

The Landscapes of Swimming in Colonial Singapore: Reflections on Sources and Methods

Jesse O'Neill

Senior Lecturer, Chelsea College of Arts

Lee Kong Chian Fellow, National Library Board Singapore

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This presentation is about a project I've been working on as Lee Kong Chian Fellow at the National Library of Singapore. It's about the places of swimming in colonial Singapore, from British settlement in 1819, to Japanese Occupation in 1942. This extends on my earlier work on post-war swimming environments, pushing that history back to the 19th century. A large part of this work has been simply trying to identify what places were available, since they're so poorly recorded. I used newspapers, travel literature, maps and visual collections, and today I'll talk briefly about what impressions these sources give and how I've used them to begin mapping early bathing places.

Local literature on sport and recreation tends to view the beginnings of public swimming as being the design of a few pools at the start of the 1930s, in particular, the Mount Emily Pool. Previously, where I was more interested in later buildings, I think I probably reiterated this idea, but now I'd argue that there's a significant history of designed swimming environments extending more than a century before these examples. I think the main reason the 1930s has seemed a beginning for studies of swimming in Singapore is essentially an anachronism: a view that swimming is limited to its practice today, and these places are the earliest that start to resemble contemporary pools. The 1930s is also when swimming properly became a sport – with swimming practices aimed at distance and speed in fixed strokes, and with local competitions and cups being established. This is the impact that sports history has had in shaping this subject – where swimming is viewed as significant as a sport, but not as leisure. So I would say it's the conception of swimming as a sport that takes place in regular pools that emphasises the historical pedigree of these 1930s pools, and pushes away earlier swimming habits.

In this research, however, I tried to remove sports history definitions, which just don't apply to the 19th century, and work instead through a broader idea of public bathing. This is an expanded field of interlinked activities that includes multiple forms of taking pleasure, or making utility, of the water. This means it draws on close historical connections of practice that link swimming and luxuriating, and personal and communal habits of public washing.

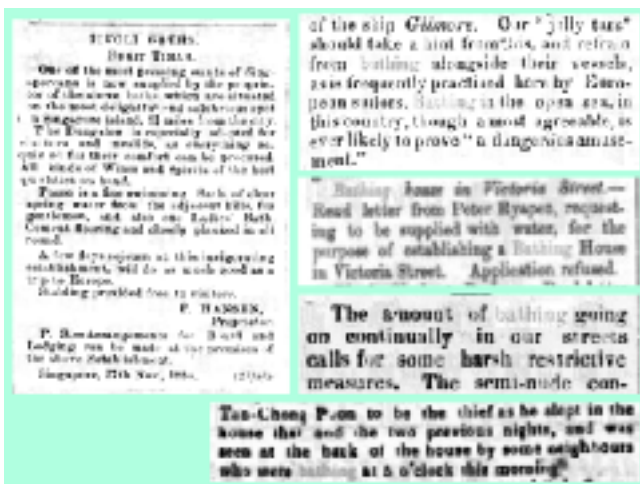
In Singapore's tropical climate, most people practiced some variation of these activities daily. Sometimes at seaside bathing enclosures or artificial ponds, sometimes in open seawater, rivers, or monsoon-flooded fields. They might bathe as play, like at the New Years Games that ran from the 1830s, or for religious observance, like at the Malay's annual *Mandi Zafar*. Bathing could be for recreation or socialising at beaches or clubs, or simply for cleaning oneself at local wells. Broadly, bathing is an opportunistic activity, wherever there's water, people will find a way to enjoy it.

The most obvious reason that Singapore's earlier bathing places are unknown and difficult to identify, is that they've left no remains. Old sea enclosures were washed away in monsoons, pools were

filled in, bathhouses demolished, even the beaches were covered over through land reclamation. Rem Koolhaas wrote about the *tabula rasa* of Singapore's urbanism, and this applies particularly well to its bathing spots. The only remaining swimming place from before the 1970s is this dilapidated pool on Keppel Hill, originally built as a reservoir in the 1890s.



So, without physical remains, it was the archives that allowed identification of places. Most significant was the newspaper archive. The press occasionally mentioned where people bathed, often through complaints of public indecency. They also reported on meetings of the Municipal Commissioners, which starts to detail a story about public bathhouses in the late 19th century. Sometimes, there are advertisements for private bathhouses, or for property sales with personal swimming tanks.

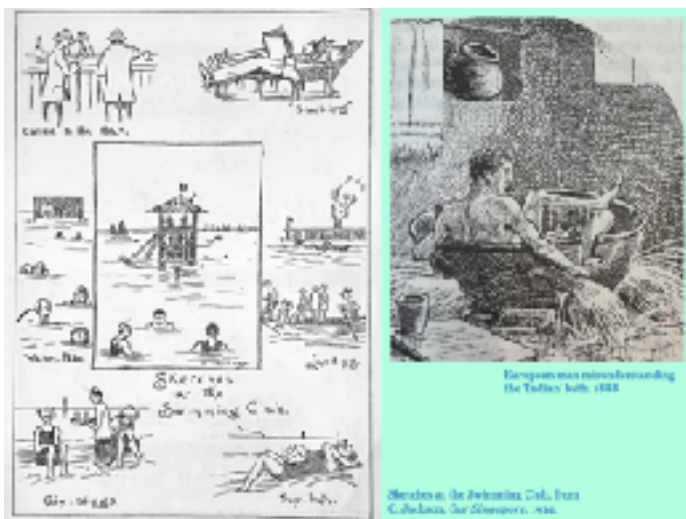


The problem is that the newspapers aren't a full record of the town's activities. To be in the newspaper a place had to be 'newsworthy'. The press might announce an impressive new bathing place, but not the decline of a mediocre one. They're not mentioned when they're nice and pleasant, often just when there's tragedy. In 1925, the press excitedly wrote about Doris Bowyer-Smyth, a socialite who was killed by a shark at the Swimming Club, just as they had about cases of drownings, attacks, injuries and impaling for the previous century. We read about places when something terrible happened, or perhaps when they were remarkable, but not when they were just nice. As such, many places are invisible, falling out of the historical record, and then out of public memory. And indeed, public memory is part of the problem. People writing on bathing in the 19th century often have no recollection of earlier swimming places. As a trading colony, most

people moved to Singapore to make money and leave, and itinerant populations couldn't maintain a recollection of urban lifestyles from a couple of decades prior.

A further issue with these newspapers is that they're an English-language medium, aimed at European audiences that were never more than 2% of Singapore's population. The bathing places they mention, as a time of racially segregated swimming, tend to be those for Europeans. The Waterfall Club of the 1870s was only addressed after it added European baths; and Aw Boon Haw's plans in 1930 for recreational grounds for the Chinese middle classes were discussed as promising urban improvements, but not as a functioning facility, because they weren't available to the readership. So the nature of the press means that it provides a partial view that lets much of the detail be forgotten.

But the press is complemented by other texts, like travel literature and personal memoir. Bathing, whether recreational or hygienic, is only a minor topic in these texts, but it enters at unexpected points and allows good insight. Bathing appears in old recollections of swimming clubs, or descriptions of ablution that include practical jokes directed at newcomers learning the habits of the so-called 'India' bath. Bruce Lockhart, in his memoir *Return to Malaya*, included that shark attack on Bowyer-Smyth from ten years before as gossip, but he didn't really believe it actually happened. These kinds of texts give passing mention to everyday practices of bathing, and some sense of the places involved, but only in fragments.



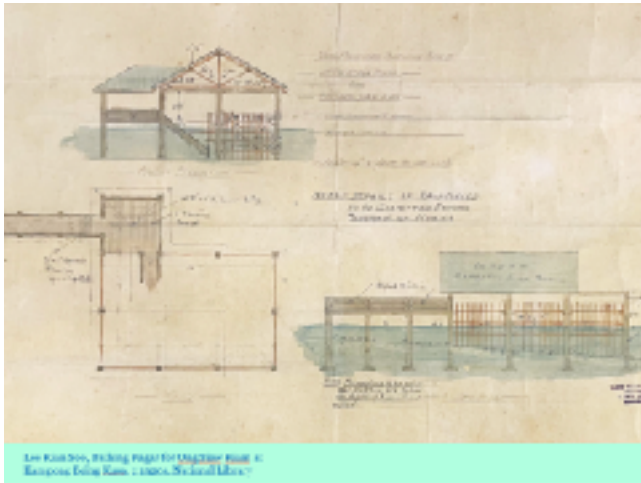
A barrier to a fuller discussion of bathing seems to have been modesty and decorum. It was a sensitive subject, because even when communal, it was personal and intimate, since it involved undressed bodies. All the earliest swimming structures included modesty screens, emulating European bathing machines, and tried to ensure direct access to the water so people couldn't be seen wearing bathing costumes.

Extending on travel texts, personal photographs start to appear after the 1880s. These again lean heavily toward European experiences of bathing, but give a better sense of the joy and community involved. These document informal bathing in situ, and show the designed quality of formal swimming places.

One of the most impressive images of early bathing is a village bath in the rural setting of Seletar from 1869. Drawn by someone staying in the Government bungalow nearby, it shows a vernacular building style, with a room for dressing, a sun shade over the water, and a small barrier that defines the place, but which isn't enough for security. Images of early places like this are rare, but cross-reading of sources shows a century-long tradition, from the 1820s to the 1920s, of designing baths through the construction methods of vernacular Orang Laut architecture.

Singapore's first piece of leisure architecture was the Battery swimming enclosure of 1827, which was built this way, which is essentially the same as the RAF sea enclosure from the early 1930s – the main

difference is that the earlier pagar was more elaborate in response to decency codes at the time, with a pier, and rooms above the fence to serve as dressing rooms and launch points. Most swimming places were in this style until the 1930s, when more modern visual styles started to enter some of the buildings. This plan for a private enclosure combines a vernacular image with modern material – using cement foundations, more refined wooden posts, and asbestos roofing.

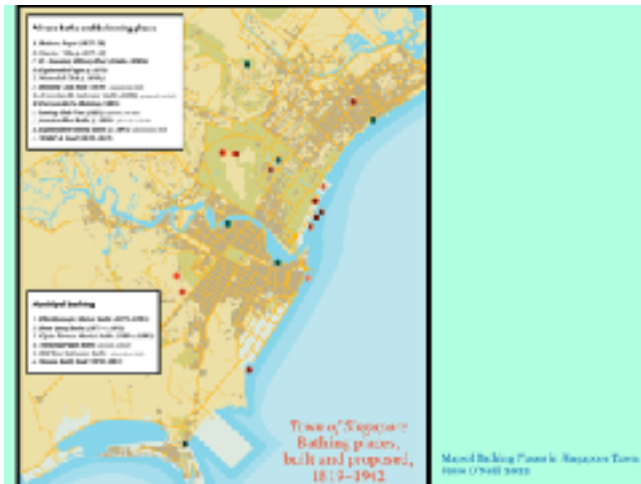


Another part of the visual record is the town survey maps that help locate formal bathing sites. Some are labelled, but often it's a task of looking for blue shapes on the map and trying to work out what they were. For example, there's an unlabelled blue rectangle at the Police Station on Pearl's Hill, but the only way to know this was a bathing pool is through the press – in reports of a murder at the nearby People's Park, an intended victim was found hiding inside the police pool.



On the subject of maps, I'll turn now to my own maps in progress, which try to position places revealed through the sources. This shows the town of Singapore. The places here are those purpose-built for communal bathing, or those fully planned but then unrealised. It's clear that with the full extent of bathing practices, there was actually more places than this. In 1876 there were 42 distinct bathing places along the Singapore River alone, which wasn't even the most popular river for bathing. These weren't architectural, instead they were classifications of river water, so they're quite different from the designed bathhouses of the 1880s, which are shown here, but of which there were only three. We know that those earlier places existed, it's just impossible to locate them. Through the viewpoint embedded in the sources, most of these places are ones open to Europeans. And this is why there's a concentration around the European government district,

particularly at the coastal Esplanade, which was the most desirable centre of recreational activity, and the place where Singapore's first bathing architecture was built in 1827.



In this map the view expands to the whole of Singapore Island, and from the 1890s it's here, outside the town, that structured sites of swimming start to really take a lasting hold. For decades people had gone to rural beaches for a day of bathing, and in 1894 the Swimming Club was established just outside the town, on the lower east coast, taking an already popular place, and turning it into a centre for swimming and leisure. Even when places were built outside the town, most were in proximity to it. Those that could be further away tended to be institutional, most on the north coast are military pools for the RAF and Navy bases. Those on the southern islands are part of the tin-smelting works.



It shows through this material that there was clearly a combined recreational and practical culture of bathing in Singapore that extended back to its establishment as a British settlement, more than a century before sporting models shaped modern swimming in the colony. This included early swimming clubs, habits of seaside swimming, habits of river bathing, municipal programmes of public bathhouses, and congregations at public wells and standpipes. Over the 19th century, bodies of water were classified for social function, and forms of bathing were a high priority, especially before popular acceptance of the town reservoir system in the 1890s. But due to the short memory of moving populations, the temporary, unassuming and vernacular quality of bathing architecture, and the sensitive nature of a subject dealing with

bodily exposure, so many of these places were short-lived and unrecorded. The landscapes of bathing were resistant to documentation and posterity, leading to historical uncertainty about their existence.

The sources allow partial reconstructions of this bathing landscape, and while the resulting maps are populated, the limitations make it evident just how incomplete they will remain. They do, however, give a sketch of earlier stages of public bathing, the regulation of waterbodies, questions over ‘the rights to the city’, and the development of leisure environments. I’ll be writing up an account of this for a Singapore National Library publication called *Chapters on Asia*. But for now, I’ll draw to an end, and say thank you for your time.

— 2018 words