

DELVE INTO SINGAPORE'S LANDMARK LAWS THAT SHAPED OUR NATION

Three of Singapore's landmark laws – the Citizenship Ordinance, the Women's Charter, the Employment Act – now feature in new NLB exhibition

Singapore, 4 July 2024 – About seven decades ago, the identity and legal status of Singapore citizens did not exist, wives in Singapore were not treated as equal partners in marriage, and Singapore's archaic employment laws were unsuited for a modern industrial economy. But all this changed with the introduction of three laws which will be featured in a refreshed exhibition by the National Library Board (NLB).

Opening to the public tomorrow (5 July 2024), the **"Laws of Our Land: Foundations of a New Nation"** exhibition puts a spotlight on the Citizenship Ordinance, the Women's Charter, and the Employment Act. Through the 37 artefacts on display and new interactive features that will allow visitors to engage with characters such as a girl servant also known as *mui tsai* and a citizen voter in the 1959 general elections, visitors will learn about the historical circumstances that led to the passing of these laws.

The 37 artefacts are from the collections of the National Archives of Singapore (NAS), the National Library (NL) and partner institutions¹, and includes the Supreme Court's copies of these laws with original signatures of the Head of State. Visitors can also look forward to other digital elements in the exhibition, including interactive games, a digital rack of union magazines, and video screenings of key moments in Singapore's journey to nationhood.

The exhibition is located at the former Chief Justice's Chamber and Office in the Supreme Court Wing of National Gallery Singapore, the same historic space that housed NLB's previous exhibition, "Law of the Land: Highlights of Singapore's Constitutional Documents" which explored the history of Singapore's constitutional development from a British settlement to a sovereign republic. The space was offered to NLB by National Gallery Singapore and hosted the exhibition from October 2016 to January 2024. NLB is pleased to continue this partnership with National Gallery Singapore to present the refreshed exhibition, "Laws of Our Land: Foundations of a New Nation".

NLB's Chief Executive Officer Ng Cher Pong said: "As the key memory institution in Singapore, NLB aims to make history, including on the nation's landmark laws, accessible to the wider public through this exhibition. This is in line with our LAB25 (Libraries and Archives Blueprint 2025) goal to be Singapore's Storyteller, to bring more areas of our history to light and to inspire more to be storytellers too."

Admission to the exhibition is free for all visitors. National Gallery Singapore is open daily from 10am to 7pm. Please visit <https://www.nationalgallery.sg/admissions> for more information. Visitors can also participate in guided tours of the exhibition.

¹ Partner institutions are the Supreme Court and National Museum Singapore.

Please refer to **Annexes A and B** for more information on the exhibition highlights and upcoming guided tours.

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About National Library Board

The National Library Board (NLB) nurtures Readers for Life, Learning Communities and a Knowledgeable Nation by promoting reading, learning and history through its network of 28 libraries, the National Library and the National Archives of Singapore. NLB also forges strategic partnerships that encourage awareness, appreciation and greater discovery of Singapore's history through its rich collections on Singapore and the region.

NLB achieves excellence through innovation, focusing on citizen engagement and co-creation, resource and digital innovation. This creates learning opportunities, greater access to library resources, services and archival collections, as well as a continual development of innovative library spaces. Established on 1 September 1995 as a statutory board, NLB is under the Ministry of Communications and Information (MCI).

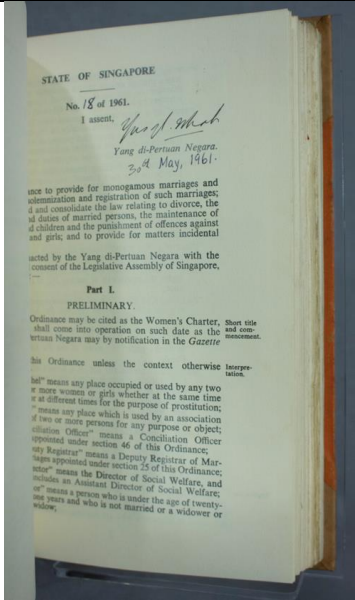
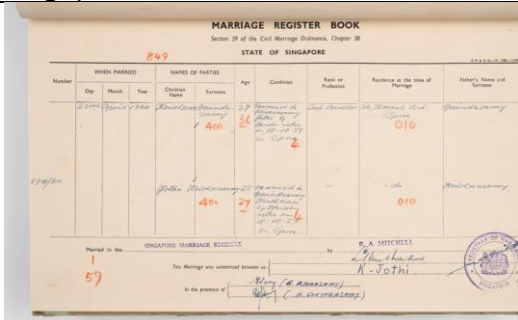
For more information, please visit the [NLB website](#), and NLB's [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), [LinkedIn](#) and [YouTube](#) channels.

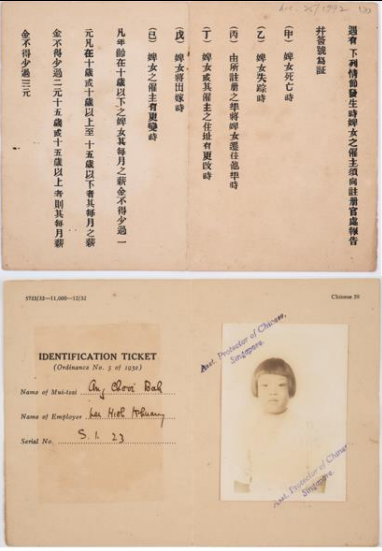
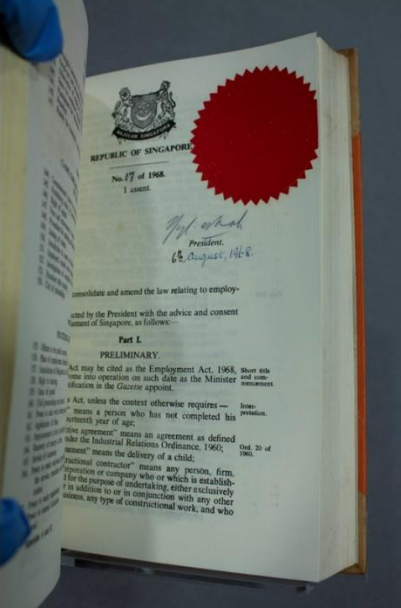
For media enquiries, please contact:

Quah Jia Ling
Weber Shandwick
Tel: +65 9699 0830
Email: jquah@webershandwick.com

Cheyenne Chia
Weber Shandwick
Tel: +65 8298 4882
Email: cchia@webershandwick.com

Annex A – Highlights of the exhibition

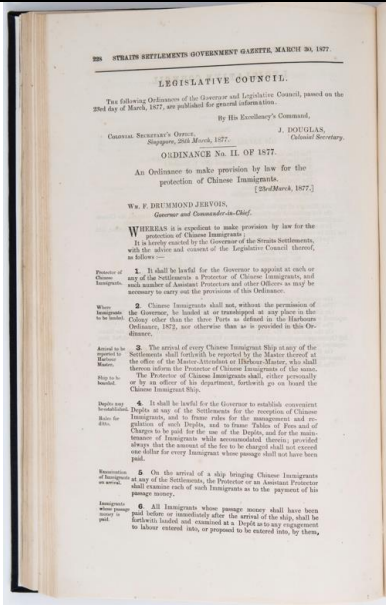
Item	Details
Women's Charter	
 <p>The Women's Charter from <i>State of Singapore Ordinances, Nos. 1–33 of 1961</i> Singapore: Government Printer, 1961 On loan from Supreme Court, Singapore</p>	<p>The Women's Charter, passed on 30 May 1961, was a pioneering legislation that gave expression to the rights of women by introducing a unitary monogamous law governing civil marriages and consolidating previous legislation pertaining to the protection of girls and women.</p> <p>On display in the exhibition is the original signed copy of the legislation, bearing the signature of the Yang di-Pertuan Negara when the bill was passed and this became law.</p> <p>It was passed after intense public debate, with two Select Committees being convened prior to it being passed in the Legislative Assembly. Also available in the exhibition multimedia are the scans of these Select Committee reports, and some audio excerpts of the debates leading up to its passing.</p>
 <p>Civil Marriage Register Book, 1960 Registry of Marriages Collection, National Archives of Singapore BV0503605L</p>	<p>One of the key areas the Women's Charter addressed was the diversity of Singapore's marriage practices with regard to marriages prior to its introduction. It was not until the passing of the Women's Charter that monogamy and compulsory registration of civil marriages was made compulsory.</p> <p>As early as the 1880s, there was colonial legislation governing the registration of Christian and Muslim marriages, and later, civil marriages. However, the registration was not compulsory, and the law also recognised local customary marriages which may or may not be accompanied with documentation, much less centrally maintained registers.</p> <p>When the Women's Charter Bill was tabled in 1959, it led to heightened public awareness of the need to register their marriages. This page from the Civil Marriage Register in 1960 on display hints at this</p>

	<p>variety of local practices that predated the passing of the Women's Charter and compulsory registration of marriages, with detailed remarks next to the couples' name indicating that they were married by local rites a year earlier.</p>
 <p>Identification Card of a Mui Tsai, 1930s Lee Siew Hong Collection, National Archives of Singapore 25/1992</p>	<p>The Women's Charter incorporated the legislation relating to the protection of women and girls, one of which had its roots in the 1930s as the Mui Tsai Ordinance.</p> <p>Introduced in the colonial period as an attempt to regulate the cases of abuse arising from the practice of Chinese girls sold to affluent families as domestic servants, the Mui Tsai Ordinance in 1932 sought to register such servants with the Chinese Protectorate. There was some basic protection granted by the Ordinance, but eventually it was replaced with much broader legislation on the protection of women and girls which removed the social category of <i>mui tsai</i> entirely. On display is one of the identity cards issued to a <i>mui tsai</i> as a result of this Ordinance.</p> <p>The exhibition also features an interactive which allows visitors to find out more about the daily of life of a <i>mui tsai</i>, through a chat function with accounts inspired by an autobiography of a <i>mui tsai</i> in the 1930s, Janet Lim's "Sold for Silver".</p>
<p>Employment Act</p>	
	<p>The Employment Act of 1968 was significant as a comprehensive consolidation of Singapore's labour laws and also laid foundations for Singapore's economic future.</p> <p>The law was crafted in response to the British military withdrawal from Singapore slated for 1971, which would be detrimental for Singapore's economy. It sought to regularise prior labour laws to ensure a more efficient workforce that could support a national industrialisation programme and attract foreign direct investments, taking into account the rights and responsibilities of employees and employers. It reinforced the values of tripartism — collaboration among unions, employers and the government — in achieving shared economic and social goals.</p>

Employment Act from Republic of Singapore Acts, Nos. 1-47 of 1968
 On loan from Supreme Court, Singapore

The Employment Act succeeded in attracting foreign investments and boosting Singapore's economy, which grew at an average of 13.4 per cent between 1968 and 1972. Gross investments rose from S\$954 million in 1969 to S\$1.76 billion in 1971.

On display in the exhibition is the original signed copy of the legislation, bearing the signature of the President.



Chinese Immigrants Ordinance, 23 March 1877, from Straits Settlements Government Gazette (January-June, 1877)
 National Library, Singapore
 B02969352C

After becoming a crown colony in 1867, the Straits Settlements experienced greater British political intervention. Chinese immigration was rising rapidly and so were instances of abuse and disorder, such as overcrowded steamers of coolies, kidnappings of *xin ke* (new immigrants) and riots by *samsengs* (gangsters) from secret societies.

The Chinese Immigrants Ordinance of 1877 safeguarded immigrants by specifying the ports where they could land, ensuring every Chinese ship reported to the Harbour Master, and establishing depots for the screening of immigrants.

The law led to the introduction of the Chinese Protectorate, a government department that administered to the affairs of the Straits Settlements Chinese community. Its chief concerns were rampant abuses in the coolie trade, trafficking of women and girls for prostitution as well as lawlessness of Chinese secret societies.



The Singapore Traction Company (STC) ran tram, trolleybus and motor bus operations in Singapore from 1925 to 1971.

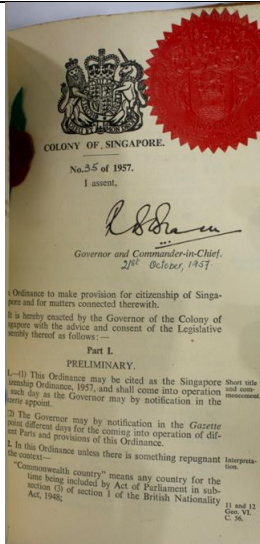
Its trade union began as the STC Employees' Association in 1937 and reformed as the STC Employees Union (STCEU) in 1947.

In 1955, STC bus workers carried out what became, at 142 days, the longest strike in postwar Singapore. The union won substantial concessions, including wage increments for operational staff.

**Singapore Traction Company
Employees Union Suara**
National Library, Singapore
B29005361D

The STCEU newsletter was called “Suara” (which means “voice” in Malay) and featured multilingual – English, Malay, Chinese, Tamil – content. It disseminated ideas about workers’ rights and the need for unity.

Citizenship Ordinance

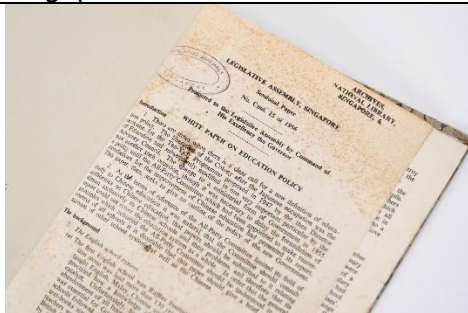


Singapore Citizenship Ordinance, from Colony of Singapore Ordinances, Nos. 1–47 of 1957
Singapore, Government Printing Office, 1957
On loan from Supreme Court of Singapore

The Singapore Citizenship Ordinance of 1957 was a landmark legislation in Singapore’s nation-building history. Passed on 21 Oct 1957, it introduced the legal status of Singapore citizens which did not exist before. Prior to this, Singapore’s multiethnic peoples were either British or foreign subjects. It also marked the first time that our people pledged allegiance to Singapore.

It permitted virtually all of Singapore’s large settled migrant population, who were mostly Chinese, to become citizens, and granted them voting rights.

It paved the way for Singapore to become a self-governing state and later an independent nation-state.




White Paper on Education Policy
Singapore: Legislative Assembly, 1956
Collection of National Library, Singapore
B02853737B

Presented at the Legislative Assembly in April 1956, this white paper marked the culmination of intense public debates on Singapore’s education policy. British efforts to forge a common Malayan identity in Singapore through cultural integration in education had stirred widespread concern, especially among the Chinese, about the survival of vernacular education and culture.

The white paper highlighted that the government rejected a melting pot or assimilationist approach as harmful to Singapore’s plural society. Instead, there would be equal treatment for vernacular languages representing Singapore’s main cultures, as well as support for vernacular schools that agreed to align with nation-building efforts.

The education debate shaped how the Singapore citizen was conceived and was vital in establishing

	<p>cultural pluralism as a cornerstone of Singapore citizenship.</p>
 <p>Poster showing elected assemblymen in 1959 General Election Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1959 Ministry of Culture Collection, National Archives of Singapore PO4928/2007</p>	<p>This poster shows the 51 people elected as Legislative Assembly members in the 1959 general election. A portrait of each elected Assembly member is displayed together with their constituency.</p> <p>The 1959 election was a milestone in Singapore’s political history, marking the first time the people voted as Singapore citizens, to vote in Singapore’s first fully elected Legislature and government under Singapore’s new state constitution. This marked the end of Singapore’s colonial era and the beginning of the People’s Action Party’s political leadership of Singapore.</p> <p>This large original poster is a visual capture of this vital historical moment.</p>

Annex B – Guided tours

Programme title	Details
“Laws of Our Land: Foundations of a New Nation” Curator’s Tour	On the third Friday of every month at 5.30pm – 6.30pm

The “Laws of Our Land: Foundations of a New Nation” exhibition will also be included in National Gallery Singapore’s docent-led building history tours.