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NATIONAL LIBRARY SINGAPORE



CENTRE STAGE

AN ENGLISH THEATRE SCRAPBOOK

Title: *Repertory Players 1937–1948*
Compiler: Janet M.A. Lawson
Language: English
Type: Scrapbook
Call no.: RRARE 792.095957 SIN
Accession no.: B32410591C
Donated by: The Stage Club

One of the oldest scrapbooks in the National Library’s collection, *Repertory Players 1937–1948* is important because of the light it sheds on Singapore’s English language theatre scene before World War II.

This scrapbook of more than 100 pages includes newspaper clippings, photographs, programmes, notes from well-wishers, lists of cast members, details about the ticketing channel (usually via Robinsons, a department store) and prices of tickets, as well as the names of companies that sponsored props used in the Repertory Players’ shows.

It also has some material on two oth-

er theatre groups: the Singapore Amateur Dramatic Club [S.A.D.C.]’ as well as The Stage Club. The material is mostly arranged chronologically.

The scrapbook is very likely to have been compiled by Janet M.A. Lawson née Janet Marquerite Alexandrine Gow² whose name is handwritten on the inside front cover and dated 5 November 1937. In 1939, she married Carl Lawson, a well-known stage actor and producer, and took on his last name thereafter.

Despite its title, the scrapbook appears to cover Janet Lawson’s involvement in Singapore’s English language theatre scene during the period, which is why it mentions productions done by the S.A.D.C., the Repertory Players, and the Stage Club. In the late 1930s, Carl Lawson played a key role in both the S.A.D.C. and the Repertory Players.³

From the scrapbook, we can see that the Repertory Players largely put up productions written in the 1930s, such as *Escape Me Never*, *George and Margaret*, *French Without Tears*, *On the Spot* and *Room for Two*.

On at least one rare occasion, the Repertory Players managed to stage the world premiere of a play in Singapore before it was due to be produced in London. This was so for *Curry Tiffin: A Comedy of Singapore*, which was staged in January 1940. The play was written by Thelma Faulkner (Mrs L.G. Hartmann), who was the wife of a military officer based in Singapore.⁴

The various cast lists give us a glimpse of Singapore’s pre-war theatre scene. And if the names on the cast list of *Curry Tiffin* are any indication, even the Asian roles were played by non-Asians. In the play, Ah Foo was played by Alan D. Dant while Barbara Pyne was Amah.

Among the items in the scrapbook is a short note from the playwright Noel Coward to Carl Lawson, expressing Coward’s regrets that he would not be able to attend the Repertory Players’ staging of his play *Weatherwise* in Singapore on his return trip.

Programme sheets reveal that in addition to entertaining the paying public, the Repertory Players also ran “camp tours”

during which they presented shows to troops at the Singapore garrisons for free.⁵ Servicemen were also given discounts if they were to watch the Repertory Players’ shows at the theatres. Some performances, for instance, the skit *Fifty-fifty*, were also organised to raise funds for the troops.

The scrapbook is, unsurprisingly, silent during the period of the Japanese occupation. The clippings end on July 5, 1941, and pick up again in 1945. The Stage Club was formed in 1945⁶ and materials about the Stage Club dating from 1947 take up the remaining pages of Lawson’s scrapbook.

The scrapbook also gives us a sense of Janet Lawson’s professional life. She was involved in some of the early productions by The Stage Club, and in many plays put up by the Repertory Players. According to a cast list, for instance, she played the role of Mon-

ica Cole in their 1947 production *We Proudly Present*. Prior to that, she took on stage management responsibilities in the Repertory Players’ *French Without Tears* (1939), as a programme sheet shows.

It was during the Repertory Players’ tour for *French Without Tears* in Kuala Lumpur that Janet and Carl Lawson wedded on 29 June 1939. Their decision to wed was apparently a sudden one as Janet’s parents were only informed by telegram after the fact.⁷

On 30 January 1940, while being sued for recovery of bills, Carl Lawson claimed in court that he had no monthly income and that he worked for his wife Janet. This is not documented in the scrapbook.⁸ On 2 February 1940, two days after her husband lost the suit, Janet Lawson published a number of public notices in local newspapers identifying her as the “proprietress”⁹ of the Rep-

ertory Players. The notice added that “[t]he performers who appear in the productions, or assist in any way, are amateurs, and receive no remuneration of any kind whatsoever for their services.”

Further research indicates that after World War II, Janet Lawson continued to act with the Stage Club at least until the early 1950s.¹⁰ Little is known about Carl Lawson in the post-war years.

This scrapbook, which was donated to the National Library in 2017 by The Stage Club, Singapore’s oldest surviving amateur English language theatre group,¹¹ offers precious insights to pre-World War II English language theatre in Singapore. It is but one of five scrapbooks donated by the Stage Club that cover the period 1937 to 1964.

♦ Kong Leng Foong

[Facing page] Enclosed with the scrapbook is a copy of the manuscript for *Monkey’s Paw*, one of the items performed at the Repertory Players’ first presentation in September 1938 at the Victoria Theatre. The play was part of a larger vaudeville programme consisting of music and dance numbers, and *Planter’s Paradise*, a comedy about life on rubber estates in Malaya, which was written by Carl Crawford Lawson. *Image source: National Library Board, Singapore.*

[Clockwise below] Janet Lawson. *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 29 June 1939, p. 1; Programme for the Repertory Players’ first presentation in September 1938 at the Victoria Theatre; Photograph of the cast of *Curry Tiffin*, a comedy written by Thelma Faulkner, wife of Major L.G. Hartman, who was stationed in Singapore before he was appointed as military attache in Bangkok. The world premiere of *Curry Tiffin* was presented by the Repertory Players in January 1940 in Singapore. This was one of the few productions about life in Malaya staged by the company. *Image source: National Library Board, Singapore.*



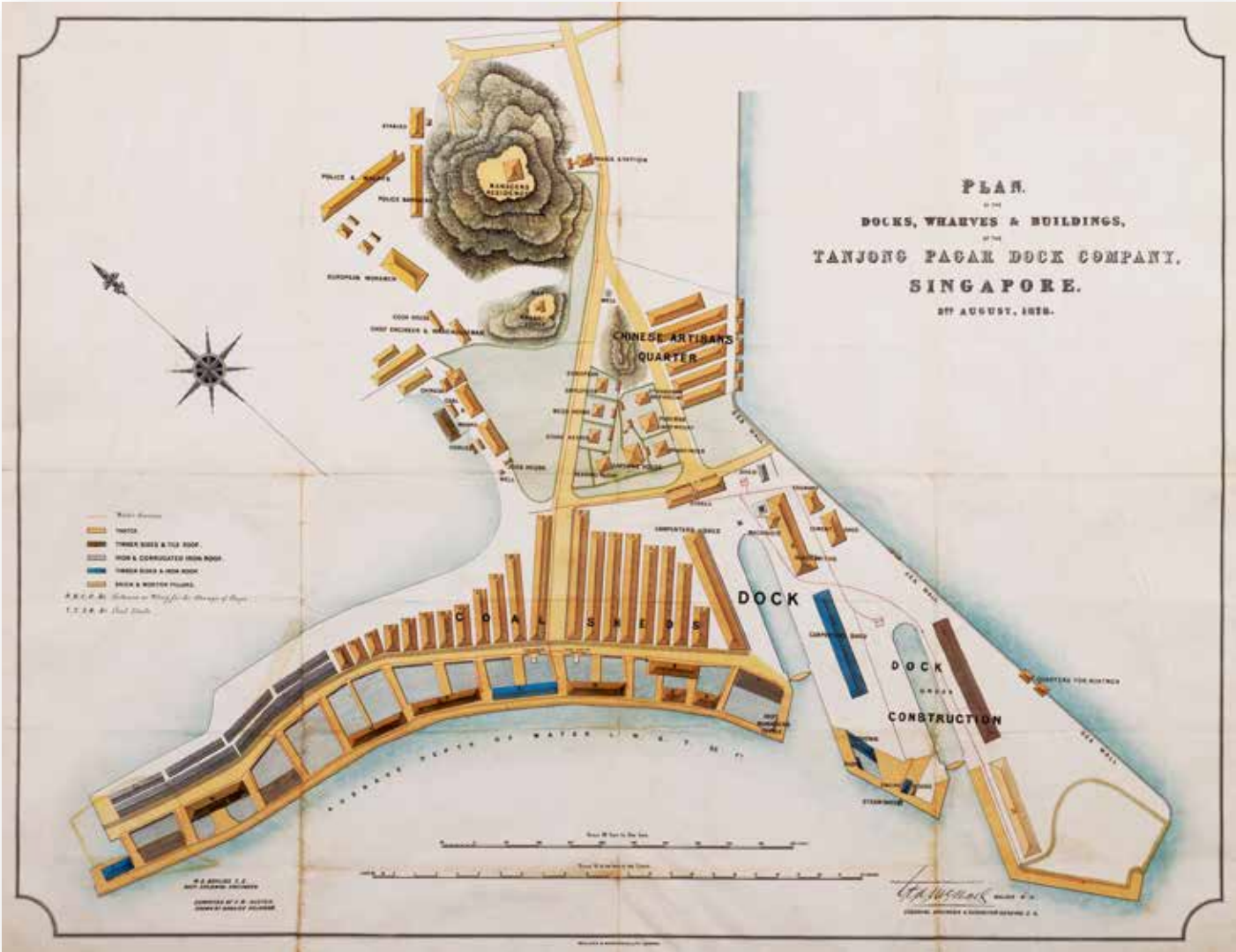
- Notes**
- 1 The Singapore Amateur Dramatic Club shares the same acronym as another group, the Singapore Amateur Dramatic Committee. It is not certain whether they are the same group.
 - 2 As reported in the *Malay Mail* article “Stage wedding in Kuala Lumpur” (1939, June 29) kept in the scrapbook. External supporting sources include: Mr. Carl Lawson & Miss Gow wed at K.L. (1939, June 29). *Malaya Tribune*, p. 13. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
 - 3 Additional research shows that Carl Lawson was the secretary of the Singapore Amateur Dramatic Club. He resigned in mid-1938. See: New headquarters for the S.A.D.C., *Morning Tribune*, p. 8 Retrieved from NewspaperSG. Prior to that, at the Club’s annual general meeting on 4 April 1938, it was suggested that the Club be renamed “Singapore Repertory Players”. A majority of the Club’s members did not support this suggestion though and to ensure that there was no further confusion, the Club clarified in a notice published in the *Morning Tribune* on 15 October 1938 that it was “not connected or associated in any way” to the Repertory Players. This notice came about soon after The Repertory Players presented their first stage presentation in September 1938, with an original work, *Planter’s Paradise*, as part of a vaudeville showcase.
 - 4 As indicated in the *Malaya Tribune* article “Singapore to see Curry Tiffin” (1939, November 16) kept in the scrapbook.
 - 5 This was also reported in news articles not kept in the scrapbook. See, for instance: Free shows for services. *The Straits Times*, p. 5. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
 - 6 Stage Club for Singapore. [1945, December 1]. *Malaya Tribune*, p. 2/3; Stage Club formed. [1945, December 2]. *The Straits Times*, p. 3. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
 - 7 Carl Lawson springs surprise whirlwind K.L. wedding to stage assistant. (1939, June 29). *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, p. 1. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
 - 8 Civil suit against Mr. Carl Lawson. (1940, 30 January). *Malaya Tribute*, p. 3. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
 - 9 As captured in four published notices, dated 2 February 1940, kept in the scrapbook – *Morning Tribune*’s “Legal notice: Repertory Players”; *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*’s “Public notices: Repertory Players”; *Malaya Tribune*’s “Legal notice: Repertory Players”; *The Straits Times*’ “Public notices: Repertory Players”.
 - 10 Stage & Music. (1953, April 17). *The Straits Times*, p. 9. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
 - 11 The Stage Club, Singapore (2019). *About us: The Stage Club*. Retrieved from The Stage Club website.

TANJONG PAGAR DOCK WIDENS ITS BERTH

Title: *Plan of the Docks, Wharves and Buildings of the Tanjong Pagar Dock Company*
Creators: F.W. Austen; Babajee Rajaram; John Frederick Aldophus; W.D. Bayliss
Year published: 1878
Publisher: Maclure & MacDonald (London)
Language: English
Type: Map (73 x 95 cm)
Call no.: RRARE 387.15095957 PLA-[KSC]
Accession no.: B29233014B
Donated by: Koh Seow Chuan

The second half of the 19th century saw rapid developments in the port of Singapore, which paved the way for the island's prosperity. Up to that time, the Singapore River had served as the settlement's main port, but as congestion at the river mouth worsened, some companies began build-

ing wharves at New Harbour (later known as Keppel Harbour), where the waters near the shore were deep. Here, larger steam vessels could berth for coaling (refuelling) as well as loading and unloading.¹ One such company, which became a key player in the development of Singapore's port, was Tan-



[Facing page] *Plan of the docks, wharves and buildings of the Tanjong Pagar Dock Company, 1878.* The plan bears the signature of Major J.F.A. McNair, the first Colonial Engineer and Surveyor-General of the Straits Settlements.³ *Image source: National Library, Singapore.*
[Above] Two vessels undergoing repairs and maintenance in Victoria Dock. *Photo by G. R. Lambert & Co. Lee Kip Lin Collection. All rights reserved. Lee Kip Lin and National Library Board, Singapore 2009.*

jong Pagar Dock Company, whose premises are shown on this coloured plan dated 2 August 1878.

Established in 1864, Tanjong Pagar Dock Company began constructing wharves and a dry dock at the west side of Tanjong Pagar.² The length of the completed wharf was 750 feet, which allowed four vessels to berth. But as shipping continued to expand worldwide, more space had to be added to cope with demand. By 1879, the year after this plan was drawn up, the length of the wharf had reached 3,305 feet. It was later extended to about 6,600 feet in 1885 through the acquisition of the Borneo Company's wharves.⁴ Compared to other wharves at New Harbour, the Tanjong Pagar Dock Company's had the advantage of being located nearer the town centre.⁵

Meanwhile, the dry dock had also been built to cater to the bigger steamers that were coming in for repairs and maintenance, which none of the docks at New Harbour were equipped to handle then.⁶ It was officially opened on 17 October 1868 by the Governor of the Straits Settlements, Sir Harry St. George Ord, and named Victoria Dock.

With the opening of the Suez Canal in November 1869, the time it took for ships to travel between Europe and Asia was dramatically reduced. Singapore's port experienced a sharp increase in steamships arriving for repairs and coaling. Consequently, in 1879 Tanjong Pagar Dock Company opened a sec-

ond – and larger – dry dock named Albert Dock, located to the east of Victoria Dock.⁷ This can be seen marked on the 1878 plan as being “under construction”. The availability of these facilities was instrumental in consolidating Singapore's status as a major port in the East.

Many shipping and coal companies stored their coal in sheds on Tanjong Pagar Dock Company's premises, a provision that was an important part of the company's business proposition.⁹ These sheds, located north of the wharf and godowns, were originally built of wood, with attap roofs. However, a serious fire that broke out in April 1877 and took two weeks to subdue destroyed an enormous stock of coal. This disaster galvanised the company to invest more money in building sheds using more resilient materials, such as bricks, tiles, corrugated zinc and iron.¹⁰

Besides storage services, a coaling station required labourers who could load the coal efficiently onto the ships. In Singapore, this labour-intensive work was carried out by Chinese coolies, most of whom were migrants from southern China. Tanjong Pagar Dock Company housed the coolies in an area on its premises marked “Chinese Artisan Quarter”, which was located north of the coal sheds.¹¹

On the printed plan of the company's premises, some hand-drawn red lines can be seen. These represent planned water

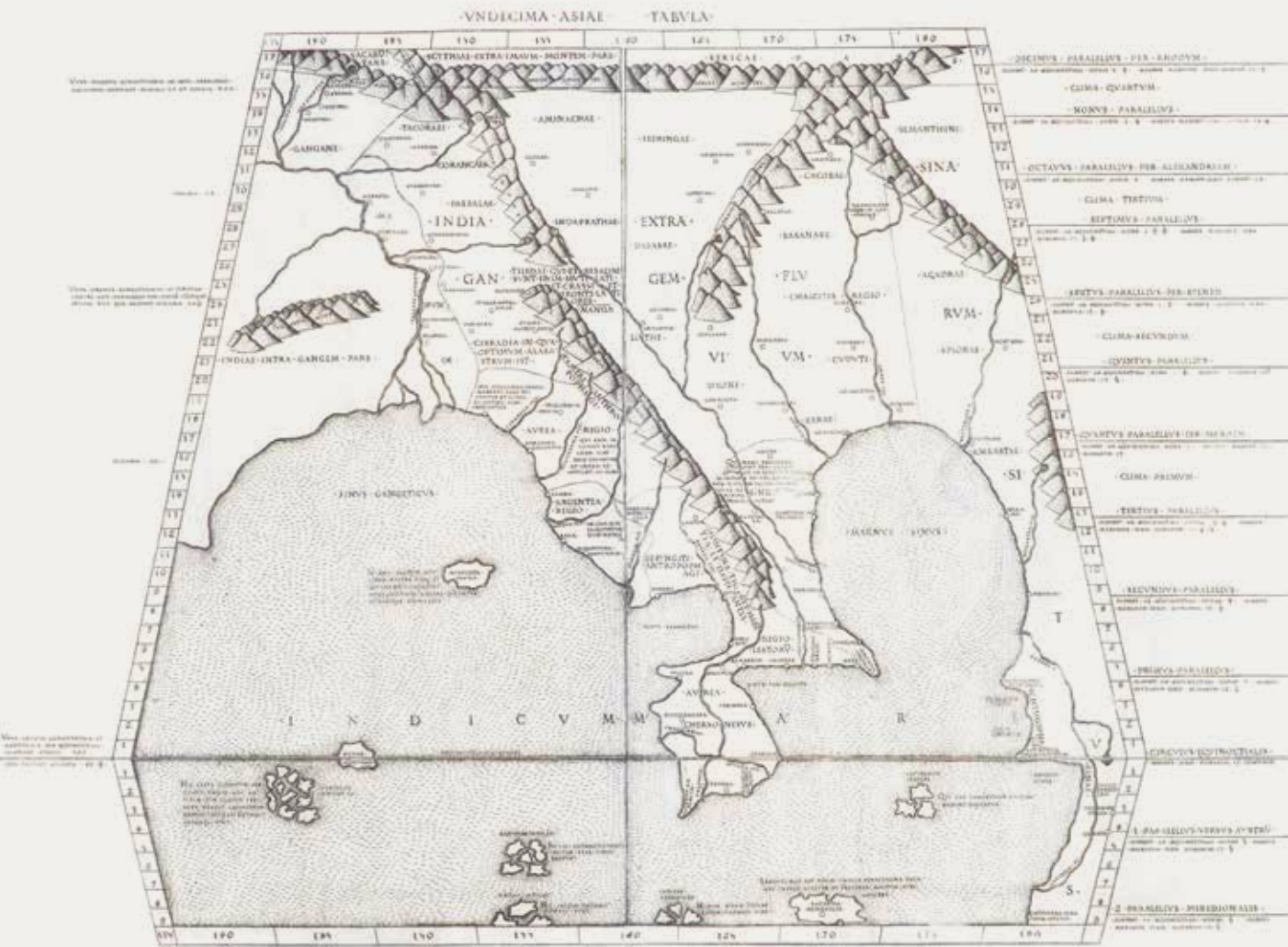
services. The supply of water at the harbour was then operated by private companies, with boats carrying water to the ships, while the government-maintained water system in town often malfunctioned. In 1880, Tanjong Pagar Dock Company completed its installation of a pipe network to supply water directly to the ships from their own pumps, for a fee.¹²

Through its acquisition of competitors and the 1899 merger with its main rival, the New Harbour Dock Company, Tanjong Pagar Dock Company came to control virtually the entire shipping business in Singapore. However, in the late 19th century, few improvements were made to the facilities to meet demand as the company was unwilling to invest more money in upgrading works. Eventually, the company was acquired by the government in 1905, thus bringing an end to private ownership of the port.¹³ Subsequently, the Singapore Harbour Board, which was formed in 1913, assumed control of port facilities.¹⁴ In 1964, the board was replaced by the Port of Singapore Authority.¹⁵ Today, port facilities are operated by PSA Corporation and Jurong Port Pte Ltd, while the Maritime Port Authority of Singapore is responsible for regulating port and marine services and facilities.¹⁶ ♦ **Joanna Tan**

Notes

- 1 Lim, R. (1993). *Tough men, bold visions: The story of Keppel* (p. 31). Singapore: Keppel Corporation. [Call no.: RSING 338.762383095957 LIM]
- 2 Lim, 1993, p. 32.
- 3 National Library Board. (2015). *Visualising space: Maps of Singapore and the region: Collections from the National Library and National Archives of Singapore* (p. 97). Singapore: National Library Board. [Call no.: RSING 911.5957 SIN]
- 4 Tanjong Pagar Citizens' Consultative Committee. (1989). *Tanjong Pagar: Singapore's cradle of development* (p. 55). Singapore: Tanjong Pagar Citizens' Consultative Committee. [Call no.: RSING 959.57 TAN-[HIS]]
- 5 Bogaars, G. (1956). *The Tanjong Pagar Dock Company, 1864–1905* (p. 131). Singapore: Government Printing Office. [Call no.: RLCOS 959.51 BOG]
- 6 Tanjong Pagar, the story of its rise and progress. (1896, May 5). *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser (Weekly)*, p. 9. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 7 Tanjong Pagar Citizens' Consultative Committee, 1989, p. 45.
- 8 Tanjong pagar, the story of its rise and progress. (1896, May 5). *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser (Weekly)*, p. 9. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 9 Bogaars, 1956, p. 133.
- 10 Tanjong Pagar Citizens' Consultative Committee, 1989, p. 46.
- 11 Bogaars, 1956, p. 145.
- 12 Bogaars, 1956, pp. 151–152.
- 13 Tanjong Pagar Citizens' Consultative Committee, 1989, pp. 48–49.
- 14 Harbour Boards. (1913, July 1). *The Straits Times*, p. 9. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 15 Port of Singapore Authority. (1984). *Singapore: Portrait of a port: A pictorial history of the port and harbour of Singapore 1819–1984* (pp. 14–15). Singapore: MPH Magazines. [Call no.: RSING 779.93871095957 SIN]
- 16 Bill for new body to regulate port industry passed. (1996, January 19). *The Straits Times*, p. 1. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

PTOLEMY'S MAP OF SOUTHEAST ASIA



The 1478 Rome edition of *Undecima Asiae Tabula* is the first edition to use the trapezoidal projection. *Image source: National Library Board, Singapore.*

Title: *Undecima Asiae Tabula* (Southeast Asia, China and India)
Creator: Claudius Ptolemy
Year Published: 1478
Printer: Arnold Buckinck (Rome)
Publisher: Domitius Calderinus
Language: Latin
Type: Map; 41 cm x 55.5 cm
Call no.: RRARE 912.54 PTO
Accession no.: B26055962B

The oldest item in the National Library's Rare Materials Collection is a 1478 copper-engraved Ptolemaic map of Southeast Asia, flanked by India and China. Measuring 41 cm by 55.5 cm, it was printed in Rome by Arnold Buckinck, a printer originally from Cologne, Germany.

This map is one of the six incunable¹ editions of maps based on Claudius Ptolemy's geographical text, *Geographia* (also known as *Cosmographia*). Written in ancient Greek, the text is a compilation of what was known about the geography of the world in the Roman Empire during the second century.

Claudius Ptolemaeus (c.83–168 AD), better known as Ptolemy, was an influential philosopher, astronomer and geographer of the ancient world. He was also considered the father of cartography. Ptolemy compiled his work, *Geographia*, based on earlier geographical works, existing works at the Library of Alexandria, and reports of contemporary travellers and traders passing through Alexandria. Although Ptolemy was not the first to write about geography and cartography, he was the first to use a rigorous scientific method to gather, organise and present his data. In *Geographia*, Ptolemy introduced a system of coordinates with latitudes and longitudes for about 8,000 places in the world.²

Ptolemy divided the Asian continent into 12 parts (*tabulae*), and dedicated the 11th (*undecima*) part to Southeast Asia and China (*Sinae*). On Ptolemy's map, Southeast Asia is depicted as "India beyond the Ganges" or "Further India".³

The 1478 Rome edition of *Geographia* is the second European printed edition to contain maps based on the Latin translation by Jacopo d'Angelo in 1406. It contains 27 unsigned maps, 12 of which are on Asia. The Bologna edition was printed in 1477, a year before the Rome edition, even though work on the latter began earlier. However, it has been noted that the quality of the Rome edition is better than the Bologna counterpart, in that the inscriptions on the 1478 edition are consistent and the lettering more elegant. According to Tony Campbell, former map librarian at the British Library, "the uneven quality of the engraved lines and the frequently crowded inscriptions [of the 1477 Bologna edition] do not make for ready comprehension."⁴

Although Arnold Buckinck's name is stated in the colophon in the 1478 edition, credit should be given to Conrad Sweynheym, a German printer. The latter began engraving the maps in 1474 and continued to improve on the copper-plate method of printing maps till his death in 1477. Sweynheym, together with Arnold Panartz (a German engraver and publisher), was responsible for introducing printing in Italy in the 15th century.⁵ As Sweynheym's partner, Buckinck completed the 1478 work.

The 1478 Rome edition is the first edition to use the trapezoidal projection, unlike the earlier 1477 Bologna edition. The trapezoidal projection renders the meridians as straight lines that converge towards the poles, thus creating a trapezoid. This was

due to the influence of Donnus Nicolaus Germanus, a 15th-century cartographer and printer.⁶ Maps from the 1478 *Geographia* also contain punched lettering (letters and numerals punched from a set of dies rather than engraved), a method perfected by Sweynheym.⁷

On the map, the leaf-shaped region called *Aurea Chersonesus* (Golden Peninsula) is usually⁸ associated with the Malay Peninsula as Ptolemy believed it to be a land abundant with gold and thus regarded it as an important place. It is depicted as extending into the southern hemisphere; this could be a result of Renaissance-era European cartographers misinterpreting Ptolemy's *Geographia* – they believed that Sumatra is joined with the Malay Peninsula, ignoring the Melaka Strait that separates them.⁹

The map features various places in Southeast Asia identified by Ptolemy who usually marked the coastal cities as "emporiums" or port cities. The ports of *Baracura*, *Barabonna* and *Bsyga* are sited at the area where Myanmar (Burma) is currently. Along the Malay Peninsula, one can see the ports of *Tacola* and *Sabana*, the latter sited at the southernmost tip. *Tacola* has been identified as the area along the western coast of the Malay Peninsula while *Sabana* (also spelled Sabara or Sabang) has been variously identified as being Selangor, Singapore or the Strait of Sabam (Kundur). However, there is no consensus among scholars regarding the actual identity of both ports.¹⁰

The map also refers to precious metals and spices found in places that are in present-day Myanmar, such as the kingdom of gold (*Aurea Regio*), and the kingdom of silver (*Argentea Regio*), further down the coast. Above *Aurea Regio* lies *Cirradia*, which Ptolemy claims has the finest cinnamon.¹¹

The map shows various topographical features of the region, such as the *Sinus Perimulicus* (Gulf of Siam), *Sinus Sabaricus* (Gulf of Martaban) and *Magnus Sinus* (Gulf of Tonkin and South China Sea), as well as the mountain range running through present-day Myanmar and northern Thailand, which Ptolemy described as being inhabited by tigers, elephants and wild men in caves.¹²

Ptolemy's descriptions of the local inhabitants on various islands dotted along the region appear on the map too. For instance, he noted that naked natives known as *Agmatae* lived on *Bazacata Insula*, which is located west of the peninsula, and most

likely refers to the Nicobar Islands. The map also depicts a group of islands, which he referred to as *Satyrorum*, situated to the southeast of the Malay Peninsula. Ptolemy believed that natives with satyr-like tails lived on *Satyrorum*. This area might refer to the northern Anambas Islands in present-day Indonesia.¹³

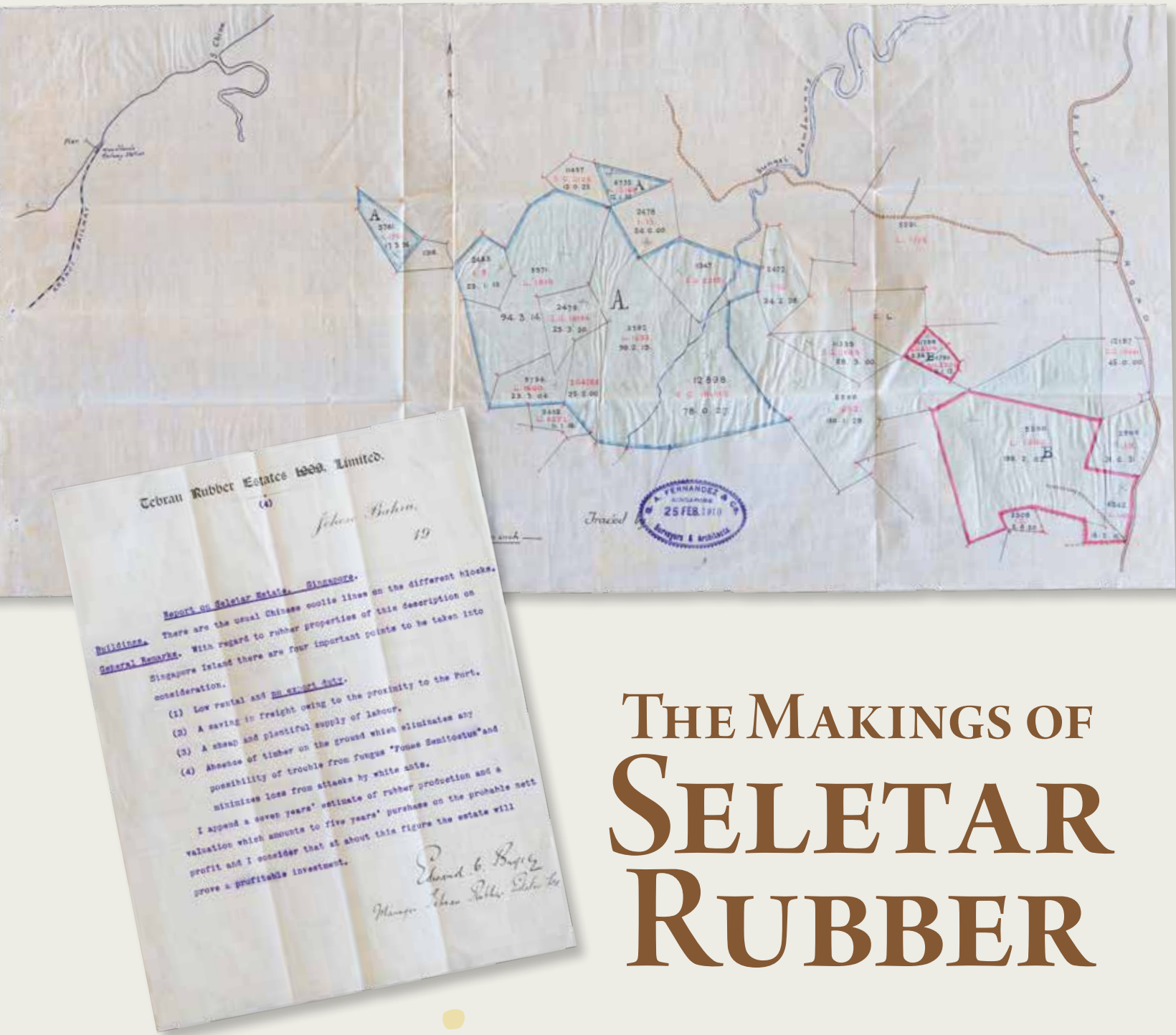
Although Ptolemy's work was a major contribution to the knowledge of geography and map-making, there were several mistakes in it that were perpetuated by European cartographers for many years. One such error depicted in the 1478 Rome edition is Ptolemy's idea that the Indian Ocean was an enclosed body of water. He believed that a land bridge connected Southeast Asia with Africa, which ran southwards from southern China, making Southeast Asia inaccessible by sea.¹⁴

The 1478 edition of *Geographia* was re-issued three times, in 1490, 1507 and 1508, with a few changes.¹⁵

♦ **Makeswary Periasamy**

Notes

- 1 An incunable publication is a book or ephemera (such as pamphlets or broadsides) printed in Europe before 1501.
- 2 Campbell, T. (1987). *The earliest printed maps, 1472–1500* (p. 122). London: British Library. (Call no.: R 912.09024 CAM)
- 3 Suarez, T. (c. 1999). *Early mapping of Southeast Asia* (pp. 82, 84). Hong Kong: Periplus Editions. (Call no.: RSING 912.59 SUA)
- 4 Parry, D. (2005). *The cartography of the East Indian Islands [Insulae Indiae Orientalis]* (p. 28). London: Country Editions. (Call no.: RSING 912.59 PAR); Campbell, 1987, pp. 126, 131.
- 5 Campbell, 1987, pp. 126, 132.
- 6 Steffoff, R. (1995). *The British Library companion to maps and mapmaking* (p. 234). London: British Library. (Call no.: R 912.03 STE); Campbell, 1987, p. 123.
- 7 Campbell, 1987, pp. 126, 223.
- 8 The term *Aurea Chersonesus* has been interpreted by various scholars as referring to Southeast Asia or Sumatra or Malay Peninsula or Malaya. In some of the early Ptolemy maps, *Aurea Chersonesus* is written on the peninsula that seems to contain both Malaya and the countries below (Sumatra, etc) it which are now separated by the Malacca Straits. Suarez (p. 84) says that the "Golden Chersonese is generally accepted to be Malaya".
- 9 Gerini, G. E. (1909). *Researches on Ptolemy's geography of Eastern Asia [further India and Indo-Malay Archipelago]* (p. 77). London: Royal Asiatic Society. (Call no.: RCL05 950 GER-[JSB]); Parry, 2005, p. 31; Suarez, 1999, p. 84.
- 10 Suarez, 1999, p. 85; Gerini, 1909, pp. 85, 92, 100; Colless, B. E. (1969, March). The Ancient history of Singapore. *Journal of Southeast Asian History*, 10(1), 1–11, p. 11. Singapore: Dept. of History, University of Malaya in Singapore. (Call no.: RCL05 959.05 JSA)
- 11 Suarez, 1999, p. 84.
- 12 Suarez, 1999, p. 85; Gerini, 1909, pp. 70, 761; Parry, p. 31.
- 13 Suarez, 1999, p. 85, 86; Gerini, 1909, pp. 707–709.
- 14 Suarez, 1999, p. 86; Parry, 2005, p. 31.
- 15 Campbell, 1987, p. 132.



Title: Seletar Rubber Estates Limited company documents
Author: Seletar Rubber Estates Limited
Year published: 1909–1921
Language: English
Type: Company Documents
Call no.: RRARE MAP 633.8952095957 PLA
Accession no.: B29252088C; B30160375C

In 1910, Seletar Rubber Estates Limited was set up in London to invest in the new and booming rubber plantation sector of Southeast Asia. The aim was to buy over an existing pineapple estate in Sembawang owned by the Singaporean Chinese businessman Tan Kah Kee (see text box), who as early as 1907 had already begun the process of interplanting lucrative rubber trees with pineapple plants.

Seletar Rubber Estates’ collection of business papers reveal fascinating details of its business history, from the initial setting up of the company in London to its

subsequent refinancing after it ran out of working capital during the post-World War I economic depression.

By the turn of the 20th century, rubber became an increasingly sought after raw material for the manufacturing of tyres for bicycles and cars as well as for rubber-insulated electrical wiring invented in the 1800s.¹ Originally, latex was tapped from various tropical trees and vines but in time Brazil’s Pará rubber tree (*Hevea brasiliensis*) became the dominant source.

In the mid-1890s, Chinese merchant Tan Chay Yan pioneered the planting of the Pará

THE MAKINGS OF SELETAR RUBBER



[Facing page] Documents which bear testimony to Seletar Rubber Estates Limited’s establishment include a page from Edward Bryce’s report on Tan Kah Kee’s plantation. It covers land area, number of trees planted and even anticipated crop yields till 1915. Of interest too is a map indicating the property lines of Tan Kah Kee’s plantation (福山園), which was prepared as part of the report to London for the setting up of its purchase by Seletar Rubber Estates. *Image source: National Library Board, Singapore.*

[Above] One of the debentures raised by Seletar Rubber Estates Limited in 1912, this one for £5,500. This was essentially a mortgage of Seletar Rubber’s assets for the loan of money to the company at 5% interest. The money was raised to complete the planting of rubber trees on the estate and build a factory to process latex. *Image source: National Library Board, Singapore.*

rubber in Malacca on a commercial scale. In the first rubber boom of 1906, the Malacca Rubber Plantations Limited was formed in London to acquire Tan’s plantations.² Investors were anxious to plough into the British Empire’s latest growth industry and its financial capital, London, saw a proliferation of such rubber investment companies.

While most rubber plantations were found in Malaya and Sumatra, rural Singapore also hosted several plantations. The rubber boom inspired Tan Kah Kee, who had just started what would become a vast business empire, to almost double his pineapple estate³ in Sembawang to 898 acres (3.63 sq km), and interplant it with rubber trees.

The resources needed to produce rubber – land, manpower and latex-processing machinery – all required sizable long-term capital investments that individual merchants in Malaya found it difficult to finance (it takes almost a decade for rubber trees to start producing latex). London companies were thus created to invest in rubber plantations in faraway Malaya.

Among the Seletar Rubber Estates’ collection is a 1909 report and map. According to the report, the nascent company had commissioned Edward Bryce, manager of

The Enterprising Tan Kah Kee

A prominent businessman and philanthropist, Tan Kah Kee (1874–1961) contributed extensively to the financing of educational institutions in Malaya and China. Born in a village on the outskirts of Xiamen in China, Tan arrived in Singapore in 1890 to work for his father. In 1903, he took over his father’s crumbling business and turned it around.

The plantation in Seletar was among Tan’s first ventures, and its profitable sale in 1909 was a significant early success for him. He expanded into the manufacturing and processing of rubber goods and food products, and started the newspaper *Nanyang Siang Pau*. Along the way, Tan groomed several of his employees, including Lee Kong Chian, his son-in-law, into successful businessmen and community leaders. Although the 1920s saw Tan’s fortunes decline, with

his company Tan Kah Kee Ltd eventually folding in 1934, he remained a respected personality and was seen as a significant anti-Japanese patriot by the Chinese community.



Portrait of Tan Kah Kee, c. 1910. *Lee Brothers Studio Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

another rubber market crash took place in 1920, and this time Seletar Rubber ran out of money. According to the papers in the Seletar Rubber Estates’ collection, this resulted in the reorganisation and renaming of the company to Seletar Plantations in October 1921. Existing shareholders would be entitled to the same amount of shares they held in Seletar Rubber only if they agreed to increase the amount they had already invested by 37.5 percent.⁵ Not surprisingly, the smaller shareholders were unhappy and sent objection letters. But altogether they had too few shares to stop the plan.

According to reports in local papers and directories, the refinanced Seletar Plantations went on to survive the depression of 1920–21 and World War II, subsequently becoming Seletar Industrial Holdings.

♦ **Timothy Pwee**

Notes

1 Coates, A. (1987). *The commerce in rubber: the first 250 years* (p. 49). Singapore: Oxford University Press. [Call no.: RSING 338.1738952 COA]

2 Ward, A. H. C., Chu, R. W., & Salaff, J. (Eds., & Trans.). (1994). *The memoirs of Tan Kah-Kee* (p. 305). Singapore: Singapore University Press. [Call no.: RSING 338.04092 TAN]; Malacca rubber flotation. (1906, February 5). *The Straits Times*, p. 8. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

3 Ward, Chu, & Salaff, 1994, pp. 299, 302–303; 陈碧笙, & 陈毅明. (1986). 《陈嘉庚年谱》 (p. 9). 福州: 福建人民出版社. [Call no.: RSING 338.04092 TAN]

4 Coates, 1987, pp. 156–164.

5 Mincing Lane Tea & Rubber Share Brokers’ Association. (1925). *Rubber producing companies–1925* (p. 461). London: The Financial Times; Seletar Rubber Estates. (1921, November 16). *The Straits Times*, p. 10. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

TALES FROM THE ACCOUNTS BOOKS



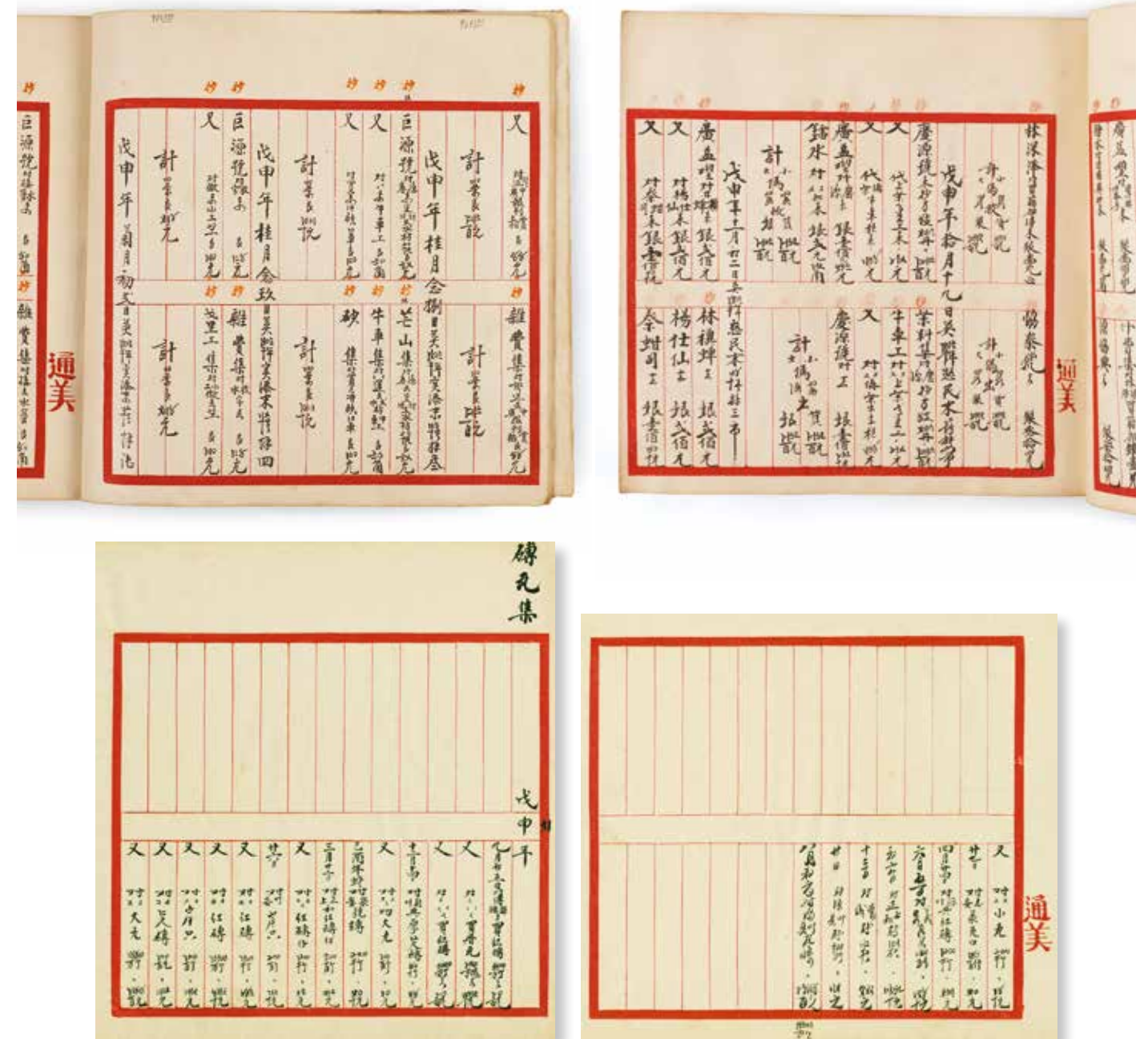
Title: 新加坡南安会馆珍藏：凤山寺新建凤山寺帐簿 (Hong San See Temple account books)
Date: 1907–1959
Language: Chinese
Type: Account books (7 volumes)
Call no.: RRARE 657.2095957 XJP
Accession nos.: B32426882B (1907, v.1); B32426885E (1907, v.2); B32426883C (1908, v.3); B32426884D (1908, v.4); B32426886F (1908, v.5); B32426887G (1910–1911, v.6); B32426888H (1945, v.7)
Donated by: Singapore Lam Ann Association

For as long as Chinese settlers have been in Singapore, there have been Chinese temples, some dating as far back as 1819. More than 1,000 Chinese temples have been found to have existed in the former British colony.¹

Seven handwritten account books from one of the oldest temples in Singapore, Hong San See Temple (水廊头凤山寺),² also known as 凤山寺, shed light on bookkeeping practices of early Chinese communities. With entries dating from about 1907 to 1959, these account books were donated by the Singapore Lam Ann Association – which assumed management of Hong San See Temple in 1973 – to the National Library in 2018.

Established in 1836, Hong San See Temple served Hokkien immigrants from Nan'an (南安), or Lam Ann, a county in southern Fujian province.³ In 1907, the colonial government acquired its original site at Tras Street for a road widening project.⁴ Nan'an builder and architect Lim Loh (林路)⁵ subsequently purchased a plot of land at Mohamed Sultan Road for the new temple.⁶ Construction of the new temple took almost five years, from 1908 to 1913, costing 56,000 Straits dollars.⁷

Interestingly, the dates recorded in the temple's early account books reflect both Gregorian and Chinese lunar calen-



[Facing page] The seven Hong San See Temple account books donated to the National Library of Singapore in 2018. *Image Source: National Library Board, Singapore.*

[Top left] The amount paid for various tiles and bricks is listed in the records. The second entry of the page (left) shows that green glazed eave tiles were bought.⁸ *Image Source: National Library Board, Singapore.*

[Top right] The temple's transactions with other organisations, such as Kwong Yik Bank (广益银行) and a Chinese company called 瑞通號, are recorded in the account books. *Image Source: National Library Board, Singapore.*

[Above] Presented are two pages from different volumes. The entries from Vol. 3 on the left featured lunar months named after flowers, whereas the entries on the right from Vol. 1 present another form of writing dates. For instance, The first entry (from right) is dated Wu-shen (戊申) year tenth lunar month nineteenth day, Gregorian year 1908 November (怒民末) Twelfth. *Image Source: National Library Board, Singapore.*

dars as well as the Chinese era name of the reigning emperor. For instance, there is an entry dated Wu-shen (戊申) year 11th lunar month 2nd day, for the Gregorian year 1908, November (怒民末) Twenty-fifth. The same Gregorian year appears in a variant dated Wu-shen (戊申) year, month of the osmanthus (eighth lunar month) and 28th

day, Gregorian year 1908 September (实添末) Twenty-third.

Additionally, Suzhou numerals – special symbols used to represent digits for book-keeping purposes,⁹ which differ from Chinese characters and Arabic numerals, are used in the account books to indicate the prices of raw materials purchased. These in-

clude sand, timber, bricks, tiles, cement and paint, and the hiring of bullock carts. Miscellaneous fees and receipts are also recorded.

Still, during the restoration of Hong San See between 2006 and 2009, these account books provided vital information that helped the Temple's Trustee's consultants and the Preservation of Monuments Board's consultants decide on the use of green glazed roof tiles.¹⁰ This was so as one of the entries in 凤山寺总簿：大清光绪33年岁次丁未孟冬月立 (1907) reveals that green glazed eave tiles were purchased in Wu-shen (戊申) year (1908) during the construction of the temple.

The names of the craftsmen involved and costs incurred in hiring them are also captured in the books. The temple used a construction method known as rival building



method (对场), whereby the building under construction is divided in the central line into two parts, either left-right two-team construction or front-back two-team construction. These two parts are completed by two teams of craftsmen working simultaneously using their own methods, techniques and designs while ensuring an integrated final form.¹¹ The names of the Quanzhou craftsmen,¹² for instance, Wang Yaoshi (汪摇司) and Yang Shixian (杨仕仙) could be found in the account books.

The temple's transactions with companies and banks, such as Kwong Yik Bank (广益银行) and a Chinese company called 瑞通號, are also documented in the account books. These provide a snapshot of the Chinese commercial firms operating in early 20th century Singapore, and offer valuable

glimpses of Chinese business life during early Singapore.

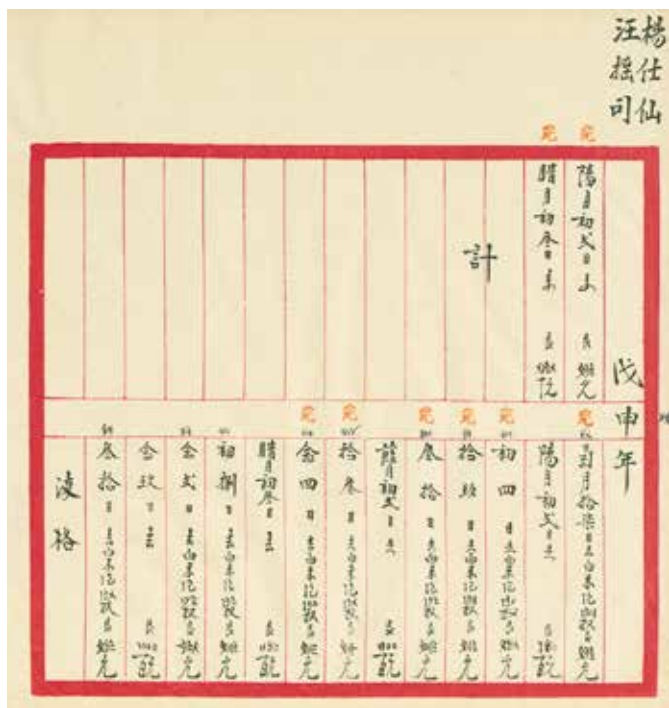
Gazetted as a national monument on 10 November 1978,¹² the historic Hong San See Temple is a living archive of the Hokkien community in early Singapore.

◆ Ang Seow Leng

[Left] Hong San See Temple, 2004: general view. *Image Source: National Library Board, Singapore.*

[Bottom left] Names of craftsmen involved in the construction of the temple, such as Wang Yaoshi (汪摇司) and Yang Shixian (杨仕仙), are written in the top right hand corner of this page from Vol. 5.¹³ *Image Source: National Library Board, Singapore.*

[Bottom Left] The temple's transactions with other organisations, such as Kwong Yik Bank (广益银行) and a Chinese company called 瑞通號, are recorded in the account books.¹⁴ *Image Source: National Library Board, Singapore.*



Notes

- Zaccheus, M. (2016, November 20). Nuggets of Singapore history, from inscriptions. *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from Factiva.
- 水廊头凤山寺 [Shui Lang Tou Feng Shan Si] is the name given to the temple to differentiate it from other temples in Singapore that are also called Hong San See. "水廊头" refers to a well that used to exist at Mohamed Sultan Road in the early 20th century. It was the main source of water for the villagers living in the area at the time. The use of this name was believed to have started in 1905, according to an inscription found at the 水廊头大伯公庙 [Shui Lang Tou Da Bo Gong Miao], a Tua Pek Kong temple. See 林文川. (2003, October 5). 本地多家寺庙取名"凤山寺". 《联合晚报》 [Lianhe Wanbao], p. 6; 新加坡地名趣谈. (1991, February 10). 《联合早报》 [Lianhe Zaobao], p. 40. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- Dean, K., & Hue, G.T. (2017). *Chinese epigraphy in Singapore 1819-1911* (Vol. 1, p. 434). Singapore: NUS Press; Guilin City: Guangxi Normal University. [Call no.: RSING 495.111 DEA]; 陈省堂. (1893, December 16). 游凤山寺记. 星报, p. 5. Retrieved from National University of Singapore website.
- Urban Redevelopment Authority (Singapore), 1992, vol. 1, p. 5.
- Lim Loh, who was also known as Lim Chee Gee (林志义) and Lim Hoon Leong (林云龙), made his fortune during pre-war Singapore from rubber estates, brick and biscuit factories, and the trading and construction businesses. He was involved in the building of Goodwood Park Hotel and Victoria Memorial Hall, and also designed and built Hong San See Temple. See Tan, T. (2008, August 14). Rare gift for SAM. *The Straits Times*, p. 8. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 郭志阳主编. (2006). 新加坡南安会馆80周年纪念特刊, 1926-2006 [Singapore Lam Ann Association 80th anniversary souvenir magazine] (p. 65). 新加坡: 新加坡南安会馆. [Call no.: RSING 369.2597 SIN]; Dean & Hue, 2017, vol. 1, p. 434.
- Dean & Hue, 2017, vol. 1, pp. 406, 434.
- 凤山寺总簿: 大清光緒叁拾叁年岁次丁未孟冬月立, [Vol. 2; pp. 185-186]
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- 2010联合国亚太文化遗产保存卓越奖颁奖典礼特辑编委会. (2010). 新加坡凤山寺: 荣膺2010联合国亚太文化遗产保存卓越奖颁奖典礼 [Singapore Hong San See Temple awarded 2010 UNESCO Asia Pacific Heritage awards for culture heritage conservation] (p. 10). 新加坡: 新加坡南安会馆. [Call no.: Chinese RSING 203.5095957 SIN]
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- 新建凤山寺大总簿: 大清光緒三十四年岁次戊申瓜月英1908年乌元吉立[商]人工匠. [Vol. 5; p. 137]
- 凤山寺草清[簿]: 大清光緒叁拾叁年岁次丁未孟冬月立, [Vol. 1; p. 34]