the History in Matchboxes

The Phillumenists

About
Hi! We are Kate, Hui Han and Zhang Ling and this is our project - The history in matchboxes.

About

Hui Han

Kate

Zhang Ling
As part of Get Real!, a job attachment program that is part of the Victoria Integrated Programme curriculum, we took on a 2-week internship with the National Library Board and became involved in its Singapore Memory Project (SMP). SMP is a national initiative to collect, preserve and provide access to personal memories and stories related to Singapore.

The topic we chose to explore was the hobby of collecting matchboxes and matchbooks in Singapore. These matchboxes are able to capture a part of Singapore’s past, as they are imprinted with the logo and address of the establishments from which they came from, of which many have disappeared.

For the project, we interviewed two ex-matchbox collectors, Mr. Dennis Tan and Mr. Lai Tuck Chong. They shared many interesting personal stories with us, and Mr. Dennis Tan was kind enough to donate his collection to the National Library Board. In addition, we also visited a select number of places found on the matchboxes in Mr Dennis Tan’s collection to discover if they had survived the continual redesign that the Singapore landscape has had and continues to endure. Of the 7 places we researched, none of the coffeehouses have survived, one restaurant remains and only one of the hotels has disappeared.

We would like to extend our most sincere thanks to the following people for making this project possible:

Ms Nurulhuda Subahan – for her strong support and constant supervision throughout the project.
Mr Yee Yeong Chong – for his mentorship and his useful comments for our project.
Mr James Seah – for his guidance on necessary interview skills.
Mr Zakaria Zainal – for his valuable sharing on his “Our Gurkhas” project, his photography tips as well as his help on how to improve our project.
Mr Lai Tuck Chong – for his narrative tips, his mentorship.
Mr Dennis Tan, Ms Catherine Tan, Mr Lai Tuck Chong, Mr Robert Wesley Seng and Mr Low Kam Hoong - for letting us interview them.
Our thanks goes to all who were not mentioned and have contributed to our project in one way or another.
Lastly, we would also like to extend our gratitude and thanks to the National Library Board and our school – Victoria Junior College – for giving us this opportunity to carry out our project.

Enjoy:)
Our first interviewees are Mr. Dennis Tan, 50 and his cousin Ms Catherine Tan, 60.

Back in the 1970s, Catherine would bring back matchboxes from her trips to the coffeehouses and hotels. When Dennis saw these matchboxes, he took an instant liking to the symmetrical design of the logos on the matchboxes. “I used to doodle car designs, TV designs just for the fun of designing products”, he shared. From then, for the span of his childhood he would collect matchboxes.

It was the first time that Catherine was seeing the whole collection of matchboxes she had helped to amass. Rummaging through the matchboxes brought with it a lot memories for her. She shared that she had heard Teresa Teng sing at the Oasis. Teresa Teng was an immensely popular Chinese singer from Taiwan, well known for her romantic ballads and folk songs. She also heard Matthew and the Mandarins, a popular Singaporean band famous for their country and Western music sing in the Horizon at Shangri-la Hotel.

A lot of the old practices she enjoyed at the coffee houses no longer exist. For example, Catherine talked about going for tea dances. People would Tango or do the cha-cha-cha dance to gentle music around tea time hence the name tea dances.
Besides matchboxes, Dennis also collected old bus tickets. Bus tickets would cost about from 5 to 25 cents depending on the distance you traversed. The bus conductor would then clip the bus ticket to note the stop on which you boarded the bus. Such practices no longer exist nowadays due to the rise of EZ-link cards.

At the end of the interview, Mr Dennis Tan advised us to keep the little things around us, like our school timetable, school badges, photos and not discard them. In 10 years time, places that were once familiar to us may have changed, but with the mementoes, at least part of our memories would be preserved—slumbering and waiting their Prince Charming and his kiss to awaken them.
Our next interviewee is Mr. Lai Tuck Chong, who is also one of our mentors for the SMP project.:) Like Mr Dennis Tan, he also started collecting matchboxes when his “uncles and aunties first started giving us these matchboxes from their trips to the cocktail bars and lounges. They were like 8 -15 years our seniors, so they were more into the dating and social scene. One of them also smoked”.

Surprisingly enough, there are a lot of things you can do with matches and their matchboxes/matchbooks. Mr Lai Tuck Chong used to keep jumping spiders in the wooden ones and play a “big-small” numbers game with the 6-digit telephone numbers on the matchboxes. Having no idea of what the former or latter activities are, I asked him to elaborate. Basically, jumping spiders are very small creatures, “no larger than a five-cent coin”. Jumping is their main form of locomotion hence their name. And the “big-small” numbers game worked like this: the matchboxes would be randomly and equally divided among all participants. “We would read off one number. Could be the first, second or third number in a telephone number. We then compare. The bigger value wins. At the end, the person with the biggest overall value wins.”

Other things one could do is to line half-opened matchboxes up to form a long train or stack them up as building blocks with “pictures with people for windows and store fronts.”

As a child, Mr Lai Tuck Chong and his friends also played around with safety matches, turning them into non-safety ones so that they could be struck anywhere.

Matchbooks would be used for spy and detective games. He and his friends would mimic James Bond and scribble secret information on the inside of the matchbooks and leave them behind as clues. “We normally just spy on our classmates, wondering what they are up to. We normally have ‘spy aids’ to help us pretend better, things like torches and guns in books, or binoculars. The back of the school stage was our regular meeting place. It had vent holes in the walls to spy out, so it was ideal.”

Another interesting piece of information Mr Lai Tuck Chong shared was that from 1969 to 1975 his father worked for the Paterson Simon Company, “as a maintenance supervisor of sorts at their Federal Matches factory in Jurong”. When he was 10, he visited the factory with his father: “What impressed me were these big rollers hanging from above with matches stuck to them. Below was a large pool that contained some brownish liquid. When the machinery was switched on, these rollers would turn, pass and dip into the pool to coat the match heads with the brown stuff, presumably red phosphorus.”
Mr Lai Tuck Chong shows us how to make a non-safety match.

Toys bought from the vendor outside Mr Lai Tuck Chong’s primary school, Matter Primary. From left, a doll whose cap and scarf I crochet in Art class at MPS, spy 'books' from toy vendor outside school, and also a pair of picture glasses.

Source: lensgypsy, Flickr
7 Oxley Rise, Penang Road is remembered in many different ways. For J. B. (Joseph Brook) David, a well-known businessman, it was the site of his mansion and his primary residence. Nowadays, people associate it with Visioncrest Residence, a series of residential and commercial buildings. But for many, it will be remembered as the former Cockpit Hotel. That is how Mr Low Kam Hoong remembers it: “Before we were married, me and my wife together with some friends would drop by the lounge once in a while to enjoy a few drinks, always keeping drinks stirrer and sometimes drink glasses as souvenirs.”

The Cockpit Hotel was iconic with its distinctive fan-shaped windows and wrought-iron balconies. Originally called Hotel De L'Europe, it only officially adopted the name “The Cockpit Hotel” in 1960. Before that, the hotel was nicknamed the Cockpit because the crew and passengers of the Dutch airline KLM frequently stayed there.

Source:
The Cockpit Hotel

The Cockpit Hotel, 7 Oxley Rise.

Source: Sammyboy

The Cockpit Hotel was bought over by the Wing Tai Asia and redeveloped into Visioncrest Residence.

The Cockpit Hotel matchboxes residing on Visioncrest Residence.
Home of the award-winning Hainanese chicken rice created by Steven Low until he was laid after 31 years of service in 2007, The Mandarin (now known as Mandarin Orchard Singapore) is a five-star hotel at 333 Orchard Road Singapore. It holds the record for the first and highest revolving restaurant in Singapore with its Top of the ‘M’ Restaurant where one can expect to enjoy a 360-degree view of the city skyline while enjoying French dishes.
Skillets was unique in many a ways: on its opening in August, 1971, it was the first coffee house in Singapore to have hostesses, whose jobs were to escort customers to their tables; it had a distinctive architectural design (a split level room, circular in shape, with the interior divided into three concentric circles by low concrete walls).

During our interview with Ms Catherine Tan and her younger brother Mr Dennis Tan, she shared that she was a frequent visitor at Skillets in part because “the building is very unusual”. To her, the food, pricing and ambience of the coffeehouse were all very up to standard.

“It was air-conditioned right...I mean how many houses were air-conditioned in the 70s,” continued her younger brother.

On the menu was a wide selection of dishes to satisfy all appetites for all occasions. From “Juice and Appetizers”, “Soups”, “Feature Deluxe Sandwiches” to “From Our Surrounding Island Water” you sure were spoilt for choice. Just to give you an idea of how much prices have gone up: back then, a Black Pepper Steak at Skillets-one of the more high-end eateries cost S$6.50, an air-flown airloin steak S$8.50.
Fun facts: The Coffee House’s name was inspired by the word “skillet”. According to the Oxford Dictionary of English, skillet means “a small metal cooking pot with a long handle, typically having legs”. The logo of the coffeehouse also adopted a picture of a metal skillet cooking over fire.
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In Red Star Chinese Restaurant, people can enjoy various kinds of Chinese food in an elegant environment made of traditional Chinese decoration. Red Star Restaurant is well-known for serving their dim sum in a very traditional Hong Kong manner. Customers can choose what they want directly from the trolley operated by the waitress.

The restaurant was first established in the 50's and the traditional serving style was preserved until now. Although the chefs have been changed to younger people, the recipes are still old school. Just as Mr. Tan has mentioned, “This restaurant is still alive today, operating as if it’s frozen in time.” If you go there, you’ll feel like you’re transported into the 70’s. Therefore, it might be a nostalgic experience for a child of 60’s and 70’s dining at this place, with the family atmosphere and the trolleys. Nowadays, every weekend, the restaurant would usually be full with families lining up for Dim Sum, which is a sign of its long-lasting reputation.
Red Star Restaurant

Following up on the suggestion by Mr Dennis Tan, my teammate, Kate and I made our way to the restaurant to personally experience the unique atmosphere:)
The restaurant is located on the 7th floor of an old building near the centre of Chinatown. At noon, the restaurant was not as full as I had imagined. We were warmly welcomed and seated. First, we were served with free Chinese tea. After we had settled down, the waitress came to us with a trolley of Chinese Dim Sum, and we chose what we liked (There were a number of waitresses pushing trolleys around, each with different selections) I chose prawn rice roll and Longan almond bean curd while Kate picked the steamed chili and siew-mai. The waitress marked our order on a yellow card.

Born in the 90’s, I myself have never tried some of the Dim Sum before, so this was the first time I had longan almond bean curd as a dessert. The bean curd has a naturally strong almond fragrance. I personally found the bean curd rather bland as I have a sweet tooth. That said, the dessert they serve should be healthier. Most of the customers there were around their mid-30s, having lunch with their families or colleagues. Each Dim Sum is sold at around 4 dollars and the portion is small. The price might be a bit expensive, but I think most of the people there are willing to cash out that extra amount to get that feeling of being transported back to old days.

by Hui Han
Red Star Restaurant

A first for Hui Han—choosing her dessert.

A first for Kate too—getting her siu-wai from the trolley lady.
Red Star Restaurant

Lunch time! On the menu today is steamed chili, slew mai, prawn rice roll and logan almond bean curd (not shown here).

Longan almond bean curd.
Despite rocky relations between Singapore and Malaysia, it seems the 2 countries have much in common—from a shared history to a shared airline: Malaysia-Singapore Airlines. In 1966, after Malaysian Airways absorbed Borneo Airways, the Singapore and Malaysian government entered a joint ownership of the airline and henceforth changed the name of the airline to Singapore-Malaysia Airlines. But alas, differences in agenda between the 2 governments led to the breakup of the airline 6 years later. Despite its short existence, it will always be remembered—through the art of phillumeny.

The Malaysia-Singapore Airlines headquarters at Robinson Road is now the Singapore Airlines Building.
Singapore Airlines’s origins can be traced back to the incorporation of Malayan Airways Limited and Imperial Airways. Today, it has evolved to become the world’s second largest airline by market capitalisation according to the International Air Transport Association. “Singaporean girls” - the female flight attendants with their modified version of the Malay Sarong Kebaya are marketed as the airline’s icon - a representative of Asian hospitality and grace.