

Chapter 16 - Singapore

(2008 to 2010)

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(27th July 2014 – Penang)

Singapore

[Blog Entry for June 2008](#)



Isaac

A couple of months before Gek and I arrived back in Singapore from Mongolia, Isaac you were born on the 15th February 2008 and became part of our story. We did not get to meet until that summer when I came back to the UK to help find a nursing home for Mum. More of you later.

The first order of the day once we had returned to Singapore was to set up a home for us both in Gek's apartment there on the west of the island in the Regent Heights Condominium, Bukit Batok. The apartment was rented out to a young Indian couple for over four

years during Gek's time away from Singapore. After some painting and redecorating followed by purchases of new Italian style furniture, we had a very comfortable place to hang our hats.

Having promised ourselves before leaving the UK for Mongolia in 2006 that if our relationship survived the two Mongolian winters spent there, we would tie the knot, we next set about arranging for our 'big' day. Unfortunately, it wasn't going to be as simple as it may sound, getting married. The Singapore government is ultra-sensitive when it comes to its nationals, particularly women, marrying non-Singaporeans. As a result, there was no guarantee that I would be able to live in Singapore with Gek after we had tied the knot. In addition to this, the regulations also said we must be on the island together for a minimum of fourteen days before we could even apply to the Register of Marriages for a date on which to hold the ceremony at their offices. Because we could not book a slot before we got back to Singapore, all the registry office wedding dates were booked up well into the future, much further into the future that either of us wanted. We had both agreed that a low-key registry office wedding followed by a simple, small gathering of family and friends at a convenient restaurant was the way the day would be planned. But now we had to rethink it.

Arrive on the scene Gek's friend Ee Lin and her husband Sebastian. They had come around to our new home for a welcome back dinner and over the table talk we mentioned our little

difficulty concerning our intended nuptials. Sebastian suggested that we get married at his club, The Raffles Town Club along Dunearn Road. The next thing we knew he was on his telephone and we were booked to hold our wedding there on the evening of the 9th July with overnight accommodation booked not only for the two of us, but also for Polly and Karim as well. Talk about think it, do it. All arranged in a matter of minutes. All we needed now was a registrar of marriages to officiate on the day. Again, one of Gek's friends, Zaibun, who was already slated to be our MC for the evening, came up with a contact who agreed to do the deed on the day, a one Chandra Mohan.

With the wedding arranged Gek and I took up an invitation to visit another of Gek's long term friends, Kah Meng, in Sabah with Sock Hoon. Sock Hoon I already knew from her visit to Gek's graduation at Emerson College. Gek has a lot of friends, as I was finding out now that we were back in Singapore. Friends from school days right through to her last employer, Ngee Ann Poly. Each place Gek has spent any time working or socialising in groups, for example with the Singapore Taiji Association, she has kept in contact with the people there. One group that has regular gatherings is the University group, some thirty plus friends who come together at least once a year for a gossip and to feast. Singapore being such a small island helps to keep these networks alive. In the UK, once you leave a place of employment you usually also leave the area and very quickly lose contact with any friends you might have there.

Kah Meng invited us to stay at her place on the outskirts of Kota Kinabalu, the principal town in Sabah. Sabah together with Sarawak makes up East Malaysia on the island of Borneo and has a land area bigger than Peninsular Malaysia where we are now living. Most of Borneo Island is part of Indonesia, but the people of Sabah and Sarawak opted to join the Malaysian Federation in 1963 when Malaysia gained its independence from the British. They could have been part of Indonesia or the Philippines but opted to throw in their lot with the Malaysians. Sabah is a very rural place with little industrial development and, with a population of only three million, it is a very peaceful place to visit.

Kah Meng's husband Hiew had a little surprise in store for me. He has a computer supply business based in Kota Kinabalu and studied for his computer related degree at Salford University in the early 1970s. Would you Adam and Eve it, he had done his industrial placement year in Blackburn, not five miles from Darwen where I grew up. Furthermore, in 1972/3 he found himself a part time job as a waiter to supplement his income, in a Chinese restaurant in Darwen! I know of only one Chinese restaurant in the town at that time, the one my Dad and I used to visit, an upstairs establishment on the corner of Darwen Circus and the road to Bolton. After a little probing of both our memories, we decided that this must have been the very place that Hiew worked and there was every chance that he had served Dad and me a dish or two. Amazing, here I was on a random, once only visit to a faraway land to meet up with someone whose path might have crossed mine some forty odd years before. At the very least, we had been within a half mile of each other back then.

After a couple of days' stay at Kah Meng's place, we four hired a minibus with driver and took off to see Mount Kinabalu, not to climb it, just to see it. Mount Kinabalu's summit is 13,000 ft above sea level and whilst it is walk-able to the top it is a very steep climb and requires an overnight stay in a rest house halfway up. Gek did climb the mountain in 2002 with a group of Polytechnic students, which needed a few months preparation by trekking up Singapore's highest hill, Bukit Timah at 500 ft. Not quite the same, is it? Gek says that the biggest difficult in the mountain climb was the thinning atmosphere as you reach the summit, with each step forward torturing your lungs. Altitude sickness also defeats a lot of climbers with quite a few stopping at the halfway rest house. We stayed overnight at the base camp; a very comfortable resort set in a beautiful park. The camp is already at 3,000 ft and the evenings were quite cool, cool enough for us to light a wood fire in the chalet's fireplace. We were almost at the equator and we needed to light a fire to keep warm. The last time this had surprised me was on my visit to the government rest house on Mtn. Afadjato in Ghana forty-five years ago. Sock Hoon and Kah Meng really felt the cold and soon the novelty of sitting shivering in front of the log fire wore off, and the two of them disappeared to the warmth of their beds.

Soon after our return from Sabah, I got word from the UK that Mum was in hospital after a fall at home, and that she now needed to move into a care home where they could better attend to her care needs. Mark and my cousins Lyn and Diane had earlier arranged with Social Services some home help for Mum, but this was clearly not enough to provide a secure environment for her. With just a few weeks to our wedding, I left Gek in Singapore and flew back to the UK to help find Mum a suitable care home in Darwen. My uncle Granville and I visited a couple of homes before settling on one for Mum. After that, there wasn't much I could do in Darwen as she was still in the hospital and the arrangements for her move were soon set up. I decided to take the opportunity to travel to Tetbury to see you, Isaac, for the first time and return to Darwen via Nottingham where I met up with Polly. Bit of a whirlwind trip but well worth it, even if I was to be back in the UK with Gek in August on our honeymoon.

(26th May 2015 – Penang)

The Wedding

[Blog Entry for July 2008](#)

Raffles Town Club's 'Marriage Package' has standard elements which include amongst other things the wedding-cake-cutting and the champagne-fountain-pouring, all of which is fitted into a well-practised and hence slick delivery by the Club's staff. A bit more over-the-top than either of us envisaged for our wedding, but in the event we both enjoyed it enormously. Among the guest who had travelled from afar to be with us that day, apart from Polly and Karim, of course, were John Larsen and his wife, Lyn. John and I became good mates over the couple of month-long visits he made to Mongolia to help with the Project. On one of his visits, Lyn accompanied John and so the four of us got to know each



Doing the Paperwork

other quite well. We would be later going to stay at their place just to the north of Brisbane, Australia. That was in 2011.

The afternoon of the wedding, Gek and I moved over to the Club to set ourselves up there for the evening event. Sebastian booked us into the best suite in the Club and to our surprise, on arrival the bed was decorated with flowers picked out in the shape of a

heart. The bathroom attached to the suite was almost as big as the bedroom, with a very large Jacuzzi in it and all the bathroom fittings in duplicate. Travel Lodge this was not. Gek's friends, Sock Hoon and Kah Meng, arrived soon after us and the three of them spent the afternoon dolling Gek up for the coming show. Me, I just potted the afternoon away doing a bit of ironing, spending some time with Polly and Karim who had arrived by coach from KL the day before.

With over one hundred guests standing clapping our entrance to the banqueting hall, Gek and I walked arms-linked through a cloud of white smoke towards the stage to take our seats opposite Chandra. All very theatrical. The wedding rings we exchanged were made of Mongolian gold, rings we had specially commissioned before we left the Ulaanbaatar. With the official business



His and hers

over, being witnessed by Gek's brother Harry and his wife Sandie, the celebrations could begin. The Project team in Mongolia gave Gek and me a copper wedding cup as a parting gift. They were aware that we intended to get married in the coming months and presented us with the cup inscribed with our names together with a traditional Mongolian blue sash. At a Mongolian wedding the cup holds mare's milk and is passed from the groom to the bride held in the blue sash, with each taking a symbolic drink from it. For our version of the tradition, we used soya milk and a red sash, as in the Chinese tradition red is for happiness and blue is for mourning.



Mongolian Traditional Wedding Cup

The rest of the evening passed for us very quickly with wedding cake cutting, champagne pouring, yam seng cheering, photograph taking and ended with an over long

thank you to everybody speech from me. I rounded off by thanking Stamford Raffles for setting up Singapore all those years ago so that Gek and I could meet. That raised a laugh or three. Once the last guest had departed and we were alone, Gek and I retired to our room and the giant Jacuzzi. Now we were no longer living 'over the brush', we were officially wife and man.

The Honeymoon

[Blog Entry for September 2008](#)

A month after our wedding, Gek and I boarded a plane bound for London. The five-week honeymoon we planned took in England, Wales, Ireland and Spain, a tour to visit family and friends. After a couple of days staying with Ruth and Richard in their Blackheath home, we drove north in a hired car taking drop-in-and-see visits to Polly in Nottingham and my Mum in her new Darwen care home before flying from Liverpool to Dublin for VSO Ruth's wedding.



VSO Mongolia: Zoe, John, Mary, Pam, Ruth, Peter, Aaron, Marie-Claude, Maija, Gek, Me

Ruth Powell was on the VSO training courses with Gek and we had flown to Ulaanbaatar together almost two years ago to the day of her wedding. She invited all our common VSO Mongolia friends to share her day, with people coming from Scotland and Canada as well as Gek and I from Singapore. Inevitably our meeting turned into a reunion

with most of us not having seen one another for at least twelve months. It was good to catch up on how they were all doing and reminisce, even our if our memories weren't that old yet.

From Dublin we flew to Bristol and spent a week with you guys in Tetbury. Isaac, your ginger mop was just beginning to show, and it was pleasing to see that the ginger gene had been passed on to yet another generation. Apart from a day out together at the Arboretum, we just hung around your house and took trips into the town. Perhaps you guys have more memories of our time together than than I do!!!

From your place we flew to Barcelona via Gatwick to visit Gek's school days friend, Yin Yoke, after first calling it at Hooke to visit the Cooper family. Yin Yoke moved to Spain in 1986 after her marriage to a Spaniard and was now living Manlleu, a small town ninety minutes train ride to the north of Barcelona.



Before travelling out to Manlleu, we spent a couple of days in Barcelona at the Travel Lodge. We managed to get off the train from the airport at the right station, but could we work out where the hotel was? No, we could not. We spent what seemed like an age in a shopping mall by the station, trying to make sense of the location map we had and the on-the-ground highways we could see. Then it dawned on us that the hotel was on an industrial estate some

twenty-minute walk from the mall. But when we did eventually book in, we found the place to be comfortable with very friendly staff. Both Gek and I had visited Barcelona before and after revisiting a couple of the sights, we boarded another train north to Manlleu. I think that Yin Yoke was a bit surprised by Gek's intention to marry and I wasn't at all sure how she would receive me. But in the event, I passed muster and she now counts as a friend of mine too.

From Yin Yoke's place, after a couple of day's stopover back in London at Ruth and Richard's, we left for Singapore and married life together.

My Mum Dies

A couple of months after we returned to Singapore from our honeymoon in the UK, my Mum passed away.

Annie Whitworth, née Ribchester, my Mum, your Great Grandmother was a very independently minded woman. She was born in 1920 into a working-class family being the eldest of three siblings, Kenneth, Frank, and Granville. She lived her early life in Farnworth, Bolton in Lancashire, only moving away to Darwen with her husband Frank in 1947, the year after I was born. I could talk about anything with my Mum, absolutely anything. We never had a cross word between us, even with me a hormonal teenager, we always could communicate. My Dad died in 1973 when mum was only 53, a devastating blow for her with the loss of her soul mate, but she picked herself up and set her sights on travelling, a thing she loved to do. An ambition of hers was to travel right around the globe which she

did do in 1985. She also visited India from where she flew in a tiny airplane around Mount Everest. We have the photographs Mum took on these journeys of discover on our Gallery, which includes those of her cruise up the Yangze River in China when she was one of the very early tourists from the west to go there.

I think I must have inherited my love of travel from my Mum. Not only have Gek and I been to China, Ireland, England, and Spain in six months from April to September, but we had also taken a short break to Sabah, East Malaysia. Not bad eh? As was to become my practice, all these visits are recorded on the 'www.davidvso.blogspot.com' blog as well as being documented in photographs on the Gallery website.

Gek and I flew back to the UK in late November to attend Mum's funeral. A very sad day.

Living in Singapore

[Blog Entry for 2009](#)

In order that I could stay in Singapore with Gek as her husband, I still needed to get a long stay social visa, renewable every year at the discretion of Singapore's immigration department. This was the same situation I had been in when I first came to Singapore in 1983 with Jenny, although back then I could only get a six-month extension on my month's tourist entry visa. I had no right to live in Singapore simply because my wife was working there. This time around it took over nine months of first a three-month, followed by a six-month before I finally got the twelve-month renewable visa in my passport. I also got a small green ID card which allowed me to use the automated entry and exist gates at Changi Airport. I liked that.

The year 2009 saw us settle into a more relaxed lifestyle in Singapore with visits to Penang and Gek's Relau apartment. The Penang apartment was rented out whilst Gek was away

from Asia. Now that it had been returned to her, we made full use of it as an escape from the hustle and bustle of Singapore. But the place really did need a lot of TLC before it began to feel like a home to us. Out with the paint brushes again for another makeover and with a new bathroom fitted, we soon began to feel comfortable there.

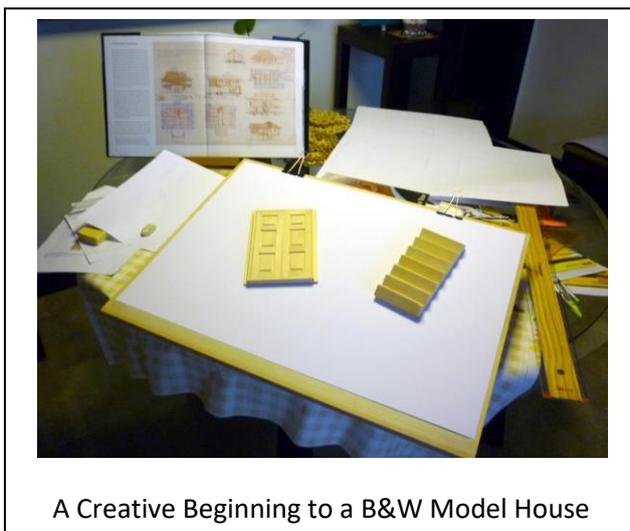


Building the Peranakan house

Gek became a full-time artist with the master bedroom in the Regent Heights apartment as her studio. I took to model house building again with my first effort

being a typical example of a Singapore Shophouse, loosely based on a restored house in the city. But before I could cut the wood, I had to go back to the drawing board. I did try learning to use a computer aided drawing package to draught the model's components, but after a couple of frustrating unforced errors through which I lost my creations, I gave up. Pencil, paper, wooden drawing board with a T square were for me, using skills I first learnt in the drawing office at Valentite-Modco back in the 1970s. As before, my preferred modelling scale was one inch to one foot or 1/12. I did some research on the type of Singapore Shophouse I intended to model, visiting the Singapore Urban Authority for archive material, as well as a recently restored Shophouse at 57 Neil Road. Most of Singapore's original shophouses have their insides gutted and remodelled to accommodate modern restaurants and boutique hotels, with just the original facades left standing. But the house at Neil Road was donated to Singapore University by the owner, on the understanding that they would restore it to as it was in the 1930s.

Shophouses were first built in Singapore in the 1820s, to a design approved by the founder of the modern city, Stamford Raffles. They are, in the main, a two storeyed terraced house with the ground floor being used for business and the first floor as accommodation for the business's owner. At the time the houses were first built, business premises were taxed on the width of their frontages with twenty-one feet being a break point in the taxes applied. This frontage tax lead directly to the buildings being designed narrow but long, in some cases only twelve feet wide but up to one hundred and twenty feet deep. Over the years, the frontage decorations on the buildings changed with the fashion of the day, right up to the 1950s when they became Art Deco in character. But the basic structure of the buildings remained the same, with the front door opening onto a covered five-foot-wide walkway and air wells spaced at intervals down the length inside to promote a cooling airflow through the building. Shophouses can still be seen in the other old Straits Settlements, in Malacca and Penang where they were given special protection in 2010 as part of a listed World Heritage Site.



A Creative Beginning to a B&W Model House

The 1920s saw several Chinese merchants becoming very rich from Singapore's development as a major trading port between South East Asia and the rest of the world, notably between China, England, and America. With this extra income, the Shophouse took on a new role becoming the show case homes of these newly wealthy merchants and the well-to-do Peranakan Chinese in Singapore. This was the type of house I had a mind to model. Most Peranakans are of Hokkien ancestry, although a

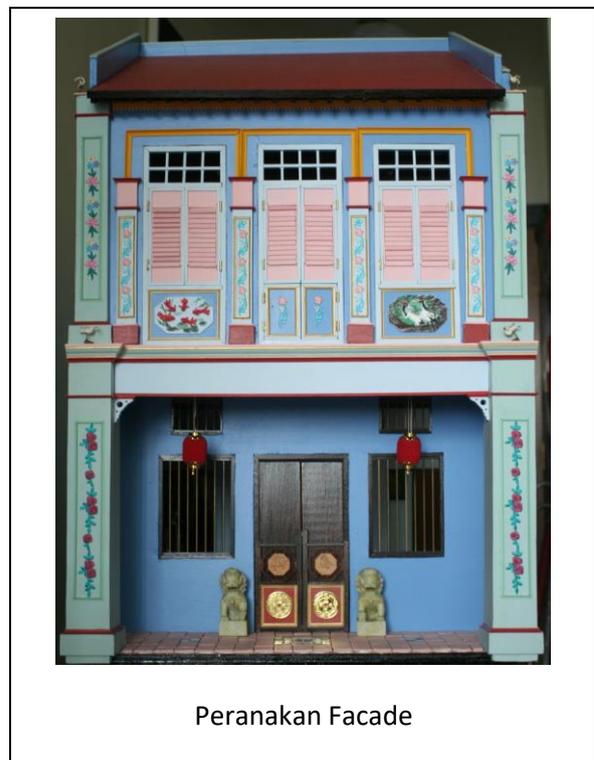
sizeable number are of Teochew (Gek's ancestry) or Hakka descent. Peranakan families occasionally imported brides from China and sent their daughters to China to find husbands. Inter-marriage in Malaysia occurs more frequently between Peranakan and people of Indian and Kristang ethnicity rather than Malay because of endogamous religious laws. These require non-Muslims intending to marry Malay-Muslims first to convert to Islam. Peranakan are not always willing to alter their religious and cultural identity in this way.

It did take a time to recover my drawing skills which in any case were never that good even at the time I was earning a living with them. The basic structure of the house was very simple to design and make, with the model's shell being finished in a few days. What did take the next twelve months was the modelling of the facade and the internal fittings of the house. There was nothing I could buy off the shelf that was appropriate to the date or style of the house I was modelling, a 1930s Peranakan Shophouse. To help me make of the house's fixtures and fittings, I bought a couple of miniature machine tools which I installed in an old wardrobe in the utility room at the back of the apartment, a milling machine and a circular saw. Gek kindly let me do the model building in the apartment's living room.

Finding ways to make the features of a house is a large part of the fun in model making. It becomes obsessive if you are not careful. Every time I am out and about shopping or visiting museums, I am ways scanning for things that could be used in my model houses. Take for instance the decoration on the Peranakan house's columns. These are strips of iron-on embroidery I found in an arts and crafts shop in Singapore's Chinatown. They were the right scale, near enough, and the colours fitted with the colour scheme I had in mind for my model. The two lions guarding the front door I found in a tourist shop in Penang's Burma Road.

Another great find was a set of wooden, hand crafted Chinese cake moulds that Sock Hoon's mother had brought with her from China in the 1930s. Sock Hoon kindly lent them to me, as they were the right scale for me to make air-dry clay casts from, with designs that fitted well with the period of my model. Gek kindly painted them for me, she being a gifted colourist.

The Peranakan house was all but finished by the time Gek and I decamped to Penang at the end of 2010. As I always enjoy the journey more than the destination, i.e. the making more than the finished model, I offered it as a donation to Singapore's Peranakan Museum, which they duly accepted. The Museum

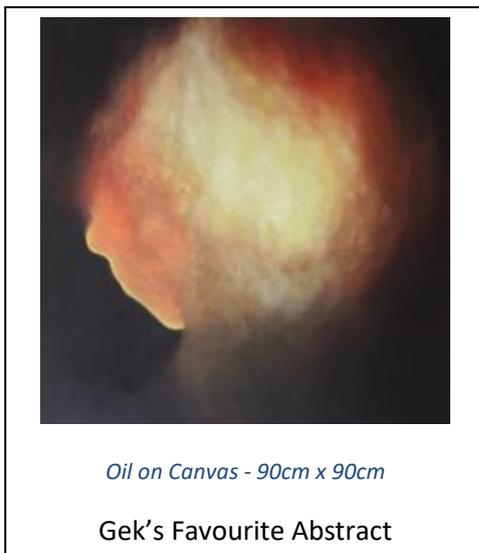


Peranakan Facade

intended to use the model in their children's Peranakan education programs. The model was also displayed in the major libraries around Singapore in 2011 to attract people to visit their premises in Armenian Street in downtown Singapore. A neat result, I think.

By April 2010, I was already adding the finishing touches to the house and was considering starting a new build project, when I chanced upon a book written by Julian Davidson on Singapore's Black and White (B&W) colonial houses. In his book was printed a copy of the original 1921 plans submitted to the Singapore city planners for a B&W house on the Sri Menanti estate.

The B&W's are at one and the same time a very elegant but practical design for a tropical dwelling, incorporating elements of the Indian colonial bungalow with the traditional Malay stilt house and the aesthetics of English mock Tudor buildings. I had to model one. The original 1921 drawing for the house had all the main house's dimensions on the one sheet of paper, together with those of the adjacent service building which housed the kitchen, garage, and servants' quarters. The main house measured eve to eve, 70 feet wide by 70 feet at the deepest part. Just a little bit on the big side. In the event I decide to trim the overall dimension to 62 inches wide by 53 inches deep, still a big model by any standard and the biggest one I had contemplated so far.

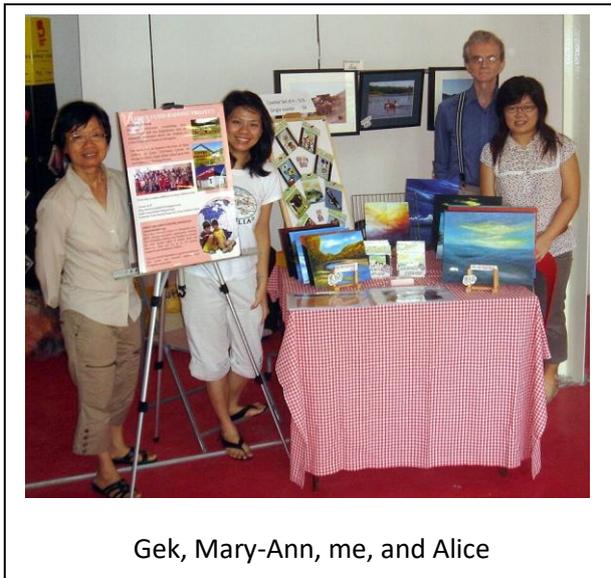


The model I designed was split from the front to the back into two equal halves, with the front porch/veranda as a detachable item. I did start the design with the porch and veranda as an integral part of the front half of the model. That is, until I realised that if I built it that way, it would be too big to get out through the apartment's front door. Not a good idea that. Before we left Singapore at the end of 2010 to live in Penang, I had not even managed to complete the front half, the whole model not being finished until late in 2014. But more of the B&W later.

Whilst I was busy designing and building miniatures, after our return from the UK Honeymoon Gek resumed her oil painting. The master bedroom in Regent Heights was set up as the painting studio with a wooden easel, painting materials and canvases of various sizes purchased from Art Friend, the only major art supplier in Singapore. She focused on abstract paintings, continuing on from what she most enjoyed doing at Emerson College. She even submitted two paintings and a model of a sculpture for two separate competitions in Singapore. No luck, unfortunately. She also put up a few paintings in the online gallery, 'Fill the Walls', managed by a local gallery located in Tanjong Pagar. In 2009, her time was

taken up by making felt products and painting Mongolian landscapes on small canvas boards for a Lotus Fund Raising Project. Regular trips to Singapore Art Museum and some local art galleries were made to get a feel for the Singaporean art scene. Only two artists stood out from the crowd, Anthony Poon a local sculptor, and Wu Guan Zhong, a Chinese artist who donated 150 of his paintings to the Singapore Art Museum. Both Gek and I were extremely impressed with their works, minimalized in style. Both had passed away, unfortunately. A check on the inventory of items we moved from Singapore to Penang in November 2010 shows that by then Gek's collection consisted of eight 90x90 cm canvases, and over thirty paintings of various sizes ranging from 30x30cm to 70x60cm, not including the sold pieces at MAAD (see below) and a few paintings given away as gifts. Gek was not really satisfied with her artworks done in Singapore and hoped that Penang would offer her more inspiration. Her favourite painting is still her first painting in oil done in summer 2004.

Gek started patchwork and quilting on our short visits to Penang in 2009/2010. Whist I was decorating the flat at Relau, Gek made by, hand, a bed spread, and several cushions covers. So, when she was not painting, she would occupy herself with needlework. A bedroom in Relau was set up for her to paint during these visits.



In November 2009, together with Alice and Mary-Ann, we put together some of Gek's art works and pooled our photographs from Mongolia, for a Lotus Fund raising stall we manned at the monthly Red Dot Design Museum craft fair. Also, on sale, were bags and necklaces that Gek had made from the felt we had brought back from Mongolia and Mongolia-themed coaster sets we had made. At the end of the weekend we had raised just over S\$500 for the Lotus Children's Centre, mainly through the generosity of family and friends who came to support us.

Over the weekend, Gek struck up a friendship with a lady running a quilting stall opposite ours, about their mutual interest in the craft. I subsequently forwarded the ladies details to your Mum, Anna, knowing of her interest in all things to do with quilting, and would you believe it, your Mum was already in contact with this lady. She had worked through some of her online quilting courses. Furthermore, this lady lived only one train stop away from our place on the north/south MRT line.

(27th May 2015 – Penang)

Vietnam

[Blog entry for Vietnam.](#)

In October 2009 we took a trip to Vietnam with Ruth, Richard, and their son Toby, to visit Hanoi and Sa Pa, close to the Vietnam/Chinese border. In Hanoi we stayed in a modern service apartment built on part of the site of the 'Hanoi Hilton', the notorious North Vietnamese prison. The Hoa Lo Prison was used by the French colonialists in Vietnam to hold political prisoners, and later by North Vietnam during its war with America when it was sarcastically known to the American inmates as the 'Hanoi Hilton'. The main prison was demolished in the 1990s, though the gate house remains as a museum to keep the memory of what happened there alive. I found the idea that a place of terror had been supplanted with a place of luxury a little disturbing. This place had been used for extreme forms of torture and murder as depicted in the museum. I would feel not a little pissed if I had suffered there only for the world to forget the horrors enacted there, so quickly.

Whilst we were walking around the museums exhibits, I fell into conversation with an American. He was on his first return visit to Vietnam since being a combatant in the south of the country during the Vietnam War. He told me that when he left some forty years ago, he never wanted to see an Asian face ever again. However, once home in the US and the truth of what had happened during the conflict came out, he completely changed his view and set up a charity to help the Vietnamese children orphaned by the war. He was, of course, very unsure of the reception he would get on this return visit. On landing at Saigon airport, the immigration officials asked him to accompany them to their office, with him fearing the worst. But in fact, they wanted to thank him for all the work he had done in supporting the country's dispossessed children. He told me he was completely overwhelmed by the ability of the people here to accept the past and move on, an example that a few other peoples around our planet could perhaps take a lesson from.



Serviced Apartment



'Hanoi Hilton' Holding Cell

Of course, you cannot have visited Hanoi without mentioning Ho Chi Minh. His was the name that the anti-war demonstrators were chanting as they marched down Whitehall back in 1969, when their chants gave me pause for thought. Ho Chi Minh was the Vietnamese

Communist revolutionary leader during the war, prime minister (1945–55) and president (1945–69) of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. However, this was a very humble man by all accounts. He shunned the trappings of a head of state, for instance continuing to live in a traditional Vietnamese attap house in the grounds of the state palace. The museum dedicated to the memory of the man I found very strange. The exhibitions included not only some of his personal belongings but also bits and pieces of battle-damaged military equipment in one section, and European modern art in another. Perhaps the intention of the museum curators was to give the impression of a man of the world, and not just a narrow minded, hardnosed communist revolutionary.



Rice Terraces

After visiting other sites of interest in Hanoi, including the remnants of the country's French colonial past, we left by overnight sleeper train for the north and Sa Pa, a French colonial mountain retreat from the heat of the plains. To make the trip we enlisted the help of a local tour guide Mr. Phung whose services Gek's friend Lek Choh, used the previous year. And he really did look after us extremely well. The first permanent French civilian resident arrived in Sa Pa in 1909. With its

attractive continental climate, health authorities believed the site had potential. But it wasn't until 1993 that Sa Pa realised that potential as a prominent holiday destination, when the decision was made to open the door fully to international tourism. Sa Pa was back on the tourist trail again, this time for a newly emerging local elite, as well as international tourists. Sa Pa is now in full economic boom, mainly from the thousands of people who come every year to walk the hundreds of miles of trekking trails between and around the villages.

A surprise for us was that the hotel where we stayed having central heating. Sa Pa is pretty much as far north as you can get in Vietnam, but you are still in a tropical zone even there. The evenings were cool and even in the day, walking the trails amongst the rice terraces was very pleasant, not sticky at all. It was however very misty for the whole of the three days we were in Sa Pa and I didn't manage to take even one decent photograph of the mountains surrounding the town.

On our return to Hanoi, we arranged with Phung to take a one-day excursion down to Halong Bay on the coast. In 1288, the Vietnamese General Tran Hung Dao stopped Mongol ships from sailing down the nearby Bach Dang River and escaping back to China following yet another attempt by the Kublai Khan to subjugate the Vietnamese. The Mongols were defeated in the land campaign by the Vietnamese's guerrilla tactics, the same tactics they used against the American invaders some 700 centuries later, again with the

invaders leaving the country with their tails between their legs. The General placed pointed hard wood stakes inclined at 45 degrees towards the land which were hidden from view at high tide. The fleeing Mongol ships didn't see the stakes as they entered the estuary from the interior and got themselves stuck on the improvised pikes. The General then sent in fire ships to finish off the ships that were still afloat. Very, very crafty was he. The stakes are still visible today at low tide having been uncover by a fish farming development in 2005 but I didn't hear about that until after we left for home, otherwise it would have been a must see for me.

Gek's Health and Trip to Bali

[Blog Entry for Bali.](#)

Our hobbies and trips up to Penang kept us well occupied for the whole of 2009, and there was only one real blot on the landscape. Gek had left Mongolia with a bad case of bronchitis on top of which she had had a bad allergic reaction to some food she ate on our journey through China. All in all, she had rough couple of months recovering from these two problems on our return to Singapore. And then a small rash appeared on her back. At first, we thought it was just an infected mosquito bite. But after a couple of months it still had not cleared up and we decided to seek some medical advice. A trip to the polyclinic and a subsequent referral visits to the Singapore Skin Centre confirmed that it was somewhat worse than an infected mosquito bite, it was a lymphatic cancer that goes under the name of Mycosis Fungoid. It is very rare condition with only four or five cases of the disease being reported in Singapore each year. The upshot is that the biopsy that was taken in 2009 of the rash for analysis seems to have removed the skin area affected by the cancer and it hasn't returned to date. Each year we make a return trip to Singapore and the Skin Centre there for Gek to have a check-up on her chronic condition.

Kok Wan, a friend of Gek from her university days, invited us to go with her to Bali where she was making use of a time-share there. After the bad news from the hospital, we felt we needed to perhaps get away for a short break and so we took Kok Wan up on her kind offer. Bali is a very strange place, much affected by pandering to the tourist industry, and particularly tourists from Australia. We took a day drive up through the centre of the island to the Bratan Caldera and on the way back south we called in at a coffee growing plantation where they produce weasel coffee. The origin of this coffee, or kopi luwak, is closely connected with the history of coffee production in Indonesia. In the early 18th century, the Dutch established the coffee plantations in their colony in the islands of Java and Sumatra, including Arabica coffee introduced from Yemen. During this time, the Dutch prohibited the local farmers and plantation workers from picking coffee fruits for their own use. Still, the native farmers wanted to have a taste of the famed coffee beverage. Soon, they learned that certain species of musang or luwak (Asian Palm Civet or weasel) consumed the coffee fruits but left the coffee seeds undigested in their droppings. The natives collected these

luwaks' coffee seed droppings, then cleaned, roasted and ground them to make their own coffee beverage. The fame of aromatic civet coffee spread from locals to Dutch plantation owners and soon became their favourite too. Doesn't sound very appetizing, I must admit, but it is very nice, honestly. We did see some of the caged weasels, but I am not at all sure that there were enough of these small creatures to consume enough coffee beans to supply the world with coffee from their droppings.

Refreshed after our short break away in Bali we returned to Singapore and our hobbies, with the occasional trips to Penang thrown in for good measure. We did take a drive around the north of Malaysia with Ruth on her visit to stay with us on Penang, which is recorded on my blog for March 2010.

[Blog Entry for March 2010.](#)

(4th June 2015 – Singapore)

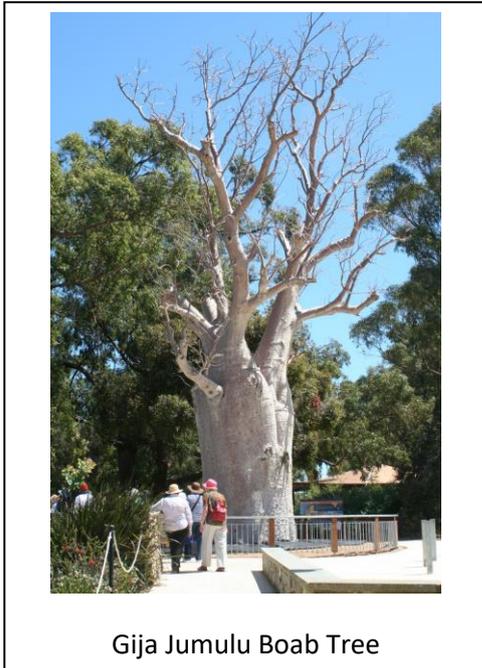
Gek and I are back in Singapore now, sorting things out for our return to the UK in October. We are currently doing the last repairs to the apartment here ready for renting it out again once we have Gek's UK settlement visa and we are on our way 'home'. The 1-Sky apartment in Penang is already packed up for our stuff to be shipped to the UK, consisting mostly of Gek's paintings and the two dollhouses. We are still intent on setting up our new home in Caerphilly, Wales. I keep track of the houses for sale on the Right Move website for possible places for us to buy. This will be the seventh home Gek and I have set up together in the last nine years. It is becoming a bit of a habit. But before all that, we are off to Hokkaido, Japan, for a three-week driving tour of the island with Alice and Mary-Ann.

South West Australia

[Blog Entry for Australia 2010.](#)

Since our return from Mongolia, our income was derived mainly from my pensions and rented properties in the UK, together with some investment income from Gek's Singapore assets. Unfortunately, the exchange rate between the UK pound and the Singapore dollar moved by some 20% over the two years we were living there, but not in our favour. We heard of the Malaysia My Second Home (MM2H) scheme from our new friends, Chris and Ranu, whom we met up with on our visits to Penang. They had bought an apartment in Georgetown and were using the MM2H visa in order to stay in Penang for longer than an ordinary tourist entry visa would allow. The cost of living in Malaysia is less than 50% that of Singapore, making a move to Penang a very attractive proposition particularly since Gek already owned an apartment there. The conditions to get an MM2H visa were doable for us and on application we were successful with Gek sponsoring me in the application. The whole application and approval process were very quick and easy with the staff at the specially created MM2H immigration office being always especially helpful to us. And so, it was that in November 2010 we rented out Gek's Regent Heights apartment yet again and

moved lock stock and barrel to Relau in Penang. But before we settled in there, we took a three-week driving holiday around South West Australia.



The day after the MM2H's visas were pasted into our passports, we boarded a plane from Kuala Lumpur to Perth, South Western Australia. As per usual Gek, has a friend and an ex-colleague living there, both of whom we arranged to meet up with. Also, for this trip Gek's brother Harry and his wife Sandie were to join us for part of this three-week holiday. Perth was in the middle of a mining boom and new buildings were going up, literally up towards the sky, in the city, particularly in the business district. Given that SWA is such a big empty place, you really had to ask why, they were building skywards. The boom also affected commodity prices and we were shocked at the cost of a restaurant meal, to the extent that we ended up at Lim's Kitchen, a Chinese eatery in the

Freemantle market complex. Luckily, we'd booked a self-catered apartment in Freemantle for our one-week stay there and could do mostly home cooked meals.

The first people we met up with were Gek's and Jenny's ex-colleague from Ngee Ann, Donald McDermid, and his wife. They had two young children about the same age as Polly and Anna and we visited their apartment in Singapore a couple of times with the children in the early 1980s. Donald had returned to work in Scotland after his Ngee Ann contract was completed but he could not settle and soon found himself another overseas appointment here in SWA. This happens to a lot of expats when they return home. They find it very difficult to pick up where they left off before leaving the UK's shores.

Captain James Stirling originally founded Perth in 1829 as the administrative centre of the Swan River Colony although Europeans first visited the Swan River estuary some 130 years earlier. The city has a very English feel to it, with the type of Victorian shopping arcades you can see in Cardiff. As they seemed to do wherever they went, the Victorians set up Kings Park a short walk from the city centre atop a hill by the river. The Park houses the botanic garden with its main attraction, for me at least, an old Gija Jumulu boab tree. This tree was transported here 3,200 km from Telegraph Creek, near Warmun in the Kimberley region of Western Australia. It was the longest land journey of a similar sized tree in history. The tree was removed to make way for the construction of a road bridge on Great Northern Highway and was replanted at the Two Rivers Lookout in the Park in July 2008. The 36-tonne tree is estimated to be 750 years old and is named from the local indigenous people near Warmun, the Gija, and their word for boab trees, Jumulu. Boabs are believed to live up to 2,000 years. There is a similar looking boab tree on Penang Island at the junction of Jalan Macalister and

Jalan Resideni. This tree, native of the semi-arid part of sub-Saharan Africa and Madagascar, was brought to Penang in 1871 by Tristram Charles Sawyer Speedy (better known simply as Captain Speedy), an English explorer.

We had walked up to the Park via Jacob's ladder and by the 242nd step we were ready for some refreshment at the park's café. As there were no unoccupied table for us to sit at, we opted to sit with a couple of ladies with whom I struck up a conversation. It transpired that they were on holiday from Market Drayton, a town not twenty miles from where I used to live Staffordshire and one of the ladies' daughter was a schoolteacher in Stone. Small world.

A couple of days after Harry and Sandie joined us, we four left Freemantle in a car hired from a local company called No Birds Car Rental, as in no pretty young women. From Freemantle we headed south down the coast towards Albany. This corner of Australia is



relatively lush with the area having a Mediterranean climate, i.e. dry summers, and wet winters. The Margaret River region south of Perth between the Indian Ocean coast and the first inland highland ridge is famous as a wine producing area. But before we reached there, we stayed a couple of nights in Dunsborough. It was while we were taking a hike around the Cape, that I witnessed the most extraordinary sight. As we walked the path set back from the sea cliffs, I noticed a family group looking down into one

of the small bays that punctuate that part of the coastline. Curious to see what they were all pointing at, I made my way down to them. In the bay below us there were two Southern Wright wales, a mother with its calf. We'd already seen the waterspouts from the whales out to sea as they migrated down the coast on their way back to the Antarctic but here were two of them in close to the coast. And then suddenly, the black dorsal fin of an Orca appeared in the water charging towards the baby whale and slamming right into its side. I couldn't at first take in what I was watching, an Orca attaching another kind of whale. This Orca's fin was at least six foot high if not higher and it was soon evident that it wasn't on its own. In quick succession at least two other smaller Orcas charged at the calf. The mother whale was trying to manoeuvre herself between the attackers and her baby but to no avail, the Orcas were far too quick and nimble through the water for her. I watched the attack for at least 15 minutes before the Orcas suddenly disappeared. I was, of course, taking photographs all the while on fast-tracking mode, my camera not having a video, but because of the speed at which the attacks took place, I didn't manage to get a decent record of what

I had witnessed. A couple of days later I showed the images I had managed to capture to the staff at the whale museum in Albany and they confirmed that the attackers were indeed Orcas and they commented that they were surprised to see them operating so far south.

When I reviewed the images on the computer, I could just make out the calf's blooded head. I now realised that the Orcas common name, Killer Whale, refers to the fact they are Whale Killers and behave akin to a wolf pack, harrying their quarry until they are weakened enough to be brought down and killed. After a little internet searching, I discovered that these attacks are not witnessed very often by us humans, the Southern Wright whales being most often attacked out in the open sea. My guess is that the mother whale brought the calf into the shallower water of the bay in an attempt to thwart the Orcas attacks. One previously witnessed Orca tactic saw the Orcas try to drown a calf by not allowing it to surface for air, repeatedly crashing onto a calf's back from a vertical dive into the air. Perhaps the mother knew this and hoped that in a shallow bay the Orcas would not be able to get deep enough in the water to generate the momentum to clear the surface high enough to effect this tactic. I also read that Southern Wrights behave in the same way as elephants, by travelling in groups for mutual protection. Once an Orca attack is threatened the whales form a circle all facing out, corralling their young in the centre for protection. I must confess, I found it a terrible event to witness and I felt quite disturbed by what I had seen for the next couple of days. I don't think of Killer Whales in the same way anymore even, if like wolves, there has been no recorded attack on a human by an Orca in the wild. Beautiful they may be but deadly they are.

From Dunsborough we drove further south and after a couple of night's stopover in Margaret River, we arrived in Albany to stay with the second of Gek's friends in this part of the world, Peck Kheng and husband Graham. Gek has friends all over the place and I could only match her in reunions when we visited the eastern seaboard of Australia the following year and met up with my cousins, David, and Stephen.

Founded in 1826, Albany was a military outpost of New South Wales, part of a plan to forestall French ambitions in the region. The area was initially named Frederick Town in honour of Prince Frederick, Duke of York and Albany. Today the town is a significant tourist destination and base from which to explore the south-west of the state and is well regarded for its natural beauty and preservation of heritage. The town has an important role in the ANZAC legend, being the last port of call for troopships departing Australia in the First World War. Ships carrying the Australian Imperial Force and the New Zealand Expeditionary Force (later known collectively as ANZACs) to Egypt to join World War I gathered in Albany's huge bay in late October 1914. The first detachment departed in convoy in November 1914, with a second detachment departing in late December. Albany was the last place in Australia that these ANZACs saw. The Albany Anzac Peace Park and the Pier of Remembrance were dedicated in 2010, as a precursor to centenary commemorations planned for 2014. The ANZACs will forever be associated with the devastating defeat of the allies at, and their subsequent evacuation from, Gallipoli in late 1915.

After a week spending quality time with Peck Kheng, Gek and we drove back to Perth via the inland route for a couple more days sightseeing in Perth there before heading back to Singapore and preparing to move to our new home in Penang.