

Lee Kong Chian Research Fellowship

Curious about the National Library's Lee Kong Chian Fellowship? Find out what our fellow, Dr Sandra Hudd, has to say about the fellowship and how her research has benefitted from this opportunity.

NL: In your recent book *The Site of the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus in Singapore: Entwined Histories of a Colonial Convent and a Nation, 1819-2015*, you shared that some traces of the original use of the CHIJ/CHIJMES site still remain using the concept of a palimpsest. Could you elaborate a little more on the sort of traces you have observed?

Sandra: In thinking about the many changes that have taken place at the CHIJ/CHIJMES site on Victoria Street, I drew on the original meaning of a palimpsest, which is a manuscript on which writing was superimposed over erased earlier writing, but in which traces of the earlier words are sometimes faintly visible. There are layers of memory and past uses at the site, but they are muted and only emerge faintly at times. The chapel is the most obvious reminder: even though it has been de-sanctified, it is clearly a former religious building, although the recent repainting of the outside gives it a bright, white artificiality as if it was just built yesterday. Similarly, in Caldwell House where the nuns lived, the original words, *Marche en ma présence et sois parfait* (Walk with me and be perfect), remain around the ceiling, yet otherwise it is only the bones of the room that remain, as in the downstairs that has now been transformed into a restaurant.

The railings incorporated into the Victoria St frontage and the partial demolition in the 1980s of buildings and one wall mean that the physical integrity of the walled enclosure of the cloister has been lost. The historical markers on the site usefully give the visitor some sense of the history and former uses, yet they cannot replace what has been lost. Places have emotional meaning that is not visible – I remember being touched on one occasion when I saw the faded remains of flowers that had been placed on the Gate of Hope, perhaps in memory of a specific orphan or even all of them. This was a poignant reminder of the history, but one that could only be interpreted if one knew the history, the cultural meaning, of the gate where children had been left.

In the book, I also reflect on community opposition to a planned dance party in April 2012 which was advertised as a 'sacrilegious night of partying' with 'dancing nuns'. It was not only criticised by the Catholic community but also by many other people who saw it as disrespectful, and the party was subsequently cancelled – showing that the adaptive reuse of a building does not totally obliterate its previous uses and our emotional attachment to place.

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NL: Can you tell us about your current research?

Sandra: I am researching the London Missionary Society (LMS) work in colonial Singapore. They arrived just months after Raffles in 1819 and established the first printing press, translating Christian texts into local languages and distributing them in homes and on the junks and small vessels in the harbour. They also established some small schools, although none remain today, with the exception of the girls' school which evolved into today's St Margaret's School. The society left Singapore for China in 1846, although Reverend Keasberry stayed on until his death in 1875, preaching in the now Prinsep St Presbyterian Church, running his school for Malay boys, and translating and printing Christian material. They are part of the early history of Singapore and particularly important in terms of the introduction of printing in the Straits Settlements.

NL: How has the National Library's collection helped you in your research? Which collections/What resources have been useful to you?

Sandra: It is wonderful to have all of the resources of the National Library within easy reach, both physically and online. The Singapore and Southeast Asian collection, of course, is most relevant and the Rare collection holds several works produced by the LMS, including the *Substance of Our Saviour's Sermon on the Mount* printed in Malay in 1829. It is marvellous that this fragile little 14-page tract has survived and is now held in the National Library.

NL: What kind of impact do you hope your Fellowship will have?

Sandra: The Fellowship has enabled me to extend my research into early Christian missionaries in Singapore which I had begun with my previous examination of Catholic missionaries. It rounds out the picture more, emphasising again the influential role of missionaries in the early development of Singapore. Whether one sees them as a force for good or as agents of empire, they played a part in early Singapore and thus deserve a place among others in Singapore's rich historiography. The Fellowship has provided the time to intensively concentrate on the research. I will be producing an article for Infopedia and for *Biblioasia*, as well as a slightly longer piece for publication by the Library.

BiblioAsia is available at www.nlb.gov.sg/biblioasia/.

NL: Would you recommend this fellowship to your peers and why?

Sandra: Definitely. The Fellowship is a great opportunity to access and utilise the impressive resources of the Library. As someone who has thought and written about Singapore for some time, and visited previously for short periods, it has also enabled me to experience actually living here for six months.