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Unearthing A Geographical Gem

Visiting the brand new Staff Lounge (at the canteen, The Deck), you might notice some attractive historic maps gracing the walls. These reprints of Singapore's oldest original maps come from the GIS and Map Resource Unit of the Department of Geography. This hidden gem lies nestled between two of the Faculty's better known sites, Lecture Theatre 11 and the Coffee Club Express, but it is seldom noticed by the casual passerby. Yet the GIS and Map Resource Unit serves an important purpose for budding and seasoned geographers, historical buffs, and even government planners and military officers. The map library dates back to the early days of the department (possibly the early 1930s) where maps provided an invaluable learning and teaching resource for geography students and faculty in the then University of Malaya at Bukit Timah campus.

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ROCKIN' GOOD TIMES AT FASS ALUMNI DINNER



TRULY A PEOPLE'S PRESIDENT



LEARNING JOURNEYS: EDUCATION IN A NEW AGE



A CELEBRATION OF EXCELLENCE AT THE FASS AWARDS CEREMONY 2007

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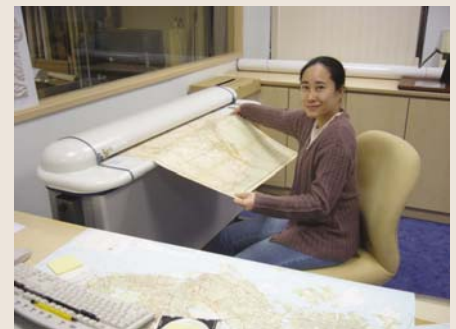
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Unearthing A Geographical Gem

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The Map Resource Unit has an extensive collection of old maps of Singapore and the region. The oldest map in the collection is a 1914 map of Singapore (from the "Water Department, Singapore"). The unit today has over 20,000 items ranging from topographic sheets, reprints of historical maps and old aerial photographs of Singapore (long before Google Earth was the rage), a wide range of atlases, as well as historic and contemporary globes. Of the maps, the collection of Southeast Asian topographic sheets is the unit's pride and joy, providing a rich historical and contemporary perspective of the region. In addition to maps, copies of these done in the Geography Department (from Honours level to Masters and PhD) are also kept here.

All the resources are available for teaching and research by staff and students of NUS. Selected map extracts are used for classes in the GIS (Geographic Information Systems) Laboratory. The Unit is also opened to the public for consultation, and has proven popular with land use surveyors, urban planners and even military personnel interested to know more Singapore's historical land uses.



Ms Sakinah Yusof (librarian) scanning a historic map for use in the Faculty Lounge

The Unit is also popular with visiting researchers from overseas. Dr Avijit Gupta (Senior Lecturer at University of Leeds), for example, is an ardent supporter who seldom misses a visit each time he is in Singapore. Dr Gupta explains "For my research and teaching of geomorphology, the Unit's large-scale Southeast Asia maps and resources are most useful." Indeed, extracts from almost all maps in the collection (except classified Singapore topographic sheets) can be made and supplied on CD-ROMs for a fee.

To keep the maps in tip-top condition, they are stored in metal cabinets in a special room which has 24-hour air-conditioning and a dry system for fire-protection. The Unit also boasts spacious tables for map reading, and a growing collection of globes. It is not uncommon to find students and faculty staff poring over the maps, aerial photographs and historic black/white photos of Singapore, curiously examining, for example, what Kent Ridge or Orchard Road used to look like in the 1950s.



1862 map of the area around the Singapore River

Associate Professor Wong Poh Poh, who has been with the Department since the mid-1960s, is in charge of the Map Resource Unit. He first published a 1:63,360 slope map of Singapore in 1969, and continues to be fascinated by maps. His cartographic interest began as a school boy tasked to draw his 'home to school journey' as part of an assignment, and evolved as he went to pre-university. "I remember drawing a detailed representation of my journey from my house in rural Singapore to my school for an exercise in primary school - putting in the stream, bridge, footpath, vegetation, road, etc. This was before I knew what a proper map was, having not seen an atlas. In my pre-university days, I relied on the available 1:25,000 sheets to build a large-scale 3-D model of my school district."

Associate Professor Wong feels that good maps are as essential as written words, and atlases are as important as dictionaries.



Associate Professor Wong standing with the steel cabinets custom-built for map storage

"The more you know about maps, the more meaningful is your life - just as your life becomes more meaningful when you read more literature. Good atlases are works of art and not just for information."

The Department of Geography will continue to build up its collection of Southeast Asia topographic sheets as long as there are resources to do so. As the only centre with a comprehensive collection of Singapore and regional maps, the Unit will continue to be not just useful for research and planning, but also for the pure enjoyment of maps. So, the next time you walk between LT11 and the Coffee Club Express, pause as you pass the doors to the GIS and Map Resource Unit. Behind its simple facade lies a roomful of memories, treasured maps and varied resources of historical, geographical and symbolic significance. You can certainly call it a gem of room!

**Article by Associate Professor T.C.
Chang with help from Associate
Professor Wong Poh Poh**