FEATURE/BUKIT BROWN
CONSERVATION
PROVISION SHOPS
SOCIAL MEMORY
Greetings,

With great satisfaction, I hereby present the second issue of Mnemozine—the magazine for all history students. This issue focuses on the historical spaces of Singapore that are silently vanishing as we speak. We have a special feature on one such space, the Bukit Brown cemetery, to be cleared in the near future to make way for a new road.

We are currently expanding our editorial team, and welcome all those who love writing to join us. Anyone is also welcome to submit their essays or other personal reflections for publication in the next issue. After all, why limit the readership of your excellent essays and ideas to just your Profs or your friends? Our magazine provides a platform for all History students to share their thoughts with many more people.

Lastly, I am left with the gratifying task of doling out thanks. Our previous editor, Alex, left me big shoes to fill when he left for Exchange this Semester. This issue would not have come to fruition were it not for the immense amounts of assistance I received. To all those who contributed articles, photos, advice, or just kind words of encouragement—I thank you all very very much! And also to you, dear reader, for supporting our effort. I hope we can all contribute to mould the magazine into something we can all be proud of.

With this, I wish one and all many more happy days of schooling!

Signing Off,
Chun Yuan
February 2012
It all started on 23rd August 2011. Amid the chatter and buzz of our History Society (hissoc) welcome tea last year, a history major walked up to us, and threw out the idea of reviving the History publication. And that was it! The first example of action initiated by a subcommittee team, action that eventually put together the magazine you now have in front of you. The Mnemozine subcommittee team is part of hissoc’s effort to recruit history majors or anyone interested to join us for ad-hoc activities. While every history major is by default a hissoc member (surprise!), the level of engagement with history majors over the past few years has left much room for improvement.

This term, hissoc hopes to provide platforms for majors to step up in proposing and executing projects of their interest, so long as they are within the society’s ability to support. Having had no ‘database’ of subcommittee members, we started our recruitment through welcome teas and email blasts, subsequently holding informal meet-ups with our subcommittee to gather information on the kind of activities that they wished to undertake. Currently, we have on board subcommittee teams working on an overseas trip, our annual history seminar and competition, as well as our history magazine. We are very much at the exploratory stage of engaging members beyond the executive committee, but we are learning along the way.

The perennial question that confronts every history major is: What are you going to do after graduation? Teaching is, and has always been, the well-trodden option. But solely equating history with a teaching career simply does not do justice to the value of history learning! Frustrated as we are by claims about the non-usefulness of history, many of us still struggle to defend its applicability in the working world, possibly because we just don’t know concretely enough. With the department’s help, we contacted a few alumni who ventured into ‘unconventional’ careers not normally expected of history graduates. Through their career talks, we hope to expose majors to the diverse range of jobs a history degree offers, and allow students to personally hear from our alumni on about how their history training has proven useful, and given them a niche in their respective fields. In line with this, we are also currently working to expand the range of internships offered to our majors. The recent internship survey was meant to gather a sense about the industries that majors are interested to work in, and we intend to use the information to source for internship offerings beyond the mainly heritage-oriented ones currently available.

After all, hissoc exists not merely to increase an appreciation of history, but also to serve the welfare of our majors. We hope that you all have enjoyed the interaction and conversations on our Facebook group. Do also keep a lookout for announcements about our future activities. I wish you all a fruitful semester ahead!

Poh Yu Hui
President, NUS History Society

MESSAGE FROM HISTORY SOCIETY

POH YU HUI
yuhui.poh@nus.edu.sg
Reflectations on Mnemozine

Mnemozine's ex-editor, Alex Chow, shares his thoughts on the magazine

Alex Chow

czolbe88@gmail.com

Over coffee with my cousin last December, I spoke of my rare exploits and mentioned the publication, whereupon I stoked her interest but only for her to laugh out loud when I revealed that it was a history magazine. It is true, the project is still largely unnecessary. Who amongst us history majors reads it? Who cares? Were we—the writers and editors—writing meaningfully, to share our perspectives on issues that are regarded as important and to encourage the creation of a community for our fellow students? Or were we merely writing as another exercise to adorn our resumes?

It is perhaps telling that most of the feedback concerning the last issue addressed the aesthetics of the magazine and seemed to forget about the content of the articles. Or rather, you guys and gals refused to be impolite by expressing boredom and disinterest with regard to the content. If so, then Mnemozine has failed (for now) to create a space for meaningful exchange and debate, nor has it made much headway in encouraging the formation of a community of history majors.

Still, it is probably still too early to tell what direction Mnemozine will take, however let it not ever be the case that this magazine only benefits and matters to its writers.

(Note from Editor: Readers are welcome to send in comments and feedback to publications@nushissoc.org. We look forward to receiving your input!)
YOUR SAY

IS HISTORY
BORING &
USELESS?

Recently, this controversial topic emerged for discussion, eliciting a myriad of comments from the History Majors Facebook community. Through the power of screen capture, a sprinkling of these thoughts have been frozen for posterity and are presented on the right.

“...History is absolutely boring and useless! You can’t have a conversation with the layman on the street without boring him to death! History is useless: it does not produce anything of practical value (unlike engineering), it does not improve the lives of people (unlike science and medicine), it does not benefit society (unlike law and social work), it does not provide solutions to the problems we face today (unlike political science, economics, sociology and geography), and it does not have any inherent aesthetic value (unlike literature and music). So what is the use of studying history?!

- Cheng Lin Chan
INTERVIEW/PROF YONG MUN CHEONG

As Head of the History Department, Prof. Yong Mun Cheong juggles between academic and administrative work. He takes some time off his busy schedule to share with Joshua Ho about his interests, responsibilities, and thoughts on engaging History students.

JOSHUA HO
joshuaho@nus.edu.sg

PLEASE TELL US A LITTLE BIT ABOUT YOURSELF, PERHAPS SOME OF THE MILESTONES IN YOUR LIFE?

During my time, there were very few schools to go to. I went to Raffles Institution because the only other school, Anglo-Chinese School, would not take me in as I was not Methodist. Following which, I went to pre-university, then to the only university, the University of Singapore. There, we studied the subjects that we had already studied at pre-university, which were History, Geography, Economics and Literature. There were also ‘new’ subjects like Sociology and Political Science which I was not very keen about. Hence I stayed on the well-trodden path most of the time and learnt to enjoy the things that I studied. I studied History, Geography and Economics. Surprisingly I did best for Economics and did not do very well for History. But I was not very interested in either Economics or any of the other subjects, so I settled on History, which I enjoyed very much.

JOSH: COULD YOU ELABORATE ON WHY YOU FOUND HISTORY SO ENJOYABLE?

Well, History allows you to reach very much into the past and you can study practically anything. Someone just told me that practically everything becomes History after a while and so you can study about anything and everything. I enjoy reading very much, especially novels about the Second World War which spurred my interest in History. I was very much interested about the Second World War in Germany and read up about all the torture and concentration camps.

ON YOUR WEB PAGE, YOU ACTUALLY STATED THAT YOU STUDIED SOUTHEAST ASIAN HISTORY FIRST, RIGHT?

Well Southeast Asian history was a very major subject at that time. All these European histories were not very widely taught. What I read about Europe was done by my own initiative and what was really taught was Southeast Asian history.
SO WHAT WAS YOUR FAVOURITE TOPIC?
I was very interested in the Japanese Occupation and how the colonial powers were driven away in the end. I wasn’t very interested in early South-east Asia, so my interest was focused upon the postwar period. Talking with parents and relatives about their experiences during the Japanese Occupation also helped to pique my interest in this topic. One would have thought that people suffered a lot during the Japanese Occupation. It may be so, but I could not understand how it was that my two elder sisters were born during the Occupation itself. The more I read about the Japanese and how they were portrayed in the textbooks and compared them with the accounts of my parents, I found out it wasn’t the atrocities that they remembered. Life just went on as per normal. However, they did remember things like when the Japanese surrendered, all the banana notes became worthless so they had no cash left. A kind aunt gave my father some money and that was the only hardship that I could recall and it did not last too long. Hence I was very motivated to find out more about how normal life continued under the Japanese Occupation, contrary to what had been depicted in the textbooks.

COULD I ASK YOU WHY DID YOU CHOOSE TO PURSUE AN ACADEMIC CAREER?
Again this was kind of driven by circumstances. At that time my parents were not rich enough, so I had to apply for a scholarship. With that scholarship I was allowed to go overseas, to Yale. After returning to Singapore, I decided that this was the kind of life I liked, that this is the kind of research that would interest me and be in line with my own disposition. Everything was more or less driven by circumstances. I was offered money to go there and study and whatever I learnt there, I picked it up.

MOVING ON, I WOULD LIKE TO ASK YOU, WHAT ARE YOUR RESPONSIBILITIES AS HEAD OF THE DEPARTMENT?
This university has a system where the headship is rotated among people and it came to my turn as it were. I must confess it’s not as if I have a vision that I want to push and see this department through, but there are certain responsibilities that have to be executed. One is to ensure there are enough modules for students to take so they can graduate. Also, you have to ensure that every semester there are a range of modules, both interesting and educational, to give students a choice. Also needed is to ensure that there are enough lecturers to teach modules for each semester and this is actually quite difficult. It is not transparent to you all. Another responsibility is to help people get research done, giving them the support needed to fund their research, and also finding them time to do their research. We have to work out a schedule for everyone to be relieved of teaching from time to time for their research. This rostering of people requires a lot of preparation which the head is required to oversee.

WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT SOME OF THE MORE RECENT INITIATIVES BY THE HISTORY SOCIETY?
I think the initiative on holding a career talk was excellent as this is something we did not have previously. It helped to show that when majoring in History, there are many possible options. There are the strictly History careers and the non-History careers. It should be made clear to many that these are all the options available to them. I think that the History Society can play a very important role by bringing back graduates to talk about their careers. This is something that I would like to help the Society push further. I don’t know what else we can do apart from just bringing in former graduates to talk about their careers, perhaps we do something more? The faculty and even the university want this to be done.

BESIDES EQUIPPING STUDENTS WITH THE KNOWLEDGE AND RELEVANT SKILLS AND PREPARING THEM TO ENTER THE WORKFORCE, DO YOU THINK THAT THERE IS A FURTHER NEED FOR THE DEPARTMENT TO ENGAGE WITH THE STUDENT POPULATION?
I’d like to see a development of strong alumni bonds after students graduate. The number of History students who graduate isn’t very large. Within any cohort we have, say 50 history majors. It should not be difficult to find a platform to bond these 50 people together. I would like to see this happen. I’m not too sure how this can be accomplished as this is supposed to happen outside the classroom. I would appreciate some advice and opinions from the students. We would really like it if graduate students would remember us and come back to the department after they have settled down.

WHAT DO YOU THINK DISTINGUISHES HISTORY MAJORS FROM STUDENTS OF OTHER DISCIPLINES?
I think to be fair to all the disciplines, NUS has embarked on a broad-based education and History is part of that education. I would hesitate to say that if you don’t study History, you wouldn’t be a good person. I think that they are all very important subjects and the choice should not be specifically to History.
WHAT IS CONSERVATION?
Conservation involves the restoration, reconstruction, rehabilitation and preservation of built heritage, be it historic buildings or historic areas. Modern conservation philosophy stresses the need for authenticity, dictating that there should be minimal intervention to the original fabric and structure of historic buildings where possible, and that any repair and restoration done should be reversible.

WHY CONSERVE?
There are both sentimental and practical reasons for countries today to conserve their built heritage. These include the desire to promote national identity, tourism; the cost-effectiveness of conserving existing buildings; and the ability to afford proper protection to conserved sites.

Having a physical, historical site can help foster national identity. People rally better around tangible manifestations of memory, and conserving key monuments helps in this regard. For instance, the Palace of Westminster is cherished in England as a symbolic representation of governance and the democratic tradition. Also, countries are recognised by their monuments. The Statue of Liberty conjures associations with the United States of America; and the Great Wall, China.

Affiliating nations with notable historical sites motivates tourists to head for these landmarks when they visit a country. Tourism thus provides economic impetus for conserving built heritage. Singapore realised this belatedly when tourist dollars dropped off in the late 1980s, and responded with a comprehensive conservation plan to preserve parts of Singapore’s built heritage to satiate tourists searching for Oriental nostalgia.

Another practical aspect of conservation is that it adds value to old buildings, breathes new life into them, and is far more cost-efficient than building a new building from scratch. Also, a certain amount of prestige goes into owning a piece of historic property.

Above all, conservation grants historical sites certain forms protection, both physical and legal. Tenants of historic buildings have to follow strict guidelines and constantly maintain their premises, ensuring that conserved buildings retain their integrity. Similarly, historical areas undergo regular upkeep. Conserved sites also tend to come under some form of legal
protection, so that would-be developers cannot casually modify the space to their liking.

**THE ORIGINS OF CONSERVATION**

The modern understanding of conservation is very much a Western one. The practice of conservation in the West stretches as far back as Greco-Roman times, where monuments were erected, restored, and preserved. Also, Western religions, in particular the Judeo-Christian tradition, have a custom of preserving existing buildings and structures — such as the adapting of pagan Roman temples and basilicas into churches after the Roman Empire adopted Christianity as the state religion.

The beginnings of the modern conservation movement also stem from the West. From the eighteenth century in Europe, historic buildings were recognised for their heritage value, and efforts were made to conserve them. Eighteenth-century conservation works, however, failed to pay any attention to authenticity or architectural evidence. Architects like Viollet-le-Duc and Sir Gilbert Scott would modify monuments to impose symmetry, which was the vogue in architecture then. This changed with the founding of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB) in 1877 in England by William Morris, who mooted the argument for authenticity in conservation. John Ruskin, another SPAB member, raised early ideas of conserving not just single historic buildings, but entire districts and cities. The SPAB Manifesto encapsulated the philosophy that the Society follows up till the present day, and even resonates in modern conservation theory and policy.

From the mid-twentieth century on, the conservation movement gained a global dimension. International organisations like the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) led the charge on the global stage through a series of charters and conventions. Some prominent ones include ICOMOS’s Venice Charter in 1964, which provided an international framework for conserving built heritage; the UNESCO World Heritage Convention in 1972, where the idea of World Heritage Sites was mooted; and UNESCO’s Nara Document on Authenticity in 1995, which affirmed the need to respect cultural differences towards authenticity in conservation.

The Nara Document is highly pertinent, considering how conservation is interpreted very differently across cultures. Often, religious beliefs would dictate conservation philosophy. In Islamic nations, the waqf, a type of religious endowment fund used to manage properties such as mosques, schools, and public services, guarantees the upkeep and repair of historic buildings. Hindu temples are required to undergo renovations and restorations every twelve years before reconsecration can take place. In Japan, the Shinto belief of *wabi-sabi*, which expounds on constant renewal and the impermanence of things, is directly reflected in Japanese conservation. For instance, exact copies of the various shrines that comprise the Ise Grand Shrine are rebuilt next to the existing shrines every twenty years, following which the old shrine is dismantled.

Despite the differences in conservation philosophy across cultures, the motivations behind conservation remain very similar. Societies often turn to conservation as a way of preserving art, architecture, and space so that the memories associated with them would endure for future generations to inherit.
NO SIMPLE SOLUTION? THE PROBLEMS OF CONSERVATION IN SINGAPORE

Wei Zhong discusses the problematic issues surrounding conservation in Singapore

ONG WEI ZHONG
weizhong@nus.edu.sg

“The history of a city is recorded not only in books, but also in its buildings...” — S Rajaratnam, Foreword of the first edition of Pastel Portraits by Gretchen Liu, 1984.

When it comes to safeguarding historical sites, conservation seems like a viable and simple solution. Conserving a historic site would mean that the place remains more or less intact. However, when taking into consideration the conservation situation in Singapore, this simple solution might seem less appealing.

Conservation falls under the jurisdiction of the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA), the national urban planning and development authority. That the URA is also the national conservation authority seems paradoxical. This might seem like a good move at the cursory glance, as having one body in charge of both development and conservation would probably mean better coordination between the two. However, given that the URA’s primary mission is urban redevelopment, it seems reasonable to express scepticism over where URA’s priorities would lie when the need for development collides with conservation interests.

When we examine some of the local conservation efforts, it is hard not to feel pessimistic. Even though it is accepted that conserved buildings will have new uses, conservation is only truly successful if the spirit of the historical site endures. Yet this is not always the case in Singapore. A notable example is the conservation of CHIJMES, a beautiful Gothic church situated in the City Hall area. Initially, the school half of the church compound had to make way for the MRT Operations Control Centre, a necessary but painful decision as the site held the collective memories of many a CHIJ girl over the decades. However,
after the historical site was finally slated for conservation, the decision to lease the church and cloisters to private contractors and adapt the place into a shopping mall drew outcries from both the public and the CHIJ community. Despite this outpouring of sentiment, the views of the local community were largely ignored, and today, CHIJMES is a commercial place. The adaptation of a religious space to commercial enterprise represents an affront to the spirit of the place, and also drastically alters remembrance of the place. In hindsight, the CHIJMES conservation effort seems like an overly practical and economical affair.

Another historic site conserved with a lacklustre spirit is Bussorah Street in Kampong Glam. During the conservation of Kampong Glam in 1992, it was decided that Bussorah Street would be transformed into a pedestrian mall. While not out of character for the place, which was a commercial street prior, there was a noticeable lack of buzz and activity after conservation. Here, conservation became a double-edged sword, as the increased rent of the shop houses meant that the old businesses could not be competitive, and many went bust. Nowadays, souvenir shops targeted at tourists have replaced the old trades. One can only find a Sasha Teddy Bears shop along Bussorah Street in place of authentic heritage.

In the cases of CHIJMES and Bussorah Street, even though the physical sites have been conserved, it is hard to argue that heritage and memories of the places have been left unscathed. Granted, both historical sites were restored beautifully. Yet noticeably absent is a sense of authenticity, which could be remedied by consulting the local communities, but appears to have been overlooked.

Finally, though a site may be scheduled for conservation, securing the funds required for the conservation works and the eventual maintenance of the site can be trying. While historical districts have been conserved at the expense of the government, local communities have to foot the bill if their buildings are marked for preservation. Raising funds poses less of an issue for larger religious communities, say those of Sultan Mosque or St Andrew’s Cathedral. However, securing funding is tougher for minority communities in Singapore, such as the Indian Muslim community. For instance, even though plans had been made to carry out conservation works for Abdul Gaffoor Mosque in 1994, its small congregation of only 800 meant that the local community struggled to secure the funds needed for conserving both the mosques and the shop houses it owns on Dunlop Street. Conservation turned out to be a painfully protracted event. Restoration works finally began in 1998 after a part of the required sum was raised, and was only completed in 2003. Even so, whether the community can consistently raise enough funds to maintain the mosque to required standards remains to be seen.

In sum, given the state of conservation in Singapore, advocating to have historical sites conserved may not be the simple solution to solving the conundrum of safeguarding places of memory and heritage for future generations of Singaporeans. That being said, even if conservation is carried out in a less questionable fashion, there should always be a balance between conservation and development. While retaining much of the historical past may give a city a sense of nostalgia and romance, resisting development will see a city stagnate and turn into a veritable museum piece.
In September 2011, the National Heritage Board (NHB) unveiled plans to conduct research into 18 traditional provision shops around Singapore as a means of preserving "heartland heritage for future generations". The National Archives of (NAS) also announced that it would conduct oral history interviews with shop owners, and use the material gathered to curate a travelling exhibition in community clubs, libraries and schools. While these actions are in line with the NHB’s 2008 Heritage Development Plan, I would argue that the NHB’s goal of "restoring [these resources] as an integral part of our daily lives" cannot be met by this effort to exhibit a still-functioning entity like the provision shop. In fact, by treating provision shops as part of a soon-to-be-forgotten past, the NHB may well be driving the nail into the coffin for an already declining trade.

The provision shop was for decades a common sight in the heartlands of Singapore, and up till the 1980s, remained a crucial channel for distributing groceries in Singapore. Since the mid-1970s, however, it has become increasingly difficult for traditional shopkeepers to keep up their trade—many have been squeezed out by cheap and accessible supermarket retailers and convenience stores, and others have been subsumed under chains of mini-supermarkets. Now, the membership of the Singapore Provision Shops Friendly Association has dwindled to fewer than 150. While I share the NHB’s opinion that building up a repository of material about this element of local heritage is essential to the construction of social memory, I believe that if we truly wish for these materials to not just be restored but also rejuvenated, we need to go beyond simply trying to capture nearly-forgotten fragments of this local trade. As Koichiro Matsuura pointed out in a commentary on living heritage, can we define culture without ‘freezing’ it; safeguard it without separating it from living processes of creativity and evolution? Traditional provision shops in Singapore need to be brought to the forefront of public consciousness and given a new lease of life that inspires active local participation, not dismantled and pinned on exhibition screens or stowed away in the archives.
The risk of attempting to rejuvenate traditional industries lies in, of course, potentially transforming the entire enterprise into something contrived. However, it is possible to tread the fine line between maintaining authenticity and putting up a display for public consumption, as a museum established in Saudi Arabia seems to have proven. One of its major features is a reproduction of a local coffee-house, complete with a ‘barista’ hired by the municipality to brew coffee in the traditional manner for visitors. This ‘live’ exhibition attracts up to a hundred visitors a day, many of whom are young locals eager to learn more about the past.

While there is no need to install a provision shop in the middle of our National Museum, I think it is possible to transform existing shops into authentic heritage sites by firstly increasing public awareness of their locations and then incorporating them into heartland tours. Shopkeepers could be paid to explain the history of their business to visiting groups of cultural tourists, and shops could also be revamped to include side exhibits such as photos tracing their development over the years and traditional artefacts like jars of cough drops, children’s toys, and pulley-tins for storing change. In this way, the provision shop itself functions as a living repository of the past, and forms a great starting point for nostalgic reminiscences from older visitors. Furthermore, the opportunity for natural interaction between shopkeepers and visitors is sure to leave a deeper impression than any static exhibition. Such an initiative is similar to an earlier effort by the NHB in Balestier and Kampong Glam, where two overhead bridges were converted into galleries showcasing the heritage and culture of these historical locations. Public spaces can be transformed into functional and accessible heritage sites that allow locals and foreigners alike to experience a piece of history outside a museum or gallery, and this is especially apt since the entity on display has long been a crucial facet of heartland life.

Traditional provision shops still have the potential to flourish; let us not sound the death-knell on them prematurely.
special feature

BUKIT BROWN

WHY BUKIT BROWN SHOULDN’T GO • 16

A TRIBUTE TO BUKIT BROWN • 17

DOCUMENTING BUKIT BROWN • 18

CONVERSATION WITH DR. CHUA AI LIN • 20
Modern Singapore would not exist without the exhumation and redevelopment of cemeteries dotting the island. HDB estates such as Bishan were built on former cemetery land. Part of Bukit Brown Cemetery will soon be cleared for a road to ease traffic congestion; the rest will be developed into a residential estate within the next 50 years. While few would disagree that Singapore faces a fundamental problem of land constraints, resulting in the need for difficult trade-offs, the construction of the new road has frustrated heritage groups and ordinary Singaporeans.

What Value?
The decision to build the road would have undergone scrutiny through a cost-benefit analysis. Benefits to present and future motorists would have weighed heavier than the costs of destroying parts of Bukit Brown — which in any case had been stamped for development, like past cemeteries. While it makes sense to attach a monetary worth to the cemetery, there are certain values which the cost-benefit analysis does not capture. For instance, heritage groups and many Singaporeans recognize Bukit Brown for its historical, educational, recreational and biodiversity values. These values are not easily measurable, severely limiting the cost-benefit analysis.

Secondly, the cost-benefit analysis assumes future motorists will behave like present ones, and future Singaporeans want to develop Bukit Brown. Such assumptions should be revised, in light of a tightening policy on vehicle growth, and the desires by heritage groups and present Singaporeans to preserve Bukit Brown. It is not far-fetched to believe that future generations will be more inclined towards preservation, as they are more distanced from the past and would want physical spaces to explore it, just as many present Singaporeans are doing now.

A Contest of Histories
While some valuations of Bukit Brown such as monetary, educational, biodiversity are clear-cut, its purported historical value is less tangible. What determines the historical value of Bukit Brown? This goes into the heart of what a historical fact means. As British historian Edward Carr would question, there were hundreds of thousands of migrants and visitors to Singapore — why did we choose to remember a select few like Chew Boon Lay by naming streets after them, and even preserving a villa which Sun Yat-sen visited only a couple of times?

Such decisions, especially the preservation of the Sun Yat-sen Nanyang Memorial Hall, were made by the government playing the role of a historian. Its nation-building agenda behind the inclusion (and exclusion) of certain events as part of mainstream history has been consistently demonstrated. If Bukit Brown had entered mainstream history as a historical fact, the government would be keener to preserve it (or it might have already done so). One can speculate that as nation-building in Singapore is driven by pragmatism and economic development, Bukit Brown adds nothing to the mainstream narrative, especially since most of those buried there are from the pre-independence period.

However, Terence Chong and Chua Ai Lin from the Singapore Heritage Society have differing views. In an article to The Straits Times, they averred that “in preserving the graves of ordinary people we are acknowledging the blood, sweat and toil of those who have contributed to the development of our city port. Such a move will enrich and democratise the Singapore story.”
While mainstream history acknowledges the labour of ordinary people before and after independence, the focus is still overwhelmingly on elite-led development. For Chong and Chua, Bukit Brown is a historical fact, perhaps in a social history of Singapore concerned with the ordinary and the everyday. The Bukit Brown graves are rare physical archives of the common people (and the rich) in Singapore. A local historian, Loh Kah Seng, is currently trying to record oral interviews of villagers who lived near the cemetery. Just as coroner’s records allowed historian James Warren to reanimate the voices of dead prostitutes and rickshaw coolies, Bukit Brown offers the future historian opportunities to weave stories of the masses—making them more human to future Singaporeans.

**FINAL CASE**

Are documenting of the graves and 3D mapping creative solutions to meeting the needs of heritage groups and future generations? Put another way, what if you visit the Louvre and return home to find out that the Mona Lisa you have seen is actually a fake? Given present technology to archive Bukit Brown, it will never (or even come close to) replicate the actual experiences of visiting the cemetery personally. The present can bequeath Bukit Brown, untouched, to future generations, who would then have the opportunity to experience it. They might or might not choose to destroy it—but at least they would have options.

Finally, while past, present and future Singaporeans possess different memories of the changing landscape, there is no reason why some physical sites should not remain in perpetuity. No one would talk of knocking down the Istana or even the Esplanade, which has gained an iconic status because of its durian-like roofs. The continuity of these special physical sites will play a crucial role in defining the Singapore identity into the future—and sacrifices to be made will be justified.

**A TRIBUTE TO BUKIT BROWN**

SAKINA ALI
u0802419@nus.edu.sg

The dead will walk, walk,
Walk the night
Bewildered and baffled
Wondering where their places of rest
Had gone, replaced
By a steady whirr, and honk
Of engines
A continuous stream of sounds
Where only silence had been before

Silence
It deafens, in this isle of change
It’s practical, they say
Make way for the Living

Discard the dead
These are only the ghosts of a forgotten past
The Living, they don’t even visit anyway
The birds and the trees hardly really matter
New homes they’ll find, in an appropriate corner

But life you see, has a peculiar way
Of getting right back in your face
The living will soon become the dead
And then they too will walk, walk,
Walk the night
Wondering just where their
Bodied halves might be.
Over the past few months, Bukit Brown Cemetery, Singapore’s largest traditional Chinese cemetery, has attracted much buzz in local media. What is unique about Bukit Brown is that it is the first cemetery where people from different Chinese dialect groups and religions were buried together, whereas previous cemeteries in colonial Singapore were usually clan or dialect-group based. It is also the last cemetery in Singapore where the graves are arranged according to fengshui or Chinese geomancy. Located beside and linked to Bukit Brown is the less well-known Seh Ong Sua (Ong Surname Hill) Cemetery. All those buried in the latter were from the Ong clan. These cemeteries are home not just to many of our ancestors, but also to innumerable flora and fauna.

In early December 2011, the Bukit Brown Documentation Project was formally started after the Government announced that part of the cemetery would be cleared to build a four-lane dual carriageway road. The Project consists of three parts. First is the documentation of individual graves, which includes copying down their inscriptions and photographing their surroundings. Currently, the graves that would most likely be affected by the proposed road are the first priority on the documenters’ list. The second is the oral history component where documenters interview people, including those who previously lived in nearby kampongs, others who worked near or in Bukit Brown, and descendants of those buried there. The third part involves documenting the exhumation process and its associated rituals. Currently, this part has not formally started as no public exhumations have been conducted, even though some graves were exhumed privately after the news of the road building was released.

The Documentation team’s journey was not always smooth-sailing, especially at the start. For the field managers, it was hard finding people who knew the traditional Chinese script, were physically fit, and willing and able to help out. For the fieldworkers, the weather and terrain proved challenging at times. At times the weather is extremely hot; at other times too wet, making it easy for one to slip and fall. Some graves are located on a steep slope, requiring the fieldworkers to climb and balance while cleaning and documenting the graves. Once, I almost fell into an exhumed hole while documenting a grave at the edge of a steep slope, in between two exhumed graves. One must also look out for snakes and other insects. Some of us encountered snakes, but luckily they were small and did not attack us. Besides, many of the graves are over a hundred years old, making it very difficult to decipher the words on the headstone. More often than not, especially in the Seh Ong Cemetery, the headstone resembles a normal slab of stone with no words on it at first sight. It is only after cleaning and chalkling the graves that the inscriptions might become more visible. In some cases, they do not. A lot depends on the skill of the fieldworker when it comes to the quality of information collected. If the fieldworker did not clean the grave or chalk the headstone well, the words would not be decipherable from the photographs. Moreover, certain words are not standard Chinese characters, but shorthand words used only by Chinese from that particular time period, and not recognisable by others without prior training.

Despite these difficulties, the team has attracted a wide range of people from different backgrounds, interests and motivations. One fellow fieldworker, Mr Lee Tei Hin from Sarawak, joins the team because he is interested in fengshui. Having travelled to Taiwan and China to visit numerous graves, Mr Lee wants to know how the fengshui of certain graves in Singapore has allowed the descendants of
those buried there to rise up as prominent members in society. He believes that the fengshui of ancestral graves is very important in determining the fate of the descendants. However, he admits that the topography of the place has changed over time and we can no longer study the fengshui of the graves based on the current landscape. Many of the rivers and waterways might have been converted into roads. At the same time, he wants to help document Singapore’s heritage as he has lived here for the past 20 years. Another fieldworker, Ms Michelle Tan, signed up because she hopes that her children might become interested in their roots and ancestors if she helps in documentation, since her husband’s great-great grandfather is buried at Bukit Brown.

In the midst of documenting Bukit Brown, I came across some interesting people and stories. A lady in her 70s popped by the site office one day and started chatting with the contractors. After hearing that Mr Lee Kuan Yew’s paternal grandfather was buried at Bukit Brown, she wanted to visit his grave. On our way there, we came across many other graves which triggered her childhood memories. She was born before World War II and used to live near Bukit Brown, which became a playground for her and her friends. Whenever tired from playing, they would sit on the sides of the graves to rest. Illegal immigrants from China who lived alongside the graves was a pre-war sight they often encountered. As these immigrants could not afford proper housing, they had only a tent over the graves to call home and the pedestal of the graves for a dining table. Far from being just a cemetery, Bukit Brown was a space for the socially marginalised as well as a place where bonds were forged and continued. Although these people may no longer be living there, and children no longer playing there, it remains a site of memory for all of them. Bukit Brown remains relevant as a public space for everyone, whether rich or poor, mainstream or marginalised, local or foreign. We may document the physical features and memories of Bukit Brown, helping to save fragments of it. But we can never replace the real Bukit Brown as a public and green space. Once cleared, this space will be lost to all. Moreover, whatever documented belongs only to the Bukit Brown of today and can never be totally comprehensive. It risks being taken as all of what the place is about. Such are the dilemmas faced by the documentation team.

Documentation has also given some of us mixed feelings. Many of us have become friends who have shared the happy moments of working together. Yet, at the same time, watching the place change day-by-day while knowing that it may be gone one day etches sadness deep in our hearts. Unknowingly, members of the documentation team have become part of Bukit Brown’s history. We might have entered as neutral individuals trying to document the physical features and memories of the place. Yet, the cemeteries have become places of memory for us as well. Despite the sadness and nostalgia, I am glad that all the graves, no matter big or small, grand or simple, are treated equally, and are equally documented. People usually only notice the graves that are big and grand, or of famous people. However, the documentation of Bukit Brown and Seh Ong Sua has so far promoted the spirit of non-elitism in an indirect way. The ordinary graves, people and past are remembered as well. And they should be.

**Bukit Brown remains relevant as a public space for everyone, whether rich or poor, mainstream or marginalised, local or foreign.**
CONVERSATION WITH DR. CHUA AI LIN

Bukit Brown cemetery has been a much discussed topic of late. To better understand the reasons for conserving this historical cemetery, Chun Yuan sat down with Dr. Chua as she weighed in on the issue, and also spoke about conservation matters in Singapore.

YONG CHUN YUAN

COULD YOU TELL US HOW YOUR INTEREST IN SINGAPORE HISTORY AND HERITAGE BEGAN?

When I came back to Singapore, after my undergraduate degree on medieval European history in England, I started working for the National Archives of Singapore (NAS). At the same time, I joined the Singapore Heritage Society (SHS). Working at the NAS made me realise how little I knew about Singapore history, and made me want to learn more. Outside of work, going for walking tours, attending talks, or interacting with the people in SHS were also ways that I was able to pick things up. So, my interest in Singapore history was something quite organic and natural at that point.
Can you name us a place in Singapore that you feel a close connection to?

This may be a bit clichéd but I do like Bukit Brown because I grew up somewhere near there and I could see the graves from my home. It’s a space that’s part of my personal childhood memory. Recently, I’ve been visiting it a lot more and appreciating what that space has to offer, in a way that I had no idea of when I was a child. It’s very special because it’s an untouched space. Almost any urban area in Singapore has changed a great deal over the last twenty years. So it’s hard to find spaces that are still the way you remember them a long time ago.

So what is your position on the recent Bukit Brown debate?

The ideal would of course be to try and conserve it as a whole. If we take that as a starting point, we would make every possible effort, consider every possible alternative, to try and achieve that goal. And when I say consider every possible alternative, it also means creative solutions that have not been used before in Singapore. This means going a bit further than what would normally constitute considering all options.

But do you think that the authorities see Bukit Brown as this critical space that is worth for us to consider exhausting all options?

I think the problem is that they haven’t realised that until now! The authorities are still treating Bukit Brown as a just another cemetery — a reusable space, intended for future development. But Bukit Brown, I would argue, is a slightly different case. It’s not just any old cemetery. To what extent is it a very significant historical site, we are only discovering now because nobody’s done the research before. Not merely from the historical and heritage standpoint, but also from the environmental standpoint. If even the specialists in these fields don’t know what’s there, we can’t assume that civil servants in LTA will know.

But setting aside heritage buffs or nature lovers for a moment, how would you convince the average Singaporean that Bukit Brown is important?

First and foremost, it’s about a diversity of spaces in Singapore. Everybody already thinks that Singapore is a boring place. Even Singaporeans have bought into this idea. If we turn everything into shopping malls, Singapore really will become a boring place. As an open space, as a historical cemetery, Bukit Brown is a very different kind of space that isn’t replicated elsewhere. It provides a diversity of experience that Singaporeans could have in their own country. An experience that’s meaningful, because at the same time you can learn about nature, and about history. And not history that’s completely divorced from our daily lives because many places in Singapore are named after the people buried in Bukit Brown. So it’s a history that people can actually connect to. Unlike say, going to Universal Studios, it’s a space where you can experience something meaningful whilst having a pleasant day out.

Would this argument be appealing to people who currently hold a negative perception towards cemetery grounds?

Let’s say you are on holiday in Paris, would you not want to visit the famous Pere-Lachaise cemetery? It’s on the tourist trail and everyone’s going there. So it’s about changing perceptions about what kind of a space the cemetery is. Whether or not the expressway is built through Bukit Brown, I think all parties and even the government agencies would like to find a way to make the place more accessible to more people, with heritage trails, signboards, etc. Things to welcome people and help them access the space. Not just physically, but also in terms of understanding what’s there, and being able to appreciate it.
I can show you a million pictures of Bukit Brown. But only by going there that you can form your own understanding of it.

MOVING ON TO A MORE GENERAL TOPIC, WHAT DO YOU THINK IS THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE FACING HERITAGE CONSERVATION IN SINGAPORE?

One of the biggest challenges is that heritage conservation needs to find ways to continue to be relevant to the community. It can’t always be a situation where funding has to be pumped in to keep it going. Creative solutions are needed to find ways to both conserve heritage and maintain it as a living space. There are ways of having a viable economic model that is not at the expense of a community. And hence we need to sit down and look at creative solutions, fresh ways of tackling these issues.

WHAT THEN DO YOU THINK LIMITS THIS SEARCH FOR CREATIVE SOLUTIONS?

I think part of the problem is ignorance. We are very ignorant of our own heritage and culture, stuck in very stereotypical ideas about what Singapore is. So, the source of ideas for our inspiration comes out of that stereotypical box. There are people like researchers and scholars who have that depth of knowledge and there are people out there who want to create new products and are looking for new sources of inspiration. But you need to link the two and that’s the gap I’m still struggling with. It’s a win-win situation, the question is just how to make that happen.

A LAST RESORT IF WE FAIL TO PROTECT A PLACE IS TO TURN TO DOCUMENTATION AND ARCHIVING TO PRESERVE MEMORIES OF THE PLACE. WHAT ARE YOUR THOUGHTS ON THIS?

It’s better than nothing. But it’s not a substitute, can never be. Living in a virtual world, we underestimate the power that our five senses still have on our understanding of the world around us. I can show you a million pictures of Bukit Brown. But only by going there that you can form your own understanding of it. It’s about the meaning that we make out of the things of the past that come to us. And that’s what’s lost – that level of personal meaning and connection.
Have a passion for writing or an eye for design?
Contact us at publications@nushissoc.org.
The Malay Village at Geylang Serai shut down on September 26th last year.

While initially constructed to showcase Malay culture and provide a place to sell Malay items, its lack of popularity and poor visitor numbers caused it to become a dead zone.

As announced in the Prime Minister’s 2011 National Day Rally speech, the Malay Village will be replaced by Wisma Geylang Serai, a civic centre and plaza with a Malay heritage gallery. As this project appears to be in its initial stages, I feel that it is worth examining how and why the Malay Village failed, so as to avoid repeating the same mistakes with Wisma Geylang Serai.

In a 1999 Straits Times interview, Tan Shee Tiong, a town planner, described the Malay Village as a contrived heritage exercise. I agree with his statement. From its inception, the Malay Village was an inauthentic depiction of Singaporean Malay heritage. The Malay Village was not a preserved Singaporean kampung; the Housing Development Board (HDB) had demolished the original kampungs at Geylang Serai before constructing the Malay Village roughly two decades later. Neither was it a replica of a Singaporean kampung. HDB architects based the Malay Village’s architecture on site studies from Malaysia and Indonesia, and consulted with the Singapore Tourism Board for advice. The eventual result came to resemble a shopping arcade instead of a kampung, due to its heavy emphasis on shops and kiosks. In this manner, the cultural aspect of the village was diluted due to its focus on the commercial aspect. The Malay community was also not involved during the conception of the Malay Village, which led to their difficulty in identifying with the Malay Village once it was constructed.
While the Malay Village did not gain the support of locals, it could still have survived with a focus on retail, by providing a place to sell Malay items. However, it did not have much to offer in that department either, for the Malay Village experienced great difficulty keeping its shops open. A recent Straits Times report (‘Malay Village redevelopment welcomed’, 16 August 2011) states that many shops were boarded up when its reporters visited. This was not an isolated phenomenon. The poor business at the Malay Village was apparent even in March 1992, where only eight shops out of seventy were open for business. A 1999 Straits Times article stated that “almost all of the 48 shops, which sold Malay clothing and craft, were closed”, and a 2006 article mentioned that most of the 70 shops were closed when reporters visited. Just across the road, the bustling crowds of Geylang Serai market only made the Malay Village’s rows of closed stalls look shabbier in comparison.

In short, the shops did not open due to a lack of customers, and potential customers were unlikely to visit the Malay Village because of its lack of open shops. This vicious cycle led to the accumulation of a six-digit debt by 2006, and contributed to its recent closure. While the Malay Village valiantly attempted to be both culturally significant and financially viable, it failed at both.

A 1999 parliamentary debate led Member of Parliament Inderjit Singh to describe the Malay Village as one of Singapore’s “stale and outdated theme parks”, grouping it with Tang Dynasty Village and Haw Par Villa. I feel that Singh’s comparison to those two attractions was quite apt. Like Haw Par Villa, the Malay Village showcases mythological images— in this case, the planners’ fabrication of what a Singaporean kampung should look like, rather than what a Singaporean kampung actually was. Like Tang Dynasty Village, the heavy financial losses that the Malay Village incurred caused it to cease its operations. There is a key lesson that we can learn from the failure of the Malay Village—the construction of a tourist attraction which is meant to depict Singaporean Malay heritage should have a degree of cultural authenticity. Emphasis on retail at the expense of cultural authenticity was one of the major factors that led to the lack of support from the public, as well as the lack of tourist revenue.

It is difficult to determine how culturally authentic Wisma Geylang Serai will be, as very little has been announced since 2008, when the Urban Redevelopment Authority first stated its plans to demolish the Malay Village and build a civic centre in its place. The 2011 National Day Rally speech provided a few more details about the plan, stating that there would be a plaza with a Malay heritage gallery. While further details about the project are not available to the public, it is heartening to note that Dr Maliki Osman, the overseer of the Wisma Geylang Serai project, is soliciting suggestions from the public on the project’s Facebook page. This shows an interest in hearing the voices of the community and their opinions on what a Malay heritage site should be, and might prevent the project from repeating the mistakes of the Malay Village.

Hopefully we will be able to learn from the failure of the Malay Village, and allow Wisma Geylang Serai to become a vibrant place to showcase authentic Malay culture.
Known to some as “last kampung mosque” of Singapore, the Pertempatan Melayu Sembawang Mosque is one of few remaining places in Sembawang untouched by development. Follow Sufiyan as he takes a closer look at the mosque...

SUFYIAN HANAFI
sufiyan.hanafi@gmail.com

The Pertempatan Melayu Sembawang Mosque was constructed in 1962 and officially completed a year later. At that time, the mosque was located within a village known as Kampung Tengah. It also served the needs of residents from nearby villages like Kampung Tanjung Irau, Kampung Lubang Bom, Kampung Hailam and Kampung Wak Hassan. The building funds were raised mainly from residents, who made monthly contributions ranging from $3 to $10, which was a heavy toll considering that their average salary was $12 a week.

SINGAPORE’S MASTER PLANS
1965 marked another chapter in our history with the separation from Malaysia and our leaders became actively involved in developing Singapore into an economically viable country. In 1980, the Jurong Town Corporation (JTC) initiated a Master Plan for a changing industrial landscape that focused on attracting capital-intensive and technologically advanced industries. They planned new industrial estates including Sembawang while arranging for villagers to be vacated from their kampung houses and rehoused to new Housing Development Board (HDB) flats in Yishun and Jurong West. Since then, the mosque has been operating on a Temporary Occupation License (TOL) and is constantly being pressured to vacate the site. Under the 2003 Master Plan released by the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA), the mosque still remains zoned for development.

A key individual who played an integral role in preserving the mosque was then Member of Parliament (MP) for Sembawang, Dr Tony Tan Keng Yam. In 2004, he managed to spare the bulldozer and helped to extend the mosque’s lease for another year. The following year, he succeeded in getting the lease extended for another three years. Dr Tan felt “emotionally attached to it”, as he recalled his annual Hari Raya celebrations in the mosque where he broke fast with the community, a tradition that had...
begun 25 years prior when he was first elected as MP. By comparing the official positions of URA and Dr Tony Tan, we find a contradiction in the facts reported. As spelt out in the Master Plans since 1980, the plot of land has been constantly targeted for development by the government. However, in 2005, Dr Tan indicated that the URA “had no immediate plans to develop the area around Jalan Mempurong, where the mosque is situated.” This divergent stance can be seen as problematic, and prompts further questions regarding the motives underlying these public statements.

Chua Beng Huat brings the discourse a step further by linking the ‘kampung mentality’ to the ‘industrialisation’ and ‘stress’ of a ‘progressive’ society. The kampung is recollected as a place where childhood was free and innocent, schools figured marginally, and the community exhibited a high degree of tolerance and cooperation, allowing a sense of public and personal security to emerge spontaneously. This perceived laidback lifestyle, exemplified by the kampung, represents an obstacle to achieving the economic well-being idealised by the government. The underlying ideology proposed by Chua strikes a parallel with the ideas of Malcom Chase and Christopher Shaw, who maintain in their article *The Dimensions of Nostalgia*, that nostalgia occurs when one encounters a different occurrence of the present juxtaposed with the past. The resettlement of Sembawang’s residents into HDB flats could be seen as sudden as they were robbed of their memories and forced into new houses determined by the state. What they encountered was a radically different physical environment of high-rise flats where they could no longer enjoy the outdoors as they had used to.

A CONTESTED PAST... AND FUTURE

The histories presented here are filled with contestations from various parties, whether residents, the government, or just simply outsiders. I personally chose this topic as I have visited the mosque on a couple of occasions and was curious to unravel the past which the site was wrapped in. The mosque, a landmark, serves as a microcosm of the rich local history that binds the community with the larger history of the colonial administrators and, more importantly, the Malay Archipelago. It would be a waste if such a monument were to be demolished by the government despite the rationale provided as physical landscapes like it serve to provide dynamism in studying the past.

AN IMAGINED VILLAGE

The disappearance of the kampung landscape in Sembawang converges all the attention to the mosque as a point of reference to reincarnate one’s memory of the place. We do see that there are multiplicities in history exhibited whether it was during the colonial period, post-independence era or the social memories of the people. During the British colonial period, narratives by governing authorities have a tendency to glorify Sembawang as an important dockyard. The present-day government, meanwhile, constantly propagates the notion of Singapore as a modernised country, thus justifying its pragmatic stance with regards to Sembawang’s land use. This leads to a constant struggle between the demands of the state and social remnants of the people. Up till today, the mosque does receive a huge number of worshippers, especially for Friday and Hari Raya prayers. The sense of “belonging” remains deeply imprinted in the lives of those used to reside there.
Situated in the heart of Singapore’s Central Business District and surrounded by modern skyscrapers, the ancient Yueh Hai Ching Temple (Yue Hai Qing Miao, 粤海清庙) appears to be a misfit with its environs. Yet this national monument is a testament of conservation triumphing development.

ORIGINS
Yueh Hai Ching is the oldest Teochew-Taoist temple in Singapore. The temple’s origins are reflected in its name which literally means “Temple built by the Guangdong people on the coast of the calm sea”.

The history of the temple can be traced back as early as 1820 when it existed as an attap hut located near the coast. In 1826 or earlier, the local Teochew (潮州) community replaced the hut with an attap-and-wood shrine dedicated to the Queen of Heaven (Tian Hou Sheng Mu, 天后圣母), better known as Ma Zu (妈祖), who ensured the safe voyages of Chinese traders travelling to and fro Singapore and China.

In 1845, the Ngee Ann Kongsi (义安公司), formed by wealthy local Teochew leaders, bought the land where the shrine stood. It rebuilt the shrine between 1850 and 1855 into the temple we know today. Chinese merchants, migrants, and sailors continued to visit Yueh Hai Ching to offer their thanks to the Queen of Heaven for their safe arrival in Singapore.

CONSERVATION
The Kongsi funded renovation and restoration works for the temple between 1895 and 1896. On 28 June 1996, the Singapore government gazetted Yueh Hai Ching as a national monument to conserve its magnificent architecture, especially its unique and exquisite carvings on its roofs and internal walls. The temple’s historic links with the local Chinese community might also be a reason for its conservation.
The Kongsi spent S$2 million to fund restoration works between 1994 and 1997, and another S$5 million for current restoration works that are expected to be completed by October 2013.

ARCHITECTURAL FEATURES
Craftsmen were employed from China to build the current Yueh Hai Ching in the 1850s. Construction materials, such as granite columns for the temple’s verandahs and interiors, were imported from the Qing Empire too.

On the temple’s roofs are delicately carved dragons, phoenixes, and Chinese towns while scenes of Chinese opera are depicted on the interior walls. These ornaments typify the superb Teochew craftsmanship of the nineteenth century. Legendary creatures and flowers are also carved on beams in the temple to symbolise eternity, tranquility, and splendour.

LINKS WITH THE LOCAL CHINESE COMMUNITY
Like most Chinese temples in Singapore, Yueh Hai Ching was a place for worship and gathering for the local Chinese community, especially the Teochews who called it “Wak Hai Cheng Bio”.

After the temple was built in the 1850s, the Teochews living along the nearby Circular Road met there to interact. The Ngee Ann Kongsi, which served the interests of the Teochew community and whose office was initially located at the back of Yueh Hai Ching, further helped to strengthen the cohesiveness among the Teochews.

Moreover, Yueh Hai Ching gradually gained popularity among worshippers from the other Chinese dialect groups, like the Cantonese (广东人) and Hakkas (客家人), who visited and prayed there regularly. The temple thus played a significant role in promoting inter-dialect group bonding within the Chinese community in colonial Singapore.

The donation of several auspicious signboards to Yueh Hai Ching in the late 1890s by Teochew businessmen attested to its importance to the local Chinese community. The temple’s prestige was further enhanced in May 1899 when China’s Guangxu Emperor (光绪皇帝) bestowed his handwritten signboard (bian-e, 匾额) to Yueh Hai Ching in recognition of its donation of 6000 silver tales for flood victims in Shandong (山东). Yueh Hai Ching was the first of only two temples in Singapore to have the rare honour of receiving such a propitious signboard. This signboard, which reads “Shu Hai Xiang Yun” (曙光祥云) or “Moving sea with peaceful clouds above”, hangs proudly above the Queen of Heaven’s altar today.

DEITIES AND RELIGIOUS ACTIVITIES
Besides the Queen of Heaven, who is also reputed to treat illnesses, the other major patron deity of Yueh Hai Ching is the Heavenly Father (Xuan Tian Shang Di, 玄天上帝). The altar of the Queen of Heaven is located in the left wing of the temple, while the Heavenly Father’s altar, which was imported from China in 1852, sits in the right wing.

Furthermore, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the temple would conduct a religious procession (游神) along the nearby streets in the Eleventh Lunar Month annually to offer thanksgivings to the deities. Chinese of all dialect groups living in that area would participate with much fanfare.

Given its religious, social, and architectural significance, Yueh Hai Ching Temple is a valued heritage site for Chinese Singaporeans. Thanks partly to the deities’ blessings, the temple has successfully defended itself against development and will be around for future generations to visit and appreciate.
INTERVIEW/ CHAR LEE

CHEW AN EE
chewanee@gmail.com

Created by Char Lee, Second Shot is a blog devoted to exploring history and heritage both at home and abroad. Besides sharing interesting anecdotes of the past, Char also provides readers with comparative photos, of the same place, taken in the past and the present.

Readers may be familiar with the Old National Library building, recognisable in the past by its red-brick façade. In an entry, Char described how he first found the new Stamford-Bras Basah area disorientating after the demolition of the Old National Library and subsequent realigning of the roads. To document the present-day site and compare it with the past landscape, he photographed the current area and obtained photos of the Old National Library from photographer Lek Li Chu. Placing the photographs side-by-side juxtaposes the changes that the building underwent over the years.

What’s also interesting is that Char does not merely photograph places that cease to exist. In many instances, he also shows us how the façade of certain buildings barely changed.

I had the honour of being in contact with Char, who spoke to me more about his interest in capturing the images of Singapore and blogging about history and heritage.

HI THERE, COULD YOU GIVE US A BRIEF INTRODUCTION OF YOURSELF?

You can call me Char Lee. I’m an NUS alumnus and graduated with a Bachelor of Communications and Media so I guess that makes me half your senior in FASS.

YOUR BLOG NAME IS TITLED “SECOND SHOT”? WHY DID YOU TITLE IT SO AND WHAT WAS THE INSPIRATION BEHIND IT?

‘Second Shot’ started around 8 years ago from my curiosity on a photo often shown in our history textbooks whenever the topic about the Sook-Ching operation during the Japanese Occupation pops up. The photo shows a crowd gathered on a road in front of a row of shophouses under the watchful eyes of the guards; there is even a cute Japanese tank if you look closer. This is one of the most illustrative photos of a Sook-Ching screening centre in the public domain and books only identify the location as North Bridge Road. But I was disappointed as well as intrigued that not a single book indicates the exact spot and I sometimes wondered if the shophouses are still standing after 60 years. One day I took a stroll along North Bridge Road at Kampong Glam hoping to find the shophouses and alley with the same “pattern” in the photo. To my surprise the spot in front of the toy shop matched the scene in the photo perfectly (the alley turned out to be the back gate of Istana Kampong Glam). Guess I was lucky as I later found a photo taken in the 70s of the same spot but the shop houses had a different façade, so they must have restored
the shophouses to their original look.

‘Second Shot’ is thus my humble attempt at capturing a present-day image of the first shot. In layman’s terms, what I’m trying to do is a “then and now”, but I try to be different with the precision of my shot. I aim for an accurate rendition of the old shot. I coin this hobby of mine ‘precision heritage photography’ or php. I need to clarify that php does not focus on the artistic aspects of the shot; I do not strive for the best exposure so to speak. In fact my earliest second shots were taken using a simple PNS digicam and they looked great, even better than my later shots from a DSLR level camera.

HOW DID YOU MANAGE TO SUSTAIN YOUR BLOG FOR SO MANY YEARS?

I can sustain the blog because I am innately curious and so will never run out of topics. In fact some of my “missions” were conducted in neighbouring countries. Blog comments, by regulars like Chun See and Peter from GMY, also motivate me.

The blog got started as a showcase for my second shot work but ‘Second Shot’ gone beyond taking photos as I expanded the blog. A historical event must take place at a point in time at a particular location. And I thought the location of a historical event is often not explored, moreover I find this geographical aspect a good way to learn history. For an event that happens in space-time, the space is the only thing that connects the present with the past.

DO YOU HAVE ANY PARTICULAR FOND MEMORIES OF ANY BUILDING OR PLACE IN SINGAPORE THAT NO LONGER EXISTS NOW? CARE TO SHARE SOME OF THESE MEMORIES WITH US?

I admit not having a particularly good memory so the blog is like my diary that can jog my memory if I were to read it years later. I did not really explore Singapore when young and this awareness about heritage only came later. For example, do you know that there is this military heritage in BMTCTekong? I think it is on their parade square because I found a photo of ex-president Nathan on the saluting dais in front of this tower. I recently found out that this was a British battery from WWII.

WHAT ARE YOUR THOUGHTS ABOUT THE CURRENT BUKIT BROWN SITUATION?

My stand is that Bukit Brown should be preserved because it is the last traditional Chinese cemetery in Singapore with in-situ tombs dating back decades. It has a good mix of rich-man and pauper tombs, and is representative of the Chinese community. We lost the chance of preserving a cemetery park in Bidadari and I hope Bukit Brown can become one. The road construction is a little short-sighted and I don’t think citizens will thank the government for the road more than they lament the loss of the cemetery in the short term. I believe to preserve the whole Bukit Brown Cemetery, the issue does not lie with engineering challenges but with priority and political will. If our government has the will, it would have the way. Since residential development will commence only years later, the cemetery can be preserved in the meantime. Until the day they start exhuming all the tombs like in Bidadari, we should not lose hope.

FINALLY, WHAT ARE YOUR THOUGHTS ABOUT HERITAGE IN GENERAL? IN SINGAPORE, ESPECIALLY WHEN CONTRASTED WITH THE NEED FOR “DEVELOPMENT”?

Heritage here is fragile and can literally disappear the next day. Whereas in some countries heritage disappears due to neglect, our heritage disappears largely due to active intervention from the government. Development is a gamut with demolition at one end of the spectrum. At the other end you have adaptive reuse like a posh hotel, a school or building for some organisations which can prolong a heritage’s lifespan. Buildings not demolished are good subjects for my second shots. We read of structurally sound buildings cleared to make way for residential purposes. Old School at Mount Sophia comes to mind. I think this is a mistake. When the site is redeveloped into a condo, it becomes private property and is not meant for the community-at-large.

THANKS FOR THE INTERVIEW.

Char Lee has blogged on quite a few issues and places in Singapore, and I found some of his posts highly interesting, such as the ones on Bugis Street and also how Simei Street came to be named. Readers interested to find out more can access his blog at http://2ndshot.blogspot.com/
Rayner Teo reviews Amy Chua’s explosive book, *World on Fire*

Amidst the number of books written on the subject of globalisation, *World on Fire* stands out as one of its genre’s most provocative and intriguing reads. Written by Yale Law Professor Amy Chua, the book reveals a darker and more sinister picture of globalisation. One that is wrought with images of ethnically targeted expulsions, confiscations, demands for renationalisation, the rise of militant Islam and the resurgence of ethno-nationalism in the developing world.

But instead of pointing fingers and appropriating blame, as do many of her contemporaries, on the usual suspects of unequal power relations and the structural, economic and technological disparities between the global North and South, Chua argues that these backlashes are in part due to a phenomenon pervasive outside, yet rarely recognised and accepted by the West. A phenomenon that transforms the free-market and democracy into agents of ethnic conflagration and hatred. The phenomenon that she refers to, also the central theme of the book, is that of the market-dominant ethnic minority.

Market-dominant minorities are, as Chua defines, ethnic minorities who under market conditions, can be expected to achieve and accumulate spectacular financial prosperity and wealth, economically dominating their indigenous counterparts in the process. From the Chinese in Southeast Asia (in particular, the Philippines and Indonesia) to the Indians in East Africa to the Jews in post-Soviet Russia to the “whites” in Latin America, market-dominant minorities can be found in almost every corner of the developing world. These market-dominant ethnic minorities are often highly visible, wield disproportionate control of their country’s economic assets (e.g. in the Philippines where Chua’s family is from, 60% of the private economy is controlled by a tiny 1% ethnic Chinese minority), and are often targets of great resentment from their ethnic-majority counterparts as a consequence of the glaring and stark differences in incomes and standards of living.

In such instances, Chua notes, the introduction of democratic processes alongside such market reforms often results in a tenuous and complex socio-economic reality for the developing countries in question. While free-market reforms have allowed a class of economically dominant ethnic minorities to emerge and flourish, democratic processes have, on the other hand, liberalised and placed political power and dominance in the hands of the frustrated indigenous masses, turning them into the most vulnerable targets for manipulation by vote-seeking, hate mongering demagogues, transforming the free-market and democracy into engines for ethnic conflagration and conflict. She further extends her argument about inter-ethnic tensions and resentment on an international level by highlighting how individual countries have been categorized by their regional neighbours (e.g. Israel in the Middle-East) and the global community (the United States) as economically dominant minorities.

As a student of history, I personally felt that the main strength of the book laid in its rich and compelling theme. It is not only extremely rare to read a book on globalisation where ethnicity is its central argument but also, a book that recognises and confronts the significance of ethnicity in the complex process of democratisation and the free-marketisation in the developing world. Equally strong and impressive were its diverse research content and Chua’s ability to set forth a convincing argument for the daunting and intricate relationship between the free-market, democracy and ethnicity. However, like the developing countries that Chua talks about in her book, *World on Fire* suffers from a fatal flaw. While Chua delivers an exceptional critique against the free-market democratisation of the developing world, she fails to propose a plausible alternative to the problematic model of free-market democratisation as an engine of development in the developing world. Instead, she recapitulates and ultimately defends the West’s stance of spreading free-markets and democracy as a model of growth and development, ultimately preventing *World on Fire* from achieving its bold intended goal of being a sobering and provocative critique of globalisation.
My eighty-five-year-old paternal grandmother (Grandma) had endured much hardship during her youth, especially during the tortuous years of the early People’s Republic. Born to a poor peasant family in Chaozhou (潮州; Teochew), Grandma had worked on the fields as a young child, planting a variety of vegetables and leading oxen to plough the land. Her life took a turn for the better when she married my paternal grandfather (Grandpa), a wealthy textile businessman, in the late 1940s.
Grandpa built a large mansion for Grandma, with four servants, some pigs and geese, while he spent most of his time tending to his businesses in Malaya and Singapore. However, with the Chinese Civil War raging and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) persecuting rich landowners, Grandma did not dare to live a luxurious life as the mistress of the house.

Grandma’s six-year ordeal began in the spring of 1950 when local CCP rural comrades ordered her to abandon the manor (which was to be demolished and its land redistributed among the peasants) and divorce “capitalist” Grandpa so as to “regain” her social status as a peasant. Although Grandma was willing to give up the mansion, she refused to divorce Grandpa: “I would only separate from my husband if Yan Luo Wang (阎罗王) (the King of Hell) summons me” was her reply. Thus, she was labelled as a “landlord” and sent to do hard labour with my infant aunt and other relatives who were all deemed “class enemies.”

With nothing except a rice bowl each and the clothes on their backs, they were forced to live in a dark and filthy cowshed for the next six years. Grandpa, who was fortunately in Singapore, applied to the CCP authorities (and gave them many bribes), requesting them to allow Grandma and Aunt to leave for Singapore. Nonetheless, the CCP refused, insisting they had to undergo “re-education” to “rectify” their minds first.

Under close surveillance by the rural comrades, Grandma and other relatives did all kinds of dirty work, including swatting a specific number of houseflies (at least forty) each day in rubbish dumps and human waste collection points. She was given little to eat and was forbidden to buy food. She could not even escape the bullying by peasant children who deliberately poured sand into her hard-drawn well water. Despite the untold suffering, Grandma endured it without complaints. In fact, it was her resilience which enabled her to survive. Most other relatives had lost their lives; they were either executed or driven to suicide.

In the spring of 1956, the CCP finally allowed Grandma and Aunt to leave for Singapore and they promptly did so before the regime changed its mind. It was a teary farewell for Grandma as she left her ancestral land but a much better future awaited her in Singapore. After a week’s journey by boat, Grandma and Aunt arrived in Singapore where they were reunited with Grandpa and lived comfortably in a Bukit Timah bungalow, along with several servants, a chauffeur, poultry, dogs, and durian trees. History had come a full circle for Grandma.

Sixty years on, Grandma still has vivid memories of the six-year nightmare. She never fails to repeatedly recount her dreadful experiences to our family as she reminds us not to take the peace and prosperity which we enjoy for granted. In spite of the CCP’s achievements in bringing China to great-power status today, Grandma remains unimpressed. “Zie (贼)” (Bandits) is what she calls Chairman Mao and his comrades.
Investment banking, Consumer Electronics, Information Technology. Careers in these industries are not what history majors normally associate themselves with. But these are also the industries that NUS history alumnus Tang Chi Lin has worked in throughout his multi-varied career. On 26th January, we were delighted for the opportunity to have Mr Tang share his experiences with us.

Mr Tang feels that the main strength of a history education is the constant practice we get at synthesising vast amounts of facts and figures and presenting them in a coherent manner. Because we have to sieve, package, and present complex information, we gain an edge when it comes to communicating ideas. And this is the main lever that we can exploit when it comes to searching for alternative careers.

According to Mr Tang, history also has practical value that can be applied to real-world scenarios, and real-life jobs. By examining the events of the past, we may be better equipped to deal with the challenges of the future. And this was not a trite claim. Mr Tang unveiled six case studies, using as examples real-life job advertisements to show us what he meant. He explained that by studying the historical development of an industry, we could gain unique insights to tackling problems encountered by companies. Taking the example of a job-opening as a service manager at HSBC, he showed us how history majors might employ their skills to create value for the company. Previously, banks used to provide similar levels of service to all customers. Whether one had ten or ten thousand dollars in the bank account, one had to queue in line to perform transactions. This practice sparked discontent from richer clients, who felt that their wait was unjustified, leading to the development of priority banking of high-net-worth clients that we see in banks today. Casting his gaze into the crystal ball, Mr Tang suggested that banks are now taking this idea one step further, by tailoring customised financial products targeted at clients of different risk appetites. As this practice gains acceptance, history students with expertise in analysing past developments would be well placed to advise banks on how best to implement this idea.

The trick then, lies in positioning ourselves to convince companies that our study of history can add value to the company. Here, he advised us to think
about how we could use historical knowledge to invent new products, advertise these products, and help the company generate more sales. Lest we think it was mercenary to think in such terms, he reminded us that the world outside of academia operated on very different rules. If we were serious about finding a job beyond the conventional fields of research, heritage and teaching, we would have to play by these rules.

Mr Tang did, however, deliver some optimistic news. In recent years, firms have become more receptive to hiring workers from a diverse range of backgrounds. Gone are the days when the HR department relied on computer software to sift out applicants lacking the prerequisite degree and consign them to the ‘chuck pile’. Instead, companies now make the effort to go through each application one-by-one, so history majors do actually stand a chance of having their resume read. What is critical though, is the crafting of one’s resume to stand out, and impress the reader sufficiently within a short span of time for the candidate to merit a second look. To do this, one needs certain skills.

The worst kind of resume, according to Mr Tang, was one that listed out every single achievement one had accrued in the years of schooling. Employers simply have no time to plough through a morass of words – most often, they just skip over. Rather, we need to highlight salient examples that highlight our relevant skills, skills that the company is looking out for. The cover letter too, is equally important. Instead of rehashing our list of accolades, the letter needs to address specifically why we are suited for the job, particularly if we venture for jobs that history majors are not expected to tread.

Yet, the best grades, the best resume, and the best cover letter, only gets one as far as the interview room. It is during the interview when most candidates stumble. Mr Tang shared how his favourite interview question, “Tell me about yourself,” often elicited blank faces and walls of silence, which only showed that job applicants failed to give thought on how they would be relevant to the company. The few that did stood out, and usually got the job.

For me, the main insight was a certain sense of possibility, and a certain sense of urgency that I needed to relate my learning to the world beyond academia. This would not come easy – for it would require time and effort to make sense of what I have learnt, and also to read up on the industries that I may be interested to join in future. And that, as Mr Tang put it, was the ‘hard truth’ of finding alternative careers.

**Key Points**

» History can be useful! Relate what you learn to the real world.
» Keep resumes short and relevant. Highlight key achievements that are applicable to the company.
» Find time to read up about the industry you may be interested in.
» Communicate your knowledge and skill set to potential employers.
NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE
HISTORY DEPARTMENT