



Jul 2014 | Newsletter of the Singapore Heritage Society

Editorial

Without its members, any NGO is reduced to a shell-like existence. Members offer energy, ideas, and a sense of community. It is thus imperative that we tap the collective wisdom of SHS members. This is especially important because the struggle over Singapore's heritage has never been so pronounced. On one hand, citizens are turning to nostalgia and all things 'retro' if only to retain a sense of belonging in the face of rapid change, both of the urban and cultural variety. On the other, policy-makers, realising the importance of heritage for national identity, have sought to define 'heritage' as well as what can be conserved and what cannot. We all agree that heritage is important. What is 'heritage' and what is worth saving, however, are matters for robust debate and open dialogue. The opportunities to shape our nation's heritage legacy can only be grasped when SHS members share a common sense of urgency. It is with this in mind that we are reviving *Roots*. We hope that this newsletter will not only keep us in touch with each other but also serve as platform for ideas to move SHS forward.



Note from President Dr Chua Ai Lin

After a nine-year hiatus, I am extremely pleased to announce the revival of SHS's *Roots* newsletter. With our Society's lean working team, it has often been difficult to sustain a publication to communicate all the work that we do, partly because there is just so much that we do. In the last few years, interest in local heritage from both citizens and the state has grown exponentially, and so has the work of SHS. *Roots* will provide a quarterly update on the events, issues and projects of the Society. By keeping abreast of current events, readers will better able to participate in public discussions about how we treat the past in present-day Singapore, and what legacy we choose to leave to future generations. SHS's tagline is Research, Education, Advocacy -- we hope you will be inspired to join us in our mission to provide and independent and alternative voice on heritage in Singapore.

Remembering the *Roots* of SHS

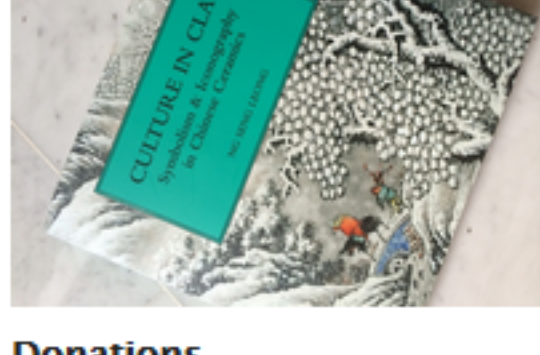
by William Lim

There was a hunger for heritage discussion when the Singapore Heritage Society (SHS) began. More than 60 persons regularly attended the lunches and discussions on conservation at Aziza's Malay restaurant at Emerald Hill for many years. Rafiq Jumabhoy, a keen and active supporter of SHS, also facilitated and financially contributed to numerous meetings at Scotts Holdings. Regular committee meetings were held at my office.

SHS's newsletter, *Roots*, was then edited by Lee Geok Boi and Win Ramdas. Events were initiated and supported voluntarily with great enthusiasm. Several *Heritage Hunts* and public exhibitions were successfully carried out with support from the museums and the media while the indefatigable Geraldene Lowe continued her incredible Chinatown discovery walks for decades. SHS organised lectures and workshops as well as published several books concerning heritage. One of the most outstanding is *Syonan: Singapore under the Japanese 1942 – 1945* by Lee Geok Boi, published in 1992. I must also acknowledge many others who were deeply committed to the various projects – in particular, Kwa Chong Guan, Kwok Kian Woon and Sharon Siddique.

SHS was registered in 1987, with the 'silent' support of many academics and government insiders. It was a time when the authorities were obsessed with maximising economic growth. There was near zero tolerance for criticism as well as little awareness and respect for conservation heritage and communal memories. Looking back, SHS appeared to be a 'mission impossible'. I am really delighted that it has survived and today has continued with new energy and a spirit of commitment.

William Lim is a local architect and was the first President and founding member of SHS.



Donations

Generous donations to SHS come in different forms. In June 2014, our long-standing member, Mr Ng Seng Leong, donated twenty copies of his new book, 'Culture in Clay: Symbolism & Iconography in Chinese Ceramics', in which he shares his wealth of knowledge gleaned over years of appreciating and collecting ceramics. This book is not available for sale publicly.

To have Mr Ng's generosity spark off a chain of goodwill, SHS will be giving away one copy of his book to each person donating \$500 or more to the Society. All donations collected help us when it comes to applying for the Ministry of Culture, Community & Youth's Cultural Matching Fund which provides dollar-for-dollar matching grants for private cash donations.

Don't forget that cash donations to SHS are entitled to 2.5 times tax deduction. For more information, please visit http://www.singaporeheritage.org/?page_id=99 or email shs.secretary@gmail.com.

Coming Events

14 Aug | Jln Kubor Cemetery Tour by Imran Tajudeen

13 Sep | Centrestage: Anatomy of a Riot

14 Sep | SHS Annual General Meeting

14 Sep | Talk by Janice Koh on championing heritage and arts

11 Oct | Symposium on Heritage Issues in Singapore, ACM Auditorium

16 Oct | Mini-Cakap Heritage: irememberOrchard Launch at Library@Orchard



Turkeys, Romance and Communists:

Stories from the KTM Railway and Tanjong Pagar Station

By Terence Heng

And then I sat on the turkey and prayed to God until my father showed up. These are some of the words I never thought I would hear when researching on the oral histories of the Keretapi Tanah Melayu (KTM) Railway and Tanjong Pagar Station. Mr Herald Bangras, a senior lecturer at Ngee Ann Polytechnic, was only a child living in the KTM officers' quarters near to the station. His father, an elder at the Church of St Teresa and a KTM customs officer, had tasked him to bring a full-grown kampong turkey to the nearby wet market for slaughter. The turkey escaped, and Herald was left to corner the bird and pin it down till help arrived.

This was just one of the many stories I encountered in this contributory project to the Singapore Memory Project. Supervising a team of 6 research assistants - we called and emailed, convinced, and cajoled 50 individuals to tell us their stories of the railway and station. We asked not only passengers, but individuals who had worked for and with KTM or had lived along the railways and near to the station. From these we experienced a myriad of stories ranging from bar fights and gun battles to sweetheart long-distance romances and late-night feasting in hidden *warungs*. There was Mr Michael Ho, who re-called how there once was a nightclub and bar in Tanjong Pagar station, where players from Singapore's domestic darts league would gather to compete; or Mr Huang Shenq Yeat, who remembers as a boy being on a train that got caught in the crossfire between British and Communist forces in Malaya, where he had to crawl along the carriage floor to hide in a nearby yam farm for two hours. There was also Madam Lim Choon Lai, whose weekend train commute from Singapore to Kuala Lumpur to care for her grandmother was an integral part of her romance with her husband, who would provide "chauffer" services every Friday and Monday to and from Tanjong Pagar Station to ensure she got to work on time.



But beyond these stories was also a recurring theme of how the railway and station was an important anchor for many Singaporeans to Singapore. Running the width of the island, these individuals saw the railway as a "spine" of the nation, reminding us of, amongst other things, Singapore and Malaysia's shared histories, our industrial heritage as an entrepot nation, and a simpler time when life was centered around community and sharing. To our interviewees, Tanjong Pagar station's very lack of change over the decades became a stark reminder of just how *much* has changed beyond its walls – that is new is not always necessarily better, and that progress cannot simply be defined through demolition.

Terence Heng is Assistant Professor at the Singapore Institute of Technology. A visual sociologist, his research centres on the spiritual heritage of Singapore, particularly Bukit Brown Cemetery and Chinese folklore religion. His poetry and photography on Chinatown was recently exhibited in the Arts House at The Old Parliament.



Pulau Ubin

In March 2014, Minister of State for National Development, Desmond Lee, announced the government's commitment to 'sensitively enhance the natural environment of Ubin and protect its heritage and its rustic charm.' Since then, MND has formed the Friends of Ubin network, bringing together different government agencies (including NParks and URA) with nature and heritage sector representatives to discuss ideas. The public can learn more and submit feedback via a dedicated website: <http://ubini.mnd.gov.sg/MS/PulauUbin.aspx>

SHS was invited to join the Friends of Ubin group, and has been on site visits to Ubin with Minister Desmond Lee and attended two discussion sessions in March and May. The next meeting is scheduled for the end of July.

The role of SHS in policy discussions is important in providing an additional dimension to the focus on biodiversity and the natural environment, which have been well-managed under purview of NParks, the agency in charge of Ubin. More than simply a historical site, the island is a cultural landscape where interaction between human settlement and the environment is its distinguishing feature, both in the past and now. SHS has proposed ethnographic cultural mapping of the Ubin community as a necessary first step to finding sustainable solutions for the island.