MUSE SG

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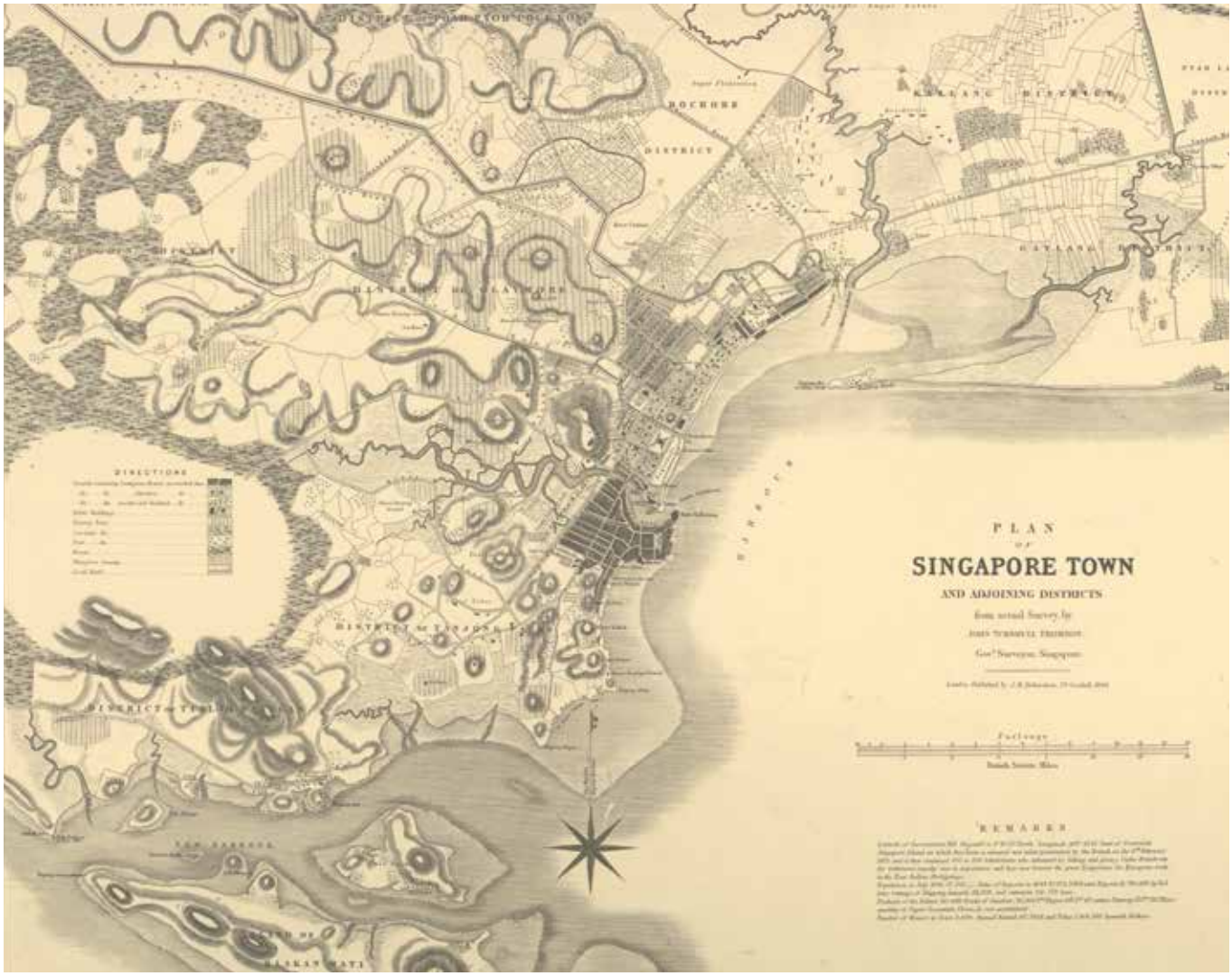
BICENTENNIAL



Plan of Singapore town and its adjoining districts, surveyed by J. T. Thomson, 1846
Image courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

FOREWORD

As part of the nationwide efforts to commemorate two centuries of Singapore's history since the arrival of the British, MUSE SG will launch a special four-part bicentennial commemorative series in 2018 and 2019. The four-part series will look back and examine how our place histories have shaped and contributed to the Singapore Story.

This is the first issue of the above series and it showcases different aspects of Singapore's place history through the stories of a number of towns. The histories of these towns are complex and multi-layered, and forged by government policies, war, trade and geography. Through the sharing of Singapore's place history, we hope to bring about a deeper appreciation of the unique heritage of the various towns and estates in Singapore.

In this issue, we begin with an introduction that traces Singapore's evolution from a small population of gambier farmers and sea traders in the early-19th century to a sprawling metropolis. Moving on to our feature articles on Toa Payoh and Kallang, we will showcase stories of these two pioneering towns which have played important roles in positioning Singapore as a world leader in public housing and aviation, and led the way for other estates to embrace change and modernity.

Our other articles on Bukit Panjang and Bishan focus on the theme of resilience. For Bukit Panjang, its remote location meant that residents had to band together as they collectively navigated the challenges confronting Singapore during its early years. Bishan, on the other hand, has had to deal with its reputation as one of Singapore's most haunted locales. By facing their challenges head-on, both towns manage to overcome the odds, while developing their own unique identities.

Finally, our articles on Yishun, Punggol and Pasir Ris feature heart-warming tales of towns that refuse to let their future be boxed in by their past or circumstance. Despite negative press reports, war-time tragedies and exclusive beginnings, these towns managed to reinvent themselves into estates known for their idyllic surrounds and modern amenities.

Working with students from National University of Singapore's History Society, a number of the articles in this issue are written by undergraduates who provide a youth's perspective on Singapore's heritage. Through this compilation of articles, we hope to contribute to the National Heritage Board's existing efforts to document and showcase the history and social memories of our local towns.

On behalf of the team at MUSE SG, we hope you will have fun reading and perhaps even discovering different sides of Singapore that you've never seen before!

MUSE SG TEAM

Publisher
National Heritage Board
61 Stamford Road,
#03-08, Stamford Court,
Singapore 178892

Chief Executive Officer
Chang Hwee Nee

Assistant Chief Executive
Alvin Tan
(Policy & Community)

MUSE SG TEAM
Director, Education & Community Outreach
Sim Wan Hui

Editors
Norsaleen Salleh
Stefanie Tham
Bryan Goh
Dr John Solomon

Design & Layout
Orgnix Creatives

Copyediting
Rufus Tan, Hedgehog Communications

Printing
Hobee Print Pte Ltd

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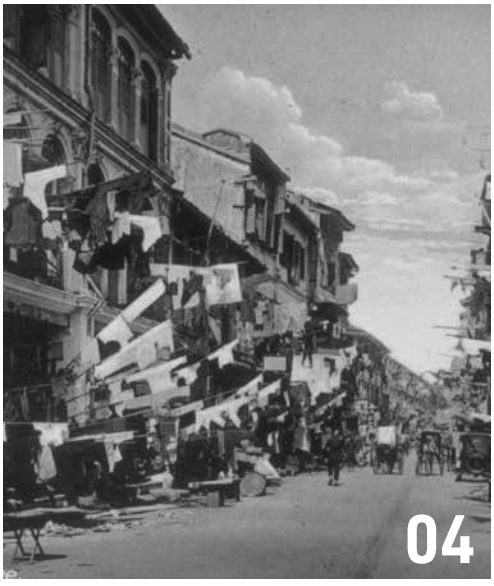
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INTRODUCTION:
BUILDING SINGAPORE'S PLACE IDENTITY

Text by Lim Wen Jun Gabriel

01

In almost 200 years since 1819, Singapore's primordial landscape has evolved into an urban city-state with ubiquitous high-rise residences and towering skyscrapers. From the Downtown Core to the most rural parts of the island, various districts and their respective communities have developed dramatically, albeit at different paces. For example, the bustling town area radiating from the Singapore River quickly took shape in the 1820s following Sir Stamford Raffles' vision of how the settlement should be ordered. In the Raffles Town Plan, neighbourhoods were designated according to ethnicity, and specific sites were reserved for green spaces and government buildings.[1] Development, however, was slower in the rural areas beyond the municipal centre. Eventually, most districts would share a similar trajectory of development as Singapore moved into the 21st century. Each of these precincts, towns and estates have evolved in a spectrum of ways, forming a patchwork of place identities that adds to Singapore's diverse and multicultural heritage.

Before further discussion, it is essential to first explore the idea of place identity. The identity of

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01 A rubber estate in Singapore, late-19th century
Image courtesy of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board

02 Singapore Town Plan by Lieutenant Philip Jackson, which was based on Raffles' instructions, 1828
Image courtesy of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board

03 A pepper plantation, 1890s
Gretchen Liu Collection, image courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

places are usually multifaceted, involving interwoven layers of cultural meaning, historical significance and social memory. One of the key elements that shape the identity of a place and its heritage are the shared, common experiences of various individuals. These experiences range from those of daily life in the kampongs to significant events like the Japanese invasion during World War II. In this light, the use of anecdotal experiences and memories is paramount. For example, my childhood memories of Pasir Ris have always been shaped by its beach, where my family had picnics every weekend. In a similar vein, my impression of Telok Blangah is shaped by Mount Faber, at which I spent countless Mid-Autumn Festivals strolling around with my family and our lanterns. These are the experiences of partaking in the heritage of each of these towns, which have shaped my impressions of them.

Place identity in Singapore can be understood in a similar way. The articles in this volume suggest that a sense of place develops through the interaction of communities and institutions with the physical landscape over time. These distinct place identities in turn widen our understanding of what it means to be Singaporean. As a result of both the place-making efforts initiated by urban planners, as well as the various communities who have put down roots in different parts of the island over the past 200 years, different locales have developed along lines that are, in the Singlish creole, "same-same, but different".

This introduction provides an overview of how place identity is inextricably linked to the broad changes in Singapore's landscape over time, thus setting the context for the discussions to follow. In the 14th century, Singapore island was home to the Malay Kingdom of Temasek as described in the Malay Annals, or the *Sejarah Melayu*. In 1819, Singapore had its first British encounter with the landing of Sir Stamford Raffles.[2] Here, Raffles found an island with around 1,000 inhabitants trading at the river and working on gambier plantations inland. The natural environment he noted was also relatively pristine.[3] Apart from the *Orang Laut* (sea people) settlement along the Singapore River, there were also other communities: the *Orang Kallang* at the mouth of the Kallang River, the *Orang Johor* at the Punggol River and the *Orang Seletar* at the estuaries of the Seletar River.[4] In addition, Chinese clan wars of the late 18th century in the Riau Islands also resulted in Teochew planters relocating to Singapore to start gambier

plantations along the Seletar River and Singapore River.[5] However, despite the activities of these early inhabitants of Singapore, much of the island's primordial landscape still remained intact. This would change upon the arrival of the British.

While downtown Singapore swiftly shaped up according to the Raffles Town Plan in the 1820s, the impact of early settlers on the overall environment of the island became increasingly visible by the mid-19th century. An 1846 map drawn by surveyor John Turnbull Thomson revealed that plantations had started to replace virgin forests, with numerous farms and plantations spreading inland, towards the north.[6] Also, because rivers, streams and Singapore's early trunk roads were the only access to rural inland Singapore at the time, agricultural development and villages were mainly found along Singapore's waterways and these early roads, as well as the city area, near the Singapore River.[7]

Some of these former plantations have left their mark on the street names of Singapore, serving as examples of how history informs place identity. One illustration is the town of Yishun, formerly part of the Nee Soon district, and named in honour of plantation owner Lim Nee Soon whose rubber and pineapple plantations contributed immensely to the development of villages in the area.[8] The place name of Boon Lay and its eponymous road in Jurong is another example, harkening back to the former rubber plantations owned by early entrepreneur Chew Boon Lay.[9]

Along with Singapore's landscape transformation from primordial to agricultural, the island's population grew exponentially from 10,683 in 1824 to 418,358 people in 1921.[10] This growth is mainly attributed to groups of migrants coming from China and the Indian sub-continent, who were drawn by expansions in trade and commerce, particularly with the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869.[11]

With a rapidly growing population, housing problems, especially in the city area, began to emerge due to the laissez-faire policy of the colonial government.[12] It was only in the early 1920s that the colonial government began addressing the issue, employing urban planning concepts to arrive at an "improvement of environmental quality through a rational ordering of space".[13] A commission was set up to make proposals for improvement in this domain, which eventually led to the establishment of the Singapore Improvement Trust (SIT) in 1927 to oversee the colony's housing needs.[14] Unfortunately, by 1942, the SIT had completed fewer than ten housing schemes, the most significant of which was Tiong Bahru.[15] The efforts of the SIT, it seems, were insufficient in alleviating the housing problem.[16]

World War II brought further disruptions to the country's landscape as the Japanese invaded Singapore in 1942. The air raids, in particular, caused not only the loss of life but also resulted in significant damage to civilian property, rendering many people homeless.[17] Consequently, the population living in the rural parts of Singapore swelled as air raids targeting central areas like Chinatown forced many to seek shelter further

04 Many tenants shared small housing quarters in Chinatown, 1920s *Lim Kheng Chye Collection, image courtesy of National Archives of Singapore*

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05 Singapore Improvement Trust flats at Upper Pickering Street, 1950s
Image courtesy of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board

06 Singapore Improvement Trust flats at Tiong Bahru, 1953
Image courtesy of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board

inland. Moreover, the end of World War II sparked a shift in the way its inhabitants viewed Singapore. Formerly perceiving themselves as sojourners who would eventually return to their native country, large portions of the immigrant population had decided to settle permanently in Singapore. Singles started families, which together with the post-war baby boom, created an urgent need for more housing. The existing settlements were overcrowded with 680,000 of the 938,000-strong population clustered within the city area. As a result, many built haphazard shelters of wood, attap, corrugated iron and scrap materials, forming squatter colonies that encircled the city.[18]

Singapore's housing shortage grew urgent in the 1960s. It was estimated that 50,000 housing units were required to meet the housing demand from 1960 to 1965 in order to relieve overcrowding in the city area, accommodate new families and resettle people housed in deteriorating buildings. The SIT had proven inadequate in meeting the post-war housing challenge due to the fact that it was a municipal body, rather than a housing authority.[19] This meant the SIT had to divide its resources to address other infrastructural issues such as road improvements, opening up of back lanes, drawing up improvement schemes and demolishing insanitary buildings.[20] The SIT was also limited by its bureaucratic structure, inhibiting it from making decisions and taking action quickly and efficiently.[21] To tackle the housing problem head on, the baton was passed to the newly established Housing & Development Board (HDB) on 1 February 1960.

At the onset, the HDB was focused on constructing as many dwelling units as possible in the shortest time and at the lowest possible cost. The board planned to disperse the population of Singapore in order to relieve the strain and congestion of the overpopulated city area.[22] This resulted in the development of satellite towns – new urban centres – in the rural parts of Singapore. "New Towns" were planned alongside Singapore's major highways, linking them to the city area where Singapore's commercial district lay.[23] Over time, the development of towns spread across the island, in tandem with the expansion of the public transport network.[24] The rapid development of high-rise residences would permanently reshape Singapore's landscape, with mass public housing featuring prominently in both the nation's skyline and its historical narrative.

This first stage of public housing development took place during the early 1960s, consisting of developments in Bukit Ho Swee, Tanglin Halt, Selegie and Queenstown. Compared to present-day residential towns, these early estates left much to be desired, with limited lifts and poor natural lighting, as well as insufficient communal, recreational and educational facilities. Nevertheless, these early developments, which had been described as "piecemeal development

in an ad hoc manner", provided the foundation for a viable living environment to be created on an unprecedented scale.[25] Also, despite the austere nature of these early estates, some of these pioneer HDB flats are today recognised for being an integral part of a place's heritage. For example, Blocks 45, 48 and 49 Stirling Road (the first blocks completed by the HDB) have been identified as heritage landmarks by residents of Queenstown for exemplifying the nation's transition from kampong to modern housing, demonstrating how shared memories do indeed inform place identity.[26]

The second and third stages of development were marked by the construction of Toa Payoh and Ang Mo Kio New Towns in 1965 and 1973 respectively. In these stages, greater attention was paid to the provision of facilities, even though focus continued to remain on providing sufficient public housing units.[27] The latter can be gleaned from the headlines of the time, with Toa Payoh Town proclaimed to be "bigger than Ipoh" (a Malaysian city, 600 acres in size).[28] A town centre offering a range of amenities was included in the design of Toa Payoh, while light industries were located in the town's periphery to provide job opportunities for residents, many of whom were former villagers.[29] Most of the buildings in Toa Payoh, however, shared a similar look (long, rectangular slabs), and facilities were still unevenly distributed across the town. These issues were subsequently addressed with Ang Mo Kio New Town, which was designed in a more systematic fashion, following a hierarchy of activity nodes and neighbourhood centres.[30]

At the end of the third stage, however, concerns about residential towns looking alike and lacking visual identity still persisted. With targets in housing construction, facilities and infrastructure provision met, more focus was given to improving the visual identity of the towns from the late 1970s.[31] As then HDB CEO Liu Thai Ker shared in 1981 regarding the board's move to increase emphasis on place making:

> The past has been a period of discipline – we were building fast and it was necessary to have definite guidelines. Now we're going into a period of variations on this discipline. We're not going to be wild or irresponsible. But we have to recognise in our new plans that people need surprises.[32]

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07 The balloting ceremony for Queenstown flats by the Housing & Development Board under the "Home Ownership for the People" scheme, 1965
Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, image courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

08 Toa Payoh Town, 1960s-80s
Image courtesy of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board

09 Bishan Town's iconic 25-storey point blocks, 2018
Image courtesy of National Heritage Board

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New town planning concepts were therefore applied in the fourth stage, which included the development of Tampines, Bukit Batok, Jurong East, Jurong West, Hougang and Yishun.[33] One strategy employed by the HDB was the implementation of roofscapes that were unique to the town: blocks in Tampines had pitched roofs whilst those in Bukit Batok had chamfered openings of various sizes.[34] These created in each town a distinct and unique skyline identity.[35] Other strategies included green reserve zones to mark the boundaries of each town, unique road networks, and the use of urban and architectural design to create landmarks.[36]

However, some of these strategies had their limitations. Roofscapes like those in Tampines were eventually found to be too costly to build, and the chamfered openings in Bukit Batok could not be repeated in other towns without risking confusion. Such challenges pushed the HDB to explore other more sustainable strategies, such as the use of unique motifs or special block designs that could become iconic of a particular town.[37] An example of this can be found in Hougang, where circular features incorporated into the design of the town's buildings through rounded balconies and rounded columns created a look distinctive from other towns.[38] Another example can be found in Bishan, with its unique pavilion roofs and 13 iconic 25-storey point blocks.[39]

These above-mentioned efforts illustrate the ways in which urban planners sought to create place identity, especially from the late 1970s onwards. These initiatives were not exclusive to the new towns. Since the late 1980s, mature towns have also been scheduled to undergo upgrading works, not only for maintenance purposes, but also to strengthen the town's visual identity.[40] However, it must be noted that while the physical landscape provides a foundation for inhabitants to identify with a locale, a sense of place is also very much dependent on the people's interaction with its built landscape. Wong and Yeh elaborate:

> Firstly, instant identification, belonging or pride cannot be expected. Physical planning and design can only provide a catalyst for a sense of identity or place to develop with familiarity and use of facilities over time.[41]

As the articles to follow suggest, the meanings of places are also created by the collective memories of communities. These identities can be generational, with each age group imbuing the same place with different meanings and associations. It is therefore an opportune time, as Singapore commemorates her bicentennial in 2019, to examine the stories of Singapore's locales and appreciate the rich heritage of place history. These narratives, while particular to each locale, have nevertheless intertwined and harmonised into one that is distinctly Singaporean.

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10 A view of Singapore's skyline at the Kampong Bahru area, undated
Image courtesy of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board

11 The Singapore skyline from Mount Faber, 2018
Image courtesy of National Heritage Board


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TOA PAYOH:
FIRST HDB SATELLITE TOWN

Text by Stefanie Tham

01

Before the 1970s, no taxi driver would have dared to enter Toa Payoh after dark. Ng Giak Hai, born in 1949 and a lifelong resident of Toa Payoh, remembers the seedier, darker underbelly of the area in its early years when violence and crime were a part of daily life. "In those days," he says, "police cars did not dare to come into the villages. If they came in, sometimes people might use guns to shoot their tyres."[1] Ng's reference is to the secret society gangsters who used to prowl the area and possessively – often forcefully – mark their turf. So rampant was the lawlessness that Toa Payoh was called the "Chicago of Singapore", a moniker that lasted well into the 1970s when a new town was erected there.[2]

Such are the layers that make up Toa Payoh's history. When we think of Toa Payoh today, many of us conjure up a quiet, matured heartland residential town that was an icon for public housing in the 1970s. Indeed, when the town was first completed, Toa Payoh served as a showcase of Singapore's impressive and successful approach to public housing and urban redevelopment – an achievement lauded by several foreign dignitaries during their visits to the island.[3]

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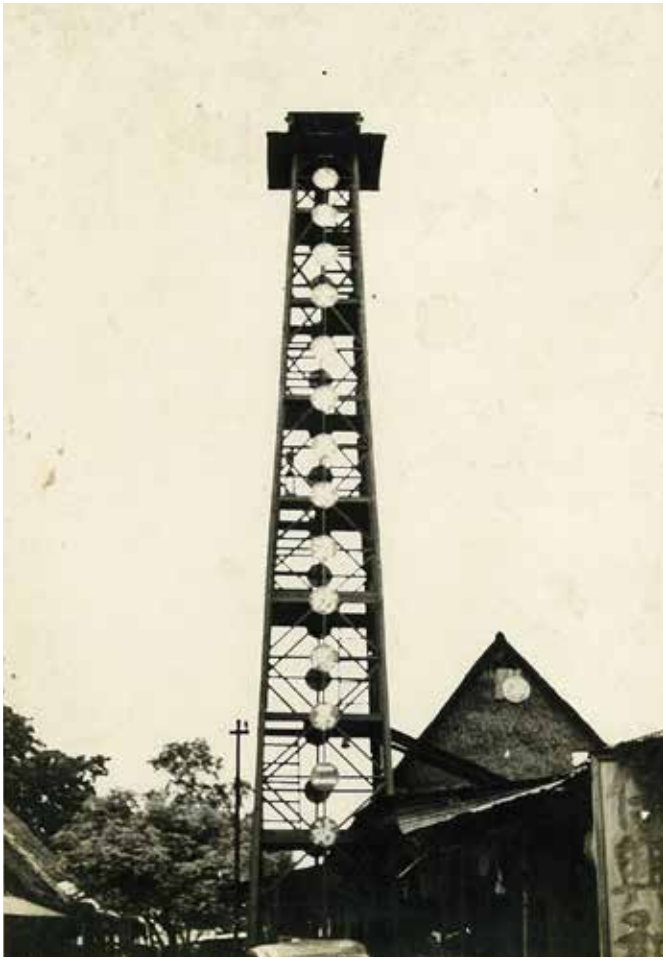

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01 Toa Payoh Central, 2014
Image courtesy of National Heritage Board

02 A village market, 1950s
Image courtesy of Toa Payoh Central Community

03 A Chinese procession across what is today's Toa Payoh Central, 1950s
Image courtesy of Teo Hup Huat

04 The 21-metre-high watch tower that was part of the village fire post at Puay Teng Keng, early-1960s
Image courtesy of Chee Tian Keng Temple

The story of Toa Payoh, however, runs deeper than this milestone in the making of modern Singapore. A former settling ground for plantation farmers, village dwellers, secret societies, shrines and temples, the history of Toa Payoh is a rich tapestry of numerous stories and voices, set against the backdrop of our country's nation-building years.

Where It Begins

Back in the 19th century, the area where Toa Payoh stands today was a natural swampland. A hint of this can be found in the etymology of the name "Toa Payoh", which literally means "big swamp".[4] Swamps were a common sight in Singapore in the past, until plantation owners settling inland started clearing the area. One of the early pioneers who used to own land in Toa Payoh was Teochew merchant and "king of pepper and gambier", Seah Eu Chin. Seah owned plantations along Thomson Road, and his property at Toa Payoh included a large bungalow named E-Choon.[5]

Early kampong residents who settled in the area were largely Chinese, although there were a handful of

Malays living near Boon Teck Road (in present-day Balestier) and Kampong Pasiran in the Novena area. There was also a small community of Indians who lived in Potong Pasir, where they herded cattle and sold them at the markets in Toa Payoh.[6]

At that time, residents belonged to closely-knit dialect-based communities that were centred around their respective temples. Kampong Puay Teng Keng, one of the former kampongs in Toa Payoh, is one such example. Consisting of mostly Hokkiens, the village was a self-sufficient community hub that provided the necessary services for its residents, such as help for funerals, religious processions, a large market, early education and even a firefighting team. To keep a closer watch on the attap houses that were prone to fires, the Puay Teng Keng villagers had a fire post erected. The team was also dispatched to help in the 1961 Bukit Ho Swee fires. Ng Giak Hai reflects on the strong kampong kinship:

> Everyone would take care of one another. During Chinese New Year, [if] you had nothing to eat, you go to your neighbour's house and he would serve you soft drinks, give you cookies to eat… This August we have a [temple] event, and all our kampong people will come back. Some of them are now Christians but they will still come, they come to visit old friends, come here to reminisce.[7]

But underneath this neighbourly warmth, Toa Payoh had a shadier side. Located at the periphery of the Downtown Core, villages in areas like Toa Payoh were often unregulated, allowing secret societies to thrive. Residents remember gangs in Toa Payoh making moonshine (illegally distilled liquor) that had very high alcohol content and would make stomachs churn and swell. Gang members would also lurk around the town seeking protection money from shops, which sometimes led to violent quarrels.[8] Former grassroots leader Wong Shou Jui recollects how fierce clashes would occur opposite his house:

> At today's Kim Keat Avenue market, there was a big plot of grassland. Many secret societies had their fights there, and we could see from our window that the fights were very intense. [The gangs] would agree on a time and place to battle it out, [and they had] fierce battles, so everyone shut their doors to let them fight.[9]

Change and Resettlement

When plans to create a new satellite town in Toa Payoh were announced in 1961 by the Housing & Development Board (HDB), the very idea of staying in high-rise concrete flats was still an alien one. High expectations were laid upon the town – Toa Payoh Town was one way the government hoped to alleviate the housing shortage of the post-war period.[10]

For the villagers, however, this change incited great fear. Many kampong residents lived off their small plots of land, and this transition would lead to them losing their source of livelihood.[11] Most of them were also doubtful that they could afford the higher rents of the new flats. Others disagreed with the compensation rates offered by the government. It was

05 Kampong residents moving out of their attap houses in Toa Payoh, 1963
The Straits Times
© Singapore Press Holdings. Reprinted with permission.

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unsurprising, then, that efforts to clear the kampongs were met with strong resistance from the villagers.[12] As Ng Giak Hai recalls:

> At that time, the move really would [make us] cry. Everyone was very scared… when they wanted to relocate us, everyone thought: "we're in trouble this time."[13]

These concerns were only appeased after extensive negotiation and compromise, particularly regarding the inclusion of monetary compensation and lower rental rates for affected villagers.[14] Nonetheless, those who underwent this transition had to adjust to an entirely new way of living, which for residents like Tan Kee Seng, meant the beginning of better things to come:

> With the public housing, the living environment was better compared to my kampong days at Ah Hood Road. I didn't have many difficulties adjusting to life in the flats.[15]

06 An aerial view of Toa Payoh, 1967
Ministry of Culture Collection, image courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

07 A lion dance performance at a new HDB estate in Toa Payoh, 1966
The Straits Times © Singapore Press Holdings. Reprinted with permission.

08 The dragon playground, 1980s
Image courtesy of the Housing and Development Board

A Great National Experiment

Today, modern high-rise flats are ubiquitous. Over 80 per cent of Singapore's population live in HDB flats.[16] Toa Payoh may not appear very different from most modern heartlands we see today, but, as the first satellite town built entirely by the HDB, Toa Payoh represented a new frontier in public housing. The town had successfully housed a population of 250,000 people, four times the number indicated in the early plans drawn up by the Singapore Improvement Trust (a pre-cursor to the HDB).[17] A solution for Singapore's housing problem had been found.

Toa Payoh also became the site of many unprecedented developments: the first Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) station, the first cooperative supermarket in Singapore (the former NTUC Welcome), the first neighbourhood police post system, and the first Residents' Association, to name a few.[18] Because of its impressive and modern amenities, Toa Payoh was selected to proudly play host to 1,500 athletes competing in the Southeast Asian Peninsular Games in 1973.[19]

For the kampong folk, Toa Payoh was a test-bed; many were unsure whether they could fit into the new town. Former communities had to adapt to a new lifestyle and newcomers from other parts of Singapore. Given the strong sense of neighbourliness in the kampongs, some wondered whether they could experience the same kind of closeness they enjoyed previously. Nevertheless, while interaction between neighbours was understandably more muted in the town's nascent days, new bonds formed over time. As Razali Ajmain shared: "After a while, I made friends, I went to the coffee shops and mixed with all races and I got used to life in the housing estate. With friends, it began to feel more like life in the kampong."[20]

The religious institutions in Toa Payoh today likewise reflect a sense of community. A mark of this can be seen in the origins of Masjid Muhajirin, built in 1977. Located along Braddell Road, it was the first mosque to be built with help from the Mosque Building Fund and community efforts, which raised funds through food sales.[21] The mosque's roots can be traced back to the Muslim Benevolent Society in Toa Payoh in the late 1960s. The society offered assistance for needy families, provided religious service for the 1,200 Muslim families in Toa Payoh, and also reached out to non-Muslims during events such as Hari Raya.[22] Other religious institutions such as the Church of the Risen Christ served the Toa Payoh community at large as well. The church organised childcare services and free tuition classes run by volunteer teachers. A small library was also opened for children before the Toa Payoh Public Library was constructed.[23]

For those who grew up in Toa Payoh, the town holds a significant place in their memories. Heritage blogger

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09 Toa Payoh Town Park (on the right) and Toa Payoh Bus Interchange (on the left), 2014
Image courtesy of National Heritage Board

Jerome Lim spent a few years of his childhood living in Block 53 of Lorong 5. Even today, he still recalls his first friend in the neighbourhood, a young boy from a Sikh family with whom he "play[ed] games like police and thieves, cowboys and Indians… along the common corridors of my block".[24] Others grew up with Toa Payoh, witnessing its coming of age. K. Malathy reflects on this:

> My family moved to Toa Payoh in 1972. I was a child then, and Toa Payoh was young, like me. The town was raw, awkward, and its blocks of flats still held a new, whitewashed look… But since then, Toa Payoh has changed. I have watched Toa Payoh grow up with me and mature into a respectable, comfortable town.[25]

Growing Memories

Indeed, Toa Payoh is constantly evolving, and its story continues to develop. These are but a sample of the numerous memories of present and former residents who have come forward to share their recollections of life in Toa Payoh. Their stories are part of the Toa Payoh Heritage Trail launched by the National Heritage Board (NHB) on 17 August 2014. A product of both the NHB and Toa Payoh community, the trail celebrates the role that Toa Payoh plays in our collective social history and the heritage sites that have become an indelible part of the town's identity today.

There are many avenues to celebrate and discover more about the heritage of Singapore. The story of Toa Payoh is a microcosm of the broader shifts in Singapore's history. While Toa Payoh's sites of heritage are unique to the town, the memories of its residents capture the socio-historical changes that have become a shared legacy amongst Singaporeans who lived through the country's path to maturity in the early decades of independence.

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This article was first published in MUSE SG Volume 7 Issue 4. Download the self-guided Toa Payoh Heritage Trail at https://roots.sg/visit/trails/toa-payoh-trail.

BISHAN:
LIVING WITH THE DEAD

Text by Ang Zhen Ye

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There is a multi-storey dwelling which is one of the most highly sought-after "residences" in Bishan. Home to many, including my great-grandmother, this prime location is always alive with chatter whenever my family visits. Yet, no one really lives in these blocks of "flats". Indeed, far from catering to the living, Peck San Theng is a final resting place for the dead.

The columbarium in Peck San Theng (Kwong Wai Siew Peck San Theng), which was opened in 1986, is touted as a "condo for the dead", and can house up to 90,000 occupants.[1] Still, when compared to the Peck San Theng cemetery of the past, which used to occupy 384 acres, this columbarium is relatively small.[2] My great-grandfather, who passed on decades before his wife and the building of the columbarium, was buried in one of the graves in the cemetery. During the government's mass grave exhumation in the 1980s, my family had to dig for my great-grandfather's remains to move him to the new columbarium.[3] Unfortunately, my family's effort to locate his remains proved to be futile. Today, he is forever lost to the ground underneath the tall, modern buildings.

Incidentally, my family moved to Bishan in 2011 and we are now closer to – or perhaps even living on – the final resting place of my deceased great-grandparents. This daily reality seems to be fundamental to Bishan's heritage: whether it is inhabitants of Bishan Town or villagers from the former Kampong San Teng, Bishan's residents have always been living with the dead. How then do residents today live, interact, or even reconcile with the dead? And how has this notion of "living with the dead" evolved from Kampong San Teng to Bishan?

01 Bishan Park, 2018
Image courtesy of National Heritage Board

Kampong San Teng – A Town Built around the Dead

The name "Bishan" is the pinyinisation of its Chinese counterpart Peck San (碧山), derived from Peck San Theng (碧山亭) Chinese cemetery. Founded in 1870 by three pioneers from Kwong Fu, Wai Chow Fu and Siew Hing Fu prefectures in Canton, China, the cemetery was run by a federation of 16 clans belonging to the Cantonese community in Singapore.[4] The cemetery started as a burial ground for the Cantonese, but eventually included other dialect groups and races. As the cemetery expanded over time, it was divided into a series of "hills" and "pavilions".[5] To locate a particular grave, one must first find the "hill" or the "pavilion" number – for example Wong Fook Hill, Pavilion No. 5 (黄福山, 第五亭) – before navigating through the thick undergrowth within the section to find the grave. This gave rise to the name "Peck San Theng", which means "Pavilions on the Jade Hills".

Following the establishment of Peck San Theng, people began to settle around the burial grounds. At first, the small community consisted of cemetery caretakers, gravediggers, peddlers selling ritual-related goods and others in charge of honouring the dead. Later on, with the influx of Chinese immigrants during the early 20th century, the community bloomed into a kampong known as Kampong San Teng.[6] However, even with the rise of new landmarks – a Chinese school, traditional teahouse, wet market, and an open-air cinema, the highlight of village life still revolved around the annual festivals for the dead, including Double Ninth Festival (重阳节), Qing Ming Festival (清明节) and the Hungry Ghost Festival (中元节).[7]

Be it cutting the grass to find the graves, preparing food in the teahouse or setting up theatrical performances or rites, the entire community would engage and interact with the dead during these three festivals. While most would have heard about the Qing Ming and Hungry Ghost festivals, not many people today know about the Taoist Double Ninth Festival. The Double Ninth Festival is held on the ninth day of the ninth lunar month.[8] During this festival, people would carry a dogwood plant, climb the hills, drink chrysanthemum wine, and eat *chong yang* (重阳) cake.[9] Many believed that the higher one climbed, the more successful one would be.[10] In addition, Kampong San Teng would also organise theatrical performances (*getai*), lion dances, and sacrifices and offerings for the spirits. Even secret societies would participate in this festival. However, instead of commemorating Huan Jing, a mythological hero who defeated an evil monster, the local gangs would choose to worship a martyr who died while engaging in secret society activities. For smaller gangs without such martyrs, they would worship a deity called Ah Phoh San (阿婆神).[11]

Activities that were associated with the dead did not only happen during these festivals. Being next to the cemetery, villagers interacted with the departed on a daily basis – often in various interesting and surprising ways. Children, for instance, played hide-and-seek in the cemetery without fear. Even when they fell into open graves, some would take the opportunity to "fish" from the graves! Loh Soo Har, a former villager and teacher at Peck San Theng Chinese School recounts:

> As the village area was surrounded by trees, it was not so suitable to fly kites there, so we would go on top of the hills... Sometimes, when we accidentally broke the string of the kite, and had to chase after the body of the kite, we would fall into [empty] graves. Sometimes, we would discover fish in the graves. Usually, people would put a water tank beside the coffin. Strangely, catfish started growing inside, and I even caught a few myself. At that time, we even sold them for money! You could say that we took the cemetery as a playground![12]

However, it was not as if there was no fear of the supernatural. Ng Su Chan, a former villager, recounts that his friend "walked into a ghost (and had) a high fever… for seven days, but miraculously after seven days, he recovered".[13] Such stories of other worldly beings and mysterious ailments were common and almost every villager had a personal story to tell.

Secret societies, on the contrary, did not fear the cemetery. Rather, local gangs enjoyed a cordial relationship with the dead, resulting in much lawlessness in the area. The origins of this lawlessness can be traced back to Toa Payoh in the 1950s and 60s.

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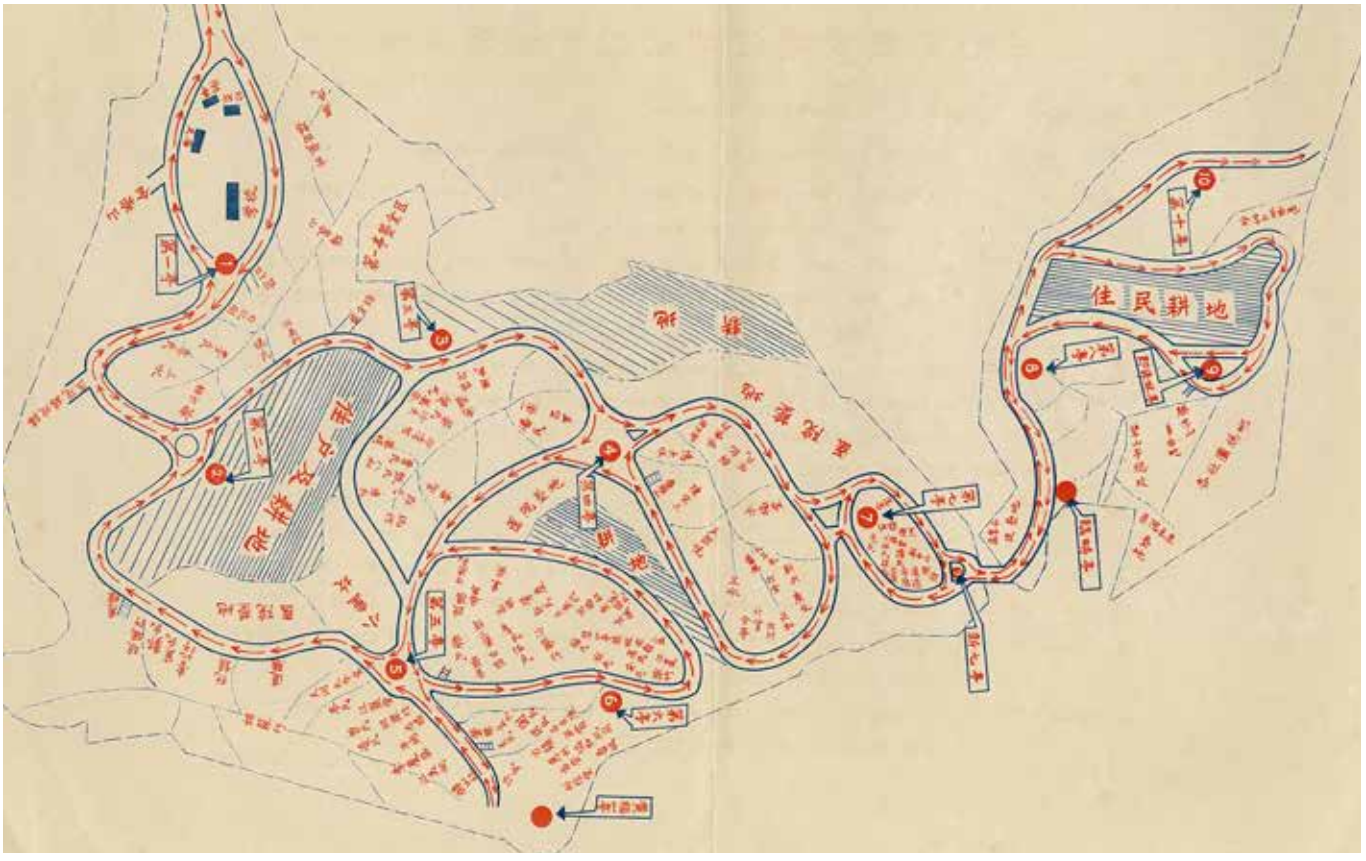
02 A crowd outside Kwong Wai Siew Peck San Theng during the Qing Ming Festival, 1988
Image courtesy of Kwong Wai Siew Peck San Theng

03 An aerial photograph of the Peck San Theng cemetery grounds taken by the British Royal Air Force, 1958
Collection held by the National Archives of Singapore, Crown copyright

04 Wong Fook Hill, Pavilion No 5, undated
Image courtesy of Kwong Wai Siew Peck San Theng

05 A motorist map of the Peck San Theng cemetery, with the red-circled numbers indicating the pavilions, undated
Image courtesy of Kwong Wai Siew Peck San Theng



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Toa Payoh then was popularly known as the "Chicago of Singapore" or the mafia district of Singapore. Much of these gangster activities spilled over to Kampong San Teng, which was considered an extension of Toa Payoh.[14] Furthermore, the quiet and secluded nature of the cemetery made it ideal for secret societies such as Flying Dragon (飞龙) and Harmony Peace (和平) to carry out gangster activities there.[15] This is illustrated in several incidences in the 1950s. On 25 June 1950, two men were caught with over one ton of unpaid-duties tobacco.[16] In an attempt to arrest illegal distillers, the customs police, on 20 November 1954, faced off with a "menacing mob of 60 men armed with sticks". The mob surrounded the police, allowing the criminals to escape in the scuffle.[17]

Due to its reputation for housing many secret societies, Kampong San Teng also became the logical place to investigate criminal activities, such as the kidnapping of multi-millionaire Tan Lark Sye's nephew in 1957.[18] These secret societies were also hostile to one another. Armed with *parangs* and guns, they often clashed with each other on the hills. The police were understandably hesitant to enter the cemetery and rarely patrolled the area, not to mention taxi drivers who avoided the place altogether.[19] Peck San Theng cemetery, in one of the administrator's words, was truly "messy and lawless".[20]

Seeking Refuge among the Dead

On 13 February 1942, during the Second World War, a critical battle between the British and the Japanese took place on the cemetery grounds. On one side was the 2nd Battalion of the Cambridgeshire Regiment, 5th Royal Norfolk Regiment, 5th Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire Regiments, and on the other, the lead elements of the Japanese Imperial Guards. The first engagement was a surprise hit-and-run bayonet attack at 11.30pm. Shortly after, the fighting intensified and both sides suffered heavy losses. Still, the 2nd Cambridgeshire Regiment managed to hold their position on knoll No. 90 (located somewhere between Pavilion No. 1 and 3). The final orders came on 15 February at 3.30pm: a half-hour cease-fire. Approximately two hours later, General Percival officially surrendered to the Japanese.[21]

During the start of the Japanese invasion, especially after the bombing of Chinatown, many Chinese – most famously the Samsui women – moved to seek

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06 The entrance of Kampong San Teng, facing Upper Thomson Road, 1958
Image courtesy of Kwong Wai Siew Peck San Theng

07 A road sign indicating Kampong San Teng, undated
Image courtesy of Kwong Wai Siew Peck San Theng

08 Family members praying to their ancestors prior to the exhumation of graves at Peck San Theng cemetery, 1980s
Ronni Pinsler Collection, image courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

refuge among the tombs.[22] Their belief that Peck San Theng would be safer was unfortunately false. Not only did a fierce battle take place in Peck San Theng, the kampong was also bombed by the Japanese. Lim Choo Sye recounts:

> It was the first time I had… such an experience of seeing how much damage bombs could do to a village… full of attap houses… it was an experience one can never forget, having seen so many houses flattened. A few people died, killed by the blasts, not so much by the bombing. There were a few limbs hanging on trees and all the trees had no more leaves.[23]

Nevertheless, while the kampong cemetery was ravaged during the Japanese invasion, life during the occupation itself was rather peaceful. Compared to the urban city areas, the Japanese left the kampong cemetery relatively untouched. The place was spared due to a few possible reasons: the Japanese fears of offending the dead, the importance of the village as a food producer, and the perception that the rural Chinese were less dangerous than their urban counterparts. Those who sought refuge among the dead recalled that they were never called up for forced labour or screenings (*Sook Ching* operations) and lived a safe life in Kampong San Teng.[24]

From Peck San to Bishan

In September 1973, the government issued an order to stop all fresh burials and closed the cemetery.[25] Six years later, Peck San Theng's land was officially acquired for urban development.[26] The notice for exhumation was given in November 1979 and from 1983 to 1990, Peck San was redeveloped into Bishan Town. Kampong San Teng and its residents were also resettled to other new towns, with most moving to Ang Mo Kio.[27] With the dead now occupying a much smaller space at the columbarium, how did modern residents go about living, interacting, or reconciling with the dead at the margins of the town? The answer seems to lie in both the architecture and the urban myths of the town.

Peck San Theng may be physically gone, but its pavilions live on in the architecture of Bishan's Housing & Development Board (HDB) flats.[28] These iconic pavilion-inspired HDB roofs were popularised by Singapore's sitcom series *Under One Roof* in the

1990s.[29] More than a simple reminder about Bishan's ghostly past, *Under One Roof* romanticised the ideal Singaporean life: living in a prime location 5-room HDB flat with children who were well educated – a marked departure from the taboo of living with the dead.[30]

Urban myths about Bishan are yet another form of interaction with the dead. Just as how ghost stories were rife in Kampong San Teng, new residents of Bishan Town had their own supernatural experiences to share. These myths persisted and were even published in *The Straits Times* in an article titled "Is Bishan MRT 'unclean'?"

> It is late at night and you are on the last train… The train, which is bound for Kranji, pulls into Bishan MRT station and you prepare to alight. To your astonishment, it does not stop. Furious, you confront the driver and demand to know why. He asks you how many passengers you saw waiting on the platform. 10 to 15, you say. He replies: "I saw more than 50 people and some were without faces. That's why I didn't stop."[31]

Even today, Bishan station is considered one of the most haunted places in Singapore.[32] There are many different stories of faceless, headless, or other worldly beings terrorising the station at night, all fuelled by the fact that the station does sit over former graves.[33] Conversely, many also consider Bishan to be a place with good fengshui.[34] As Kenneth Pinto puts it,

> When the place started getting more popular with people because it was quite central, then things got twisted around... Because of the cemetery's high ground, you got good views, supposedly good fengshui. And, yeah, conveniently forget all these ghost stories.[35]

Concluding Thoughts: The Dead as a Reflection of the Living

In many ways, the legacy of the dead is reflected in the lives of the living. Just as how the dead moved from jade hills to "condos", the living too moved from kampongs to high-rise flats. What is currently home to some 90,000 Singaporeans was once an idyllic resting place for more than 100,000 Chinese migrants. Yet, in this process of turning squatters to citizens, many former kampong residents feel a sense of longing for the past; a sense that they have lost a familiar way of life, relationships, and people, in exchange for modernity and a new way of life.[36] That is not to say that the choice to develop was wrong.

09 An aerial view of Bishan Town, 2018
Image courtesy of National Heritage Board

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Without moving the graves, I wouldn't be able to live in Bishan and enjoy its modern facilities. But there is something nostalgic – even for a new resident like me – to be so closely associated with the dead. This nostalgia cannot be substituted by pavilion roofs or urban myths. Perhaps the best way to reconcile with this past is just to remember its history: just as how I remember the elusive great-grandparents that I "live" with today.

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KALLANG:
A TRAILBLAZER

01

Text by Tan Jia Yi

01

In Singapore's transformation from quiet obscurity to fast-paced innovation, Kallang has consistently exemplified the spirit of "new and upcoming". The area has a history of pioneering developments in Singapore, be it the tentative steps into the global economy or technological innovations like street lighting and aviation. The history of Kallang mirrors the broader evolution of Singapore with several aspects of its multi-faceted past forming a central part of our heritage. Many of the essential symbols of Singapore originate from Kallang – the Kallang River, the former National Stadium and of course, the iconic Kallang Wave cheer.[1] Throughout the narrative of a relatively young Singapore, Kallang has played a fundamental role as a trailblazer of the nation.

The Origin of Kallang

The name "Kallang" possibly derives from the *Orang Kallang*, a mobile community that was indigenous to the region, and who were living in Singapore before the British first arrived. The *Orang Kallang* were followers of the Temenggongs, or Malay chiefs who used to rule the area before the arrival of the British.[2] The *Orang Kallang* lived along the river, subsisting on fishing and taking up various occupational roles that included producing *rokok daun* (a type of Malay palm leaf cigarette), providing water transportation, and gathering and selling wood for fuel.[3] The *Orang Kallang*'s role in water transportation would inspire town planners more than a century later in their plans to increase the accessibility between Kallang and Bishan through the Kallang Waterway.[4]

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After Singapore was formally ceded to the British in 1824, most of the *Orang Kallang* moved to the Pulai River in Johor where they remained under the jurisdiction of their Temenggong.[5] Others moved to the offshore southern islands or to the Geylang area, as well as the northern coast of Singapore.[6] In 1836, Dr William Montgomerie started Kallangdale, a large-scale sugarcane plantation located at the former Woodsville Road (now expunged).[7] As similar European mega-plantations encroached into local settlements, Chinese immigrants who worked in these plantations also moved into Kallang and formed significant communities alongside local Malay villages.[8] As in other parts of Singapore, the growing ethnic pluralism of Kallang, and the close proximity of different communities to each other, formed the basis of Singapore's contemporary multicultural society.

The Glory of Forefront Development

By the 1830s, brick kilns had grown extensively in Kallang, overshadowing the sugar businesses there. This shift from sugar to bricks was a logical economic decision given the abundance of mud, easily retrieved from the nearby swamps. In 1858, brickmaking had become a colonial enterprise, and locally-produced bricks were recognised for their quality, winning awards at international events such as the 1867 Agra exhibition.[9] Kallang's brick kilns played a significant role in the construction of early towns in Singapore, paving the way for the further development of other settlements on the southern and western regions of Singapore.[10]

Further trailblazing Singapore's development into an urbanised nation was Kallang Gas Works, which lit up the streets of Singapore for the very first time in 1862.[11] Gas lighting continued to be used extensively in Singapore until 1955, when it was gradually replaced by electricity.[12] Kallang Gas Works supplied the nation with gas for more than a century until 1998 when it was replaced by Senoko Gas Works.[13] CityGas, the company that managed Kallang Gas Works, also produced gas as common fuel for cooking, heating and drying applications in homes and commercial premises.[14]

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01 The Kallang River, 2018
Image courtesy of National Heritage Board

02 Malay *sampans* on the Kallang River, 1911
Lim Kheng Chye Collection, image courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

03 Kallang Gas Works, 1960s
Kouo Shang-Wei Collection, 郭尚慰收集, *image courtesy of the National Library Board, Singapore*

04 A timber yard at Kallang, 1911
Arshak C. Galstaun Collection, image courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Kallang's heritage of being the industrial powerhouse of Singapore is evident in the colloquialisms of the older generation, where Kallang is still remembered as *huey sia*. Meaning fire stronghold in Hokkien, *huey sia* aptly encapsulates the memories of many of its inhabitants, including that of long-time resident Seah Ah Kheng. Seah has lived in Kallang since the time of her birth in 1943, first in an attap hut and later on in a Housing & Development Board (HDB) flat.[15] Slogging daily in the canteen of the gas works selling mixed rice, Seah witnessed the growth of Kallang from the time of post-war poverty and hunger to one which produced industrial innovations such as gas lighting. The Kallang Gas Works was a symbol of modernity and hope for a better future, but it too typified the anxieties of a changing landscape – locals harboured fears that the gas works would one day explode and engulf all that had been achieved thus far, literally transforming Kallang into a *huey sia*.[16]

Kallang also became a key location for the regional timber industry. The waterways of the Kallang River attracted enterprises and individuals from the timber industry, including the largest enterprise in the colony – Singapore Steam Saw Mills, which was located along Kallang Road.[17] Timber bought from the Malay Peninsula and the Indonesian islands was shipped via the sea and floated down the Kallang River to the mills that congregated near the Kallang River basin.[18] These timber resources further bolstered Kallang's role as a base of export for the wider region, shipping timber directly by steamer to all parts of the Far East, including Bangkok, Hong Kong, Shanghai and Peking – the major timber markets of the time.[19] Thereafter, in the 1960s and 1970s, the sawmills received even more orders with an increasing global demand for regional timber products. Eventually, they moved out of Kallang and consolidated in the Sungei Kadut Industrial Estate in 1976.[20]

One of the high points of Singapore's development in the 20th century was the establishment of Kallang Airport in 1937.[21] Due to its strategic location, Kallang had the honour of housing Singapore's first commercial international airport building.[22] Before Kallang, commercial air services had been handled by

the Seletar military airbase.[23] This new airport further connected Singapore to the rest of the world. Thanks to its advantageous location, Kallang Airport had become one of the largest and most important airports of the world during its prime from 1937 to the end of the 1940s.[24] Costing nine million dollars, Kallang Airport was a crown jewel for the British Empire in Asia and was termed the "essence of modernity".[25] Famed pilot Amelia Earhart even described the new airport as an "aviation miracle of the East", reiterating its unprecedented nature, and positioning it at the forefront of Singapore's development.[26] In 1955, Kallang Airport was replaced by the newly constructed Paya Lebar Airport which was better able to cope with increased traffic.[27] Thereafter, the building played host to various other organisations, including the Singapore Youth Council Headquarters and the National Stadium.[28]

Memory and Entertainment

Within Singapore's cultural and entertainment scene, Kallang paved the way with its amusement parks: New World in 1923 and Happy World (also known as Gay World) in 1936. These worlds formed the early strands of Singapore's popular culture, housing dancing halls, amusement rides and iconic cabaret girls who danced to both Malay tunes and the Western foxtrot.[29] The amusement parks were described as bustling with excitement, or using the Singlish creole term, they were "happening". Seah fondly remembers: "Whenever we needed entertainment – to watch upcoming movies for five cents or Teochew opera – we went to Gay World".[30]

These amusement parks played a major role in pioneering Singapore's music scene, attracting both local and regional musicians. Budding local artists including the Velvetones and The Quests were two of the acts that were fostered out of this environment.[31] Notably, The Quests went on to produce "Shanty", the first song by a local band to reach the top of the Singapore charts, displacing even The Beatles' "I Should Have Known Better".[32] The song stayed number one for over 10 weeks.[33] Many of these bands were inspired by visiting bands such as Cliff Richards and The Shadows to venture into their own music. Andy Lim, a 75-year-old retired teacher who used to stay in Kallang, fondly recalls watching a concert at the National Stadium:

> The stadium was so crowded. But nobody bothered with the heat because the heat onstage was worse – in a good way! It was a fantastic, really hot show. That's when every boy who saw Cliff Richard and The Shadows, in their resplendent suits and with those guitars, went: "I wanna be a band boy!"[34]

The booming growth of home-grown musicians at these parks animated Singapore's music scene, with Kallang at the centre of it all. Perhaps, it is this glorious era of Singaporean music that makes the amusement parks so nostalgic to the older generation, many of whom spent their younger days dancing the cha-cha.

The old National Stadium was the birthplace of a distinct Singaporean emblem – the Kallang Wave. During the legendary 1990 Malaysia Cup match

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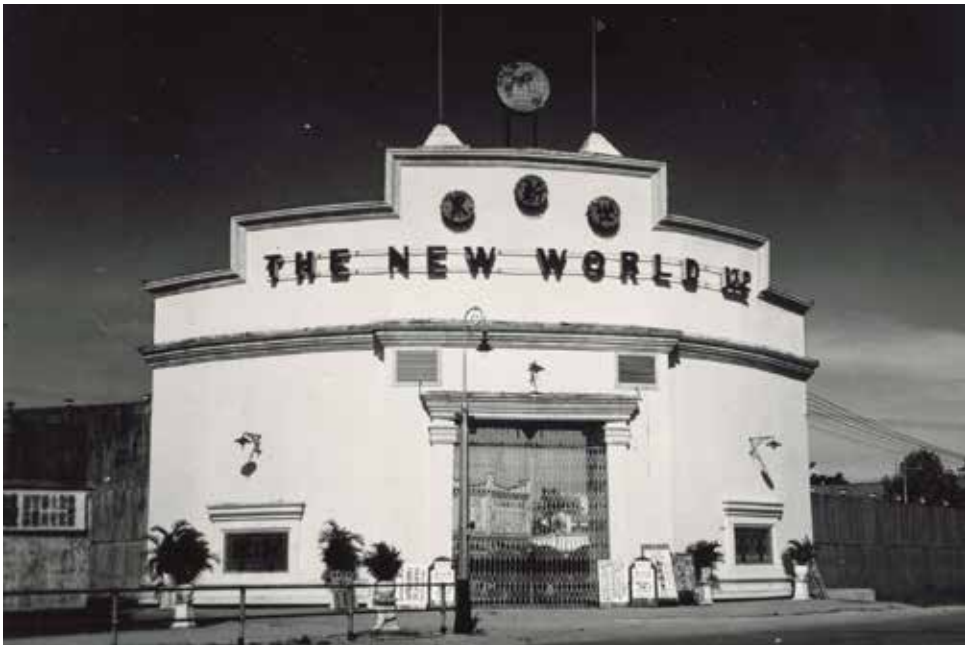

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05 An aerial view of Kallang Airport, 1937
Civil Aviation Authority of Singapore Collection, image courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

06 Passengers alighting from a British Overseas Airways Corporation plane at Kallang Airport, 1950
Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, image courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

07 Happy World Amusement Park, 1940s
Image courtesy of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board

08 New World Amusement Park, 1938-39
Image courtesy of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board

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against Perlis, the Singaporean coach hollered: "Untuk Bangsa Dan Negara! Majulah!", roughly translating to "For country! Onward!", to encourage the Singaporean football players.[35] The shout evolved into a cheer aptly named the Kallang Wave as it was formed by spectators at National Stadium raising their arms in succession to simulate a wave. The match was a watershed win for Singapore, not only in football terms, but on a national level; the palpable passion of the audience, moving as one to the Kallang Wave, made history in that very moment. The Kallang Wave of 1990 set the precedence for many celebrations to come, where it would be repeated at events like the National Day Parade to unify Singaporeans in one movement.

Today, the newly constructed National Stadium, Singapore Sports Hub and Kallang Wave Mall have continued this heritage of unifying Singaporeans. The Kallang Wave Mall, in particular, was timed to open on Singapore's 50th birthday – a significant milestone in Singapore's history. Former president of SMRT Desmond Kuek commented: "The Kallang Wave retains the association with the old National Stadium, and symbolises the distinctive spirit, energy and close community ties."[36] Similarly, the Sports Hub was built in 2014 to encourage a rejuvenation of sporting events and entertainment in Singapore in the spirit of the old National Stadium.[37] Today, the Sports Hub continues the tradition of hosting regional sports events like the ASEAN Basketball League, as well as welcoming international entertainers such as The Script and Katy Perry.[38] These efforts to refurbish and rebrand such sites represent a continuity of Kallang's role in pioneering Singapore's development as an entertainment hub. To this day, these sites in Kallang continue to revive and extend the tradition of exciting entertainment in Singapore.

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The River Flows On

Renowned architect Jan Gehl remind us that there is a "continued need…[to create] great public spaces [to] sustain the soul and life of cities".[39] The Kallang River was a stream of life for over 200 years of Singapore's history, and this persists to this day in the projects for recreation under the Active, Beautiful, Clean Waters (ABC) waterway.[40] The Kallang River has revitalised its role in transportation, connecting Bishan to Kallang and increasing Kallang's centrality. Although Kallang's role as a trailblazer is now part of the history books, plans for the Kallang River and the new National Stadium continue to incorporate elements of its exciting past. The heritage of Kallang as a place blazing with fiery excitement, and which pioneered so many aspects of Singapore's development, is one to be cherished, especially as the river of time flows on.

09 The former National Stadium, 1973
Civil Aviation Authority of Singapore Collection, image courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

10 Fireworks during the National Day celebration at the Sports Hub, 2016
Image courtesy of National Heritage Board

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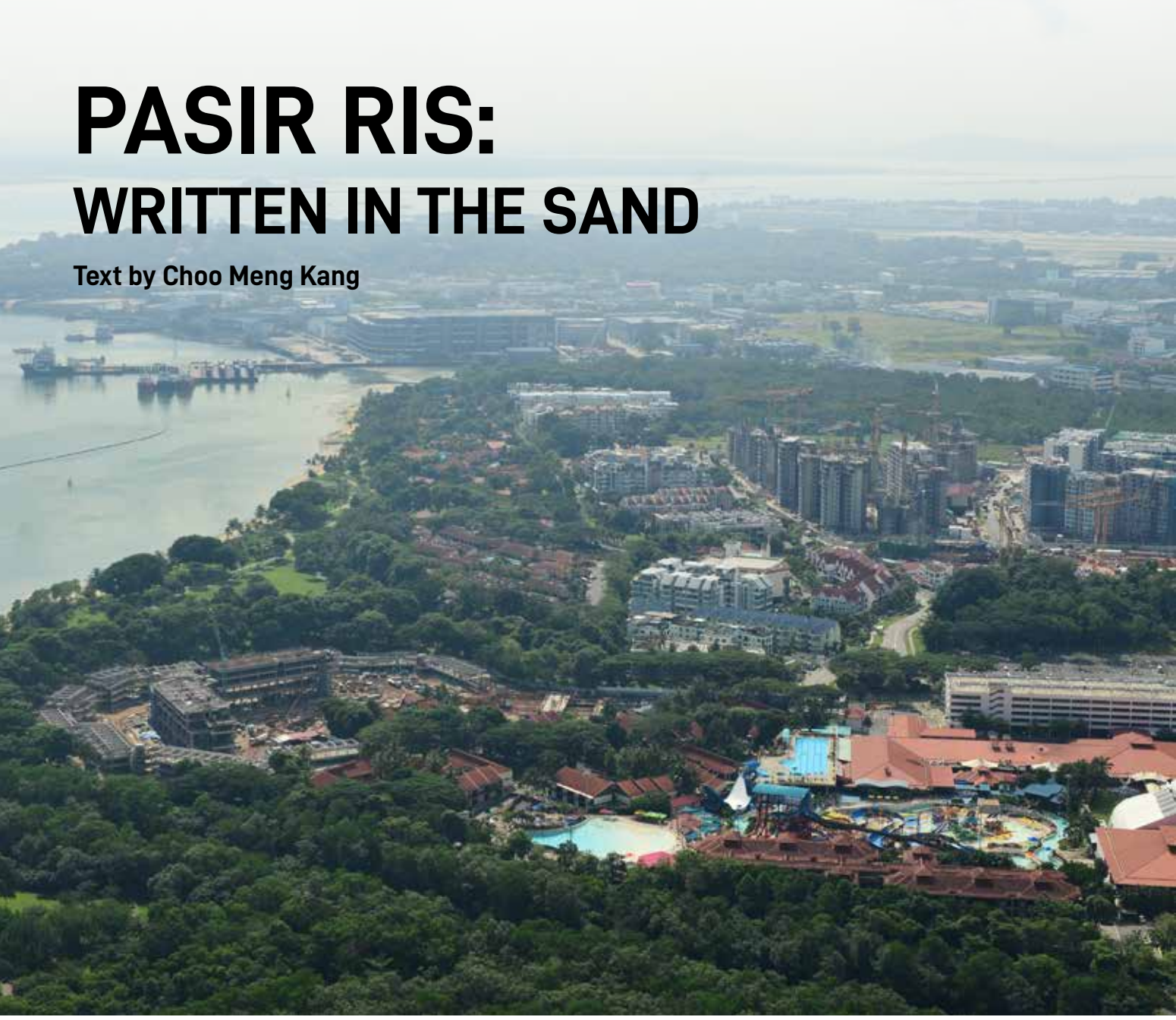
PASIR RIS:
WRITTEN IN THE SAND

Text by Choo Meng Kang



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Singaporeans identify with Pasir Ris in different ways. For the many residents who live in Pasir Ris, the town is home. But to others, it is a place filled with memories of Basic Military Training where Singaporean sons shared hugs of greetings and goodbyes with their families and friends. Most Singaporeans, however, would associate Pasir Ris with a place to unwind and take a break from the mundane and hectic routines of school and work by enjoying the town's coastal chalets, water theme park and beach front. The unique history of Pasir Ris, and its identity as a beach front town for rest and recreation have shaped its development and defined its unique character in the collective memory of Singaporeans.

Origins: "Sand to Be Shred"

The first mention of Pasir Ris dates back to 1844 in land surveyor John Turnbull Thomson's map, where its name was spelled "Passier Reis".[1] The name Pasir Ris is possibly a contraction of the word "Pasir Hiris" (in Malay, Pasir means "long sand" and Hiris means "to shred or slice").[2] This likely indicates that the locale was named after its sandy beach front.

The early Pasir Ris villages, such as Kampong Loyang and Kampong Pasir Ris, were all centred on agriculture and livestock farming, and these were the mainstay activities in the district in the early-19th century.[3] This, however, changed in the 1890s when Jewish broker Ezra Nathan and real estate agent H. D. Chopard

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built country homes meant for rest and recreation in Pasir Ris. Chopard's bungalow, priced at $2 per day, had sea bathing and fresh water as its key selling points. Its popularity, however, is unknown.[4] Similarly, Nathan's bungalow in Pasir Ris was also utilised for celebrations and recreation, though specifically by the Jewish community.[5] The establishment of these holiday bungalows by the beach in the 19th century marked the beginning of Pasir Ris' recreational nature.

Early Development of the Beach Front

After the establishment of these bungalows, Pasir Ris soon gained a reputation as a retreat space for the upper echelons of Singapore's society. For instance, wealthy businessman Teo Kim Eng often hosted gatherings for the Useful Badminton Party, a reputable badminton club, at his Pasir Ris bungalow.[6] Newspaper advertisements also illustrate Teo's bungalow being used for picnics for the Straits Chinese Methodist Youth Fellowship.[7]

However, getting to Pasir Ris was a difficult challenge. To approach Pasir Ris from the city centre, one had to travel the length of Changi Road before turning west down Tampines Road for many miles. For Teo's events, transportation for participants even had to be arranged and announced on the newspapers.[8] Compared to the easily accessible south-eastern coastline stretching from Tanjong Katong to Changi (present-day East Coast area), Pasir Ris was a much less desirable location.[9] The inaccessibility of Pasir Ris perhaps explains why there are scant records of new seaside bungalows being built there between the 1910s and 1930s.

The 1950s: Further Expansion

After a pause during the Japanese Occupation, a number of new developments commenced on the Pasir Ris beach front. The popularity of the beach and the demand for recreation in the post-war years gave private investors an incentive to develop a resort hotel there. One such development was the former Pasir Ris Hotel, which opened on 17 May 1952 at 143 Elias Road, off the 10th milestone of Tampines Road.[10] However, like the earlier retreat houses, the recreational facilities at Pasir Ris Hotel were open

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01 An aerial view of Pasir Ris overlooking Downtown East, 2014 *Image courtesy of the Housing & Development Board*

02 An aerial photograph of Pasir Ris Hotel taken by the British Royal Air Force, 1958 *Collection held by the National Archives of Singapore, Crown copyright*

03 A bus run by the Paya Lebar Bus Company passing by the entrance into Pasir Ris Hotel, 1955 *F. W. York Collection, image courtesy of National Archives of Singapore*

04 The new facilities at Pasir Ris beach, 1958 *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, image courtesy of National Archives of Singapore*

only to a select group of people. In May 1959, the hotel was taken over by the British Royal Air Force (RAF) and used exclusively for their personnel and families. This resulted in quite a stir during an incident where Hong Kong star Ting Lan was denied service from the hotel staff after her filming.[11] Such incidents aptly reflect how Pasir Ris was a popular recreation destination only for colonial administrators and the affluent, at least until the mid-1950s.

Nevertheless, efforts to develop Pasir Ris as a town for recreation and leisure were not just relegated to the private sector, and state-initiated efforts eventually opened up the beach for greater public use. In 1958, the state-run Singapore Rural Board developed the beaches at Changi and Pasir Ris. Then Chief Minister Lim Yew Hock officially opened facilities at Pasir Ris beach in August 1958, claiming they were "available to everyone on the island".[12] The development saw the building of a promenade, the installation of shelters and seats, as well as the construction of a sea wall.[13] Shortly after the opening, the Singapore City Council planned a giant picnic at Pasir Ris beach for 5,000 of its employees and their family members. Ninety buses and four hundred cars were activated to transport the employees, while 50 hawkers were given special permission to set up food stalls.[14] These forms of government endorsement helped Pasir Ris to gradually shift its public image from an elitist recreation destination to a more inclusive one.

This combination of government and private initiatives reinforced Pasir Ris' identity as a resort-like recreational town. In the 1950s and early 60s, Pasir Ris beach became a go-to place for the hit recreational activity of the time – water skiing. The sport attracted people from all walks of life, including British Commissioner General of Southeast Asia Malcolm MacDonald who participated in a water ski gala there in 1955.[15] Additionally, the Malayan Water-ski Association also held numerous water-skiing competitions and galas at Pasir Ris Hotel. These competitions were held every two months at Pasir Ris, and became a spectacle of fun for both competitors and patrons of the beach.[16]

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05 Children playing in the waters of Pasir Ris beach during an event held by the former Social Welfare Department, 1966
Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, image courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

06 Then Minister for Environment Lim Kim San touring the holiday flats at Pasir Ris, 1973
Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, image courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

07 Picnickers participating in games during an event held by the former Social Welfare Department, 1966
Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, image courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

08 Pasir Ris Beach, c. 1970
Image courtesy of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board

Post-1965: Towards the Building of a Residential Town

Although there were developments on the beach front, the residential area and villages of Pasir Ris remained largely untouched. Up until the 1960s, only poultry farmers and fishermen lived in Pasir Ris.[17] After Singapore's independence in 1965, plans were made to spruce up the area. This included the building of two community centres in 1966: Pasir Ris Village Community Centre at the 11th milestone of Tampines Road and Kampong Loyang Community Centre at the 13th milestone of Tampines Road.[18] These centres became communal spaces that allowed residents to interact and bond over recreational activities such as holiday camps, or classes where residents could learn cooking, ballet, piano, guitar and cake-making.[19]

In 1974, a private housing company, Kong Joo Pte Ltd, built over 300 bungalows and semi-detached houses around the area of Pasir Ris Hotel.[20] Unfortunately, due to a housing slump, the state's Housing & Urban Development Company (HUDC) decided in late-1974 to buy over the unsold terrace houses and resell them at a cheaper price to middle-class citizens.[21] Initiatives such as these contributed to the expansion of residential areas. These new residents increased the number of people living in Pasir Ris, which formerly comprised long-time village residents who continued to live in Kampong Loyang and Kampong Pasir Ris until the 1980s, when they were resettled into the nearby residential towns.[22]

Meanwhile, activity on the beach front was going strong. In 1971, the People's Association built several multi-storied holiday flats catering to income groups of all levels.[23] This was a departure from the days when the options of private bungalows, villas and Pasir Ris Hotel could only be afforded by companies, institutions or the wealthy. These holiday flats built by the People's Association further added to Pasir Ris' transformation from a largely private leisure space to an all-inclusive holiday town.

As for the eponymous hotel, after RAF's exclusive contract ended in 1966, Pasir Ris Hotel was once again opened to the public. Reportedly though, it never quite "regained its former popularity".[24] This eventually led to a change in management in 1974, with Paul Lim taking over as general manager.[25] He embarked on a re-branding effort of the hotel with an emphasis on leisure by the beach and sea. The hotel advertised scenic surroundings, modern sanitation and barbecue pits, and offered boating, dancing and swimming to guests and the public. It even had a tag line: "After a week in the city, we know just what you need".[26]

With the need to house Singapore's growing population, the Housing & Development Board (HDB) began land reclamation works along the coast of Pasir Ris in 1979 with the aim of building a new residential town.[27] Upon the completion of Pasir Ris Town in 1988, population density was growing in tandem with the development of new recreational spaces.[28] The establishment of spaces such as the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) holiday resorts, NTUC Downtown East and Wild Wild Wet facilitated Pasir Ris' sustained reputation as a location for recreation. The NTUC holiday resorts officially opened in 1988 as the largest seaside resort in Singapore, with 396 chalets that could accommodate 1,600 holiday-makers each day.[29] In 2004, it underwent a revamp and was renamed NTUC Downtown East. Renovations cost $65 million and two theme parks were added into its list of attractions. These included the Escape Theme Park (closed in 2011) which featured high thrill adventure rides and Wild Wild Wet – a water theme park.[30] An entry by Ronnie Ang, as part of the Singapore Memory Project, typifies patrons' memories of Downtown East as a hub for recreation:

> Downtown East is the recreation complex in Pasir Ris. With cinemas, bowling alley, shopping centre, supermarket, restaurants, children's playgrounds, entertainment marquee, water theme park and a hotel. A place any one at any age can go to relax.[31]

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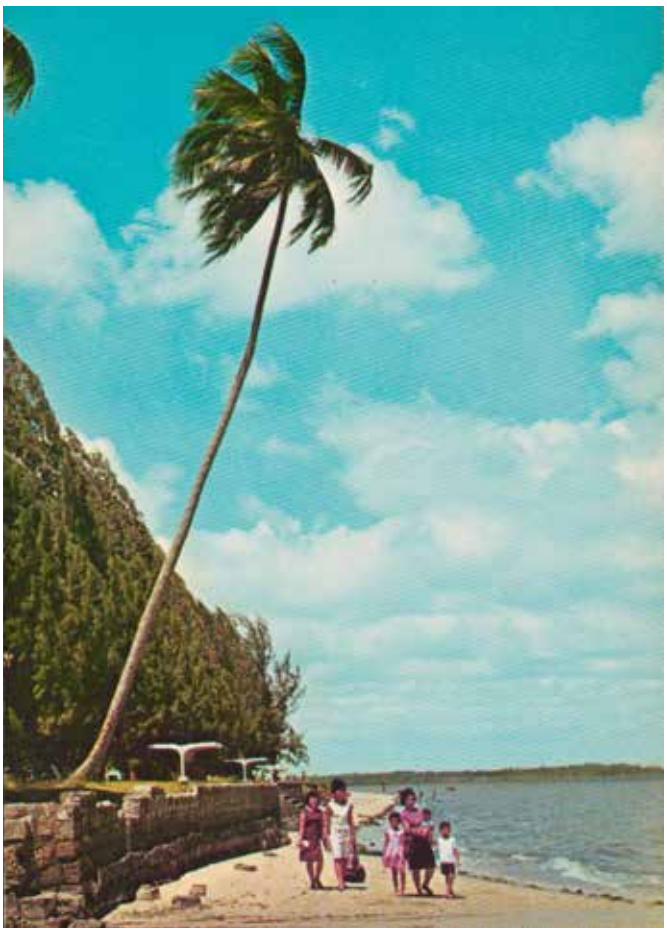

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09 Children playing at Pasir Ris Park, 1987
Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, image courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

10 Families at Pasir Ris Park, 1987
Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, image courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Company retreats, birthday celebrations and class gatherings during school holidays became the mainstay reasons for the usage of these recreational spaces. Contrasted to Sentosa Island, which had become an increasingly expensive tourist destination, Pasir Ris provided Singaporeans with a cheaper alternative for recreation. An online post on TripAdvisor made by user Willy Lim echoes such a view:

> The rear side of the [Downtown East] chalets is Pasir Ris beach. You can go cycling or spend some time at the beach. Consider it as a more budget friendly alternative to a Sentosa staycation.[32]

Aside from recreational spaces being constructed, the building of a bus interchange in 1989 and the White Sands shopping centre in 1994 also contributed towards the urbanisation of Pasir Ris.[33] These two spaces are significant to the memories of numerous Singaporean families. With the opening of the new Basic Military Training Centre (BMTC) in 1999 on the island of Pulau Tekong, located north-east of Pasir Ris, Pasir Ris Bus Interchange had become a fall-in and drop-off point for BMTC recruits.[34] Families and friends would often have a meal together nearby before heading to the Basic Military Training fall-in area located within the sheltered walkways of the bus interchange. In an interview with NSman Chia Tai Wei Eugene, he recounts:

> Whenever it was time to book in, I would have a meal with my family at White Sands before bidding them farewell at the fall-in area at the interchange.[35]

Such private moments are part of the collective memory that Singaporeans have of White Sands shopping mall and the bus interchange. These two spaces not only provide Singaporeans with opportunities for recreation, but also give families and friends an opportunity for heartfelt goodbyes and joyful reunifications. By partaking in these activities, Singaporeans unknowingly associate Pasir Ris with emotions of enjoyment and social bonding. This consequently ascribes to Pasir Ris the reputation of a recreational hub which is today embodied by numerous recreation sites – a testament to its longstanding, living heritage.

Present Day: An Enduring Heritage Shaped by Surrounding Sands

Since the 1880s, the identity of Pasir Ris has always been centred on the notion of a beachfront locale built for recreation and leisure. This legacy is reflected through the ocean-themed architectural designs of

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playgrounds and parks such as the Atlantis Park and the Bumboat Playground off Elias Road.

Today, Pasir Ris continues to retain its resort-like ambience even amidst its redevelopment as a residential estate. This atmosphere is continually reinforced by urban developers selling the dream of beach-front living, just as Pasir Ris Hotel once did. Whether such an identity will endure the test of time depends on the waves of new residents that now call Pasir Ris home. Nevertheless, whether you think of Pasir Ris as a beach-front resort, or as a home by the beach, one thing is for certain: Pasir Ris' heritage has always been shaped by the sands that surround it.

11 Wild Wild Wet, 2018
Image courtesy of National Heritage Board

12 Downtown East, 2018
Image courtesy of National Heritage Board

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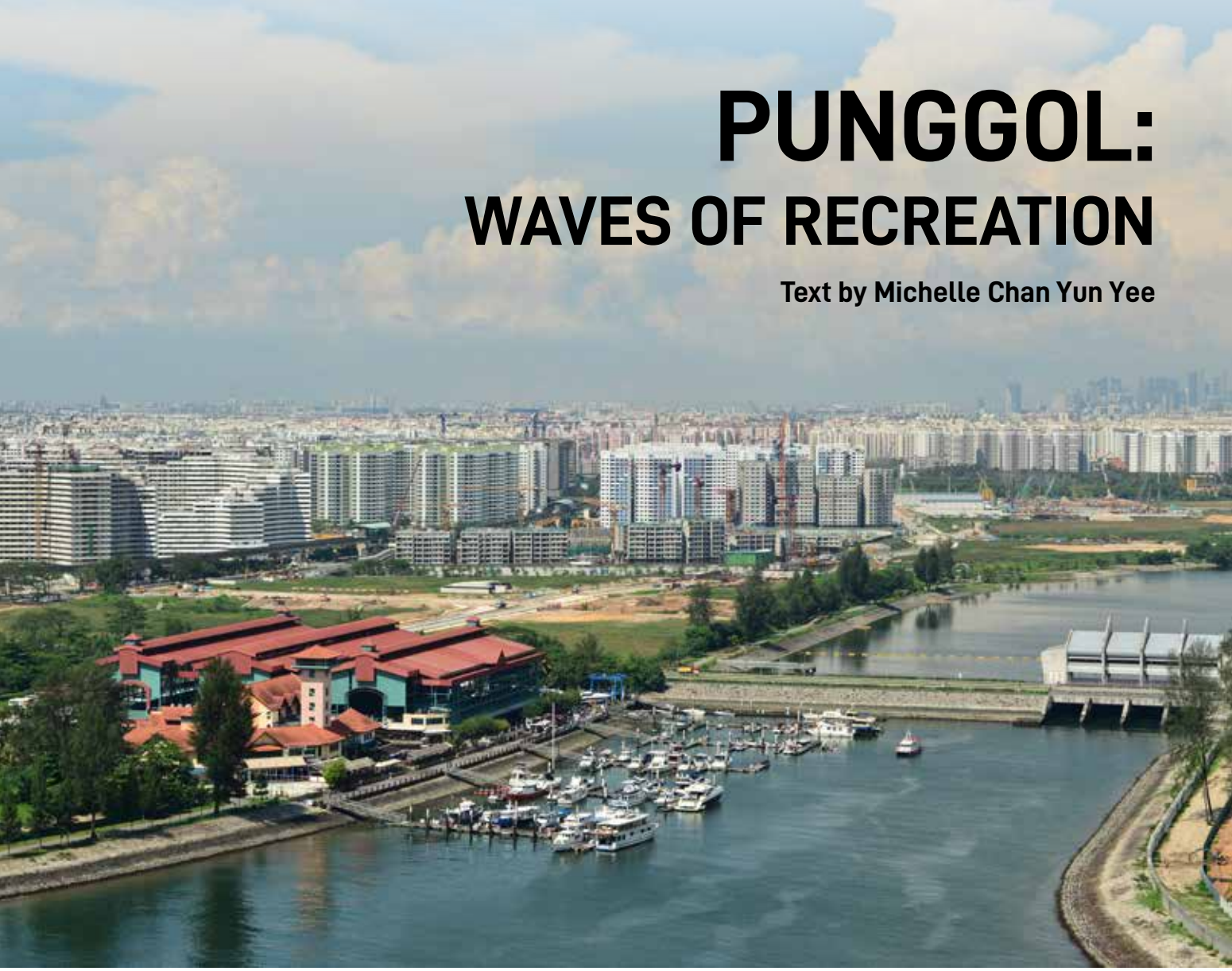
PUNGGOL:
WAVES OF RECREATION

Text by Michelle Chan Yun Yee



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In 1996, the Urban Redevelopment Authority of Singapore (URA) published a brochure advertising Punggol as the "waterfront town of the 21st century".[1] Indeed, Punggol has a longstanding heritage of being a town that boasts of living and relaxation by the waters. However, like a wave, the trajectory of Punggol's reputation as a waterfront recreational retreat has undergone a series of crests and troughs. Hailing back to the colonial era, Punggol's idyllic setting was first disrupted by the Japanese Occupation of Singapore from 1942-1945. Following the war, Punggol saw a re-emergence of its recreation scene. This resurgence, however, was again interrupted by the Northshore Reclamation Project during the late 1980s. In fact, it was only in the late 1990s that Punggol began to fully reclaim its name as a place for recreation, culminating in its image today as a waterfront town. This article explores Punggol's history, in particular its waterfront and recreational heritage, which has endured many moments in time to become what it is today.

Early Punggol

Today's Punggol refers to the area bounded by Tampines Expressway and the two rivers, Sungei Serangoon and Sungei Punggol.[2] However, from the colonial era up to the 1970s, Punggol extended beyond this demarcation to include the sub-districts of Sengkang and Buangkok.[3] This large historical boundary explains why Punggol has both coastal as well as agricultural characteristics; the latter further suggested by the meaning of its place name.

The first use of the name "Pongul" (eventually evolving into "Punggol") was by John Turnbull Thomson in his 1844 land survey map.[4] The etymology of the

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01 An aerial view of Punggol Point, 2014
Image courtesy of the Housing & Development Board

02 A vegetable farm at Punggol, c. 1970s
Image courtesy of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board

03 A wooden kelong at Punggol, c. 1905
Image courtesy of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board

name "Punggol" has many possible explanations, though they all share Malay origins. Also sometimes spelt as "Ponggol", the name means "hurling sticks at the branches of fruit trees to bring the fruits down to the ground".[5] Alternatively, it can also be translated as "a place where fruits and forest produce are offered for wholesale", implying that Punggol was a rural, agricultural area.[6] A third explanation involves the man who started Punggol village – Wak Sumang. In an interview with the National Archives of Singapore, his great grandson Awang bin Osman claimed that Wak Sumang gave Punggol its name after obtaining the go-ahead from the British government to start a new village.[7] While Wak Sumang was clearing his garden, a large tree was burnt and its branch, known as *punggur* in Malay, fell on his hut. He then decided to name the village "Punggur".[8] These interpretations of Punggol's etymology suggest origins based on its rural location and bucolic landscape.

Relaxing in Remote Punggol

Punggol's rural atmosphere and relative isolation from the Downtown Core of Singapore made it a suitable place for retreat and recreation. Punggol was so remote that it could only be accessed via two roads – Serangoon Road and Punggol Road.[9] In fact, public transport into Punggol was sorely lacking until 1935, when one bus route was finally introduced by the Ponggol Bus Service Company.[10]

Europeans living in Singapore certainly recognised that Punggol was the ideal retreat location since a few of them chose to build their bungalow-style country houses there. The Matilda House is one such bungalow that has withstood the test of time to become an iconic landmark in Punggol. Irish lawyer Alexander William Cashin built the Matilda House as a present for his wife, and it served as a weekend house for his family.[11] It comprised an extensive fruit garden, and a view of the Punggol River estuary and the Straits of Johore.[12] Boasting amenities such as stables and tennis courts, it provided its occupants with various sources of recreation.[13] In fact, swimming in a *pagar* (a lagoon formed by stakes driven into the nearby sea) was something that his son Howard Cashin distinctly recalls.[14] This perception of Punggol as an ideal place of retreat from the city was possibly what drew wealthy Europeans to build their houses there, forming the basis of Punggol's association with recreation.

Apart from the Europeans, other visitors were also drawn to Punggol by two major attractions – the Japanese Fishing Pond and the Basapa Zoo. The Japanese Fishing Pond shifted from Changi to Punggol, opening on 24 December 1927.[15] There, visitors could catch their own fish to cook and consume fresh from the waters.[16] About a hundred yards away was the Basapa Ponggol Zoo.[17] Owned by William Lawrence Soma Basapa, in 1928, it moved from its original location at Serangoon Road to a 10-hectare plot near the Punggol seafront along the former Track 22 as it had grown too large for its previous location.[18] The zoo was immensely popular among local residents, especially on weekends.[19] The zoo also won praise with a generous feature in Sir Roland Braddell's 1934 book, *The Lights of Singapore*. Inside, the zoo was described as "a truly delightful place" and that "a trip to the zoo is one of the things that no visitor should omit; it has a personality entirely its own, and is pitched in beautiful surroundings on the Straits of Johore".[20] Being Singapore's only zoo at that time, it was commonly dubbed "the Singapore Zoo", even though it was privately owned.[21]

Peace Disrupted

The arrival of the Japanese in 1942 severely disrupted the serenity of Punggol. The first salvo was fired when the British ordered Basapa to relocate his animals and birds within 24 hours as they wanted to use the Basapa

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04 A group of teenagers having a picnic at Punggol Beach, 1949
Wong Sin Eng Collection, image courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Zoo land for defence against the imminent Japanese arrival.[22] Basapa failed to do so and the British shot his animals and freed the birds.[23] True enough, the Japanese used Punggol Beach as one point of entry to invade Singapore.[24]

During the Japanese Occupation, Punggol was infamously known for the *Sook Ching* massacres. *Sook Ching*, meaning purging through cleansing in Chinese, was conducted by the Japanese occupiers and primarily targeted Chinese communities perceived to be hostile to the Japanese. The process began with screening of Chinese men aged 18 to 50 by Japanese Kempeitai officers and their informants. Those singled out as anti-Japanese would be arrested and brought to one of the several sites designated for execution. Punggol Point was one of them. On 28 February 1942, about 300 Chinese civilians were executed by the auxiliary military police firing squad at Punggol.[25] The *Indian Daily Mail* reported an elderly fisherman, Peh Ah Boh, visiting Punggol after the massacre and personally witnessing more than ten corpses floating on the waterfront.[26] The legacy of the *Sook Ching* on Punggol stretches as far as 1998, when a newspaper report called Punggol Point the "Slaughter Beach". It reported that "[a] man digging for earthworms to use as fishing bait… found parts of a human skeleton instead".[27]

Apart from animals and humans, Punggol's infrastructure was also badly affected with the majority of bungalows as well as the Japanese Fishing Pond destroyed. Punggol's recreation scene had become almost non-existent. Through the Japanese Occupation, Punggol gained a new reputation, not associated with recreation but with death and destruction.

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05 The former Singapore Zoo at Punggol, 1965
Primary Production Department Collection, image courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

06 Seafood restaurants by the beach at Punggol Point, 1993
Lee Kip Lin Collection, image courtesy of the National Library Board, Singapore

07 The view from the pier at Punggol Point, 1993
Lee Kip Lin Collection, image courtesy of the National Library Board, Singapore

Recreation Resuscitation

After the Japanese Occupation, life slowly seeped back into Punggol. In spite of the beach's darkened history, residents living near the coast continued life as before. For these residents, the waterfront was an integral part of their lives. Abigail Chew, who lived near Punggol Point in the late 1970s, recalls: "The sea was so near my home that it would hit against the fence [of my house]."[28] Her daughter, Anna Chew, still has memories of playing at the beach, wading into the sea and climbing into the sampans tied to stakes.[29]

It was during this post-war period that Punggol's reputation as a place for recreation grew in prominence once more. Remnants of old attractions in Punggol could be seen, albeit with some differences. For instance, in 1963, Chan Kim Suan, a landowner and animal lover, opened another zoo at Punggol.[30] Called "Singapore Zoo", it had only 70 animals, making it significantly smaller than Basapa Zoo, which had comprised 200 animals and 2,000 birds during its peak. Furthermore, it was less popular than Basapa's zoo as it was visited mainly by Chan's friends.[31]

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Singapore Zoo shuttered in the early 1970s due to financial woes.[32] Apart from the return of the zoo, a newly built Ponggol Rest House also occupied the site of the former Japanese Fishing Pond.[33] Claiming to be the "ideal seaside health resort", it boasted a hotel, bar and restaurant, and featured activities such as picnics, boating, water skiing, fishing and swimming.[34]

However, it was the new attractions established over the subsequent decades that really brought Punggol back to life, adding to its bustle. One major draw to Punggol was its seafood offerings. A notable example would be the Sea Palace Kelong Restaurant cum Nite-Club set up in Punggol in 1969.[35] It was Singapore's only kelong-style restaurant nightclub and was built over stilts at Punggol Point, providing a novel sea-side experience for diners.[36] Moreover, it was said that its seafood could not come any fresher as they were caught right off the surrounding waters.[37] Unfortunately, the restaurant burnt down in 1972 due to unknown reasons and never reopened again.[38]

Nevertheless, this did not spell the demise of the food scene at Punggol as other seafood restaurants continued to draw in the crowds. The cluster of seafood restaurants at Punggol Point became known as Seafood Village, where chilli crab, butter prawns and deep fried baby squid became part of a list of must-order dishes. Writing in *The Straits Times* in 1990, Margaret Chan describes the atmosphere of Seafood Village:

> Eating seafood at Punggol Point is like eating seafood nowhere else in the world. Imagine on a weekend night, a crowd of 6,000 at one sitting… the Ponggol Restaurant alone sits almost 2,000 at one time. If this is not exciting enough, take a table at the end of the road so that you can eat while massive SBS buses negotiate three-point turns within touching distance of you. Talk about living dangerously.[39]

The competition between restaurants and the good quality of Punggol's seafood cemented Punggol's reputation as the go-to place for delicious seafood and waterfront dining.

Water sports were another type of activity that added to the bustle of Punggol. Fishing, for example, had gained such a repute that then Vice-President of USA Richard Nixon asked about it during his visit to Singapore in 1953.[40] In addition, skiing and boating were also done along the coastline.[41] Punggol Beach was the choice venue for a number of events such as the Singapore Powerboat Association 1982 Regatta, 1983 7-Up Water Ski Series and 1983 Easter Boat Show.[42] By 1986, there were eight boatels (waterside hotels) in Punggol, including Marina Beach Resort, which was one of the largest in Singapore.[43] Besides providing docking facilities for travellers' boats, the boatels also rented out boats for water-skiing, fishing and sightseeing.[44]

Indeed, the post-war era in Punggol saw a resurgence of the area's recreational scene. With the many attractions and events associated with its waterfront location, Punggol's identity and heritage as a place of recreation was cemented.

Waterfront Town of the 21st Century

In 1982, it was announced that Punggol would be redeveloped in the mid-1990s.[45] The reclamation of land under the Northeastern Coast Reclamation Project would establish Punggol Town, which would eventually become a waterfront residential town of the 21st century, as envisioned by the Urban Redevelopment Authority and the Housing & Development Board (HDB).[46]

These redevelopment plans affected the sea-fronting and pig farming industries located further inland.[47] The latter was part of an official nationwide plan to curb pollution by phasing out pig farming and importing pork instead.[48] The last of 22 pig farms in Punggol closed by November 1990, with some former farm owners shifting to hydroponic vegetable and orchid farming, as well as other businesses.[49] In order to make way for land reclamation, the boatels, seafood restaurants and people living between Punggol Track One and Seven were given till the end of 1994 to relocate.[50] Once developmental work went into full swing, Punggol's former recreation scene receded from the public eye.

Even though redevelopment plans hit a snag during the 1990s and early 2000s due to the Asian Financial Crisis, Punggol Town today is finally experiencing a revitalised recreation scene.[51] Some of the new amenities in Punggol have their roots in the past, representing a continuity with Punggol's heritage. One example is Punggol Marina Club. Although Punggol's boatels of the 1980s were closed due to land reclamation works in the early 1990s, they returned in the form of the Punggol Marina Club, which opened in 1996.[52] This private club was formed by a group of former Punggol boatel owners (namely Awang Boat Sheds, Zainal Water-ski Centre, Marina View and Yap Boatel), who helped to provide temporary boat storage

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facilities during the redevelopment phase.[53] Another example is the Punggol Settlement at Punggol Point, which was completed in 2014.[54] Punggol Settlement currently houses a number of seafood restaurants, reminiscent of the former Seafood Village. Ponggol Seafood Restaurant, which was at Punggol Point from 1969 to 1994, has even returned, joining the other restaurants at Punggol Settlement.[55]

In addition, a new water catchment area named Punggol Waterway was also opened in 2015.[56] Waterfront living now resurfaces through the HDB flats, a shopping mall named Waterway Point, the SAFRA complex and the Punggol Polyclinic, which flank the waterway. Coney Island, opened in 2015, was another integral part of the envisioned Waterfront Town.[57] Developed as a park and green space, Coney Island is linked by bridge to the Punggol Waterway Park Connector.[58] These recreation amenities have added to Punggol's waterfront legacy, honouring its heritage and perpetuating its identity as a place for recreation.[59]

08 Awang Boat Sheds, a former boatel run by Awang bin Abdullah at Punggol Point, 1985
Image courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

09 A boat race at Punggol Point, 1966
Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, image courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

10 An aerial view of Punggol Town, with Coney Island in the background, 2014
Image courtesy of the Housing & Development Board

11 Punggol Waterway Park, 2018
Image courtesy of National Heritage Board

Conclusion

While Punggol's reputation as a retreat space has gone through numerous crests and troughs, it is undeniable that waterfront recreation has always been an integral part of its identity. Although the waterfront branding was an intentional effort made by physical planners, this identity is one that has roots in the area's heritage. At the same time, the events of the Japanese Occupation also imprinted the tragedy of the *Sook Ching* massacres onto the town's history. For the generation that went through the Japanese Occupation, Punggol Beach will always be associated with the suffering that many experienced during this period – so much so that the beach gained the moniker: "Singapore's Slaughter Beach".[60]

Nevertheless, for others – especially the younger generation of Singaporeans – this dark past does not eclipse the exciting recreational offerings that Punggol is known for today. As Francis Tan, a restaurant owner at Punggol Settlement, says: "I don't let the dark past get to me. I chose this place for my restaurant because it has a beautiful view of the sea."[61] The redevelopment of Punggol has undoubtedly brought about a new commitment to its reputation as a waterfront town, giving the place its new nickname – "waterway". With Punggol reclaiming its historical identity, the area has come full circle, with new generations of Singaporeans now sharing in and expanding the collective memory of Punggol's waterfront heritage.

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YISHUN:
BETWEEN THE ODD AND ORDINARY

01

Enter the term "Yishun" into any online search engine and questions such as "How scary is Yishun?" and "Is Yishun jinxed?" are likely to appear. This reflects, perhaps, the broader public fascination with Yishun in recent years, which stems in part from apocryphal accounts of unusual occurrences in the town. *The Straits Times*, for example, has reported a disproportionate number of cat killings in Yishun, in addition to a purportedly high rate of murders and suicides.[1] There was even an incident in January 2017 in which two men attempted to use stun guns on police officers – an act hitherto unheard of in Singapore.[2] Coupled with other sensational happenings both reported and rumoured, it is perhaps not surprising that Yishun's identity has of late been defined by this tendency for the unusual to occur.

Set aside such reports, however, and Yishun is not unlike other suburban towns in Singapore which trace their histories to small-scale villages in the rural periphery. Its toponym, a pinyinised variant of Nee Soon, reflects this. The latter was the place-name of an eponymous village formerly located at the intersection of Thomson Road and Sembawang Road. Until the 1980s, Nee Soon Village was home to a post office, a community centre and a market, but these were subsequently relocated when villagers began gravitating towards Yishun New Town following its construction later in the same decade.[3]

Given this seemingly anodyne history, how then did Yishun gain its reputation as a place for the odd and unexpected? Is this an accurate reflection of Yishun's heritage and identity? Taking such musings as an inspiration, this article examines Yishun's broader history, which reveals that in some respects, the impression of Yishun as a place where the unusual unfolds may have roots beyond today's urban myth. Even so, we suggest that this is but one facet of Yishun's heritage. From tranquil Yishun Park to the quaint but alluring Sembawang Hot Spring, Yishun is

Text by Hong Wei En Isaac, Goh Seng Chuan Joshua, Lim Wen Jun Gabriel and Gavin Leong

01 Yishun Town, 2018
Image courtesy of National Heritage Board

equally defined by its pleasant environs which meld aspects of today's fast-paced life with the less hurried ambience of yesteryear. In this respect, Yishun shares much in common with mature heartland towns such as Hougang, where one can detect elements of an old-world charm sandwiched amidst more recent urban developments.[4] Arguably, one could thus posit that Yishun's place identity is defined not by a singular element, but by its synthesis of the odd and the ordinary, the new and the old, and the modern and the rustic.

The history of Yishun's association with the odd and unusual can be traced to the late-1880s, when the area near today's Lower Seletar Reservoir Park was dominated by gambier and pepper plantations.[5] This was a period of shifting economic fortunes as the value of both crops had begun to fall. In their place were rubber plantations that started sprouting up across Singapore during the late-19th century.[6] Yishun, however, proved to be one area in Singapore where the iconic rubber plant was rivalled in prominence by a zesty and quirky tropical fruit – the pineapple.[7] More than just an exotic crop, pineapples were prized by the British as a tangible expression of the wealth and fecundity of their tropical imperial possessions.[8] This in turn explains why prominent businessmen of the era soon sought cost-effective ways of planting the spiky fruit.[9] While some assert that growing pineapples amongst slow-growing rubber trees was a technique pioneered by rubber magnate Tan Kah Kee, it was Tan's contemporary, Lim Nee Soon, also known as the Pineapple King, who popularised it.[10] In fact, by the 1910s, some 6,000 acres of land in today's Yishun and Sembawang had been leased to Lim's London-registered Bukit Sembawang Rubber Company for the growing of both crops.[11] Eclipsing smaller estates such as the York and Kah Hoe estates, Lim's extensive plantation holdings were testament to his strong association with the area. By 1930, the British even saw fit to rechristen Jia Chui Village to "Nee Soon", after Lim himself.[12]

Initially populated by plantation workers toiling in adjacent estates, Nee Soon Village had, by the 1920s, emerged as a small but notable centre of commerce in the northern part of Singapore.[13] Interestingly, not unlike the urban myths surrounding Yishun today, the village also attracted significant press attention for a string of unusual occurrences. As early as 1923, *The Straits Times* reported the arrest of a "Hylam" (colloquial term for a person of Hainanese descent) named Wee Teck at Lim Nee Soon's rubber factory for the unlicensed possession of an automatic pistol, 96 rounds of ammunition and a knife.[14] While such infractions of the law may no doubt have been commonplace, what was intriguing was the fact that the accused was arrested in his sleep at the unearthly hour of 4am, with a loaded revolver stashed under his pillow.[15] Another odd occurrence was a 1932 fire strong enough to demolish one of the five buildings owned by Lee Rubber Co. Ltd. Interestingly, the 300 piculs of rubber contained within it remained largely untouched.[16]

Such events aside, other uncanny incidents in Nee Soon were associated with the significant British military presence in the area. This generated its own set of tensions. For example, in the early days following the end of the Second World War, an ammunition explosion at Nee Soon Camp, a military base, was reported to have "broke[n] windows in Nee Soon Village, after having initially been set off by a grass fire".[17] As if this was not disconcerting enough, two men were found mysteriously shot dead at the same camp later the same year.[18] Yet even such reports could not compare with the bizarre sightings of apparitions which habitually thrusted Nee Soon into the national limelight. Indeed, in 1949, Nee Soon Village was said to be abuzz with sightings of a woman who "had returned from her grave and had gone back to her husband".[19] This association with the supernatural seems to have continued, for a *New Nation* report some three decades later mentions two wardens stationed at Seletar Reservoir who testified to having "heard and seen weird things in the [Nee Soon] vicinity."[20] Quoting a local *bomoh* (Malay for "spirit hunter"), the newspaper speculated that Nee Soon was indeed home to a spirit, which likely inhabited an area "where a lot of accidents have occurred".[21]

Beyond the supernatural and mysterious, another facet of Yishun's reputation as a place for the unusual involves the equally fascinating fact that the town has throughout its history played host to unique events not otherwise found in Singapore. Among the most notable was the earliest iterations of the Singapore Grand Prix, which ran from 1961 to 1973.[22]

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02 A photograph of Lim Nee Soon, 1905
Lim Chong Hsien Collection, image courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

03 Lim Nee Soon in front of a truck fully loaded with pineapples, 1916
Lim Chong Hsien Collection, image courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

04 A kampong house in Nee Soon Village, 1985
Image courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

05 A village in Yishun, 1981
Image courtesy of the Housing & Development Board

06 Lim Nee Soon Rubber Factory, 1985
Image courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

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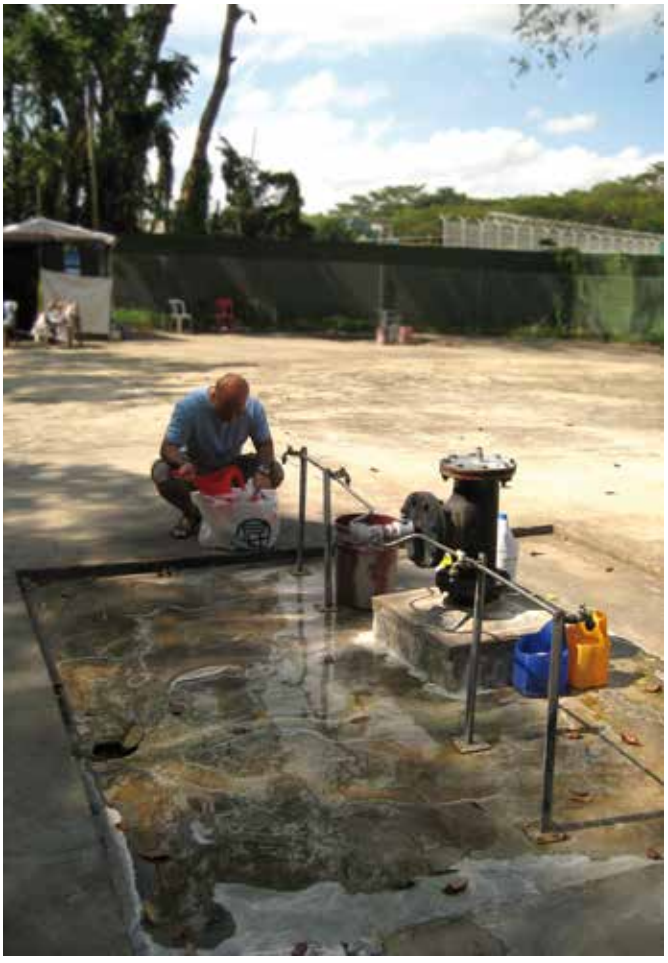
07 Lower Seletar Reservoir, c. 1980
Image courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Taking place along a 4.8km circuit that wound from Sembawang Hill Circus through Old Thomson Road, the route took drivers to the junction of Mandai and Nee Soon Roads, within a whisker's breadth of Nee Soon Village.[23] In fact, so proximal was Nee Soon to the race route that both Nee Soon Police Station and Nee Soon Village were designated as alighting points for guests arriving by bus.[24] In the words of a *Straits Times* reporter covering the event in 1961: "the crowds streamed in all day through the two main gates at Sembawang Circus and Nee Soon", such that "police [soon] had to stop the sale of tickets at both entrances".[25]

Apart from significant events such as the Grand Prix, one can also note the phenomenon of institutions in Yishun adopting rather unique practices which speak to the peculiarities of their geo-historical situations. A fine example would be Naval Base Secondary School, which in the 1950s was the only secondary school in the Sembawang-Yishun area. As it was located within the British Naval Base, staff and students had to adopt the unique convention of having all 10 fingers printed before being issued entry passes![26] Another site which similarly speaks to the somewhat quirky reputation of Yishun is Sembawang Hot Spring, whose waters some believe can cure rheumatism and skin diseases.[27] Initially discovered by W. A. B. Goodall in 1908, the spring has over the years played host to institutions such as Fraser and Neave, the Japanese Military and even the Singapore Government, who explored plans for bottling plants, thermal baths and a spa complex![28] In 2017, the National Parks Board announced that the spring would be transformed into a park 10 times its current size, featuring a cafe and a floral walk. The project is expected to be completed by 2019.[29]

Yet even if one takes into account Yishun's propensity to play host to the odd and unusual, what else can be said to be constitutive of the town's identity and heritage? As intimated earlier, it would be remiss only to allude to the odd and uncanny, while omitting to mention how one can find in Yishun pockets of a rustic, laidback environment interspersed amidst the



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high-rise concrete jungle. Yishun Park, a 17-hectare green lung situated in the heart of Yishun New Town is an example of such a space.[30] While parks are certainly an ubiquitous element of Singapore's landscape, Yishun Park is distinctive in the fact that it serves, quite literally, as a material embodiment of Yishun's very own history. Indeed, unbeknownst to many, the park is sited on the grounds of the former Chye Kay Village, and this is evinced by the numerous rubber, rambutan, durian and guava trees which continue to flourish today.[31] Leaving the verdant for the azure, it is also worth pointing out that Yishun has the distinction of being home to not one but two equally idyllic reservoir parks – Upper Seletar and Lower Seletar.[32] Coupled with the little-known fact that nearby Sungei Khatib Bongsu is home to one of Singapore's few remaining patches of tidal mangrove forests, it is easy to see why some see Yishun as Singapore's rustic northern frontier, replete with sites of natural beauty.[33]

08 Sembawang Hot Springs, 2010
Image courtesy of National Heritage Board

09 An aerial view of Yishun Town when it was under construction, 1983
Image courtesy of the Housing & Development Board

10 Chong Pang Market and Food Centre, 2018
Image courtesy of National Heritage Board

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11 Chong Pang Nasi Lemak, 2018
Image courtesy of National Heritage Board

12 Chong Pang Village, 1986
Image courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

13 Yishun Park, 2018
Image courtesy of National Heritage Board

If nature is central to Yishun's laidback, old-world charm, so too are its many long-time family-run businesses nestled amidst the bustle of modern Yishun. Located along Sembawang Road, Chong Pang Nasi Lemak is one such outfit.[34] Tracing its roots to a stall set up at the former Chong Pang Village Hawker Centre in 1973, this popular food outlet has since become so closely associated with the area that food bloggers have christened its rendition of the well-known coconut rice dish the "pride of Chong Pang".[35] The stall takes its name from the eponymous village, which itself was named after the son of Lim Nee Soon – Lim Chong Pang. Today, Chong Pang Nasi Lemak serves as a reminder of the old village's former shops, which included traditional bakeries, tailors and even a village acupuncturist.[36] Indeed, from a long-term perspective it would not be unreasonable to suggest that the stall plays a contemporary role mirroring that of the former Sultan Theatre, which, according to Pearl Sequerah, was the historical landmark of Chong Pang Village during its heyday in the 1950s.[37]

Until its recent relocation to Owen Road, another enterprise which was synonymous with Yishun was Danny's Tattoo Art (known colloquially as the Gurkha Store) – located in a row of shophouses along Transit Road.[38] According to its proprietors, Madan Lal Aitabir and Ram Lal Aitabir, tattoos were previously priced from between $6 to $15, which in the 1970s, attracted the attention of military servicemen from Britain, New Zealand, Australia and the United States who inhabited the nearby Nee Soon military barracks.[39] Some American soldiers returning from the Vietnam War were even known to have requested tattoos inscribed with names of their fallen comrades.[40] Other servicemen serving in Nee Soon Camp from the 1980s onwards may also have been familiar with Chua Peng Hock Trading Co., better known by its later iconic name, Hock Gift Shop. Established initially as a small-scale setup selling "tidbits, cold drinks, plastic bags, and army field camp products", it later began offering army personnel a variety of bespoke services including embroidery and the embossment of name tags.[41] With the variety of paraphernalia sold, it is perhaps not surprising that a 1981 *New Nation* report saw fit to describe Transit Road as the "Change Alley of Nee Soon Village" – "two dozen little shops in a remote part of Singapore".[42] Somewhat ironically, it is change which has since caught up with Transit Road. Once a hub for National Servicemen undergoing their Basic Military Training, the row of shophouses has in recent years been replaced by a private residential development.[43]

The change that has recently enveloped Transit Road can be seen as emblematic of wider developments that have occurred in Yishun since the 1970s. With the construction of Yishun Town proceeding apace from 1977, much of the landscape has become dominated by high-rise Housing & Development Board (HDB) flats, punctuated by the occasional neighbourhood centre.[44] The commercial heart of Yishun has shifted

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too, from the area around the former Nee Soon Village to Yishun Central, home to the gargantuan Northpoint City.[45] Yet, as examined, elements of a rustic, laidback Yishun still exist, lending the town an idyllic and tranquil vibe typical of towns built in the 1970s and 80s. Although this image of Yishun's identity as a pleasant and laidback town has in recent years been overshadowed by sensational reports of its purportedly peculiar character, it is perhaps the synthesis of both of these facets – the odd and exciting coupled with the pleasant and ordinary – that jointly constitutes Yishun's unique place identity. Far from being unusual, this polysemic character of Yishun's place identity very much echoes the words of geographers Lily Kong and Brenda Yeoh:

> [The] interplay of past and present in the creation of place meanings is more complicated than it seems… Place meanings evolve with each inventive interplay of time and setting, varying with individuals and the unique conditions they find themselves… There is no singular meaning ascribed to a place nor a singular way of deriving those meanings.[46]

Phrased simply in the candid words of Yishun resident, Jude Leong Wei Zhong:

> Besides the food available at Chong Pang Market & Food Centre, what I like most about living in Yishun is that it's close to nature – even my home at Springside Park is right in the midst of flora and fauna! Yet at the same time, I'm also aware that Yishun is known to others for its odd and quirky reputation. To me, that's also part of what makes this town endearing![47]

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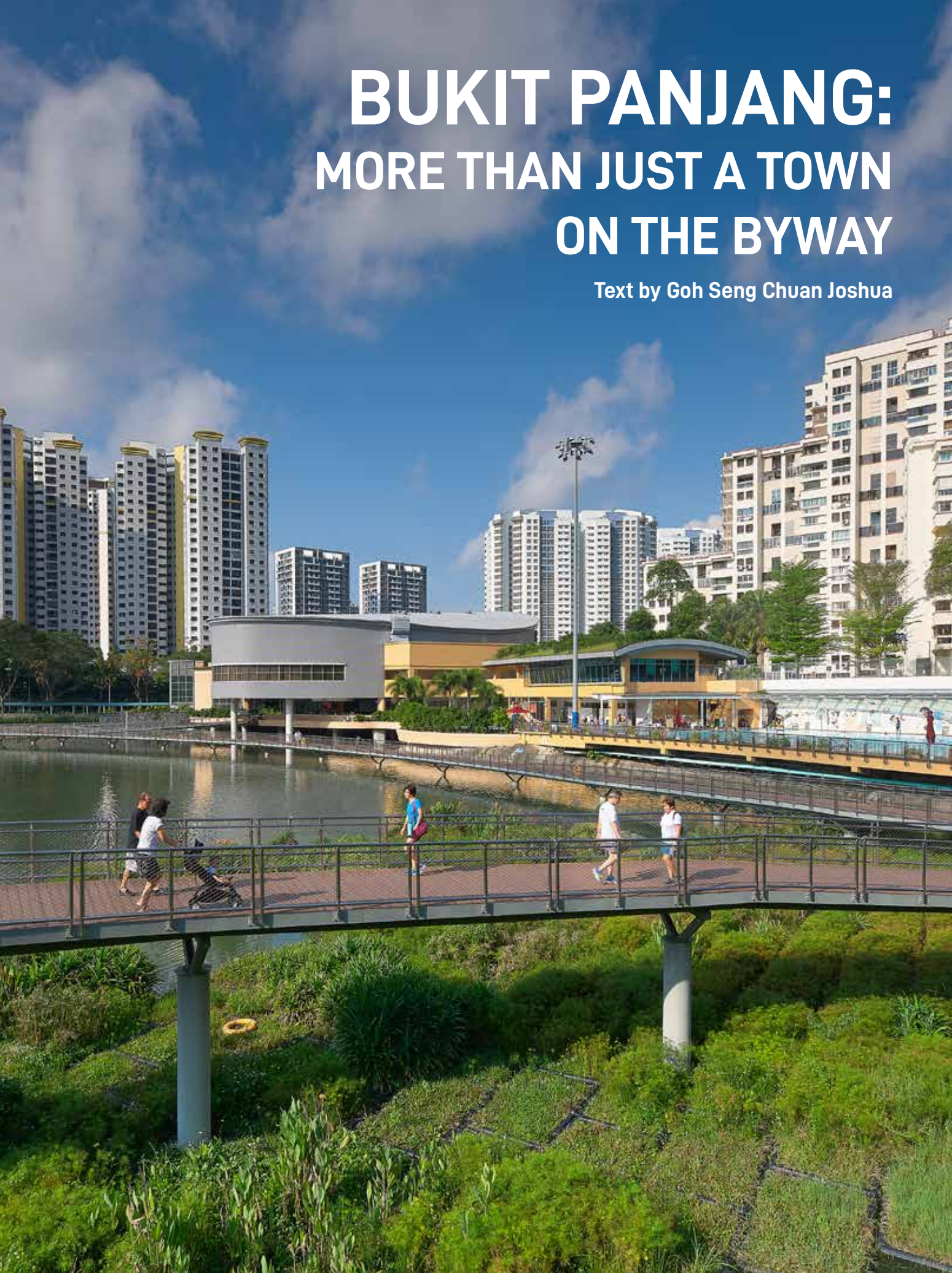
Mention Bukit Panjang to any Singaporean and images of a typical Housing & Development Board (HDB) town will likely come to mind. In fact, a peak-hour trip through Bukit Panjang on a Light Rapid Transit (LRT) train will bring one face-to-face with rows of towering residential flats, punctuated occasionally by the odd park or community space. As the train-car glides into Bukit Panjang Integrated Transport Hub, waves of passengers can be glimpsed hurrying along, some bound for the spanking new Hillion Mall. A quick glance, and it is soon apparent that many of these commuters have just arrived via the adjacent Downtown Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) Line, returning from a day's work in the city.

Half a century ago, however, the commute to Bukit Panjang would have had been made not in air-conditioned comfort, but in a Vulcan omnibus operated by the Green Bus Company.[1] Trundling down Upper Bukit Timah Road on bus service No. 2, one would have encountered acres of dense foliage, interspersed with factories belching out thick, grey smoke.[2] Every now and then, a cacophony of intoned hawker voices would have wafted through the bus' opened windows, as if attempting to compete with the periodic whistle of the Malayan Railway locomotive as it thundered towards the level crossing at Choa Chu Kang Road.[3] As the bus wound around the traffic circus situated where Junction 10 stands today, a mishmash of zinc and brick shophouses would have come into view.[4] Known colloquially as *chap kor* ("tenth mile" in Hokkien), this was Bukit Panjang, a cluster of villages that comprised a few thousand residents during the 1950s.[5] What histories were inscribed in the landscape of this seemingly nondescript town; or was it just another town on the byway?

01 Bukit Panjang, 2018
Image courtesy of National Heritage Board

BUKIT PANJANG: MORE THAN JUST A TOWN ON THE BYWAY

Text by Goh Seng Chuan Joshua



Long before the advent of shopping malls such as Junction 10, "tenth mile" had already been used colloquially to refer to Bukit Panjang. In fact, the origins of both toponyms can be traced to the mid-1800s, when a number of settlements emerged at the 10th milestone of Bukit Timah Road, near a 132-metre hill known as Bukit Panjang (which means "long hill" in Malay).[6] Initially inhabited by gambier and pepper planters, these settlements began to expand when Bukit Timah Road was extended northwards to Kranji in 1845. In the process, new forms of economic activity such as rubber cultivation were introduced to Bukit Panjang.[7] In 1912, the well-known business magnate Ong Sam Leong was reported to have tapped the first tree at his new Bukit Panjang Rubber Estate, which was located at the 10½ milestone of Bukit Timah Road.[8] That such estates were likely a defining feature of the then Bukit Panjang landscape is also suggested by a *Malaya Tribune* report of 1916 announcing the auction of another possibly similar rubber and coconut estate at Chua Chu Kang Road near the Bukit Panjang Railway Station.[9]

Situated near today's Bukit Panjang Post Office, the now defunct Bukit Panjang Railway Station was also integral to the town's rapid growth in the early 1900s. Constructed as part of the Singapore Railway in 1903, it was by 1912 incorporated into the Federated Malay States Railway. This meant that it would have been possible to proceed by train from Bukit Panjang to Holland Road, Cluny Road or even Kuala Lumpur.[10] According to a notice published in the *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser* in 1910, trains were scheduled to call at Bukit Panjang station up to five times daily, carrying not only passengers, but also goods, mail, and even stone from the Mandai Quarry.[11] In fact, an early description of Bukit Panjang as a rather unremarkable locale is provided by a *Straits Times* reporter covering the opening of the railway line in 1903:

> The engine whistled shrilly and in a few minutes drew up at Bukit Panjang, a small station not quite complete yet, of the Cluny Road type. Here, some Tamil women were noticed carrying baskets of gravel on their heads, the gravel being spread about the floor of the station. A few Chinese coolies came on board here and the train was soon speeding on its way.[12]

As the town continued to evolve in the decades after, it is likely that the earlier image of Bukit Panjang as just another nondescript town became more an anachronism than a true reflection of its identity. Certainly, residents of Bukit Panjang in the 1950s would have been familiar with an altogether different town than the one described in the *Straits Times* report of 1903. The Bukit Panjang they would have known,

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02 A bus from the Green Bus Company passing through Bukit Panjang, 1956
F. W. York Collection, image courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

03 Shophouses along Bukit Panjang Road, 1986
Image courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

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04 Singapore Improvement Trust houses at Bukit Panjang, 1957
Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, image courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

far from being mundane, was brimming with verve and assertiveness, for it was a town which doggedly coupled a can-do ethos with a spirit of mutual help as it confronted the challenges of Singapore's early nation-building years. No doubt it was roiled, at times, by the turbulent socio-political currents of the era, but this itself ensured that residents of Bukit Panjang forged a distinct collective identity defined by a strong sense of esprit de corps. Testament to the fact that this spirit of camaraderie was no myth, but was indeed being tangibly expressed, is a speech by the then acting Colonial Secretary J. D. Higham to the newly-formed Bukit Panjang Youth Club in 1954. Praising the club's community centeredness, he pronounced with more than a sliver of prescience, that in Bukit Panjang "there is already a sense of belonging to a group", from which he predicted would "grow [the] most fruitful movements".[13]

Part of the reason why a spirit of collegial solidarity began to take root so strongly in Bukit Panjang was the fact that the trunk road which brought development to the town was also the same feature that separated it by ten miles from the city. Indeed, a *Singapore Free Press* report of 1955 could not resist describing Bukit Panjang as the "vegetable basket" of Singapore – a "far off rural constituency of bullock-cart trails, away from the hurly-burly of city life".[14] Given this description, one can perhaps understand why residents of Bukit Panjang often came together to fend for themselves, especially in instances when help seemed distant, delayed or deficient. In 1957, for example, the Singapore Improvement Trust launched Bukit Panjang Estate (later renamed Teck Whye Estate), which comprised some 200 single-storey terrace houses.[15] Branded as a low-cost alternative for workers employed in the Bukit Timah area, the houses were touted in the local press as being "excellent shield[s] against heat and cold", with their construction even bearing the approval stamp of a United Nations expert.[16] Yet, by 1958, tenants were being told tartly by the trust's chairman, J. M. Fraser, that they had to "help themselves" when they appealed for assistance to fix asbestos roofs that were producing oven-like indoor temperatures of 38 degrees celsius.[17] In a *Straits Times* article from 1958, Fraser was even reported to

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05 The opening of a mobile library at Bukit Panjang Community Centre, 1966
Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, image courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

06 Then Chief Minister David Marshall at the opening of the horti-agricultural show at Bukit Panjang Community Centre, 1955
Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, image courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

07 Sin Wah Theatre, 1960s
Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, image courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

have told tenants that the trust was "charging you a favourable rent which isn't even economical for us".[18] Furious tenants, miffed that their petitions had been ignored, were reported to have organised a meeting at the Bukit Panjang Community Centre to decide on a course of action.[19] Perhaps not coincidentally, within two weeks of the meeting, the matter was raised for discussion in the then Legislative Assembly.[20]

At times, the collective indignation felt by residents and workers of Bukit Panjang towards social injustice was so intense that meetings gave way to strikes, and petitions came to be substituted with the picket. Situated where Tan Chong Industrial Park is standing today, the Nanyang Shoe Factory – where many womenfolk from Bukit Panjang were reputed to have worked – was one compound beset by numerous strikes in the 1950s and 1960s.[21] Although the charged political atmosphere of the day no doubt influenced strikers' demands, newspaper reports from the era also reveal that on most occasions the strikers' grievances stemmed from prosaic bread-and-butter concerns: the desire for a 50-cent wage raise or for overtime allowance to be granted.[22] Industrial action undertaken was thus not necessarily always the handiwork of disruptive elements, but could well have been prompted by workers uniting to seek redress for injustices such as the refusal of a company to pay arrears.[23] Chua Beng Tee, who witnessed many such strikes, recalls that "in the past, people took action once they felt aggrieved, no matter if it was a minor issue. That's much less likely to happen today!"[24]

While a lively sense of disaffection certainly permeated through the Bukit Panjang of the 1950s and 1960s, more often than not the response it prompted amongst residents was a spirited attempt to channel this restiveness for a greater good. Bukit Panjang Community Centre, in particular, stood out for its many initiatives that attempted to tackle issues of both local and national dimensions. In 1955, the centre organised Singapore's inaugural district horti-agricultural show, which included demonstrations for farmers, displays of crops, and even advice for

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carp breeders.[25] At the show's opening, then Chief Minister David Marshall publicly commended Bukit Panjang Community Centre for their public spirit in organising such an event, which he opined was "of great assistance".[26] Not to be outdone, the community centre further down at Jalan Kong Kuan was also reported to have organised its fair share of charitable activities, on occasion using the Sin Wah Theatre near Lorong Ah Thia to screen shows as part of its fund-raising programmes.[27]

Beyond the walls of such community institutions, it would be remiss to disregard the many instances in which this sense of public-spiritedness found expression through ground-up grassroots initiatives, pursued by ordinary Bukit Panjang residents of all races and creeds. A particularly revealing case involves the former Lembaga Masjid Jamik, which in 1960 began a building fund drive to build a mosque in Bukit Panjang, as the next nearest mosque was some seven miles away.[28] Not content with merely raising funds, more than 100 volunteers from Bukit Panjang came together as part of a self-styled "Operation Masjid", helping to clear the site on which the mosque would be constructed.[29] The mosque, originally named Jamek Mosque, was subsequently renamed Al-Khair in 1963, and continues to serve the Muslim community at 1 Teck Whye Crescent today.[30]

Over at Bukit Panjang Government High School, which was established as Bukit Panjang Secondary School in 1957, students who had barely turned 13 banded together when they arrived at their new school premises in Jalan Teck Whye in 1959 to find that there were no desks and chairs.[31] Professor Low Cheng Hock, who was amongst the school's first batch of students, recalls how all the students rushed to help carry the school furniture from a lorry when it arrived two weeks later. As weeks passed, the entire cohort even transformed the barren land behind the school into a proper field by planting grass seeds and nurturing it with cow dung.[32] Peh Ching Boon, who attended the school in the 1960s, also discovered how valuable the close-knit ties amongst Bukit Panjang

residents could be when on one occasion, a handful of students mischievously released the air valve of his bicycle's tyres. Fortunately, he was spared a trek home by virtue of his uncle's friendship with the school's doctor, who brought him to a nearby shop to repair the leak. Moreover, he was even told he could henceforth park his bicycle outside the Principal's office![33]

Fast forward to today, the Bukit Panjang of the mid-20th century is scarcely recognisable amidst the rows of towering HDB flats. Nonetheless, a spirit of camaraderie continues to flourish amidst the high-rise urbanscape, testifying to the esprit de corps so strongly embedded in the town's heritage. For example, even as new initiatives such as community gardens have emerged, longstanding community institutions such as the Bukit Panjang Youth Club continue to flourish too, with the latter even pioneering signature programmes such as FoodNotes, a youth-led food donation drive for the needy.[34] Emblematic of the extent to which Bukit Panjang has managed to carve out a distinct identity is perhaps the sheer fact that its place-name continues to be used widely amongst Singaporeans, in lieu of the less familiar "Zhenghua". In fact, "Zhenghua" had been chosen to replace "Bukit Panjang" as part of a government initiative in the 1980s to rechristen towns with "pinyinised" toponyms, but the original place-name was reinstated after a spirited public debate (Bukit Panjang was the only town in Singapore in which a reversal of the policy was effected).[35] On hindsight, one can surmise from the episode that Singaporeans are, without a doubt, cognisant of the importance of place identities and histories, and how these work in concert to distinguish places like Bukit Panjang from being mere towns on the byway. In the words of geographers Brenda Yeoh and Lily Kong, it is only logical that:

> Place and history are closely intertwined in the rich texture of individual and social life. There is no history without place, and no place without history; to lose sight of one would be to lose a sense of the other.[36]

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08 Bukit Panjang Government High School, c. 1970
Bukit Panjang Government School Collection, image courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

09 Pupils of Bukit Panjang Government High School on an excursion to Nanyang Shoe Factory, 1950
Bukit Panjang Government School Collection, image courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

10 The community garden at Bukit Panjang N2 Park, 2018
Image courtesy of National Heritage Board

11 Junction 10, 2018
Image courtesy of National Heritage Board

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WRITERS FOR MUSE SG

Lim Wen Jun Gabriel is a Year 2 History major at the National University of Singapore. Besides fighting his way through every semester, he enjoys exploring Singapore's waterways on a kayak, seeking out photogenic people and places, and just eating.

Ang Zhen Ye is a Year 2 History major at the National University of Singapore. His interests lie in hunting for good coffee and food. Apart from his school work, he spends most of his free time reading and making music.

Choo Meng Kang is a Year 2 History major at the National University of Singapore. His interests include tasting good food around Singapore, watching football and taking part in community service events.

Hong Wei En, Isaac is a Year 1 History major at the National University of Singapore. Passionate about music, he enjoys performing unique renditions of classic songs. To him, the simple things in life are the best; porridge and a cuppa on a rainy day, divine.

Gavin Leong is a Year 2 History major at the National University of Singapore. He is fascinated by military history, likes doing accents and enjoys a good meal while relaxing in the company of friends.

Stefanie Tham is Manager (Research & Exhibition) at the National Heritage Board's Education & Community Outreach division. She has researched on various towns in Singapore, and works on developing NHB's heritage trails and community galleries.

Tan Jia Yi is a Year 1 History major at the National University of Singapore. She enjoys travelling and trying suspicious street food. She hopes that one day Singapore can learn to love her own organic history, despite it being typecast as conventionally manufactured.

Michelle Chan Yun Yee is a Year 1 History major from the National University of Singapore. Her all-time favourite drink is grass jelly soya milk, known colloquially as Michael Jackson. She is also an avid archer and soccer player.

Goh Seng Chuan Joshua is a Year 3 History and Geography major at the National University of Singapore. He believes in grounding his academic knowledge through conversations with ordinary Singaporeans about their everyday heritage.

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