FOUR VERSES FOR THE SOUND OF SAND

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Most of us actually forget that, as Singaporeans, we are mostly walking on water, or on the sand of others.
– Robert Zhao, 'As We Walk on Water'

The song of sand was once attributed to djinns who could mimic voices of the wandering party and trick the wayward drifter into another world. Early travelers described their singing as "a variety of musical instruments, and still more commonly the sound of drums,"[2] or the "tolling of underground bells."[3] Researchers now inform us that the vibration of isomorphic sand grains in arid climates produce the booming and whistling cadence of dunes. This means that singing sand has never and will never be heard in Singapore, with its humidity and inconsistent sizes of sand imported from diverse sources.

Still, booming sand offers a possibility of engaging with the displaced spirits from Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Vietnam that linger on this city-island through "space auditors," a designation for mediums who seek permission from resident ghosts for use of their space. I've heard of the way the mediums walk around empty buildings, stopping at corners to converse in various tongues with spirits hailing from all over the world. The auditors explained that some ghosts had always resided in the area. Others had traveled from the origins of objects once exhibited in the space before deciding to disembark here. If their presence no longer registers on a corporeal level, it persists as a sonic pulse.

What would the sounds and voices from a space audit conducted on the sand barges, stockpiles, and reclamation sites of Singapore tell us? I turn to audiovisual sources to conduct an alternative measurement by tracing their presences in that otherworldly realm of cinema. The sound of sand remains elusive. I can't tell you in any real, clarified manner about the sonic properties of sand, but the attempt to conceptualize and orchestrate a soundscape led me backward and forward in time to a point where the whisper of sand stood for the fall of an empire.

1

The earliest report of a sand quarry in Tampines (*Tempinis* or *Tempenis*) dates back to 1912. The number of quarries in the area grew in tandem with the demand for public housing in post-war Singapore. By the 1960s, Tampines had become the sand basin on which the newly independent nation depended upon: "Singapore's building industry needs about 600 lorryloads of sand a day, and all that quantity [is] produced...mainly in the Tampines area."[4] Residents recalled that, at its peak, the extraction and movement of sand from family land to construction sites occurred 24/7.[5]

Tampines' status as cradle for material extraction to aid in reifying visions of a new metropolis accompanied the birth of a new martial arts star: Fei Pao (played by real-life Kyokushin karate pioneer Peter Chong), the noodle-seller turned kungfu protégé in Tony Yeow and James Sebastian's exploitation film, *Ring of Fury* (1973). Coming at the heels of a waning Golden Age of Malay Cinema, the film was meant to be "evolutionary,"[6] a proposition for the next iteration in Singapore's cinema modeled after Hong Kong's explosive kungfu movies. After Fei Pao refuses to pay the Iron Mask gang's protection fee, his lackeys target his family, only for his mother to succumb to her injuries in a house fire. To exact revenge, Fei Pao receives intensive martial arts training on sandy terrain. The sequence begins as he straps his legs to large wheels and pulls himself forward on his arms; at one point he steels his abs to form a surface against which a large rock can be shattered by blows from an iron sledgehammer. In the way a quarry worker uses his sledgehammer to break large rocks into fragments, the sand-forged Fei Pao unleashes his skills as a warrior and defeats the enemy in an unnamed quarry in Tampines amid the precarious, vein-like slopes softened by a startlingly blue lagoon.

For its portrayal of gangsterism, *Ring of Fury* was banished to the wasteland of censorship for three decades. It was buried under dust clouds from lorries overflowing with sand and stone[7] that had crushed motorists,[8] lying beside the workers who died in quarry accidents.[9] While the restored film received an enthusiastic audience response, its audio mix remains oddly muted. When there isn't the heroic blare of trumpets and strings, repetitive whooshes deliver Fei Pao's choreography. Nothing indicates the drilling, grinding, blasting, and the incessant coughing emanating from the sand miners who inhaled large doses of silicon. For SGD 10-20 a day, the afflicted workers stayed in the pits and even returned from retirement despite their silicosis diagnosis.[10] They remained there, the wails of grieving families all around them.

2

Artist and sailor Charles Lim asks the Sandman, *"You did the reclamation for some of the Southern Islands and Pasir Panjang. Do you know which location the sand came from? "*

"I roughly know which area of the sea, but of course we did not monitor the exact location of the sand," the Pedant demures. *"The interesting part is the work involved. Not many people know... "*[11]

Earlier in *Sea State 7* (2015), the Sandman spoke of traveling to the nearby islands of Karimun, Durian Island, and Batam to search for sand, but the reluctance to provide any specificity when directly addressed seems endemic to conversations about land reclamations in Singapore. Assurances are instead provided in government speak. Recently, on the topic of the Long Island reclamation, the Minister of National Development affirmed, "Our agencies will check that the necessary environmental-related approvals from source countries are in order before contractors are allowed to commence sand imports".[12] In a variation of its "ownself check ownself" mechanism, the signatures of Singapore officials are found on "contract[s] between a Cambodian company and Cambodian government authority".[13] The loop closes on itself.

The following three-channel video, *Sea State 9: PROCLAMATION (drag), (drop), (pour)* (2018), occurs in a trio of silent overhead drone shots. In the first panel, *drag*, the camera tracks the movements of a sand barge docking at an undisclosed location. As seawater rushes inwards, the sand slides and disappears below the barge. The water turns cloudy. A storm blooms into the next panel, *drop*, which observes as water churns from excavators returning earth to the earth. The last panel, *pour*, zooms in on sand dredgers bellowing their load of sand into the sea for land to come forth. As part of the series, Lim retrieved and displayed the Foreshores Act, a presidential declaration to claim reclaimed land as property of the state.

The droning recollections of a detached sandman settles over the eyeline of god looming above—a white noise that mutes and conceals the striking of a gavel that declares submerged sand as Singaporean. The silence of mechanized and automated labor of reclamation is deafening. A miracle takes no effort to come to pass. It should simply be.

3

A pair of police officers preside over the orchestra of a land reclamation site in Yeo Siew Hua's *A Land Imagined* (2018). Their conversations with the workers on site can barely be heard above the sounds of whirring machines, hammering, and sand falling from a mining machine above them. While they attempt to track the whereabouts of Ajit, a missing migrant worker, their search soon expands to include his missing friend, Wang. The officers meander through shifting sands, following a trail that leads them to the edges of the expanding boundary between Singapore and the sea, a liminal nowhereness for all the sand that flows in from its neighbors. Its paths and trails vanish before their eyes. Lok, the lead investigator, can't sleep: a policeman can't be a policeman if he can't find missing people. To tire himself out, he runs in place on a treadmill that laboriously winds itself forward to facilitate the illusion of movement. At the moment he seems to reach the end of himself, he is led to an industrial site where a rave is taking place. As .gif sings, *if i walk/ walk far enough/ maybe i would find/ if i, if i...*, the ensuing dance party feels like the last standing refuge at the end of the world. How far can Lok walk when every step he takes is merely a step in the endless expansion of Singapore's shores? The effort to reach the end of extending boundaries is akin to running in place. At the rave, Lok enters a trance and begins to dance, dance, and dance with other workers under some spell of mass hysteria which has always disproportionately affected blue-collar workers of Singapore.[14] They work themselves to access an ecstasy which could take them beyond their plateau. He doesn't know this but he's come as close to Wang as he possibly can. Wang, too, had suffered from insomnia and found relief in dancing with Ajit, only to vanish after he was caught digging Ajit's body out from the sand. The intrigue that comes over Lok when someone with their back turned looks just like Wang! Then the dawning realization that he might have been dancing with ghosts on a mass grave.

4

In *Sandcastles* (2024), the distance between Singapore, Singapore and Singapore, Michigan is reduced with the hiss of sand. The first transition from Singapore to Michigan is enacted with, *"Above the sand, a great city extends skywards. On the other side of the world, an old lumber town lies buried beneath it."* This transitional cut functions as a mirror. Built upon sand, the skyscrapers of Singapore, Singapore is the inversion of towns buried under the sand dunes in Singapore, Michigan. The film further operates as a sandglass that contains the disparate Singapores in a single timeline. Because their redevelopments affect their environment (the sand dunes of Saugatuck face the possibility of ecological destruction from commercial development), it's unclear at this point just which end the sand is flowing to. Sand whistles as it rocks between one crevice of Singapore to another.

Director Carin Leong asserts that each Singapore begins with the oral tradition. In Singapore, Singapore, an elderly woman tells the gaggle of children around her that the public housing flats, like the one they currently live in, were previously mountains, stones, and earth. In Singapore, Michigan, an elderly man tells the children seated in a semi-circle around him that the dwellers of Singapore deserted the town because they had cut down all the trees and there was nothing left to build an industry with. Leong similarly ends her film with an account by Ray E. Nies:

> *"I cannot tell you much about the beginning of modern Singapore... But I can tell you about the finish of it. I was there and I saw it.*
>
> *"There is a legend in Singapore of two friends who sought shelter in the old town and found only the top of a single roof protruding from the drifted sand. As they sat there, the thought came to start a fire. This they did and that fire was the end of Singapore. Little did the builders of Singapore dream that the end of their most imposing edifice would be to warm a couple of tramps."*

But I can tell you about the beginning of modern Singapore. When Stamford Raffles instructed that work on "draining the ground on the south-west side of the river" proceed "with the least delay practicable"[15] and to "level the high and fill up the low lands"[16] in 1822, what he really commanded into the island was the centrality and devotion to capital. It set in motion the free port he envisioned would "destroy the spell of Dutch monopoly"[17] in the Malay Peninsula and allow the British to stake their claim over its resources. Boat Quay, the portion of the sea that was the site of the first reclamation, has long been subject to the marvel of cinema: from the Charles Urban Trading Company *The Cingalee* (1904) showcasing the success of the iconic dock in the Port of Singapore to *Hati Iblis* (*Devilish Hearts*, 1953), in which a tattered Ramlan wanders through the commercial district. The shame of his failure to secure a job and provide for his family is all the more acute in the bustle of pedestrians around him. The fetish for rendering wealth onscreen has always run parallel to the inextricable link between the economy and land reclamation in this country. Boat Quay now forms the border of Raffles Place, the central business district from which money circulates—and on which its workers perform the daily miracle of walking on water.

Nothing divine is meant to survive on this earth.

1 Robert Zhao, "As We Walk on Water," *ARTMargins* 4, no. 2 (2015): 64-79.

2 Marco Polo, *The Travels of Marco Polo*, (Blackmask Online, 2002), 89.

3 Ralph Bagnold, *The Physics Of Blown Sand And Desert Dunes* (London: Methuen & Co., 1954), 250.

4 "Building Industry Hit By Sand Shortage," *The Singapore Free Press*, October 9, 1961.

5 *Tampines Heritage Trail*, National Heritage Board, 26.

6 Tee Pao Chew, "James Sebastian and Ring of Fury," *Asian Film Archive*, May 4, 2020.

7 Tan Bah Bah, "Saga of the Tampines sand dune," *The Straits Times*, April 12, 1991.

8 "A two-year ride with danger," *New Nation*, July 11, 1974, 2.

9 "Work stops at 2-death sand quarry," *The Straits Times*, November 23, 1978, 8.

10 Sonny Yap, "Dangerous road to a pot of gold...," *New Nation*, June 6, 1973, 3.

11 Charles Lim, "Sand Man," in *Sea State* Charles Lim Yi Yong, ed. Shabbir Hussain Mustafa (Singapore: National Arts Council, 2015), 105-106.

12 Louisa Tang, "'Long Island' reclamation: Imported sand must be sourced from legally permissible areas, says Desmond Lee," *Channel News Asia*, January 9, 2024.

13 *Shifting Sand*, (Global Witness, 2010), 13.

14 P. K. Chew, W. H. Phoon, and H. A. Mae Lim, "Epidemic Hysteria Among Some Factory Workers in Singapore," *Singapore Medical Journal* 17, no. 1 (1976). Several of the workers described a "jin" taking possession of them that demanded for production lines to be halted.

15 Thomas Stamford Raffles, instructions to town planning committee, November 4, 1822. Hugh Egerton, *Sir Stamford Raffles: England in the Far East*, (New York: T. F. Unwin), 281.

16 Thomas Stamford Raffles, letter, June 12, 1823. *Memoir of the Life and Public Services of Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles*, ed. Lady Sophia Raffles (London: John Murray), 548.

17 Thomas Stamford Raffles, letter to Colonel Addenbrooke, June 10, 1819. *Memoir of the Life and Public Services of Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles*, ed. Lady Sophia Raffles (London: John Murray), 380.