

News from Asia

Riverbeds of Sumatra: the latest target of treasure hunters

John N. Miksic

At the Asian Academy for Heritage Management's Asia-Pacific Regional Conference on Underwater Cultural Heritage, held in Manila several months ago, I presented a paper on a new form of looting that is destroying Southeast Asia's archaeological heritage. This involves the looting from beds of rivers that have been important centers of habitation, trade, and industry for centuries.

Shipwreck archaeology in Southeast Asia has experienced major advances in the last 15 years. The archaeology of ports is underdeveloped by comparison. This is especially ironic since much of Southeast Asia's cultural development took place along major rivers. Most major ports in the region were not located on the sea coast, but upstream, sometimes 100 km or more from the river mouths. We know much about the transport of artifacts, but little about their destinations. If we could discover the locations where the consumers of these items lived, we could reconstruct the economic and political situation in the region in much finer detail than is possible at present.

The Musi River in southeast Sumatra has been a major artery of commerce for over 2,000 years. Much of the remaining archaeological evidence of the kingdom of Sriwijaya probably lies beneath the Musi River in modern Palembang. Whereas the nobility of Sriwijaya lived on dry land, much of its population lived either on stilt houses or on rafts. Evidence of their existence as well as port activity, such as warehousing and transshipping of cargo, lies in the mud beneath the river. The head of the archaeological office for South Sumatra has established a website devoted to the development of Wetland Archaeology (<http://nurhadirangkuti.blogspot.com>). This website gives important recognition to the identification of wetlands in Indonesia as a specific focus of archaeological research.

Looting of the Musi riverbed has greatly accelerated in the last few years. Two locations on the Batang Hari, which flows from West Sumatra province to the sea in Jambi, are being subjected to the same treatment. In some areas fishermen use hoses filled with air from compressors to enable them to dive to the river beds, a similar technique to that used to loot shipwrecks in the open sea. They probe the muddy bottom with iron rods, often causing serious damage to, for example, Chinese porcelain. In the upper reaches of the Batang Hari, others use suction devices operated from boats called *dompeng* to scour the riverbed.

A wide range of artifacts is still within easy reach on the riverbed, but the supply is diminishing. Valuable items are probably disposed of through networks leading to Jakarta, where the majority of collectors live. What remain behind for the fishermen to sell on their own are probably the dregs of the treasures lying under 20 metres of water and a metre of river mud, yet even these include objects that hold the potential to clarify many details of early Southeast Asia.

Small gold items include coins, cylindrical amulet containers meant to be suspended from strings hung around the neck, and pieces of jewellery, including types known from central Java and dated to the late first millennium. Also found are large quantities of beads of glass and stone in addition to gold examples. Religious objects included numerous items associated with Buddhism. In addition to bronze statues of Buddha, there are examples of what appear to be stamps used to print Buddhist texts on clay. More research is needed to clarify their significance.



Above: Musi river, Palembang.

Right: Map showing Early Southeast Asian Ports (drawn by Dr. G.Y. Goh).

All Photos courtesy John N. Miksic.



Right: Head of Buddhist deity, stone. Height approximately 13 cm.

Below: Gold ear ornament, 2 cm high. Cylindrical amulet containers meant to be suspended from strings hung around the neck.



Bronze items include large quantities of Chinese coins of the Tang through Song dynasties, bronze faces of Kala, mirrors, and bells with vajra handles for use in esoteric Buddhist rituals. Rolled sheets of heavy metal appear to be tin or lead votive objects inscribed with mantras. Utilitarian objects include scale weights. Porcelains span a wide range of Chinese export wares, from Tang Yue bowls through to middle Ming cobalt blue wares. Earthenware, both local coarse ware and fine kendis from south Thailand, is also in the assemblage. Probably many more examples lie on the riverbed, but they are not easily sold and thus not often brought to the surface.

Archaeologists rarely undertake excavations in rivers. Such research faces considerable technical and financial challenges. Conventional marine archaeologists would lay out a grid on the riverbed and excavate using an airlift. Whether this would be feasible in the Musi River needs to be investigated. An alternative would be to adopt salvage archaeology methods, using mechanical excavation employing dredging equipment to expedite the recovery of artifacts.

About the Conference

The Inaugural Asia-Pacific Regional Conference on Underwater Cultural Heritage was held by the Asian Academy for Heritage Management, from 8 to 12 November 2011 in Manila, Philippines. The conference was hosted by the National Museum of Philippines. A total of 128 delegates from 35 nations attended the conference.

The conference aimed to exchange and disseminate information about underwater cultural heritage in Asia and the countries of the Indian and Pacific Oceans, facilitate professional development for underwater archaeologists and underwater cultural heritage managers in the Asia-Pacific region, provide a forum for discussion and exchange of ideas about and approaches to underwater cultural heritage and underwater archaeology and to publish the proceedings both online and in print and disseminate to a wide audience. The conference proceedings are available at the Museum of Underwater Archaeology (MUA) Online: www.themua.org/collections/items/browse?collection=2

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News from Asia (continued)

Penang Story: a history of connections

Aparajita Basu

CITIES, AS WE KNOW, have their own stories. Some speak of meteoric rises and falls. Others spin sagas of cud-chewing continuity. Penang, the Malaysian port at the northern edge of the Straits of Malacca, has a unique story of consistent vibrancy, from the advent of British colonial rule in the 18th century. Rife with “conjunctures and confluences” or flows of peoples, knowledge and culture between Southeast Asia and the broader worlds of the Indian and Pacific Oceans, Penang was at the forefront of economic and cultural contributions to local, regional and global histories. In 2001 Star Publications and the Penang Heritage Trust jointly organized a project entitled “The Penang Story” to create an awareness of the port’s unusual history and cultural identity. In May 2010 the first workshop of the “Penang and the Indian Ocean” project was held by the University of Cambridge. Phase II of that workshop was held from 16 to 18 September 2011 in the form of a conference organized by the Penang Heritage Trust, Think City, Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) and academics from the University of Cambridge and London University.

From the outset it was clear that the conference was predicated on two objectives. The first was to break the traditional boundaries of area studies between the geographical zones conventionally divided into South and Southeast Asia. The second goal was to emphasize Penang’s significant connections with South Asia, which have been overlooked in favor of links with Chinese maritime networks of commerce and migration. Both objectives were underscored very effectively during the conference. Sir Christopher Bayly’s keynote lecture “Penang and Bombay: Indian Ocean Port Cities in the 19th Century” was a case in point. Presenting Bombay and Penang comparatively as sister cities of colonial cosmopolitan modernity, he argued that both shared a maritime culture of inclusiveness, and mercantile elites (Parsis, Peranakan Babas and Jawi Pekans) in each formed the backbone of colonial civil society.

A subsequent panel on early history compounded the notion that comparisons were vital, establishing the longevity of trade links between South India and the west coast of peninsular Malaysia, stretching back to the first millennium of the Common Era. Mohd Supian bin Sabtu discussed how Indian motifs were adapted in the temple structures of the Bujang Valley. Barbara Andaya presented the ‘knowledge-gathering’ practices of John Adolphus Pope, a fourteen-year-old Third Officer of the English country ship *Princess Royal* who wrote letters about his impressions of port cities. Another paper that brought to the fore an unusual cross-cultural encounter was by Wong Yee Tuan. Contradicting the idea that Chinese merchants formed a homogeneous group, trading only with China, he argued that they also traded with and went to India in the 1820s. The papers of another session worked to establish the multi-directionality of intellectual flows in the Penang region, discussing Malay music, colonial photography, as well as climate ecology and cultivation.

One of the most cohesive panels at the conference discussed the history of Indian diasporas in Penang. Jayati Bhattacharya presented an information-rich account of South Asian commercial networks as did Khoo Salma Nasution, who categorized the range and variety of Tamil Muslim communities working in Penang. Lakshmi Subramaniam provided a sharp analysis of the evolution of the ‘Greater India’ concept in twentieth-century Tamil print-culture, while Rathi Menon spoke on the assimilation and acculturation of Malayali communities in Penang. Together, the papers were useful in bringing home the notion that ethnic diasporas have to be disaggregated. Two separate trajectories of South Asian migrants emerged – one of well-to-do business communities and the other of indentured laborers, with the former more homeland-bound in terms of ideological positioning and the latter more assimilative (marrying into local ethnic groups).

Michael Montesano reversed standard notions of Penang being a docile receptacle of trans-regional influences by positing that it was the active model for changes in real estate development in the Andaman littoral in the 1960s. He also made the illuminating point that Penang is once again becoming a knowledge hub as the demand for Chinese language instruction is growing in southern Thailand. Solvay Gerke highlighted how the India-Penang connection has drastically been strengthened in the last decade through scientific collaborations in universities. While the implications of history on the present situation of Penang could have been spoken to more directly by the final panel, all in all, the conference ended on a high note, establishing Penang’s renewed vigor as a center for intellectual and cultural exchanges in the Indian Ocean.

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(Re)Constructing Nalanda: a twenty-first-century university

Anjana Sharma

THE NAME NALANDA has become an icon for cross-cultural interactions and intra-regional connectivity around the globe. Located in Bihar, India, near the site where the Buddha attained enlightenment, the centre of learning at Nalanda was a major hub for educational and intellectual exchanges among Asian societies from the fifth to the twelfth centuries. It received students from almost all parts of Asia, stimulated intellectual, scientific, and religious dialogues, and dispatched missionaries to the leading Buddhist centres of Asia. Later generations called this centre of learning “Nalanda University” and described it as the world’s first educational institution of higher learning.

Eight hundred years ago, marauding invaders destroyed Nalanda University. Legend has it that the University’s nine-storey library burned for many months. The end of Nalanda came at a time when Oxford and Cambridge were being established in the West. Now, the historic Nalanda University has been recreated by an Act of the Indian Parliament passed in September 2010. It is, by charter, an international and secular institution of national importance.

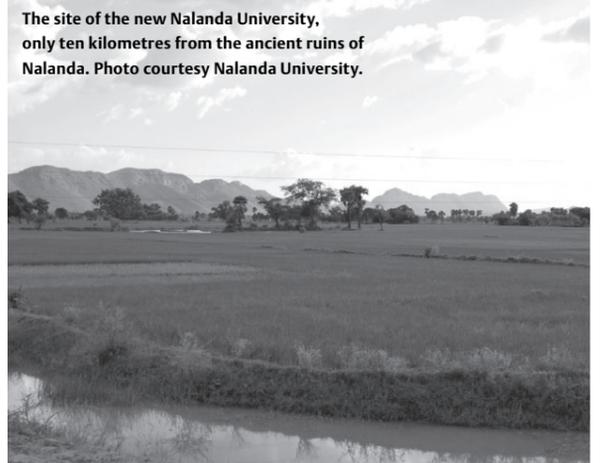
However, the revival of this ancient seat of learning goes beyond the national context. Instead, it represents the shared values and common vision of Asian countries that are coming together under the East Asian Summit forum to forge a region based on the foundations of peace and harmony. An important step toward re-establishing the educational links and intra-regional connectivity that existed at Nalanda was taken at the meeting of the East Asia Summit countries held in Thailand in 2009. During the conclave, the leaders of the member-countries issued a joint press statement that supported the establishment of the Nalanda University as a “non-state, non-profit, secular, and self-governing international institution with a continental focus that will bring together the brightest and most dedicated students from all countries of Asia.”

The Vision Statement of the University, drafted by the Indian government appointed Nalanda Mentor Group (now the Governing Board of the University) chaired by the Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen, elaborates this outlook in terms of the present and the future: “There is now a perfect opportunity to recreate the hallowed universalism of Nalanda as a centre of knowledge. The second millennium CE ended with a tremendous resurgence of Asia after centuries of stagnation, division and decline. Asia is today synonymous with a dynamic entrepreneurial and innovative culture, based on knowledge and enterprise not forgetful of its past yet not afraid to face the future. Asian countries are coming together to forge a continent based on the foundations of peace and harmony.”

Nalanda’s greatest gift was to liberate knowledge from the narrow confines of geography and religion and seek to share knowledge with the world at large. More than ever the task that lies ahead of universities of the new millennia is to rescue knowledge from the model of either a capitalist economy or of a political imperative that drives higher education globally at the present moment.

What Nalanda seeks to create anew is a model of a University that is transcendent: consensual, free of divisiveness and fundamentally creative. It is this revisionist and revolutionary aspect of the university that underlay the choice of the first two Schools with which the university will begin its academic life: Historical Studies and the School of Environment and Ecology. Given the university’s location – rural, agrarian and in a historically dense area of the ancient Magadha – the two chosen Schools best serve to seamlessly merge the local, the regional, the national and the transnational. Only ten kilometres from the ancient ruins of Nalanda, the site of the new University is located in an area that is archaeologically rich and will provide both students and faculty with an opportunity to engage with history as a lived experience and create new ways of writing, reading or transmitting history.

The School of Environment and Ecology is also premised upon the same principles. The surrounding farmland area of the University is virtually rainfall dependent. Large sections of the populace of the region thus principally rely on an economy that is either driven by the rural setting or, seasonally, by religious tourism. Rajgir, the small town in which Nalanda University is situated, is a critical site that interlinks Buddhism and Jainism, and has a global and pan-Asian footprint. However, this global footfall has had a limited



The site of the new Nalanda University, only ten kilometres from the ancient ruins of Nalanda. Photo courtesy Nalanda University.

relationship with the community and it is the hope that the School of Environment and Ecology will drive the economic and human health of the region and contribute by teaching and practicing the principles of sustainability at both the individual and community levels. Consequently, even before the formal beginning of the University, the aim is to build a totally green and sustainable campus that will integrate the principles of man and nature living in harmony. The idea, of course, is not only to teach “disciplinary” knowledge in the class, but also to firmly ground knowledge into practice.

The exciting task of the revival process at the ground level has already begun. There is an office near the site and one in New Delhi, which is the current hub of activity. The university’s website (nalandauniv.edu.in) has now been established and allows people to express their views and ideas on the university. It has already created a support group that encompasses people from various parts of the world desirous to be part of this uniquely transformative journey. A global competition for the master plan of the University campus will be launched soon, and the recruitment process for the founding faculty is anticipated to begin within a year.

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Meeting the Mummies of the Tarim Basin: the Bronze Age and early Iron Age mummies of Eastern Central Asia

Victor H. Mair

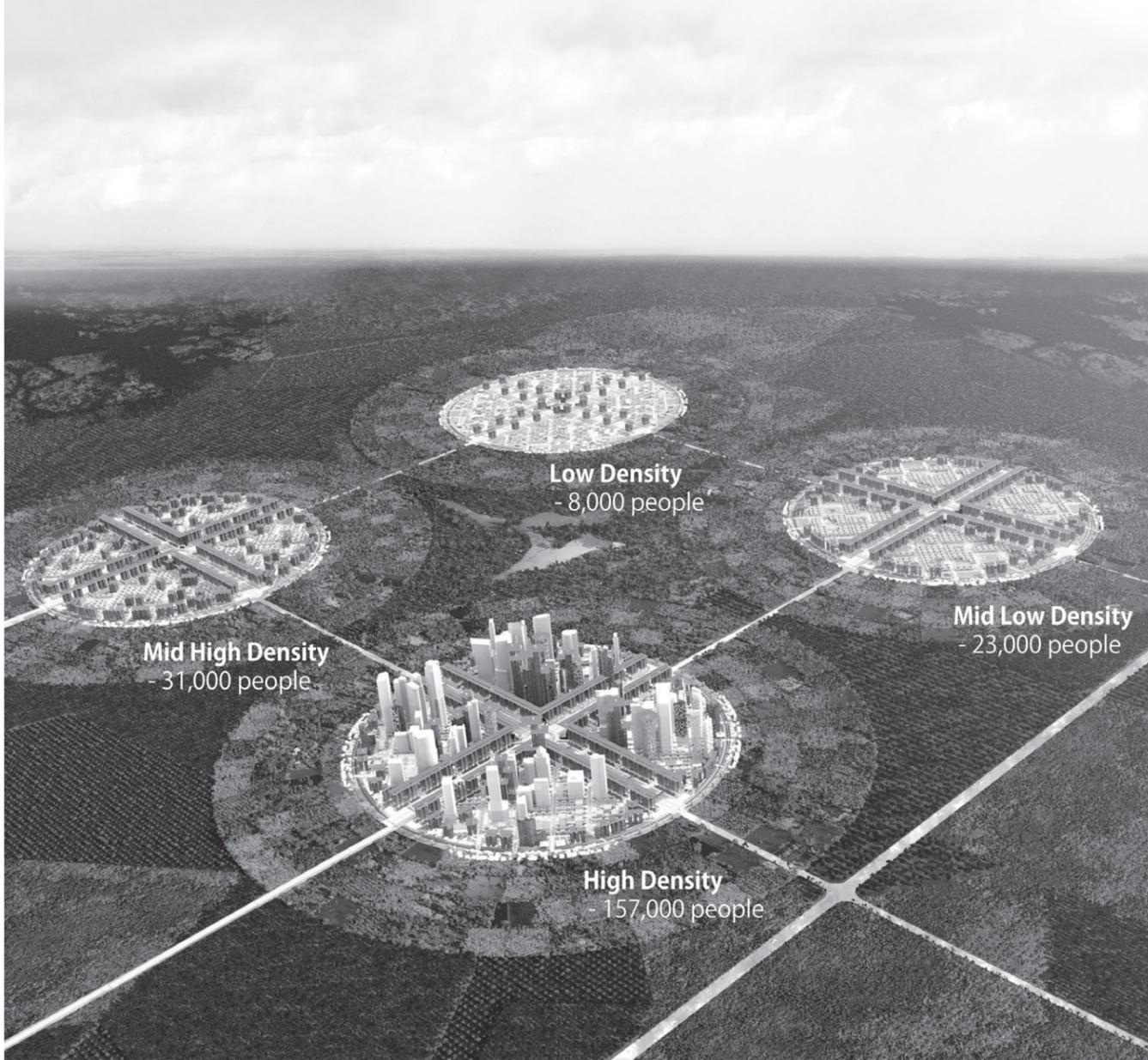
THE MUMMIES OF EASTERN CENTRAL ASIA first entered my consciousness in the summer of 1988. I had vaguely heard about them from the end of the 70s, but until I came face to face with the mummies in the late 80s, I did not have a real sense of their enormous importance for the study of Eurasian prehistory and history. I had been to the regional museum in Urumchi many times before, but when I returned for yet another visit that summer, I was stunned. I was leading a group from the Smithsonian Institution, and was totally unprepared for the newly opened exhibition of Bronze Age and Early Iron Age mummies that we encountered on that occasion.

I should preface my remarks by noting that the human remains I am talking about are not actually mummies, but rather desiccated corpses. Their uncanny state of preservation is due, not to any artificial means, but to the extreme aridity and saline soils of the environment. The severely cold winters also played a significant role in arresting the processes of putrefaction and decomposition of the human remains.

When we first passed through the black curtains that hung from the top of the door, I was somewhat suspicious, because the mummies looked too good to be true. The thought that we were in some sort of Madame Tussauds occurred to me, as though the mummies were part of an elaborate hoax being

Rurbanisation as a vision for the Nalanda campus region: an academic design project by NUS architecture students

Tay Kheng Soon



A model of rurbanisation. Courtesy Tay Kheng Soon.

RUBANISATION re-conceptualizes the urban and the rural as one space not two. It is a compound word coined from the words 'rural' and 'urban'. The Ruban is therefore a form of human settlement that has both rural and urban characteristics in which to work, live, learn, play, farm and heal.

Rurbanisation as a means of rebalancing local production and consumption is not an easy task. The need for huge investments in infrastructure, education, support for small and medium enterprises, and the viability of family-based small-plot agriculture have to be addressed. Clearly the time for a paradigm change has come and a new imagination is needed.

The establishment of Nalanda University gives us an opportunity to address this paradigm shift. The challenge is to move towards defining a new civilizational direction away from the exclusively materialist model of development inherited from the industrial age. Nalanda will be intimately linked to the region which sustains it and will learn from it, while the region will contribute towards defining Nalanda's local and global scholastic mission within a conception of environmental sustainability.

It is in this context that 4th year students of the National University of Singapore Architecture School will spend twelve weeks, starting January 2012, thinking about the issues of networked settlements in the form of the Rubanisation of the region and taking this perspective to the design of the Nalanda Master Plan. Each student will focus on the architectural design of a building or group of buildings within the master plan to express the new paradigm and image of how life would be or should be in the future campus.

Students will make a site visit to Nalanda, meet with relevant university and local officials, and examine the historical and geographical settings. In collaboration with other Singapore institutions, it will select the three best designs for presentation in Singapore and India. Indeed, this project underscores the mission of collaborative educational experiences inherent in the Nalanda initiative under the East Asia Summit forum and demonstrates Singapore's ongoing support for the project.

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perpetrated to drum up tourism. Yet the labels claimed the mummies dated to the first and second millennium B.C. The artifacts accompanying them were also remarkably well-preserved and, in many instances, technologically and culturally advanced for the time. For example, these people had bronze, wheat, and the wheel before these appeared in the Central Plains of China, and their woolen textiles were of extraordinarily fine quality.

The longer I stayed in that room and carefully observed the mummies and their associated artifacts, however, the less doubt I had that they were real. I was particularly struck by one of the mummies who bore a striking resemblance to my second oldest brother (I later called him Ur-David). Consequently, I told my Smithsonian charges that they had free time to go shopping or do whatever they wished for the rest of the day, and I stayed in that hall for the entire afternoon until the museum closed.

Since I was not an archaeologist but a specialist on medieval Buddhist literature at the time, I simply filed what I had seen during that long afternoon in the back of my mind and returned to my customary research on popular Buddhist literature. Nonetheless, the mummies of Eastern Central Asia had a profound impact on me, and my memory of them persisted during the next few years.

Then, in September 1991, an amazing discovery was made on the border between Austria and Italy. Two German hikers traversing the Similaun Glacier chanced upon a body that had been frozen in the ice, but had become partially exposed. As the body and the accessories that accompanied it were



Left and right: Mummy from Xinjiang. Photos by Wang Da Gang.



so well-preserved, it was first thought that these were the remains of a hiker or skier who had died not long before. Upon further investigation, it became apparent that the deceased was a Bronze Age individual. This was Ötzi, the 5300-year-old iceman who got his name from the Ötztal (Ötz Valley) in Austria, at the top of which he was found.

I still remember my reactions as I keenly read the newspaper reports of Ötzi's discovery. I was mesmerized by the account of Ötzi's removal from the ice and transportation to Innsbruck, together with all of his elaborate gear and also struck by how many researchers were involved in all aspects of the investigation of this one Bronze Age person. At some point as I was taking in this flood of astonishing information, this Chinese expostulation burst into my mind: "Bu gong-ping!" (It's not fair!). I instantaneously recalled the mummies I had encountered in the Urumchi Museum three years earlier and reflected that, not only were they virtually unknown to the world outside of Urumchi, there was next to no cutting-edge research being done on them.

That very afternoon, I began to organize an international investigation to undertake research on the mummies of Eastern Central Asia. After two years of planning, fundraising, and organization, I led my first expedition to the Tarim Basin

in the summer of 1993. That initial expedition was focused on ancient DNA studies, but later expeditions would delve into textiles, bronze and iron metallurgy, agriculture, and all other aspects of the existence of the earliest inhabitants of the region. In April 1996, I hosted a major international conference on the mummies at the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, which constituted a watershed in research on Eurasian prehistory and history.

To this day, more than two decades after that fateful encounter in the summer of 1988, I am actively engaged in investigations on the Tarim mummies. To use another Chinese expression, the mummies of Eastern Central Asia and I "youyuan" (have an affinity). A deeper level of kinship results from the fact that, as a boy, my father pastured his family's animals high up in the same mountains where Ötzi passed into eternity. These are questions that I will be working on for the rest of my life, but they are not merely matters of personal interest, since they have implications for human relationships in Eurasia from the late Neolithic to the present.

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News from Asia (continued)

The Kusu Pilgrimage: an enduring myth

Lu Caixia



1.

ON A SMALL ISLAND about 5 kilometres south of Singapore, the enduring power of myth manifests itself in the form of an annual pilgrimage, for which tens of thousands of devotees undertake to its shores; a practice possibly dating back centuries. Over time, a fusion of religious practices occurred as believers of different faiths gathered to pray at a Chinese temple and three Malay shrines (*keramat*) on the island, a phenomenon that is none too surprising in a place like Singapore, where people of diverse cultures and religions share the limited physical space of this city-state.

Named for its turtle-like shape, Kusu (Turtle Island in the Hokkien dialect) is one of the most visited of some 60 offshore islands belonging to, and a rare instance of undisturbed sanctity in, development-driven Singapore. Numerous tales surround its origins, the most popular among which is the story of a giant turtle rescuing shipwrecked fishermen by transforming into the island.

The Kusu pilgrimage takes place throughout the ninth month of the Chinese lunar calendar, falling between the months of September and November. This is when Kusu awakes from its slumber as ferry-loads of mainly ethnic Chinese devotees arrive. Many devotees first visit the temple of Tua Pek Kong (Dabogong, 大伯公, literally meaning Grand Uncle), a popular deity among the Southeast Asian Chinese. Also seen as the God of Prosperity, Merchant God and the patron god of seafarers, the origins of this deity remain debatable, with some identifying him as the local representation of the Chinese Earth God (Tudigong, 土地公), and others seeing him as symbolic of early Chinese pioneers in the region.

After praying to Tua Pek Kong, some pilgrims climb 152 steps up a hillock to pray at the shrines of Syed Abdul Rahman, Nenek Ghalib and Puteri Fatimah, three Malay saints who lived in the 19th century. Most accounts generally relate how Syed Abdul Rahman came to the island, while the other two are said to be his mother and sister respectively. This form of saint worship or *keramat* worship – a legacy of early Sufi Islam and pre-Islamic belief – has similarities with Tua Pek Kong worship. As some Southeast Asian Chinese have also adopted the practice, the Malay saints too acquired the Sino-Malay honorific of Datuk Kong, a combination of the Malay title “Datuk” and the Chinese title “Kong”. Syed Abdul Rahman is thus simply referred to as “Datuk Kong”.

No one seems to know with any certainty when or how the Kusu pilgrimage began. With no archival records kept by the Chinese temple or Malay shrines, memories fade as guardianship is passed down from generation to generation. Present caretakers offer hazy accounts of the pilgrimage’s origins as told by their predecessors. Cecilia Seet Lay Choo – a fourth-generation descendent of the first caretaker Bibi (a term of address for older Straits Chinese women) Ooi Chai Hoong – explained that the Tua Pek Kong temple’s founding is unrelated to the legend of the giant turtle. Instead, it was a fairly nondescript story in which some fishermen brought a statue of Tua Pek Kong to a little hut on Kusu to pray for safety on the seas and a good catch; the island was a resting point for them. The simple altar gradually expanded into a proper temple through regular visits and contributions by the devotees. Ishak – a third-generation caretaker of the

Malay shrines – similarly dismissed the turtle legend. His account is that Syed Abdul Rahman vanished while on Kusu with his friends. He later appeared in their dreams to ask for a shrine to be built. Ishak is also skeptical of the claim that the three saints were family.

With no archival records, the only available textual references are the inscriptions listing contributors to the establishment and renovation of the shrines and temple. Much information can also be gleaned from old newspaper reports on the pilgrimage and the popular myths of Kusu. Spanning over a century, these reports shed light on how the accounts have evolved with time, thus showing the malleability of oral history.

According to some local English newspaper articles published in the 1940s and 50s, pilgrimage to Kusu began as early as 1813, the year of Syed Abdul Rahman’s death, before Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles’ arrival in 1819. A petition notice published on 14 August 1875 in the Singapore English daily *The Straits Times* further suggests that it was a fairly established practice by then. Submitted by Cheang Hong Lim, a wealthy Straits Chinese businessman and philanthropist, to J. F. A. McNair, then Colonial General and Surveyor-General of the Straits Settlements, the petition sought to secure the title to Peak Island (as Kusu was known then) and noted that “many of the Chinese and native inhabitants of this Settlement” prayed regularly to the Tua Pek Kong and Datuk Keramat on the island “for upwards of thirty years”. It further reflected their unhappiness over the British colonial authorities’ use of the sacred island as a burial ground for immigrants who died in quarantine on the neighbouring St. John’s Island.

Judging from inscriptions found at the temple and shrines, Straits Chinese devotees seemed to be the main or more active group in sustaining the pilgrimage in its earlier years. At the Chinese temple, Straits Chinese tycoon Ong Sam Leong figures prominently among the top donors for contributing 100 Straits dollars to renovation works in 1909, while inscriptions at the Malay shrines reveal that Nenek Ghalib’s shrine was constructed with donations from Baba (a term of address for Straits Chinese men) Hoe Beng Whatt and others, after she “arrived at the house of” Hoe in 1917. This was taken to mean that she had appeared in Hoe’s dreams and asked for the shrine to be built in exchange for granting the donors success in business. This tale reflects the situation in which *keramat* worship came to depend almost exclusively on local Chinese patronage, despite being Malay in origin, as many Malay-Muslims renounced such practices as they became more orthodox in their faith.

As such, Chinese influences abound in the rituals observed at the shrines, with Malay caretakers chanting blessings in Hokkien and devotees burning joss paper and adding oil to lamps in front of the shrines for a small donation. However, as a gesture of respect to the Malay saints, devotees refrain from consuming pork and bringing food containing pork or lard when they visit. Ritual paraphernalia used here are also different from the ones used at the Chinese temple, with yellow saffron rice, chicken, lamb and Indian incense being offered at the former. Despite these differences, the Chinese temple and Malay shrines serve similar tutelary functions,



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1: Tourists pose in front of the cheery “Welcome to Kusu Island” sign at the jetty.

2: The Tua Pek Kong temple has been expanded and refurbished several times with donations from devotees.

3: The Datuk Nenek Keramat, one of the three *keramats*, or shrines, on top of a hillock on Kusu.

4: The weekends during the pilgrimage season see the greatest numbers of pilgrims coming to pray.

receiving prayers for peace, health, wealth and prosperity. Both places also offer “fertility trees” on which those wanting children hang stones and other items to make their wishes, while gamblers pray to both Chinese and Malay deities for winning lottery numbers. It is not unusual to see followers of different religions visiting the temple and shrines. Professing to “believe in all gods”, Selvi M., (49, nurse) an Indian Hindu, visited Kusu with her Chinese Taoist colleagues during the pilgrimage season and prayed at both the Chinese temple and the Malay shrines. Both Taoist and Buddhist pilgrims make offerings at Tua Pek Kong temple, which also houses the Guanyin (观音, Goddess of Mercy), revered by followers of both religions.

Given the twin attractions of a mystical origin and idyllic surroundings, Kusu has been marketed as a tourist attraction, with mixed results. Many tourist guidebooks on Singapore include information on Kusu and it is described in official tourism literature as a “holiday resort” with “blue lagoons, pristine beaches and tranquil settings”. Since the 1970s, Singapore tourism authorities have been keen to develop a cluster of islands south of Singapore (Southern Islands) – which Kusu was a part of – into a recreational resort. This spurred an ambitious project for which S\$50 million was spent to beautify these islands. Since then, Kusu has been enlarged to nearly 6 times its original size (from 1.5 hectares

The Legends of Kusu

NUMEROUS LEGENDS about the origins of the Kusu pilgrimage have surfaced over time. An information panel on Kusu lists five of them, though there are more. The most popular tale tells of two shipwrecked fishermen – a Chinese and a Malay – who were saved by a giant turtle that transformed into Kusu. This was likely inspired by the turtle-like shape of Kusu before reclamation took place, when it was made up of two smaller islets joined by a narrow strip of land visible at low tide, with the bigger islet resembling the turtle’s body, and the smaller, the head. In a similar account, it was Syed Abdul Rahman and his family who were shipwrecked and the turtle emerged to tow them ashore.

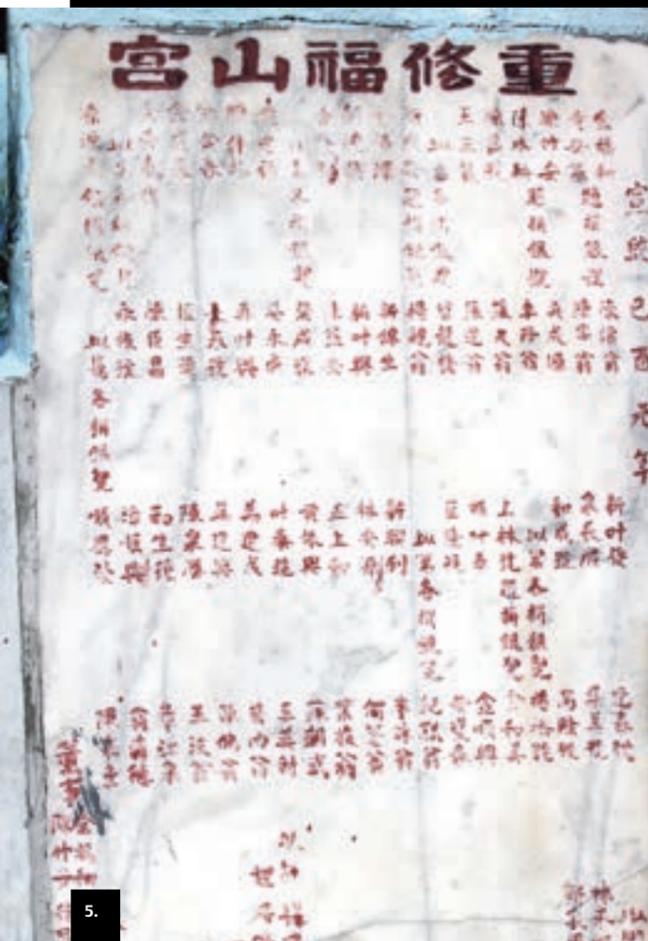
Another legend speaks of two holy men, Syed Rahman (an Arab) and Yam (a Chinese), who meditated and fasted on their pilgrimage to Kusu. Yam fell ill and Syed prayed for him. Their lives were saved when a boat with food and water appeared. Thereafter, the

two men regularly visited Kusu to give thanks. When they died, they were buried next to each other on the island. The Tua Pek Kong temple and the Datuk Kong shrine were subsequently erected to remember them.

A third legend is the retelling of a tale in the *Sejarah Melayu* (The Malay Annals, an account of the history of the Malay Sultanate in the 15th and early 16th century), describing schools of *todak* (swordfish) that attacked people on the shore with their sword-like bills. One day, a Malay boy proposed to the king that banana stems be planted along the seashore to bait the *todak*. This idea worked with the fish becoming trapped as their bills pierced the stems. The king later killed the clever boy as he feared a threat to his own rule. Said to be adopted by a Chinese couple living on Kusu, the boy’s spirit lingered on the island to protect his foster parents and they became the saints of Kusu after dying of old age.

1: The “Kusu turtle”. Sculpture erected on the island.
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to 8.5 hectares) through land reclamation. Pleasure cruises on Chinese junks and island tours were organized. In the 1990s, further plans drawing inspiration from Port Grimaud in the south of France envisioned private waterfront residences, hotels and restaurants in a “canal-laced marine village resort” on the neighbouring Lazarus Island. Kusu, however, was to remain generally undisturbed yet incorporated into its exclusive surroundings. By then, the natural environment of the southern offshore islands had become a concern, with surrounding coral reefs damaged by land reclamation. Calls for the conservation of coral reefs around these islands were made as early as 1991 and awareness of the need to protect marine life has grown since. Ultimately, plans for resort development did not take off. Although resurrected by the Singapore Tourism Board in 2006, they were postponed again in 2007. When asked, a spokesperson from the Urban Redevelopment Authority in Singapore said that the relevant authorities are still working together to review and study possible interim and long-term development plans for the islands, but this excludes Kusu. Past proposals similarly left Kusu largely untouched.

Success in raising tourist numbers aside, an interesting outcome of efforts at tourism promotion is the drawing of Malaysian tourist-pilgrims, who form a significant proportion of foreigners visiting Kusu. Bong Soo Yen – a 43-year-old

female devotee from Penang – joined one such three-day tour of Singapore. For a fee of RM250 (about US\$79), she travelled overnight on a coach, reaching Kusu in the morning by ferry. The itinerary usually includes visiting famous places of worship and tourist attractions. With the opening of Singapore’s new integrated resort on the nearby Sentosa Island, many tour operators have included a casino visit in their programmes.

For many who visit Kusu during the pilgrimage season, the yearly trip is not only a chance to renew vows and prayers, but also a time to seek respite from the hectic pace of city life. For Jessie Han (70, nurse), the peaceful atmosphere on the island is part of the appeal. As a teenager, she had accompanied her grandmother to Kusu on a *sampan* (small wooden boat). As there was no jetty then and the boats could not reach the shore, she recalls having to roll up her pants to walk up the beach. Similarly, Yap Kok Chuan (63, harbour pilot) and his wife began their pilgrimage by accompanying their parents to Kusu and have continued to do so for more than 30 years. In the past, it was also a family outing with their children. Now that the children have grown up, they still make the annual trip on their own. On why they have persisted for so many years, Mr Yap said, “Once you’ve started doing so, you don’t dare to stop. So we come every year without fail.”

5: An inscription at the Tua Pek Kong temple listing the Chinese donors who contributed to its renovation in 1909.

6: An inscription at the Datok Nenek Keramat listing the Chinese donors who contributed to its construction. It further reveals that Datuk Nenek “paid a visit” to the main donor Baba Hoe Beng Whatt at his home.

7: An idyllic and peaceful getaway – an image that a revamped Kusu Island seeks to project.

8: Some pilgrims hang stones on fertility trees to pray for children and remove them when their wishes have been granted.

9: The Siong Leng Musical Association stages a musical performance at the Tua Pek Kong Temple every year during the Kusu pilgrimage. Photo Courtesy Siong Leng Musical Association.

10: A group of nurses, both Chinese and Indian, make the Kusu pilgrimage together on their day off from work.

All photos taken by Lu Caixia unless otherwise indicated.

Their example illustrates the changing nature and trend of the Kusu pilgrimage. What was a family affair is now mainly observed by the older generation, in shrinking numbers. According to statistics from the Sentosa Development Corporation – the agency responsible for managing Kusu – pilgrim numbers have decreased yearly since 2001. Compared to more than 136,000 pilgrims who made the trip in 2001, less than half (about 52,000) did so last year. This was in stark contrast to three decades ago when a record number of 23,000 people reportedly visited on a single day in 1976 and Kusu received over 200,000 visitors annually. Now, daily visitorship peaks at about 5,000.

Caretakers and pilgrims who were interviewed attributed the decline to several factors. One reason was that few from the younger generation still follow religious traditions. Other more prosaic reasons given included the shifting of ferry services to a new but relatively inaccessible pier in 2006. Several interviewees opined that this prevented the frail and aged from making the pilgrimage. Although the ferry journey was shortened by half (from 30 minutes to 15 minutes each way), more effort was needed to get to the pier.

Some pilgrims also felt that ferry fares were becoming too costly at S\$15 (about US\$11) for a return trip. For many years prior, pilgrims could choose between taking privately-operated bumboats (water taxis) or a ferry service operated by the former Port of Singapore Authority (PSA). Yap Kok Chuan recalls: “Bumboat rides to the island cost only 30 to 50 cents in the 1960s and 70s. Even during the oil crisis, ticket prices did not go up.” In the late 1970s, the PSA declined to increase fares despite pressure from bumboat operators, stating that it was providing a public service. It relented in 1981, citing heavy losses, and eventually relinquished this responsibility. Today, a single private company provides the ferry service.

Although pilgrim numbers have fallen sharply over the past decade, those interviewed hope that the Kusu pilgrimage will see a revival. The Siong Leng Musical Association – a traditional arts group formed in 1941 to preserve, develop, and promote Nan Yin (literally meaning “The Music of the South”) and Li Yuan opera – stages a musical performance on Kusu every year during pilgrimage season, a practice started by its late chairman Teng Mah Seng in the 1970s. Over the years, this event has garnered more attention and the number of participants and observers has increased from dozens to hundreds.

Cecilia Seet hopes that more people will visit Kusu when a new subway station opens at the pier – next to a new international cruise terminal – in two years’ time. Meanwhile, the pilgrimage is gaining new followers among the migrant community. Sheila Lin (35, from the service industry) – a Chinese Fujian native – went on her first pilgrimage five years ago after hearing about the supposed efficacy of the Kusu deities. Far away from home, her prayers are for safety and good luck, both for herself and her family in Fujian. Continually fuelled by the hopes and wishes of those who reach its shores, the Kusu pilgrimage survives the times.

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Tua Pek Kong’s Cult in the Chinese Diaspora

A FEW YEARS AGO, I wrote a paper on the Tua Pek Kong temple on Kusu in which I argued that the Singapore government’s interest in harnessing the economic potential of this temple since the 1980s had led to the commercialization and touristization of Kusu. My instructor and classmates were amazed by the active and highly dominating role of the state in managing society and developing the economy such that even a small 8.5-hectare island can barely escape its attention. Therefore, at the end of the semester, I brought them to Kusu to see how the larger forces of social change and state management had impacted it in general and the Tua Pek Kong temple in particular. However, during our trip, what struck me most was the simple question of a classmate from Mainland China: Who is Tua Pek Kong? To my surprise, my Chinese friend had neither heard of Tua Pek Kong nor was aware of his popularity among the Southeast Asian Chinese.

So who is Tua Pek Kong? Apparently, there is no agreement among scholars on the origin and identity of this deity. In the history of Malaysia and Singapore, the cult of Tua Pek Kong appeared in three multifaceted forms: a symbol of

sworn brotherhood, a local Sino-Malay deity, and a Sinicized god. As a sworn brotherhood, Tua Pek Kong was both a patron deity and a mutual aid organization to its members. This group even took control of governance, law and order in the diasporic community. After becoming involved in destructive riots with its rival groups, it was outlawed by the colonial government and eventually ceased to exist by the end of the 19th century. Concomitantly, Tua Pek Kong was venerated as a Sino-Malay deity, in several different forms, in the Chinese diaspora. According to an old inscription in Pahang, the local community worshipped him as Bentougong (本頭公). In other parts of Malaysia and Singapore, the Sino-Malay Tua Pek Kong symbolically blended elements of Malay animistic worship with Chinese religious practices. Most interestingly, on Kusu, Tua Pek Kong is a Sino-Malay deity with a Muslim sworn brother. The cult even incorporated Islamic ideas and Datuk Kong worship into its religious practices. Finally, the Sinicized Tua Pek Kong demonstrates how the cult existed in what Robert Hymes calls a “dual model of divinity.” On one hand, he was the spirit of extraordinary Chinese pioneers, god of prosperity,

protector of Overseas Chinese, and even a mediator of conflict. On the other hand, he was absorbed into the Chinese bureaucratic religious hierarchy in the Overseas Chinese annals.

In the absence of a Chinese bureaucratic state structure, Chinese migrants in 19th century Southeast Asia probably appreciated the familial connections and dyadic relationship between themselves and the divine uncle more than a multilevel bureaucratic hierarchy. Furthermore, they were active agents in inventing their religious beliefs. Some were quick to incorporate local Malay animistic worship and popular Islamic ideas into the cult of Tua Pek Kong, making him a Sino-Malay deity. Others deemed him a Sinicized god with efficacious response and a personal touch. Nevertheless, it is not possible to exactly pinpoint who Tua Pek Kong is. Perhaps it was precisely this multifaceted nature of the cult that best serves the complex needs of the Overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia.

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