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GIVING A FUTURE TO OUR PAST
**SINGAPORE
HERITAGE
SOCIETY**

ROOTS: Newsletter of the Singapore Heritage Society February 2018 Issue

President's Message

Welcome to the first of a new series of newsletters, which we have put together to keep you informed about the Society's activities.

I was recently invited to take part in an event at the beginning of February 2018 called [Cultural Industries and Intellectual Property in Southeast Asia](#) organized by Singapore Management University and the National Gallery Singapore.

I decided to speak on the topic of "Protection of Cultural Heritage beyond Intellectual Property: The International Dimension", which I thought was timely since Singapore will be ratifying the [2003 UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage Convention](#) this year.



When we consider heritage, we tend to think in terms of physical objects such as archaeological relics, artworks, handicrafts, documents and buildings. But these objects can often only be fully appreciated in the context of intangible matters – the beliefs that inspired their creation, and the activities and rituals involving them, for instance.

By its nature, intangible cultural heritage transcends the material. The Convention identifies five domains of such heritage: oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage; performing arts; social practices, rituals and festive events; knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe; and traditional craftsmanship.

Why preserve it, though? I can do no better than to quote Article 2(1) of the Convention, which

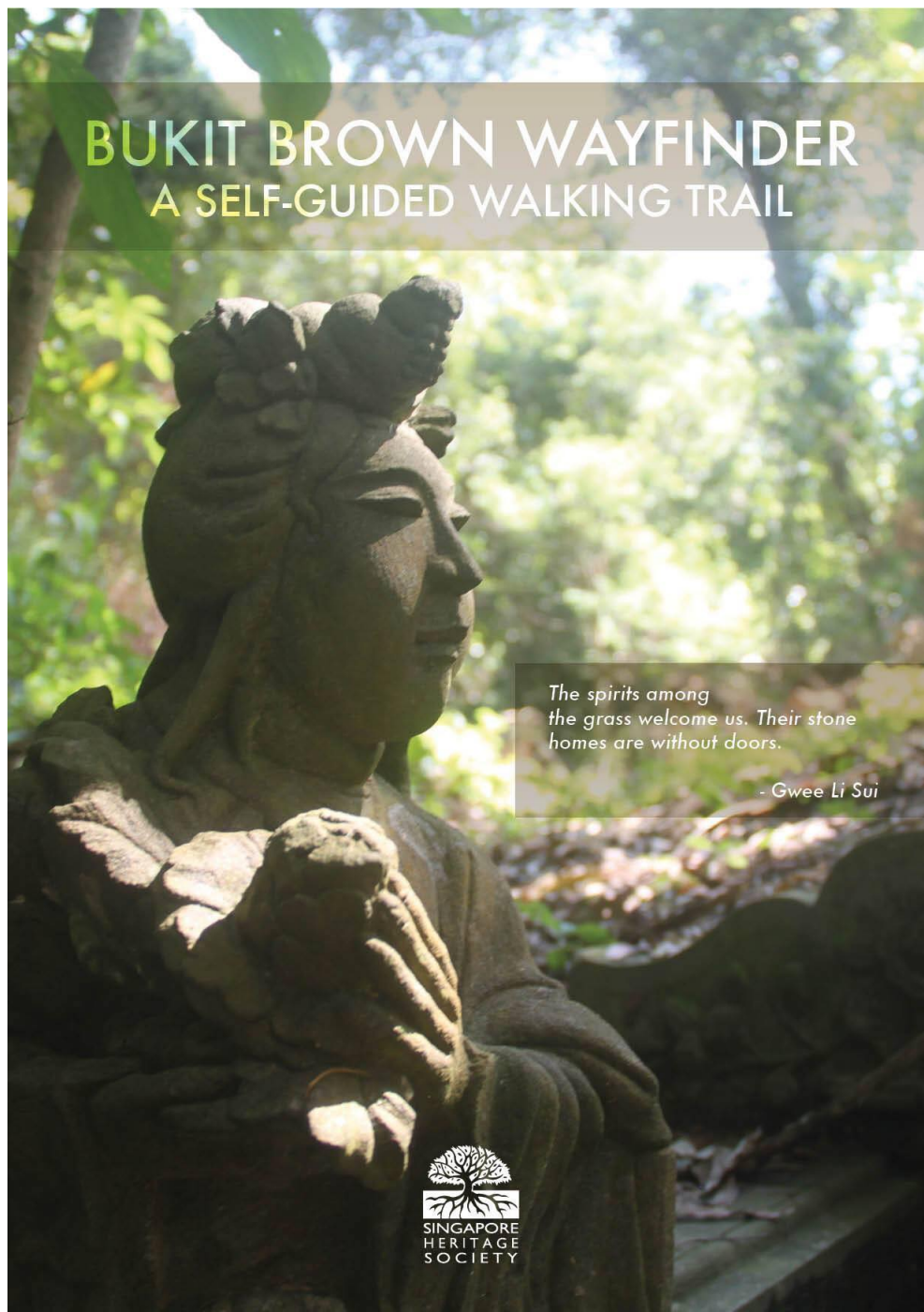
states that intangible cultural heritage, “transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity”.

Once Singapore becomes a party to the Convention, it will want to begin identifying and drawing up an inventory of the intangible cultural heritage present in its territory with the participation of communities, groups and non-governmental organizations. Eventually, some of this heritage may be inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

We should therefore start thinking about the types of intangible cultural heritage that we would wish to see memorialized either at the local or international level. This is something all of us can do to promote greater appreciation of our rich heritage.

Warmest regards,
Dr Jack Tsen-Ta Lee
President of the Singapore Heritage Society

Launch of the Bukit Brown Wayfinder



On the morning of 18 November 2017, the Singapore Heritage Society unveiled the Bukit Brown Wayfinder – Singapore's first self-guided heritage trail in a cemetery – at Bukit Brown Cemetery. The launch of this trail will allow heritage enthusiasts to explore accessible parts of Bukit Brown on their own. The launch was officiated by our Guest of Honour **Mr Desmond Lee**, Minister for Social and Family Development and Second Minister for National Development.



Guest of Honour Minister Desmond Lee launching Bukit Brown Wayfinder

The Wayfinder heritage trail facilitates self-discovery of the rich history, culture, traditions and personal stories unique to Bukit Brown. It features on-site signage of 25 tombs supported by route directional markers and information panels for visitors. It is complemented by a [downloadable online booklet](#) which expands on the history, habitat and heritage of the municipal cemetery for the Chinese which was opened in 1922 and closed for burials in 1973.



According to **Dr Jack Tsen-Ta Lee**, President of SHS, "The Wayfinder was conceived by SHS to support and sustain continued interest in Bukit Brown from the general public and requests especially from educational institutions and community groups for guided walks from the volunteers on the ground, popularly known as 'Brownies'". He added, "Wayfinder serves as an introduction to Singapore's history and heritage both before and after independence in a tangible way through the tombstones, and covers our colonial past, our place in maritime trade, stories from the diaspora and Singapore under Japanese occupation, in short our place in regional and global political, economic and social history."

The Wayfinder draws primarily on community sources from the ground particularly the work of independent researchers on material culture and family archives of descendants of some of the featured tombs.



Minister Desmond Lee and Dr Jack Lee using the Wayfinder guide in front of the tomb of Dr Lee's maternal great-grandparents

The Wayfinder trail was developed by the SHS with funding support from the **Ministry of National Development (MND)** and **National Heritage Board (NHB)**. In developing the walking trail, the SHS consulted extensively with various agencies under a multi-agency work group chaired by the MND. In particular, advice from the **National Parks Board (NParks)** was sought. SHS is also grateful for the support on the ground given by the community in their contributions of time, effort and content.

The Bukit Brown Wayfinder Guide can be downloaded from our [website](#).

Celebrating International Mother Language Day (21 February)

This year on International Mother Language Day (21 February), we would like to shine a spotlight on the many languages that our mothers and grandmothers speak. According to Singapore's General Household survey in 2016, the proportion of Singaporeans who mainly use mother tongues at home, especially Chinese dialects and Malay, have fallen between 18% and 33% in the past decade. In the words of UNESCO, "Every language reflects a unique world-view with its own value systems, philosophy and particular cultural features [...] They support cultural identity and are an essential part of a community's heritage."



A video promoting International Mother Language Day created by our interns

Our SHS interns have made two videos, '[What I call my grandma](#)' and '[Stuff my grandma says](#)', which have reached more than 7,000 people so far on the SHS [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#) pages.



Another video promoting International Mother Language Day created by our interns

Everyone is invited to join the social media campaign with these three simple steps:

1. Take a video of yourself saying some things your grandmother says
2. Upload the video on your social media account
3. Don't forget to hashtag! #mothertonguesofSG #stuffmygrandmasays #motherlanguageday #singaporeheritagesociety

You can also email mothertongues@singaporeheritage.org to make a submission which we might share on our pages.

Read more:

- <https://en.unesco.org/international-days/international-mother-language-day>
- <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/culture/themes/endangered-languages/faq-on-endangered-languages/>

Entertaining the Gods and The Social Diary of a Spirit Medium

The debut of the public screening of the two documentaries *Entertaining the Gods* and *The Social Diary of a Spirit Medium* on 26 November 2017 at The Pod, National Library, followed by a panel discussion comprising the documentary makers and academic experts, brought to a close one of the most successful and engaging sessions for the SHS event season of 2017. It took close to a year to organise and tickets were snapped up almost within a day of their release.



Ronni Pinsler with SHS ExCo member Catherine Lim

The wide ranging discussions on the practice of spirit mediumship and other temple practices – their significance, relevance and meaning – came from personal observations, both young and old among the audience. With rare footage from the late seventies featured, it was an event that also attracted heritage enthusiasts and bloggers who keenly follow the rapidly changing streetscape of the city around the Singapore River.



The panelists from left to right: Chan Chow Wah, Dr Margaret Chan, Ronni Pinsler, Kelvin Ang, and Prof Kenneth Dean

A spectacular nighttime view from the National Library's 16th floor provided a fitting backdrop for the event, which was a most successful partnership between the Singapore Heritage

Society and the **National Archives of Singapore**, the **Urban Redevelopment Authority** and the **Singapore Management University's Wee Kim Wee Centre**.

New SHS Interns

In November 2017, the Society started its open call for new interns who will be interning with us from January till April 2018. After intensive rounds of shortlisting and interviews, we are proud to announce the six interns who will be working closely with us.



From left to right: Simarpreet Kaur, Tham Sok Yee, Ng Yung Hian, Low De Wei, Lee Xuan Jin, and Choy Jing Yi

The interns who have joined the SHS family are:

- **Ms Simarpreet Kaur**, a second year Global Studies student at NUS who has great passion for classical Indian and Punjabi folk music and loves exploring old architecture in Singapore. She hopes that through this internship she can contribute to the heritage of Punjabi-Sikhs in Singapore eventually.
- **Ms Tham Sok Yee**, a fourth year Political Science student at NUS who is passionate about history, political theory and international relations. She hopes that through this internship she can add value to her community.

- **Ms Ng Yung Hian**, who is pursuing her doctorate in East Asian Languages and Civilization at UPenn. She hopes that her time with us will allow her to learn more about and also promote Singapore's cultural heritage and diverse identities.
- **Mr Low De Wei**, a graduate of Hwa Chong Institution and is now currently waiting to enter university. He loves travelling and is an active volunteer at the National Museum of Singapore. He hopes in his time with us to learn more about how civil society groups safeguard and promote our cultural heritage.
- **Mr Lee Xuan Jin**, a student at Hwa Chong Institution who was inspired to learn more about Singapore's heritage after hearing stories of yesteryear Singapore from his family.
- **Ms Choy Jing Yi**, a fourth year Global Studies student at NUS who loves dancing and is part of the NUS Dance Ensemble. She hopes that her time with us will allow her to explore different cultures and also to form a deeper understanding of Singapore's heritage.

You may see our interns helping out at our events. Do say hi to them and welcome them to the SHS family.

Society News and Updates

Appointment of an Executive Director

Following the advertisement in December of an opening for a part-time Executive Director, we are very pleased to announce the appointment of **Dr Chua Ai Lin**, who brings to the table over 20 years experience in SHS, including four years as SHS President (2013–2017).

Revitalising the Pulau Ubin Kampong

As part of the Friends of Ubin Network, SHS is part of the organising committee for a Balik Kampung Chinese New Year party for current and former Ubin residents on 24 February 2018. This is the first of many initiatives with the aim of reinvigorating the island community, especially with younger family members.

Engagement with Government Agencies

In December and January, SHS ExCo representatives attended STB engagement workshops on Chinatown and Little India, as well as briefings on upcoming initiatives by NHB, URA, NParks, and PMO.

Conference Presentations

SHS President, Dr Jack Tsen-Ta Lee, presented a paper entitled 'Protection of Cultural Heritage Beyond Intellectual Property: The International Dimension' at an international conference on *Cultural Industries and Intellectual Property in Southeast Asia* organised by the

Singapore Management University and the National Gallery Singapore on 1–2 February 2018.

International Networking

In January, SHS ExCo members hosted Ms Freya Aitken-Turff, Executive Director of China Exchange in London, to share experiences of issues facing Chinatowns in Singapore and London.



SHS ExCo members Han Ming Guang (*first from the left*) and Catherine Lim (*first from the right*) with Dr Jerome Denis (*fourth from the left*) and his students

In February, our ExCo members Catherine Lim and Honorary Secretary Han Ming Guang also hosted Dr Jerome Denis and his students from Mines Paris Tech who are in Singapore studying the relationship between the state and civil society. Dr Jerome and his students were keen on learning more about the history of SHS and the role SHS plays in heritage advocacy.

Upcoming SHS Events

Talk: Death and Burial in Paris – 10 March 2018

Though Paris is the city of love, it is also the place where the modern traditions of Western death and burial were established. Dr Gopin's lecture will trace the tradition of mass burial in Parisian church graveyards to the new modern idea of the world's first cemetery in 1804. Père Lachaise Cemetery is the culmination of a struggle to reform burial practices and this radical idea of a cemetery became the basis for all the traditions of burial in the west. The revolutionary idea of individual burial in a modern cemetery spread quickly in the west – England, Spain, Germany, and

the United States – and arrived in Singapore surprisingly early in 1834 in the now-disappeared Fort Canning Cemetery.

Dr Seth Gopin was born in New York City and earned a BA in French from Rutgers College (1979) and a PhD in Art History from Rutgers University (1994). He was employed at Rutgers for more than a quarter of a century and oversaw the Office for Scholarships and Fellowships, was in charge of Study Abroad Programs, and served as the Director of Global Studies. Now retired, his interests include urban architecture and the structure of cities. He has been knighted by the French government for his groundbreaking work in popularising the history of the city of Paris to Americans and is a Chevalier of the Ordre des Palmes Académiques.

Click [here](#) to register for the talk.

Talk: Exploring the History and Evolution of Malayalees in Singapore – 17 March 2018

Dr Anitha Devi Pillai will highlight some of the key research findings related to the history and the evolution of the Malayalee community in Singapore over the last one hundred years.

The Malayalees are the second largest Indian community in Singapore after the Tamils. Members of the community have played important and prominent roles in the transformation of Singapore.

During her talk, Dr Pillai will share interesting anecdotes gathered first-hand from different generations of the community. She will also explore how the community evolved from one with strong ties to Kerala, India, to one where the second and third generation assimilated into the larger Singapore society; as well as the recent changes to the community with the influx of migrant professionals over the last ten years.

The talk will be based on her book *From Kerala to Singapore: Voices from the Singapore Malayalee Community* which was published last year.

Click [here](#) to register for the talk.

WORLD CITIES SUMMIT 2018



8 - 12 JULY 2018
Marina Bay Sands, Singapore

Liveable & Sustainable Cities:
Embracing the Future through
Innovation and Collaboration



The World Cities Summit is an exclusive platform for government leaders and industry experts to address liveable and sustainable city challenges, share integrated urban solutions and forge new partnerships. Over the past decade, the Summit has achieved global recognition with a credible gathering of the best minds in planning and urban development.

Themed “Liveable & Sustainable Cities: Embracing the Future through Innovation and Collaboration”, the 6th World Cities Summit in 2018 will explore how cities can be more liveable and resilient through better governance and planning, technology and social innovations, as well as collaborations with various stakeholders and with other cities. Through shared vision and active engagement, the public, private and people sectors can co-create innovative and integrated urban solutions for a more sustainable future.

Confirmed speakers include:

- Michael Berkowitz, President, 100 Resilient Cities
- Jan Gehl, Founder, Gehl Architects
- Dr Jonathan Woetzel, Director and Senior Partner, McKinsey Global Institute
- Kamlesh Yagnik, Chief Resilience Officer, Surat
- Patricia McCarney, President and CEO, World Council on City Data

Singapore Heritage Society members will enjoy a **10% discount** when they register via this newsletter.

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