# There once was a dam in KL

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**BY YIP YOKE TENG**



The site of Pudu Sentral used to be the Pudu Dam. — Photo from 'The Disappearing Kuala Lumpur' by Teo Chee Keong.

## OUR STREET HERITAGE

JALAN Pudu, despite having a history dating back to the 1880s, is often regarded as the backyard of Petaling Street and has lived in its shadows for decades.

Whenever it does come under the spotlight, it is usually for negative reasons such as dirty markets, chaotic traffic and prostitution.

Nevertheless, this "supporting character" has won the affection of two researchers, architect Teo Chee Keong and artist Yeoh Lian Heng, after they started delving into its past and appreciating its present.

One of the most interesting finds was a photo showing a lake in Pudu where anglers flocked. Only much later, the baffled researchers learnt that it was the Pudu Dam, located where the Pudu Bus Stand is now.

"The photo could have been taken in the 1910s. An old map showed the Pudu Dam and its source was Bukit Bintang near Jalan Alor. Imagine, there was a stream starting from the higher ground of Bukit Bintang, forming a lake here, before flowing westward towards the Central Market area and merging into the Klang River," Teo wrote in his book, *The Disappearing Kuala Lumpur.*



The old Puduraya is now called the Pudu Sentral bus terminal after a major upgrade.

"Along this stream, the British government built a railway to Cheras and Ampang, which was later replaced with Jalan Tun Tan Cheng Lok and Jalan Pudu," he added.

Some old-timers also recall their grandparents calling it the "Lotus Lake", and joked that the abandoned and waterlogged Plaza Rakyat next to Pudu Bus Station actually did fit the bill.

In his book, Teo detailed the history of Pudu that connects Petaling Street to Cheras.

According to an 1889 map, there was a Pudu Village on the current site of the Pudu prison, with two streets named Rathborne Street and Hill Street to refer to two British brick factories invited into Malaya by Frank Swettenham to expedite the development of Kuala Lumpur.

In 1891, the factories were moved to Brickfields and the prison was then built, becoming the landmark of Pudu until today, even thought it is set for redevelopment.

"A short distance from the prison, one would come to a muddy valley with very few inhabitants and that was why the Chinese called Pudu the 'Half Jungle'," wrote Teo in the book.

By 1900, as Petaling Street became overcrowded, the British government moved the residents to Pudu on the south and Batu Road on the north, and shops and houses were built rapidly to accommodate the need.

Tung Shin Hospital, previously known as Pooi Shin Thong, was founded in 1881 by Kapitan Cina Yap Kwan Seng. A new single story ward was built in 1917.

Jalan Pudu was then upgraded to an arterial road, a new railway was constructed to connect the sites of Pudu Bus Station, Pudu Jail and Jalan Pudu all the way to Cheras.

Pudu gradually expanded with the earliest shops built along the main road, near the Pudu market. It started to thrive and became popular, but mainly to complement the busy Petaling Street area.

People flocked to Pudu for the market, which was originally located in Jalan Pasar (the Electronics Street), hence the name.

In the 1950s, as the city was recovering from World War II, the agricultural land of Pudu was converted for commercial development and a cluster of four- to five-storey buildings emerged behind the old shophouses.

Most residents and traders moved into Pudu around this time. Printers started to gather here, too, and the industry has characterised Pudu until today.

Teo pointed out that old buildings in Pudu were built or rebuilt in different eras, showing distinct architectural features.

The oldest ones were small and simple as bricks were expensive. Others mimicked European styles with auspicious Chinese emblems thrown in; hints of Art Deco could also be spotted.

The popular Pudu market, where food and clothes are sold. — Photos by IZZRAFIQA LIAS

Yeoh, on the other hand, was obsessed with Pudu for a good six months in 2010, during which he led a community art project involving more than 200 people in a series of activities to rediscover and reintroduce Pudu.

They collected oral history of Pudu from more than 60 locals, handmade six coffee table books about the old trades there, held an exhibition, art installations and guided tours among others. This sparked an interest in Pudu, not only among youth but also the jaded locals.

"Contrary to the negative connotations of Pudu, I learnt that it was a place full of life. This small area alone has four cinemas and four schools. Some of the shops have three different businesses running in one lot. Folks here work hard for a living, but strong neighbourliness sweetens the hard life, this has been the way of Pudu for decades," he said.

"There was a poets' society while a number of established writers were also born and bred here," he added.

Yeoh felt they had not acted quickly enough to capture the richness of Pudu, which is no longer protected under a height limit ruling because of its proximity to the old airport in Sungai Besi.

"I met a man who painted those huge movie posters, he had kept his work carefully for years but could not save them when the squatter area he lived in was wiped out in 2007. I feel his pain.

"The demography is changing; the school enrolment has also reduced by half. All these show one thing — we need to do more to document this area,'' he added.

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