

# Psychogeoforensics

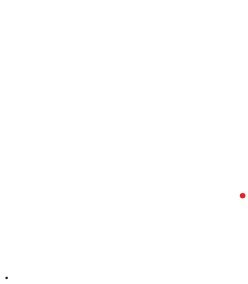
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Singapore is a city that constantly changes, which makes it a city hard to define. At 47 years, our nation state is young and still a kind of *tabula rasa*. Large government-operated agencies are tasked with shaping our national identity<sup>1</sup>, and for years they have struggled to define what is “definitive”, “historic” or “memorable” about this nation; many writers, poets, filmmakers and artists have also grappled with this issue. Yet for the most part, “Singapore” remains a mysterious, highly debatable concept. What is “Singapore?”<sup>2</sup> Where can we find the meaning of “Singapore”? Let us begin by examining the language which we use to speak about “Singapore”.

## The Definition and Vocabulary of Singapore

Singapore’s identity crisis may stem from the problem of having little land mass, yet being made up of physically and culturally fragmented parts that have not been assembled into a whole.

### Singapore as “A Red Dot”



Singapore – a main island and 62 smaller islands around it – occupies 714.3 square kilometres, with a population density of 7,257 per square kilometre. Even its main island is considered relatively small compared to other Southeast Asian countries such as Malaysia (329,847 square kilometres) and Indonesia (1,904,569 square kilometres).

Once, in an interview with the Wall Street Journal, former Indonesian Prime Minister B. J. Habibie infamously described Singapore as a “little red dot” – which caused many Singaporeans to see red. In a conference on 3 May 2003, former Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong responded that Habibie’s description of Singapore was “a vivid and valuable reminder that we are indeed very small and very vulnerable”. He added that the phrase “little red dot” had since “become a permanent part of our vocabulary”, a subtle nod to the Singaporean appropriation of the term, and the self-awareness of our small size.

A dot is simply a rounded speck, the smallest mark one can make on a map, and inherent in its small size is the loss of all other distinguishing features.

### Singapore as “A Black Hole”



In 2010, the Singapore Tourism Board launched its new “destination brand” known as “YourSingapore”. The main image used in its campaign featured the shape of the Singapore Island formed out of various brightly coloured cubes. Other offshoots of the campaign also featured the shape of Singapore formed out of shopping bags and food items.

This image of a generic, graphical Singapore island was accompanied by the curious tagline “What is your Singapore?” It was a peculiar question to be asking visitors, who might never have been to Singapore, and perhaps were hoping to be given a clue as to what “Singapore” might be. The shape of Singapore becomes nothing more than a blank cipher to them; it may as well be a black hole of meaning, with no answers to be found. It raises the question: how do we build an identity or tradition in a country that looks outside for cultural legitimacy and definitions, rather than attempting to answer the question from within?

## Multilingualism:

### Trying to read more into Singapore

# 多讲华语，少说方言

(Speak More Mandarin, Speak Less Dialect)

Slogan for the 1979 Speak Mandarin campaign, launched on 7 September 1979

The vocabulary of Singapore is quite unusual – we have four official languages: Malay, Chinese, Tamil, and English. It is the only country apart from China where ethnic Chinese constitute the majority of the population, and the remainder of the population is racially diverse. Occasionally, there is confusion from foreigners who have never visited Singapore, who mistakenly assume that Singapore must be a province of China since Singapore is predominantly Chinese. However, it is nothing like China, as a significant percentage of young Chinese Singaporeans speak English rather than Mandarin at home, and many cannot speak the language of their forefathers after years of media restrictions on the use of dialects on television and radio.

For many, the decision to use English as the dominant language was a wise political decision. Our citizens speak a language that is known the world over, and this makes Singapore a welcome destination for international travellers. In the politically-correct modernity of today, it is easy to forget the racial tensions and riots of the 1960s, and the very real need back then for Singapore to have a common neutral language to bring together a racially diverse nation experiencing a clash of ways and cultures.

This however, may have come at the cost of losing parts of our cultural identity. Despite the perceived cultural “richness” and “accessibility” to both English and Chinese speaking worlds that could come with bilingualism, for most ordinary people it is very hard to become an effectively bilingual speaker without it impacting one’s level of competency in one of the languages.

The language barriers that arise from a superficial multilingualism might also hamper the transmission of oral histories, traditional stories, and a deeper understanding of literature and histories in one’s “native tongue”. Not only are we physically separated from the land of our ancestors, we are also culturally fragmented through the differences in spoken languages, which potentially impedes our communication with the older generation of dialect-speaking Singaporeans.

So when we research a local history in a particular language, we begin to wonder if we might be missing out on other records that were written or documented in another language. It is difficult to research one’s own history when one no longer really knows the language that an archive is written in. It is a pity that we are unable to be a dutiful audience to older people recounting their life stories and patiently trading old stories about old places. We have lost slang words, aphorisms, poetry and folk stories. As a result, the past is an impenetrable mystery, and even a written archive of history as we know it feels fragmented and incomplete.

## Fragments and Archives in Singapore

Archives are of interest to us because the physical record and written word have the power to bring intangible things into existence. Without documentation, data or archives, it is very difficult to examine and discuss that which does not physically exist, such as events in the past, people who are no longer living, people who are transients through an area, or buildings and spaces which have changed or no longer exist. Thus, the written word, narrative or story is what brings it to life. In this way, an archive can be crucial in the process of creating a national narrative where one does not yet exist.

However, we are not always so lucky to find scholarship or pre-existing research on the more hidden or obscure parts of our own histories. So our archives may become repositories of fragments rather than repositories of complete artefacts or facts. Many of the histories in Singapore can only be pieced together in fragments, such as the story of Pulau Saigon, an island that was once in the Singapore River.

## Case Study: The Mystery of “Pulau Saigon”



Figure 3. The Singapore River in 1819

We first encountered “Pulau Saigon” while independently researching the Singapore River. While tracing out the shape of early maps, it was noted that there appeared to be a sizeable island in the Singapore River. An error in the 2009 edition of *Mighty Minds’ Street Directory*, in which “Pulau Saigon Bridge” had been mislabeled as “Saiboo Bridge” (due to its proximity to Saiboo Street), also brought the peculiar name to our attention, as no such island exists in Singapore today. When we asked around, virtually no one had heard of it.

After referring to city plans and other maps from before the 1970s, it became obvious that the largest islet in the early maps was actually “Pulau Saigon”. Geographically, the meandering Singapore River separated Pulau Saigon from Magazine Road, where the Tan Si Chong Su temple still stands to this day, on its eastern side of the Singapore River’s banks. It was large enough to accommodate an abattoir and railway station, and numerous warehouses. Yet mysteriously, it disappeared clean off the map by the late 1970s. We know of it today only because there was an archaeological dig done on the very spot, to dredge up and study its last remains before it was no more. A modest collection of pottery shards and small physical fragments is still housed at the National University of Singapore Museum.

Further research showed that the longest sustained piece of writing about it to date is a thesis titled “Uncovering Pulau Saigon”, written in 1995 by Cheryl-Ann Low from the National University of Singapore (Geography Department). Even then, Low’s research is very telling of the limitations of Singapore’s official archives - that there are very few mentions of “Pulau Saigon” in the Municipal Reports (only in relation to the performance and output of the abattoir), and that Pulau Saigon’s oral history informants would now be incredibly old, and eventually no one would be able to tell us about it.

Low writes that in 1890, “Pulau Saigon” appears in an annual report which states that since 1888, one portion of Pulau Saigon had been given to the municipality for an abattoir, and in return, a handsome iron bridge had been constructed to link it to the main Singapore island. This bridge stood for many years and when the Japanese bombed Singapore, one of the fire bombs landed quite close to the end of the bridge on Singapore’s

mainland, and the fire and flammable fluid flowed to the other side, setting parts of Pulau Saigon on fire as well – a stark reminder of how Pulau Saigon was physically still very much a part of the rest of Singapore.

In the end, the most interesting part of this aforementioned paper is Low’s description, which in turn is inspired by a single line from another report from 1894. In the municipal record, the following is noted: “On Chinese New Year’s Day on 1894, between 8pm and 5am, nine hundred and seven pigs were slaughtered.”

In response to this single line in the municipal report, Low manages to write an admirably colourful description of what sort of scene this might have looked like:

*Day and night, the auditory nerves were assaulted by the painful cries of cattle being slaughtered. The chugging of the trains, and for a rather brief period, the groans of incinerators could be heard. On top of that, there was also a dreadful stench to tolerate, an odour that was a mix of the smells of live cattle, raw meat, waste materials, burning refuse, and the infamous smell of the Singapore River at low tide.*

Without sufficient information or oral history records, the existence of Pulau Saigon would fade from existence completely. Few to no vestiges remain of this tiny islet that once teemed with the chaos of life and death. All we have left are a few broken shards of pottery and a few words in the national archives to mark its existence. But for a moment, with the colourful description of the sounds and smells of living and dying, we can imagine Pulau Saigon coming to life in our minds, roaring and bursting into colour. And all we need to bridge the gap is simply our imagination – that is the power of the story.

Fragments, incomplete clues and traces are of great interest to us because it appears to be the dominant manner in which information about Singapore can be found. So in 2010, the Singapore Psychogeographical Society was formed with the explicit aim of researching, collecting, and curating fragments – to attempt to stitch the fragments back into a cohesive whole.

## The Formation of the Singapore Psychogeographical Society

The Singapore Psychogeographical Society is a loose association of words, devoted to promoting a better understanding of the world through ludic adventures, independent research, digital documentation, and archival activism. It is facilitated by Debbie Ding, who maintains a physical

and digital archive of writing, journey transcripts, maps, urban signs, photographic records, and other physical fragments of land.

Through “psychogeoforensics”, it encourages people to construct/reconstruct their own narratives around the various physical traces, histories, and archives that may be overlooked in the fast-developing urban city of Singapore. From pottery shards, to traces of excavation, to marker scribbles on walls, it is hoped that we can write stories and histories from the clues found along the way.

In “Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography” (1955), Guy Debord defined ‘psychogeography’ as “the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organised or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals.”

“Psychogeoforensics” is an extension of that concept, a neologism coined to describe the approach taken by the Singapore Psychogeographical Society. To combine psychogeography – which is an appreciation for the geographical aspects of a city that influence the actions and lives of individuals living within it – with the domain of forensics seems almost logical.

Because of the peculiar fragmented nature of history and culture in Singapore, we could also view Singapore as a scene of mystery, or the missing artefact. We are here to solve the mystery of what and where Singapore is; we are here to reconstruct the narrative of Singapore, by going through all the possible clues of its whereabouts.

Our goal is to narrate places back into being. Let the crack in the wall tell its secrets. Let the small trees by the roadside speak to you. Let the electrical box on the street corner testify as the witness, or actor in the dramatic reconstruction of the story.

<sup>1</sup> “Our Mission (is) to Foster Nationhood, Identity And Creativity Through Heritage And Cultural Development”. (From “National Heritage Board - Our Vision & Mission”. <http://www.nhb.gov.sg/NHBPortal/AboutUs/Mission&Vision> (accessed October 2012))

<sup>2</sup> The Singapore Tourism Board slogan for 2010 was “What is your Singapore?”

The following is a description of some of the archives of the Singapore Psychogeographical Society:

## Early Archives from the Singapore Psychogeographical Society

### 1. Yangtze Scribbler

In 2010, various urban explorations yielded the discovery of a series of mysterious signs in the stairwell of the Yangtze Cinema. These scribbles were documented in photography and its unknown author was nicknamed the "Yangtze Scribbler". Efforts were made to locate the author, and to decode the meaning of the numbers in the sign, but there have been no conclusive findings so far.

In 2012, similar signs were also found near Victoria Lane and Queen Street, proving that the author must still be active in Singapore. It remains a mystery, and can be considered one of the best examples of true graffiti art in Singapore.



## 2. Collection of Survey Markers (2009-2012)

From the years of 2009 to 2012, various urban explorations yielded a vast photographic collection of over 500 “survey markers” on the streets of Singapore and other countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Germany, United Kingdom, and South Korea. Each photograph has feet for reference to human scale, and is geotagged. Most of the survey markers found are not official land survey markers which are registered with the Integrated Land

Service (ILS) in Singapore, have a strict format, numbering system and are usually made of metal. Instead, the collection focuses on the ubiquitous and more informal spray-painted signs often made in the process of land surveys and civil engineering surveys. These unofficial markings and temporary measurements made as the city is being constructed are not regulated, so their meaning is sometimes only known by the artist/writer himself. Thus, this resource remains a mystery.





## New Archives in 2012

### 3. The Catalogue of Ethnographic Fragments

In 2012, a series of 27 fragments were retrieved from the streets of Central Singapore. These consisted of fragments of pavements, vehicular roads, drains and other spaces of urban Singapore. This collection was exhibited in “A Public Exchange of Ethnographic Fragments” at the Substation Random Room in July 2012. Members of the public were invited to look at and touch the fragments, to join in a conversation about rock collecting or geology, or even exchange rocks with us by filling out a simple form with a story about their rock. We received almost a dozen rock donations and exchanges over the month, ranging from a tear-shaped drop of about 1 centimetre in diameter, to cement cubes, to fragments from other famous pavements in Singapore.

A majority of the fragments in our archive of rocks were originally collected from sites near Sungei Road, a popular open-air street market that first emerged during the hard years of the Japanese Occupation. For years, a “Thieves Market” flourished

along the banks of the Rochor Canal, where the poor and desperate could buy all sorts of cheap or second-hand household goods. To this day, the market is still running, with a certain reputation for being a distribution point for stolen goods, antiques and other curios.

But in 2011, it was announced that the land upon which the market was situated was to be taken back by the government. The new Jalan Besar MRT (Downtown Line DT22) station was to be built over the area which the Sungei Road Market has occupied for the last few decades – and construction for this station started in July 2011. As preparation for the construction started, the road was broken up into pieces and parts were excavated.

During the construction process, the fragmented material from old roads can actually be recycled. The material may be ground up to be used as the mineral aggregate that is used to make other roads and pavements in Singapore. As a result, there is the faintest possibility that we might encounter this very same particle of dirt again in the physical form of another road. However, by that point, it would be very unlikely that anyone would know of the history or significance of that particular fragment having once been part of another historic road. It would instead blend homogeneously into



Sungei Road Fragment V

the body of the brand new road until the day that that too is dug up.

Thus, to prevent the significance and existence of these roads from being completely forgotten, it was decided that some of these fragments had to be rescued and physically removed from the site in a timely fashion.

The fragments were taken from the site, wrapped in cloth for protection, and stored until an appropriate time arrived for them to be displayed as artefacts. In this process of removing it from the site, we also aimed to transform these fragments into ethnographic objects.

Ethnography refers to an area of social anthropology aimed at studying the culture of groups of people. We can glean clues about the social meanings within the ordinary activities of people through the objects used on a daily basis. At Sungei Road's "Thieves Market", we can learn many things about Singaporeans as we look through the piles of second-hand objects. Likewise, these man-made rocks, which appear in vast quantities near the numerous construction sites, can also be a telling trace in the story of Singapore and the attempts to construct a national identity.

The objects that are examined in the process of an ethnographic study are also known as "ethnographic objects". Often, some of the objects we want to study may be physically broken or too severely fragmented to be considered whole, so we have chosen to describe them as "ethnographic fragments".

Ethnographic fragments are not only "fragmented" because of their physical state of being a small part of a larger body, but also in the way that they have become objects of ethnography – particularly the manner in which they are detached, defined and made into objects, removed in time and space from their original site.

It is the narrative that transforms it into an object valuable for conservation and display – in other words, it is the story that enables it to become a "cultural artefact", rather than the mere consideration of its aesthetics.

We value these man-made rock fragments as being part of the physical fabric of Singapore. These may be man-made, and all look the same, but the fragments are still part of the physical land on which we live and walk. It is quite literally, a little piece of Singapore that we can hold on to.



## Conclusion: Why we need to archive

We do not need to change the architecture to create a spatial shift – if we feel moved by the story, then the city and its architecture have already changed. These archives of signs and fragments exist not just as passive observers of histories, but also as active agents for change in Singapore – they are fertile material for our dreams of old spaces with new futures; they are the markers delineating the empty spaces where we can inscribe our own meaning and national identity into being.

