



# LIVING IN SINGAPORE

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# A Glimpse of History in Balestier

By Asif R. Chowdhury

In a quiet corner of the otherwise busy Balestier Road in Singapore, sits a beautiful colonial bungalow. The bungalow stands lonely amidst the high-rises that surround it, but any passerby, especially if new to the area, would be hard pressed not to give this majestic colonial architecture with its sprawling garden a second glance. Such a large house with even a larger compound is indeed a rare sight in our small city-state of Singapore. One can't help but wonder who once lived behind its doors as, indeed, the bungalow used to be a residence. Today, though, it is known as the Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall, serving as a museum since 1964, dedicated to Sun Yat Sen.

Sun Yat Sen, a Chinese revolutionary leader from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, is lesser known compared to some of the country's other prolific leaders, such as Mao Zedong or Chiang Kai-shek. However, he is regarded as the founding father of modern China by both mainland China and Taiwan, known in both places as "Father of Nation". Sun Yat Sen also served as the first President of the Republic of China, even though very briefly.

Originally trained as a physician, Sun Yat Sen turned his attention to politics amid the unrest in China during the latter half of the nineteenth century and he played a key role in many of the uprisings against the Qing Imperial Dynasty. In 1911, when the last emperor of China Pu Yi abdicated from the throne, the Qing Dynasty was finally overthrown and the Republic of China was established. Sun Yat Sen's leadership was instrumental in overthrowing the almost 4,000-year-old Chinese Empire and establishing the Republic. Interestingly, Singapore and particularly this colonial bungalow played a key role in that effort.

There are several reasons for the fall of the imperial system. The two Opium Wars in the mid-1800s against the West, both of which China lost, had weakened the Qing Dynasty and continual internal politics and military threats created further problems for the Emperor. Dissatisfaction among the common people had started to grow stronger and they felt the Emperor had once again lost the mandate from heaven. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, there was a push by the people to modernize China. Instead of embracing such demand, Empress Dowager Cixi, who was considered



to be the real power behind the throne, thwarted all such efforts, which only fuelled the dissatisfaction further. All these gave credence to several uprisings targeted to overthrow the imperial system. During that time, Sun Yat Sen travelled extensively abroad to secure support and funding for his cause against Imperial China from the Chinese diaspora. Among many of his overseas destinations, he found strong support in Singapore from the local Chinese community. He particularly received support from a prominent businessman of Peranakan descent, Teo Eng Hock. Teo Eng Hock had started a free pro-revolutionary newspaper in Singapore targeted at the local Chinese community. Curiously, Sun Yat Sen got a hold of a copy of this newspaper while he was visiting Hawaii and, impressed with Teo Eng Hock's drive, Sun Yat Sen sought him out during one of his many visits to Singapore in the early 1900s. Having the same end-goal of overthrowing the Qing Dynasty and establishing a Republic, the two hit it off.

So how is all this connected to our lonely colonial bungalow? The bungalow was originally built by a wealthy Cantonese businessman in 1902 and Teo Eng Hock bought it in 1905 as a retirement sanctuary for his mother, Madam Tan Poh Neo. They named it "Wan Qing Yuan" villa. By then, Teo Eng Hock and Sun Yat Sen had established a good relationship. He wanted to offer Wan Qing Yuan villa to Sun Yat Sen as his base in Singapore for the rebellion. When Teo Eng Hock asked his mother's permission, she readily agreed.

Soon, Wan Qing Yuan villa became one of the main hubs in Southeast Asia for supporting and planning China's cause. In the subsequent years, Sun Yat Sen visited Singapore several times and always stayed at the villa, where he met with the local Chinese businessman to discuss and plan steps in overthrowing the imperial system. In July 1908, Sun Yat Sen declared Singapore and, in particular, Teo Eng Hock's beautiful bungalow as Southeast Asia's headquarters for the revolutionary effort.

With the success of the revolution imminent, Teo Eng Hock sold the Wan Qing Yuan villa in 1910. Since then, the ownership of the villa changed several times. Finally, in 1937, six Chinese community leaders, all members of the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce, pooled resources and purchased the property with the goal of turning it into a memorial hall in honor of Sun Yat Sen. With the support of Nanjing Government, the villa was refurbished and was inaugurated on New Year's Day in 1940.

The villa went through its share of history in the years that followed. The Japanese used it as their military base during the Second World War, during which time many of the artefacts were unfortunately destroyed. After the War, it fell into disrepair, but after years of refurbishment and restoration, the bungalow was eventually named "Sun Yat Sen Villa" in 1964 and by 1965 it had been converted into a library and museum. The Singapore government declared it a national monument in 1994 and the building was renamed "Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall".

Through four separate well-decorated galleries, the museum tells the story of Singapore's involvement and influence towards the creation of the Republic of China. The first gallery introduces some of the prominent Chinese businessmen from the turn of the last century who served as key figures in supporting the rebellion, with special focus on the family of Teo Eng Hock. Gallery Two chronicles the activities of Sun Yat



Photos courtesy of Asif Chowdhury



Gallery One

Sen with the local Chinese leaders to support the cause in China leading to the declaration of the villa as the local headquarters for Southeast Asia. The third gallery is dedicated to the many insurgencies which finally helped to overthrow the Imperial system and established the Republic of China. The final gallery is about the positive impact the successful 1911 revolution had on the local Chinese communities in the region. One such impact was the collaboration of the local Chinese leaders who had supported Sun Yat Sen to establish many Chinese schools which initiated the modern education system in Singapore. It also proudly displays and highlights the contributions of Chinese business people who pioneered in the building of Singapore as a nation.

The museum has an additional gallery known as Bo Ai Gallery, which houses temporary exhibits, one of which depicted the life and times of Madam Soong Ching Ling, the wife of Sun Yat Sen, a highly educated leader in her own right.

Each gallery displays numerous artefacts from the villa over the course of time, including old

photographs of the local leaders and Sun Yat Sen illustrating the history of the villa and how it was utilized. An intriguing feature is exhibits in the form of 3D holograms recreating various events. One of the other interesting displays is Sun Yat Sen's bedroom, kept in the same manner as it was during the time when he stayed here during his many visits.

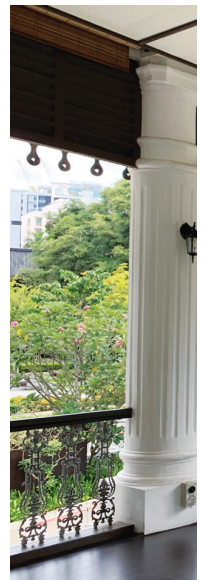
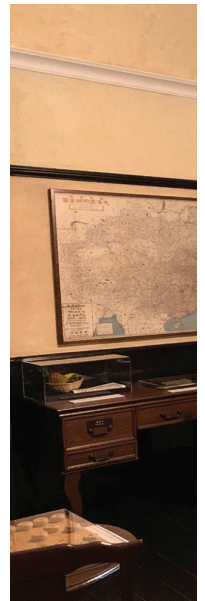
Besides the exhibits, the architecture of the colonial villa with its high ceilings, beautiful woodwork and a pretty patio overlooking the garden, is quite something to see. Spending time in the manicured garden is highly recommended, where there are a few bronze murals; true pieces of artwork, depicting the local life from that time period.

Whether it is to admire a glimpse of Singapore's history in the early 1900s and its involvement in the creation of the Republic of China, or simply for a stroll both inside the beautiful villa and outside in the garden, this is a wonderful way to spend a lazy weekend afternoon.

Photos courtesy of Asif Chowdhury



*Asif is part of the executive management at a global semiconductor company and has written for various trade journals. Asif spent four years as an expatriate in Tokyo, Japan in business development, which led him to travel extensively over the country. He currently lives in Singapore with his wife and son, while his daughter is studying for a BSc at Purdue University, Indiana.*





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