

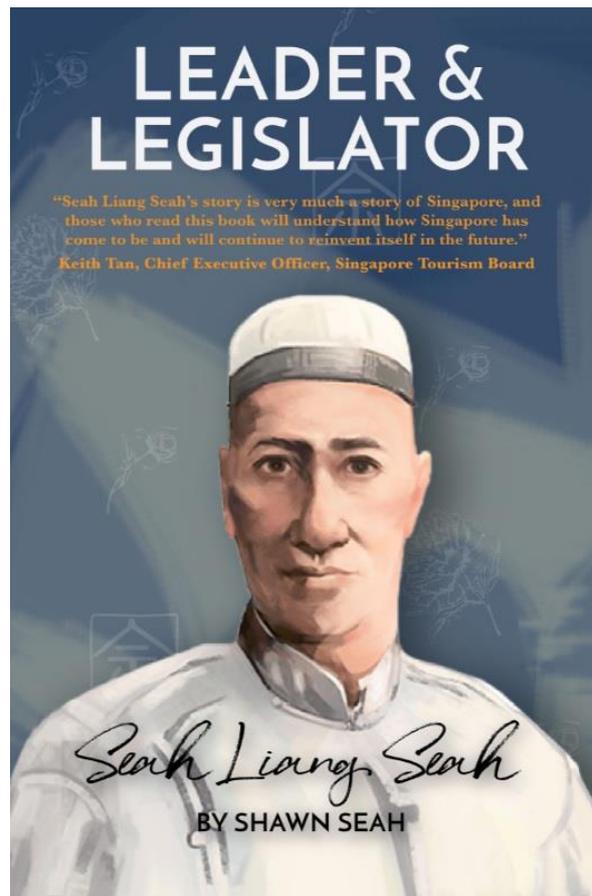
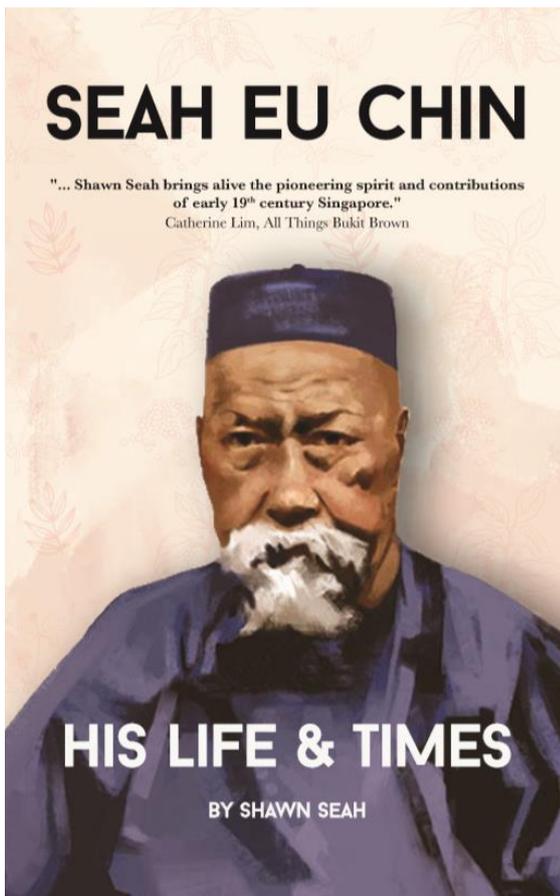
Searching for My Roots

<https://www.mackerel.life/searching-for-my-roots/>

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29 Sept 2019

I am not a professional writer, but I have written two books on my family. Often, people ask me: Why did you write these books? It probably was not easy holding down a full-time job, and writing late into the night and on weekends. What motivated you?



This is the back-story of how I went about searching for my roots.

When I was in primary school, I was interested in the street names named after members of my family, such as Seah Street, Eu Chin Street, Liang Seah Street, and Peck Seah Street. My father would occasionally share about these prominent pioneers we descended from, and I always thought it would be interesting to know: who were these people, what did they achieve, and what were their stories? One story my father told me was that my ancestors were incredibly wealthy business people who lived in Orchard Road and Boat Quay, in beautiful houses surrounded by flowers. Another story was that Seah Liang Seah had a most unusual will when he passed away. The inheritance could only be distributed 21 years after the death of King George V's last surviving child (yes, you read that right).



I did nothing much to pursue those questions back then. Like most Singaporean students, I faithfully attended school, did co-curricular activities, and pursued my current interests. Like many other boys, I played football occasionally and computer games frequently. And, when I was a youth, even if I was interested in history, it was mostly in international and European history (especially in secondary school and Junior College).

I had an awe-inspiring history teacher in Junior College who taught me—among other things—about the French Revolution, the 1848 Revolutions, the Russian Revolutions (both of them), the two World Wars, and the Cold War. But the most important thing is that she taught me the love of learning about the past and reflecting upon what it means for the present. History helps us understand why things are the way they are today. Far from being history, history is a living subject.

Later, a few years into university, a few interconnected events unfolded, one after another. Slowly, but surely, they raised my interest in finding out more about my ancestors and other pioneers in Singapore.

Reconnecting with the Past

First, during my undergraduate studies at the National University of Singapore, I took a Southeast Asian studies module, where I was required to write a short paper on a topic relating to Southeast Asia. Taking this opportunity, I wrote about my childhood interests. I briefly described how my ancestor Seah Eu Chin and his family were an integral part of the Southeast Asian maritime trade, what their identity (were Seah Eu Chin's descendants Teochew or Straits Chinese, or both?) could

have been, and how they contributed to Singapore. Well-received by the encouraging and supportive Teaching Assistant, my paper was the unexpected foundation stone of what eventually became the manuscript of my first book, *Seah Eu Chin: His Life & Times*.

Second, my master's thesis helped me in writing my book. I pursued my Master's degree in Economic History at the London School of Economics in 2010. And amazingly, inspiration to write about the Peranakan middleman traders and the Chinese secret societies during the colonial period between 1819 and 1867 came to me in a dream. (The dream visited me at night, and not during classes, I hasten to add.) And in my Master's thesis, I wrote about the Straits Chinese pioneers and focused some of the discussion on my ancestors. This provided more material which fed into my first manuscript.

After my studies, I came back to Singapore to start work, and so writing took a backseat. For a while, local history and my passion to write were put on hold.

And then it happened.

In September 2011, the Land Transport Authority (LTA) announced a plan to construct a new road parallel to Lornie Road, cutting through part of Bukit Brown Cemetery. Before that moment, like most Singaporeans, I didn't know Bukit Brown even existed, or what its significance was, or who were buried there.

In my view, this announcement changed the local heritage scene.

A Call to Action

Fearing that the rich history of Bukit Brown would be lost to future generations, some Singaporeans banded together to protest this development. They wanted the cemetery preserved and protected from the road-building project. This has been covered extensively by the media.

Following this whole saga with particular interest, I was spurred to start writing on my family's history seriously, and quickly. For me, this was the turning point where I decided: I must stand up and be counted. And I thought to myself: if I cannot write my ancestor Seah Eu Chin's story, his life's achievements and contributions to Singapore could be lost, possibly forever.

As the Greek poet Pindar rightly said, "Unsung, the noblest deed will die."

People thought I was crazy, wasting my time on a fool's errand.

"Nobody reads local history!"

"There is no interest in Singapore's history."

"Don't waste your time!"

No book on Seah Eu Chin had ever been written at that time. Yes, there were articles here and there; chapters in books; and newspaper articles, but not a book with his story. It was just waiting to be told. It was a daunting task. And sometimes when I look back, I am amazed at how far I have come and how many odds I have overcome.

In 2012, when I had started researching and writing in earnest, yet another event happened. In November 2012, two tombstone hunters, brothers Charles and Raymond Goh, found Seah Eu Chin's tomb at Grave Hill, near Bukit Brown. It once was lost, but now was found.

The find was massive, literally and figuratively.

For context, some people say that Seah Eu Chin's tomb is the second largest tomb in Singapore behind Ong Sam Leong's tomb (the history enthusiasts say it is about 600 square metres), but others say, depending on how you measure it, the tomb could very well be the largest in Singapore.



The tomb's discovery enticed me to delve deeper into history, heritage, and identity issues. One useful way of preserving our history, and understanding our Singapore identity, is through documenting it in writing. As my journey unravelled, it became clearer that preserving the memory of Singapore's history and heritage would be one of the causes close to my heart.

In 2017, *Seah Eu Chin: His Life & Times* was successfully sold and distributed.

How did the second book come about? It arose from the manuscript of the first.

A discussion with the National Heritage Board about my first book eventually led to the idea of writing a second book on Seah Liang Seah, Seah Eu Chin's most prominent and powerful son. As a result, I expanded upon my manuscript to form a new book, *Leader and Legislator—Seah Liang Seah*, eventually published in 2019.

Beyond the Horizon

Reminiscing on my personal journey with heritage and identity in Singapore, I hope that my books on Seah Eu Chin, Seah Liang Seah, and their Straits Chinese contemporaries can enrich the Singapore Story. Singapore has a rich, fascinating, and valuable history, if we only knew where to look. And I found my calling in wanting to contribute to the idea that we have a local history of our own.

Over the next few years, my aim is to continue writing local history, in areas such as my father's kampong and the stories of the Teochew Catholics in Singapore. I hope to write simple, accessible, and readable history. I also hope these books can preserve the memory of my illustrious ancestors and family—at the very least, because of my first two books, more people will be aware of the people behind Seah Street, Eu Chin Street, Liang Seah Street, and Peck Seah Street. And if the books can inspire readers to find their roots, or explore their heritage or the history of Singapore, I would have more than achieved my aim.

As Singaporeans, we should know who we are as a people, where we come from, and what we should do to move forward together. This is my personal wish for my fellow Singaporeans.

Leader & Legislator: Seah Liang Seah and *Seah Eu Chin: His Life & Times* are available here and here from Pagesetter Services.