

LIVING HERITAGES

LIAN LOW

1

In 2014, Malaysia's Prime Minister Najib Razak launched Melaka Gateway, a multi-billion dollar Chinese led mega-development involving 246 hectares of three artificial islands off Melaka's coastline. Melaka Gateway, according to the Prime Minister, will be the "largest marina in Asia." Set for completion in 2025, the marina will feature luxury apartments, villas with private jetties, hotels, entertainment venues and a monorail.

KAJ Development, the master developer of the Melaka Gateway Project, has a promotional video animating the future Melaka. The slogan is: "the past presents the future." The narrator reports, "Melaka Gateway is built for commercial greatness, cultural splendour and, magnificent lifestyles designed to delight and entertain with local and international flavours." From the azure blue of the Straits, empty islands appear above water, then multiple rectangular skyscrapers shoot up into the sky like giant trees on steroids. On one island there's a Gateway Floating Stadium. The narrator goes on to report that the design is constructed to prepare for the influx of tourists to Melaka.

Watching this video reminds me of an episode of *Doctor Who* where Bill and the Doctor find themselves on a sanitised and architecturally perfect planet where there are no humans, except robots obsessed with ensuring that any life forms they encounter are happy. The robots read the human life forms by the emoticons on their backs. If the human life forms show their true feelings of sadness, they are exterminated.

2

I met Bert Tan at his Malacca Nyonya Peranakan restaurant, Riverine Coffeehouse because I was craving something Nyonya, like ayam pongteh, a very Malacca specific dish that my grandmother used to make. Chicken stew with potatoes made from taucheo (fermented soybean paste) and gula Melaka (dark palm sugar)¹. The entrance

1 [Eds. Note] On May 3, 2017, the state government announced that the name 'Malacca', commonly used in English, would cease to be used and instead be replaced with the name 'Melaka'.

to the Riverine Coffeehouse was via a lane flanked on either side by restaurants and guesthouses. The back of the restaurant overlooked the Malacca River and across the bank was the Church of St Francis Xavier, built in 1856.

"If you look across from here, you'll see that the church is on a bit of an angle. It's sloping," Bert smiles, a mischievous glint in his eyes.

In 2008, two Malaysian cities—Melaka and George Town—were awarded UNESCO World Heritage status. Melaka and George Town's architectural and cultural townscape could not be found anywhere else in East and Southeast Asia. Melaka's townscape can be traced to the fifteenth century Malay Sultanate, and the Portuguese and Dutch colonisation of the country. Yet cartoon-like travesties seem to feature in Melaka's modern public art installations—like the white mouse-deers in the middle of the town square, a Dutch windmill by the bridge overlooking the river, and a large replica of a Chinese junk at the gateway of Melaka's Chinatown on Jonker Street.

In 2014, Malaysia and China celebrated forty years of formal diplomatic relations. Each broad lipstick red step leading towards the junk has a display of replica porcelain and other treasures the Chinese Admiral Zheng would have brought with him on his travels to build diplomatic relations with the Malay kingdom in the fifteenth century. There were even white waves splashing against the ship's hull.

"It's bad luck to have the ship up in the air like that. Ships are meant to be in the water. To sail," Bert smirks. "People think that Melaka is now all commercial; it's fake."

Bert can trace his Peranakan family's ancestry to the 1740s, he is eighth generation Malaccan on his mother's side, male ancestors sailing from China as traders. There would have been intermarriage with local-born ancestors who were Malay or Batak or Javanese, he isn't sure. Passionate about invigorating interest in Malaysia's history and heritage, in 2012 Bert founded the Malaysian Heritage and History Club (MHHC) a Facebook Group which boasts over 11,000 members ranging from academics to history geeks eager to share information. And the numbers keep growing.

Outside social media, the Club organises events and history and heritage talks featuring speakers drawn from Facebook members.

“Our history is being manipulated for political purpose, for certain groups of people, for a certain race. It’s used as a device of separation, of division. Divide and rule.”

Bert’s activism and passion for a democratic engagement and participation in history is grounded within the grassroots.

“I met a professor who said you don’t need to go to university. It’s just paper, it’s just an establishment. Even the professor will go to the layman for a story.”

As I dig into chicken pongteh and spicy stinky beans, Bert, knowing that I’m on a hunt for stories and Malacca history, sits next to me, a packet of cigarettes in one hand, and a massive tome in the other.

“My friend, Saidah, wrote this book—*Rosalie and Other Love Songs*. Did you know that the origin of Malaysia’s national anthem, ‘Negaraku’ is a popular love song? It’s called ‘Terang Bulan.’”

Bert’s friend is celebrated composer, author and lawyer, Saidah Rasdam, who has written for theatre, dance, film and television. ‘Terang Bulan’ (or ‘Bright Moon’) began as ‘Rosalie’, the melody favoured by the son of an exiled Sultan.

Rosalie and Other Love Songs is a weighty volume of 302 pages, and has been described as “the single most important volume so far written on Malaysian musical history,” by Tunku Abidin Muhriz in *The Malay Mail*.

Bert leaves me with the book, and within its pages, there’s an acknowledgement—“The Malaysian Heritage and History Club has irreverent but erudite members.”

3

2013, 2014, 2015; I return to my country of birth

I’ve not ‘gone home’, ‘been back’ for over ten years because...
blood lines bruised by a patriarch.

Local-foreigner; familiar and strange

Tak boleh berbahasa Cina, ‘tapi boleh cakap sedikit Bahasa Malaysia / I can’t speak Chinese but I can speak a bit of Malay
I’ve returned to a place where those that I love are gone

4

It’s been one year since I’ve seen Bert, and I’m looking forward to more stories. The last time we met he introduced me to Josephine Chua, a local who can trace her ancestry to a Malaccan Chinese community leader, Kapitan Chua Su Cheong, who in 1801 headed the rebuilding of the oldest functioning Chinese temple in Malaysia. I walk along Lorong Hang Jebat, the street named after a Malay warrior in the fifteenth century, one of the greatest silat fighters and mass murderers in Malaysian history. I can’t find Riverine Coffeehouse and wonder if I’m in the wrong area. I walk into a fancy restaurant, the interior decorated like a hotel lobby, not homely like Bert’s.

“Riverine? I don’t know. I think it’s moved.”

Disappointed, I head back hungry to my guesthouse. I

munch on small fingers of sugar bananas I’d bought earlier and look up Bert’s email in my account. I drop him an email at midnight, and amazingly he responds two minutes later, despite my last contact with him being the year before! He doesn’t explain what’s happened to his restaurant, but we connect on WhatsApp and he arranges to pick me up for dinner the next day.

5

Bert arrives in an old Hyundai Getz that looks like it’ll stop running unexpectedly. It smells of stale cigarettes. It’s not a car I’d imagined a restaurant owner possessing. He still has that mischievous glint in his eyes.

“I’ll take you to this place that’s a bit further out but has really good food.”

Wo Wat Restaurant food court is tucked by Jalan Tengker’s main road under fluorescent light fittings and a zinc roof. We walk past stalls advertising each specialty—claypot chicken rice, radish cake, sambal sting ray, nyonya satay on charcoal smoke, kuey teow tossed in hot woks against large flames, barbecued chicken and ducks on steel hooks ready for order. We seat ourselves at an empty white plastic table with yellow chairs and our first order is teh tarik, sweetened condensed milk tea.

Bert closed Riverine Coffeehouse after six years in business despite being awarded one of the best restaurants in Malacca. Rent was too high in the middle of Melaka town. The electric appliances and lighting in the building kept acting erratically. He succumbed to hiring a Taoist exorcist to get rid of whatever was haunting his restaurant.

“Yalah, like in the movies. He even brought a sword.”

Our conversation picks up from when we first met about Malacca’s history. I wonder what he thinks is untrue about the history published in the tourist brochures.

“Like Hang Li Poh’s well, there’s no such thing. It was called Perigi Raja in the Malay Sultanate period. And now it’s called Perigi Hang Li Poh. Because in 1984 they tried to flatten Bukit China, which made people angry. I was in secondary school in Form Four at the time. I distributed and collected all the petitions. That’s my earliest activism.”

Outside of China, Bukit China (translates literally to Chinese Hill) is reported to have the largest remaining traditional Chinese burial ground with over 12,500 graves, with some graves dating back from the 1600s.

The Save Bukit China campaign attracted close to 300,000 people across ethnic and class lines opposing the State Government’s proposal for development. Malaysia had not witnessed an opposition to development of this magnitude before.

Bert’s now working on different projects, creating alternative spaces to voice narratives ignored or absent from official tourist bureaucrats. A member of the Malaysian Heritage

and History Club had contacted him about exhibiting Malaysian Independence Day or Merdeka Day memorabilia. This grew into a free exhibition in September called the People's Merdeka Exhibition. It was important to Bert that the exhibition was free. Accessible to anyone with an interest in history and heritage. At the exhibition, the Club launched a zine called *Messing with Melaka*, with content related to local knowledge about Malacca's history and places to eat. The title of the zine is a satirical word play on the State Government's official and questionable tourism campaign to promote a clean environment for Melaka called "Don't Mess with Melaka." In addition, Bert is working on an upcoming exhibition called *New/Old Malacca*, a collaboration between the Malaysian Heritage and History Club, the Baba and Nyonya Heritage Museum and the Daily Fix Café.

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I loop the lock around a pole and my hire bicycle and walk into the Daily Fix Café. Its entrance is a shopfront with gifts like batik sarongs, postcards, antique items and ornaments easily sold to tourists as gifts for family and friends back home. Walking through the shopfront, I enter into a light courtyard area and the café is at the back.

Upstairs where the event talks and main exhibition will be held, Bert is seated with Melissa Chan, housekeeper of the Baba and Nyonya Heritage Museum. The Baba and Nyonya Heritage Museum is a conversion of a family home where four generations of the Peranakan Chinese Chan family had lived since 1861, with Melissa being the fifth generation.

The premise of *New/Old Malacca* was a question about what people thought about the changing landscape of Malacca town, and how they felt about changes with modernity coming in. Furthermore, what does heritage mean to them? Their collaboration first began a year ago, on an app called Timera where historical photos of Malacca are juxtaposed with Melaka as it is now. In one picture, at the bottom of St Paul's Hill, the contemporary colour photograph is juxtaposed with a black and white image of a man in a suit and a woman in a hat and dress that would suit Western fashion of the thirties.

Features in the *New/Old Malacca* exhibition include an eighty-plus-year-old family-owned Teochew porridge restaurant called Long Fatt, traders, locksmiths, a rattan furniture maker, the Portuguese Settlement, kuih badak food sellers and local community members.

"I think all of us stumbled into this a bit. We're not historians. Personally, for me, I work in a museum, so it's been a learning process. Also, I think working in a UNESCO site, and having the badge of UNESCO has made me question, what is heritage and what does heritage mean to me and to the community that I'm working with as well?" Melissa says.

New/Old Malacca features community narratives that don't fit into the neat tourism and marketing ads or slogans

of the State Government or Melaka Gateway's mega development project. There are narratives like Martin Theseira's, a community leader from the Portuguese Settlement, who has witnessed over the decades how development along Melaka's shorefront resulted in the dispersal and resettlement of the Portuguese-Malaccan community. With the latest Melaka Gateway development plans, again, the Portuguese Settlement feels insecure about their future, yet there are no clear answers with a frustrating lack of community consultation. The largest number of speakers of the Malaccan-Portuguese creole, *Papia Kristang*, a language that's classified as severely endangered in UNESCO's *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger*, are located among the Portuguese Settlement's population of about 1200 residents at Ujong Pasir on Melaka's shorefront.

"I suppose as a stakeholder here, we sustain through ticket sales through the museum, but then how do we give an authentic experience to visitors? To help bring them along on this journey of the different layers of Malacca? I'm still discovering what heritage means to me," says Melissa.

7

Upon returning to a childhood memory, Melaka

The small town of historical legends, the birth of Malaysia's nationhood

The town of excursions and day trips from Malaysians and tourists

Where my grandmother's family are from

Where I find the fabled Chinese Princess Hang Li Poh who sailed with 500 followers to marry a Malay Sultan is not real

Where I meet the descendant of a Chinese Kapitan who tells me that Melaka is drawn on a whiteboard with an erasable marker

Where nothing is permanent, and everything is for sale.

Where property developers dug up her ancestor's grave and many others along Bukit China when there were no protestors, their remains now reburied location unknown

Where I stand at the shore of Ujong Pasir, looking out to the Straits of Malacca, imagining the imaginary Chinese Princess and her 500 followers sailing in for marriage and diplomacy

Where looking out from this very shore, a Portuguese Settlement community leader points to where Melaka Gateway's artificial islands will rise from the sea

Where the already ominous high rise resorts cast their shadows upon his community below.

I keep returning to Melaka for rasa saying

A feeling of love for this place which I hope is shared

To understand her beyond the propaganda and superficial public art monuments

To know her living heritages, her unsung heroes and forgotten histories. ▪