

MEDIA RELEASE

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DISCOVER SINGAPORE'S PIONEERING TRADES THROUGH FIRSTHAND ACCOUNTS OF SIX TRADESMEN AND COMMUNITY CONTRIBUTIONS

Community comes on board to contribute their stories, memories and artefacts to a community exhibition at the National Museum of Singapore.

Singapore, 14 March 2013 – Casting wedding jewellery, writing letters and hand-painting movie posters are not occupations that are commonplace today. Hence, the National Heritage Board (NHB) is working with the community to document and present our nation's old trades through a community exhibition titled *Trading Stories: Conversations with Six Pioneering Tradesmen*.

2. Featuring the personal stories and memories of six pioneering tradesmen and contributions from the community, *Trading Stories* provides fresh insights on the old trades of Singapore. From a traditional goldsmith to a movie poster painter, *tukang urut* or Malay confinement lady, Samsui woman, poultry farmer and letter writer, the exhibition recounts the eventful journeys and experiences they had in Singapore's early years of development.

3. The exhibition also looks at how some of these early trades have evolved to remain relevant and needful in society today. These poignant stories of sacrifices and struggles, of passion and courage, and of resilience and adaptability, serve as lessons and inspiration for the younger generations of today. Hence, *Trading Stories* is a tribute to the pragmatic fortitude and entrepreneurial courage of Singapore's older workforce, and an acknowledgement to the many experiences and voices that make up the fabric of the Singapore story.

4. As a showcase of the community by the community, the exhibition is the result of the close collaboration with many Singaporeans to identify these personal stories of early Singapore. It features over 20 exhibits contributed by the community. These items include private artefacts and keepsakes, locally produced documentaries and a community photography exhibit on old local trades. In addition, visitors to the exhibition will be able to leave their personal memories of old trades which will enhance the existing content as well, thus growing the exhibition further.

5. "Said Mr Faizal Somadi, who contributed his works of Jawi calligraphy (Arabic calligraphy in Malay language) to be showcased alongside the story of the letter writer, "I have always been interested in more traditional forms of writing, such as the Latin manuscript and Arabic calligraphy, also known as khat. To me, learning khat is not only part of my heritage and culture, but I am also doing my part to ensure that it continues to live on for the future, which is why I also give lessons to others on khat. I sometimes incorporate khat into my work as a graphic designer; I want to show that traditional writing can still be very much part of our lives today."

6. Ms Thangamma Karthigesu, Director of the Education and Outreach Division, NHB, said, “The Singapore we know today is built by the hands of those before us. It is important that we acknowledge the resilience, resourcefulness and innovation that our forebears have demonstrated, as these qualities serve to shape our future as well. We are very heartened that our six tradesmen so generously shared their life stories with us, so that more Singaporeans will know about these values that have carried them through life. This exhibition would also not be possible without the contributions from members of the community that have helped create an impactful showcase that we know will resonate with Singaporeans of all ages.”

7. To further engage the community, a series of street theatre performances and demonstrations of old trades, rarely seen in Singapore today, will complement the exhibition on weekends in May and June. And to encourage a greater appreciation of the contributions of our forefathers amongst our younger generations, school programmes will be introduced to help enhance the *Trading Stories* experience for primary and secondary school students.

8. *Trading Stories* will run from 15 March to 23 June 2013 at the Stamford Gallery, National Museum of Singapore. Opening hours are from 10am to 6pm daily and admission is free. For more information, please visit www.nhb.gov.sg/tradingstories.

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Annex A: Profile of Six Pioneering Tradesmen
Annex B: Profile of Community Contributors
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About National Heritage Board

The National Heritage Board (NHB) champions the development and promotion of a vibrant cultural and heritage sector in Singapore. It makes heritage enriching, relevant and accessible to all through staging innovative programmes and forging partnerships with both private and people sector counterparts. NHB leverages on state-of-the-art technology and refreshing new approaches to make heritage more dynamic, alive and exciting for different audiences. It also manages both national and public museums, the Preservation of Monuments Board and the Heritage Conservation Centre. NHB was formed on 1 August 1993 as a statutory board under the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts (MICA). Please visit www.nhb.gov.sg for more information.

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TRADING STORIES: CONVERSATIONS WITH SIX PIONEERING TRADESMEN

• **Profile of Six Pioneering Tradesmen**

Urut Lady

Runtik Binti Murtono, 53 year old
Born in Surabaya, East Java, immigrated to Singapore in 1994

She has been massaging and “wrapping” new mothers back to health and shapeliness for more than 35 years. A third generation keeper of the secrets of traditional Malay confinement practices and medicine, she counts mothers of many races amongst her clients.

Attending to new mothers

Fondly known to her clients as Ibu Tutik, Madam Runtia binte Murtono comes from a line of traditional midwives and *jamu* healers. Her grandmother was a village elder whose knowledge of the traditional Malay art of natural healing with *jamu* (a blend of herbs derived from bark, roots and flowers of plants) and birthing rituals, made her a much sought after *Bidan* (midwife) in her kampong in Surabaya, East Java.

Since moving to Singapore in 1994, Ibu Tutik has made her living as an *urut* lady and what she earns supports her family here, with enough left over to send back to relatives to build a house for them in Surabaya. “My days are long; I start at 8am in the mornings, travelling from my home in Sengkang to all corners of Singapore - Tanjong Rhu, Orchard Road, Clementi, Bukit Panjang - wherever my clients’ live. When I get home in the evenings, it’s time to cook dinner and do house chores. But, I enjoy my work and I am still strong.”

Ibu Tutik’s clients will call her in advance of their delivery to ensure that she is there for them during their confinement month; many come back to her when they are expecting again. The *urut* lady does not need to advertise her services: many of Ibu Tutik’s clients come to her by referrals from satisfied mothers.





Letter Writer

Thangaraju s/o Singaram, 85 years old
Born in Tamil Nadu, India, immigrated to Singapore in 1951.

Tamil immigrants who could not read or write would seek his help with letter writing. But he was more than a letter writer: in helping those who came to him to maintain ties with their loved ones in India, he often also played the part of a counsellor and a mediator.

The South Indian immigrant

Although he was born to a poor farming family in Tamil Nadu, Thangaraju was unusually privileged to have received ten years of schooling. "My mother insisted on it even though it was a struggle for the family." The privilege has brought blessings, opening doors to the *Thirukkural* Tamil moral classic that has guided him in his life; education has also enabled him to help other Tamil immigrants who could not read and write.

The Tamil immigrants who went to Thangaraju with their letters were mainly older men with little schooling. Often they would meet in coffee shops in the little alleys off Serangoon Road. Over a cup of tea, Thangaraju would read to them their letters from home and listen to what they wanted to say in return. Helping with letter writing was his customary activity on Sundays and holidays for many years even after he moved to Kampong Bahru in the mid-1960s.

By then, Thangaraju had established a family of his own and was working as a warehouse supervisor for the Port Authority of Singapore. With his savings, he brought his family to Singapore in 1966. Anchored by the life he had created here and the extended family of immigrant 'brothers', he felt a new sense of belonging. For the early immigrant, Singapore is now his home.





Samsui Woman

Ng Moey Chye, 81 years old
Born in Singapore

She worked as a menial labourer in construction sites, doing work that machines now perform. It has been a hard life, but she remains thankful for the young volunteers who are helping her in her old age.

Sworn to singlehood

“Feisty” is the word that comes to mind when describing 81 year old Ng Moey Chye. Living on her own in a one-room Housing Development Board rental flat in Red Hill, she does not allow her age to slow her down. Ng supports herself by collecting used cardboard. Once a week, she will make her way to the Apex Club of Singapore’s food distribution point to receive a package that includes vegetable and bread. Ng makes sure to collect the empty boxes too.

Born in Singapore in 1932, Ng was the daughter of a Samsui Woman. Her mother had settled into a marriage that produced more than 10 children. Her parents could not support another child and were forced to give Ng up for adoption when she was born. She never went to school and started supporting herself when she was 13 years old. At 17, she decided to become a Samsui Woman and swore to remain single after seeing a friend’s unhappy marriage with a compulsive gambler. Nothing was more important to Ng than her independence, even if it meant having to support herself.

Today, Ng does not have a family to call her own as most of her Samsui sisters have gone back to China or have passed away. Nevertheless the octogenarian remains positive and determined to maintain her independence.





Poultry Farmer

Ho Seng Choon, 89 years old
Born in China, immigrated to Singapore in 1929

He has been a poultry farmer for more than 60 years. A pioneer in introducing advanced methods of primary production in Singapore, his fowl business has grown from kampong farm to a leader in the science of poultry production.

An Industry Leader in the Fowl Business

Singapore's only game bird farm, Lian Wah Hang is fully integrated, specializing in breeding modules, with its own stock of "grandparents" and "parents" for game bird reproduction, providing 11 million quail eggs annually to consumers in Singapore alone. All this started with a young man who had a passion in exploring the new, and the drive to face the challenges of the farm business.

Rebuilding his life after the war, Ho saw the business potential of poultry farming with Singapore's growing population. He embarked on a study trip to Japan and the Netherlands in the early 1950s to learn the latest methods in livestock breeding and production. Securing land in Changi and Choa Chu Kang, Ho started Lian Wah Hang Farm in 1955 with a few batches of chicks from Japan. 60 years later, the sole proprietorship has grown into a conglomerate with farms in Singapore and Johore, and retail lines for battery systems and feedmills, husbandry consultancy and education.

In 1998, Ho passed the baton to his youngest son, William, a second-generation farmer. Enjoying the fruits of his labour, the 89-year-old is content and healthy. Living on his farm in Lim Chu Kang, he continues to contribute to the farming industry and the community of farmers in the Kranji Countryside enclave.





Indian Goldsmith

Murugaian s/o Ratnaswami Asari, 72 years old
Born in Tamil Nadu, India, immigrated to Singapore in
1957

Of the Achari craftsman caste, he left the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu in the 1950s to find work in Singapore. Then, there were hundreds of goldsmiths working in Little India. Now, his is one of only two in the area still in the traditional business of handcrafted jewellery.

Midas Touch

Among the many goldsmith shops in Little India, Murugaian's RMP Jewellers & Goldsmith on Kerbau Road looks like one that time has forgotten. Located in a narrow shophouse, little about its shop-front announces the nature of its business. Inside, the shop is tiny and security bars protect a modest assortment of silver and gold ornaments.

Like the shop he owns, Murugaian's unassuming front belies a gritty pioneering spirit. He entered the goldsmith trade relatively late in life. 16 years old when he left Tamil Nadu in 1957, he became an apprentice to a master goldsmith in Buffalo Road when he was well in his 20s. Working as a carpenter for the Royal Air Force by day and a gardener on weekends, he devoted nights to learning the skill of traditional goldsmithing. After four years of apprenticeship, he rented a small smithy space for \$60 a month and began taking orders for traditionally handcrafted jewellery. In the 1980s, Murugaian started his own jewellery shop and opened Indian Jewellers in a back lane off Serangoon Road. He later moved the shop to main street Serangoon Road and acquired an adjoining unit to expand the business.

Murugaian's son Parthiban now manages Indian Jewellers, and the old man keeps himself busy with RMP Jewellers & Goldsmith. He started the latter in 2009 and plans to hand over the goldsmithing business to Parthiban when he retires.





Movie Poster Painter

Ang Hao Sai, 62 years old
Born in Singapore

An art-maker at heart

He was not a good student but he excelled in art. With just Primary 6 level education, 13-year-old Ang Hao Sai left school to become an apprentice in Lam Kok, a large poster studio on Cairnhill Road. As an apprentice, he did menial jobs at the studio for 3 meals a day and a small allowance of \$20 a month. He hung around after others had left to secretly practice sketching movie stars and scenes on scraps of paper. Recognising his interest, Lam Kok's boss put the boy on the production line. Assigned the role of applying background colours, Ang Hao Sai began his 30-year career of painting movie posters in the early half of the 1960s and quickly rose to become the studio's master painter.

In 1987, Ang started his own poster painting business, relying on Cathay for most of his jobs. Hao Meng Art Studio was then a two-man production team while Ang's wife provided administrative support. But the movie poster painting industry was already in its sunset years. Hao Meng Art Studio eventually found its niche after the late 1990s in events and festive production, building stage backdrops and event sets for clients such as Omni-Theatre and Science Centre.

The 62 year-old Ang remains active in the family business even as he prepares to hand the reigns over to his son Adrian. He knows that the company must adapt to keep up with industry practices. In his workshop at Ang Mo Kio Industrial Park, digital software and an industrial inkjet printer now perform the work he used to do by hand.



TRADING STORIES: CONVERSATIONS WITH SIX PIONEERING TRADESMEN

- Profile of Community Contributors

COMMUNITY PHOTOGRAPHY EXHIBIT: JEROME LIM

Once told that it was his destiny to wander through life, Jerome Lim attempts to capture on through photographs, the many things that have caught his imagination on life's long and winding road.

Jerome's site, The Long and Winding Road (thelongwindingroad.wordpress.com), was picked as the Best Photography blog at the Singapore Blog Awards in both 2011 and 2012.

JAWI CALLIGRAPHY ARTWORKS FOR LETTER WRITER SECTION: FAIZAL SOMADI

Faizal Somadi (b. 1979, Singapore) has been practicing the art of calligraphy since he was 10 years old. Moving from Latin manuscript, the graphic designer embarked on learning *khat* in 2002 from calligraphers in Asia. Since then, Faizal has been actively creating as well as giving lessons on the traditional art form. His journey on *khat* continues under the tutelage of a Turkish master calligrapher.

LOAN OF HAND-PAINTED "MY MAGIC" MOVIE POSTER: ERIC KHOO

Award winning filmmaker Eric Khoo helms Zhao Wei Films and Gorylah Pictures. The Cultural Medallion recipient was awarded the Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Letters in 2008, and his feature, *My Magic*, was nominated for the Cannes Palme d'Or in the same year.

Khoo put Singapore on the international film map with his first feature film "Mee Pok Man" (1995), picking up prizes at Fukuoka, Pusan and Singapore. His second feature "12 Storeys" (1997) was the first Singaporean film to be invited officially to participate in the 50th Cannes Film Festival (1997).

Directed by Singapore filmmaker Eric Khoo, *My Magic* is a story about love and redemption of a broken magician and his 12 year-old son. Khoo commissioned the *My Magic* canvas poster for display at the film's Singapore premier on 25 September, 2008 at Golden Village Vivo City. "I felt the subject matter and bizarre magic would come across really well in an old style canvas painting. A nod to nostalgia."

LOAN OF EMBROIDERY "SAMSUI WOMEN AT LUNCH": AGNES TSU

Madam Agnes Tsu sewed this embroidery in 1964 as an art and craft entry for her Cambridge O Level Examination when she was 17 years old. Sent to London for

grading, it impressed the Cambridge examiners and won her a high grade. But this is not the only reason why the embroidery is special for Agnes. “My late father drew the Samsui Women picture for me. He was very artistic, and the embroidery is one way for me to remember him by.”

LOAN OF WEDDING SAREE, VEIL AND COSTUME JEWELLERY: MRS SUSHEETA MANOHARAN

Susheeta Manoharan is the Social Chairman of the Ceylon Sports Club as well the Social and Cultural Secretary of the Singapore Ceylon Tamils Association. She wore this sari and veil on her wedding day on 18 August 2002 at the Sreenivasa Perumal Temple. We are grateful to Susheeta for the personal loan as well as for helping with dressing the mannequin.

ANNEX C

TRADING STORIES: CONVERSATIONS WITH SIX PIONEERING TRADESMEN

- **Public and School Programmes**

Public Programmes:

Venue: NMS Glass Atrium

Date: 25 & 26 May and 1, 2, 15, 16, 22 & 23 June

Time: Please visit www.nhb.gov.sg/tradingstories for more information

Admission fees: Free

As part of the exhibition, a special series of street theatre performances and demonstrations of the old trades will be presented at the National Museum on weekends in May and June. Visitors of all ages will be entertained by performances and demonstrations rarely seen in Singapore today.

School Programmes:

Venue: NMS Seminar Rooms

Date: 28 March – 13 June 2013

Time: 2.30pm – 4.30pm

Admission fees: Free

To register: Please visit www.nhb.gov.sg/tradingstories to download the registration form and follow the instructions for submission

Schools are invited to register for an educational programme specially designed to enhance the *Trading Stories* experience for Primary and Secondary students.

Programme Highlights for Schools:

1. Self-exploratory tour of the “Trading Stories: Conversations with Six Tradesmen” exhibition (30 minutes)

Visit a special exhibition on old trades in Singapore and how tradesmen have coped with the challenge of changing times. Featuring the lives of six individuals who have made their living as a traditional goldsmith, movie poster painter, tukang urut or Malay confinement lady, Samsui woman, poultry farmer and letter writer, the exhibition sheds light on some of Singapore’s old trades through their personal stories – stories of sacrifices and struggles, of passion and fortitude, of entrepreneurial courage and adaptability.

2. Self-exploratory tour of the Singapore History Gallery (30 minutes)

The Singapore History Gallery adopts a story-telling approach, unveiling different perspectives as students travel through tales of the past. To let students appreciate the struggles that early settlers had to overcome, they will be taken

through the 'drama' of major national events as well as the personal stories of individuals.

3. Hands-on craft activities (60 minutes)

These activities are designed to provide students with a glimpse into the lives of tradesmen, so that they can appreciate the skill and dedication which goes into each trade. Students will try out the trades for themselves by performing simple craft activities.

4. Facebook Photo Contest (online)

Students will also be able to take part in the Facebook Photo Contest by taking photos of themselves with props from the six trades featured in the "Trade Stories" exhibition and posting it up on NHB's I Love Museum Facebook page. The best photos accompanied with the most creative captions stand to win attractive cash vouchers.

**An activity sheet will be provided to each student to guide and engage them throughout the entire programme.*