

**Longing and Belonging: Railway heritage in Japan and Southeast Asia  
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*Locals waiting for the train at a railway crossing in Yogyakarta*

**Mahen Bala** is a documentary photographer, writer, and visual artist. His primary interest is in investigating the human experience, and relationship between people, place, and identity. In 2018, he published *Postcards from the South* (SIRD, 2018), a comprehensive archive of memory and history of the Malaysian railways.

***Longing and Belonging: Railway heritage in Japan and Southeast Asia***

Mahen Bala is currently travelling across Java in Indonesia, and Japan to study the relationship between people and the railways. This project attempts to capture a contemporary snapshot of the railways in Japan and Southeast Asia; looking at how the railway landscape has changed since they were established more than a century ago, and how people interact with this public-private space that is the railway line. He hopes this project will contribute to a wider, more inclusive narrative of connected histories in Asia and Southeast Asia.

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### **Research objectives:**

- to examine how railway heritage is researched, curated and presented in museums.
- to investigate personal and communal relationships with the railway.
- to examine the various criteria used in determining heritage value; connectivity, economic, social, historical, geographical values etc.

### **Research methodology**

- Visits to railway museums to collect information about the museum itself: methods of research and display, visitor count, future plans, etc.
- Visits to places of interest to observe how people engage and identify with railway heritage. These places include: railway stations, abandoned railway heritage, tourist train rides, etc.
- Conduct casual conversations with locals allow us to understand how people feel about the railways and its history.

### **Interview guide**

The intention of interviews is to understand how people (regardless of background and position) **feel** about the railways. The list of questions below is a simple guide. Interviews are designed to be informal and casual, and interviewees are reminded that there is no right or wrong answer. Their opinion and feeling is important for the research. Interviews should be recorded when possible, and then transcribed so it can be included as part of the research material.

#### Locals:

- Do you always travel on trains?
- Where do you travel to/from?
- Is the ticket expensive?
- What do you like about being on trains?
- How has your experience with the railways changed over the years/decades?
- Is better or worse now?
- Any memorable experience on trains?
- How long do you think the service has been running?
- Do you know who built the railways?
- Do you think preserving railway heritage is important? Why?

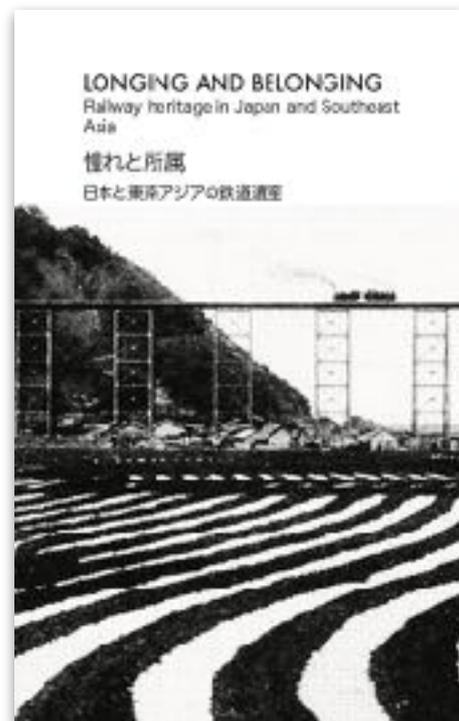
#### Museums:

- When did the museum begin operations?
- What is the motivation behind setting up a railway museum?
- How is the information and exhibit within the museum presented?
- Why is railway museum important to the people?
- Who are the people who visit the museum? Locals? Tourists? Researchers?
- Are the number of visitors increasing or declining?
- How do people feel/react when they visit the museum?
- Any feedback or suggestions from visitors?

- Some railway museums are in locations where there are no longer any functioning railway lines. Why is that so?
- What are the main challenges in operating and sustaining a railway museum?

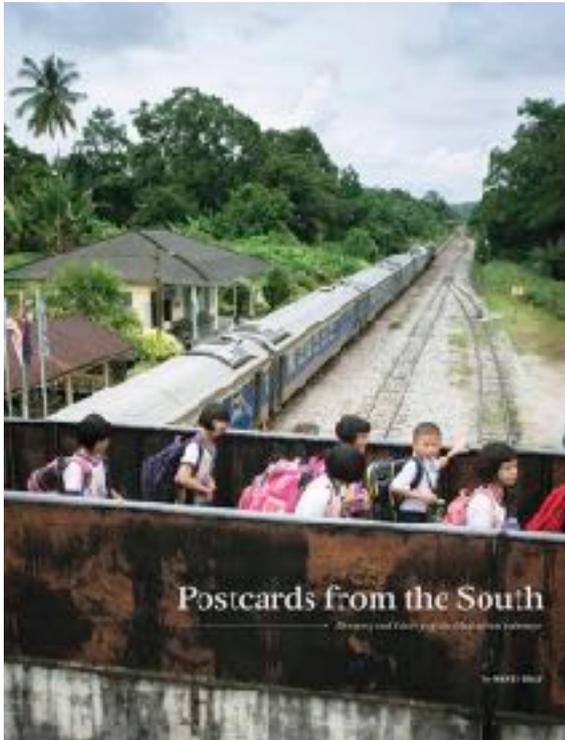
Heritage lines:

- When did the service begin operations?
- What is the motivation behind running a heritage/tourist line?
- What do visitors expect when they visit?
- Who are your main visitors? Locals? Tourists?
- How do you ensure sustainability in running such services?
- Any future plans for development?



Document continues below

***Postcards from the South* (SIRD, 2018)**



**About the book**

The first railway line in Malaya was built in 1869 by the ambitious Maharaja Abu Bakar of Johor. Two decades later, the British built an extensive network to facilitate the transport of tin, and later rubber, to the ports. This network remains in use today as a passenger line, stitching together three corners of the peninsula.

For more than a century, the railways have remained a mainstay in the lives of all Malaysians, a romantic symbol of travel to exotic destinations, and of power, industry and modernisation.

*Postcards from the South* retraces the historic Southern Line, giving voice to the railway, the people and the places they call home. A parallel narrative explores new perspectives on a century and a half of railway history and its role in nation-building, using previously unpublished photographs, documents and maps.

**Review**

“The writing of the history of any complex nation must necessarily attempt to capture the complexity of that nation itself, and this has always been a challenge for historians and political scientists alike. In so many ways that challenge has been met in this truly extraordinary work, which recounts the personal experiences and life-histories of Malaysians from all walks of life. Bound together by the theme of mobility and movement, this is not merely a history of Malaysia’s railways, but is a story of Malaysia and Malaysians; connected by their bond to the land that they love and the hopes and apprehensions they harbor in their hearts. In so many ways, it has identified the conundrum of what Malaysia is, and what being Malaysian means; and marks a major step forward in the writing of Malaysian history from the bottom-up.”

**Assoc. Professor Farish A. Noor**, RSIS and the School of History, NTU