been rendered commercially insignificant by the recently established port of Singapore.[5] Realising this new state of affairs, Balestier relocated to Singapore. This was in spite of the significant trade restrictions that still existed between the United States and Great Britain after the war of 1812.[6] Nevertheless, Balestier gained permission to reside in Singapore with the tacit approval of the British colonial authorities, and he would work over the next two years to officially open Singapore-American trade.[7] Over the next two years, Balestier would work to officially open Singapore-American trade. This goal was finally achieved with the colony's legal recognition of Anglo-American trade in June 1836, with Joseph Balestier appointed as the first US consul to Singapore.[8]

An enterprising individual who was well versed in agricultural techniques, Balestier applied for a colonial land-grant to build a sugarcane plantation. In 1835, he was allocated a 1,000-acre plot of land in the Rochor District, but as this was jungle and swampland *terra incognita*, this area first had to be tediously cleared by hand.[9] This venture soon bore fruit with a successful harvest in 1838 – no mean feat considering that Balestier was among the first successful sugarcane cultivators in Singapore.[10] The fine quality of Balestier's muscovado sugar also bagged him the gold medal of the Calcutta Agricultural Society in 1840.[11]

However, tragedy soon struck as Balestier's health failed, particularly after witnessing the deaths of his son and wife from illness in 1844 and 1847 respectively.[12] Adding to his woes, his business suffered owing to significant import duties along with heavy competition from sugar producers in Siam and Indochina.[13] The abundant monsoon rains also destroyed the sugar crop, ultimately spelling the doom of his enterprise.[14] By the time Balestier returned to the United States in 1848, he had lost most of his assets and property.[15]

Colloquialisms and Communities

Under the administration of the colonial government,

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04 Labourers in Malaya loading harvested sugarcane onto boats, early 1900s
Image courtesy of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board

05 Singapore Indian Association, 1972
Image courtesy of Urban Redevelopment Authority

06 Balestier Market, 1992
Lee Kip Lin Collection, Image courtesy of National Library Board, Singapore

07 The interior of Maha Sasanaramsi Burmese Buddhist Temple, 2018
Image courtesy of National Heritage Board

the former Balestier plantation was leased in part for growing Chinese vegetables, and also briefly housed a sheep farm.[16] Meanwhile, the area became more accessible as Balestier Road became connected with Thomson Road.[17] The agricultural character of Balestier would remain for the next half-century, reflected through its many new names that emerged from communities who lived in the area. For instance, the Tamils called Balestier "Thanir Kampong", meaning "water village", likely referring to the area's proximity to the water source of Sungei Whampoa, where water was drawn and transported onto bullock carts.[18] In a similar vein, the Cantonese "Wu Hap Thong" and Malay "Kebun Limau" names point towards the presence of taro and lime crops that were cultivated by early settlers.[19]

The Hokkiens also came up with other names. One such example is "Mang Ka Kha", or "foot of the jackfruit tree", which can trace its toponymy to *nangka*, the Malay term for Jackfruit.[20] Teo Ah Wah, who lived near Balestier Road in the 1950s, quipped that this name could sound rather humorous when taken out of context:

> Some said jokingly that it was because there were many mosquitoes which bit people's legs. But I don't think it was this reason. It should have been because there were many *nangka* trees there then. So the area around these trees was called "Mang Ka Kha."[21]

Soon, however, other names emerged that pointed towards an altogether different phase of Balestier's history – one reflecting its gradual urbanisation. A particular European colloquialism for Balestier was "Recreation Road", possibly due to the presence of recreation clubs that were set up during the late 1800s. These included the Swiss Rifle Shooting Club (now Swiss Club) and the Singapore Polo Club, both of which have since shifted out of the precinct.[22] However, many other recreation clubs can still be found in Balestier, such as the Singapore Indian Association and Ceylon Sports Club.[23]

Another name was "Or Kio", or "black bridge" in Hokkien, referring to a former bridge that existed as a nearby landmark.[24] The bridge lent its name to "Or Kio Pa Sat", another moniker for Balestier Market, which was originally built in 1922 to house roadside food vendors and hawkers.[25] The bridge vanished by the 1950s, but Balestier Market endured. While it only offers cooked food today, it remains the only surviving rural market building in Singapore.[26]

The Burmese Connection

Some ascribed names, however, can be misleading. An oft cited observation about Balestier is the sheer number of street names that refer to places in Myanmar (formerly Burma), such as Mandalay, Moulmein, Irrawady, Pegu and Shan Street.[27] Some might draw a link between these road names and the grand Maha Sasanaramsi Burmese Buddhist Temple at Tai Gin Road, which serves as a place of worship for both Burmese and Chinese Buddhists throughout Singapore. However, although the temple was established more than a century ago in 1878, it relocated from Kinta Road to Balestier only in 1991.[28] In reality, the Burmese road names are not actually indicative of any major Burmese presence in Balestier. Unlike colloquialisms like "Or Kio", the origins of these street names apparently lie in a street naming suggestion made by an unnamed but influential Burmese resident, which was emphatically taken up by the colonial municipality.[29]

The Most Dangerous Road in Singapore

While perhaps more of a title than a name, Balestier Road came to be known as Singapore's most hazardous road in 1987.[30] As one of Singapore's key arterial highways into the city, complaints about road hazards and congestion could be traced as far back as the 1940s.[31] The problem initially began with illicit roadside hawking, as itinerant hawkers often lacked a designated place to hawk their goods.[32] This issue came to a head in the late 1950s when business regularly spilled over onto the street, resulting in several accidents and near-misses for motorists along Balestier Road.[33]

While crackdowns subsequently removed hawkers from the equation, the problem persisted as a result of the growth of nearby residential estates like Ang Mo Kio, Whampoa and Toa Payoh, which increased traffic flow along Balestier Road.[34] In 1987, there were approximately 22 fatal accidents occurring for every kilometre of Balestier Road, a figure that exceeded the national average.[35] While present day, Balestier Road remains a busy conduit, its association with road accidents has since faded over time, perhaps due to more stringent enforcement measures against illegal parking.[36]

Rumah Miskin

Today, the Balestier precinct is peppered with high rise condominiums, perhaps suggesting a growing affluence in the area. It might thus be of interest to note that one of Balestier's old names was actually "Rumah Miskin" or "house of the poor" in Malay.[37] The name referred to Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH), which was formerly the Chinese Pauper Hospital, an institution dedicated to providing medical care for those "unable to earn a livelihood".[38] Relocated from Pearl's Hill to Balestier in 1860, it became the first of many other medical facilities, including the Mandalay Road Hospital and Rotary Clinic, which would establish Balestier's longstanding association with healthcare.[39]

From an early stage, the healthcare institutions of Balestier have helped to control and manage epidemics in Singapore. In the early-20th century, Middleton Hospital (renamed the Communicable Diseases Centre in 1985), served as a quarantine camp for infectious diseases such as cholera, polio, diphtheria and smallpox which were rife during this period.[40] Later on in 1947, TTSH was designated the official centre for the management of tuberculosis, a highly infectious and terminal disease common amongst the poor.[41] More recently, in 2003, TTSH dealt with the SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) epidemic, which arrived in Singapore through an unwitting "Typhoid Mary" who contracted the virus in Guangzhou. By the time she was detected, she had infected 22 close contacts, forming the first cluster of SARS cases.[42]

On 31 May 2003, Singaporeans collectively breathed a sigh of relief as the country was declared SARS-Free.[43] Through prompt measures by the Ministry of Health that involved airport screenings, enforced quarantines and a brief closure of schools, the outbreak managed to be contained with only 238 total infected.[44] This traumatic chapter in Singapore's recent history, which

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08 Pedestrians prepaing to cross Balestier Road near the Ava Road junction, 1982
Lee Kip Lin Collection, Image courtesy of National Library Board, Singapore

09 A Franciscan nun and a nurse tending to a patient at Mandalay Road Hospital, 1959
Image courtesy of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board

10 The former pavilion wards of Tan Tock Seng Hospital, 2018
Image courtesy of National Heritage Board

11 The Sim Kwong Ho shophouses along Balestier Road, 2018
Image courtesy of National Heritage Board

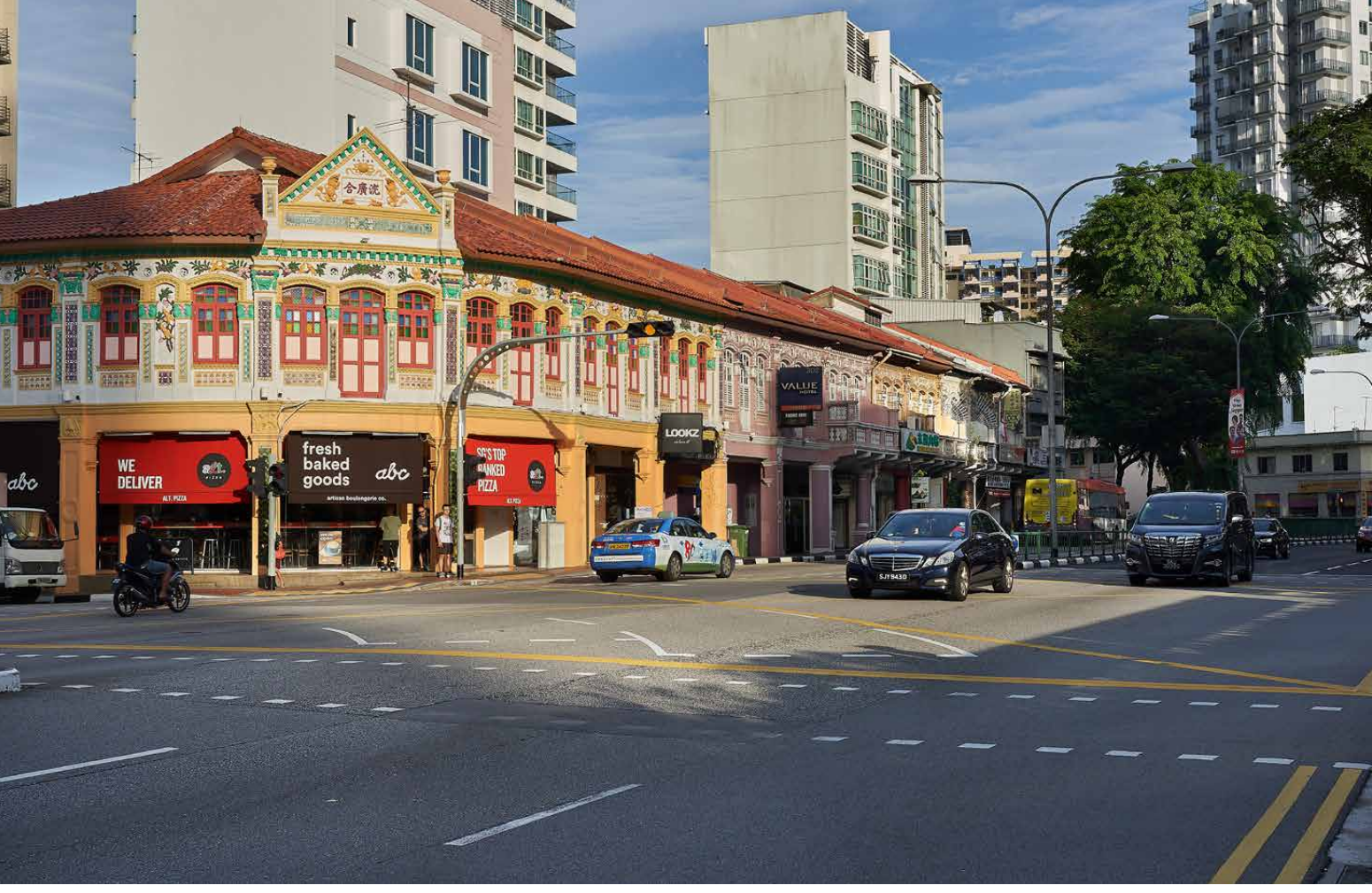
resulted in 33 deaths, was thus closed through the painstaking dedication and sacrifice of Balestier's medical professionals.[45]

Future of Balestier

Balestier and its numerous names serve to remind us of the almost unrelenting pace of change in the area. This remains an ongoing process, due in no small part to the increasing gentrification of Balestier.[46] Presently, the name "Balestier" is more likely to invoke images of a foodie's paradise, rather than that of its rural, consular namesake.

Still, some of these former place names continue to live on, hidden in the names of Balestier's religious and cultural institutions. Other names have been commodified. "Or Kio", for instance, is no longer a rustic, phantom bridge but a modern condominium, Okio, towering high above Balestier's recognisable shopfronts.[47] Meanwhile, Balestier's age-old association with healthcare is also set to continue with the upcoming Health City Novena, a new and greatly expanded complex projected for completion in 2030.[48]

With names that evoke both the old and the new, Balestier is more than a place that has weathered the various epochs of Singapore's history, but one that is deeply and tangibly grounded in its rich and vibrant heritage.



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Download the Balestier Heritage Trail companion guide and map at NHB's portal on roots.sg/visit/trails.

MARINE PARADE:
TURNING THE TIDE OF THE EAST COAST SEAFRONT

Text by Dayana Rizal

Whether through sights or sounds, the East Coast seafront features prominently in the memories of Marine Parade residents. Although Aminah Abdul Rahman's family home did not have a sea view, the long-term resident of Marine Crescent distinctly recalls the sounds that came from the sea: "The honking from the ships were a part of life. We just accepted it as a normal thing".[1] Along with her parents and her nine siblings, Aminah belonged to the pioneer generation of Marine Parade residents who had moved in during the mid-1970s. Although she has since relocated, Aminah deeply treasures the memories of her life in the Marine Parade estate, which owes its origins to the East Coast Land Reclamation project. This project was led by Singapore's Housing & Development Board (HDB) and executed with the help of its appointed Japanese engineers.[2] Land reclamation began in 1966, and by 1972, the HDB had built the first flats on reclaimed land at the East Coast.[3] Particularly noteworthy are the flats at Marine Terrace, which boast picturesque views of the sea.

But what existed on the eastern seafront before this extensive residential project of the 1960s? From stories that have been passed on through word of mouth, we hear anecdotes such as the one from Aminah's late mother of how "the ocean stretched all the way to CHIJ Katong Convent and [that] where [thei]r home was, [it] used to be a giant piece of *batu putih* [Malay for 'white rock'] in the middle of the ocean".[4] Indeed, before the advent of land reclamation, Singapore's East Coast featured a very different landscape.

01 Marine Parade estate, 2019
Image courtesy of National Heritage Board

02 Marine Parade estate, showing the first point-block flats, 1973
Marine Parade Community Centre Collection, Image courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

02

The Renaissance Grand Hotel, for instance, was formerly located right by the sea. Unfortunately, as a result of the land reclamation project, the hotel lost its prime location on the beachfront. This likely contributed to its declining popularity causing it to eventually close down in 2000. Recalling the abandoned Renaissance Grand Hotel building of the 2000s, Ain Zainal describes it as "…creepy and haunted-looking. Being young, my friends and I would dare each other to go inside but we really had no guts to".[5] Other residents of the area, however, had more light-hearted memories of the hotel's heyday, as seen from reports in *The Straits Times* about older residents "playing football and flying kites in the field in front [of the hotel]" during the 1950s and 1960s.[6] It is worth noting, though, that the history of the Renaissance Grand Hotel goes even further back, and was a part of the East Coast's heritage of seaside retreats.

Seaside Retreats

Around the turn of the century, Singapore's eastern coast was a medley of coconut plantations, scattered hotels and large private residences.[7] As a result of its sparsely populated and undeveloped landscape, this area exuded an idyllic rustic charm. This made it an attractive getaway destination for wealthy merchants and businessmen. One such South Indian cattle merchant was Moona Kader Sultan, who owned a large beachfront bungalow along South Still Road.[8] Built in 1917, this house was named Karikal Mahal in honour of the owner's hometown in Karaikal, Tamil Nadu.[9] It was then bought over by the Lee Rubber Company in 1947 and transformed into the Renaissance Grand Hotel.[10] Yet another example of an idyllic seaside retreat was Sea Breeze Lodge, which was built in 1898 by wealthy businessman Choa Kim Keat for family weekend getaways.[11] Previously a few steps from the beach, this bungalow now stands facing the busy Marine Parade Road.

Like Karikal Mahal and the Sea Breeze Lodge, the old Sea View Hotel was similarly built along the sandy beaches of the eastern coast in 1906.[12] Commissioned by a Jewish Municipal Commissioner and merchant by the name of Manasseh Meyer, Sea View Hotel was a prime sanctuary and gathering area for European guests.[13] The hotel frequently hosted events that catered to this particular demographic, such as the "Beach Pyjama Parade" in 1932.[14] Images from an article reporting the festivity of this event showed European ladies and men alike posing in their bedtime attire on the beachfront.[15] The hotel's good run eventually came to an end after a series of unfortunate events, including an 87-day worker strike in 1963, culminating in the closure of the hotel in 1964.[16] In 1969, however, a new Sea View Hotel was built nearby, continuing the name and legacy of

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03 Renaissance Grand Hotel, 1985
Lee Kip Lin Collection, Image courtesy of Lee Kip Lin and National Library Board, Singapore

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04 Aerial photograph of the East Coast seafront taken by the British Royal Airforce, 1958
Collection held by National Archives of Singapore, Crown copyright

05 Road leading to Sea View Hotel, undated
Image courtesy of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board

06 The old Sea View Hotel, 1920
Image courtesy of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board

07 The new Sea View Hotel, which opened in 1969, c. 1970s
Image courtesy of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board

08

09

08 Families and children at East Coast Parkway, late 1970s
Image courtesy of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board

09 The National Day Carnival at East Coast Parkway, 1986
Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, Image courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

the former hotel, as well as continuing the trend of seaside retreats in the east.[17]

Birth of a Seaside Community

From the colonial period until the 1960s, Singapore's eastern coast remained relatively quiet aside from the few seaside resorts. With the land reclamation works of the 1970s, however, the physical landscape of Singapore's East Coast was effectively transformed. In 1972, the HDB announced a whopping $26 million budget for a "Marine Parade Housing Estate".[18] This name drew an unfavourable opinion in *New Nation*, where a writer named "N. K." argued that "a more appropriate name would be the New Katong Housing Estate".[19] This was perhaps because Katong was then a more familiar landmark. HDB subsequently defended their decision by explaining that the new estate would "be built on the reclaimed site along the former marine parade".[20] Despite this mild naming controversy, the new estate proved to be a hit. According to reports, 2,736 Marine Parade flats were sold by June 1974, a considerable success with balloting having only started two months earlier.[21] The birth of the Marine Parade estate ultimately created a new social demographic for the East Coast. By the late 1980s, the once sparsely populated backwater had been converted into an urban space fit for community building and living.[22]

Part of this urban space was to be transformed into a large man-made beach. This reclaimed beachfront is known by many today as the East Coast Parkway. Completed in 1977, the East Coast Parkway was considered a landscaped marvel by scholars studying the urbanisation of Singapore. Facilities such as jogging and bicycle tracks, shelters and a multitude of barbeque pits had been made available for public use throughout the park, which was built entirely on reclaimed land.[23] Additionally, Marine Parade residents also enjoyed easy access to East Coast

Parkway through a total of 10 underpasses, built during the 1970s, that connected the residential areas to the beachfront.[24] For Ain Zainal and her family, their most frequented underpass was the one located at Marine Terrace which exited directly at the iconic old Marine Cove.[25]

Leisure activities aside, the vast amount of open space at the East Coast beachfront also made the location ideal for large community events. One such event was the 1986 National Day Carnival that was organised by People's Association, Singapore Armed Forces, Singapore Sports Council and Singapore Tourist Promotion Board. The three-day long carnival boasted a medley of entertainment attractions and activities. Apart from celebrating the country's independence, the event also served to raise the spirits of Singaporeans who were feeling the negative effects of the year's economic recession.[26] While the popularity of the event might have caused some inconveniences to residents such as Aminah who remembered "the whole cycling and jogging path [to be] packed with people", it nevertheless showcased East Coast Parkway as not just a space for the residents of Marine Parade but a facility for all Singaporeans.[27]

Further from the beachfront, the iconic Parkway Parade represented another locus of residential activity. Opened to the public in December 1983, Parkway Parade was Singapore's first regional shopping centre, and featured the popular indoor amusement and family food centre – Funworld.[28] Aminah reminisces spending "almost every Thursday" in the 1990s with her eldest daughter at Funworld, where "there were amusement rides that the kids nowadays would probably not enjoy as much as their iPhone games, but we definitely did and we were adults!"[29] With Parkway Parade located right within the Marine Parade heartlands, residents did not have to travel far for entertainment and leisure.

By the 1980s, Marine Parade was being advertised and lauded as the newest and hottest housing estate, alongside East Coast Parkway which had developed a reputation as the "biggest park" in Singapore.[30] In 1988, an article in *The Straits Times* even compared Marine Parade to the American seaside urban centre of Santa Monica, with both situated only a stone's throw away from an easily accessible public beachfront.[31]

The Changing Tides of Marine Parade

Since the 1980s, Marine Parade estate has acquired a distinctively Singaporean identity that is rooted in community. With Singaporeans from all across the island visiting East Coast Parkway for leisure and recreation, the popular park has arguably become a part of the shared heritage of Singapore. For Marine Parade residents, the beachfront remains an enduring feature in their memories and experiences of the estate. As long-time resident Ain recalls, places such as East Coast Parkway have become an "iconic part of my childhood, where we had the most memorable family picnics". During these occasions, Ain's late grandmother would "cook enough food to feed an entire kampong and the whole family would troop down together from [thei]r house to the beach". The park remains a reminder of her late grandmother who "never left the house, except for such family occasions".[32]

In recent years, the charms of the East Coast seafront have made Marine Parade a prime location for luxury housing developments. One such project is the Côte d'Azur, which boasts unhindered views of the ocean. Built in 2016, this condominium was named after the scenic holiday coast of the French Riviera in a bid to evoke sentiments of easy-going relaxation in its potential residents.[33] The development of such luxury housing certainly represents a departure from the more modest HDB housing of the 1970s and 1980s.

Nestled amidst these new developments, one can nevertheless spot the occasional heritage building, such as the Sea Breeze Lodge and the old Grand Hotel, which have been spared from demolition. After the death of Sea Breeze Lodge's long-term owner Mr Eric Choa in 2009, the lodge was sold to Far East Organization in 2011.[34] Despite the land sale, the lodge has since been conserved by the Urban Redevelopment Authority and will continue to stand for years to come. As for the old Renaissance Grand Hotel, it received a facelift in 2016 and now houses Odyssey The Global Preschool and Pat's Schoolhouse Katong.[35] Reflecting on the age and heritage of Sea Breeze Lodge, Nur Metalynn says, "It's cool to know that this building has not been [entirely] demolished to make way for a new condominium".[36] These buildings give present-day Singaporeans a glimpse into the long history of Singapore's East Coast – one that predates the establishment of Marine Parade estate.

10

10 East Coast Park, 2019
Image courtesy of National Heritage Board

For me, the memories of growing up in Marine Parade estate during the 2000s, which by then was close to 30 years old, are unique in their own way. I remember making my first friends in the PAP Community Foundation (PCF) kindergarten at Marine Crescent Block 46, I remember accompanying my mother on her trips to Bengawan Solo at Marine Terrace Block 58, and I remember wearing my rollerblades into the iconic McDonalds at the old Marine Cove. These were the landmarks of my childhood and I believe that other Marine Parade residents would also share similar feelings of nostalgia about this place. Ultimately, even though the finer details of the memories of Marine Parade may vary, one thing is clear: Marine Parade estate effectively turned the tide of Singapore's East Coast, as it developed from a largely empty reclaimed land into a distinctly Singaporean heartland.

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TELOK BLANGAH:
A HARBOUR IN THE "COOKING POT BAY"

Text by Liew Yi Ling

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In the past, Telok Blangah was known colloquially as "cooking pot bay". This came from the words "*teluk*" or "*telok*", which in Malay means "bay", and "*blanga*", which is a type of clay cooking pot commonly used by South Indians. There are at least two theories about the etymology of this name. Some believe that the name came about as a result of the cooking pot shape of the bay, while yet others are of the view that the alternatively spelt "*belangah*" refers, in fact, to a "stopping place" for vessels – referencing Telok Blangah's long history as a harbour for ships.[1]

Indeed, the area of Telok Blangah is one of the handful of places in Singapore that is deeply-rooted in heritage and historicity. Its story extends to at least the 14th century, when Keppel Harbour, the waterway between the southern end of mainland Singapore and Pulau Brani was part of the Old Strait of Singapore. Prior to the advent of Sir Stamford Raffles under the flag of the British East India Company, the Old Strait was used by explorers and traders from both the East and West, as noted in Portuguese, Dutch and British cartography between the 15th and early 18th centuries.[2] During this period, seamen passing

01 The replica of "Long Ya Men" at Labrador Park, 2019
Image courtesy of National Heritage Board

02 A map of Keppel Harbour showing Telok Blangah and the Old Strait, 1907
Singapore Maritime Museum Collection, Image courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

03 Telok Blangah and Keppel Harbour, 2019
Image courtesy of National Heritage Board

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through the Old Strait would often seek to catch the winds of the southwest monsoon in a bid to connect from the Straits of Malacca onto the larger South China Sea.[3]

Writings by Portuguese diplomat Tomé Pires also recorded the presence of *Orang Laut* communities living in the area during the 16th century.[4] Similarly, accounts of early activity were noted by 14th century Yuan Dynasty Chinese trader, Wang Dayuan, whose sea voyages took him to the Old Strait.[5] In 1349, Wang, writing in *Daoyi Zhilue* ("A Description of the Barbarians of the Isles" in Mandarin), briefly described the harbour and its surroundings as home to a small group of Chinese traders and pirates. Although historians have since questioned the authenticity of his account, noting the unlikeliness of traders living alongside pirates that would plunder their goods and disrupt trade, Wang's writings nevertheless support the theory that the early inhabitants of Telok Blangah relied on trading activities along the harbour for their livelihood.[6]

Notably, Wang also described the passage into the Old Strait as being marked by two teeth-like granite outcrops dubbed "Long Ya Men" ("Dragon's Teeth Gate" in Mandarin).[7] From Ming Dynasty records, there is further mention of Admiral Zheng possibly using "Long Ya Men" as a visual marker to sail through the Old Strait via its western entrance on one of his seven major voyages to East Indies between 1405 and 1433.[8] This rock formation has also been noted by several other travellers, including the Portuguese in 1604, who named the rock "Batu Qina", meaning "China Rock", and the British in 1709, who christened the rock as "Lot's Wife".[9]

This natural rock formation was located at the present location of Labrador Point, but was removed by the British in 1848 to facilitate access for larger steamships entering the harbour.[10] Hence, should you happen to take a walk through Labrador Park towards the harbour, do not mistake the six-metre-high stone structure for one of the two original teeth of "Long Ya Men"[11] It is simply a replica, but nevertheless one that reminds us of the extensive maritime history of Telok Blangah.

Aside from the activities at its harbour, Telok Blangah saw little development until Raffles arrived in Singapore in 1819 and entered into a treaty with the Temenggong of Johor, Abdul Rahman and the Sultan of Singapore, Tengku Long. Because the Temenggong initially resided near the mouth of the Singapore River along the Straits of Singapore, he had a long historical claim over the sea routes. This claim, however, clashed with the British's belief in free trade, as well as undermined the authority of the East India Company.

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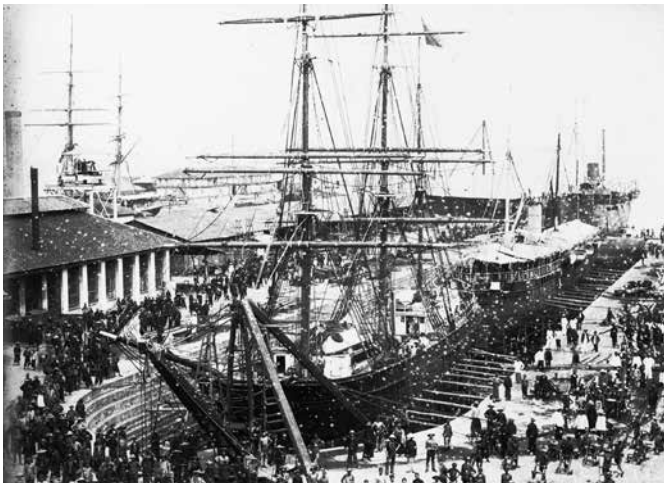

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04 The entrance into the New Habour (now Keppel Harbour), c. 1890
Image courtesy of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board

05 A view of Temenggong's village at Telok Blangah, 1870s
Image courtesy of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board

06 Tanjong Pagar Dock Company, c. 1890s
Image courtesy of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board

07 Workers unloading goods from a docked ship at Keppel Harbour, 1950s
Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, Image courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

It was perhaps not surprising, then, that some five years later, Temenggong Abdul Rahman was uprooted by the British and relocated to Telok Blangah. Because of the Temenggong's extensive power over the trade routes, his relocation to Telok Blangah could be seen as a deliberate manoeuvre to challenge the power of the local rulers and to establish British influence over its new harbour at the southern tip of Singapore.[12] Later on, as Singapore became increasingly established as a trading port, immigrants from South and East Asia began to flock to the island, causing Singapore's population to grow exponentially. To cope with the booming population, Raffles made another move to relocate the Arab and Indonesian communities to Telok Blangah.[13]

At first, Telok Blangah appeared to have little potential for development. The landscape was scattered with swamps and hills, save for a small Malay fishing village and several burial grounds.[14] However, this began to change in the following decades. A key driver for this development was the establishment of a monopoly over the trade of gutta-percha (a type of gum resin) by the Temmengong.[15] This trade was further facilitated by Telok Blangah's proximity to the harbour, allowing the Temenggong to profit greatly.[16] As a result, the rural environment of Telok Blangah became increasingly dynamic, with its development both intertwined and buttressed by the sea trade.

The formation of the privately-owned Tanjong Pagar Dock Company in 1864 further vitalised the area. With the construction of Victoria Dock on the western side of Tanjong Pagar in 1868, the company was able to establish a monopoly on all port and shipping services at the New Harbour (now Keppel Harbour) by 1899.[17] However, as the company could not manage the high shipping volume, the British expropriated the business

in 1905, turning it into a government-owned agency known as the Tanjong Pagar Dock Board.[18] In 1913, the government took over the board and renamed it the Singapore Harbour Board (SHB).[19]

SHB owned docks and wharves along the coastline of Singapore, starting from the periphery of Telok Blangah and stretching all the way to Tanjong Pagar. As Yap Siong Eu, a resident of Telok Blangah during the early 20th century, recalls: the harbour was largely populated by SHB artisans, who were mostly technicians in charge of fixing ships. These craftsmen lived in Telok Blangah because SHB provided its workers with free living quarters. Describing the bustling scene at Telok Blangah near Keppel Harbour, Yap says that in addition to the mostly-Cantonese artisans, there were also many other ethnically diverse immigrants who arrived in Singapore via Keppel Harbour. They often came to Singapore penniless and earned a living doing manual labour for SHB. To cater to the presence of all these workers, a large number of hawkers also began selling food and drinks in the area. Yap, in particular, remembers enjoying a red bean paste snack which was sold by a Japanese hawker during the 1930s when he was still a high school student.[20]

During World War II, the significance of the harbour to Telok Blangah became increasingly pronounced. The harbour was strategically important for the British not only for its shipping routes, but also because it was a potential entry point for the Japanese to enter Singapore.[21] Although the Japanese eventually invaded Singapore from the north-east instead, Keppel Harbour was one of the first targets of Japanese bombing. On December 8, 1941, the docks were struck, causing disruption to shipping activities.[22] As the British defeat became increasingly imminent, the harbour at Telok Blangah became an important means by which the Royal Marines could evacuate the Allied forces from Singapore to Sumatra.[23] While the harbour could be viewed as a symbol of the British defeat as forces escaped via the Old Strait, it also represented liberation when the tides of the war turned and the

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victorious British returned to Singapore. This was clearly demonstrated in September 1945, as residents from Telok Blangah lined the streets to warmly welcome the British troops as they marched back into Singapore, formally ending the Japanese Occupation.[24]

After the war, life in Telok Blangah slowly returned to normal. In 1964, SHB was replaced by the Port of Singapore Authority (PSA), which then became the Maritime and Port Authority of Singapore (MPA) in 1996. Witnessing these changes was Quek Tee Dhye, who first started working as an apprentice for the SHB at the Jardine Steps docks by the old World Trade Centre (HarbourFront Centre). He noted that some of the old SHB docks continue to be used today, and that his former workplace has since been converted into the Caribbean at Keppel Bay condominium.[25]

This is unsurprising, given that in recent years, Telok Blangah – especially in the area along the harbour – has become home to exclusive new villas and condominiums. The harbour now takes on new significance as these high-end developments become increasingly prized for their sea view. Apart from the Caribbean, Keppel Land has also launched the Reflections at Keppel Bay condominium, which is an iconic high-rise development dominating the skyline of Telok Blangah. Designed by world-renowned architect Daniel Libeskind, Reflections boasts over a thousand "waterfront condominium units" and open spaces on the roofs which allow homeowners to enjoy "panoramic views of the sea".[26] Reflections has also now become one of Telok Blangah's most recognisable developments, with a design that has clearly been influenced by Keppel Harbour and its surroundings. The unique sail-like roof on each building, for example, pays homage to the area's deep connection with the sea.

While the housing scene in the area continues to evolve dynamically, remnants of Telok Blangah's historic past persist. The Temenggong Daeng Ibrahim Mosque at 30 Telok Blangah Road, which is named after the son of Temenggong Abdul Rahman, is one

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08 A view of the new residential developments along Keppel Harbour, 2019
Image courtesy of National Heritage Board

09 Temenggong Daeng Ibrahim Mosque, 2019
Image courtesy of National Heritage Board

such exhibit. The expansive whitewashed building with jade green roofs is located within Temenggong Abdul Rahman's former residential compound, and serves today a popular gathering and prayer place for Muslims living in Telok Blangah.[27]

In close proximity to the mosque, along Malang Road, is a forest where many trekking enthusiasts frequently go to exercise. In 2008, a group of trekkers accidentally discovered an abandoned Muslim cemetery containing the tombs of Telok Blangah's old inhabitants. As such, the Temenggong's old residence has become a landmark of sorts for adventure-seekers who wish to experience a part of the estate's long-lasting heritage.[28]

For the past 700 years, Telok Blangah's heritage and identity have been heavily influenced by the harbour and the landscape surrounding it. From a seaside village in the 14th century, Telok Blangah has leveraged on its proximity to the harbour and transformed to be at the forefront of Singapore's developments. These more recent developments have added a new dynamic to the identity and heritage of the locale, proving that even in today's age, the harbour is still playing a significant role in shaping the historical landscape and identity of Telok Blangah, just as it has done over the centuries.

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01

KRETA AYER:
A CANTONESE PAST

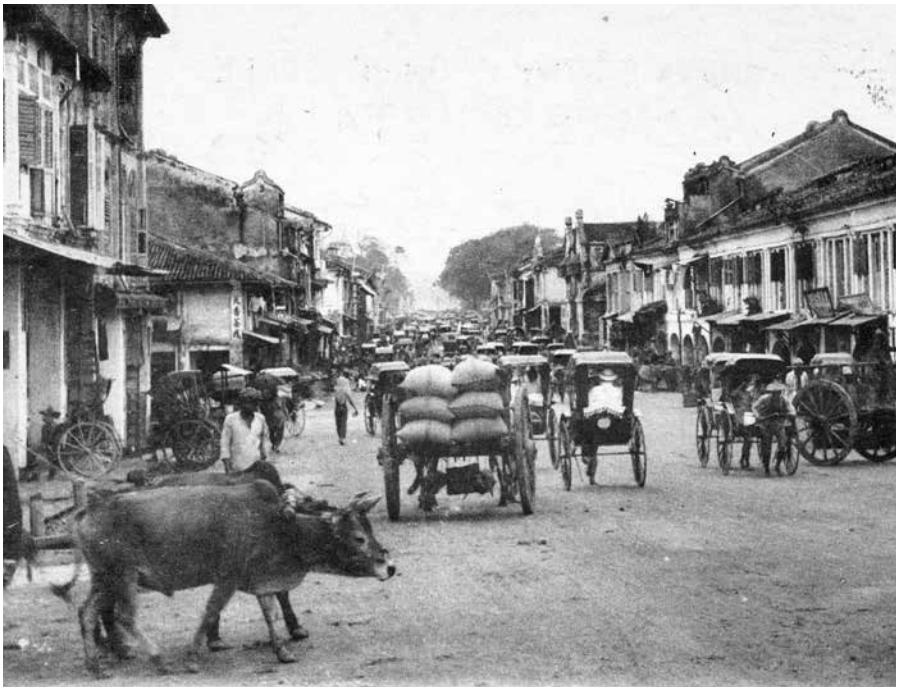
Text by Kirk Tan, Gavin Leong and Lim Wen Jun Gabriel

Today, Kreta Ayer lies at the centre of Chinatown, with dozens of shops catering largely to tourists. A quick search of the term "Kreta Ayer" on Google brings up numerous articles, centred mostly on events being held in Chinatown and the fates of vendors from the former Sungei Road Market. But as we dig further into the town's history, we begin to see a Kreta Ayer different from how it has come to be understood today. This article will explore the various continuities and disruptions in Kreta Ayer's history, using the Cantonese community as a starting point and showing how Kreta Ayer became the heart of present-day Chinatown.

Before delving any further into the locale's history, its parameters and etymology must first be clarified. The Urban Redevelopment Authority's map for its Chinatown Heritage Trail shows Kreta Ayer to be the commercial centre of Chinatown, within the area bounded by Sago Street, South Bridge Road and New Bridge Road.[1] The area is known by different names to different communities. From as early as the 1880s, the Hokkiens knew the precinct as "Gu Chia Tsui" whereas the Cantonese referred to it as "Ngow Chay Shui".[2] The Malay name, "Kreta Ayer", was first used in 1922 by the Singapore Municipal Commission.[3] All three names make reference to the process of water being drawn by bullock carts and transported to residents.[4] This was because the hard, stony ground made it difficult for wells to be dug and thus water had to be transported in from wells at Spring Street and Ann Siang Hill, the only sources of drinking water in the area.[5]

Beginnings of a Cantonese Enclave

The origins of Kreta Ayer's heavy Cantonese presence lie in the migration of dialect groups from southern China to Singapore in the 19th century. Early Chinese migrants would settle in close proximity to others of the same dialect group, bound by a common language and ancestral homeland.[6] This sense of mutual identification manifested in clan and kinship associations which served as networks for subsequent Chinese migrants to Singapore.[7] Noting the potential for disputes between dialect groups, Sir Stamford Raffles not only designated the area known today as Chinatown for the Chinese, but further divided Chinatown into sub-districts for each dialect group.[8] Kreta Ayer would thus become a Cantonese enclave. Other dialect groups settled in other parts of Chinatown, with Hokkiens living in Telok Ayer and Teochews living at Hong Kong Street.[9] Wong Kum Fatt, a Cantonese resident of Kreta Ayer in the 1930s-40s, recalls that "Kreta Ayer [Road], Sago Street, Sago Lane, Smith Street and Pagoda Street… [were all called] 'Ngau Che Shui'. The whole area [was] all Cantonese", and that "only after the war [was] there



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01 An aerial view of Chinatown, 2011
Image courtesy of Urban Redevelopment Authority

02 Bullock carts and rickshaws along New Bridge Road, undated
Image courtesy of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board

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03 A funeral rite being conducted at Sago Lane, 1981
Paul Piollet Collection, Image courtesy of National Heritage Board

04 The former Lai Chun Yuen Opera House along Smith Street, 1890s
Image courtesy of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board

a mix of Hokkien and Cantonese [in Kreta Ayer]… At that time, no Hokkien [would] come across that Chinatown borderline. Telok Ayer, it all belongs to Hokkien[s]".[10] By the mid-19th century, there was a clear demarcation of territory between the dialect groups among the residents of Chinatown, and Kreta Ayer was firmly Cantonese.

Kreta Ayer: Under Colonial Rule

Thus, the story of Kreta Ayer during the period of British colonial rule was largely [one] of its Cantonese community. Besides the colonial government's efforts to designate Kreta Ayer as a Cantonese enclave, the community's presence also manifested in the trades it dominated. From the mid-19th century, the Cantonese started to become associated with certain occupations in Kreta Ayer. Some examples of the trades dominated by the Cantonese were carpentry, goldsmithing, paperwork crafting and tailoring.[11]

Kreta Ayer was also famous for the "death houses" located along Sago Lane, established as early as the 1880s.[12] These were homes where the chronically sick and the dying waited out their days.[13] These houses handled all matters related to the dead, such as the employment of funeral bands and priests.[14] Sago Lane

was also filled with shops selling funeral paraphernalia such as paper clothes, appliances and joss money for the afterlife.[15] These paraphernalia would be burned, a process that was believed to send the items to deceased relatives for use in the afterlife.[16] Thus, Sago Lane was called "Sei Yan Kai" (dead people's street) by the Cantonese, and became famous for specialising in funeral parlours or death houses.[17] It was also known as "Man Jai Kai", as Man Jai was the name of the Cantonese owner of the first death house.[18]

The Cantonese presence in Kreta Ayer was also reflected through its entertainment industry, with Cantonese operas and storytellers dotting the town's streets. From the latter half of the 19th century, Cantonese opera emerged as a major form of entertainment in Kreta Ayer. This growth in the popularity of Cantonese opera culminated in the 834-seat Lai Chun Yuen Opera House built in 1887 on Smith Street, a street also known to the Cantonese community as "Hei Yuen Kai" (theatre street).[19] The opera house attracted large crowds from the Cantonese community and hosted performances by famous Cantonese opera troupes from China, especially during the 1920s.[20] According to Dr Lo Hong Ling, a Cantonese doctor residing in the area, the opera house was the "centre spot of Chinatown". The opera house was so prominent that it had become a landmark in the area, with adjacent streets being named for their locational relation to the theatre. Temple Street, for instance, was colloquially referred to by the Cantonese as "Hei Yuen Hau Kai" (theatre-back street).[21]

Besides performances within the opera house, street opera or wayang (Malay for "theatrical performance employing puppets or human dancers") also emerged as a form of cheap and mobile cultural entertainment in Kreta Ayer.[22] Wayang, which had become synonymous with Chinese street opera in Singapore, was very popular and performed on vacant lots, with actors often wearing elaborate costumes and makeup.[23] The Cantonese, the Hokkiens and the Teochew each had their own style of wayang, and Cantonese wayang was naturally the most prominent in Kreta Ayer.[24]

Chinese street storytelling sessions were also popular throughout Chinatown. Similar stories were told in different dialects to cater to the different audiences.[25] As one who frequented such sessions, Chan Chon Koe, a Cantonese from Hong Kong, recalled that the storytellers were very popular and entertaining.[26] Storytellers would light incense sticks, each stick lasting for 20 minutes, to keep time. Sometimes these storytellers would also read out news reports for audience members who were illiterate.[27] According to Kua Ee Heok, early immigrants always looked forward to these forms of cultural entertainment, especially as the stories about Chinese folklore provided a spiritual link to their ancestral homeland.[28]

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05 A Chinese street opera performance, 1998
Paul Piollet Collection, Image courtesy of National Heritage Board

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06 Jamae Mosque, 2019
Image courtesy of National Heritage Board

07 Sri Mariamman Temple, 2019
Image courtesy of National Heritage Board

Yet while the Cantonese were the largest community in Kreta Ayer, it is important to note that South Asians also resided in the town. Today, religious buildings that catered to South Asians still exist in Kreta Ayer, a legacy of the British East India Company which allotted plots of land in Chinatown for non-Chinese religious sites. One example is the Jamae Mosque. Built in the 1820s by the Chulias (immigrants from southern India), the temple has Chinese, Malay and Anglo-Indian architectural influences.[29] Another prominent religious site is the Sri Mariamman Temple, which was built at the junction of Pagoda Street and South Bridge Road in 1827. This temple served Hindu immigrants from southern India, who settled near the peripheries of Kreta Ayer.[30] In the 1820s, Indian boatmen sold goat milk and herbs at the nearby Cross Street, which is how this street became known to the Tamils as "Paalkadei Sadakku" (street of the milk shops), and to the Chinese as "Kiat Leng Kia Ko", or Klingsman Street.[31] There was also Pagoda Street, which was named after the gopuram (pagoda-like entrance tower) which stands over the main gate of the Sri Mariamman Temple.[32]

Another group that established itself in Kreta Ayer were the Japanese prostitutes or *karayuki-san*, who were mainly found along Banda Street and the area around Spring Street. The heart of the red light district had previously been located along North Canal Road, but had shifted to Kreta Ayer by the 1890s. Their presence there led to Banda and Spring Streets being referred to as "Phan Tsai Mei" (lane of foreign prostitutes) and "Yap Pun Kai" (Japanese street) by the Cantonese. By 1902, Sago Street was home to at least 28 brothels, with at least three establishments bearing the name "Japanese house".[33] Smith Street also had Japanese brothels, and became known as *fan tsai mei ma ta liu pin* (end of foreign brothels beside the police station).[34] Eventually however, with the rise of Japan as an international power in the early 20th century, the Japanese state's attitudes toward such professions took a turn. Viewing these women as a source of national shame, the Japanese Consulate General in Singapore banned Japanese brothels in 1920.[35] Even so, places like Smith Street remained home to Chinese brothels, and these establishments

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08 A portrait of two *karayuki-san*, c. 1890
Image courtesy of National Heritage Board

09 The junction of Smith Street and Trengganu Street, 2019
Image courtesy of National Heritage Board

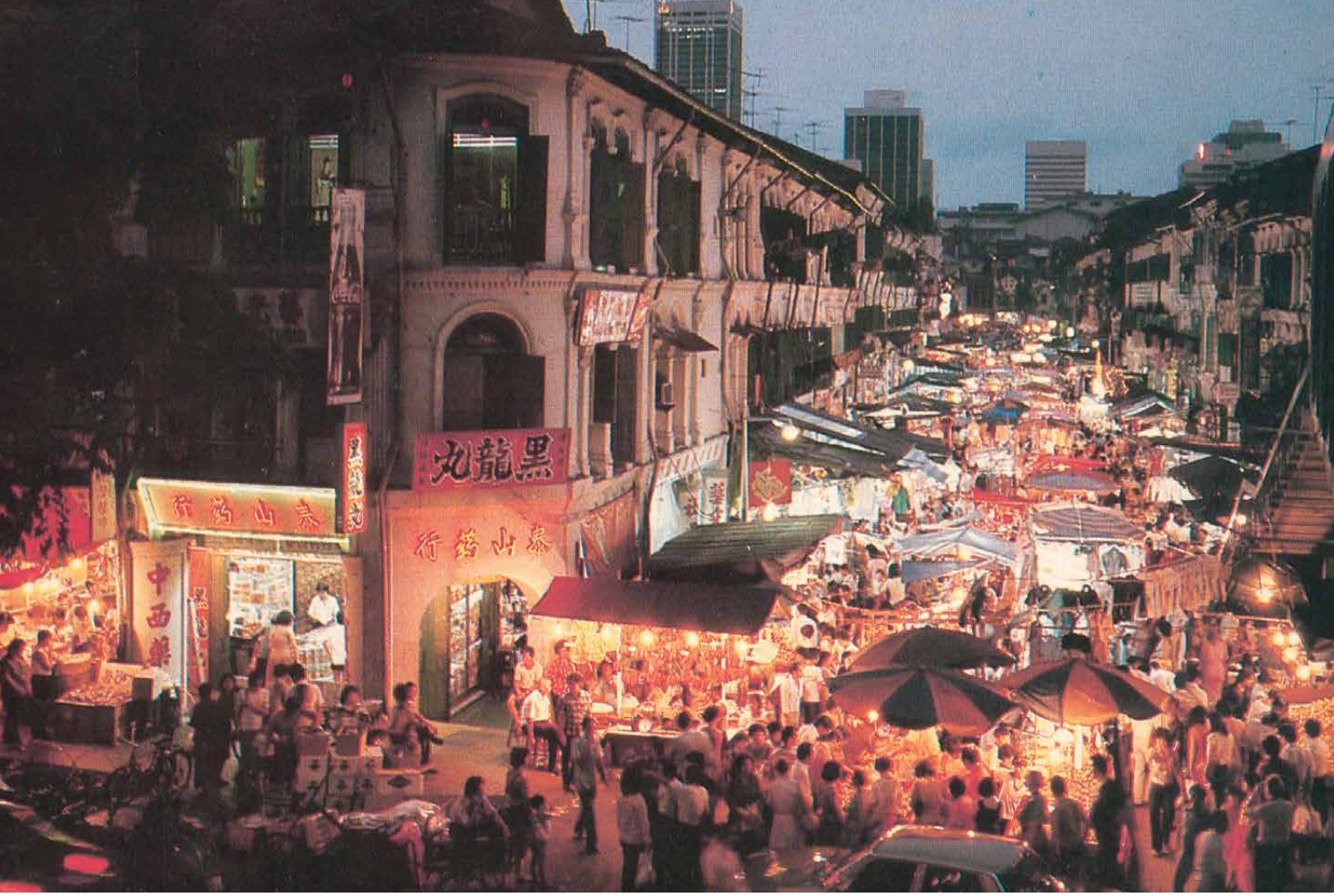
continued to operate in Kreta Ayer well into the 20th century.[36]

Developments in the Post-War Era

The number of migrants living in Kreta Ayer continued to grow until the end of World War II. After the war, the government had to address the limited availability of housing, and the squalid living conditions in Kreta Ayer and the rest of the Chinatown area.[37] 1960 marked the beginning of the restructuring of residential settlements by the Housing & Development Board (HDB). This policy resulted in the resettling of Cantonese people from Kreta Ayer to other parts of Singapore.[38] According to Wong, until the 1940s, most Cantonese were still "cramped up within Kreta Ayer… Most of these people [would] shift out later on when they have this SIT (Singapore Improvement Trust)... [then] they all move out to Tiong Bahru".[39]

Furthermore, as Singapore modernised, attitudes towards traditional practices began to change. The death houses at Sago Lane were banned in 1961 due to noise pollution and fire safety concerns.[40] Sago Lane subsequently became a public housing area with virtually no practitioners of the funeral trade remaining there. The area that used to bear witness to this deathly profession is now a busy carpark beside the Buddha Tooth Relic Temple.[41]

Post-war developments also greatly affected Cantonese entertainment in Kreta Ayer. After the Japanese Occupation, in which the Lai Chun Yuen Opera House suffered heavy bomb damage, there was a shift in priorities regarding land-use. This led to a decline of Cantonese theatre performances in Chinatown. The Lai Chun Yuen Opera House, which became a merchandise shop and later a warehouse for street hawkers, never regained its former prominence.[42] It was subsequently redesigned into a hotel.[43] The change in attitudes towards traditional practices was another contributing factor to the decline of Chinese opera performances. By the 1970s, Chinese opera largely lost its popularity, possibly due to competition from



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other forms of entertainment in Singapore's rapidly modernising society. Nevertheless, the art form was preserved by the Kreta Ayer People's Theatre built in 1969, which over the subsequent decades hosted both amateur and professional performers.[44]

From Kreta Ayer to Chinatown

By the 1980s, as a result of urban resettlement, Kreta Ayer was no longer a Cantonese enclave. Kreta Ayer, and its neighbouring districts like Telok Ayer, had become less exclusive and part of a larger, more cohesive Chinatown community. One resident, Madam Soh, recalls: "Thirty years ago, most of the people living here were Cantonese. When some moved away to newer housing estates, some Hokkien families from Telok Ayer moved in." In 1989, *The Straits Times* reported that many Chinatown residents were "rather indifferent" about the dilution of the dialect enclaves and movement of the people.[45]

At this time, Chinatown was also being developed as a tourist attraction. The Singapore Tourist Promotion Board invited foreign experts to provide input on the commercial prospects for Chinatown.[46] In this debate on the future of Chinatown, some called to preserve the physical structures, while others believed that the spirit of Chinatown was embodied by the way of life that came to be associated with the town.[47] In the end, shophouses were preserved, and street hawkers were relocated to Kreta Ayer Complex.[48] Meanwhile, the Urban Redevelopment Authority conducted a face-lift operation for 44 shophouses that it acquired in Chinatown as part of its town conservation efforts.[49] New infrastructure was also built, such as pedestrian walkways, improved signage and public spaces for community activities such as wayang.[50] Kreta Ayer itself was accorded conservation status in 1989.[51]

Kreta Ayer Today

After years of physical and demographic change, Kreta Ayer is no longer the Cantonese enclave that people often remember it by. As we have noted, even back then, there were already other communities like the

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Indians and *karayuki-san* who co-existed in the town. Nevertheless, as part of contemporary Chinatown, Kreta Ayer has managed to retain elements of its Cantonese legacy. Cantonese opera continues to live on at the Kreta Ayer People's Theatre, while the Kreta Ayer Heritage Gallery (to open in July 2019) showcases the town's cultural heritage, such as opera, puppetry and music.[52] Yet the true reminder of Kreta Ayer's past as a Cantonese enclave is perhaps best observed in the older residents who lived through Kreta Ayer's numerous changes. Indeed, if you listen carefully, smatterings of Cantonese can still be heard outside Chinatown Complex near Sago Lane, where long-time residents socialise and play games such as Chinese chess.

10 The night bazaar at Pagoda Street, c. 1970s
Image courtesy of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board

11 Kreta Ayer People's Theatre, 2019
Image courtesy of National Heritage Board

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JOO CHIAT:
COSMOPOLITAN CRUCIBLE OF SINGAPORE'S EAST

Text by Debbie Ng and Goh Seng Chuan Joshua

In Channel 5's 2008 drama *Sayang Sayang*, viewers are treated to a comedic spectacle in which the matriarch of a rich Straits Chinese family fends off her stepmother's attempt to take over the family business, Tan Original Kueh Chang.[1] While the family's antics certainly captivate, adding to the series' appeal is its backdrop which features one of Singapore's most recognisable districts – Joo Chiat. Tan Original Kueh Chang, in fact, takes its inspiration from Kim Choo Kueh Chang located at 60 Joo Chiat Place, with several scenes shot at the shop's premises itself.[2] The Tan family home, too, exudes the quintessentially Straits Chinese vibes associated with Katong-Joo Chiat. While its location at 789 Mountbatten Road does not fall within the boundaries of Joo Chiat per se, the bungalow's Straits Eclectic-style architecture calls to mind the unique facades that characterise many homes in the district, such as the terrace houses of 15 to 19 Koon Seng Road.[3]

With such portrayals surfacing in popular culture, it is no surprise that Joo Chiat's place identity has come to be associated with the ornate built heritage and elaborate material culture of the Straits Chinese.[4] Indeed, such an image of Joo Chiat is also reinforced by efforts to market the district to visitors from abroad. On the Visit Singapore website, tourists are

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enjoined to "discover Peranakan culture" as they "stroll past heritage shophouses" and "quaint stores", with Joo Chiat's identity being described in terms of its "colourful two-storey shophouses" and "terrace houses with ornate facades".[5] *Time Out* magazine's online page concurs, suggesting that in Joo Chiat, one can easily "explore the heritage of the Peranakans – if [one] knows where to look".[6] In sum, Joo Chiat – which broadly speaking is bordered by Marine Parade Road, Joo Chiat Place, Haig Road and Still Road – has been reduced in the public imagination to being the archetypal Peranakan district in Singapore: one in which even the word "Peranakan" (a Malay term referring broadly to the locally-born) is deployed in

01 Koon Seng Road in Joo Chiat, 2019
Image courtesy of National Heritage Board

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02 Joo Chiat Road, c. 1930
Collection of Singapore Philatelic Museum, Postcard donated by Prof Cheah Jin Seng

03 Joo Chiat Road, towards Joo Chiat Place, 1984
Lee Kip Lin Collection, Image courtesy of Lee Kip Lin and National Library Board, Singapore

04 A police station at Grove Estate, a coconut plantation belonging to Thomas Dunman, late 19th century
Image courtesy of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board

05 An aerial photograph of the Joo Chiat-Katong area taken by the British Royal Airforce, 1958
Collection held by National Archives of Singapore, Crown copyright

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its most narrow sense to refer primarily to only the Straits Chinese.[7]

Given the above, one may rightly question whether such understandings of Joo Chiat's heritage accord with historical evidence. How valid are portrayals of Joo Chiat as a place defined largely by the culture and contributions of the Straits Chinese?[8] Using a historical approach, this article demonstrates that contrary to predominant representations, Joo Chiat's place identity cannot be circumscribed by a narrow focus on Straits Chinese culture alone. Instead, from its earliest days, the district's landscape was characterised by a multiculturalism of a far broader ilk – one that went beyond stock notions of hybridity to include a genuinely eclectic mix of influences derived from the contributions of Europeans, Jews, Baweanese and Arabs. To use the words of David Tantow and Brenda Yeoh, the "paramount mingling of cultures" that occurred in Joo Chiat in the past is one that is quite different from the "present-day state-endorsed practice of 'selective cosmopolitanism'".[9] Viewed from this angle, the current proliferation of Western-style diners and internationally-themed boutiques in Joo Chiat indicates, perhaps, not an assault on its place identity, but a continuation of its age-old cosmopolitan milieu albeit in an updated skein – one that, in many respects, challenges us to re-examine our often trite conceptions of Joo Chiat's heritage.

In tracing the history of Joo Chiat, it should be noted at the outset that the district's development precedes the existence of the toponym by which we refer to the area today. Indeed, until the 1930s, Joo Chiat tended to be subsumed as part of a greater Katong district, a place name which in current parlance is typically used to refer to the area west of Joo Chiat.[10] For this reason, the nomenclature Katong-Joo Chiat is often used today. In early colonial maps, however, the term "Tanjong Katong" was predominantly used by colonial officials to denote the plot of land which lay at the easternmost edge of the established British settlement.[11] With British settlement of Singapore proceeding apace in the years after 1819, the area quickly became dominated by European estate-type agriculture, and this in turn bequeathed the district much of its present-day toponymic heritage. Dunman Road is one such example, having been named after Thomas Dunman – Singapore's first Commissioner of Police and owner of the 435-acre Grove Estate, which cultivated coconut as its primary crop.[12] Thomas Owen Crane, a contemporary of Dunman, similarly pursued coconut planting in the district, with his legacy being preserved in the form of Crane Road, which today bisects Onan Road and Carpmael Road.[13] Roads aside, these pioneer European cultivators also bestowed Joo Chiat with the reputation of being an idyllic and laidback district through their construction of grand holiday homes by the sea – a reputation, which, interestingly, has remained intact despite the fact that the coastline has since been extended southwards with the construction of Marine Parade in the 1970s.[14] As a *Straits Times* editor mused in 2008, Joo Chiat continues to "exude laid back charms".[15]

By the turn of the 20th century, the pioneer generation of European planters had, as a result of incidents such as pest outbreaks, sold their estates to a younger cohort of landowners.[16] Although it is true that prominent Peranakans such as Tan Kim Cheng and Tan Quee Lan figured amongst this newer group of property holders, newspaper reports reveal that the beneficiaries of this land parcellation process were a diverse lot, with newcomers including figures like A. Kandasamy and Parsick Joaquim (father of Agnes Joaquim, who in 1899 bred the Vanda Miss Joaquim – Singapore's national flower).[17] It was from this second-wave of landowners, indeed, that Chew Joo Chiat – an immigrant from China born in the 1870s – would eventually acquire land in the 1930s. He purchased lots originating from Robert Little's Confederate Estate marking a third wave of change in real estate ownership.[18] Such rampant changes in land titles, in part, reflected Singapore's urban growth in the early 20th century. Given that the district was situated just at the outer limits of the Municipal boundaries, the area was considered prime estate by property speculators keen to cash in on the demand for space that was increasingly scarce in town.[19]

In this frenzy of real estate activity, it is pertinent to note that many projects in the area were not initiated by Peranakans at all, or even by Chew, whose name the district gradually came to be referred by.[20] Symptomatic of the global influences that shaped interwar Joo Chiat is the Karikal Mahal, located

at the junction of Still Road and East Coast Road. Currently housing a preschool, it was built in 1917 by the affluent cattle merchant Moona Kader Sultan, who had in mind a large mansion fit for his numerous wives.[21] Subsequently rechristened as the Grand Hotel in 1947, it then served a function similar to the now-defunct Seaview Hotel, which was established in 1906 by Mannaseh Meyer at the present location of Jalan Seaview.[22] In the 1910s, Meyer, a Jew hailing from Calcutta, also established in the vicinity what a *Straits Times* article would later term as "the first block of flats in Singapore" – the Meyer Flats at Seaview.[23]

Even though personas such as Sultan and Meyer certainly contributed to demonstrating the wide range of influences that shaped early Joo Chiat, it would be a mistake to assume that Joo Chiat's cosmopolitan milieu only derived from the presence of its well-to-do inhabitants.[24] Kampong Amber, situated at the intersection of Amber Road and Mountbatten Road, is a case in point. From the early 1900s to the 1980s, Kampong Amber was home to several Baweanese families – migrants from Pulau Bawean in Java who today are considered a sub-ethnic group of the Malay community.[25] Hajah Junaidah Bte Junit, who spent parts of her holidays at her aunt's home in Kampong Amber in the 1960s, recalls "hawkers from Kampong Amber [who] sold cheap local dishes such as *mee rebus*, *lontong* and *nasi lemak*", as well as an earlier generation of villagers who lived "side by side with wealthy Chinese towkays, most notable of whom was the wife of Lee Choon Guan".[26] No strangers to Joo Chiat, the Lees possessed substantial landholdings in the area, with Lee Choon Guan's father, the Malacca-born Peranakan Lee Cheng Yan, having constructed Mandalay Villa, a thirteen-room bungalow with a sea pavilion, in 1902.[27] A prominent landmark associated with Joo Chiat for much of the 20th century, the villa was torn down in 1983.[28]

Away from the coast and towards the inland areas, several other aspects of Joo Chiat's built heritage further reveal the contributions of diverse groups whose social impact were no less influential than the Straits Chinese of the early 20th century. Situated at 130 Joo Chiat Road, Masjid Khalid was constructed in 1917 on land owned by Haji Abdul Khalid bin Haji Mohamed Tyed, a philanthropist and businessman whose decision to construct a mosque was prompted by a group of food peddlers who desired a place for worship.[29] According to the mosque's own records, and in yet another nod to the cosmopolitan nature of early Joo Chiat, the mosque's first official recorded *imam* (religious leader) was Syeikh Osman Bin Syaikh Omar Al-Ganus, an Arab from Palembang who was given the title *abah* (Malay for "father") by the local community.[30] Serving as Joo Chiat's head *qadi* (Islamic law magistrate), Syeikh Osman was reputed to have helped officiate "many Muslim marriages around Joo Chiat, Onan Road and its neighbouring districts".[31]

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06 Kampong Amber, 1991
Lee Kip Lin Collection, Image courtesy of Lee Kip Lin and National Library Board, Singapore

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07 Masjid Khalild, 2019
Image courtesy of National Heritage Board

08 The former Roxy Theatre, 1940s
Image courtesy of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board

What is interesting here, perhaps, is the fact that beyond Masjid Khalid, the Arab contribution to early 20th century Joo Chiat was more commonplace than often acknowledged. Nowhere is this better illustrated than in the case of the Red House Bakery (officially Katong Bakery & Confectionery Company), Joo Chiat's most iconic landmark situated at 63 East Coast Road. In popular accounts, the original shophouse bakery (demolished in 2003 and subsequently reconstructed) often starred as the social locus of Joo Chiat during its halcyon days, with former patrons fondly recalling its crisp curry puffs and delectable swiss rolls.[32] Less known, however, is the fact that since 1957, the land on which the original shophouse once stood has been considered a *waqaf* asset, having been placed in trust by Sheriffa Zain Alsharoff Mohamed Alsagoff, herself a descendent of Hajjah Fatimah (who built the Hajjah Fatimah Mosque situated at Beach Road).[33] A form of Islamic endowment (*waqaf*), this meant that earnings from the shophouse lease were to be used to fund the education of Sheriffa Zain's grandchildren, and subsequently, the running of a free clinic.[34]

At this juncture, it is evident that the landscape of early 20th century Joo Chiat was, far from being shaped primarily by the Straits Chinese, in fact a product of people and influences from around the world. With this in mind, how then does one make sense of the district's evolution in the century's latter half, which often tends to be overlooked given the

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09 A view of East Coast Road with Red House Bakery on the left, 2019
Image courtesy of National Heritage Board

focus on Joo Chiat's origins and the purportedly Peranakan character which accompanied its early growth? Perhaps, if one follows the argument that Joo Chiat has always been a cosmopolitan crucible, one may glimpse that the global orientation of Joo Chiat not only continued, but took on new forms that spoke to the rapid social change occurring in Singapore during the 1950s and 1960s.

Formerly situated along East Coast Road, the Tay Buan Guan Department Store and the Roxy, Palace, and Odeon-Katong theatres were just some of the sites in Joo Chiat where residents could access the global popular culture of the mid-20th century that enthralled many across Singapore. At Tay Buan Guan, which hosted both a supermarket and an emporium, patrons could peruse the latest trends in international fashion, which according to a 1967 advertisement in *The Straits Times*, included handknitted wools of the "freshest colours".[35] The Roxy, Palace and Odeon-Katong theatres, meanwhile, helped shaped the modern cultural sensibilities of a generation of Joo Chiat residents who grew up watching American-produced movies such as Tarzan, King Kong and Superman at its premises.[36] Dr Natarajan Varaprasad, who grew up in Joo Chiat in the 1950s and 1960s, recalled "queue[ing] up on Sunday mornings" and paying $1.50 to watch "Westerns" at the Roxy and Odeon-Katong.[37] Rita Fernando, who lived in Siglap during the same era, similarly recalled that many were attracted by the affordable prices offered at the Roxy theatre, with cinema-goers often congregating at the promontory at the end of Joo Chiat Road for supper after their movie.[38]

Incidentally, perhaps the ultimate litmus test demonstrating that Joo Chiat's history has always been inflected with a global outlook concerns the wide array of food offerings which the district is known for.[39] While the global range of dining options available in Joo Chiat may seem to be a present-day phenomenon, the district was in fact one of the first areas away from downtown Singapore where Singaporeans had their first tastes of Americanised western-style cuisine, which had started to become popular in the 1950s and 1960s. The now defunct Wonderland Café, once situated between the former Joo Chiat Police Station and Roxy Cinema, for example, was where many Singaporeans reportedly savoured their first ice-cream banana splits and sundae coiffures.[40] The Tay Buan Guan store, too, boasted a milkbar in the 1960s, bringing to Singapore's East an American-style dining concept where patrons could enjoy milkshakes and smoothies.[41] Seen in this light, the proliferation of trendy upscale malls in Joo Chiat today may not be entirely new, but merely a continuation of a decades-old trend. To rehash a popular Teochew saying, "*gim* Tanglin, *ngeng* Katong" (gold Tanglin, silver Katong) – if Orchard deserves the accolade of being Singapore's most desirable precinct, Joo Chiat, with its cosmopolitan sensibilities, has never been far behind.[42]

To conclude, it is worth mentioning a recent development in 21st century Joo Chiat – the appearance of Vietnamese-run bars, eateries and stores – and appraising some of the responses to the growth of what has been dubbed Singapore's "Little Vietnam".[43] For an editor of a 2010 CNN Travel article, the presence of a "Little Vietnam" in Joo Chiat was "slightly jarring and incongruous in more ways than one" given how Joo Chiat is "rich and steeped in Eurasian and Peranakan history".[44] In a somewhat similar vein, an online commentator on TripAdvisor remarked in 2013 on the "noticeable increase in the number of modern food outlets that sell chocolates, Vietnamese food, [and] bakeries", pointedly expressing the "hope [that] they (the authorities) retain or preserve the older shophouses, many of which still have elaborate Peranakan designs and patterns".[45] While both responses are certainly heartening with respect to their interest in the Straits Chinese elements of Joo Chiat's heritage, they are also reminders of the strong and somewhat skewed popular impression of Joo Chiat's heritage. Our sojourn through Joo Chiat's history has revealed, instead, that Joo Chiat's place identity is constituted by much more than just Peranakan influences. From the work of early European settlers to the generosity of Arab philanthropists, this is a district whose landscape bears the influences of an eclectic mix of races and creeds; its receptivity to diverse, global influences, in many respects, presents a microcosm of Singapore at large. Ultimately, it is arguably this quality that explains why Joo Chiat endears itself to Singaporeans living both inside and outside its boundaries. It is for this reason, too, that Joo Chiat can fittingly be termed the cosmopolitan crucible of Singapore's east.

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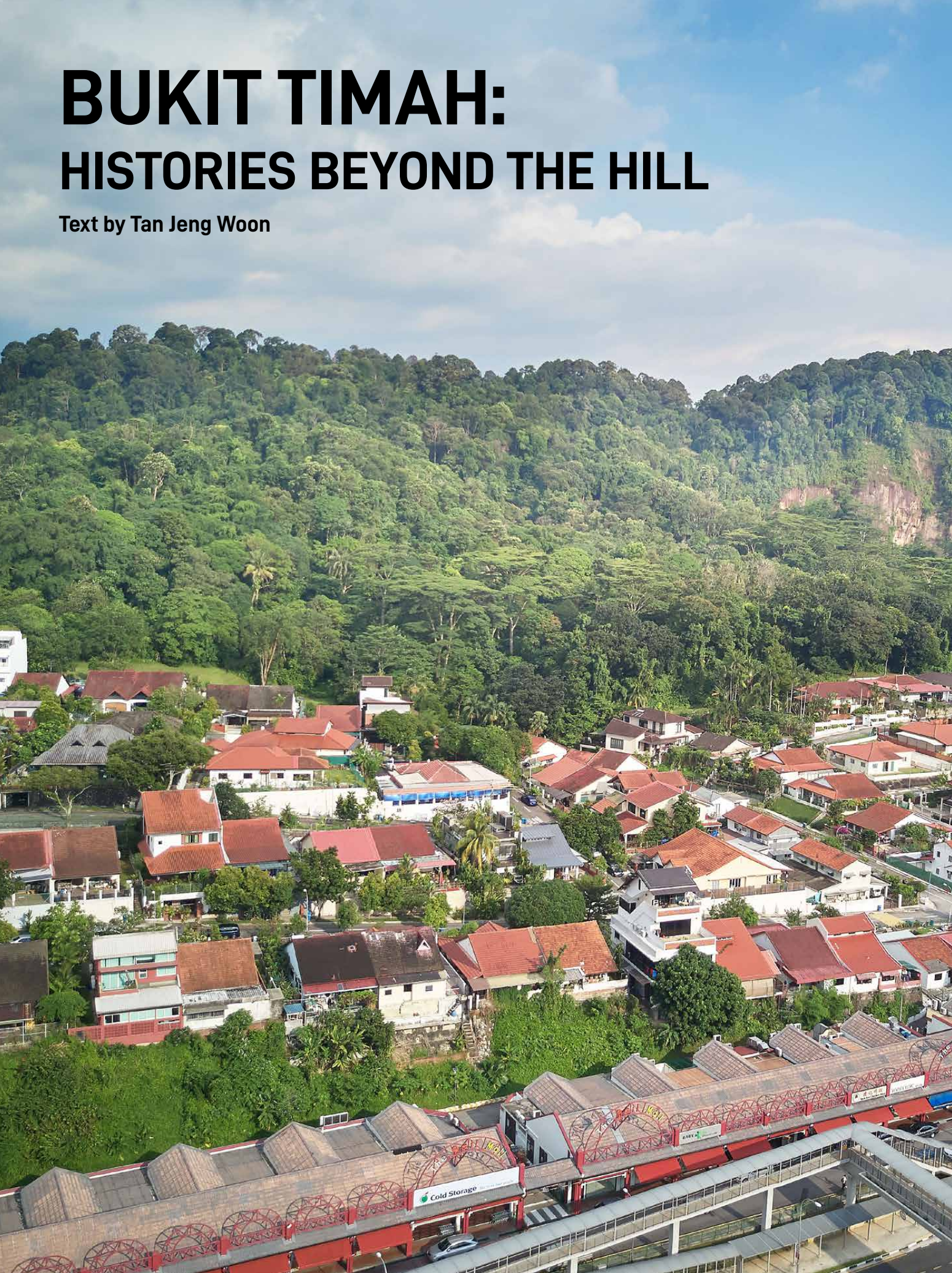
BUKIT TIMAH:
HISTORIES BEYOND THE HILL

Text by Tan Jeng Woon



In today's context, Bukit Timah is almost synonymous with its natural heritage. The name Bukit Timah refers to Singapore's highest hill, which is home to the largest contiguous tract of primary rainforest in Singapore. It is therefore no surprise that a quick search of Bukit Timah on Google will yield many results related to nature. In fact, my personal experience with Bukit Timah is also based in nature; my family and I will frequent the Botanic Gardens and the Bukit Timah Nature Reserve on the weekends for our weekly morning walks.

However, while the defining character of Bukit Timah has always been nature, the relationship between the area's historical development and its natural heritage is something that is often overlooked. Looking back, colonial desire to explore and conquer the area's "wild" forests was a major catalyst for the construction of Bukit Timah Road and the railway which used to pass through the area. This was soon followed by industries and communities drawn to Bukit Timah's natural resources and accessibility. Progressively, spaces for religion and leisure emerged to serve these new settlers. Even during the war, Bukit Timah's natural terrain was crucial in determining outcomes. By exploring the history of this area, we get a deeper understanding of how Bukit Timah's natural resources played a role in shaping its development over time.[1]

Bukit Timah's Beginnings

Bukit Timah started as a densely forested area that was only touched by Chinese settlers who ventured inland to set up small gambier plantations. However, in general, Bukit Timah was still considered "wild and lawless" by the Europeans, who had not yet explored the area. Hence, in order to instil some form of control, the British built Bukit Timah Road between the 1830s to 1840s. The road was completed in 1845 and served as an artery, connecting Singapore town centre in the south, to Kranji in the north of the island, and finally into Johor.[2] Consequently, this

01 An aerial view of Bukit Timah, with Bukit Timah Hill in the background and Fuyong Estate in the foreground, 2016
Image courtesy of National Heritage Board

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02 The railway station at Bukit Timah, early 20th century
Image courtesy of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board

03 Workers at a granite quarry in Bukit Timah, 1957
Wong Kwan Collection, Image courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

04 A view of Bukit Timah's greenery from Hindhede Nature Park, 2016
Image courtesy of National Heritage Board

arterial road facilitated a growing flow of people and produce from plantations and rural areas to downtown Singapore.

With the amount of people and produce travelling on Bukit Timah Road steadily increasing, the colonial government felt it necessary to construct the Singapore-Kranji Railway (later Singapore-Jurong Railway) to further aid this traffic flow.[3] As such, the station at Bukit Timah opened in 1903 to help expedite the movement of people and materials such as granite and rubber downtown.[4] The arrival of Bukit Timah station also subsequently saw a community settling around it. Tan Kek Tiam recalled that when he alighted at Bukit Timah station in the 1920s:

> I would walk the forest, whole jungles [of] rubber trees… there was a boy's reformatory just in front of the station and our church, the Glory Church, behind the track.[5]

The facilities, like the ones described by Tan, suggest that there was already a sizable community living in the Bukit Timah area at the time.

An Industrial Hub

However, the railway was not the only factor that contributed to the growing settlement in Bukit Timah. The birth of new industries such as granite quarrying and factories that emerged from Bukit Timah's natural resources were also attracting people to come and live in the area. The growth of the granite industry, in particular, was aided by the railway which provided an efficient mode of transportation for these rocks.[6] To meet the growing demand for granite, which was being used in island-wide construction projects such as the Causeway and various other roadworks, other quarries such as Hindhede Quarry soon began to open up.[7] Describing the experience of living near to the quarry, residents of the nearby Fuyong Estate would "hear sirens wailing from the quarry, warning everyone to stay away from the rock blasting".[8] Unfortunately, rock blasting had severe environmental repercussions, which were evident even in the early years of the quarrying industry.[9] Such damages included "destruction of natural habitats, soil erosion, changes in the area's hydrology and alterations to the climate".[10] Today, in order to remedy these environmental damages and restore Bukit Timah's biodiversity, NParks has started rehabilitative projects, such as turning Singapore Quarry and Hindhede Quarry into wetland habitats by filling them with rainwater.[11]

Apart from the quarrying industry, factories, attracted by natural resources and the convenience of the Singapore-Johore Railway, also began moving

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into Bukit Timah, turning the place into an industrial hub. Notably, rubber was one such industry that took advantage of the natural resources available in Bukit Timah. What began as a project under the guidance of Henry Nicholas Ridley to cultivate rubber in the Botanical Gardens during the late 19th century had morphed into a large-scale commercial operation by 1910.[12] Forested areas in Bukit Timah were being cleared for rubber cultivation as worldwide demand for rubber skyrocketed.[13] Soon after, rubber processing factories were opened to complement Bukit Timah's rubber plantations.[14] One of these rubber factories was Lam Choon Rubber Factory. The factory was established before the war, with a large rubber plantation surrounding the facility. The factory "emitted a strong stench when rubber was smoked [while] yellow coloured rubber sheets hung out to dry in the sun".[15] By the 1970s, however, demand for rubber had slowed, and rubber plantations in Singapore began to dwindle. This eventually prompted the owner of Lam Choon factory, Tan Su Kiok, to sell off the premises in 1977.[16]

Bukit Timah at War

The Japanese Occupation is a dark episode in Singapore's history, and Bukit Timah was certainly not immune to witnessing some of these tragic moments. Unexpectedly, there was, however, one factory in Bukit Timah that provided locals with a sense of security during this time of bleakness.

During WWII, Bukit Timah was a prime target for the Japanese. Due to its natural terrain, the area was strategically important. Not only did Bukit Timah Hill provide a natural vantage point overlooking downtown Singapore, the area also contained Singapore's main water catchment areas including Peirce and MacRitchie reservoirs. Therefore, for the Japanese, capturing Bukit Timah would be akin to winning half the battle.[17] On 11 February 1942, Bukit Timah fell to the Japanese, dealing a serious blow to the British defenders.

On 15 February 1942, Singapore surrendered to the Japanese. British Lieutenant-General Arthur Percival signed the surrender documents at the Ford Factory in Bukit Timah, marking the start of the Japanese Occupation in Singapore. The factory, which opened in late 1941 as Ford Motor Company's first assembly plant in Southeast Asia, was converted into a *butai* (Japanese for "facility") and used by Japanese conglomerate Nissan to assemble military vehicles for Japanese war effort.[18]

Other factories along Bukit Timah were also used by the Japanese during the occupation. For example, Lam Choon factory was converted into a soy sauce

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05 A picture from the Japanese magazine, *Shashin Shuho*, showing the surrender of the British forces at the Ford Factory, 1942
Lim Kheng Chye Collection, Image courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

06 The Ford Factory at Upper Bukit Timah Road, 1950s
Image courtesy of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board

factory run by Noda Shoyu Kaisha, the predecessor of Kikkoman Corporation.[19] Robert Chong, who used to work at Noda Shoyu, remembered the factory as the main supplier of Japanese soy sauce in Malaya:

> Most of [the workers] lived nearby and we knew each other before the war. So they all go there to work because [Noda Shoyu had] better benefits – more rice ration, everything. You get plenty of rice, double the ration I used to get at [my previous job]. Fortnightly, you get two bottles of soy sauce, first class quality.

What was distinctive and perhaps surprising about Noda Shoyu was that the Japanese management treated local workers of the factory considerably well. According to Chong:

> …there's no slapping, no yelling or cursing or using vulgar language. Most of them could speak English and Malay… they treated us well and gave good rations, food, everything.[20]

Today, the factory's site has been taken over by Bukit Timah Plaza, leaving behind no traces of either the occupation or the site's association with rubber.

Communal Spaces

As described earlier by Chong, many of the workers at Noda Shoyu lived within the vicinity of the factory. This was often the case for factory workers in Bukit Timah, who preferred not to commute daily to their workplace. By the late 1940s, there were groups of kampongs located throughout the entire stretch of Bukit Timah Road. For instance, at the 6th milestone, there were villages like Kampong Racecourse, Kampong Tempe and the Chinese village at Jalan Lim Tai See.

Kampong Racecourse, as its name suggests, was located opposite the Singapore Turf Club racecourse, where incidentally most of the kampong's Baweanese residents worked.[21] In the case of Kampong Tempe, the village was named after the similarly-named fermented soybean food item which they produced. These food products were particularly popular during festive occasions, where as many as 5,000 pieces of *tempe* would be made a day. They could also be found on a more regular basis down at the Chinese shops at the nearby Jalan Lim Tai See.[22]

As these villages became more established, residents started setting up institutions such as places of worship. Within Kampong Tempe and the Chinese

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07 The prayer hall of Masjid Al-Huda, 2016
Image courtesy of National Heritage Board

08 A Hari Raya gathering of the Malay community in Kampong Tempe, 1958
Image courtesy of Masjid Al-Huda

village at Jalan Lim Tai See, villagers established Masjid Al-Huda and Hoon San Temple respectively. Masjid Al-Huda, which has been serving Muslims living around the 6th milestone since 1925, was originally constructed out of wood.[23] In its original form, the mosque featured a multi-tiered roof, mirroring Javanese architecture and representing the heritage of Kampong Tempe's Javanese residents.[24] By 1960, the villagers decided to rebuild the mosque in concrete. According to the chairman of the mosque, Azman Kassim, this reconstruction was made possible through community fundraising efforts by Kampong Tempe's residents.[25]

At Jalan Lim Tai See, the Chinese village erected Hoon San Temple in 1902 to honour the deity Lim Tai See. Between the 1950s and 1960s, as part of its rituals, the temple regularly featured operas performed on a theatre stage.[26] Kassim recalls:

> …after prayers at the mosque, we Malays liked to go watch the operas even though we didn't understand them! The actors would be flying across the stage and we would shine our torchlights on them. When they sold *cheng tng* (a Chinese dessert), the Malays would be lining up as well.[27]

This exchange of cultures between the two communities was prominent and endures till today. Despite the kampongs having long disappeared from the area, Masjid Al-Huda and Hoon San Temple continue to maintain good relations with each other by exchanging gifts of food during festive events such as Lunar New Year and Hari Raya Puasa.[28]

Besides places of worship, institutions for recreation were also set up to entertain the residents of Bukit Timah. The Singapore Turf Club, having bought an extensive 244 acres of land from the Bukit Timah

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Rubber Estate, opened in 1933 and catered to the upper classes.[29] For the masses, rows of shophouses at Cluny Road and Chun Tin Road, as well as the Adam Food Centre offered a broad selection of food.

Yet, one of the more well-known facilities for entertainment would arguably be the former Beauty World, which was often frequented by the workers and residents of Bukit Timah.[30] The amusement park opened in 1944, during the Japanese Occupation, near the 7th milestone.[31] It was originally named "Tai Tong Ah Sai Kai" (Cantonese for "Greater East Asia World"), in line with the contemporary Japanese imperialist propaganda of a Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.[32] The park mainly served as a gambling facility to battle sharp inflation caused by the "banana note" currency. *Tikam-tikam* (Malay for "taking a chance"), *pai-gow* (Cantonese for "making nine" in Cantonese), *fan-tan* (Mandarin for "repeated divisions") and other games were available at the 20-plus stalls in the park.[33] Besides gambling, the park also featured a market for farmers in Bukit Timah to sell their produce, a wayang (Chinese opera) stage, food stalls and the Tiong Hwa cinema.[34] Tan Wah Meng, former resident of Bukit Timah Village during the Japanese Occupation, recalled that the cinema was open-air and that usually "the film [screened was] a Japanese show (propaganda). [There were] very few Chinese shows unless you get the very old ones".[35]

The years immediately after the war saw the park transform into a market. It took on the name "Beauty World" in reference to its prior existence as an amusement park, and following the suit of other established parks like Great World, New World and Happy World.[36] The Beauty World Market opened in 1947, and its zinc roofs and canvas sheets housed stalls offering an abundant range of goods to residents of Bukit Timah.[37] Unfortunately, the marketplace experienced two severe fires in 1975 and 1977, and was posing health and safety problems to its residents.[38] In response, the government acquired the land in 1975, and constructed Beauty World Centre across the road in 1984 to accommodate stall owners from the old marketplace.[39] Today, Beauty World Centre continues to house shops providing an array of services. These include education centres and music schools which attract families with school-going children, especially during the weekends.[40]

12

09 Hoon San Temple, 2016
Image courtesy of National Heritage Board

10 Sundry shops and the Tiong Hwa cinema (in the background) at the former Beauty World, 1972
Image courtesy of Urban Redevelopment Authority

11 Stalls at the former Beauty World, 1982
Image courtesy of Urban Redevelopment Authority

12 Bukit Timah Nature Reserve, 2016
Image courtesy of National Heritage Board

Roots in Nature

In today's setting, the lush and serene greenery of Bukit Timah seems incongruent with the area's past as an active industrial hub, as well as the legacies of World War II. Moreover, Bukit Timah's modern housing estates render kampong days to a distant past; a far-cry from the scene in the 1980s, in which residents of kampongs were reluctant to leave despite being offered millions by property developers.[41]

For my family, our history with Bukit Timah extends beyond our weekly walks at the nature reserve. My parents used to live with my maternal grandparents at Sixth Avenue when they first got married and had me. They would tell me how they used to bring me along to food places like Beauty World Plaza and Adam Food Centre on the weekends, when grandma would take a rest from cooking. While I was too young to recall my life at Sixth Avenue, my parents' stories of our time there contribute to the collective memory of Bukit Timah that goes beyond its natural heritage.

There are many more stories that Bukit Timah has yet to tell, some of which have become lost in time. As recently as 2018, local newspapers reported on a war relic being found in Bukit Timah Nature Reserve, reminding us of the eponymous hill's strategic importance during the war.[42] Through looking at the area's rich history, we get a greater understanding of why Bukit Timah's identity can never be separated from nature. In fact, much of what makes up Bukit Timah's history began from its natural heritage, before branching and growing into wider communities and shared memories. As former student of Duchess Primary School, Sarkasi B. Said Tzee, aptly remarks: "When I go back to Bukit Timah, I'm again going back to nature."[43]

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