



MEDIA RELEASE

Embargoed till 28 April 2016, 12 noon

PULAU UBIN'S CULTURAL HERITAGE: AN EVOLVING KAMPONG COMMUNITY

NHB's Cultural Mapping Project uncovers social networks that extend beyond the island, keeping the kampong spirit alive.

SINGAPORE, 28 April 2016 – Far from being a sleepy backwater island in decline, Pulau Ubin houses a vibrant and evolving community with close links to mainland Singapore. It exists, not just as a geographical site with a rural settlement of wooden houses, but as a kampong-centred social network, founded on kinship, neighbourly relations and/or friendship. This is one of the key findings of the *Pulau Ubin Cultural Mapping Project*, commissioned by the National Heritage Board (NHB), as part of its ongoing efforts to document and showcase Singapore's heritage.

2. The year-long *Pulau Ubin Cultural Mapping Project*, which started in April 2015, documents the well-loved island's living heritage through oral history accounts and lifestyles of its residents and former residents. The project builds on past Pulau Ubin related documentation and research efforts by NHB such as the 2013 documentation of Pulau Ubin's historical sites, a virtual tour of the island, a documentary on Ubin's boat operators, the *Balik Pulau: Stories from Singapore's Islands* exhibition at the National Museum of Singapore in 2014, and a series of stamps depicting Pulau Ubin's iconic landmarks issued in 2014.

3. Mr Alvin Tan, NHB's Assistant Chief Executive Officer (Policy & Community), said, "This project is significant as it is the first such project of its nature and scale to be conducted on Pulau Ubin and it corrects common misconceptions about Pulau Ubin. Moreover, its findings will be useful to the Friends of Ubin Network and will inform our deliberations on how best to retain and enhance Pulau Ubin's heritage and charm for future generations of Singaporeans."

A Vibrant, Evolving Community

4. One of these misconceptions is that the island population is dwindling, with the younger generations preferring to set up home on mainland Singapore. The findings from the Cultural Mapping Project challenges this and informs us that Pulau Ubin's kampong-centred social network is a thriving one, and has evolved to extend beyond residents living on the island, to non-residents and regular visitors. They are drawn into the network by their diverse connections with the island, whether through work, family-run businesses, informal apprenticeships, religious activities, or fitness and leisure. The constant flow of non-residents to the island, and their induction into the existing network, reflects that it is likely to continue to grow, expand and evolve.



5. Key Pulau Ubin-centric events and activities contribute to the growth of the abovementioned Pulau Ubin social network. One of the island's key signature events is the annual Tua Pek Kong Festival, which is a six-day festival that includes activities such as Teochew opera, *getai* performances, lion dance, a ritual by the sea, and religious processions. In 2015, the festival drew an estimated 5,000 visitors to the island and it provides a platform for the renewal and expansion of Pulau Ubin's social network.

Unique Island Heritage

6. The project also documents different aspects of Ubin's unique island heritage, including the social history of the island; religious practices and festive events (i.e., annual Tua Pek Kong Festival); building and repair works (including building of houses and digging of wells); cultivation of indigenous fruits, herbs and spices; fishing and crabbing (by line, hook and trap); as well as knowledge of wildlife such as hornbills and wild boars. Findings of the project have shown that the Ubin community live in harmony with the island's rich biodiversity, and residents possess a range of traditional skills and knowledge about nature. Please refer to **Annex A** for the profiles of selected residents who are living and/or living on Pulau Ubin.

Heritage Offerings on Pulau Ubin

7. As part of the *Pulau Ubin Cultural Mapping Project*, NHB has also produced a 25-minute documentary titled "Life on Ubin", which presents the memories and experiences of current and former residents of Pulau Ubin. The documentary will be uploaded on NHB's new heritage portal, Roots.sg, on 28 April 2016.

8. Members of the public will also be able to experience Pulau Ubin's unique heritage for themselves in May during NHB's *Singapore HeritageFest 2016 (SHF)*. There will be outdoor performances and film screenings on the evening of 14 May 2016. Please refer to the *SHF* website for more information <http://heritagefest.sg/>.

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About the National Heritage Board

The National Heritage Board (NHB) was formed on 1 August 1993. As the custodian of Singapore's heritage, NHB is responsible for telling the Singapore story, sharing



the Singaporean experience and imparting our Singapore spirit. NHB's mission is to preserve and celebrate the shared heritage of our diverse communities, for the purpose of education, nation-building and cultural understanding. It manages the national museums and heritage institutions, and sets policies relating to heritage sites, monuments and the national collection. Through the national collection, NHB curates heritage programmes and presents exhibitions to connect the past, present and future generations of Singaporeans. NHB is now a statutory board under the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth. Please visit www.nhb.gov.sg for more information.

PROFILES OF UBIN RESIDENTS OR FORMER RESIDENTS

Mr Ahmad bin Kassim



Mr Ahmad Kassim at home



Mr Ahmad getting ready to cut a hole in a coconut for drinking

Mr Ahmad Kassim and his wife reside permanently on Pulau Ubin. He is now 80 year old and has lived on Ubin for 70 years. Ahmad arrived on the island with his father and his six siblings during the Japanese Occupation of Singapore. Ahmad knows how to build and repair wooden structures, and dig wells. He built his own house in Kampong Sungei Durian on Ubin and now resides in the house built by his late father in Kampong Melayu. He used to work for NEA to check areas for mosquito breeding. Now he sells drinks to visitors to the island from his home and occasionally hosts visits by school children from various schools. Ahmad is popularly known as *Ahmad Janggut*, Ahmad the Bearded, on Pulau Ubin. Now, his family and his brother's family are the only ones left in Kampong Melayu.

Mr Tan Leong Kit



Left: Tan Leong Kit with visitors to his drinks stall "Y u so like that".

Right: Tan Leong Kiat with the harvested roots of the Elephant's Foot Plant.



Mr Tan Leong Kit is 85 years old and moved to Ubin in the late 1970s. Formerly a pig farmer in Bishan, he relocated to Ubin after pig farms were discontinued on the main island of Singapore. His pig farm in Ubin was extensive – from the 16th milestone to the 23rd milestone, which is now a forested area. He bought piglets from America to rear until they were big enough to sell to other pig farmers. After his pig farm on Ubin closed down in the 1980s, he has been planting medicinal herbs around his home and sells drinks to visitors on the island.

Mr Tan's wife, Chua Geok Mui, returns to Ubin every weekend. He has 8 children and his third son, Tan Kwee San 陈贵三, comes to help at the shop every weekend and usually stays for 2-3 nights.

Ms Emily Chia



Ms Emily Chia



Yeo Meo Keng, usually called Ah Hui, seated on the left of the photograph, while her younger sister Yeo Hui Na stands next to her.

Ms Emily Chia is the daughter of Chia Ah Bah and Yeo Hui Na. Her father Chia Ah Bah, her aunt Yeo Hui Bek and her uncle Lim Chai Hee run the bicycle rental shop at No. 25. Her mother's sister, Yeo Meo Keng, is one of the van drivers who transport visitors around the island.

Emily comes to Ubin three times a week to help with the bike rental business at No. 25. She grew up with her cousins (children of Yeo Meo Keng), who have stayed with her family in Singapore since they were young. Her aunt, Yeo Meo Keng, hardly leaves Pulau Ubin and receives daily food supplies from Singapore through another aunt, Yeo Hui Bek.



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Mr John Ng



John Ng with his boat in the background.

John grew up in a kampung in Singapore and started coming to Ubin after marrying Ivy Choo. His mother-in-law, Mdm Ong Ang Kui, also known as “Lai Huat So” [Hokkien:來发嫂] operates the “Ah ma drinks stall” at Jalan Jelutong in Ubin.

John used to work in an abbatoir for ducks but became a ferry operator in 2015. After obtaining his boat license, John started out by working on someone else’s boat. About a year ago, he invested in his own boat with a friend and now plies the Changi-Ubin route every day.

On some nights, especially before the weekend or a public holiday, he may stay overnight at his mother-in-law’s place. He also helps his mother-in-law to fix things around the house.

Ms Chew Loke Kuan



Yoke Kuan in her family's shop at No. 49a.

Yoke Kuan lived on Ubin from her birth until the 1980s when she got married. She came back to Ubin in 2011 to manage the shop at No. 49a, which sells traditional goods and was previously managed by her father, Chew Cheng Tiong. He died from cancer in late 2015. The 86-year-old shop, named Chew Teck Seng, was established by her grandfather. Her father inherited the shop and Yoke Kuan currently manages the shop with her brother.

Yoke Kuan grew up in House 363B which is currently managed by the NParks as an example of Chinese Kampung House on Ubin. Every month, NParks conducts a "Kampung Tour" featuring this house.