

HAW PAR VILLA : LEGEND

'Haw Par Villa' is a cultural theme park in Singapore that exhibits painted concrete statues and dioramas based on traditional Chinese myths, legends and folklore. Originally known as 'The Tiger Balm Gardens' it was built in 1937 by brothers Aw Boon Haw and Aw Boon Par the promoters and developers of the well-known heat rub 'Tiger Balm'. The park initially was a gift from Boon Haw to his younger brother and included a hilltop mansion that looked onto the sea and what was then a beach that stretched along the coast of Pasir Panjang. The gardens that surrounded the residence were open to the public on weekends and holidays and in its heyday were highly popular. The park was envisioned as a public space for families and a place to educate the new generation on Chinese stories that emphasized traditional morals and values. Boon Haw had intended a walk through the gardens to be a journey through the world of Chinese mythology.

At present the park remains mostly deserted despite renewed attempts to make it the significant tourist attraction and popular hotspot it once was. With the air of an abandoned amusement park Haw Par Villa has the comforting timeless aura of a ruin. It seems unaffected by the relentless march of progress and tumultuous change Singapore has and is undergoing. The park however has undergone many changes. Only a couple of years after Haw Par Villa was built did World War Two begin. Boon Par fled with his family to Burma leaving Haw Par Villa empty. It was then taken over by the Japanese during the occupation of Singapore. They resided in the mansion and used the location to monitor ships at sea. After the War local residents vandalized Haw Par Villa only remembering it as a sign of the Japanese occupation. When Boon Haw returned from Hong Kong to find his brother he was met with a deserted ruin. Boon Par had died in Burma. The debris was cleared and a memorial remains noting where the house once stood.

The space that was occupied by the house has remained empty and the view it once gazed upon has changed. Singapore has physically expanded through land reclamation. The shoreline has receded and Haw Par Villa continues to drift further away from the sea. As the very site of Haw Par Villa seems to have changed so have the individual statues and dioramas within it. Concrete does not hold paint well. Many of the statues, reliefs and dioramas have been repainted over the years. Each statue is a palimpsest with many authors. Colours, details and entire backgrounds have been simplified or obliterated when the successive painter cannot replicate the original. And despite being made from concrete many of the statues have been altered, moved or are now simply gone. Strange lacunas or odd pathways through the park hint at the changes over the years. Photographs of the site become confusing as many fail to match the current reality of the park. These images suggest that there is another path yet to take, or another gateway yet breached, to travel to the rest of the park. This exhibition is the beginning of a project for mapping Haw Par Villa as a site that deals with fiction, time and reality. This text is to serve as a legend for that map.