

PHT *newsletter*

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TREES and the MPPP

*Heritage trees as defined by
an MPPP elder spokesman*

According to an unnamed senior official of the Penang Island Municipal Council (MPPP), heritage trees are those "planted by well-known leaders who visited Penang" and have been "nurtured and protected" — presumably by the MPPP — "for having historical value or strengthening bonds of friendship between countries" (*New Straits Times*, 3 December '94).

As the *NST* reports it, the MPPP's recent decision "to cut down 26 trees aged between 80 and 100 years" has met with strong public protests and its press statement is meant to dispel "the misconception that all old roadside trees on the island are considered heritage trees".

What are we to make of this new MPPP proclamation about our heritage? Are we to think the MPPP is not prepared to consider any tree, no matter how ancient, as having any heritage value unless it's one handed down to us by a foreign dignitary? Besides the two *Bunga Tanjung* at the mini Dataran at the Esplanade, doubtless favourites of the MPPP because they "bear testimony to the visit on Feb 21, 1970 of the present Japanese Emperor Akihito and the then South Australian Premier Don A Dunstan", how many other such lucky trees — I wonder and would the MPPP say — do we have in Penang? Ten? Twenty? Let's overestimate and put it at 100, 200 if you like.

But what about the *Royal Palm* of Peel Avenue, the *Rain Tree* of Jalan Pangkor, the *Tembusu* of Free School Road, and the countless thousands of other roadside trees planted by the MPPP's own gardeners long ago, before its present elder spokesman with no name was born? And what about that glorious *Rose of India* on the street where you live? Do all these qualify as heritage trees? It looks like they don't and the MPPP may at any time cut down any number of them so that it can build an ever denser spider's web of roads over the Penang landscape.

Which train of thought takes me to Alor Star and the speech the Sultan of Kedah made at the Kedah State Assembly. The MPPP might find something wise in what the Sultan said: "There is a need for stricter measures along the coastline and in industrial areas. We must not be carried away with the chase of industrialisation and even that of tourism" (*The Star*, 5 December '94). My point here is this. Here is the Sultan telling the people of Kedah, our neighbours, about the need to safeguard the environment. And here is the MPPP telling the people of Penang it is ready, willing, and able to destroy all those old roadside trees on the island it does not recognise as heritage trees — which, I fear, is every last old roadside tree on the island, if the MPPP's idea of what a heritage tree is is anything to go by.

While we wait and see what the authorities might be up to next, we might remind them that it's as much their responsibility as the general public's to protect the trees of our island home, whether these be the garden *Bunga Tanjung* planted by important visiting personages, or the roadside *Angsana* planted by the city's gardeners, or, for that matter, the wild *Pulai* and *Jelutong* and *Tree Fern* deep in the hills planted by nobody but which have been with us ever since we found this rock we call *Pearl of the Orient*.



Old is Beautiful

*Let us by all means
preserve the tree
planted by the
Emperor of Japan,
but.....*

I refer to the report in the *New Straits Times* dated 3rd December which quoted a senior MPPP official as saying that only trees which were planted by well-known visitors to Penang can be considered as heritage trees, and all other trees are of no significance. This is of course an extraordinarily narrow and rigid use of the term heritage. The statement is not in keeping with the usual practice because it assumes that heritage must be based only on history and denies all other factors.

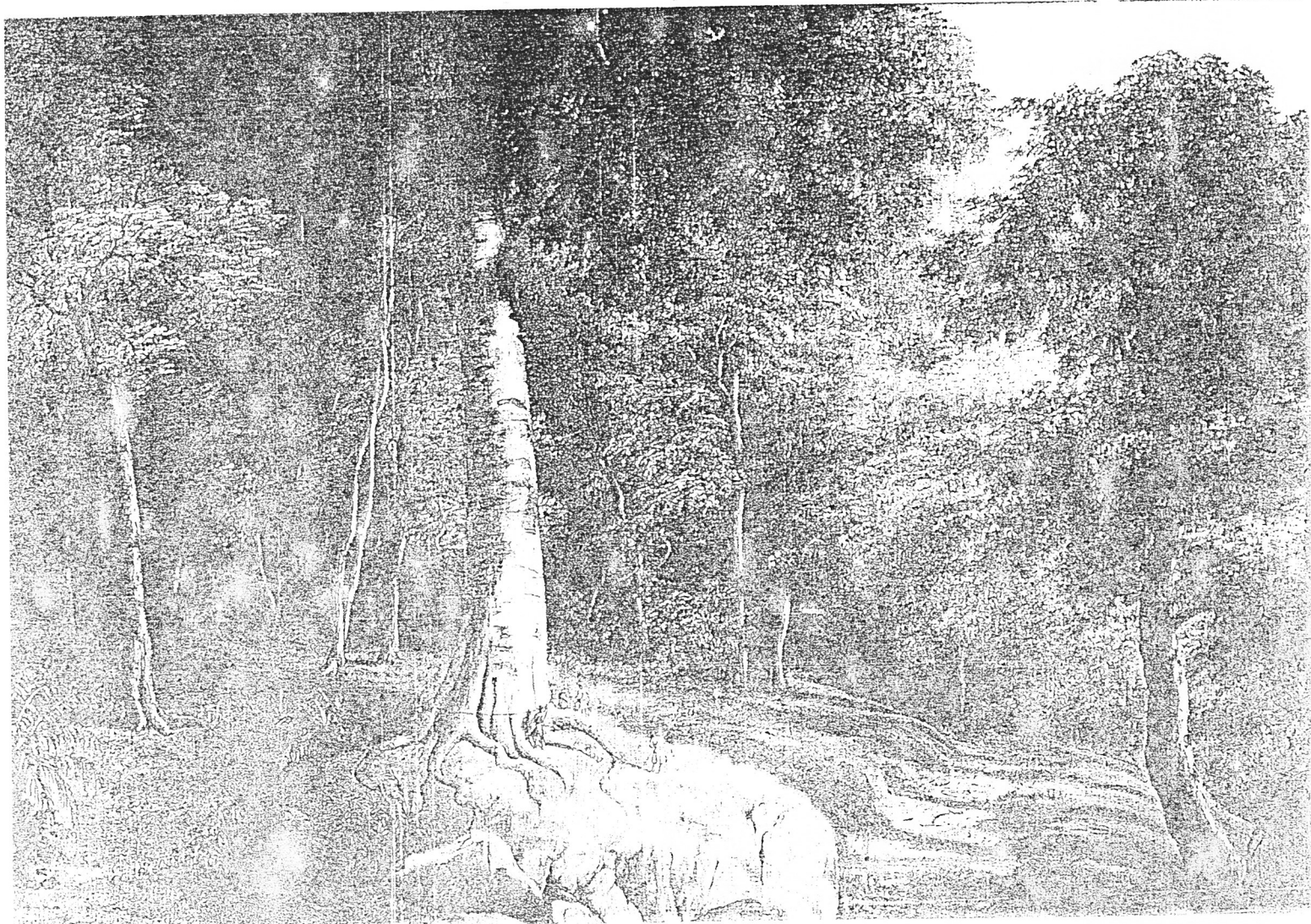
Current thinking accepts a much broader criterion. Usually a tree, a building or even a natural feature

has heritage value if it has historical, cultural, aesthetic, religious or scientific significance to a section, which need not necessarily be the majority, of the people. As such, any object, natural or man-made, may be considered heritage as long as there are people who value it for any of the above reasons.

No one disputes that the trees planted by famous visitors are heritage trees, but the other old trees are equally to be valued. Some, if not most, of them have been standing for so long that they form a permanent part of the streetscape. They add to the beauty and character of much of Penang. Narrow roads shaded by giant trees (and who can forget roads which are carpeted by the yellow angsa flowers at *Cheng Beng*) are as much an integral part of the image of our city as Fort Cornwallis, the Kapitan Keling Mosque or the Ayer Itam Pagoda. Just think how the appearance and and charm of, for instance, Macalister Road would change if the old angsa trees were cut down and replaced by saplings.

Let us by all means preserve the tree planted by the Emperor of Japan, but let us also preserve the other trees for aesthetic and cultural reasons.

Ahmad Chik



CAPT. ROBERT SMITH, THE GREAT TREE, 1818, OIL