

Choy Ka Fai

Lan Fang Chronicles

“History itself happens in moments when there is a possibility for a future”

The Lan Fang Chronicles¹ project was inspired by a casual conversation with an amateur historian, who related the stories about early civilizations in Southeast Asia – from the pirates of Malacca, to the sultanates of Demak Empire² and the democrats of the Lan Fang Republic. I became very curious about the authenticity of the Lan Fang Republic; the more I investigated, the more intrigued I became.

Why did this 18th century Chinese colony not leave a bigger imprint on the history of our times? Why did we forget? Or perhaps, why did we not want to remember?

In Singapore, histories are often commercialised and politically enhanced. We choose what we want to remember; we decide what our future generations want to remember. What alternative do we have? And what was the history before Raffles “discovered” Singapore?

The project does not set out to depict historical events, but to recollect and reflect on the representation of these narratives. Though this journey of recovery, we may find a parallel universe to the Singapore story.

¹ *Lan Fang Chronicles (2009 – 2012)* is a project inspired by the histories and investigations of the 18th century Lan Fang Republic (1777 – 1884) founded by Hakka Chinese in West Borneo. The Republic existed for 107 years with 10 presidents until its reigns came to an end with the Dutch Occupation in 1884. The Chinese first came to Borneo as gold miners and formed various clans grouped by the area of their origins. Today it is nothing more than a fading legend for its living descendants.

² *The Demak Sultanate (1475 – 1548)* was a Javanese Muslim state located on Java’s north coast in Indonesia. The sultanate was the first Muslim state in Java, and once dominated most of the northern coast of Java and southern Sumatra.



Recycled gold mine, possible location of Lan Fang Republic ancient capital, Mandor, West Borneo, Indonesia
Lan Fang Chronicles 2009, Image by Vivian Lee

Dayak gold miner, Mandor, West Borneo, Indonesia
Lan Fang Chronicles 2009, Image by Vivian Lee



26 July 2009, Pontianak, West Borneo, Indonesia

Three years ago, I started this journey of the unknown, with research and excavation.

When I travelled to the sites of significance, there was almost nothing to be found, as if the evidence had evaporated with time. Yet, traces remain in the invisibility of our collective memories.

I started my first research trip locating the only surviving temple that still worships the founder of the Lan Fang Republic. There was not much to be found – except a portrait of Luo Fang Bo hanging

proudly at the altar. The temple keepers and the worshippers did not know much of the histories either. All they knew was that Luo Fang Bo was some kind of a deity, and they prayed to him for peace and safety. That is when I realised that perhaps the landscape “knows” more about the stories behind this mystical republic. I wanted to document these places, the landscapes that had witnessed the historical events of the Lan Fang Republic.

Through revisiting these landscapes of events where historical significance has been eroded with the mundane passage of life, it may be possible to construct an impossible access to the past through the imaginations of our present.



Luo Fang Bo's Temple, Sungei Purun, Mandor, West Borneo, Indonesia
Insignificant Landscape Series #07, Lan Fang Chronicles 2009, Image by Choy Ka Fai



Recycled gold mine, possible location of Lan Fang Republic ancient capital, Mandor, West Borneo, Indonesia
Insignificant Landscape Series #05, Lan Fang Chronicles 2009, Image by Choy Ka Fai



Kapuas River, Central Mosque, Pontianak, West Borneo, Indonesia
Insignificant Landscape Series #03, Lan Fang Chronicles 2009, Image by Choy Ka Fai

羅芳伯等所建蘭芳大總制之疆域與交通及關係詳圖



Lan Fang Republic Map, Origin of Immigrants and Diasporic Routes
1961, Unknown Artist, Private Collection Of Luo Xiang Lin



The Last Descendant, Luo Fu Sheng, Meixian, Guangzhou, China
Lan Fang Chronicles 2010, Image by Stefen Chow

25 April 2010, Meixian, Guangzhou, China

After one year of research, having visited West Borneo and Luo Fang Bo's hometown in Meixian, I found many documents, records and "truth". While available historical records are limited, my role as an artist is not to add to these academic records. So I began to think about what I wanted to say with this story. What alternative perspectives and approaches could I bring to these historical findings that included some degree of speculation and imagination?

The myriad of historical materials and social findings fell into place when I started to connect the missing "truths" with imagined re-creations of what could have been. In a way, the "truth" becomes less important.

Interview with Luo Fu Sheng,
the last descendant of Luo Fang Bo.

He is 73. He has 3 daughters.

He has a suitcase full of laminated photocopied documents about Luo Fang Bo and the Lan Fang Republic.

He tells me stories I already know, except one. He says that Luo Fang Bo has some special power to ride on crocodiles.



The DeGroot Collections (Speculative Artifacts)
Lan Fang Chronicles 2012, Image by Choy Ka Fai

12 August 2011, Leiden, the Netherlands

As I attempt to recover these fragments of a distant past, stories become histories, histories become myths, myths become memories, and memories sometimes become forgeries.

Leiden was the last of my research sites. For the first time, what greeted me were authentic documents and handwritten manuscripts. If there was any need of evidence of the Lan Fang Republic, this was it. I met Mr Koos Kuiper, the Dutch Sinologist who kindly showed me the pristine collection of original Chinese manuscripts, which was named

after Dutch Sinologist J. J. M. De Groot who published the earliest known and most comprehensive documents (from Western perspective) on the Lan Fang Republic in 1885. Almost all the known archives could be found there and the nearby KITLV (Royal Netherlands Institute of South East Asian and Caribbean Studies).

These real documents, letters and maps depicting fragments of the Republic's histories provided the foundation to speculate on the possibility of a museum of artifacts, as physical manifestation of narratives, re-enactments and mythical recollection.

Object #001 Lan Fang Kongsí Hall Fortress Gate
The DeGroot Collections, (Speculative Artifacts)
Lan Fang Chronicles 2012, Image by Choy Ka Fai



Object #008 Luo Fang Bo's Crocodile Leash,
The DeGroot Collections (Speculative Artifacts)
Lan Fang Chronicles 2012, Image by Choy Ka Fai



Object #012 Lan Fang Kongsí Official Wax Seal,
The DeGroot (Speculative Artifacts)
Lan Fang Chronicles 2012, Image by Choy Ka Fai



Object #013 Lan Fang Kongsí Hall Altarpeice,
The DeGroot Collections (Speculative Artifacts)
Lan Fang Chronicles 2012, Image by Choy Ka Fai



Ying Fo Fui Kun's Ancestral Temple and Cemetery, Singapore
Lan Fang Chronicles 2012, Image by Law Kian Yan



Epic Poem of The Kongsí War, Installation Performance, Ying Fo Fui Kun, Singapore
Lan Fang Chronicles 2012, Image by Law Kian Yan

18 May 2012, Singapore

I am not Hakka. I am Singaporean.

Ying Fo Fui Kun was set up by Hakka Chinese immigrants in 1822, three years after Sir Stamford Raffles arrived in Singapore.

14 The people of Ying Fo Fui Kun were all from Jia

Ying prefecture of Meixian, China.

Ying Fo Fui Kun Ancestral Hall was set up in the clan association in 1887, three years after the Lan Fang Republic was destroyed.

The people of Lan Fang Republic were all from Jia Ying prefecture of Meixian, China.



The Archivist Room, Installation Performance, Ying Fo Fui Kun, Holland Village, Singapore
Lan Fang Chronicles 2012, Image by Law Kian Yan



Memoir Of The Visitor, Installation Performance, Ying Fo Fui Kun, Holland Village, Singapore
Lan Fang Chronicles 2012, Image by Little Red Ant Creative Studio

The Lan Fang Chronicles project was presented as part of the Singapore Arts Festival 2012, in the form of a temporary museum at the unique site of Ying Fo Fui Kun (Clan Association)'s Ancestral Hall.

While the installation performance traces the path the Republic took, it also meanders into the future

and a pseudo-mythical past to explore Lan Fang's potential.

Each narrative draws from fact and fiction, memories and forgeries, history and myth – all to reconstruct and tell the story of what is, what was, and what could have been the Lan Fang Republic.