



MYTH AND MORALITY IN SINGAPORE

Haw Par Villa
gathers stories
of Confucian
cultural values
in one place.



"The sculptures talk to you silently," says Haw Par Villa's park manager Lawrence Na.

Long before the glittering Marina Bay Sands hotel and casino complex came to dominate Singapore's skyline, the sculpture garden of Haw Par Villa was the city's central cultural attraction. Containing over 1,000 figures depicting scenes from Chinese myths and fables, it reminds one of a time a few decades ago when the now-ultramodern Singapore was little more than a fishing village.

The grand house was originally built in 1937 by Tiger Balm ointment tycoon Aw Boon Haw as a home for his brother and business partner Aw Boon Par. It was settled in the Pasir Panjang neighbourhood overlooking the Singapore Strait, and surrounded by manicured gardens filled with sculptures and ponds. These were open for the public to enjoy and learn about traditional Chinese values. The gardens also did a bit of advertising for Tiger Balm.

After the Second World War, Aw Boon Haw restored and expanded the grounds. Haw Par Villa became a popular leisure

destination, particularly during festival weekends when the Aw family would distribute red *ang pao* envelopes of money for good luck.

Although Haw Par Villa's figures lack the exquisite craftsmanship of ancient Chinese sculptures – they are utilitarian, made of painted cement over metal frames, and easy to repair – park manager Lawrence Na says the collection is unique in its comprehensive anthology of tales.

"Even if you go to China it is not easy to find a collection of legends in one place," Na says. "Here you see everything from the Song Dynasty [starting in the 900s] down to the Ming Dynasty and the Qing Dynasty, the last dynasty."

The giant dioramas feature well-known Chinese myths such as Journey to the West, in which pilgrims travel to India in search of enlightenment, and the Legend of the White Snake, a tale of thwarted romance between a virtuous young man and a magical female snake spirit. Perhaps the most notorious exhibit, however,

is the Ten Courts of Hell. These vivid and less than family-friendly scenes depict the tortures that befall those who stray from Confucian virtues before being allowed to reincarnate. Agonized figures are crushed, impaled and frozen into blocks of ice for transgressions including robbery, gambling and disrespecting elders.

Side-by-side with the fantastical dioramas are colloquial scenes of farming, business, family and friendship, which extol the value of working together and the wholesome fun of the countryside compared with the excess of rowdy and sometimes transgressive life in cities.

The Haw family sold the park in 1985 to the Singapore government. Haw Par Villa reached its zenith over the next decade, with art workshops and theatre performances, but soon began receiving less

funding and park attendance dropped considerably.

In a country as focused on progress as Singapore, it can be difficult to preserve space for old things. Na, who has worked here for 12 years, believes Haw Par Villa still has value, and not just for those who remember the park in its heyday; he says it's a great place for conversation.

"When you go to McDonalds, you eat a hamburger and talk about hamburgers. But here you talk about life, you talk about behaviour – and at the end of the day you hope that the children retain it. It is not food eaten and forgotten. This is a different kind of food."

INFORMATION

Haw Par Villa is located at 262 Pasir Panjang Road, and open daily from 9 am to 7 pm (last entry 6 pm). Admission is free. Take the MRT to Haw Par Villa.

FINNAIR FLIES nonstop daily to Singapore.



Top: A replica of the Statue of Liberty is a nod to American culture.