

Guide to Biographical Research in Singapore*

Introduction

There are many resources which can help in finding out biographical information about personalities from Singapore's past. Aside from the obvious sources (biographies and autobiographies, Who's Who) there exist other more obscure sources which can also yield useful information. Biographical and genealogical research in Singapore, especially for the colonial period, can be significantly more difficult than genealogy in other countries for the following reasons:

- Records are not as complete, especially for the colonial period, where registered birth and death records are mostly no longer extant. In Britain, for example, baptismal records can provide a very complete listing of a family's lineage, but no such equivalents exist in Singapore.
- Most earlier records are not computerized.
- Personal names are frequently anglicized in different ways, and one needs to know all the orthographic variants for a complete search
- As a mostly immigrant community, records may be in countries of origin or may no longer be extant.

Steps to conducting biographical research:

1. Consolidate what is already known about the subject's life by reference to a general work (e.g. an encyclopaedia).
2. Decide what sources are most likely to contain information about the subject. (e.g. publications/records of organizations the subject belonged to.)
3. Note down important dates and places, and draw up a chronology, which can aid in narrowing down uncertain details or pinning down when exactly an event occurred. Dates are also important when checking up newspapers.
4. Compile a list of sources used along the way, for later reference and to draw up a bibliography. Also make note of sources cited in books and articles read, to trace backwards and check against primary sources.

Sometimes, conflicts or contradictions may appear, with one source saying one thing, and another saying something else. There are some possible reasons for this: one of them is in error, accounts copied from somewhere else perpetuated an earlier mistake, they are different interpretations of the same historical evidence (which may eventually turn out to be inadequate for making any firm conclusions), or they may reflect different aspects of the subject's life (e.g. his private life vs. his public life). Often, it might be impossible to choose one and reject another, so both may have to be accepted as possibilities. This is the same approach as philological scholarship.

* Compiled by Brandon Seah (kb.seah at gmail.com), 2007.

Many Singaporean personalities of the past have led part of their lives or were involved in affairs in other countries. Books and articles published outside Singapore should not be overlooked, and foreign archives and institutions may contain useful records.

The list of sources below is not exhaustive, but only an introduction with examples of what exists in various genres. This bibliography is biased towards Chinese sources, because of my own research interests.

The National Library Board has published PathFinder pamphlets on this topic from which some of the following references have been obtained:

Heirwin Mohd and Ong Eng Chuan. *Singapore Personalities Past and Present*. National Library Board, 2003.

Heirwin Mohd. *Prominent Singaporeans: sources of information*. Singapore: National Library Board, 2004.

General Works and Books

These can help provide the first step into finding out more.

Koh, Tommy et al. (eds.) *Singapore: the encyclopedia*. Singapore: Editions Didier Millet, National Heritage Board, 2006.

Corfield, Justin J. *Encyclopedia of Singapore*. Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2006.

Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka. *Ensiklopedia sejarah dan kebudayaan Melayu*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1999.

Lal, Brij V. et al. (eds.) *The encyclopedia of the Indian diaspora*. Singapore: Editions Didier Millet, National University of Singapore, 2006.

Pan, Lynn (ed.) *The encyclopedia of the Chinese overseas*. Singapore: Editions Didier Millet, 2006.

Pugalenthi Sr. *Indian pioneers of Singapore*. Singapore: VJ Times, 1998.

Buckley, C.B. *Anecdotal history of old times in Singapore*. 1902, reprint Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1984.

Makepeace, W, G.E. Brooke, R.St J. Braddel (eds.) *One hundred years of Singapore*. 1921, reprint Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1991.

Song Ong Siang. *One hundred years' history of the Chinese in Singapore*. 1902, reprint Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1984.

Turnbull, C.M. *A history of Singapore, 1819-1988*. Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1989.

Also consult:

Guide to the sources of history in Singapore. 2 vols. Singapore: National Archives, 1989. which lists and describes archival sources and holding institutions.

Tim Yap Fuan (ed.) *A sense of history: a select bibliography on the history of Singapore*. Singapore: National University of Singapore Library, 1998.

Biographies

The most straightforward way to get information about someone is if a biography has been written of his or her life or if he or she has penned an autobiography. Examples:

Chandran, R. (producer) *Hedwig Anuar: first lady of the National Library* (videorecording). Singapore: National Library, 1988.

Ng, Harris. *Recovered grace: schizophrenia*. Singapore: Harris Ng Yoke Meng, 2005.

李王晶莹 〈我的爸妈：王佐与秀锦的故事〉 新加坡：李王晶莹，2005.

傅子玖 《陈嘉庚传》 石家庄：花山文艺出版社，1999.

Journal Articles

Biographical articles are sometimes published in academic journals. Alternatively, papers may be published on historical topics or incidents which the research subject may have been involved in. Examples of journals which publish papers relevant to Singapore history and personalities:

Asian Culture (亚洲文化)

Journal of Southeast Asian Studies (and its predecessor)

Journal of the Island Society (新社学报, defunct)

Journal of the Malaysian Branch, Royal Asiatic Society (and its predecessors)

Journal of the South Seas Society (南洋学报)

Journal of Tropical Geography

南洋大学学报 (defunct)

The National University of Singapore produces the *Periodicals Index (PERIND)* to periodical literature on Singapore and South-East Asian topics from the 1980s onwards that is available from its website. The National Library Board publishes the *Singapore Periodicals Index* on CD-ROM, indexing periodicals published in Singapore from 1981 onwards.

Indices to individual journals have also been published from time to time, these can be consulted for articles before the start dates of the above two indices:

Lim Bee Lum. *Index of articles of the Journal of Southeast Asian History (1960-69) and the Journal of Southeast Asian Studies (1970-79)*. Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1981.

Lim Huck Tee and D.E.K. Wijasuriya. *Index Malaysiana: an index to the Journal of the Straits Branch, Royal Asiatic Society and the Journal of the Malayan Branch, Royal*

Asiatic Society, 1878-1963. Kuala Lumpur: Malaysian Branch, Royal Asiatic Society, 1970. [With supplements]

林孝胜 《亚洲文化》 索引1983-2002, 新加坡亚洲研究学会学报>> 新加坡: 新加坡亚洲研究学会, 2002.

Epigraphy

This is an often neglected source of primary historical information. It includes memorial inscriptions, gravestones, and statuary. They usually have material that cannot be found in any published or written records. Although they can appear to be little other than lists of names and dates, much can be inferred from them, as Mak Lau Fong's book demonstrates.

陈荆和与陈育崧编著 《新加坡华文碑铭集录》 香港: 香港中文大学出版部 1972.

[This book compiles transcriptions of the contents of all Chinese epigraphic inscriptions in Singapore known to the authors, for instance, lists of donors to temple building funds, and even memorial stones in Chinese churches.]

Franke, Wolfgang, and Chen Tieh Fan (comp. and eds.) *Chinese epigraphic materials in Malaysia*. 3 vols. Kuala Lumpur, University of Malaya Press, 1982-85. [These volumes include an index to personal names found within the transcriptions of epigraphy that they have published.]

Franke, Wolfgang (comp. and ed.) *Chinese epigraphic materials in Indonesia*. 3 vols. Singapore: South Seas Society, 1988.

Chng, David K.Y. *Heroic images of Ming loyalists: a study of the spirit tablets of the Ghee Hin Kongsì leaders in Singapore*. Singapore: Singapore Society of Asian Studies, 1999.

Mak Lau Fong. *Rigidity of system boundary among major Chinese dialect groups in the 19th century: a study of inscription data*. Singapore: Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences, Nanyang University, 1978.

Stallwood, H.A. 'The Old Cemetery on Fort Canning, Singapore.' Pp. 269-317 in: Sheppard, Mubim (ed.) *Singapore 150 years*. Singapore: Times Books International, MBRAS, 1982.

Genealogies

Numerous Chinese clans in Singapore have published genealogies of their family lines, which may include the subject of interest. There also exist unpublished ones in private hands or in the possession of clan associations. Some examples:

吴剑平编 《南洋吴氏宗谱: 纪元前1293年—公元1976年合为3269年》 新加坡: 南洋吴氏宗亲会重修宗谱编委会, 1976.

许教正 《许氏宗谱》 新加坡: 星洲许氏总会, 1963.

杨大金 《杨氏宗谱》 新加坡: 星洲杨氏总会, 1965.

The Genealogy of Lim Nee Soon (undated, unpublished) National Archives of Singapore.

Newspapers

Newspapers contain contemporary accounts of people and events, as well as obituaries. However, to be able to locate the material, one must at least know the approximate date when something happened, because no indices are available to Singapore newspapers yet. If the subject was involved in some commercial interests, there is also the possibility of looking for advertisements put out by these bodies in the press, a hitherto neglected source of interesting historical information on commercial activity and daily life.

Lim Pui Huen, P. (comp.) *Singapore, Malaysian, and Brunei newspapers: an international union list*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1992. [This lists known historical and current newspapers, their period of publication, and which institutions have them in their collections.]

Most newspaper holdings are in libraries on microform, but the earliest Chinese newspaper in Singapore, the *Lat Pau*, has been digitized and put online by the NUS Chinese Library: <http://www.lib.nus.edu.sg/lebao/index.htm>, as well as another later paper, the Sin Kuo Mit Jit Pao: <http://www.lib.nus.edu.sg/skm/>.

Anniversary issues of newspapers also may contain biographical write-ups on prominent personalities of the time, or of the past. Newspaper publishers may also issue commemorative publications. For example:

Singapore Free Press Centenary Number, 8 Oct 1935.

Straits Times Millennium Special, 31 Dec 1999.

关楚璞主编 〈星洲十年〉 新加坡:星洲日报, 1940.

Legal Records

If the subject or his associates or family has been involved in legal cases, for instance in the case of inheritance disputes among his heirs, legal records may contain these cases which also record other details of their life and activities which may have been legally relevant to the cases at hand.

Colonial era:

Woods, R.C. (comp.) *A selection of Oriental cases decided in the Supreme Court of the Straits Settlements*. Penang: privately printed, 1869.

Leicester, Stephen (comp.) *Straits Law Reports: being a report of cases decided in the Supreme Court of the Straits Settlements Penang, Singapore, and Malacca*. Penang, 1877.

Norton-Kyshe, James William. (ed.) *Cases heard and determined in Her Majesty's Supreme Court of the Straits Settlements, 1808-1884* ["Kyshe's Reports"] 4 vols. Singapore: Singapore and Straits Printing Office, 1885-1890.
Straits Law Journal (and reporter). Jun 1888 to Jun 1891.
Straits Law Reports (new series). Jul 1891 to Apr 1892.
Straits Settlements Law Reports. 1893 onwards.

Modern era:

Legal Research Board (comp.) *Index to Malaysian and Singapore cases, 1932-1996*. Kuala Lumpur: International Law Book Services, 1998.

Community Association Records

Clan associations, community associations, clubs and societies have published records such as membership directories (see below) and souvenir magazines usually commemorating certain anniversaries. Most clan associations do not have records extending back to the 19th century as many records were lost during the Japanese Occupation, therefore, these souvenir publications may be the only available sources for their history. A number of associations also have unpublished archival records, most of which are also available on microfilm (private donor's collections) at the National Archives.

Chng, David K. Y. (comp.) *A select bibliography of Chinese sources for nineteenth-century Singapore*. Singapore: National Library, 1987.

Lim How Seng (comp.) *Singapore Chinese Huiguan publications: a bibliography*. Singapore: Singapore Federation of Chinese Clan Associations, 1989.

郑良树 〈新马华族史料文献汇目〉 新加坡: 南洋学会, 1984.

The above publications contain lists of Chinese clan association souvenir magazines. Also see the bibliography of Yen Ching-hwang's book:
Yen Ching-hwang. *A social history of the Chinese in Singapore and Malaya 1800-1911*. Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1986.

Examples of commemorative publications:

Braga-Blake, Myrna (ed.) *Singapore Eurasians: memories and hopes*. Singapore: Times Editions, 1992.

〈福建会馆主办道南学校创校八十周年纪念特刊〉 新加坡: [该校], 1987.

〈新加坡潮州八邑会馆成立六十周年纪念特刊〉 新加坡: [该会馆], 1989.

Government Records

Government records are kept at the National Archives of Singapore, which has an online catalogue at Archives and Artefacts Online, <http://www.a2o.com.sg/>.

The manuscript collections of materials before the Transfer to the Colonial Office (i.e. before 1867) are partially indexed:

Tan Soo Chye (comp.) *Index to the Straits Settlements Records 1800-1867*. Singapore: typescript, 1971.

Post-transfer (after 1867) records are mostly in the CO 273 series of Colonial Office papers, held in the Public Record Office, UK, of which Singapore institutions have microform copies. This series has also been indexed:

Kratoska, Paul H. (comp.) *Index to British Colonial Office files pertaining to British Malaya 1838-1946*. 4 vols. Kuala Lumpur: Arkib Negara Malaysia, 1990.

These records are most useful for researching on persons like colonial officials, prominent 'locals' (usually merchants), social conditions, and so on. Examples of what biographical material can be found include certificates of naturalization for foreign-born Singapore residents, official reports of public institutions and government departments, petitions to which the subject might be signatory.

Parliamentary records include reports on issues of the day; the subject might have been called to give testimony to commission hearings, may have been signatory to a petition submitted to the authorities (thus giving some idea of his concerns and interests), or may have been a Member of Parliament or the Legislative Council.

Chng, David K.Y. (comp.) *Index to papers and reports laid before the Legislative Council of the Straits Settlements (1867-1955)*. Singapore: National Archives, 1992. This index is organized alphabetically by topic, so given a topic which one's research subject is known to have been involved in, (e.g. immigration, housing) one can look for papers or reports which may have mention of him or her.

Establishment Lists

These contain lists of government figures, usually with short biographical data for the more important members such as cabinet ministers. Civil servants and employees of public institutions can also be found within. Establishment lists for the colonial years can be found within the *Singapore and Straits Directory* (see below). Also consult:

Straits Settlements Blue Book. Singapore: Government Printing Office, until 1940.

Post-independence Singapore's establishment lists up to 1977/78:
Establishment List – Singapore. Singapore: Parliament, papers by command.

From 1977 onwards, it was merged with another publication to become:

The budget for the financial year: Republic of Singapore. Singapore: Singapore National Printers, 1978-onwards

From 1981 onwards, there is available the:

Singapore government directory. Singapore: Ministry of Information, Communications, and the Arts.

Directories

Commercial directories list commercial bodies grouped by category and frequently also list proprietors, boards of directors, etc. The earliest is the *Singapore Almanack and Directory*, which was later known under different names but is usually cited as *Singapore and Straits Directory*:

1846-1860, *Singapore almanack and directory.*

1870-1874, *Straits calendar and directory.*

1877-1879, *Singapore directory for the Straits Settlements, Singapore and Malayan directory.*

1949- , *Straits Times directory of Singapore and Malaya.*

Early volumes include an alphabetical directory of prominent citizens (usually Europeans, but with some notable non-Europeans such as Hoo Ah Kay and the Sultan of Johore) and their addresses.

The National Library also holds in its collections the membership directories of various associations and organizations, e.g. chambers of commerce, professional associations, clubs and societies. It has compiled a list of directories in its collection:

National Library Board (comp.) *Directories of Singapore and Malaysia.* Singapore: NLB, 1996.

Who's Who

This covers the 'official' *Who's Who*, the latest edition of which is:

Low Kar Tiang (ed.) *Who's who in Singapore 2006.* Singapore: Who's Who Pub., 2006.

But there are other similar publications such as:

Legal Who's who in Singapore. Singapore: Key Media Pte. Ltd., 2003.

People at the peak: the who's who of Singapore. Singapore: Magazines Incorporated, 2003.

Aplin, Nick, David Waters, Leong May Lai. *Singapore Olympians: the complete who's who 1936-2004.* Singapore: Singapore National Olympic Council, 2005.

Sim, Victor (ed.) *Biographies of prominent Chinese in Singapore*. Singapore: Nan Kok Publication Company, 1950.

Varathan, S. *Personalities of Tamil Drama in Singapore*. Singapore: Singapore Indian Artistes' Association, 1991.

陈立贵 〈新加坡人物论丛〉 香港: 香港新华彩印出版社, 2002.

宋哲美 《星马人物志》 香港: 东南亚研究所, 1969-.

许教正主编 〈东南亚人物志〉 新加坡: 许教正, 1965-1969.

Chinese community groups and individuals have several similar books:

柯木林主编 《新华历史人物列传》 新加坡: 教育出版公司, 1995.

潘醒农 《马来亚潮侨通鉴》 新加坡: 南岛出版社, 1950.

吴华 〈新加坡海南人物录〉 新加坡: 武吉智马琼崖联谊会海南作家作品研究室, 2004.

Others

Ephemera, unpublished private collection records in the National Archives, oral history recordings, burial records, Commonwealth War Graves Commission records,

Oral histories and their synopses can be searched online through the National Archives' website, <http://www.a2o.com.sg/>.

There have also been published catalogues of recordings, and other books containing interviews:

Archives and Oral History Department. *Pioneers of Singapore: a catalogue of oral history interviews*. Singapore: Archives and Oral History Department, 1984.

Chew, Melanie. *Leaders of Singapore*. Singapore: Resource Press, 1996.

Other materials which can be found through the National Archives include: photographs and other portraiture, private records (e.g. letters and diaries) which have been donated to the Archives by private individuals, burial records, or maps and building plans (these may shed light on places of residence or housing conditions, since building owner's names were recorded).

Birth and death extracts can be obtained from the Immigrations and Checkpoints Authority for a fee.

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission keeps an online database of personnel buried in cemeteries under its care (including the Kranji cemetery), mostly personnel who were killed in the two World Wars.