

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

23 Jalan AU5 C/3  
Lembah Keramat  
Ulu Kelang, Selangor  
Malaysia  
8 December, 1982

BEB-12

Sketchbook II

Mr. Peter Bird Martin  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
Wheelock House  
4 West Wheelock Street  
Hanover, NH 03755

Dear Peter,

For first-time visitors from the West, Malaysia and Singapore are sometimes disappointments. Sojourners, fresh from the rich cultural stews of Nepal, Indonesia, Burma, Thailand or India find the Peninsula and her southern island neighbor, like a bland soup, curiously unsatisfying. Other newcomers, with only a diet of National Geographic TV specials, tourist literature and Somerset Maugham imagery for reference, come away somewhat hungry as well. True, Malaysia and Singapore are the envy of Southeast Asia. They suffer little from the poverty, malnourishment and corruption that plague the rest of the region. And, despite stratified, multi-racial, multi-religious societies, they have managed to remain stable and reasonably democratic, a boon for travellers. The variegated cuisine is renowned. So is the shopping, particularly in Singapore. Certainly the amenities are here: the hotels, the tour services, the limosines and coaches. And of course, Malaysia has lots of that classic tropical scenery: the steaming jungles, the palm-fringed beaches, the glittering coral reefs. But somehow, much of the exotica, the Eastern Mystery, the festive color and archaic ritual that thrive elsewhere in Asia seem subdued, enervated here. The very success of Malaysia and Singapore as modern, industrializing, urbanizing nations has, alas, smothered many of those cultural attributes the tourist promotional boards now try to promote. What's left? Mere husks, preserved in museums, cultural shows and architectural froth. After all the mouthwatering descriptions in the tourist brochures, it seems a trifle dull.

Tourist illusions die quickest in the cities. Kuala Lumpur, with little patience for the past, has grown from a tropical hamlet to become a sprawling conglomeration of skyscrapers, squatter settlements, suburban tracts, freeways, traffic jams and noise. Singapore is even more modern. Once a filthy, disease-ridden port, Singapore is now Southeast Asia's "city of the future," a meticulously-planned urban showcase of international architecture, high-density, high-rise housing, efficient public transportation,

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land reclamation and zero population growth. Though neither city is promoted as "traditionally Asian," tourists are often surprised to find that all those carefully cropped brochure photos of venerable mosques, shrines, temples and monuments have failed to include the intervening mesh of reinforced concrete, glass and steel. The old structures, isolated and crumbling, are fast being shouldered out by their shiny new neighbors. They hold little charm anymore, only dusty memories.

In these urban environs, there are scant opportunities for the tourist to catch Instamatic local color. Fewer and fewer city dwellers wear traditional clothing these days, the majority having shifted their tastes in tempo with their changing surroundings. Far more urban women wear jeans and T-shirts or knickers and heels than the Indian sari, Chinese cheong sam or samfu. And the sarung kebaya, form-fitting Malay dress still worn as the official uniform of Malaysian and Singaporean airline stewardesses, is a rare sight on city streets, particularly among Malays. Those Malay women not in disco attire or other high-fashion wear usually prefer the more chaste, loose-fitting baju kurung to the revealing kebaya. Most Islamic dress restrictions are satisfied by the kurung. For the more pious, proper accompaniment is a head scarf, a hood-like tudung or occasionally and incredibly in this tropical heat, the jubah, a black, Arab-style, floor-length shroud, with matching veil, socks and gloves. Though some Muslim men have adopted Arab dress as well - a full-length tunic, turban and goatee - they, like other traditionalists in the long-shirted Indian veshti or the pajama-like Malay baju, look somehow out of place in the modern, urban arena. The majority of urban males share the female penchant for Western attire. Most can be seen in shirt-tie-trouser combinations, safari suits and similar office wear. After hours they are be-jeaned in the best Western tradition: Calvin Klein, Jordache, Levi Strauss, or local brands like Padini and F.U. The generic football jersey, wind breaker, or boots and sweatshirt are also popular. In Singapore, teenagers have taken to California/Australia casual summer attire: jogging shorts, sun visor, flip-flop sandals or running shoes, a nylon rucksack, a Walkman (Sony or reasonable facsimile) and, yes, roller skates.

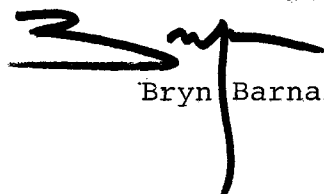
The real Malaysia is said to be in the kampung, the village (high-rise, land-starved Singapore has few left), what the sloganists at the Malaysian Tourist Development Corporation once termed "The Ark of the Malay Heart." Here too, reality proves disenchanting and often depressingly kitch. The carved timber palaces and homes that grace tourist pamphlets are few and far between in the rural areas. Most have fallen into disrepair. Those still standing have often been sold off piecemeal to museums and tour groups or simply modernized at the expense of tradition, the atap thatch replaced with corrugated iron roofing,

carved shutters with louvers, wooden balustrades with painted wrought iron and tiled steps with unadorned concrete. New village homes also incorporate such stylistic modifications. Polychrome formica flooring has proven a popular, and longer-lasting alternative to woven tikar mats in many modern kampung homes. Cabinets brim with pyrex and tupperware. Polyester antimacassars cover the vinyl sofas and car seats (synthetic fur dashboard covers with chi-chi ball trim, crocheted pillows and other folk decorations are also popular automotive refinements). Koranic script now shares the walls with posterized cats, rock stars and European scenery. Traditional clothing, custom and entertainment, once the hallmarks of the kampung, have plenty of popular imported competition, too. The sarung, though still pervasive, seems to be losing ground to acrylic jogging suits, particularly for casual evening wear. Jeans are another popular alternative. True, the melancholy strains of the Islamic call to prayer, the azan, can still be heard five times daily, and performances of traditional ghazal music or the menora play are not all that uncommon. But even in the east-coast state of Kelantan, where the shadow puppet theater, kite flying, top spinning and other traditional entertainments are said to reign supreme, devotees of Pink Floyd and Dallas are legion. In the remoter, as yet unelectrified villages, fans can still catch their faves on car battery stereos and televisions.

For those who find reality disillusioning, however, all is not lost. Malaysia's east coast now has beachside resorts like Club Mediteranée, Tanjung Jara and Rantau Abang, palatial manors of carved timber and glazed tile set amongst the palms, where one can relax and ruminate on the days of yore, imagining what it was really like here, once upon a time.

The losses inflicted by modernity, though perhaps a betrayal of tourist dreams, are conversely, just the sort of thing I like to sketch. Over the last six months I've filled another of my sketchbooks with these vignettes of change. Concentrating on the Kuala Lumpur area, with occasional forays to the east coast, Penang and Singapore, I've documented demolition, deterioration and decay, shifting fashions, urban fads and other oddities of the landscape that have caught my attention. Some of the more successful are included here. I have continued to work with my conventional media (markers, india ink, pencil, gouache and charcoal), experimenting occasionally with sepia inks, chalks and casein. Though most of the sketches I've included were done on the spot, a few were reworked in the studio from memory. Two employed posed models and two others used ancillary photo reference. As such, these latter pictures aren't really sketches per se, but I felt they should be included here. I've grouped the pictures into categories, according to subject matter, including brief explanations with each section.

Sincerely,

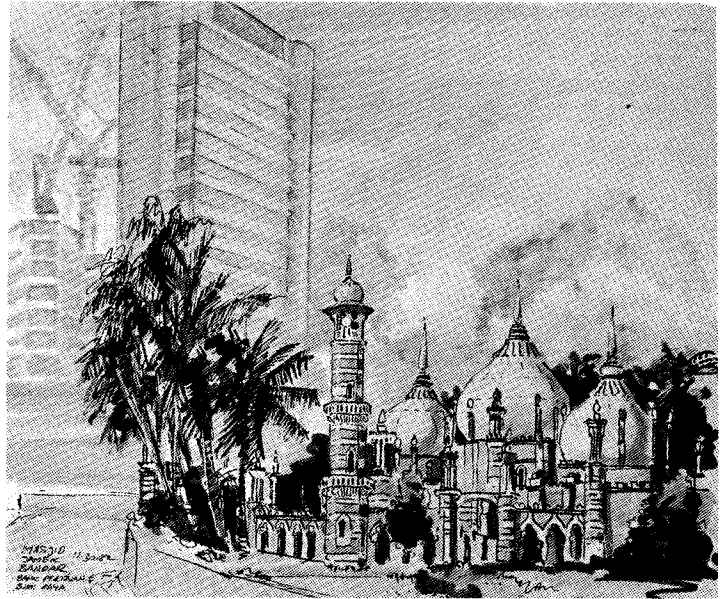
A stylized handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a large, sweeping 'B' followed by a series of loops and a final vertical stroke.

Bryn Barnard

## Kuala Lumpur

This shophouse probably won't stand much longer. It is situated on Jalan Bukit Bintang, one of Kuala Lumpur's busiest streets and a popular location for fast food eateries (five) and shopping plazas (three). The two sketches here were done three months apart, from opposite ends of the building.

The Jamek(ja-me) Indian Mosque, an official historical structure, has a better chance of survival. Built in the North Indian style favored by the British colonial architects at the turn of the century,

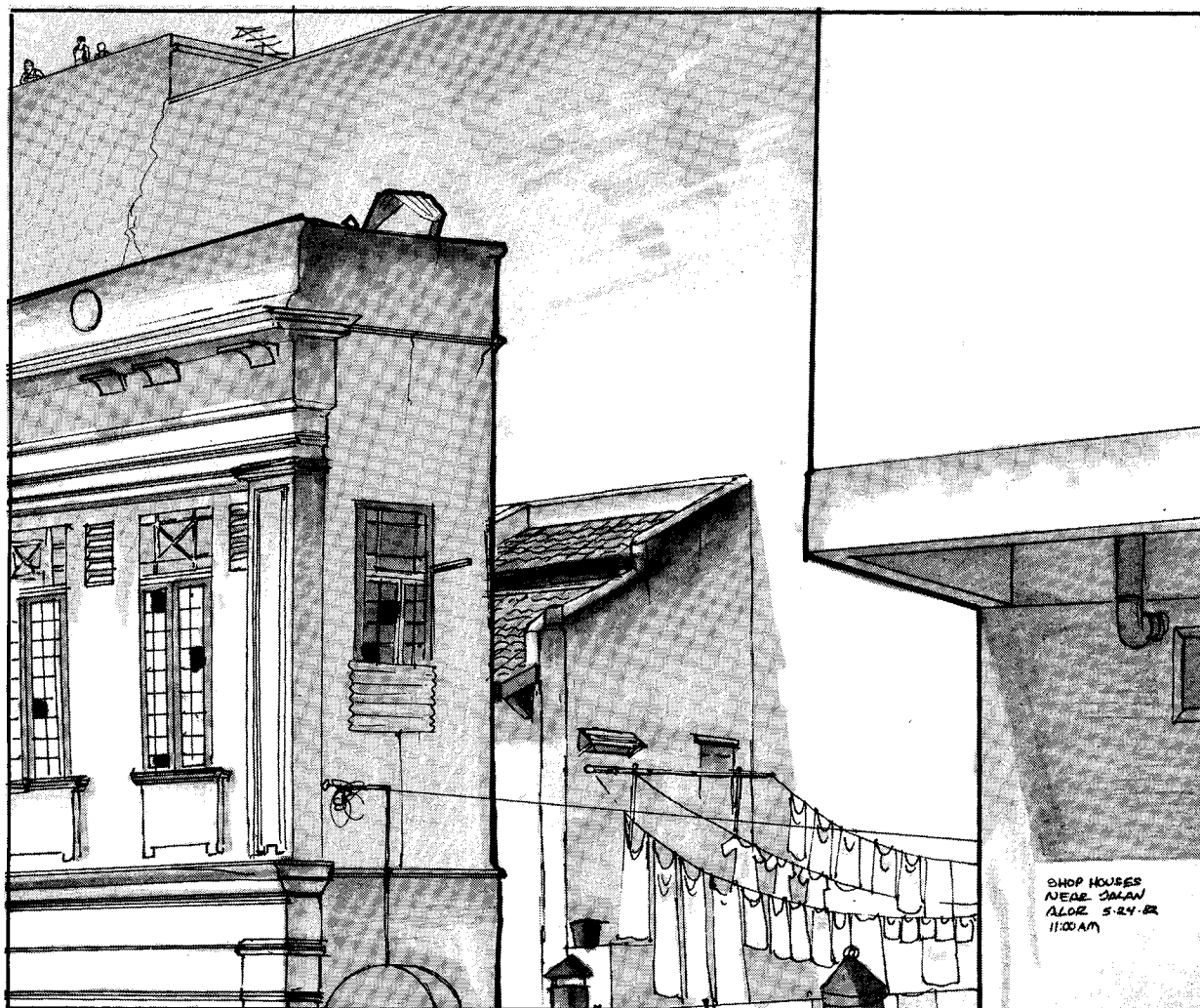


1. Jamek Indian Mosque, Kuala Lumpur



2. Shophouse, Jalan Bukit Bintang, Kuala Lumpur (one)

the mosque stands at the confluence of the Gombak and Kelang Rivers, a muddy juncture of yellow and brown water. This muddy confluence, kuala lumpur, gives the Federal capital its name. In the background of the sketch rises the monolithic bulk of Bank Pertanian (Agricultural Bank) and the as yet incomplete Bumi Daya complex. The latter, a Japanese built project, is Malaysia's first building to employ steel girder construction rather than the traditional, slower, reinforced concrete that typifies most Malaysian skyscrapers.

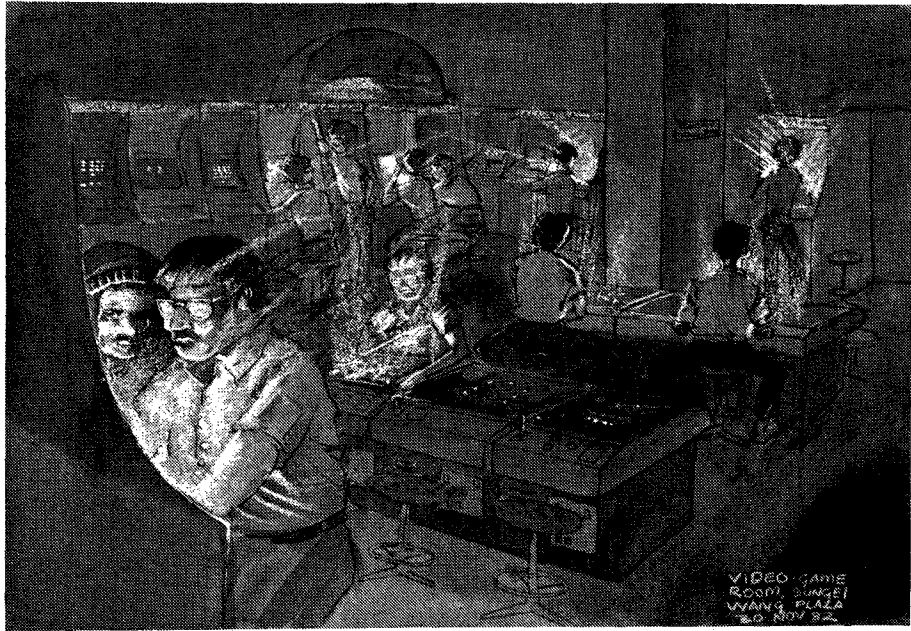


### 3. Shophouse, Jalan Bukit Bintang, Kuala Lumpur (two)

#### Sungei Wang

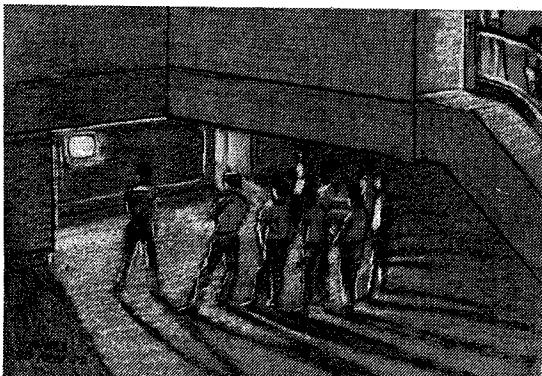
Many years ago, near the present day Jalan Bukit Bintang, a stream flowed: money river, sungei wang. The stream is gone now, but its modern namesake, a multi-story shopping plaza, is

perhaps more appropriately named. Sungei Wang Plaza and the attached Bukit Bintang (star hill) Plaza are KL's most popular shopping areas, filled with fashion boutiques, pharmacies, video parlors, and fast food joints. Among the latter is the most profitable Kentucky Fried Chicken franchise in the world, occasi-



onally grossing upwards of US\$13,000 per day. McDonald's has opened just across the street on Jalan Bukit Bintang, but has yet to equal the world record sales of Singapore's Orchard Road branch.

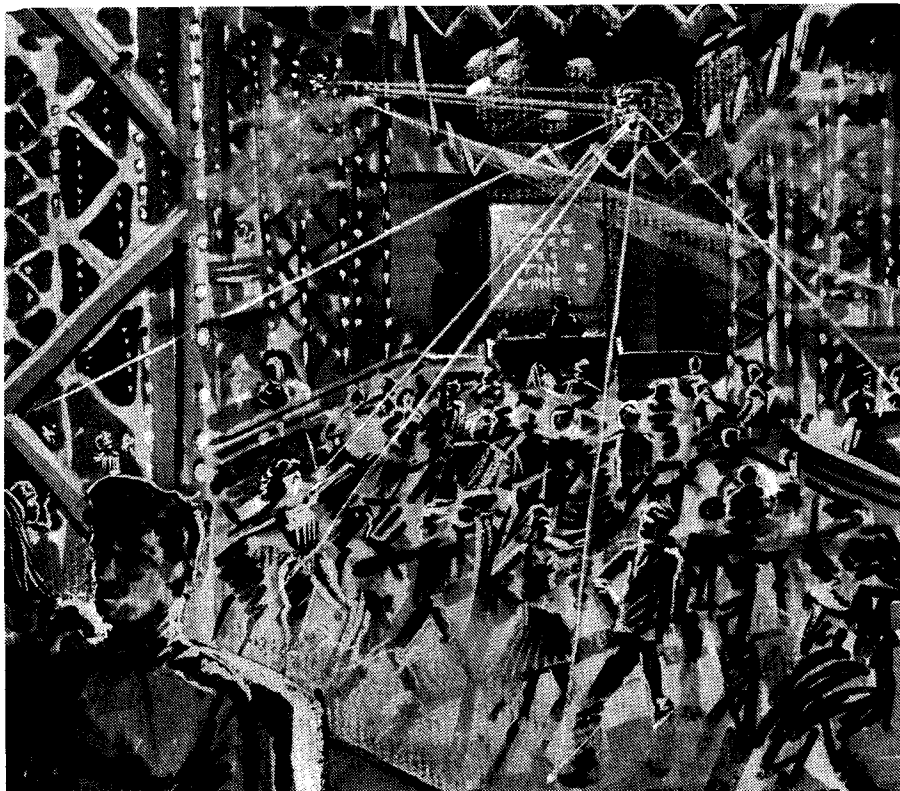
Like fast food, video games have taken Malaysia by storm (Singapore, following the example of Indonesia and the Philippines, has banned them). Such entertainment survives here despite public outcry and media tales of parental anguish and moral degeneration. Sungei Wang hosts a plethora of video parlors; all are dark, smoky and almost exclusively male. For traditionalists, some have a few pinball machines or even an attached pool hall.



5. Studio Four video, Sungei Wang Plaza.

Just across the inner Sungei Wang courtyard from the video parlor I've sketched here is yet another form of video addiction. Studio Four, a Sungei Wang record, tape and video tape store has a sales gimmick that would be dear to an American merchandiser's heart: daily, store-window showings of the latest available video movies. This device has proven exceedingly popular with Sungei Wang shoppers, particularly males. Every





afternoon a group of kutu jalan ("street lice," colloquial Malay for panhandlers and other street people that make their homes in the plazas and surrounding environs) forms near the Studio Four video screen, by evening growing to include male office workers and occasionally, their wife and girlfriends. Other stores and shopping plazas have jumped on the video bandwagon as well, in concert with the Cathay film organization. Cathay has installed ceiling-mounted video sets in a number of the Kuala Lumpur shopping areas and the Pudu Raya bus terminal. Snippets of the latest Kung Fu thrillers and Western

#### 6. Tin Mine, Kuala Lumpur Hilton.

imports keep customer heads riveted skywards throughout the day, assuredly a boon for pickpockets. Malayan Railways' Ekspres Rakyat (People's Express) trains and the Peninsular MARA buses now also have video movies on their longer runs. Video is fast outdistancing cinema as the most popular form of mass entertainment in Malaysia. Times are hard if you own a movie house.

Down the road from Sungei Wang stands the Kuala Lumpur Hilton, home of the Tin Mine, KL's most popular, and most expensive discotheque. Deep in the Hilton basement, the Tin Mine nightly churns out disco muzak and rock tunes (unlike the States, Western music has yet to catch on here as a popular music form) to the visual accompaniment of a recently installed laser and oversized video display screen. The latter, when not displaying the latest request or birthday announcement runs Pac-Man-like patterns or non-representational color washes.

#### Dakwah

Though most Malaysians call these hooded women and their male counterparts "dakwah," or missionaries, they are in fact not a cohesive organisation, but rather, an ideological movement of Islamic revival, akin in some ways to the West's charismatic Chris-



7. Malay woman in tudung, Kuala Lumpur

tianity. Mostly urban, and particularly strong in the universities, these "born-again Muslims" try to live by the spirit and letter of Islam and spread the Word to their errant brethren. Some, rejecting Westernized urban life completely, have set up communes, teaching their young and growing their own food in a closed society perceived by them to be more pure, more Islamic, than the corrupt outside. Dakwah women clothe themselves from head to toe in tudung and baju kurung, showing only their faces from chin to hairline, hands and feet. The more radical employ the jubah, allowing no males to touch them other than blood relatives or their husbands. Green, a color of particular significance to Muslims, is very popular dakwah attire for both males and females.





8. Dakwah couple, KL

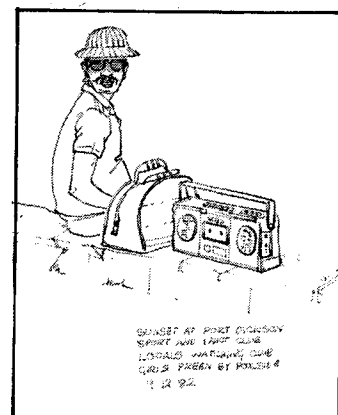
lightly reported in the Malay press (and virtually ignored in the English language newspapers) the conference drew some 80,000 dakwah, Malaysians and their ideological counterparts overseas. Eye-witness sources in Kuala Trengganu, and third-hand rumours in Kuala Lumpur have it that Neil Armstrong (of moonwalk fame) and Cat Stevens (popular pop-musician of the 1970's), both Muslim converts, were in attendance.

### The Coasts

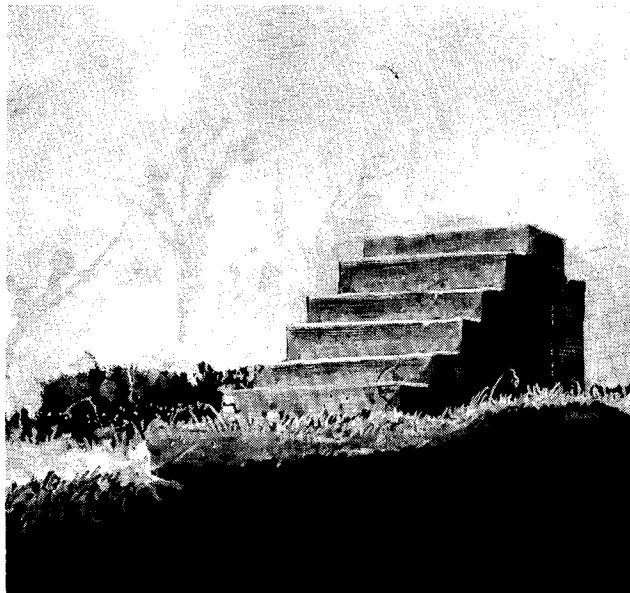
Batu Rakit, Rawa Island and Port Dickson are examples of Malaysia's abundant seaside towns, the former two on the east coast, the latter on the west. Batu Rakit, a small fishing village 15 kilometers north of Kuala Trengganu, hosts a small government resthouse, currently situated some fifty meters further inland than its still-intact original foundations due to continual wave erosion. The

Though considered narrow-minded and reactionary by less straight-laced Muslims, the dakwah movement has become a force to reckon with in Malaysian politics. Malaysia is only 50% Muslim, but many dakwah would like to see an Islamic government, a la Khomeini, installed here. The current, secular, coalition, National Front government has a section of the Prime Minister's Department devoted specially to keeping watch on the dakwah, and has even set up an official dakwah organization of its own in an attempt to direct grassroots power into less confrontational lines. Doubtless, the government's decision to set up a Malaysian Islamic Bank and Islamic University were, in part, designed to placate dakwah demands for an Islamic Malaysia.

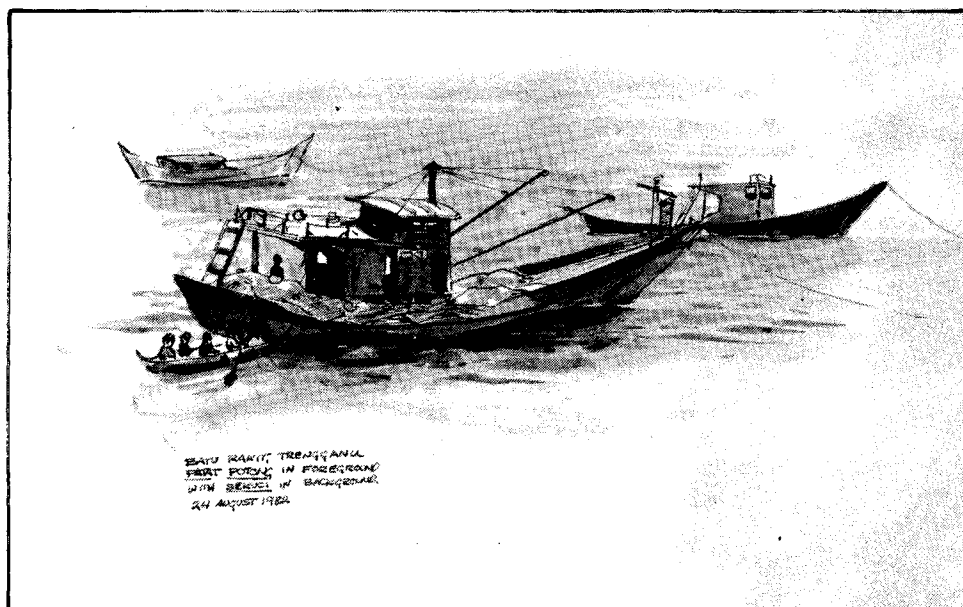
The dakwah movement is by no means a purely Malaysian phenomenon. A few weeks ago an international dakwah jamboree was held near the east coast city of Kuala Trengganu. Though only



9. Girl watcher, Port Dickson, Negeri Sembilan



10. Steps, Batu Rakit, Trengganu.



11. Fishing boats, Batu Rakit.



12. Jetty, Pulau Rawa Resort Island, Johore



13. Coconut palm, Pulau Rawa

steps to the original foundations now teeter on the edge of a ten meter cliff, leading nowhere. Rawa Island, a small resort off the coast of Johore state is owned and operated by a nephew of the Sultan of that region. I spent a night there last October, my host a Malay bomoh (shaman) from the mainland, who had recently exorcised the resort of a ghost, thought to be stealing valuables, antagonizing employees and shaking the resort's cottages on windless nights. Port Dickson is a less supernaturally-infested area, providing a popular training ground for Malaysian and expatriate windsurfers, but only meager haunts for west coast fishermen.

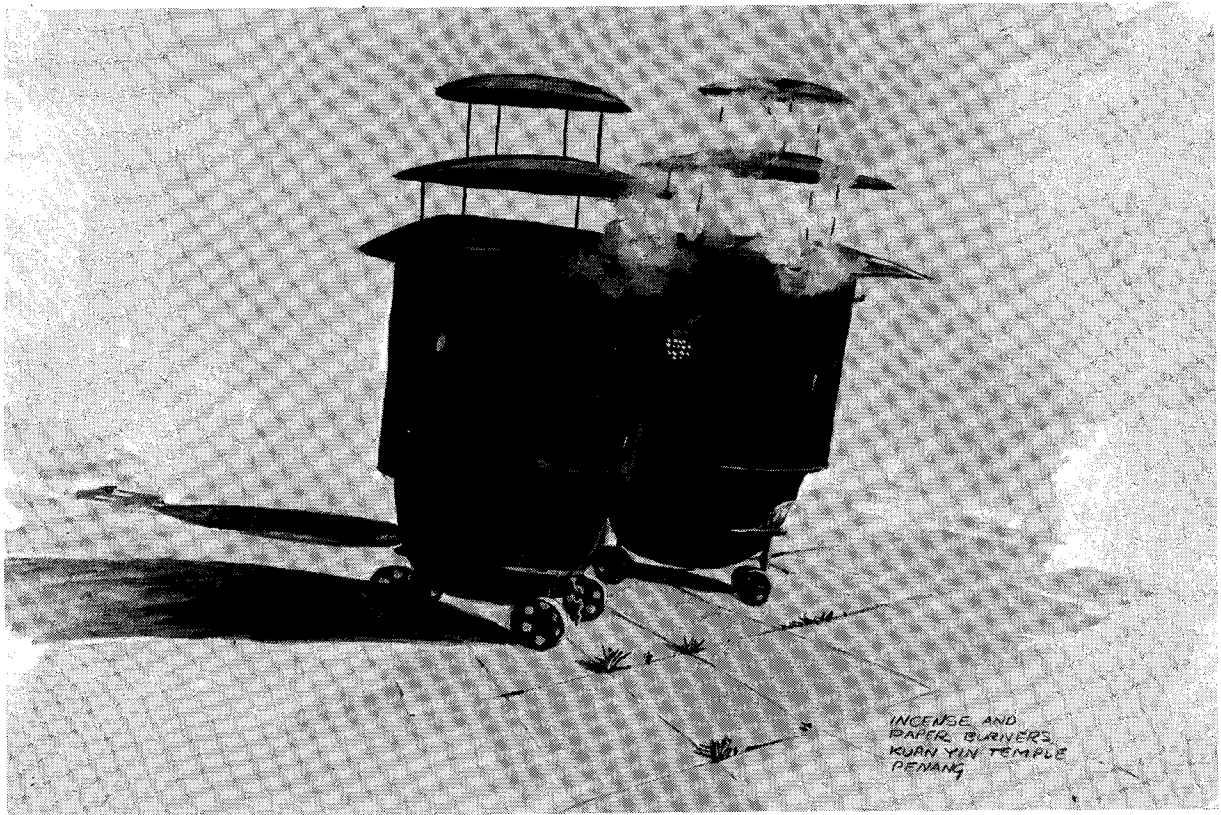
### Penang

This west coast island-state, the first British colonial possession on the Malay Peninsula, has long been passed by much of the change sweeping through other parts of post-Independence Malaysia. Steeped in colonial atmosphere and blessed with long stretches of beach, Penang is a perennial favorite with tourists. Well into the 1970's, Georgetown, the state capital, remained a sleepy city of narrow lanes, Chinese shophouses, British monuments, three-wheeled trishaws (pedicabs) and a scattering of restaurants and food-stalls considered by many to be the best in the country. Heavily Chinese, Penang was, and is the only state with a Chinese Chief Minister, an anomaly in a country where most high level politicians are Malay.

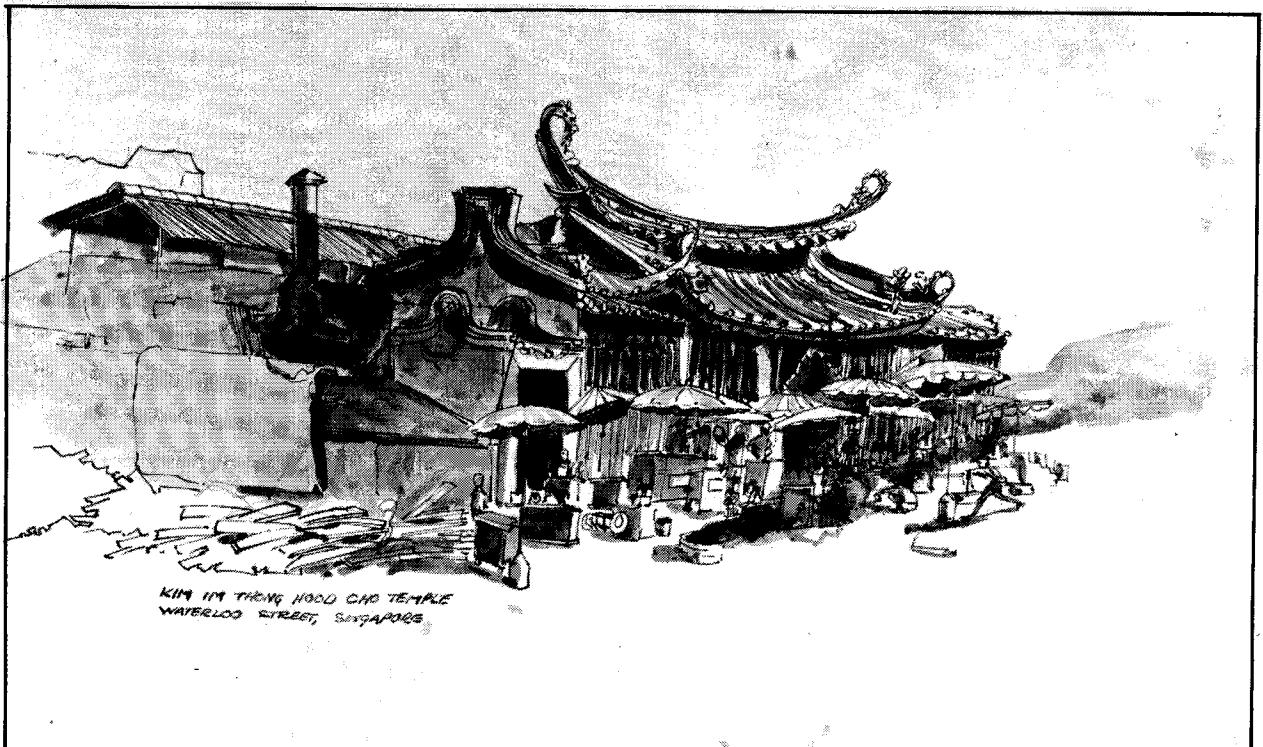
Today, change is on Penang's doorstep and knocking hard to come in. Batu Ferringhi, the most popular beach, is well on the way to becoming a mini-Waikiki, lined with hotels. Sewage outfall ensures unsafe swimming and murky water for much of the year. Georgetown now has its first multi-story skyscraper complex and will soon have to endure other urban redevelopment in line with national government policy. In a few years, the Koreans will have completed a controversial, multi-million dollar bridge connecting the island with the mainland, augmenting and perhaps one day replacing the present day ferry service. Malaysia's "Pearl of the Orient" will have entered the mainstream.

### Singapore

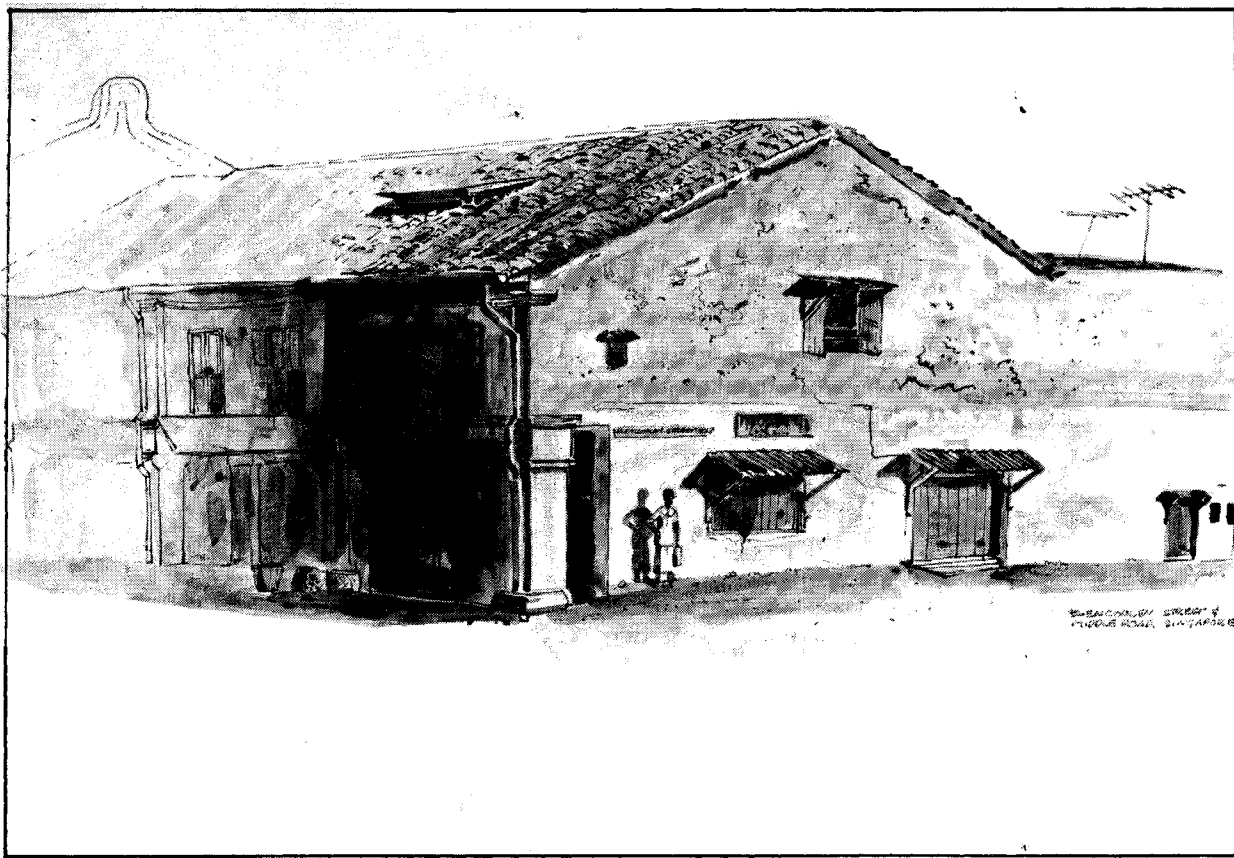
Here, though urban redevelopment has almost completely transformed a colonial entrepot into an ultra-modern island metropolis, pockets of the past remain. Bencoolen and Waterloo Streets are two of these, popular among budget travellers for their inexpensive Chinese hostelryes and "colonial charm." Two years hence, the hotels will be gone, replaced by high-rise apartments. Already, the Kim Im Thong Hood Cho temple, which I sketched a few months back, has been demolished. A multi-story reinforced concrete version of the temple is under construction on the same site. Though



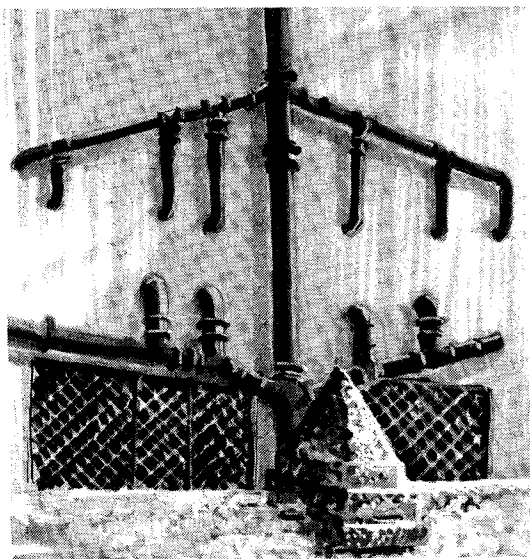
14. Incense burners, Kuan Yin temple, Penang.



15. Kim Im Thong Hood Cho temple, Waterloo Street, Singapore.



16. Bencoolen Street and Middle Road shophouse, Singapore



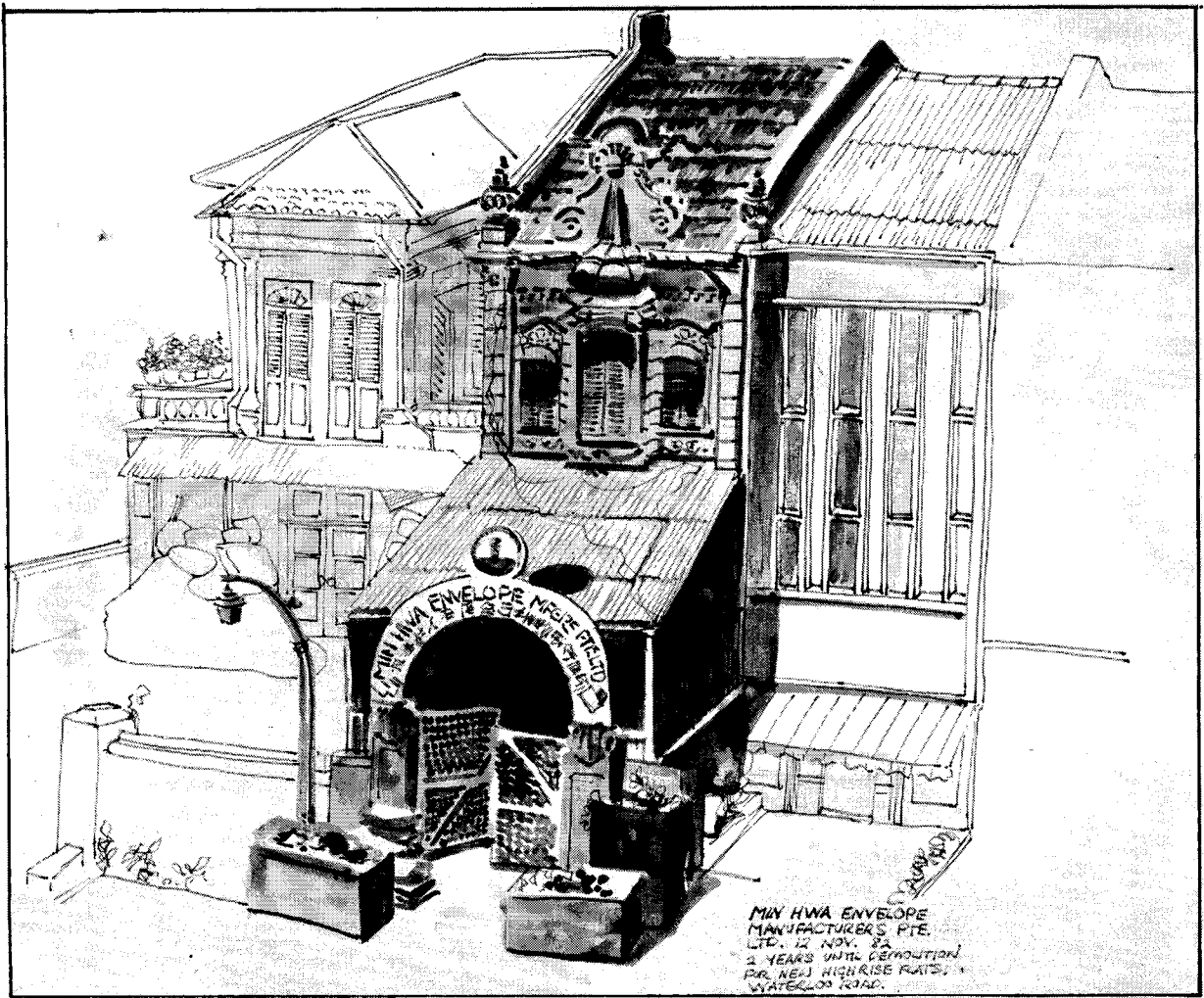
17. St. Andrews Institution  
Waterloo Street and Bras  
Basah Road, Singapore

thus far, I have managed only to sketch the waterpipes of Saint Andrews Institution, not to worry: this primary-secondary school will be spared. Also saved, but not yet sketched, will be one of Southeast Asia's only synagogues, opposite St. Andrews on Waterloo Street.

#### Cranes

Like much of the heavy equipment I have seen here, this crane, about two kilometers from my house, stands rusting and idle, apparently forgotten. A victim, perhaps, of recession? No one seems to know. Six months ago a solitary vine was just beginning to work its way up a lifting cable. A few others had invaded the cab. By

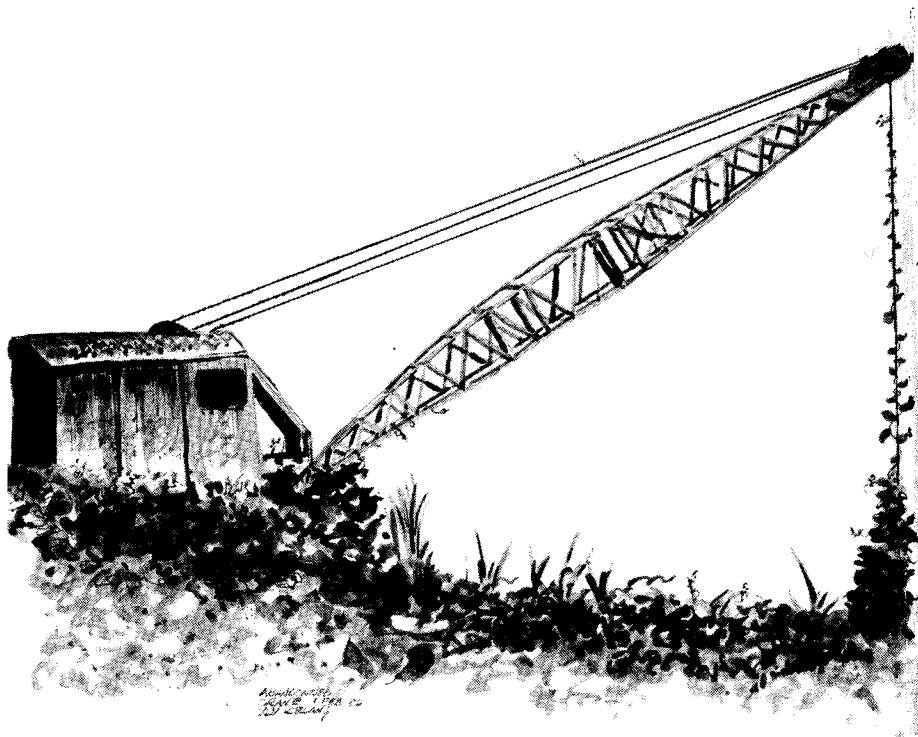




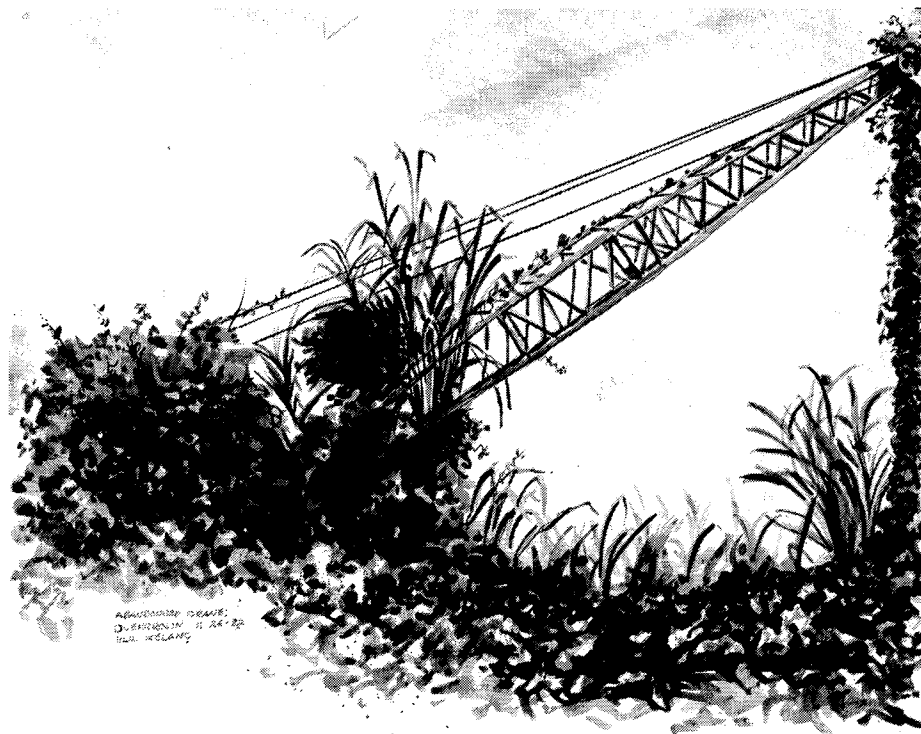
18. Min Hwa Envelope Manufacturers Pte. Ltd.,  
Waterloo Road, Singapore.



19. World War II concrete pillbox, Jurong,  
Singapore.



20. Crane, Ulu Kelang, June 1982

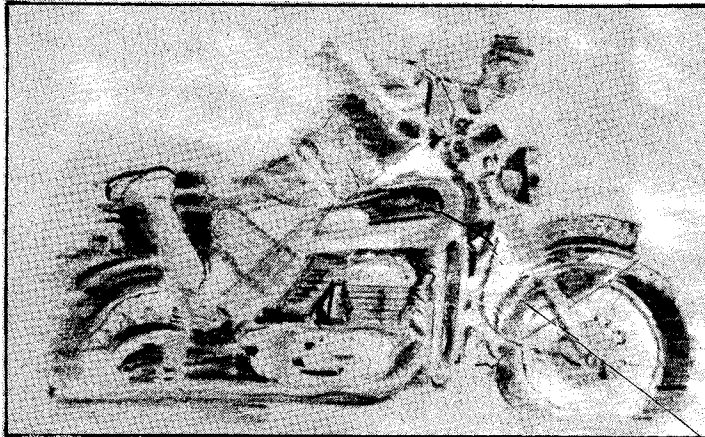


21. Crane, Ulu Kelang, November 1982

November, both cab and cable were completely enshrouded with foliage. The crane itself will soon follow, completing the transformation of heavy machinery to countryside hillock; complete, that is, until the bulldozers roll in to clear the area for housing.

### Transportation

I ride a motorcycle in Malaysia, a form of transport that, though admittedly inconvenient in tropical cloudbursts, gets me from here to there with maximum economy, speed and manoeuvrability. Though Malaysians have far more cars per capita than most of their Southeast Asian contemporaries, motorcycles are still ubiquitous (bicycles are few; horse and bullock carts are rarer still). Motorcyclists are the bane of cars, pedestrians and, of course, other motorcyclists, inserting themselves between every vehicle on the road, turning two lanes to six, four lanes to ten, ad infinitum. Though responsible bikers do exist (especially those who use their machines for commerce like the bread and milk vendors), a surprising number, whether riding Suzuki 1000's or tiny Vespas, seem to think themselves Easy Riders and CHiP's stuntmen. Weaving and squeezing their way through every traffic jam, these amateur showmen adopt a variety of prone and seated poses, more for audience recognition, I think, than practicality. I've depicted some of the more common gymnastics below.



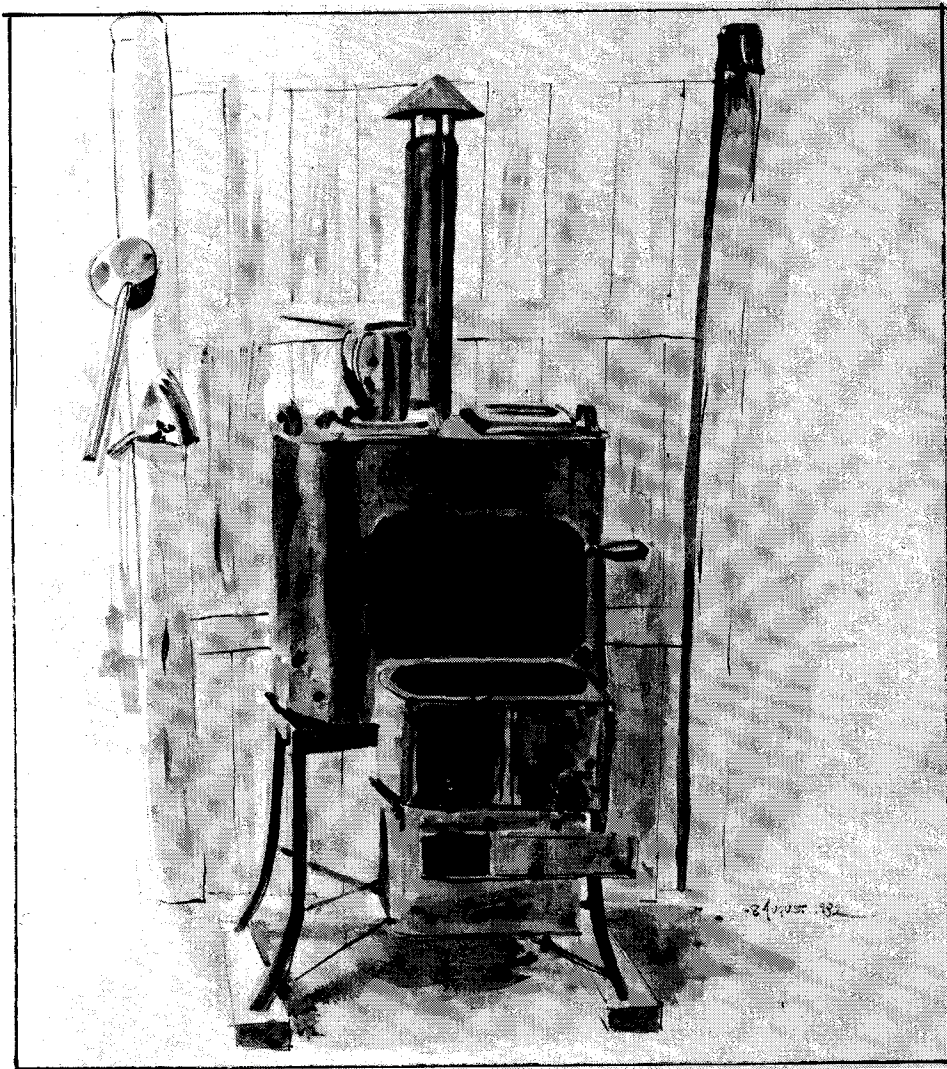
22. Racing prone position. A rarity during the daylight hours, the prone position really comes into its own after midnight, when biking syndicates take to the freeways. Using the straight-a-ways as racetracks these clubs bet thousands of dollars on their favorite bikes. Though illegal, few are caught.

23. The drag-leg position is popular for starts and tight turns, using rubber flip-flop sandals in imitation of steel overshoes to steady the motorcycle.

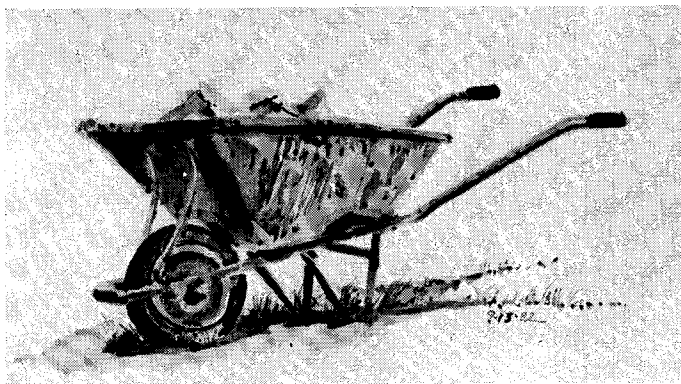


24. The spread-leg counterbalance position may have actually have some practical application on old-style Vespas and other motorscooters with offset engines. A left leg swung wide may have provided an effective counterweight to the heavy right side. On most modern bikes, however, the stance has little use, but is now a stylistic quirk of many Malaysian riders.

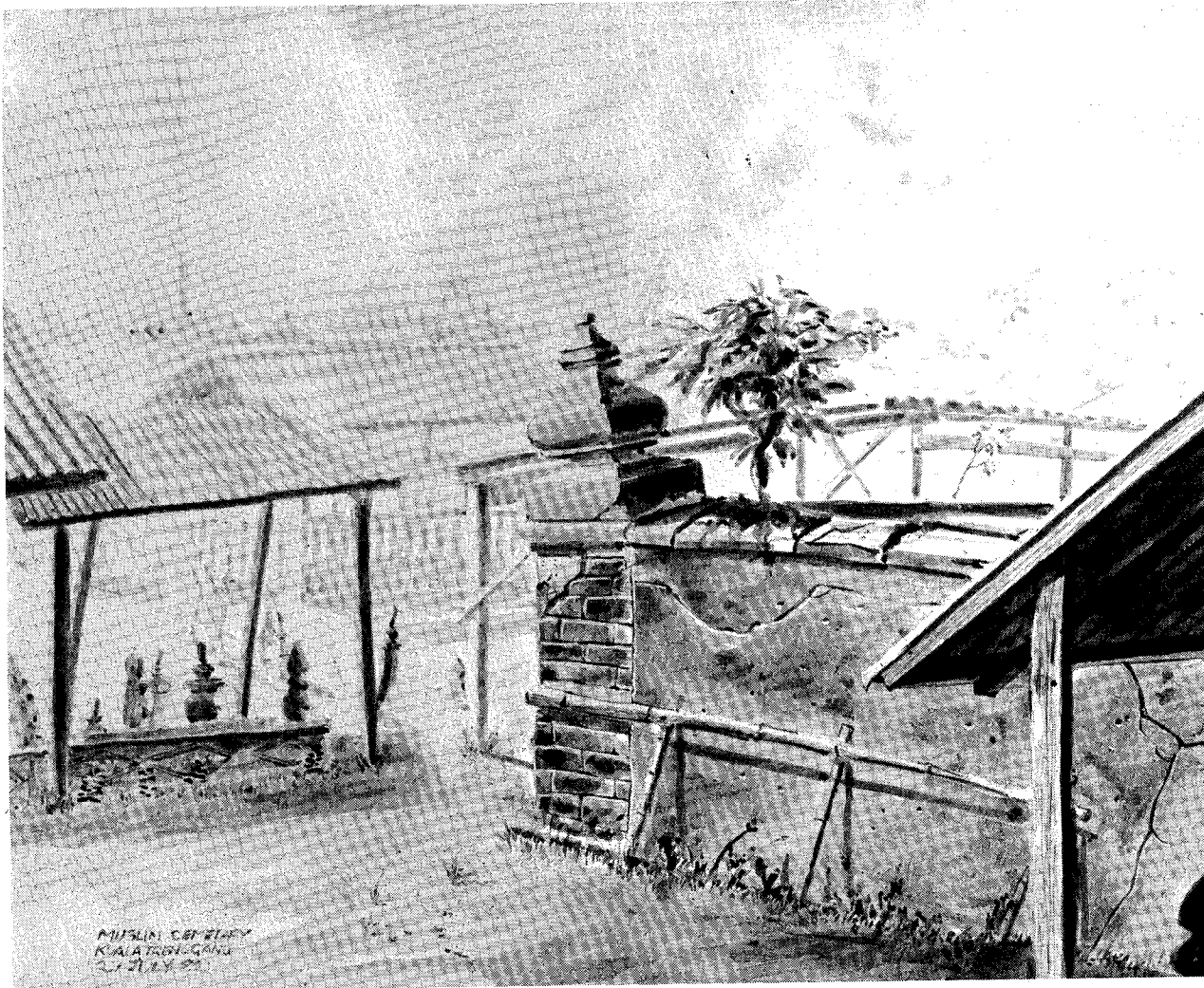


Miscellaneous Sketches

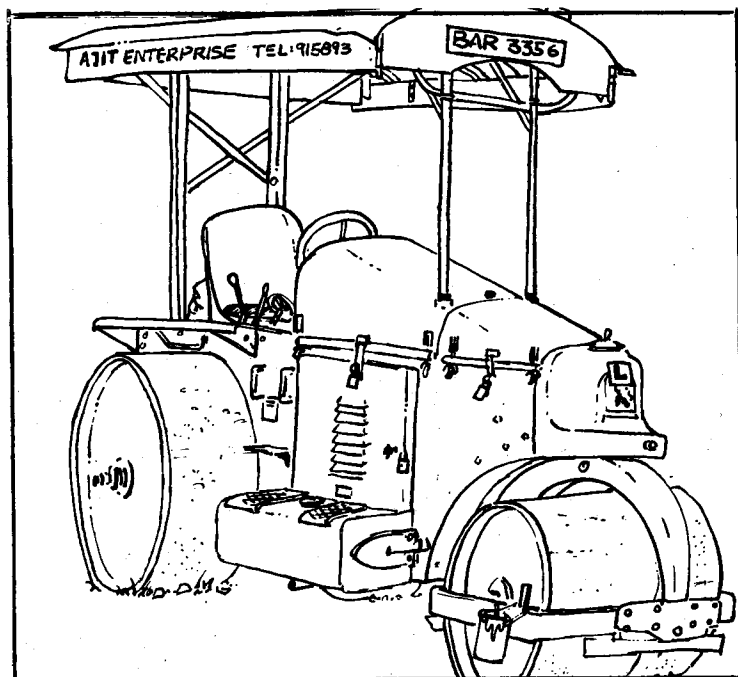
25. Chinese  
brass coffee and  
tea stove, Batu  
Rakit, Trengganu.



26. Wheelbarrow, Port  
Dickson, Negeri Sembilan.

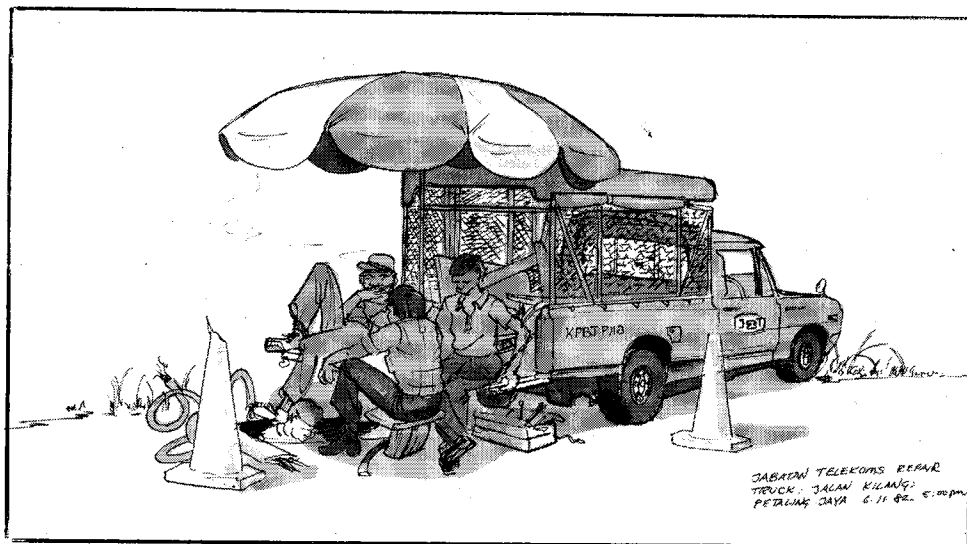


27. Muslim graveyard, Kuala Trengganu, Trengganu



28. Road roller with "L" plate. The "L" stands for learner, but detractors say it means "lembu", a reference to kereta lembu, bullock carts.

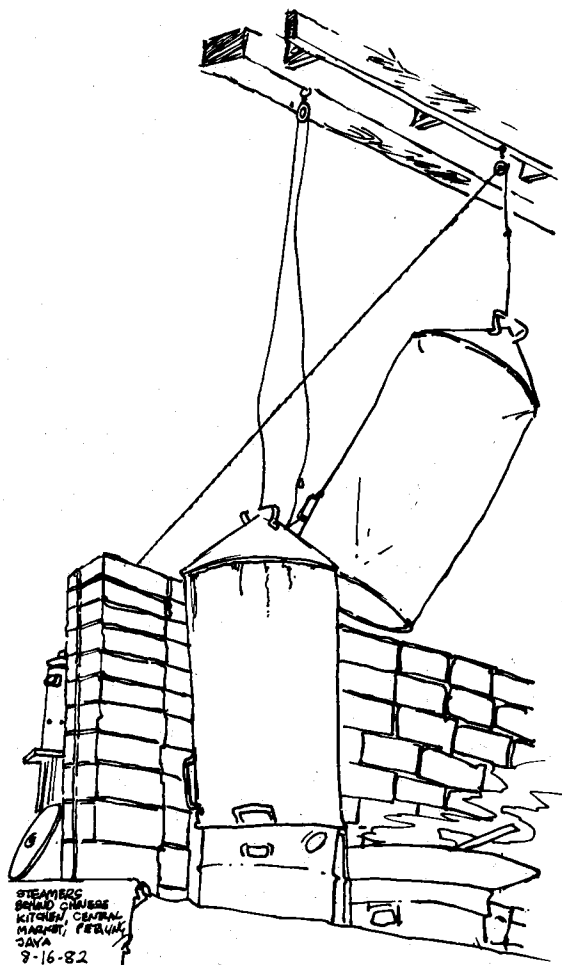




29. Government Telecommunications Department repair truck.



30. King Street, Penang



31. Chinese steamers, Petaling  
Jaya



List of Illustrations

1. Jamek Indian Mosque. Marker and ink on paper.
2. Shophouse, Jalan Bukit Bintang. Marker and ink on bristol board.
3. Shophouse, Jalan Bukit Bintang. Marker and ink on bristol board.
4. Video-game room, Sungei Wang. Sepia ink, white goauche and white chaulk on sepia canson paper.
5. Vidlots, Sungei Wang. Charcoal and white chaulk on sepia canson paper.
6. Tin Mine, Hilton Hotel. Ink, markers, white goauche and chaulk on toned paper.
7. Malay women in tudung (posed model). Pencil on charcoal paper.
8. Dakwah couple. Ink, marker and white goauche on charcoal paper.
9. Girl watcher. Sepia ink on bristol board.
10. Steps, Batu Rakit. Sepia ink, marker, casein on bristol board.
11. Boats, Batu Rakit. Sepia ink on bristol board.
12. Jetty, Pulau Rawa. Pencil on bristol board.
13. Palm, Pulau Rawa. Pencil on bristol board.
14. Incense burners (sketch with photo reference). Goauche on bristol board.
15. Kim Im Thong Hood Cho temple. Sepia ink on bristol board.
16. Shophouse, Bencoolen Street and Middle Road. Sepia ink on bristol board.
17. St. Andrews Institution. Marker and white goauche, ink on bristol board.
18. Min Hwa Envelope Manufacturers. Sepia ink on bristol board.
19. Pillbox. Marker, ink and white goauche on bristol board.
20. Crane (before). Sepia ink on bristol board.
21. Crane (after). Sepia ink on bristol board.
22. Motorcyclist, prone (posed model). Charcoal on bristol board.
23. Motorcyclist, drag-leg (posed model). Charcoal on bristol board.
24. Motorcyclist, spread-leg (posed model). Charcoal on bristol board.
25. Chinese coffee and tea stove. Sepia ink on bristol board.
26. Wheelbarrow. Sepia ink on bristol board.

- 27. Muslim graveyard. Sepia ink and goauche on bristol board.
- 28. Road roller. Sepia ink on bristol board.
- 29. Government Telecommunications Department repair truck. Marker and ink on bristol board.
- 30. King Street (sketch with photo reference). Casein on bristol board.
- 31. Chinese steamer. Sepia ink on bristol board.

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