Collaborative Research Projects

crossing disciplinary boundaries

Edited by: Cally Cheung
The History of Rivers in Singapore

Student: Cheang Tze Mun
Supervisor: Prof Koh Keng We

Written by: Vanessa Ellen Nah Mei Yin
When one thinks of **Singapore**, one might think of a modern, first world city-state. Singapore is a global trade and finance hub, a “concrete jungle” with state-of-the-art facilities and services. But how many of us think about Singapore’s geography and the role features like rivers have played in her growth? Research on Singapore’s **Kallang** and **Rochor** rivers have situated them in terms of redevelopment or social history, but **Cheang Tze Mun** investigates their broader history on a deeper level.

When asked about what attracted him to this research project on the Kallang and Rochor Rivers, History undergraduate Tze Mun explained the appeal was two-fold. Firstly, he was inspired by his fascination with nature and how man interacts with it. The second factor that drew Tze Mun to the project was simply intellectual curiosity for a topic he knew little about:

“**When I read about the scope of the project, it occurred to me that I did not know the full story of these two rivers, and it motivated me to begin in-depth research to satisfy my curiosity. I wanted to know what the history of the rivers was, to fill in the blanks to the best of my abilities and scratch this itch.**”

In his URECA project, Tze Mun accesses a wealth of materials and documents such as books, newspaper articles, maps, photographs and official records from the National Archives of Singapore to investigate their history and transformation, especially in the context of post-independence Singapore. The research is broad and multidimensional, combining socio-economic, political, environmental and cultural considerations for a well-rounded holistic account of the Kallang and Rochor Rivers.
Galstaun, Arshak G., 1925. View of Water Buffaloes in Rochor River.
There is something novel about the expansion and destruction of the natural environment whether by humans or the force of nature. Here, it’s mostly the human factor with what I am researching, but nature has a way of responding to these changes by man.

- Tze Mun
Documenting the History of Singapore's Food Culture through Oral History

Student: David Tan
Supervisor: Prof Hallam Stevens
Written by: Shreya Agrawal
Most of us patronise hawker centres, food courts, and restaurants regularly, but have you ever thought about the lives and histories of hawkers who toil hard everyday?

**David Tan**’s project provides an alternative perspective to the lives of hawkers which is studied through the lens of individual hawkers from 1960s to the present. He has conducted an extensive field research where he interacted and interviewed several hawkers, in an attempt to uncover the trials and tribulations of a fast-evolving hawker industry. This is especially pertinent in a cosmopolitan and urbanised city like Singapore where he admits that “the hawker trade is perceived as a low status job with difficult working conditions”, and young Singaporeans are unwilling to take up such jobs. Every hawker has his or her own story, and it is important that researchers like David, do not leave them out in a culture where economic development is prioritised.

Most hawkers have been in their job since several generations and continue their business as they feel a sense of belonging to the hawker tradition. In his research, he further questions whether Singapore has already lost her hawker heritage and initiates an academic dialogue on the measures that could be taken to help and preserve the hawker industry.
Exploring Historical Toponomastics in “Romance of the Three Kingdoms”
Linguistic student Michelle Sim’s dedicated project breathes new, riveting life into historical monikers of China.

Her research analyses place names in legendary lands, by focusing on the Chinese classic, “Romance of the Three Kingdoms” (三国演义) by Luo Guan Zhong (罗贯中). The book features tales of battles and warfare strategies making use of geographical terrain, bringing significance to the places mentioned. She hopes to understand historical location names in China against this backdrop, and by adopting the historical toponomastics approach. It also fills the gap in the literature regarding analysis of Mandarin Chinese legendary lands and toponomastics studies.

Two significant places from the text are analysed, namely Xia Pi City (下邳) and Crouching Dragon (卧龙岗). She also delves into the folk etymology on the respective places and evaluates them using existing etymological evidence. Folk etymology for Xia Pi City was incongruent with existing etymological evidence, and that the name Crouching Dragon was geographically-motivated, as a metaphorical description of the mountain ridges. Although the current research is limited in its scope, there is room for future research to expand and conduct actual fieldwork to have a better conceptualisation of folk etymology and name origins.
天下大勢，分久必合，合久必分。
（三国演义）
Ghosts in the Machine: Digital Humanities, Religious Minorities & Cross-Class Marriage in English Fiction

Student: Shreya Agrawal
Supervisor: Prof Samara Anne Cahill
When one mentions ‘Literature’, what comes to one’s mind is the image of reading long novels, poetry and drama. However, reading Literature at NTU now includes reading graphs, analysing frequencies and interpreting data.

**Digital Humanities** is an emerging field that puts data and traditional humanistic interpretation in fruitful conversation. During her research, Shreya Agrawal compiled an overwhelming number of references to religious minorities including Quakers and Muslims from primary-text databases **Eighteenth-Century Collections Online (ECCO)** and **Nineteenth-Century Collections Online (NCCO)**. Using the graphing tools available in NCCO to process the data from her keyword searches, Shreya then used traditional literary analysis to sift through the findings and to interpret the most relevant references.
Shreya’s project adds to the existing scholarship as she focuses on the question of why two influential, Anglocentric novels – Samuel Richardson’s Pamela (1740) and Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre (1847) included crucial references to the religious minorities of Quakers and Muslims when the eponymous heroines were negotiating the conditions of their marriages to higher-status men.

She investigates what would references to Quakers and Muslims have meant to Richardson’s and Brontë’s contemporaneous readers and how these references inflect social anxiety about marriage, reproduction, social mobility, and the transmission of property? Her project also includes references to the “East”, imperialism and feminist orientalism.
Land of Lilies & Mandarins: Western Representations of China in 1927 to 1957

Student: Cally Cheung
Supervisor: Prof Graham Matthews
In the hands of the mass, fiction enacts as soft power for those of authority. The fluctuating images associated with China as a nation-state—as configured by the West—are recast in Cally Cheung’s project with Prof Graham Matthews. She spearheads the massive database, meticulously collating all fictive quotations, pertaining to all things Chinese, in the Western literary archive.

Western interest in China rapidly developed in the eighteenth-century, spurred by the Rococo period, leading to a cultural demand for things that were exotic and extravagant. The import of new Chinese products such as tea, silk, and porcelain further marked the nation-state as a source of artistic and intellectual aspiration—until the French Revolution. The subsequent rise of imperialism and industrialism in the West replaced earlier enthusiasm for the orient culture with derision and hostility. As the meaning of China and its turbulent presence in the West continuously evolves and fluctuates throughout history, her research seeks to track these shifts and trace the underlying connections over time.

To date, she has amassed 3,100 relevant quotations after combing through 1,861 individual novels. Her next steps will cover a larger time-frame, as well as firm up on a coding system that will streamline the close-reading tendencies characteristic of the Humanities.
“China is my favourite country,” Fay said. “I’ve always liked China.” She spoke of it as if it were a food that had been offered her since childhood, and that she had eaten and relished while others refused it as unpalatable.

- Janet Frame, “Owls Do Cry”
Ex-isles: Islands that Disappeared

Student: Vanessa Ellen Nah Mei Yin
Supervisor: Dr. Francesco Cacciafoco
Vanessa Nah is a Year 3 Linguistics & Multilingual Studies student at NTU, yet her project isn’t quite about Linguistics—at least, not just this field of study. What began as a purely Linguistics study on the etymology of “off the map” place names became an interdisciplinary project linking cartography, history and geography. It even took on philosophical underpinnings about the type of knowledge and discovery the “un-discovery” of phantom islands leads to.

In her project, Vanessa looks at three phantom islands. These refer to islands that were thought to exist, but in reality never did and only survived on maps—some for hundreds and hundreds of years.

1. **Bermeja near Mexico**, named for its supposed reddish colouration, was sought for the ownership of oil reserves that its discovery would have granted Mexico over the United States. Alas it has never been found, and the island is wrought with conspiracy even today.

2. **Hy Brasil off Ireland’s coast** is unique in that it surfaced on maps first in 1330, and only later came to be associated with Irish myth and folklore. While other mythical phantom islands appeared on maps after their associated legends and stories were already established, Hy Brasil’s cartographic path happened in reverse.

3. **Sandy Island off New Caledonia** appeared on maps as early as 1908, but was only removed from maps in 2012. This makes it the most recent example of a phantom island “unfound”.


These phantom islands are linked by a common theme: hope. Bermeja is Mexico’s hope for economic power, Hy Brasil Ireland’s hope for their legendary heaven on earth, and Sandy Island a hope we can all understand. It is a hope for the unknown, for discovering we don’t know all that we think we do after all. With huge advances in technology and new findings made every day, sometimes new knowledge is about relooking old knowledge. This is exactly what studying phantom islands teaches us. As Vanessa’s paper concludes: “it is not about uncovering what we do not know, but un-discovering what we do.”