I am Like the Karung Guni of Teak!



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TALES FROM AN ISLAND
AFTER A TIMBER BOOM



CK.I
CK.II
CK.VI
CHUA CHU KANG
SUNGEI KRANJI
SUNGEI KANGKAR
S TENGAH
SUNGEI PENG SIANG
S KADUT
S SAWA
S PANG SUA
S KARANG
S KHANTU
S GEDONG
S MURAI
P PERGAM
JALAN PERAMU
AVENUE
LORONG JEBUN
JALAN ENGGANG
LORONG KEBASI
LORONG BISTARI
LORONG AYAM
STAGMONT RING
WOODLANDS
RAILWAY
31 km
30 km
29 km
28 km
27 km
21 km
19 km

I AM LIKE THE KARUNG GUNI OF TEAK
Tales from An Island After A Timber Boom

Published by the Migrant Ecologies Project for NUS Museum
Conceptualized by Lucy Davis in collaboration with Kee Ya Ting

The publication is part of the exhibition:

"When You Get Closer to the Heart,
You May Find Cracks..."
STORIES OF WOOD BY THE MIGRANT ECOLOGIES PROJECT



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I am Like the Karung Guni of Teak!

TALES FROM AN ISLAND AFTER A TIMBER BOOM

Conceptualized by Lucy Davis in collaboration with Kee Ya Ting
Edited by Jason Wee and Kenneth Tay

A PORTRAIT OF A SINGAPORE TIMBER PATRIARCHY AND A PLACE IN THE HEART OF AN ENTREPOT ECONOMY

"***I am like the karung guni of teak***," says Allen Oei of his status and stature.

Allen Oei Soo Chi left home at 14 and worked himself up to become one of entrepot Singapore's most successful traders and legendary timber connoisseurs. In the first section of this exhibition book, excerpts of interviews with the charismatic Mr Oei are placed alongside photographs from his personal album. The scenes depict his early working life in various regional logging stations.

The second section combines the perspectives of Allen Oei with those of his university educated son, Simon, with whom he started his most recent venture NatureWood. Stories of both father and son are photographs from Sungei Kadut Industrial Estate today—the site to which the Singapore government relocated all sawmills and timber factories in an industrial-zoning exercise in the late 1970's.

Like the Singapore timber industry itself, the heady boom years for Sungei Kadut have long passed. The ongoing, catastrophic environmental consequences of the regional timber trade are well known and documented elsewhere in this exhibition. In the intensely globalised and connected 21st century, regional forest nations no longer require Singaporean middlemen to trade their dwindling supplies to consumers in Europe, America, Australia, China, India and Japan. Speculations suggest that the Sungei Kadut estate will possibly last another decade before being closed and the land reallocated. But Simon Oei is upbeat about Nature Wood, the company he started with his father in 2001, embracing both the financial and ecological challenges ahead.

Allen Oei still travels regularly around the region to advise on the upgrading of machinery for both sawmills and finished products. NatureWood continues to have considerable connections and partnerships with factories in Burma. A series of photos from Burma donated by Allen and Simon Oei are also included in the second half of this book.

Together these narratives portray a series of fragmented histories of wood—one of the most compelling materials with which this island city was built and with whose troubled legacy we are complicit.

PART I

A BIOGRAPHY OF FATHER & SON

Allen Oei was born in 1947. He grew up in Singapore after his father, Oei Kim Leong moved the family from Surabaya, Java before the Japanese Occupation. Allen is one of eight children and the only one to be English educated.

Allen has been working with timber as a log selector grader and trader in Indonesia, Malaysia, India and Burma since the late 1960's.

While Allen's father had studied in China, Allen was English-language educated. Life at home with a father who he describes as rather temperamental was a challenge for Allen and he left at the age of 14.

Allen Oei attended Queenstown Technical School from 1960-64 and became a favourite of both his teachers and his principal for whom he helped sell coffee tables and chairs.

I was lucky… the first time I touched teak I was 13 years old… I redid table chairs and everything I repair, so the principle was very happy.

Allen was a member of the aeromodeling and rocketry club and enjoyed making planes and architectural drawings. He would use the money he earned from selling furniture to fund his club. But he says that the furniture industry was not for him:

After I came into the timber export business, I believe that furniture is the worst thing to do. Like fashion change, when you come out with a new design, people copy, In our dialect, we say "you die more". You die even more. 加死。

After Allen left school he spent three years working for the Singapore government timber board, monitoring the activities of Singapore-based timber factories. During this time, gangs controlled many of the fledgling industrial areas in Singapore.

In those day, you don't pay some money, you cannot set up business… I did not know it was such a corrupted world. When we came out of the school and worked for the government, we wanted to be the hero mah, we catch this guy, we catch that guy for our boss. The factories don't like us. I have to go every factory what. I nearly get hammered by three factories... They push the whole pile of timber on me. And I think I was so light, I fly out, I don't know how I jump. My senior shout at me, then I hear the sound. Pop! … They cut the tyre on my scooter. There was also once I got robbed take my watch, my money, waylay me… and then say 'from here to go home ah, how much you need?' I said $10, then give me back $10!

At one time, they waylay me 5 person to one. Using the timber they want to whack me. I said you want to whack me for what? I'm doing my job. If anything we can talk. Maybe I know how to cheat a bit but. I thought I was the only one corrupted! The last inspector was already corrupted, we are not corrupted. So, we don't know so we just send in report. Sawmill get close, suspension. Then of course the boss very angry la…



Allen Oei surveying stocks of ramin logs from a shipwreck in Sampit, a river timber port in central Kalimantan, Indonesia 1974.



While working with the government Allen met a Danish trader from P. Bork International A/S, a timber company seeking to set up a factory in Singapore. He worked for Bork for nearly a decade from 1970-79. His hands-on experiences with logging and log grading throughout the region stem from that time.

> *The boss really tested me, which means if my logs came into the factory, and more than 15% are [faulty] rejected, I have to [leave]. But if [the bad logs were] within, lets say 5–10%, he [would] reward me.*

In 1979, what Allen calls an instinctive feeling led him to leave Bork and start out alone.

> *… my job was getting worse and worse. In the early days, I can go to one forest and get one shipment; of 5000 cubic metres. In two or three weeks. As the years go by, I have to go to three forests and it takes two to three months to get one shipment. In 1979... My job was becoming more difficult and I was getting into more trouble with more and more rejects, because I couldn't control the quality anymore. The good logs were less, the forests are going deeper and deeper.*

Three years later the P Bork company closed.

In 1980, Allen Oei set up his first family timber company, called Linggua Trading Company Pte. Ltd. with the blessing of several logging companies and buyers. By that time, Allen was already such an institution in the regional timber industry that logging offered supplies of logs up front with payment only after Allen was able to sell them. The buyers likewise agreed to paid first and received the logs and timber later. He closed it just before the first Iraq war, decision he calls a second instinctive move. By the 1990's Allen Oei was able to leverage the significant contacts he had developed in Burma as an advisor to Singapore businessman Tony Chew of Asia Resources. Tony Chew is the chairman of this business federation and sits on the board of several independent and government-linked Singaporean corporations.

Parallel to this process, Allen Oei is a highly sought after consultant involved in training industry employees in techniques of grading and cutting timber in Malaysia, Indonesia and Burma.

In 2001, Allen started Nature Wood with his son Simon.

LEFT SPREAD
Allen Oei, measuring one of a shipment to Singapore of the last export logs from Burma before a 31 March ban.
Photographs by Kee Ya Ting, April 2014.

Simon Oei, born in 1971, has had a very different upbringing to his father. He studied computer science at NUS and worked for Hewlett Packard and Microsoft as a programmer and then a network engineer before finally joining his father's business at the age of 29.



Simon Oei photographed by his Dad in the grounds of P Bork A/S International 1974.

When asked if he spent time with Dad at work when he was growing up, Simon replied:

I don't remember this photo being taken! The only time I went to my Dad's factories was when I was a teenager. He asked me to paint the ends of the wood to protect from getting cracked. I used blue paint as we use colours to indicate which wood belongs to which buyer. [But]… after less than 2 hours I told him it was impossible. I said "I'm tired, I really cannot do it!"… It was so hot! The sun was terrible!

Then, just before my Dad close a company when I was 24 he asked me to join him. I told him no, "No, you go ahead and close your company… I just go my way, and you go your way". At the time I wanted to work in IT. I had a dream of Shenton Way, an aircon office. I didn't want to work in sawdust of Sungei Kadut where the men are are all rough and then you are not able to wear long-sleeved and tie. But then at the age of 29, I come to realized there are too many people in IT. You throw a rock you will hit someone working in IT! I needed to learn how to do business. I talked to my Dad.

But with my Dad, if you join him and want to take over the business, he expects you to start from ground zero: paint the ends; carry the wood; flip the wood; turn the wood. There's no such thing as immediately sit in the office… Wah! I worked like mad dog. I'm not allowed to have any workers. One man show. Container come, you do everything. I do the forklift, I drive the forklift… even tearing, packing, wrapping, strapping... My weight dropped from 68 kilo to 55 kilo. But after 4–5 years I realized that timber is actually not so bad. I fell in love with wood. And then I really have passion for this industry.

So when my Dad said, "Okay, I think you can do your own business. Let's close this timber business and you can do your computer thing." I said "No way, I'm very happy with where I am! Let's invite more investors to pump in more cash so that we can make the company grow." So we did that. And that is why I am still here today…



Simon Oei was a little shy being photographed when we interviewed him.
This is close up of the end of a polished teak log on his desk at Nature Wood, 2014.





Tanjung Sengatta East Kalimantan Log Camp 1972–78.

Allen Oei:

When I started working in the timber industry in the 1970s, I went up to every state in Malaysia. In Indonesia I also covered all parts, Port Moresby, Sulawesi, Sumatra all corners, Kalimantan I also finish, Sabah… I later went to Burma and to India. The only place I have not been to is the Philippines.

I worked with rough people. All started from the gangster. In fact all the factories are owned by gangster. They tried to kill me many times!

I went to Indonesia in '71. '71 still very bad, every time I have army with me. Four army. Two in front, with helmet and machine gun. Because at that time, after Sukarno fell, it was very dangerous for Chinese. They will throw my passport in the fire. They want you to die. They will throw you inside the water. A lot of the villagers wanted to kill us. Fell the coconut tree to obstruct us because they didn't want us to chop their forest.



Banjar Masin Kalimantan ramin log selection site 1972–78.

Allen Oei:

Also in Indo once I wanted to sack a worker for stealing and ended up in a fight with a village chief, [I said to him] "Outside you are the village chief, here I am the chief. I never even say You steal, I said He steal. I respect you. You respect me. If not, I leave and go back."

That night, they invited one big gang to my house and I thought he was going to kill me. But no, it was to invite me to his house for a party!



Cochin, India 1973.



Kuantan, Malaysia 1974.



IFA log camp run by a French company in Pekanbaru, Riau, Indonesia April 1974.



Allen Oei standing with IFA [Industries et Forest Asiatiques] Logs,
Pekanbaru, Riau, Indonesia April 1974.



Allen Oei standing with IFA [Industries et Forest Asiatiques] Logs
for a French Company in Pekanbaru, Riau, Indonesia April 1974.



Allen Oei standing with IFA [Industries et Forest Asiatiques] Logs,
Pekanbaru, Riau, Indonesia April 1974.

Allen Oei:

The IFA [Industries et Forest Asiatiques] boss was very happy with an Indonesian colleague of mine who knew how to play with the Indonesian documents. Because he was the one doing all the loading [of logs onto the boat]. So one document, he get times ten and still giving the same document to the government. The French guy liked him, said, 'We make a lot of money from you'. But… you know what? He steal the timber.

A lot of people steal timber from the forest reserve. They open the load, they are allowed to take maybe half kilometer[into the reserve]. But they steal from even ten kilometers inside. A lot of stealing. So when the police come, the guys block all the road… Or they burn the forest. That's why sometimes they burn the forest. To evade the… you know.







All photos in this page:
Grading ramin logs from a bumboat, Pontianak 1971–72.

Allen Oei:

The first time I was sent out to Indonesia was to Pontianak. I spent four weeks in such beautiful country with nice weather. I stayed in a bumboat for four weeks grading the logs. Sit on the boat. Wash on the boat. Shit on these boat, because the rivers lead into the forest. These are ramin logs that they threw down into the water—very creamy white. They were so fast, I had to wear a swimming costume, stand on the log, barefoot and grade from there.

The first, I kept falling into the water. If it's a new log, not so slippery. If it's about three weeks or to a month, the algae starts then it's very difficult to step on it. But I managed. I train myself until even small log, I can stand on it and turn the logs with my feet. All my raft of logs would be tied up and later the vessel will come and pick up the logs.



Allen Oei, on floating ramin logs Banjarmasin 1972–78.



Allen Oei grading meranti logs in forest 1970's.

Allen Oei:

The first time I was in the forest I cried.

Allen Oei:

… I was very agile in my younger days.

Every week, I make a trip to the forest, I have to select trees not from the lorry but from the forest, when it fell, if not, I cannot see most of the defects. Once the logs are trimmed, the sawyers are also very smart, they can hide the defect and cut it. But buying standing tree is still the best because you can see how healthy it is. I follow the jeep, the sawyer will send me in and I come back again. I used to go up to the forest standing behind on the back of the truck and then go… twenty miles inside the forest. Come out, my face full of dust…

After a while, they know what I want and they will help me. So I also lucky lah. They see that my job is so tough, such a young guy and so then they help me preselect. But I must trust them also.

*The marks I am making here are the American system. They clip the number to the hammer. The hammer two sides, one is the clip, one is the nail. The Chinese… the Asians don't do that because we are so fast. The French are doing log by log, doing number by number before they sell. They make sure everything is in proper order. The Chinese don't care. This one anyhow, gasak**.

(*gasak—Malay Singlish for doing something haphazardly)



Allen Oei in action grading logs. Tanjung Sengatta, East Kalimantan, Indonesia 1972–78.



Allen Oei marking logs with a hammer. Tanjung Sengatta, East Kalimantan, Indonesia 1972–78.





Photos above:
Allen Oei grading logs. Tanjung Sengatta, East Kalimantan, Indonesia 1972–78.

Allen Oei:

There was no handphone or radio… only morse code in the forest. I was in the forest for 10 days when my father passed away. They cannot reach me. I only found out when I got out again.



Tanjung Sengatta, East Kalimantan 1972–78.



Log grading barefoot in the water, Tanjung Sengatta, East Kalimantan 1972–78.

Allen Oei:

To get to Samarinda, it takes a long way. You would go to Balikpapan. After Balikpapan, you have to take this lousy taxi full of people. All cargo inside the taxi. So I have to buy the ticket for front seat. Then from here we take the speedboat up to the forest. About 6 hours… 48 horsepower per hour. Until there, your whole back won't break. First time I go there, I cannot even wake up…



Log pond Tanjung Sengatta, East Kalimantan 1972–77.



Log grading barefoot in the water, Tanjung Sengatta, East Kalimantan 1972–78.

Allen Oei:

… There are very few ladies [in the timber industry]… they are not as strong; [to do this work you] must go to the log yard. It is very dry and all the earth flying about everywhere. During the rainy weather, you must wear boots as it is flooded everywhere. We have to climb up the log to inspect. And they will not bring it out for you to see, they will pile it up. They will hide the lousy ones inside and make sure it is difficult for you to go in and see. Furthermore, usually in one parcel, there are 40 to 50 logs and in a day we have to look at 100 parcels. Nowadays though, [with the lack of timber] there are fewer parcels to inspect… And the people are very rough.

There was this one Taiwanese girl though I can never beat her [at drinking], my liver almost died… the worst was when I drank 2 and half bottles [of whisky] with the loggers. [In another incident] on their way to Sabah, they drank all the alcohol on the plane! But now I stopped.









All photos in this page:
Allen Oei selecting and marking ebony logs in Poso, Celebes/Central Sulawesi.

Allen Oei:

These are all ebony logs in this photo. We had to go up to the mountain and these aborigine guys [indigenous people], are always close to the rocky mountains. I cannot climb up. These aborigines, their legs have hand fingers like monkeys. So, they put me at the back of the key chair. Then tie me up 1000 feet high, they also like that, talk talk talk like monkey. But I cannot fall. He cannot fall… if he die, I die.

These are all in the forest. This is how these logs are felled. They let it rot for one year, two years, three years. Until all the sapwood, all the outer layer all finish.

Lai Chee Kien:

In the meantime, were you all worried about people taking your logs away?

Allen Oei:

Not easy. It's very heavy. Very heavy, how to take? So far even in Singapore, nobody steals logs. People always steal plank, steal your furniture. But logs, how to steal? Got number. How you run away? Not very easy to carry.







Photos above:
Danish timber company Bork factory in Kranji, Singapore 1970–79.
Simon Oei as a child outside the gate of the Bork factory.

Allen Oei:

This is my first employer, the Danish company Bork… in Kranji. The most beautiful factory in Singapore… you know the Europeans, they dare to spend money.

The logs in the picture are meranti logs. We only buy big logs. We buy one metre and up. Our logs, anyhow, must be one metre because we split into four. All the time I was dealing Malaysian and Indonesian logs, white meranti, yellow, rosewood, sometimes we tried other species.

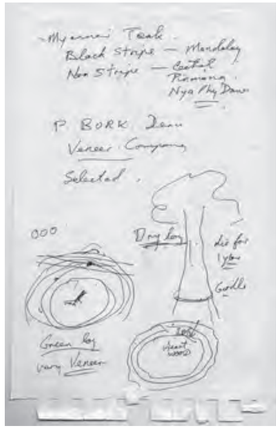
… I made a lot of money off rosewood. My daughter Rosalynd was born during that time.







Photos above:
With Bork Managing Director Neil Romburt in a Burmese government log depot.



Alan Oei's diagram of difference between girdled (dry) and green logs during our interview.

Allen Oei:

Actually this Danish company very good. They bring people in every year to teach us management, politics, accounts. Then in 1975, my Danish boss sent me to Burma. Bork had good contacts with the Burmese since 1960s; they were like the master to Burmese government. When Bork came in the Burmese were girdling the teak according to the British system so that the sap would dry up and you can float the logs down rivers to the sea. We called these logs dry logs. But for veneer, non-dry green logs are better—when you slice it you can see the vein. We used empty oil drums to float the green logs in the water.

PART II

PROFILE OF A PLACE:
31 SUNGEI KADUT STREET 4

The global demand for timber rose considerably after World War Two. For Singapore, however, the timber boom years started two decades later, in the late 1960's, and lasted until the 1990's. A supply-side boost to the industry came in 1967 when Indonesian General Suharto's New Order government backed by the IMF and the World Bank, offered lucrative forest concession and investment arrangements to foreign companies. The move was intended to address Indonesia's national debt as well as to raise Indonesia's position as a Southeast Asian timber-exporter vis a vis the Philippines and Malaysia. A flood of foreign investment followed, marking the beginnings of what would be a profitable but environmentally devastating carve-up of Indonesia's forests, first by logging companies and later by agribusinesses such as palm oil and paper pulp. By 1978 Singapore was the seventh most important investor in the Indonesian Forest sector, behind South Korea, Japan, the US, Malaysia, Hong Kong and the Philippines[1].

By the second half of the 1970's timber also was Singapore's 4th largest export industry with exports hitting the 1 billion dollar mark in May 1980[2]. Traditionally, timber processing activities were concentrated in three regions: the southeast, around the Kallang river (the earliest site for Singapore's timber industries); the southwest, with newer plywood industries along the Jurong river, and Kranji in the northwest where newer factories, some run by foreign investors had appeared in the 1970's. Singapore's earlier timber industries, like many of the island's raw material-processing factories were traditionally situated next to the sea or along rivers to facilitate smoother offloading of materials directly from the ships.

[1] Ross, Michael L, *Timber Booms and Institutional Breakdown in Southeast Asia*. Cambridge University Press 2001 pg 166–69.

[2] Ong Han Boon, *A geographical analysis of Singapore's timber industry's development and distribution network–using the sawmills and plywood as examples*. Nanyang University (Nantah) 1970.







These graphics come from a Geography bachelor's degree dissertation by Ong Han Boon, *A geographical analysis of Singapore's timber industry's development and distribution network–using the sawmills and plywood as examples*. Nanyang University (Nantah) 1970.

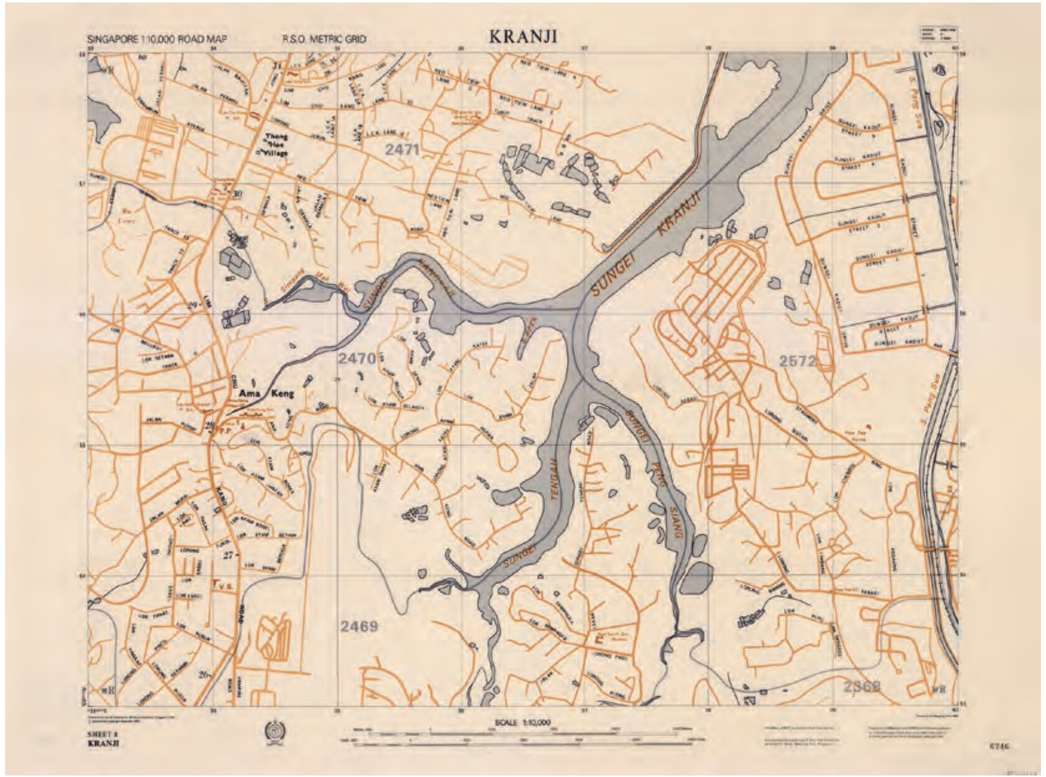
The government started encouraging timber industries to move northwest, to Sungei Kadut, an area adjacent to existing Kranji factories in the mid-70's as part of an industrial zoning exercise. During Singapore's colonial occupation, Sungei Kadut (which means sackcloth river in Malay) was a site of some of last indigenous forest reserves. By the late 1970's, however, the aspirations of a growing state included transforming the forest reserves into a state of the art industrial estate. The industrial transformation of the site was simultaneous with the end of river transport and storage of timber in Singapore. An expanding and successful land infrastructure made it more convenient to transport the logs from Singapore's main container ports at Keppel and Jurong to the new sawmills and factories by road[3].

[3] Ong, 1970 as above



These two maps of North West Singapore are reproduced with kind permission of the Singapore Land Authority. Sungei Kadut can be found in the top right of each of the maps.

By 1979 the Singaporean government demanded that all remaining timber industries move to Sungei Kadut. Allen Oei was already familiar with Sungei Kadut from his tenure at P. Bork A/S International who had constructed a factory in the area. As evidenced by the following newspaper clippings, the move was not without its difficulties. Timber merchants and sawmill owners were concerned by what they feared would be higher rentals and disruptions to their businesses associated with the move. Nonetheless, Sungei Kadut became for better or worse the central location for timber merchants, sawmills, flooring and furniture enterprises. Sungei Kadut is a site where many a fortune has been made in an industry that, while volatile, was still immensely profitable for Singaporean merchants until the 1990's.



The following newspaper clippings are reproduced with kind permission of Singapore Press Holdings.

The Straits Times, 13 September 1970, Page 19

Exclusive areas for timber industry in the Republic


The Sunday Times September 13, 1970

Exclusive areas for timber industry in the Republic

By Special Writer

Facilities

The Straits Times, 18 May 1975, Page 24

Business begins to pick up again after a bad year


Page 24

The Sunday Times May 18, 1975

BUSINESS BEGINS TO PICK UP AGAIN AFTER A BAD YEAR

By EDMUND TEO

WOODWORKING and SAWMILLING

Sunday Times Feature

Relocation of sawmills will give industry a boost

The Straits Times, 13 October 1975, Page 9

Sawmills: Cut rentals and ease laws


Sawmills: Cut rentals and ease laws

Strict rules

Subsidy

The Straits Times, 29 February 1976, Page 17

Good future for S'pore's woodworking industry



Good future for S'pore's woodworking industry

By CHRISTINA GOONESEKERE

Woodworking and sawmilling
SPECIAL FEATURE

Factors

Plea

COMPLEX JOB FOR THE FINISHER

The Specialists
ORIGINAL VOLLMER
Saw Maintenance Machines of Outstanding Quality and Efficiency
THE NUMBER ONE T.C.T. SAW IN ASIA

VOLLMER (S) PTE LTD

The Straits Times, 4 August 1979, Page 17

More land for wood-based firms in Kranji, Kadut



THE STRAITS TIMES, SATURDAY, AUGUST 4, 1979

More land for wood-based firms in Kranji, Kadut

By PAUL JANSEN

Allocations

Processes

The Straits Times, 3 October 1979, Page 11

Sawmills to shift to new site by year-end



PAGE 11

Sawmills to shift to new site by year-end

14,063 jobs

The Straits Times, 8 May 1980, Page 9

Exports hit $1.1b mark last year



Exports hit $1.1b mark last year

Increase of 50 per cent in value over 1978

In operation

Secondary

A largely unregulated and environmentally catastrophic plunder of regional forests through most of the 20th century ultimately contributed to a downturn in Singapore's timber fortunes by the late 1990's. The downturn was exacerbated by a series of regional and world political and economic crises, the development of sophisticated, industrial timber processing, and the expansion of the export and communication capacities of regional forest nations that reduced the need for Singaporean middlemen.

Today, the factories and streets of Sungei Kadut estate feel like they belong to a different era—a time when the raw materials that used to build this island's city and economy were more tangible and present in the landscape. Many of the last remaining timber companies are closing. Those with connections are relocating to Indonesia, Malaysia and Burma.

However, Allen and Simon Oei are still positive about their own future as suggested by the comments of father and son accompanying the second half of this book. The photographs depict scenes from Nature Wood's warehouse at 31 Sungei Kadut Street 4 in early April 2014, with a small detour to Burma from whence a final shipment of logs had just arrived.

ALLEN OEI:

My wife scolded me at first when I try to bring my son into this business.

"Our Lee Kuan Yew already said timber dying industry. Where got some more timber for your son to do?"

I said "Got!" Because in the late 90's the [Indonesian] government finally allowed private individuals to cut wood. Before that time private were not allowed to cut teak. So from 1996 onwards, I become the trainer and master for these [new private companies]. I was the teacher for 30 over factories.

I started NatureWood without a single cent. I was able to get my contacts to invest for me. That time, Simon cried! He wondered how it would start. But I brought Simon to Surabaya and showed him to the locals and tell them to help him. So Simon came in at just right time, when every factory is running very smoothly already. Everything just take off. It take off without any energy. He just sit on the 747!



Allen Oei:

[In the early days] The whole world market [was] in my fingers, any company wants to close down, I can take everything. I can take up any rubbish. I can still sell away the reject at no loss. My boss liked me because I never let my company lose money. Even with the rejects, the company can still sell it and make money.

In the 80's, Indonesia stopped export of whole logs. Must be square. Then post '89 they only export finished product. When they changed to square logs there was a lot of wastage. The leftover round bits they will just throw away. So I offered to remove the extra wood for free and they were happy. I sold the leftovers to this US guy who made wooden handles for penknives.

I am like the karung guni of teak!

Simon Oei:

Today we also try and use as much of the tree as we possibly can. In my Dad's time a lot of the wood we use now would have been burned. But Indonesian architects are becoming good at using every part of the wood—even if it has holes in it. American buyers also appreciate wood that is not perfect. Unfortunately many Asian and some European buyers still prefer wood that is "clean"; without defects. But buyers have to accept that we can't get big logs for them anymore. In the past it was possible to buy 200 to 300 year old trees! Today we have to buy teak that is only 30 years old—less wood and more possible defects.

LEFT SPREAD
Allen & Simon Oei's Nature Wood Warehouse at 31 Sungei Kadut Street 4.
Photograph by Lucy Davis, April 2014.





Allen & Simon Oei's Nature Wood Warehouse at 31 Sungei Kadut Street 4.
Photographs by Kee Ya Ting, April 2014.

Simon Oei:

The Sungei Kadut that you see today used to be famous for its timber people. All my Singapore Timber Association bosses, all the big bosses, made their money in the '70s –'80s, in the boom years. Then the '90s was the slowdown. The Iraq war came. After that, in the '90s, the Internet era. From then it was totally down down down down.

As a Singaporean, I feel that we should actually move out of this country, at least, and work in Malaysia as a bare minimum. Singaporeans today need to work on two countries at least, perhaps more. When I started this business in 2000, I stocked everything in Singapore. Now we stocking in Malaysia, Myanmar, Indonesia.







Allen & Simon Oei's Nature Wood Warehouse at 31 Sungei Kadut Street 4.
Photographs by Kee Ya Ting, April 2014.

Simon Oei:

I'm the third generation of timber traders. We have to fight a different fight. The Chinese are coming in. The Burmese are coming in. The Indonesians coming in and setting up companies in Singapore. To register a company here and stock in Singapore is not difficult. We actually encourage foreign companies to have an office here. That's part of the Singapore plan. But a lot of the so-called intermediate parties like agents, traders are being cut out. I'm okay because I'm fully prepared.

Allen Oei:

All over Asia they believe in the wood god—like the Datuk Kong. In every forest we must pray. They [the kapala/or headman in Burma or even the surveyor] know which tree is sacred… you won't even be allowed to cut the tree with the spirit. They are not allowed to touch that tree. They cannot. You even try to cut it, you're sick.

In the factory during the seventh month, we will pray and every month we will give thanks. We have special lamps for good energy like this one [points to lamp in ceiling] and the fengshui master will tell you how to make your business smoother. This one, even my Christian boss believes… I was a Christian in my school day. Then I married my wife. My wife a Buddhist. So 40 years being a Buddhist. Last year, she said, let's go. So she's the one. We became Christian, disposed all our idols and everything.

Simon Oei:

… We Chinese, believe in five elements. Metal, wood, earth and air. I believe that wood, no matter how many generations down the road will be still an element that we need. Maybe floor, maybe furniture, maybe any parts of it. It will still be useful. That's what I believe in. And therefore, even though they say it is a "sunset industry", I carry on.



Allen Oei:

I still think I have one extra sight though, I always can tell when there is a downturn. I don't know how to explain.

LEFT SPREAD
Allen & Simon Oei's Nature Wood Warehouse at 31 Sungei Kadut Street 4.
Photograph by Kee Yo Ting, April 2014.

RIGHT
Old circular saw machinery at Allen & Simon Oei's Nature Wood Warehouse at 31 Sungei Kadut Street 4.
Photographs by Kee Yo Ting, April 2014.







Old circular saw machinery at Allen & Simon Oei's Nature Wood Warehouse at 31 Sungei Kadut Street 4.
Photograph by Kee Ya Ting, April 2014.



Crayon specifically for marking wood.
"Squirrel Brand Crayons for Timber, Made in the People's Republic of China" (translation by Lai Chee Kien)
Photograph by Lucy Davis, April 2014.

Allen Oei:

Teak is also known throughout the world. Even the poorest guy in Indonesia, the poorest guy in the road in Myanmar, they will say, if I get married I must have a teak marriage box or teak bed. In fact, the whole world everybody loves teak.

Simon Oei:

In the past, my Dad could buy wood for $100 and sell it for $3000-$5000 because Europeans did not know the price. And the distance was so great, it took such a long time to travel. That's why in the past, timber merchants were the richest men. But this is no longer true. Today the flights, the budget airlines are so easily available. And with the internet everything can be googled. You can check pricess on Alibaba.com and also check who is selling to who.



Allen Oei writes on the Burmese log to show Lai Chee Kien where the heart wood is situated.
Photograph by Lai Chee Kien, April 2014.



Allen Oei:

Times have changed when it comes to labour. In the 1960s, we still have many Singaporeans. The Chinese as well as the Thais are generally better labourers for the timber industry. They have a lot of strength and in the old days they use the hand saws. But they are getting old. We are getting more Malaysians. In the old days, Malaysian Chinese are very hardworking, if you ask them to work 24 hours they will. That was until the 1980's when the old labourers made it rich and they became lazy. By this time, there were already no more Singaporeans.

Now we are getting Chinese and Burmese. They are very hardworking. When they first came, their salary was $900, they were drawing $3000 from me; but when they were sick, I stopped them, so now they keep very fit. I said I would deduct their pay if they work when they are ill. Now they keep very fit. Their salary also went up to $1800 and they are drawing $4000–$5000. Indians are very difficult. Burmese are also a little bit Indian, if you look at the food they eat. So Burmese are also half Indian, they are not so responsible and they are very united. This is their character, they help one another. If one machine is spoilt, you will not be able to get a worker to take the blame.

I like everything to be fast, and everybody to be like me. These days though I have learnt to be calmer, after I become a Christian, I pray more.

LEFT SPREAD
Some of the last logs imported to Singapore from Burma before the 31 March 2014 export ban.
Allen & Simon Oei's Nature Wood Warehouse at 31 Sungei Kadut Street 4.
Photograph by Lucy Davis, April 2014.



Wong Shao Guo and Chen Gang Jie at Allen & Simon Oei's Nature Wood Warehouse at 31 Sungei Kadut Street 4.
Photograph by Kee Ya Ting, April 2014.



Ah Zhong at Allen & Simon Oei's Nature Wood Warehouse at 31 Sungei Kadut Street 4.
Photograph by Kee Ya Ting, April 2014.

Allen Oei:

There are also generational issues… I think every parent has this problem. Nowadays, children are more educated and they want their ways. The children try to change. I say … you still have to learn from me! Even for my son it is difficult. The director who is taking over my job found it difficult too. All the rich man sons. I made him [the director] stand beside the saw, but difficult la, I have the passion and they don't.

Simon Oei:

When I was a child, my Dad was often not home. He spent most of the time at overseas because last time the plane was not frequent as it is today. Now I'm doing the same thing to my family… I'm travelling a lot. But I'm trying hard to cut things short to make sure that most of my weekends I'll be back. Monday, I'll fly again already. So that's why I try to be… a weekend Dad.

My Dad… his philosophy and my philosophy is different. He feels that for a family… to be the breadwinner, you make sure that bread is on the table. That is his priority. For me, yes I agree but I do agree that you also need to spend time with the family.



Allen Oei instructs Lai Chee Kien on the different parts of the log.
Photograph by Kee Ya Ting, April 2014.



Zhang Bao Li at Allen & Simon Oei's Nature Wood Warehouse at 31 Sungei Kadut Street 4.
Photograph by Kee Ya Ting, April 2014.





Ah Zhong at Allen & Simon Oei's Nature Wood Warehouse at 31 Sungei Kadut Street 4.
Photographs by Kee Yü Ting, April 2014.

Allen Oei:

You can get killed! It's the small logs people get killed by. Because people are not so careful with small logs… And they are not so visible. Most accidents I seen are small logs and tree branches.

Allen Oei:

In the timber industry, those who are in this business, they all know Allen Oei. And I am not an easy guy to work with. I every time want my buyer to buy natural wood. I always say that my buyers should buy mixed quality, but usable quality. I'm not asking my buyer to buy rubbish. I think buyer buy some natural with some defects. But some buyer no, they want "plastic" looking wood with no marks. These are the buyers that don't like me. Most of the buyer who like me enjoy profit.

The key to my success is that I make sure my suppliers make money first. Then my buyer makes money. If these two don't make money, how I make money? This is how I look at it.

Simon Oei:

A lot of Singaporean architects are asking for FSC [Forest Stewardship Council] certified, sustainable wood. But Singapore is a no-forest country. There is no Forestry Department or expertise. Even Singapore's Timber Association, is a trading company type of association; a business. The next best, so-called department is the AVA [The Agri-Food and Veterinary Authority]. But they are not foresters. As long as you don't put on the form that you have wood that is CITES [Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species] listed then they simply won't know what you have. For example, inside is ramin, but you put "rubber". It looks the same, to be honest! So, they import as rubber wood. For Singaporeans, they only look at paper. Rubber wood!







Main photograph left to right:
Brothers Zhang Bao Li and Zhang Bao Dong, Ah Zhong, Wong Shao Guo
and Chen Gang Jie at Allen & Simon Oei's Nature Wood Warehouse
at 31 Sungei Kadut Street 4.
Photographs by Kee Ya Ting, April 2014.







Chen Gang Jie and Wong Shao Guo at Allen & Simon Oei's Nature Wood Warehouse at 31 Sungei Kadut Street 4.
Photographs by Kee Ya Ting, April 2014.

Simon Oei:

The government and the NGOs are putting in a lot of effort to make sure everything is legal. The architects and the builders are saying that there needs to be type of paper. But paper, being paper, I can print it right? It can be faked, it can be real.

Of course I don't do this kind of thing. But it's possible. And it's difficult to make sure things are legal from Singapore because there is so much illegal wood around. To be frank, the major problem with legality lies really with the country of origin. In Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar you need to inform the government that the wood is being legally harvested and taxes are paid. The government will also have to take action, whether to replant or put the tax money in their pocket. We can't do anything about that. That is up to them.

Because there is no forestry expertise here, Singapore can make things legal. Exporting it out of Singapore is legal. We practically don't need anything to import. In Europe and the USA, USA has the Lacey Act and Europe has the European Timber Regulation [EUTR]. For us, it really all boils down to what is called "due diligence". The AVA would only spot-check you. You as the importer have to do the due diligence. Which means you have to make sure that you know what you are importing.



Cutting a log with an old fashioned circular saw.
Allen & Simon Oei's Nature Wood Warehouse at 31 Sungei Kadut Street 4.
Photograph by Kee Ya Ting, April 2014.

Allen Oei:

I have taught people in more than more than 30 over companies in Indonesia. They don't even know how to cut teak. When I was there, they were selling to the Japanese. Beautiful rosewood! $50 a meter! I said, Wah! straight away I give him $800, then I teach him how to cut. I buy benchsaw, give them. Then I teach them to cut teak, they all dare not. Their father give them the factory, the young men don't know what to do! I said to the father and the son, I give you the machine, I give you the logs, I give you the expert from Singapore. I bring in 3 expert. I buy the logs from you!

Simon Oei:

In the past, I would guess that the industry was 100 percent, or 80–90% illegal. But things are changing. More industry people are educated. People start to know and want to know what they are buying. If you understand the industry you can tell whether it is legal. It's very simple, just visit the factory. You would know already.

I feel that I have a purpose in this area. I want to help bring more standards to the industry. That's why I joined the Singapore Timber Association and the US National Wood Floor Association. I went to take courses in USA as an inspector. None of these things are taught in regional schools: how to cut a tree down; how to source the forest, how to grade timber; sawmilling; recycling into furniture, installing floors and doors… none of these things are taught as far as I know. People in this industry are all hands-on people. I feel I can give new expertise to the industry. Bringing in standards and utilizing the raw material to the fullest—these are the key things that I'm advocating!

PLACES THE LOGS LEFT BEHIND:

SNAPSHOTS FROM
THE BURMA TIMBER TRADE, APRIL 2013

On the 31st of March 2013, the Burmese government imposed a ban on the export of logs from the country. There is considerable speculation amongst environmental groups and Burma-watchers as to whether such a sanction will be effective in curbing the devastation of remaining forest reserves.

The following photographs are snapshots taken by a Nature Wood employee. They show a government Myanmar Timber Enterprise (MTE) log depot, followed by Nature Wood's own, award-winning partner factory.

The logs at Allen and Simon Oei's Sungei Kadut warehouse originated from depots and warehouses such as these. The logs reached Singapore before the ban.



Myanmar Timber Enterprise (MTE) log depot/grading station.
Photo courtesy of Allen Oei/Simon Oei, April 2014.

Allen Oei:

Before 1990—only invited agents could enter Burma, and when the government gave us something, the whole world would know. My Danish boss was an appointed agent so I could go in with him.

After 1990 I was also able to go in many times, I had networks, the people know you and the people trust me. Before 1990 the logging was slower. After 1990s, it was a lot faster. They use trucks. They use bulldozers. They use chainsaws. Last time, they cannot even use chainsaws. Last time they use military.

One time when they come shopping to Singapore, your pocket must have at least three hundred dollars to half-a-million dollars… the whole family would come to shop. And then all us companies we would pool together, we share, we have more than six Singapore companies working with Burma.



Myanmar Timber Enterprise (MTE) log depot/grading station.
Photo courtesy of Allen Oei/Simon Oei, April 2014.

Allen Oei:

No matter how poor the Burmese workers were in those days, they were contented … but the Indonesians, they got a taste of the beautiful life. Burma may be the same as Indonesia in the next 10 years cause they just opened up… you will see! When the country opens up, the government has to keep up the pace, give the people more education and work and then increase their salary, and then they will be like Singapore and Malaysia.

When I visit there [in Burma], my European boss visit there, I bring more presents than him like tiger balm and lighter for even custom officers. They don't even have Nescafe. Sometimes, I bring them other things like Panadol and all the medicine they do not have.

Our agent was earning as low as $6 until 1990. When I employed my manager, I was still paying them $10 and they were willing. That's why I say I buy them food, I see them, I really pity them! Even the army asks them to build the road; they are asked to make the big rocks into the smaller ones. They are told to build the road for their family so that next time their house will be worth more money. Even the children have to go out to build the roads… but you are under the army, what can you do?

I think the government has to do a lot. It's quite difficult, because all the money has been siphoned out. I'm sorry I'm one of them! I helped them [laughter]… I do regret stealing logs out, but never mind, we need to eat and we need to survive. European people keep telling us not to take, but I always tell them "You don't buy la!" But they have to buy also, they have to eat also. I always believe in the supply demand balance pan.



Myanmar Timber Enterprise (MTE) log depot/grading station.
Photo courtesy of Allen Oei/Simon Oei, April 2014.

Allen Oei:

There will be ecological problems though... unless they try to end the illegal felling near to China, which is the biggest. They tried many times but cannot, there is still too much going to China rather than coming down. I hope they can stop that, if they don't, we are in trouble, and our supply will be dying. I once flew helicopter over the area by the border and everything was bare. They don't log the unfamous species, logging is still selective, mainly teak, rosewood and of course, there are new plantations. For the Chinese government, they shoot many Chinese smugglers during the past 8-9 years and tax $150 for every cubic metre found. The Chinese government helped the Myanmar government to replant trees with this money.



Myanmar Timber Enterprise (MTE) log depot/grading station.
Photo courtesy of Allen Oei/Simon Oei, April 2014.

Allen Oei:

You know it's nearly impossible to stop log export from Myanmar right now.

Number one: the factories are not ready, they are all run down factories, apart from my partner's factory. My partner has the best factory and has won the Best Factory Award.

Number two: there are so many logs lying around depots throughout the whole of Myanmar.





Nature Wood's "Best Factory" award-winning partner premises in Myanmar.
Photo courtesy of Allen Oei/Simon Oei, April 2014.

Allen Oei:

I don't worry about the log export ban too much as we have five factories in Myanmar. One is our own, and the other five are affiliated. One is also our partner. My students work in all these factories. In fact I have taught in so many factories. Indonesia we also have. But in Indonesia we don't have our own factory. We only have one affiliated and doing quite well. And we have constant source of supply.

Allen Oei:

In my time the real logging is this: they really mark the tree, give the number, and when you fell, the tree must put the same number but you put A, B, C. Four parts… A, B, C, D. So when you sell, there is a record. And they have a forest, say the forest marking. Then they will mark the tree. And the numbers are all around. And what species, they will have different color paint. So they will mark on the map… they will mark the trees all have number and they have to pass it to the forester. The forester then will approve. Then they will charge you the royalty when they come up in auction.

That was in the old days. Today, nobody practice here. But I think in French, in the Ivory Coast, where the French especially, the English and the Americans log, they do follow the system. Here, we don't… we still follow the system… we do it on computer [laughs]. We don't do it actually… You know, we just bluff the forester.





Close up of an end of one of the last logs imported to Singapore from Burma before the 31 March 2014 export ban. Donated to our project by Allen & Simon Oei.
Photograph by Lucy Davis, April 2014.



Close up of an end of one of the last logs imported to Singapore from Burma before the 31 March 2014 export ban. Donated to our project by Allen & Simon Oei.
Photograph by Lucy Davis, April 2014.

Allen Oei:

Many people were afraid when they see me go into the tender room. I'm the only one that [imediately] knows the quality and price. It's like wine. It's the colour, it's the texture, the annual rings and the size but mainly the colour and texture.

So from the outside you watch and you see the inside… through every layer. Today a cow cause one injury here; tomorrow the tree heal already… so ok you cut this piece, actually the defect is in the center, so after you cut again, it comes out.



Close up of an end of one of the last logs imported to Singapore from Burma before the 31 March 2014 export ban. Donated to our project by Allen & Simon Oei.
Photograph by Lucy Davis, April 2014.

Allen Oei:

Sometimes, to find out if it is rotten and hollow inside, we use the hammer and you know, if it's a good log, the sound remain the same. But if you knock then you find a hollow sound, "tok tok tok tok khoark…", then die… that means you have a bad one… Knock all away until you find a hollow sound like the drum sound. This is how we inspect … but all through experience…

Simon Oei:

The heart is not always at the centre. You would expect it to be, when we look at a tree we expect it to grow like this but it doesn't. That's why in plantations we plant trees side by side, very close to each other so they will grow straight. Not all the trees are intended to grow into big trees. Some are called "thinning posts"; they are just there to make the tree grow straight. Later when the trees are bigger we cut the "thinning posts".

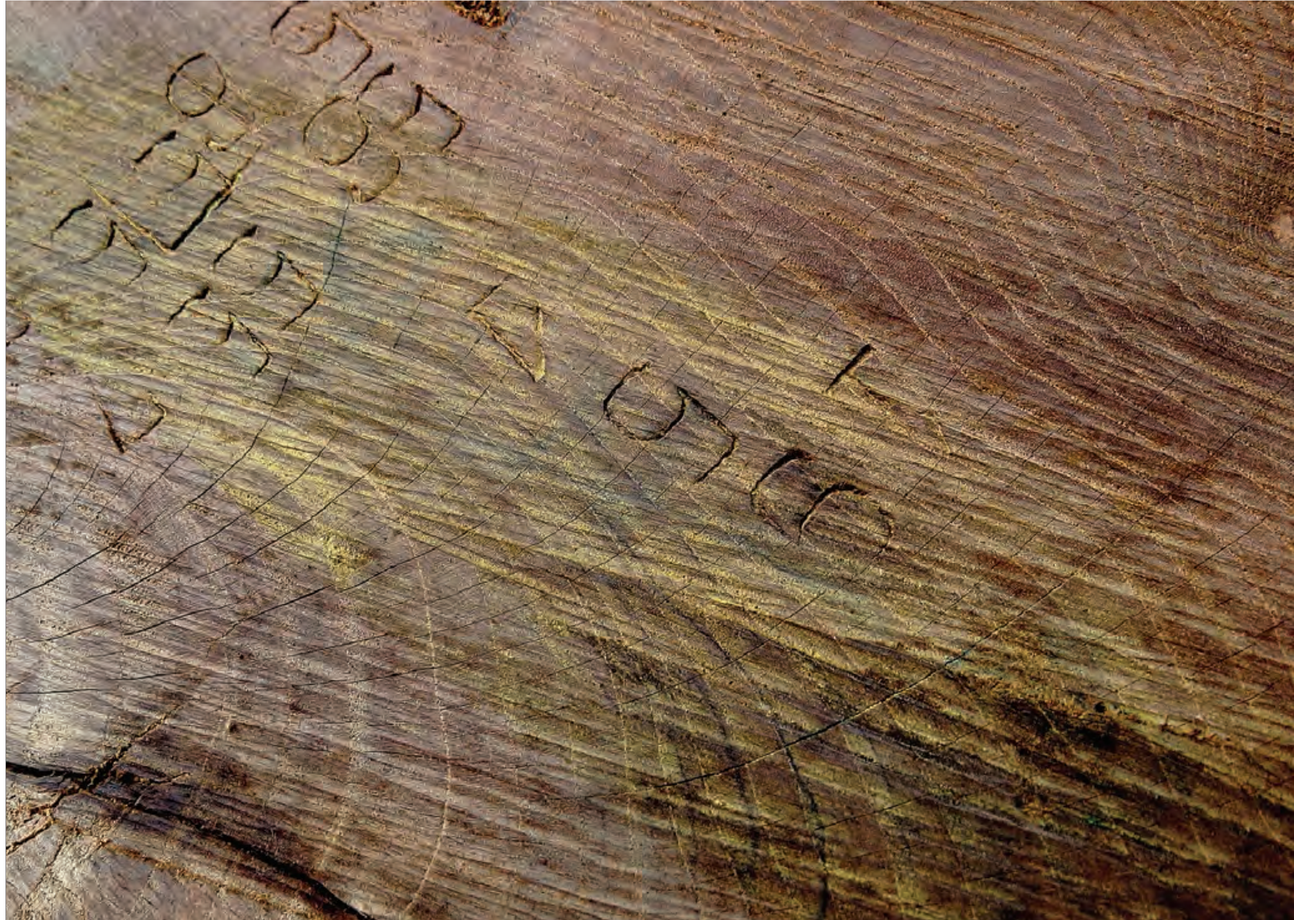
Allen Oei:

Or from where you see this, the worm is always from the heart.

The color and the shit will tell you,

if you find worm shit in the heart, you can find worm hole in the tree.

RIGHT SPREAD
Close up of an end of one of last logs imported to Singapore from Burma before the 31 March 2014 export ban. Donated to our project by Allen & Simon Oei.
Photograph by Lucy Davis, April 2014.





CHUA CHU KANG
CK.II
CK.VI
SUNGEI KRANJI
S KADUT
S SAWA
SUNGEI KANGKAR
S GEDONG
S MURAI
S TENGAH
SUNGEI PENG SIANG
JALAN ENGGANG
GEDONG ROAD
AVENUE
LORONG
NEO TIEW ROAD
NEO TIEW LANE
30 km
29 km
28 km
27 km
22 km
21 km
20
15 km
KRANJI
WAR MEMORIAL
WOODLANDS
MANDAI
MANDAI
ESTATE
C C ROAD
LORONG KADUT
RADUT
LORONG BISTARI
STAGMONT RING
KEBASI
LORONG CHENGAL
L BANING
YEW TEE
VILLAGE
GALI BATU
MALAYAN
WOODLANDS
L AYAM BOSEK
L AYAM JANTAN
L AYAM BOSEL
L AYAM BETINA
L AYAM BERODA
LORONG AYAM
LORONG AYAM HUTAN
LORONG AYAM KATEK
JALAN MURAI
AMA
TRACK