

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Researching rural histories in Singapore:
Premises and contexts

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Abstract

Contemporary Singapore is presently cited and expressed as an Asian metropolis with good urban infrastructure and management systems. Like many places around the world, however, the island-city-state was progressively urbanized from its prior landscapes and seascapes, which included a long period of British colonization in its history. Its natural landforms, water bodies, and ecologies were systematically altered and transformed since the 19th century, when the colonial city was planned and occupied, and continuing into the 20th century following independence in 1965. Rural or countryside areas to the north of the city gradually made way for public housing, industrial areas, and other uses. With successive post-independence master plans, Singapore phased out agriculture and other land-use practices as it positioned itself as a confluence point for global trade. In the 21st century, Singapore graduated its stance from connoting a “garden city” to one more consonant with nature and environmental concerns. Issues such as food security, resource use, and climate practices recalled the specter of its prior rural areas and practices, which had erstwhile not been studied or evaluated comprehensively. This article examines and frames research questions and contexts of former rural areas in Singapore in relation to historical overseas Chinese settlements. The Chinese currently form the largest ethnic population category in Singapore, but they used to live in both urban and rural areas. In the 1970s, three-quarters of the rural population were Chinese, but they were progressively resettled or moved into public housing estates. This article argues for more comprehensive studies and recovery of this neglected history, and the importance of such countryside histories as needful knowledge in future planning, even as Singapore attempts to become a global city.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Immigration of Chinese to Singapore

Singapore's early physical development as a colonial town from 1819 onward was mainly in the southern areas of the island, between the Singapore River and the Rochor River-Kallang River systems. Observing that there was already a thriving port and trade

settlement in the latter, the British set up their cantonment adjacent to the Singapore River and gradually expanded this colonial space for governance.

However, records indicate that a number of Chinese gambier farmers had already established plantations on the island in the early 1810s, under the aegis of descendants of the Johor–Riau Empire. Stamford Raffles (1781–1826), acknowledged as one of the first few British settlers in colonial Singapore, altered the island's southern coastal landscape soon after he arrived in 1819 by creating a cantonment between two river systems. The European Town was planned and located to the northwest of this cantonment. Four roads ran parallel to the southeastern coast between the cantonment and the Rochor River area. The perpendicular road to these four roads, Middle Road, marked the midway line of the European Town, and possibly marked the midway line as well between the indigenous Sultan's residential compounds and the British cantonment at the Singapore River.

Chinese immigrants, perceived by the British as “an industrious race” and integral to the British enterprise, increased exponentially in number from 3,317 in 1824 to 86,800 in 1881. This number doubled again in two decades by 1901. The immigrant sub-ethnic Chinese groups of the Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese, and one group of Hakka had earlier settled along the southwestern side of the Singapore River, leaving other subsequent sub-ethnic groups like the Hainanese, other Hakka groups, Hokchia, Foochow, and Henghua groups to settle in and around the European Town nearer to the Rochore River area. At that time, Europeans were beginning to move further inland to the fringes of Singapore Town for experimentation with nutmeg planting. Together with the Malays (including the Sultan's families and retainers, Arabs, and Bugis), South Asians, and the Europeans who continued to reside in these areas, a truly multi-ethnic and multi-religious landscape was established near the Rochor River–Kallang River system.

2. Municipal and rural areas in Singapore

The division and classification of Singapore's landscapes and seascapes into separate urban and rural entities occurred some 60 years after the British arrived on the island. Immigrant groups, including the Chinese, progressively settled in the rural areas as the town became increasingly congested. The Municipal Commission was set up in 1887 for the governance of Singapore Town located on the island's southern coast, while the outlying, rural areas to the northern, eastern, and western areas remained under the administration of the colonial government (Yeo, 2016 and Leong, 1995). The Singapore Rural Board was only

set up 20 years later, in 1908, to administer these rural areas, eventually extending such administration to include offshore islands.

Before British arrival and for some time afterwards, the coastlines of the main island and the offshore islands were inhabited by different groups of sea peoples collectively known as *Orang Laut* (Waller, 2001). One such group was the *Orang Seletar*, originally living along the Seletar River in northern Singapore, or along the straits (or *selat*). Descendants of these groups are now mainly living on land and separately across both sides of the Straits of Johor. Other groups of *Orang Laut* had historically served both locals and foreigners as their guides through the treacherous straits.

Before 1959, the Rural Board provided public facilities such as roads and bridges, regulated building construction, and licensed hazardous or offensive trades. However, the Municipal Commission and the Rural Board were in constant conflict with each other due to disparities in personnel, funding, resources, and voting rights. The People's Action Party government, which won the 1959 legislative assembly elections, created different ministries to serve Singapore's developmental needs. Both the Municipality (subsequently known as the City Council) and the Rural Board were dissolved, and their functions were delegated to these new ministries. The previously bifurcated spaces of the urban and the rural in Singapore were thus reconceived as one governance space (Figure 1).

The rural–urban distinction was further diffused—if not gradually erased—with the announcement and subsequent implementation of the first local master plan known as the 1971 Concept Plan (Figure 2). This plan was developed by local planners under the State and City Planning Project with input and assistance from the United Nations. Known

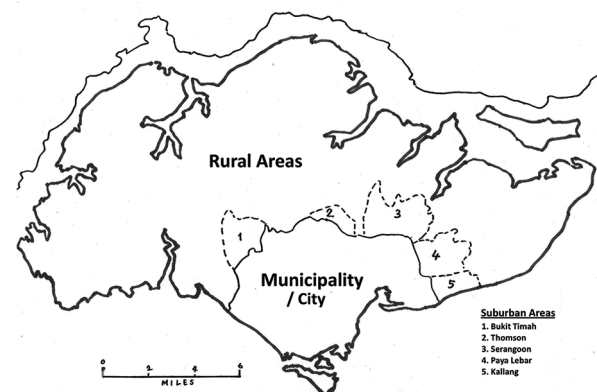


Figure 1. Singapore map showing the urban, suburban, and rural areas in 1960

Source: Map by the author.

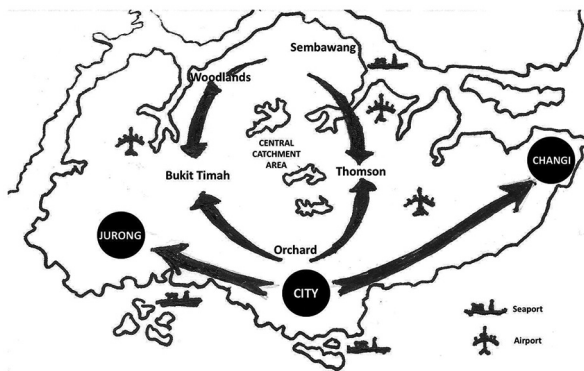


Figure 2. The Ring Concept Plan of 1971
Source: Map by the author.

conceptually as the “Modified Ring Plan,” it comprised a developmental corridor stretching west to east—from Jurong passing through the city to Changi—running mainly parallel to Singapore’s southern coast. The “ring” component in the plan intersected this corridor at the city and was extended northwards, encompassing a nature reserve known as the Central Catchment Area. Public housing towns were planned along the trajectory of this ring. All of these developments were connected by road infrastructure and, eventually, by a mass rapid transit system.

To understand and analyze Singapore’s rural histories, I propose that research may be committed around three sub-histories: (i) Ecology (flora and fauna), (ii) Agriculture, and (iii) Communities (human settlements). The islands and seas were initially uninhabited by humans, and hence formed the island’s earliest biological make-up in terms of flora and fauna, and the basis for the island’s “original state.” Agricultural practices of both colonial and local actors over a century progressively cleared forests and altered these ecological systems. Human settlement in these areas, examined through patterns of community settlement and spatial use, may thus describe and measure how the lands and seas have transformed. Up until this time, these three areas of research have existed mainly separately from one another. Considered together, these mutually related aspects may illustrate the island’s developmental history from primeval times onwards. This integrated approach may also elucidate the developments and interactions between the bifurcated spatial model of the colonial government and the Modified Ring Plan of the first fully local government—now firmly in place after 50 years.

3. Transforming prior landscapes

3.1. Flora and fauna

To understand the transformation of Singapore’s landscape, we need to trace its ecological history as far back as possible.

O’Dempsey (2014) suggested that “primeval Singapore” was covered by three forest ecosystems: mangrove forests, freshwater swamps, and lowland dipterocarp forests. Subsequently, the development of land areas for agricultural uses resulted in the depletion of Singapore’s flora and fauna.

The decimation of Singapore’s flora and fauna was caused by colonial-era agricultural practices, which will be discussed in the next section. An 1879 study of the extant principal native forest trees served as a wake-up call to the colonial government, whose prior inaction had led to the near-total destruction of the island’s native forests due to illicit felling and charcoal burning. A more detailed survey conducted 4 years later revealed that only 8 percent of the original forest cover remained. Remedial measures taken included the setting up of a Forestry Department in 1884 and the mandating of a Municipal Catchment Area in 1900. However, the loss of timber-yielding trees persisted. Today, Singapore’s nature reserves constitute only about 0.5 percent of the original primary rainforest that once covered most of the island (O’Dempsey, 2014).

Raffles’ mandate and construction regulations required the use of specific fire-resistant materials in Singapore Town. Outside the town, most houses were built from timber for their structures and external cladding. Such timber would have been harvested from local trees. An additional factor for the rapid depletion of timber trees in the 19th century was Singapore’s export of prefabricated housing. When Australian towns were being settled in the 1850s, migrant homesteaders requiring housing imported “Singapore cottages” or “Singapore houses” as dwellings. These were manufactured on the island and exported in flat-packed form, similar to present-day self-assembly furniture. The sizes of these houses ranged from 22 × 11 ft to larger models measuring 44 × 22 ft (Ting, 2024).

Creatures that inhabited the island’s landscapes were either culled or domesticated according to their perceived threat or usefulness to humans after European arrival. Barnard (2019) has written about the various colonial interventions to delimit animal populations on the island, beginning with mitigating rat infestations. Over several decades in the mid-19th century, dogs were also culled. A corollary to the cutting of large swathes of forests for plantation agriculture was the change to jungle landscapes. This act depleted the food sources of carnivores like tigers, which then lurked in the replacement underbrush for prey, closer to human settlements. The last reported tiger on the island was killed in 1930. As Barnard (2019, p. 19) observed, “the tools to tame all imperial creatures were traps, rewards, violence, and eventually rules and regulations, all part of the imperial process.”

Singapore's tropical environment had promoted biodiversity on a large scale. In 1840, James Low, a colonial civil servant, listed "tigers, elk, small deer, plandok, monkeys, wild cats, civet cats, lemurs, flying foxes, and squirrels." (Barnard, 2019, p. 23) However, such abundant biodiversity has changed in just a century. The biologist Richard Corlett estimated that Singapore lost at least 100 bird species, 20 species of freshwater fish, and several mammal species during the colonial era. Peter Ng and Navjot Sodhi estimated a high total local extinction rate of 73 percent for all species, which may mainly be attributed to deforestation in the 19th century (Barnard, 2019).

3.2. Agricultural histories

Agriculture transformed Singapore's geography over time, but drastically. In the 1840s, nutmeg was grown in the Orchard Road and Tanjong Pagar areas. Cash crops were cultivated by both European and Chinese planters. For Europeans, trial crops included sugar cane, coconuts, and coffee, but a "nutmeg mania" led to the planting of 43,000 nutmeg trees by 1843 in areas just beyond the southern river areas.

However, this venture began to fail by the 1850s, and cultivation was abandoned due to declining soil quality and a devastating nutmeg blight. The next major crop to be grown on a large scale was rubber. Rubber trees were successfully grown in Singapore in 1877, sparking a boom. In the 1920s, overproduction brought down rubber prices by the time of the Great Depression (1929–1939), and a 1934 international rubber regulation spelled its demise.

The earliest crops grown by Chinese planters were gambier and pepper. Their method of shifting cultivation, however, severely depleted forests and soils, and the industry died out by the 1910s. With the introduction of industrial canning, large areas of land formerly covered by pepper and gambier were converted for pineapple cultivation (Figure 4). The pineapple and rubber booms of the early 20th century led to an influx of people into previously unsettled interiors. As with rubber, the Depression also affected pineapple production, and both crop industries collapsed by the time of the Japanese Occupation (1942–1945).

The separated town-countryside landscape also created a mutual market economy for folks living in the two zones. Farm and vegetable produce from the rural areas would be supplied to town markets or peddled by hawkers, while other hawkers sourced needed merchandise like tools, fabrics, furniture, and even luxury items for sale in the interior villages. In a postwar survey conducted by geographer James Blaut (1927–2000), most farms were small in scale—about one acre—and clustered near water sources such as rivers and streams (Blaut, 1953).

Food shortages during the Japanese Occupation drew many residents to rural locations to grow their own food. Idle pineapple and rubber estates were converted into food gardens, with tapioca and vegetables being the two most important crops. Market gardening established itself as the most important agricultural activity by the end of the war, with total farmland areas tripling from about 5,000 acres in 1940 to 15,000 acres in 1948.

Like the surge in food crop production, the postwar pork sufficiency resulted from another period of unrest, this time across the Causeway. The exponential increase in Singapore's pig farms came about during the Malayan Emergency (1948–1960) in peninsular Malaya to flush out suspected "Communist Terrorists" hiding in the jungles, particularly in the states of Perak and neighbouring Johor. A containment strategy known as the Briggs Plan formalized the creation of perimeter-fenced hamlets for rural Chinese, who were suspected of supplying food, medicine, and information to the insurgents. These hamlets—officially termed "New Villages"—were likened by many observers to internment camps. After 1953, many pig farmers in peninsular Malaya feared resettlement into such New Villages and decided to transfer operations to Singapore. Pig numbers increased 20-fold, from 35,500 in 1946 to 750,000 in 1958. In 1977, local farms produced 1.25 million pigs. This ensured pork self-sufficiency. However, the entire pig farm sector would be decimated only a decade later.

At the time of Independence in 1965, there was food sufficiency. Singapore was 100 percent self-sufficient in local pork, poultry, and eggs; 50 percent in vegetables and fruits for local consumption; and 30 percent in fish (Chou, 2014). The implementation and augmentation of the "Modified Ring Plan" caused large-scale agricultural resettlement over the following decades, which progressively confined agricultural activity to the island's northwestern sector.

3.3. Communities

Only 5 years after the founding of Singapore in 1824, it was recorded that a triad society known as *Tian Di Hui* (天地会), comprising thousands of men, was recorded as living in jungle areas to support the gambier and pepper economy. Munshi Abdullah (1796–1854), Raffles's Malay tutor, once trekked for 11 hours before reaching one such area. Surrounded by a deep, wide ditch and crossed by a narrow bridge, the settlement contained "three large huts each at least 180 ft in length, inside which men swarmed like maggots" (Blythe, 1969, p. 76).

The Johor Sultan, who held jurisdiction over the land before the island was ceded completely to the British, made agreements with Chinese farmers in the 19th century. These

led to the establishment of several settlement areas and watersheds along the island's northern fringes for the cultivation of gambier and pepper. The cultivators practised shifting cultivation along the various riverine watersheds in settlements known as *chu kang* (厝港), and contributed to the clearing of erstwhile forests for subsequent settlement and development.

From the 1840s onward, the construction of roads enabled connections between Singapore Town and the island interiors to its east, west, and north. Chinese residents moved progressively into the rural areas, and by the turn of the 20th century, they comprised two-thirds of the rural population. Most were farmers, plantation workers, or shopkeepers. The villages soon built schools, mutual aid associations, and other community structures such as clan or village shrines. By 1970, three-quarters of rural dwellers were Chinese farmers mainly involved in market farming.

The various types of built structures in these villages may collectively permit us to better understand the landscapes and settlements of these Chinese market farmers and the communities they established, apart from the lands and waters they cultivated. Two such structures, rural Chinese houses and combined temples, may allow studies of and connections to their past existence, as these are related to everyday dwelling and religious sustenance for individuals or for the community as a whole. Nuclear or multi-tier family houses were the most widespread residential building type, while the combined temples were often constructed during the processes of resettling rural Chinese dwellers into new towns.

4. Built structures of Chinese communities

4.1. Rural Chinese houses

Five years after Singapore's Independence in 1970, the administrative rural areas covered nearly 80 percent of the main island, surrounding the city area in the south on three sides. Such rural areas collectively accounted for approximately 20 percent of the population at the time, with nearly 45 square miles of farmland (De Koninck, 1975). Farming areas had already been diminishing since 1940, due mainly to the conversion of rubber and pineapple plantations to other uses.

Rudolphe De Koninck's research on farming communities in 1960s Singapore identified four types of rural settlements. The first two, market garden areas and plantation squatter areas, may be traced to agricultural and plantation histories for over a century, as discussed above (Figure 3). From 1957, rural dwellers were resettled by the Singapore Improvement Trust and subsequently by

the Housing and Development Board. Such resettlement areas were classified by De Koninck as a third category. His fourth category consists of what he termed "farm-military villages," which straddled farming activities and areas serving British military camps and installations (De Koninck, 1975).

Market farming areas were composed of small plots with irregularly spaced houses adjacent to cultivated areas. These formed villages with densities of about 4,000–5,000 persons per square mile (Figure 5). There is some vehicular access in the villages, with irregular road paths branching off from the main metalled roads, the former unfamiliar to visitors but well known to locals. The villages and adjacent areas were built over hilly terrains, swamps, streams, and dense vegetation, and such landscape features contributed to the complexity and spatial definition of the settlements.

Houses in such villages were mainly rectangular or square in plan, constructed of timber and roofed with dried *attap* palm leaf panels, corrugated zinc sheets, or asbestos panels. Unlike vernacular Malay houses, which were constructed with raised platforms, Chinese villagers usually constructed houses directly on the ground. Where available, the ground surfaces were compacted and screeded over with cement. The timber wall panels of these houses were sometimes supported by a low wall constructed of bricks or cement, extending from the floor to the window sill. A post-and-beam timber structure, which was connected to the peripheral walls, supported the double-pitched or hipped roofs.

As Toh (1981) observed in his study of such houses, Chinese villagers placed importance on the use of geomancy (*feng shui*; 風水) for house design, a practice sustained despite having long migrated from southern China. These principles were used to determine the orientation, location, and plan form of individual houses. Toh (1981) noted that 80 percent of the houses he surveyed were sited on higher ground in relation to the surroundings, often on slopes. Houses were oriented with their front doors facing south where possible, as "south" symbolized good luck and fortune in Chinese geomancy. On plan, the living room—its most important space—was to be centrally located, with other rules for the placement of the back door and kitchen.

Toh (1981) divided the surveyed houses into six types based on the floor plan. Type A featured a rectangular plan with a single hipped roof covering all functional spaces: living room, bedrooms, kitchen, and bathing areas. This type was identified as the one introduced by Chinese immigrants and closely resembled homes in their native villages in plan form. Types B through F had more complex floor plans and were sheltered by double or multiple roofs. These types are derived from Type A and were modified

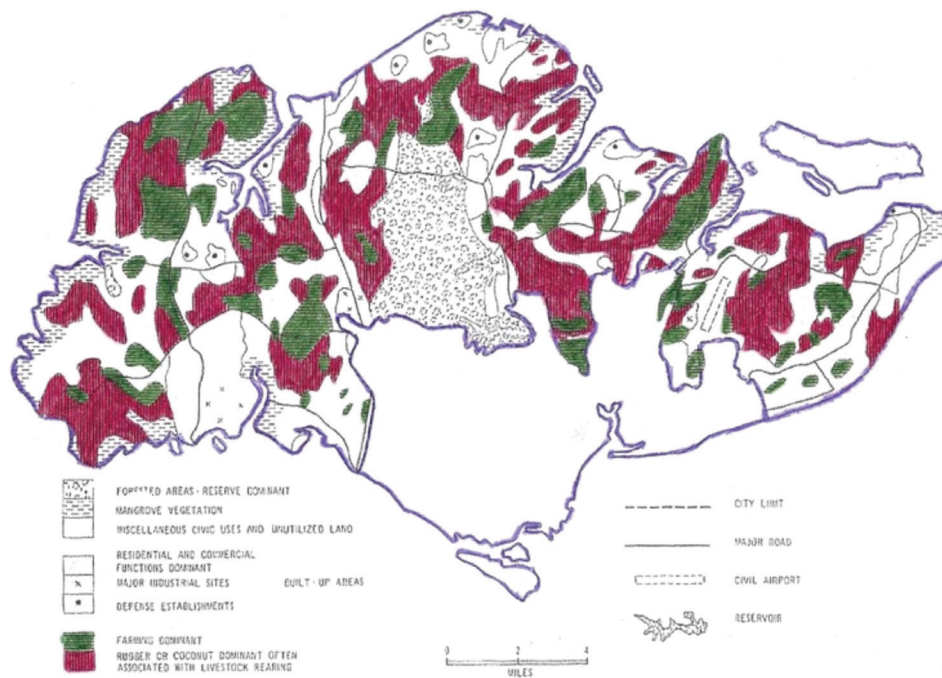


Figure 3. Rural land use map of Singapore in 1970.
Notes: green represents market farms; red represents plantations.
Source: Map by Rudolphe De Koninck (1975).



Figure 4. Plantation areas along Buona Vista Road, near the present-day National University of Singapore
Source: Postcard image in author's collection.



Figure 5. Vegetable farm in rural Singapore, circa 1960s
Source: Postcard image in the author's collection.

over time after their extended periods of residence in Singapore.

Toh did not elaborate on why or how the five subsequent plan types diverged from the “introduced” Type A. His drawings, however, show that Type A was less suited to Singapore's tropical climate. Collectively, Types B to F constitute 81.4 percent of the houses he surveyed, while Type A accounted for only 18.6 percent. The key distinguishing feature of the “developed” types was the use of multiple roofs to shelter different functions, compared to the singular roof of the “introduced” Type A.

The prevalence of multiple roofs in the small houses surveyed suggests a preference for the use of such roof forms, despite their higher costs and greater material requirements. Notably, all of the “developed” types featured separate roofs over the kitchen and dining areas. This design choice was likely due to safety concerns, as these houses were primarily built from combustible materials, making them vulnerable to fires that could result in significant property damage or even loss of life. Separate roof structures also helped to contain smoke and cooking odors and to prevent vermin infestation, thereby

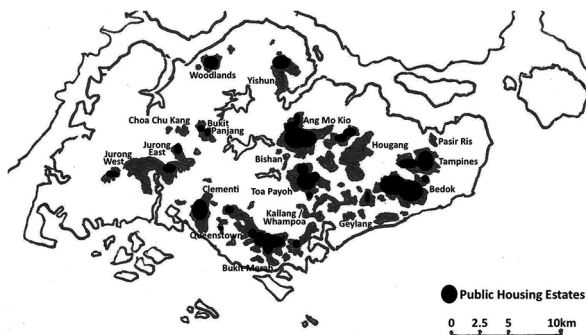


Figure 6. Locations of public housing estates in Singapore, 1989
Source: Map by De Koninck (2008).



Figure 7. The United Five Temple at Toa Payoh, the first combined temple in Singapore
Source: Photo by the author (2020).

preventing them from crossing into living and sleeping areas.

In all the “developed” types, separating the kitchen and bathing areas from the living and bedroom spaces created a narrow corridor or walkway between the two house blocks and their respective roofs. In Types C, D, and E, additional corridors were constructed to separate the living and sleeping areas as well. It may be deduced that this design served to enhance ventilation by allowing air circulation between rooms for a more conducive living environment. The design of separate blocks for potential fire containment and cross-ventilation resulted in a forsaking of the symmetrical layout of the “introduced” house plan, resulting in more irregular floor plans. These deviations from southern China house plans were made to respond to the climate in rural Singapore.

4.2. Combined temples in Singapore

After Singapore’s Independence, the government adopted a ring-shaped master plan in 1971, which was superimposed

over the previous colonial one from 1958. Public housing estates, traffic infrastructure, and other amenities occupied the rural areas, which the colonial plan had maintained. This new plan thus required all residents to resettle or relocate to apartment flats in these new housing estates. Community structures, such as shrines and clan temples, were similarly required to relocate.

Working with the planning and housing authorities, the temple committees from evicted sites eventually leased government land to jointly build new temples within shared compounds beginning in 1972. They were reconstituted as “combined temples” or “joint temples,” with each temple committee granted a renewable 30-year lease for its lot within the shared configuration. Between 1974 and 2012, 65 combined temples were formed, amalgamating more than a hundred temples that were previously scattered across rural Singapore. Most combined temples comprise three or more constituent temples, with the largest—Tampines Chinese Temple—housing 12.

Each combined temple building comprises individual temples arranged in a linear plan, placed side by side with shared walls, except at the two ends. All temple entrances face the same direction, with storage and kitchen facilities located at the back. The positioning of each temple within the row is either mutually agreed upon among the temple committees or by ballot in some cases.

The United Five Temple at Lorong 7, Toa Payoh, was the first of such combined temples (Figure 7). Its design and operation offer glimpses at how this temple type was conceived, planned, and used. The Toa Payoh area, formerly comprising mainly market garden plots and swamps near the Whampoa River, was converted into Singapore’s first post-Independence constructed satellite town. Different shrines and temples that had previously served Teochew, Hokkien, Cantonese, and Hainanese communities—each with different main deities and located at different locations—were brought together within the new combined temple. As one Hainanese temple was dedicated to *yin* deities from the Underworld, it was placed at one end and separated from the other four temples by a contiguous wall. Each temple celebrates the birthday of its principal deity according to the lunar calendar. In addition, the four *yang* temples jointly celebrate the birthday of their common protective tiger lord deity (虎爷; *Huye*) each year.

The combined temple is a recently created type that has rarely existed in other Chinese communities. Apart from altered temple practices, its architectural forms departed significantly from those found in China and elsewhere, incorporating compromises, adaptations, and innovations. Daoist, Buddhist, and local deities were sometimes housed “under one roof” in these shared spaces. Subsequent

to the initial combination of temples as one combined temple within one structure, they may be reconstructed as separate entities on mutual agreement, or when leases were renewed. Temples that cannot afford to renew their leases were required to vacate their lots, which are then taken over by other temples or absorbed by neighboring ones.

Longstanding design principles for Chinese temples, such as the creation of a central processional and ritual axis, are often abandoned when even-numbered constituent temples are combined. Second, the main entrance may be positioned at the side of the building rather than aligned along the axis in front of the main altar due to site constraints. Third, the tallest structure may not be constructed along the central axis of the complex, especially when temples at the ends of the row construct taller buildings than the one in the middle. Finally, tentage structures are built for individual temples or for all temples between the entrance and the combined temple. These may be temporary or permanent according to decisions of the constituent temple committees, as permanent theater structures are no longer constructed in Singapore's Chinese temples. These adaptations and changes disrupt conventional spatial hierarchies and traditional architectural design principles in Chinese temple design.

The above discussions of rural Chinese houses and combined temples demonstrate that overseas Chinese who migrated to Singapore and other parts of the tropics adapted to new landscapes, different climates, social conditions, and political development, and in the process altered primary spatial forms over time in response to these factors. Importantly, this calls upon researchers to map, document, and analyze these spatial adaptations as situated architecture, rather than presuppose or characterize such built forms as "impure" or "erroneous" deviations from those in China.

These discussions have focused on two extant spatial types related to rural spaces in Singapore and its rural Chinese communities. Other rural spaces and built forms, including those linked to cottage industries, rural factories, quarries, military camps, railway sites, and even cemeteries, also warrant investigation and research, and may be the subjects of future studies. Suffice it to say, research on rural histories enhances our understanding of the range of wilderness, agriculture, and settlements that once existed in Singapore, as well as the communities that inhabited them.

5. Conclusion

About 80 percent of Singapore's population was living in public housing by the 1990s (Figure 6). The work of the Housing and Development Board, the key agency

responsible for estate construction and housing provision, enabled the majority of Singaporeans to attain home ownership of high-rise apartment flats since the agency's inception in 1960. Over the course of three decades from the 1960s to the 1990s, the rural landscape and the villages (known locally as *kampungs*) were displaced by these new estates, becoming obscured even in the memories of former residents.

In a 1995 article, sociologist Chua Beng Huat observed the surfacing of nostalgia for these *kampungs*, most of which had been replaced by new development by that time. He placed 1993 as the time that this phenomenon began, based on a noticeable increase in references to "*kampung*" in Singapore's main newspaper. These references were subsequently circulated, correlated, and constructed as expressions and constructs of shared nostalgia. Chua characterized the essence of the "memorialized *kampung*" as embodying "a 'relaxed' pace of life, communitarian co-operation and happy days despite material privation." (Chua, 1995, p. 228)

In the decades that followed, such constructions and imaginations of the *kampung* and its corollary "*kampung* spirit" did not abate. Instead, they expanded and evolved, particularly through the onset of social media and their representations in popular media such as films, as well as official promotion and legitimization by state institutions, including museums. A current trend is the proliferation of (often excessive) wall murals in public and common spaces that nostalgically depict Singapore's rural pasts. These murals frequently feature *kampungs*, vernacular houses, and scenes of rural Singapore. Paraphrasing David Lowenthal, some of these depictions of the country(side) became a kind of foreign past for many younger Singaporeans (cf. Lowenthal, 1985).

Along with such nostalgic yearning and depiction of the past, there have been several notable developments related to rural spaces and histories. One key indicator is the continued recasting and renaming of the campaigns to green Singapore, which began with a 1963 tree-planting campaign that evolved to construe the island's development as a "Garden City." In the year 2000, the Urban Redevelopment Authority rebranded this vision as a "City in a Garden," in effect enveloping one entity within another, when previously one was effectively an adjective. Two decades later, in 2020, the National Parks Board recast the slogan as "Our City in Nature." The replacement of "garden" with "nature," and the shift in the agency involved in such rebranding exercises, suggest a recalibration of the developmental trajectory and politics of Singapore's green spaces. The reconfiguration of "garden" to "nature"—a term more closely associated with a pre-urban, less

human-modified landscape—warrants closer scrutiny, particularly with regard to its projected meanings and intended audiences.

In 2014, otters re-entered the urban spaces of Singapore after having been confined to isolated habitats to the island's north. As they navigated city streets and spaces and established new habitats along its waterways and other land areas, they became a symbol of how liveable the island had become for both humans and wildlife, and the possibility that Singaporeans could share environments with other creatures.

As Singapore had drastically reduced agriculture and animal husbandry after 1965, it needed to rely heavily on food imports from elsewhere around the world. However, the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as incidences of major supply chain disruptions, prompted serious reconsideration about its future food security. In response, the “30 by 30” initiative, launched in 2019 with the target of locally producing 30 percent of Singapore's food requirements by the year 2030. Agro-tech industries, the main component of this drive, have so far met with more challenges than successful examples.

The rapid urbanization of Singapore after World War II—and its acceleration during the three decades from Independence through the 1990s—has largely eclipsed and erased rural ecumene and its associated knowledge. These issues and concerns about the island's landscape futures, human–animal interactions, and food security, are connected to non-urban imaginaries and land-use practices. The revisiting of Singapore's rural histories and practices as valuable, albeit largely forgotten, knowledge bases would help with the understanding of historical trajectories that had led to the present situation, as well as to provide additional tools and means to address them. Yet studies and resources about Singapore's rural domain remain scarce and are unintegrated. Renewed efforts in the collation, translation, and interpretation of these rural histories, built forms, knowledges, experiences, and practices are now essential for informing and structuring master plans, such that a more sustainable and ecologically balanced future for Singapore may be charted.

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