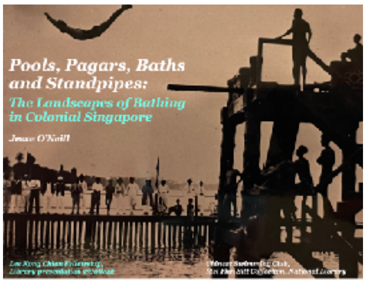
Pools, Pagars, Baths and Standpipes:
The Landscapes of Bathing in Colonial Singapore

Lee Kong Chian Fellowship
National Library Board of Singapore

Jesse O'Neill
23 August 2022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Over the past six months, as part of the Lee Kong Chian Fellowship, I've been looking at practices and places of swimming in colonial Singapore, from the start of British settlement until the Second World War, which came out of an interest in the architectural environments of swimming and leisure.

On local swimming places, there's a general sense that the earliest were built at in the 1930s, which were the Mount Emily Swimming Pool, and the Katong Pagar, and that before this, enjoying the water was restricted to European residents. But this view misses a great part of the subject. Two reasons probably shaped this view of a start to swimming in the 1930s: one is an emphasis on the idea of pools as public facilities; the other is a focus on swimming as a sport, which was only developed in Singapore around that time. In the nineteenth century, people went into the water for other reasons – it was for recreation, cleanliness or socialising, more than for competition.

This doesn't mean there weren't competitions in the nineteenth century, though 'games' might be a better term. For example, in the 1880s water games were held in the New Harbour for dockworkers and the public, where in addition to races, the competitions also included blindfolded swimming, obstacles races and the greasy pole. These were entertainments, and quite different from the athletic swimming meets that developed later.

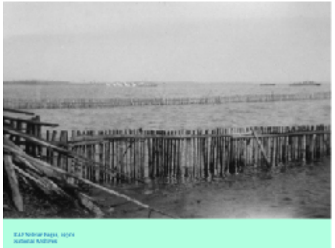
So, I want to set up a clarification. My approach, for this period, is to view the activity and places of 'bathing', rather than 'swimming'. In the nineteenth century swimming more often meant escaping danger, getting away from pirates or a sinking ship. Recreational water games was bathing. The complication is that bathing could also mean washing. But for a period where people didn't have indoor plumbing, where distinct bathrooms were more elite, and where washing practices were quite different from today, these two sides of bathing could be one and the same. Going for a bath in public could easily involve cleaning the body, socialising, getting exercise, taking in the medicinal qualities of the water, and enjoying the pleasure of it, all at the same time. It was only in the twentieth century that this activity took on two very separate public and private forms. As such, my aim has been to consider the wider development of a culture of public bathing in Singapore. Looking at the ways this activity left marks on the landscape, and how this reflects changing ideas of bathing from the nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century.

There are many ways to talk about this subject. It addresses the right to access public space, questions of racial and gendered segregation, economic privilege, and colonialist systems of order. It addresses questions of public and governmental imposition over private concern, and historical notions of morality. But in the process of researching this subject, many of these themes had to wait in order to do the more foundational work of finding what bathing places were actually available at different times, where they were located, what demand there was for bathing, and what kinds of structures were needed. So what I'll do now is to give a descriptive narrative of the different communal bathing places that were planned and developed in Singapore, and how they suggest different cultural drives, or 'periods' of bathing.

German sailors in their ship swimming pool, 1906
National Museum

Most of Singapore's bathing places were shaped by British ideas around bathing. Obviously this doesn't mean that there wasn't bathing earlier – the earliest European settlers saw Malays and Orang Laut as having a supernatural power for swimming. But in terms of the physical constructions of bathing places, these were shaped as a continuation of European histories of bathing, washing, and taking water cures.

The British colonialists who first arrived in Singapore in 1819 came from a culture that had only recently turned away from European traditions of inland natural springs, and were starting to find pleasure in bathing at the sea. Of course, what they found in Singapore was burdensome weather and pleasantly warm seas. For decades after setting up the Company port, sailors would regularly take part in a practice of bathing 'ship-side', which meant jumping overboard to enjoy the harbour waters. This came with dangers of drowning or sharks, and newspapers warned against the activity, but it did little to dissuade people.



British interests in the shore no doubt also influenced a group of men who got together in early 1827, and decided to finance the creation of a fenced swimming enclosure on the Esplanade beach, under the No.2 Battery, at the place that was later called Scandal Point. As best as can be determined, this structure was the first formal site for any sport or game in Singapore. By the newspaper description of this Battery Pagar, it sounds like it was built in regional vernacular construction methods, using conventions of Malay and Orang Laut architecture, something that remained a convention of bathing architecture for the next hundred years, as we see in this image a similar structure in Seletar front he 1930s.

The construction fronted directly onto the Esplanade, with three walls of nibung poles making an enclosure of 65 by 65 metres. Above the water on the far wall from the shore there were dressing rooms, which also tells us that on at least one of the side walls there was a pier that let people walk from the shore to the dressing rooms. This followed the established method of visiting the beach in Britain, which aimed to preserve modesty.

Bath houses, Penang, c.1909
National Archives

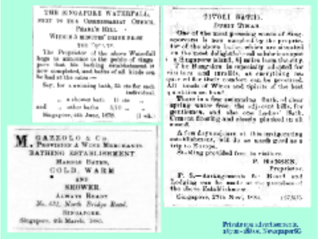
Changing rooms over the water gave people direct access to the sea, without having to be seen walking across a beach in a state of undress. These bath houses from Penang in 1909 gives us an impression of how the Battery Pagar changing rooms worked. But, there's only one further reference to this place, from the start of 1828, when a couple of convicts were swimming there at 3am. A police peon was trying to get them out, and from his boat, pushed his spear in-between the walls of the structure. Without seeing he accidentally stuck one of the convicts, killing him. The policeman was convicted on manslaughter. And that is the last reference to the Battery Pagar, which probably didn't survive 1828, and most likely it collapsed in the monsoon.

Interestingly, later discussion about Singapore's bathing facilities show that not only was this place short-lived, it also quickly forgotten, saying something about the public memory of urban development in the early decades of the colony.

Beach at the foot of Mount Palmer, c.1900
National Museum

The next identifiable swimming place came a couple of decades later, in 1849, and seems equally short-lived – something common for bathing in the nineteenth century. It was Marine Villa, an enclosure at the end of Telok Ayer Road. It was open two days a week for families, and one day for single men, and had a 10c entry fee. It was last mentioned in 1850.

In the middle of the 1860s, two bathing places were developed. One was a brick freshwater pool at Abbotsford, off Orchard Road. This was another private venture, but apparently it wasn't used much. It lasted about a year. And around this time, Singapore's first swimming club was founded. Charles Crane was assigned to organise the place, and built a pagar in Tanjong Rhu. It lasted a couple of years, then being destroyed in the monsoon.



THE SINGAPORE WATERFALL,
NEXT TO THE COMMISSARIAT OFFICE,
PEARL'S HILL.
WITHIN 5 MINUTES' DRIVE FROM
THE [illegible]

The Proprietor of the above Waterfall begs to announce to the public of Singapore that his bathing establishment is now completed, and baths of all kinds can be had at the rates:—

[illegible]

Singapore, [illegible] June, 1878. (1 wk.)

M. GAZZOLO & Co.
PROVISION & WINE MERCHANTS.
BATHING ESTABLISHMENT
MARBLE BATHS,
COLD, WARM
AND
SHOWER.
ALWAYS READY
No. 432, North Bridge Road.
SINGAPORE.
Singapore, 4th March, 1885.

TIVOLI BATHS.
BUKIT TIMAH.

[illegible]

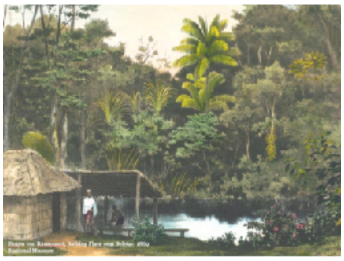
P. HANSEN,
Proprietor.

[illegible]

Singapore, 27th Nov., 188[illegible]

Bathing advertisements, 1870s–1880s, NewspaperSG

In the 1870s and 1880s a couple of indoor bathhouses were then available. In town, Gazzolo & Co. was on North Bridge Road, and the Waterfall Club was at the foot of Pearl Hill. For those with the ability to spend a couple of days in the country, there was the Tivoli Bathhouse and the St Valentine's Bath, both in Bukit Timah. None of these were longstanding establishments, but they do show an interest in trying to create a place for bathing in one mode or another. Mostly, these came in a period after the Straits Settlements became a colony separate of India, which was a period of economic growth, and subsequently, one where European settlers demanded something more of their place of residence – wanting to develop the town, to make it impressive, and recreational. The problem with each of these places seems mostly to be financial. Not enough members, not enough visitors to provide maintaining costs. And surely some part of this would be that most seemingly aimed only at European patronage, a very small part of Singapore’s population.



Across the period of these clubs and businesses, and particularly from the 1870s onwards, there was a recurring element of letter-writers in the public press, insisting, contrary to all evidence, that surely it must be good business to establish a public bath. They pointed to the provisions of other towns, like Shanghai, Penang, and Hong Kong, and asked, if these places could have baths, why couldn’t Singapore? They wrote with no apparent recognition of Singapore’s past attempts, making their suggestions, which often involved the Esplanade. There was even a suggestion that Cheang Hong Lim should extend his philanthropy and build one. This was, of course, a period, where recreational bathing was a private enterprise, and not the realm of the municipality.

These complaints give us a sense of what kinds of bathing environments people then wanted. They were usually driven equally by concerns of safety and modesty, much like the original pagar of 1827. They wanted fenced enclosures to protect themselves from sharks and crocodiles. They wanted changing rooms or a fenced screen to protect their christian morality. Over time, they also wanted the enclosures further out to sea, so tidal patterns couldn’t dictate bathing times. These kinds of suggestions did conform around the same ideas, and I think shaped the more substantial proposals that followed.

At times, in the late nineteenth century there were resolute plans for new bathing places that weren’t realised. For example, in 1889 the Rowing Club aimed to be a centre for swimming, with ambitious plans for seaside pool on the Raffles Reclamation ground. These fell apart because their ideas of a concrete pool just weren’t affordable. In 1891, other plans from a private individual were put to the Straits’ Legislative Assembly for a floating bath to be moored off either Johnston’s Pier or the Esplanade. The Assembly rejected both: Johnston’s Pier on the grounds it would interrupt boats, and the Esplanade on the grounds that that was the most prominent public place in the town, and they wouldn’t privatise this space or risk spoiling its views.

Tanjong Katong Singapore

Pier and outhouse (postcard), Katong, 1920s
National Archives

Liu Kang, *Bathing in the River*, 1947,
National Gallery

But even if there couldn’t be enough formal places for public demand, it’s clear that people still found places to bathe. That may have been through sneaking nighttime swims at the Esplanade, or visiting Beach Road, travelling out to Tanjong Katong or Pasir Panjang, or further, to Changi. All of these were popular places where the sea invited, but without any of the architecture of bathing. Katong, which later became a centre for swimming, was popular for bathing as early as the 1850s. Ultimately, bathing was an opportunistic activity – people could bathe wherever they found water, whether it was the sea, rivers, canals, ponds, quarries, or monsoon-struck flooded fields.

Over time, as the town started to suggest its own expansion, people began building holiday homes along the coasts. These initially provided opportunities for visiting the beach, which was gradually formalised through constructions of piers, bathing rooms, and personal enclosures. For the wealthy, who bought in the right areas, bathing in the sea was always available. Without possibility of consistent access to a club, people provided for themselves, developing a coastal architecture of swimming, which often emulated, on smaller scale, the ambitions of larger swimming schemes.

But at this stage, it’s notable that it was also the poorer strata of society that had these values of security and modesty imposed upon them in bathing. This was the area where Singapore’s municipality placed their own order upon the landscape. Certain letter-writers in the press began launching attack on people publicly bathing – protesting that they might see bodies in various states of undress, or that men and women were bathing together. Apart from nude European sailors at remote beaches, most often, there was a racial and gendered tone to these complaints.

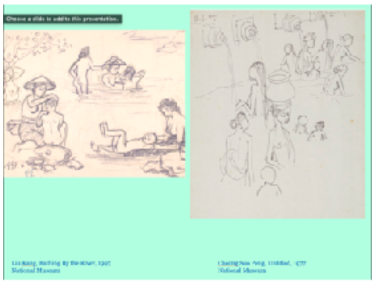
albumen Photograph, 'A Swim in the River', early 1900s
National Museum

Children Bathing, c.1930
National Museum

Given this was primarily a European press, the problem was often implied that white women might happen to see degrees of exposed brown skin in public spaces. They complained of Chinese men washing in back lanes, Malays bathing in the canals and rivers, and Indian men in the Bras Basah River at Dhoby Ghaut, the latter especially when that also became the site of the Ladies' Lawn Tennis Club in 1884. Just as earlier bathing places hoped to shield themselves from public view, the public hoped that these places might be shielded, if not completely removed.

The municipality responded, at first, through building attap screens and small enclosures around common bathing spots, whether public wells or riversides. One of the earliest was in the late 1840s at a well in Telok Blangah, opposite the Temenggung's palace, in what was reported as a great cleaning and beautification of that town.

This approach continued. But over time, the Municipal Commissioners secured greater powers in organising the urban environment, allowing them to designate fixed bathing places, and make bathing in any other places a chargeable offence. Through this, they began a process of classifying town water spaces, determining the allowable functions of water bodies.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Liu Kang, Bathing by the River, 1997
National Museum

Cheong Soo Pieng, Untitled, 1977
National Museum

The moral concern of exposure was part of this process, but the designation of public bathing was also part of the commissioners' broader concern for disentangling the town's water systems. In trying to establish the Impounding Reservoir, they were also classifying water according to social and economic function. Water used for shipping was not suitable for bathing, and so that needed to be restricted. Water that was a drinking source, was also not suitable for bathing, and so it had to be restricted. This eventually led to the municipality's efforts to close contaminated public and domestic wells, which would help prevent disease, but also cut many people off from accessible water. To limit bathing, the municipality were also able to place criminal charges on people found bathing nude in public places.

Impounding Reservoir, late 19th century
National Museum

This regulation of town water created a classification of water spaces according to understood functions, but the rules were often subverted. We see this early in the Impounding Reservoir, which was obviously intended for piped town water, but where many people saw prime opportunity for bathing – a chargeable offence. One European man bathing there tried to get out of the charge by claiming he was simply trying to retrieve his hat that had blown into the water. The fact that he was completely undressed and clearly in the company of two Japanese prostitutes didn't help his defence.

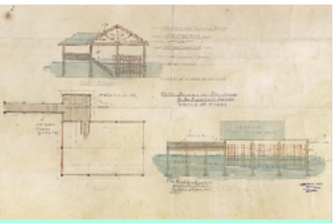
These rules about recognised bathing places led to concerns among the municipal commissioners as to the accessibility of the broader working class public to water and washing facilities. And even where there was access, there remained concern over the water's cleanliness. In the 1870s, for example, there were reported to be over fifty designated bathing places along the Singapore River and adjacent canals. And even then, the Singapore River was the most polluted water body in town. And so, the municipality tried a new strategy. Rather than just classifying bathing spaces, they would try to establish their own. They would have an affordable 1c entry, provide clean water, and encourage people to develop good hygiene. An initial trial was built on the Singapore River behind the Ellenborough Market in 1874. This was before the reservoir was finshed, so the water did have to be drawn from the river, but by being placed at the market it was hoped it might become an established social centre for those who lived in the area.

Ellenborough's Market and Boat Quay Municipal Bath Houses, *Map of Singapore* 1881. National Library

After the reservoir was completed in 1877, the Ellenborough Market Bath House was rebuilt, using cleaner municipal water. Another was built on Boat Quay in 1879. These were enclosed wooden buildings, with tiled roofs, taps, and iron tanks made to hold water. A third was built at the Clyde Terrace Market on Beach Road, and a fourth was negotiated with the Tanjong Pagar Dock Company, but that seems not to be have been constructed. The municipal bath houses seem not to have progressed beyond this point, and those that were built disappeared in the early 1890s.

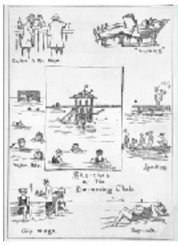
In some respects, municipal bath houses were part of a bridging of the town's attitudes to a changing model of water supply. They hoped to centralise the new reservoir, and get rid of dependence on older water gathering methods. This novelty and confusion probably explains why the programme didn't continue. The municipality grew very concerned about the the precise amount of water people used, deciding to impose a fixed limit. But this was a response to the fact that their reservoir simply wasn't producing enough water, and that most people at that time saw water as a consistent and freely available resource that could also be drawn from domestic or public wells. As such, many rejected the idea of an entrance fee to these bath houses and stayed away.

The bath houses began a great period of conflict for the municipal commissioners, as shortages in piped water became common, and the town began a programme of closing wells on grounds of hygiene. The municipal bath houses fell into broader arguments about water between people and the town. But as for their ending, it's possible that they simply became irrelevant as more houses started to have public mains put on. And for those who didn't, it was ultimately cheaper and more accessible to just make use of municipal standpipes as places to gather water and wash. Even if these bath houses were controversial, there still were many other remaining sanctioned bathing places. Functional bathing for cleanliness, generally needed to take place near to home, or near work. This is why the Rochor Canal was such a popular place for washing, and the same goes for the Dhoby Ghaut – they were places of living and work.



Lee Kian Soo, Bathing Pagar for Ong Sam Kiam at Kampong [illegible], c. 1910s, National Library

Recreational bathing, however, could take place further afield, and this is why we find people of all kinds making trips out to Katong or Changi for more pleasant waters. It was this practice that encouraged those who bought property there to build their own personal swimming places. This drawing shows a private pagar built for Ong Sew Kiam in Kampong Beting Kusa, near Changi. From the early twentieth century, this structure included conventions of old bathing enclosures, and made use of modern construction, showing common approaches to design at the time. It was built with a posted fenced, using cement foundations and asbestos roofing. It created a pier from the shore to an enclosed swimming area, half covered with a roof to protect from the sun.



Singapore Swimming Club diving platform, c.1900 National Museum

[illegible] at the Swimming Club, from C. [illegible], Our Singapore, 1914. National Library

In this period that two more swimming clubs were established, and these are the ones that stayed. The Singapore Swimming Club was founded in Katong in 1893, and the Chinese Swimming Club was fully established about fifteen years later, spending the next decade finding a location, before finally settling on Amber Road. Arguably, what allowed these clubs to survive where others hadn't was that they embraced a model that earlier plans rejected, avoiding a financial trap. They avoided the expensive and complicated places of the town, choosing to reside in a rural location that had long been popular among swimmers, even if this limited swimming time to weekends. They also didn't build enclosures or pools, instead just renting a bungalow for changing and shelter, and relying on the seashore. The European Swimming Club instead put their money into easing the difficulty of travel, setting up a weekend sampan launch from Johnston Pier that got members to the beach and back. It was only when the Singapore Swimming Club had been running six years that they bothered building any bathing structure. It was a diving platform out in the water, which is shown here, providing somewhere to swim to, climb up, and dive back in.

In the first decades of the twentieth century, these two clubs were there centre of popular swimming, and put an end to complaints about the lack of swimming spaces, even if some people still complained they were too far away. The Singapore Swimming Club also did some work to support early ideas of competitive swimming, though at this point the physical format and the swimming strokes employed hadn't quite reached the standards of modern athletic swimming. But this would develop in the 1920s through another club.

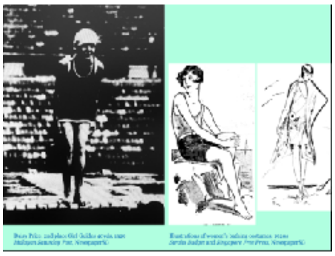
Garrison sports at the YMCA Pool, Fort Canning, 1928. Newspapers SG

New Singapore Street Map, c.1930 National Archives

In 1919, the Young Men's Christian Association got permission to take over one of the tanks of the Fort Canning reservoir and turn it into a saltwater pool. This allowed them to pursue their international ambition of physical education. The YMCA was another private club, but with their social mission, this pool had a much wider reach than others, and I would argue this was the most important pool in establishing a modern and public swimming culture in Singapore, more so than the later municipal baths. The very existence of the public Mount Emily Swimming Pool was based on the YMCA's success, and it largely followed its model.

From the early 1920s, the YMCA gave swimming lessons to boy scouts, girl guides, and local schoolchildren. The YMCA Physical Director visited to the Chinese Swimming Club to give instruction in sporting strokes, setting the path for them to produce the strongest competitive swimmers of the 1920s, who later competed in the Far East Olympics and consistently beat other clubs in local competitions. On school holidays, the YMCA opened their pool free of charge to local school children, and set up a schedule allowing the public to attend in designated social groups. The YMCA was a club, but it opened itself to the public, driving the popularity of swimming in Singapore. The YMCA's 36-metre pool also became the centre for swimming competitions. From 1920, they held an annual swimming championship. The premier race was the 120 yard freestyle, open to anyone in Singapore, which Ng Mong Guan of the Chinese Swimming Club dominated.

In the 1920s and ‘30s, it was partly the success of the YMCA Pool, and partly international fashions for swimming, and partly tragedy at the Singapore Swimming Club, that led to an explosion of pool building. A push away from open-sea bathing came in 1925 at the Swimming Club, when Doris Bowyer-Smyth, a young socialite from Sydney swam out to the club’s diving platform. She climbed up, and jumped back into the water, where she taken by a shark and died. A wave of recognition about the dangers of open water followed, and people became very hesitant about swimming outside an enclosure. An architecture of bathing was now necessary. Along the east coast, the Singapore Swimming Club built a pagar, the Chinese Swimming Club and the Sea View Hotel built one, and more private residents did as well. The British Military followed, building their own sea enclosures at their bases.



To some extent, this concern about the safety of the sea also began drawing peoples’ attention inland. But it was also the fashion for swimming, changing attitudes around the modesty of bathing costumes, and new engineering techniques that allowed the design of new purpose-built swimming pools. There was something modern and desirable about swimming, sun bathing and more revealing and glamorously designed bathing suits were in fashion. And there were new methods maintaining consistently clean water through oxidising filtration systems and chemical cleaning. These factors allowed other clubs to entertain ideas of providing swimming places.

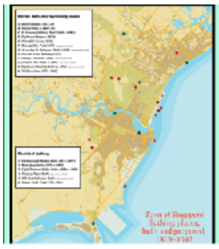
The Swiss Club built theirs first, the Tanglin Club followed. The new Golf Club that emerged out of the closure of the old Racecourse proposed one as well. These were inland clubs, but they saw the desirability of modern swimming. Aw Boon Haw also saw the lack of provision for the Chinese middle classes and began his own recreational club in Pasir Panjang in 1930, which included the swimming pool that became the Tiger Pool. The Military joined in, building inland pools just ten years after having built their seaside enclosures. And the municipality, seeing the success of the YMCA, decided to make a pool out of the old Mount Emily Service Reservoir.

The Singapore Swimming Club and Chinese Swimming Club were falling behind through their attachment to the sea. It was a need to keep up with other clubs that pushed them to build their own pools in the 1930s. As such, this was a period of transition, when new swimming options opened. These decades saw transition of recreational bathing into athletic swimming. They provided new seaside and inland baths, and gave a diversity of saltwater, freshwater, chemically-treated and filtered waters, all with different swimming qualities.

Map of Singapore Town, [illegible]
National Archives

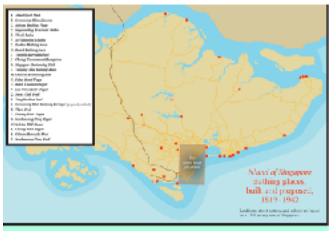
The urgency for enclosing swimming places in architectural constructs meant that by the end of the 1930s, parts of the east coast shoreline looked as they do on this map, dotted with bathing structures and piers, one for the public at Katong Park, a few for clubs and hotels, but mostly private structures for personal recreation. All of these were demolished in 1941, as part of the military's preparation for Japanese invasion.

A couple of years before, in 1939, the Singapore Amateur Swimming Association was founded, bringing together the prominent sporting and military clubs. Their aim was to finalise regulations of swimming as an athletic activity, standardising practices, and ultimately allowing Singaporeans to compete in the Olympics under the name of Singapore. This made progress in the 1950s when the Singapore's Amateur Swimming signed on with FINA. And so, the start of the Second World War makes a sensible conclusion for this period of the development of bathing in colonial Singapore, since it ends with a physical removal of some of the older styles of pleasure bathing, and the establishing of a plan to further swimming as a sport, which after the war, began requiring the creation of new internationally standardised pools.



Map of Bathing Places in Singapore Town,
[illegible]

To summarise this story, I'll show two maps that I'm in the process of preparing, which helps identifying and locating early bathing places. The first shows Singapore town. Here, I've plotted pools, sea enclosures and bathhouses that were built, and those which were properly planned and proposed. It doesn't include places only vaguely proposed, it doesn't include informal bathing places that didn't make use of enclosures. So these are the establishments of bathing in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. The map shows particular focus around the government district, especially the Esplanade, which as the centre of nineteenth century sports and a wide-open space fronting the sea, this isn't surprising. We also get a sense from this how many places were planned, and then not built – either because land use permissions couldn't be granted, or because costs were prohibitive. Of the built places, most didn't last too long. The longest lasting within this period was the Fort Canning military tank, which operated for about thirty years from the 1860s to the 1890s.



Map of Bathing Places on Singapore Island,
[illegible]

This second map shows the island of Singapore. There seems to have been a much greater chance of success in swimming when the venues left the town, with the majority stretching along the south west and east coasts – still within some reach of the town, but decidedly outside of it. Many of these swimming places were built by the military – at Gilman and Tanglin Barracks, in Changi, Sembawang and Seletar. Others were made made by companies for residential workers – the tin smelter on Pulau Brani, or the Dock Company on Keppel Hill. Others were the property of social clubs, and these had to be within reach of their membership – even the at end of the nineteenth century, travelling to the Tivoli Baths in Bukit Merah, or the Singapore Swimming Club could be seen as too far and too difficult. The Tiger Pool in Pasir Panjang in 1930 was set up only on the grounds that by that point there was a bus service to get people there.

Undoubtedly these maps are still incomplete, with limited discussion at the time, many known baths are difficult to place, and swimming pools like this one at Keppel Hill are so absent in the written records that it's difficult to know really how it was used. But by way of a conclusion, that what this mapping of bathing places does do is show us a broad interest in bathing and swimming in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. It shows bathing as a common practice, sometimes private, but often communal, leading to the creation of clubs and communities of bathers. And it shows us the broader ways in which various linked activities of bathing were viewed at the time – through debates about recreation, and access to the water, and how these were mapped out onto Singapore's urban and rural landscape. And so, with that, I'll now draw to a close, and say thank you for your time.