



## The Chimeric Trace: The *Makara* and Other Connections to Come

Tan Zi Hao

To cite this article: Tan Zi Hao (2022) The Chimeric Trace: The *Makara* and Other Connections to Come, *Art in Translation*, 14:3, 338-370, DOI: [10.1080/17561310.2022.2114674](https://doi.org/10.1080/17561310.2022.2114674)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17561310.2022.2114674>



Published online: 20 Sep 2022.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 916



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



# The Chimeric Trace: The *Makara* and Other Connections to Come

**Tan Zi Hao**   
**Multimedia University**

## **Abstract**

The *makara* is a chimeric creature composed of parts from an elephant, a crocodile, a fish, and others. As an iconography derived from early Indian traditions, the *makara* has traversed the Indian Ocean, making its mark principally on Hindu-Buddhist monuments and ceremonial paraphernalia in South and Southeast Asia. Looking at select objects spanning centuries, a *longue durée* approach to the *makara* is conceived to attend to the migration of an iconography that has been translated into different registers. Unraveling the latent affinities among the manifold forms of the *makara*, this essay foregrounds the transregional trace

of a chimera customarily sidelined in historical analyses. A loose chronology directs the course of the essay, proceeding from ancient relics to early modern weaponry, and culminating with the half-lion and half-fish Merlion, the national icon of Singapore. By navigating the vicissitudes of the chimeric trace of the *makara*, this essay demonstrates how trans-cultural encounters occur in ways that eschew pre-established assumptions of culture.

**KEYWORDS:** chimera, *makara*, Merlion, iconography, trace, *longue durée*, cultural history, South Asia, Southeast Asia

### **A *Longue Durée* Approach to the *Makara***

With an upturned elephant trunk, a ferocious jaw agape, and a crocodilian body that terminates with stylized foliation, the *makara* is a mythical chimeric creature stemming from early Hindu-Buddhist traditions. Its diversiform appearance has been variously approximated as a “sea monster,” a “crocodile” or “dolphin,” a “sea-elephant” or “water-elephant,” even compared to a “rhinoceros” or “tapir.”<sup>1</sup> Equipped with powerful appendages of animals from land and water, the *makara* is able to roam multiple realms, making it a fitting conveyor or “*vāhana*” that carries Hindu divinities. That the epic *Mahabharata* relates the enormity of the *makara* as “submarine reefs,” and likens warriors evading danger to “fish from the jaws of a *makara*,” indicates the creature’s colossal and preternatural existence.<sup>2</sup> In the *Pañcatantra* collection of animal fables, a well-known tale involving a monkey and a *makara* suggests that the latter behaves like a crocodile. The tale is also found in the Pāli Buddhist *jātaka*, but the character is called “*suṅsumāra*” or “*kumbhīla*.” The former in particular, when read in its Sanskrit equivalent “*śiṣumāra*,” denotes “baby-killer,” a rendition redolent of the notorious crocodile-infested rivers in India.<sup>3</sup>

As a religious iconography, the visual and material legacy of the *makara* looms large over Hindu-Buddhist edifices throughout Asia, including but not limited to South and Southeast Asia, both of which are the primary focus of this essay.<sup>4</sup> But the allotment of *makaras* to distinct religions and regions is far from the complete picture. By examining the multiple manifestations of *makaras* over the *longue durée*, across a span of centuries and a wide geographic range, this essay attempts to demonstrate how an iconography is never affixed to a singular civilizational narrative. “The idea of civilization,” David Ludden reminds, “induces a reading back of ‘present-national sentiments’ into a timeless past; it thereby prevents history from working against cultural hegemonies.”<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the *makara* is impregnated with symbolic meanings that are constantly evolving and are dependent on the zones of contact. Circulation of the iconography is guaranteed by the mobilities of

merchants, travelers, and religious entrepreneurs, crossing the Indian Ocean and into the Straits of Melaka, the Java Sea, and the South China Sea, exchanging not only material goods but also ideas. Transcultural encounters as such propel the *makara* into an active realm of translation and localization, where artisans and other cultural agents endow the iconography with ever-new meanings, creating what Ronit Ricci—following Alton Becker—identifies as “new prior texts.”<sup>6</sup>

In underscoring the transcultural universe within which the *makara* moves, it is useful to recall Sheldon Pollock’s cautionary remark: “there exist no cultural agents who are not always-already transcultured.”<sup>7</sup> In a similar vein, there exists neither text nor imagery that is not always-already prior, and yet continually rehashed and reshaped. The *Makara*, from the outset, is never a stable object of scrutiny. Compounding the iconography is the chimeric and imaginative nature of the *makara* itself, which renders its very form “unstable and in perpetual becoming,” as the art historian Odette Viennot well recognizes.<sup>8</sup> If there is any semblance of unity among the manifold forms of the *makara*, it exists only as a trace that is ambiguous, incongruous, pliable. As an ever-new prior text, every manifestation of the *makara* is a reinvention: something is added, something else effaced. “Effacement,” proclaims Jacques Derrida, “belongs to the very structure of the trace.”<sup>9</sup> Privileging Derrida’s notion of the trace in this study of iconography does not imply a flattening of historical circumstances and cultural specificities. Insofar as this essay regards the chimeric trace of the *makara* as an established iconographic form, it also seeks to delve into the ways in which the *makara* has succumbed to morphological transformation and effacement throughout the long-term processes of visual translation.

To grapple with the kind of crossings and connections to come, the *longue durée* perspective is adopted in this essay to attend to pre-modern and early modern historical connections among such vast regions as the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia. From early Buddhist sanctuaries in India, to seventeenth-and-eighteenth-century Persianate empires, to the Kathmandu Valley and the Malay Archipelago among others, this essay follows a capricious itinerary that may at first catch readers off guard. Yet, the *makara* iconography holds strong symbolic resonance across these various locations, wherein it occupies a concrete material presence, appearing as architectural fragments, water spouts, ceremonial paraphernalia, powder flasks, and weaponry. It is from this wide range of artifacts that the chimeric trace can be effectively gauged. If the iconography of the *makara* is inherently unstable, how has it persisted and transformed in these select objects? What traces remain of the *makara*? Following a loose chronology, this essay begins by charting the manifold forms of the *makara*, in addition to identifying the undercurrents of a trace that put the *makara* in a state of liminality. As a boundary-crossing creature, the *makara* is also a bridging device, linking multiple universes. The next section details how this ability is essentially

tied to the *makara*'s ambivalence as a symbol bordering life and death. Commonly positioned at the edges not unlike gargoyles, *makaras* often spew out vegetation and other life forms, symbolic of the fecundity of the lotus rhizome in Indian iconography. But the *makara* is as productive as it is destructive, because the unfolding of life from its opening jaws implies a simultaneous act of devouring. Moving along rhizomatic routes, the final section posits a more radical understanding of the trace by including the Merlion—the putative national icon of modern Singapore—in the analysis. The Merlion, at first glimpse, may appear incompatible and completely alien to the process of transculturation that has engulfed the *makara*. Typically examined as a symbol of antiquity, the *makara* appears by default to be of little relevance to contemporary culture. But there are conjectures that point to an intriguing nexus of influence suggestive of particular affinities between the *makara* and the Merlion. This immediately puts into question the narrow constitution of the Merlion as a national icon that essentializes local culture at the expense of history. By deploying a broad perspective across time and space and extending the scope of comparison to include the Merlion, the chimeric trace of the *makara* reveals itself as a dynamic site for rethinking the reified notions of culture.

### Manifold Ways of Being Amphibious

One of the earliest manifestations of the *makara* can be seen in the third-century BCE Lomas Rishi Cave of Bihar.<sup>10</sup> A pair of *makaras* sits at the lower edges of its archivolt, in front of which a row of elephants assembles facing the arch. Equipped with a short but thick snout, curling slightly upward, and a tail with a dorsal crest of spines, the *makara*'s likeness to a crocodile is striking and echoes the crocodile imagery of the Indus period.<sup>11</sup> Later prototypes of the *makara* are found ornamenting the rotundas, lintels, or pillars of Buddhist sites at Sanchi, Sarnath, Bharhut, Amaravati, and Bodh Gaya, built between 300 BCE and 600 CE. In these reliefs, the *makara* varies from an elephant (Figure 1) to an oddly unguulate crocodile (Figure 2), ending in caudal fins or scaly rear body (Figure 3). Scrutinizing the stylistic evolution of the *makara* as it was transposed from Bihar to Bharhut, archaeologist J. Ph. Vogel attributes it to the structural constraint prescribed by the architecture. The rear body of the creature was truncated to conform to the design of rounded corners, and hence, it is “by the force of circumstances,” Vogel continues, that a crocodilian *makara* “finds itself half-metamorphosed into a fish.”<sup>12</sup>

Scales or fins, elephantine or crocodilian semblances, the *makara*'s symbolic affiliation with water is beyond doubt, for they are indices of its ability to navigate aquatic realms. In the Buddhist *jātaka* tales dating from the fifth century BCE, the perils of the sea are evoked by the looming presence of *makaras*.<sup>13</sup> Hindu divinities, tied to the element of water and symbolic of fertility and abundance, were later portrayed riding

**Figure 1**

Architectural fragment with elephantine *makara*, first century BCE, sandstone, Sarnath, Uttar Pradesh, photo by John C. Huntington. Courtesy of the John C. and Susan L. Huntington Archive of Buddhist and Asian Art.

**Figure 2**

Medallion with *makara*, 100–80 BCE, sandstone, Bharhut, Madhya Pradesh, photo by John C. Huntington. Courtesy of the John C. and Susan L. Huntington Archive of Buddhist and Asian Art.



atop *makaras* as their vehicle or “*vāhana*.”<sup>14</sup> As a *vāhana*, the *makara* is accorded significant status. Neither a complete animal nor a deity, it is otherworldly but slightly less than divine, occupying a “liminal space”

**Figure 3**

Rail coping fragment with *makara*, second century, limestone, Amaravati, Andhra Pradesh. © The Trustees of the British Museum. All rights reserved.



in the hierarchy of being.<sup>15</sup> Usually zoomorphic, the *vāhana* operates exactly like a “porter,” a “divine go-between,” as a result of which the *makara* is by nature embroiled in the duality of life and death, since it serves as a vehicle that enables boundary-crossing movements, linking earthly and spiritual realms.<sup>16</sup>

Versatile as it is, the *makara* is frequently presupposed as an iconography belonging to early Indian traditions. But this geographical and cultural fidelity begins to falter as one turns to ancient Greece. A lineage of the *makara* is connected to the zodiac of Capricorn, whose chimeric appearance flourished during Hellenistic times but whose origin can be traced, further back in time, to neo-Sumerian Mesopotamia around the late third millennium BCE, where the imagery of goat-fish was already commonplace.<sup>17</sup> In astrology, the *makara* is the Hindu equivalent of the zodiac Capricorn.<sup>18</sup> Both creatures have the upper torso of a land animal whose hind legs are substituted by a forked caudal fin; both share an inherent affinity of being amphibious, since they are constituted, unequivocally, by parts culled from terrestrial and aquatic animals. During the reign of Augustus from 27 BCE to 14 CE, the Mesopotamian goat-fish image gained renewed traction and was revived as Capricorn—the emperor’s birth sign.<sup>19</sup> The use of Capricorn was ideologically charged with oblique reference to Augustus’s dominance over land and sea.<sup>20</sup> If the *makara* is the divine conveyor subjecting Hindu deities to various crossings, Capricorn is the purveyor of Augustus’s power, exemplifying the amphibious reach of his empire. Like the *makara*, the Capricorn is likewise imbued with symbolism of prosperity and abundance, which is alluded to by its horn, a mnemonic

**Figure 4**

Roman imperial coin with head of Augustus (obverse) and Capricorn (reverse), 17–16 BCE, silver, Colonia Patricia. Classical Numismatic Group, LLC. ([www.cngcoins.com](http://www.cngcoins.com)).



for the cornucopia, the Horn of Plenty. At a period where prosperity was restored through Augustus's military prowess, Capricorn heralded the positive rhetoric of a "Golden Age of fertility and abundance."<sup>21</sup> The Augustan coinage, struck from 27 BCE onward, bearing the cornucopia and Capricorn steering the globe with a rudder, is indicative of this ambition (Figure 4). "Where the cornucopia so often is linked with Capricorn and other symbols of universal domination," Darcy Krasne writes, "the horn is unflinchingly associated with cosmic power."<sup>22</sup>

From the *makara* to Capricorn and back, the constitutive aquatic and terrestrial animals may vary in combination, but still they reverberate within the same imaginative trace of an amphibious chimera. They mobilize divinities and sovereigns in their conquest of geographic and cosmic territories. Boundary-crossing *makaras* are not only propitious for projecting the extent of power. Being able to stride two worlds, *makaras* are potent guardians of the threshold. Strategically positioned at gateways called *torana* or around the perimeter of temple architecture in South and Southeast Asia, they demarcate the boundary of inside and outside, of the sacred and profane.<sup>23</sup> A staple in Hindu-Buddhist architecture, the *torana* is an intricately ornamented arch populated by legendary creatures including the *makara*. At the apex of this arciform edifice is the imposing *kīrttimukha* or *kāla*—meaning the "face of glory" or "time" respectively—a ferocious head-only creature that invokes annihilation. From the head, scrolls and whorls cascade sideways to conjure a frame that terminates in a pair of *makaras*. One Javanese *torana* of consummate grandeur belongs to the Buddhist monument Borobudur, built in the eighth century by the Śāilendra dynasty (Figure 5). Crowning the arch is a grimacing *kāla*, presented with bulging eyes and fangs in sharp relief. Festoons of foliage and flowers flow from its mouth and fringe the circumference of the *torana* frame. The base of the arch curls away from the center and joins the head of *makaras*, secured directly at ground level in consonance with their chthonic associations. Buddhist initiates who once crossed the *kāla-makara torana* might have perceived it as a symbolic entry into the path of

**Figure 5**

*Kāla-makara toraṇa*, eighth century, andesite, Borobudur, Central Java, photo by Ohannes Kurkdjian (c. 1895–1915). Rijksmuseum/Gift of J.C.P. Bierens de Haan.



enlightenment, not only because of its sacrosanct location at the upper galleries of Borobudur, but also due to the signification of the *kāla* and *makara* as *amṛta*, the elixir of immortality.<sup>24</sup>

In Java, the *makara* pair is usually positioned addorsed, in contradistinction to the Indian *torāṇa* with confronting *makaras*.<sup>25</sup> Inward-facing and confronting *makaras* are less common in the Southeast Asian region because the *torāṇa* imagery was not transmitted squarely from Indian architecture, but probably reached Javanese shores via images of Hindu deities or manuscript paintings that illustrate cusped halos and mounts flanked by outward-facing *makaras*.<sup>26</sup> *Makaras* throughout Southeast Asia are also portrayed limbless or without hind legs, unlike the four-legged pachydermic *makaras* in India. The Southeast Asian variant is consistently truncated and is more attuned to the Sinhalese *makaras*

carved on the wingstones of Buddhist shrines in Anurādhapura. Direct connection between Javanese and Sinhalese kingdoms was recorded in an inscription dated 792 CE by the aforementioned Śailendra dynasty, the builder of Borobudur.<sup>27</sup> Around the ninth and tenth centuries, Sinhalese shrines often displayed balustrades with *makaras* regurgitating scrolls that terminate in volutes.<sup>28</sup> The scrolls, symbolic of the stream of divine waters, canopy what appears to be an idyllic scene of Kailāsa, the heavenly abode of gods.<sup>29</sup> Once again, this signification of transcendence can be ascribed to the amphibious nature of the *makara* as a *vāhana*, as a keeper of threshold, enabling the crossing of boundaries.

Besides embellishing temple complexes, the iconography of the *makara* thrives on smaller-scale ceremonial paraphernalia and bodily accouterments. *Makara* earrings, armlets, and even a few gold plaques depicting *makaras* at the helm of Varuṇa—dated from the fourth to sixth centuries—were found in the ancient cities of Oc-èo and Pyu of today's Vietnam and Myanmar. That the artifacts bear strong Indian influence, particularly of western Deccan and southern India, is suggestive of early maritime exchange between South and Southeast Asia.<sup>30</sup> Apart from concerns for beautification and status-marking, putting on accessories likely induces prosperity and offers protection. Among the supreme divinities in Hinduism, *makara* earrings, otherwise known as *makara-kunḍala*, adorn the earlobes of Vishnu and Śiva, who are the respective preserver and destroyer of the universe. Tied to this affiliation is the fundamental conception of life cycle, within which boundary-crossing *makaras* play an ambivalent role bridging life and death.

Thus far, the *makara* has been predominantly a Hindu-Buddhist affair, but as a time-honored motif, its significance stretches beyond the ambit of any single religion as one understands it today. A Shi'a processional battle standard, dated between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, presents a disk with a pierced inscription of "Allah, Muhammad, 'Ali," which is also engraved separately on the surrounding frame. Flanking the inscription is a pair of serpentine *makaras* with crested heads and interlocking tails (Figure 6). Also called *'alam*, the standard was widespread in the Shi'i states of the Deccan and Safavid Iran.<sup>31</sup> Such standards are still being paraded during Muharram processions in Iran and in Hyderabad, India, serving as a symbolic proxy for Imam Husain, invoking his martyrdom at the Battle of Karbala. The presence of *makara* statuettes on the standard is unsurprising, considering the function of *'alam* as "a kind of transtemporal threshold or passageway," which engenders the commemoration of a martyred hero of a distant past.<sup>32</sup>

The variegated and omnipresent iconography of the *makara* attests to the *longue durée* of a chimeric trace, within which no single *makara* mirrors another. Each manifestation secures a style befitting specific locales, and yet, altogether they suggest symbolic parallels, which are evidence of transcultural encounters that are the primary focus of this essay. Iconographically and ontologically, the *makara* emerges as a node

**Figure 6**

Processional standard ('*alam*), late seventeenth–early eighteenth century, brass, probably in Hyderabad, Deccan. The Metropolitan Museum of Art/Friends of Islamic Art Gifts.



of connections: as an iconography, the *makara* traverses plateaus and eras, embarking upon transregional and transoceanic routes, undermining rigid categories of culture and religion; and yet, as a chimera in and of itself, connections inhere within its figuration. An amphibious creature of connecting terrestrial and aquatic animals, the *makara* steers divinities as a *vāhana*, inasmuch as it delineates the threshold on a *torana* or an '*alam*, essentially providing a means through which to transcend boundaries and to move about multiple realms.

### **Rhizomatic Life: Extrusion in Succession**

More than being a node of connections, the *makara* is an extension of sorts whose open muzzle is a source of fecundity. Foliated scrolls and

figurines, from lotuses to demigods or warriors, invariably extrude from the mouth of the *makara*. In Southeast Asia, besides anthropomorphic figurines, there are lions, birds, *nagas*, and so on. As has been suggested above, fertility is symptomatic of the *makara*'s life-giving and life-sustaining potency. The art historian Ananda K. Coomaraswamy is particularly illuminating when he compares a *makara* with the nodes of a submerged lotus rhizome in early Indian iconography. The imagery of the "rhizome, with nodes at regular intervals," he writes, "throws off flowers and leaves," providing a visual basis for the "vegetative meander... springing from a *makara*'s jaws."<sup>33</sup> Resemblance between the two, however, is not merely morphological. Following Coomaraswamy, the archaeologist F.D.K. Bosch aptly reminds us that both "share an important biological function, *viz.* the power to bring forth vegetation."<sup>34</sup> It is in this almost organic aptitude for bestowing life that the *makara* is rhizomatic, in a literal as well as in a Deleuzo-Guattarian sense, since it extrudes life forms that thrive and metamorphose beyond itself.<sup>35</sup>

At the Patan Durbar Square in the Kathmandu Valley, a *makara* water spout or *hitimanga* in Newari, dated 570 CE by an inscription of the Lichchhavi dynasty, accentuates the creature's fecundity with successive extrusions of life (Figure 7).<sup>36</sup> Cantilevered out over the pool of water below it, the *makara* presents an imposing appearance, with glaring eyes and thick lush brows. From its jaws, a mustached water buffalo is extruded, which in turn, extrudes a fish that issues forth water. Its elephantine trunk curls upward and seamlessly morphs into a *garuda*, which is crowned with three intertwining *naga* serpents. Typical of other water spouts in the area, another aquatic animal, in this case a fish, is firmly affixed on the back of the *makara*. Here, a single water spout is constituted by a total of five animal kinds. By the late Malla period around the seventeenth century, a different variant of the *hitimanga* proliferated. A notable example can be found in Bhaktapur (Figure 8). Rendered in gilt repoussé brass dated to 1688, the *makara* is fleshier and less angular. It ejects only a ram, but the entire cantilever is crowded by a vivid panoply of largely aquatic animals, such as a duck, frog, tortoise, snake, crocodile, and others.<sup>37</sup> Complicitous with this radical transformation is the notion of fertility implicit in the *makara*, operating like a rhizome from which life multiplies.

The explosive parturition of life that came to envelop the Bhaktapur *hitimanga* betokens a probable homage to the imagery of composite beasts prevalent in Mughal art.<sup>38</sup> Mughal composites are constituted by contorted animal or human figures, fitting snugly against one another to form the silhouette of an elephant, camel, or horse.<sup>39</sup> More can be gleaned from an exquisite Mughal ivory powder flask of the seventeenth century (Figure 9). The flask depicts scenes of animals devouring one another, but taken together, the entire flask is itself a fish-shaped composite.<sup>40</sup> Among the turbulent crowd are two crocodilian *makaras*, respectively carved on either end of the flask. On one end, a bird takes

**Figure 7**

*Makara* water spout, 570, stone, Patan Durbar Square, Lalitpur, photo by Thomas Schrom. Digital Archive of Nepalese Arts and Monuments.

**Figure 8**

*Makara* water spout, 1688, brass, Bhaktapur Durbar Square, Bhaktapur. Wikimedia Commons.



flight from a *makara*'s mouth; on the other, an antelope leaps to escape from a feline predator, yet, it also appears to have escaped from a *makara*, much larger in scale and with an upturned snout, positioned exactly below the antelope's bending forelegs. Less dramatic but no less enigmatic depictions of the *makara* are found in north-west Indian powder flasks around the eighteenth century. In an example reminiscent of the *hitimanga* in Nepal, a ram leaps out from a *makara*, whose trunk transforms into another animal (Figure 10). At the Museum of Islamic Art, Doha, there is a gilded wooden powder flask featuring a *makara*

**Figure 9**

Powder primer flask with animal figures, late seventeenth century, ivory with gilt metal spanner, Mughal Empire. Los Angeles County of Art/ Gift of Corinne and Don Whitaker.



extruding a fish while its spotted body artfully blends into the spotted train of a peacock. The peacock's body in turn curls supplely forward to complete the circumference of the nautilus-shaped flask.<sup>41</sup>

The *makara* heads that occupy the various Mughal powder flasks bear considerable resonance with some of the zoomorphic cannons found in Indian forts. At the Mehrangarh Fort of Rajasthan, an eighteenth-century cannon assumes the form of a *makara* with a crested head and a bulbous snout, closely resembling the *makaras* on the ivory powder flask. The Bijapur Fort hosts an earlier extant cannon, the biggest in India when it was cast in 1549. The gargantuan Malik-i-Maidan presents a leonine head with elongated canines, seizing a miniaturized elephant with its open maw.<sup>42</sup> From powder flasks to cannons, embattled creatures impart to the artifacts a talismanic quality, protecting the users from impending dangers.<sup>43</sup> Applied to shooting accouterments and destructive artillery, the iconography of the *makara*, more than anything, emanates apotropaic power. If not already apparent, there is an underlying ambivalence in this symbolic articulation of power: the preservation of life is expressed through the *makara*'s destructive force. Life is expelled from as much as it is devoured by the *makara*.

In Thailand as in India, incremental multiplication of lives originating from a *makara*'s mouth can be equally observed. Early monastic architecture, such as the storeyed Wat Ku Kut, built in Hariphunchai in the eleventh century and renovated two centuries after, showcases *makara* heads framing the niches of standing Buddhas, extruding only festoons. Since the establishment of Lan Na and Sukhothai kingdoms around the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, *makaras* almost always spew out *nagas*.<sup>44</sup> Flanking the stairways of Wat Chedi Luang in Chiang Mai, designed in Lan Na style, are *makaras* clumsily lying at the base of the pyramidal structure, and from each of their mouths spawns a formidable five-headed *naga*. The central *naga* head is the most colossal and

**Figure 10**

Priming flask with *makara* head, eighteenth century, horn and ivory, Rajasthan. The Metropolitan Museum of Art/Bequest of George C. Stone.



thereafter the others diminish sideways. All five mimic the menacing posture of a hooded cobra. The multiplication of life forms has persisted in different ways even until the recent past. At the main stairway of Wat Buppharam, for instance, one witnesses a *makara* extruding a second *makara* that extrudes a three-headed *naga* (Figure 11). Upon reaching the intermediate landing of the stairs, the succession of lives continues unabated with yet another *makara* extruding a second, a third, and a fourth *makara*, before ceasing with a five-headed *naga* (Figure 12). In this incessant extrusion of lives, the *makara*'s fecundity is dramatized twofold, threefold, fourfold. But there is an ambivalence in this rhizomatic reiteration, for on a subsidiary balustrade wall of the same temple complex is the famous Buddhist adage: "Time always devours all creatures along with itself,"<sup>45</sup> and resting atop the balustrade are brightly painted *makaras* partaking in a stream of parturition, or perhaps in manic cannibalization (Figure 13). Bear in mind that "Time" is herein read as "*kāla*," the destroyer of all things, customarily positioned at the center of the *kāla-makara toraṇa*. A Thai Buddhist scholar regards the devouring *makaras* as an illustration of the surrendering of one's ego, thus paraphrased by Carol Stratton, "the purpose of having different creatures combined with the *makara* might be to deny the sin of pride: the *naga* is not the only one able to offer protection."<sup>46</sup>

The current of life that runs through the *makara* is not always unidirectional. Whether the *makara* is extruding or devouring life very much depends on the eye of the beholder. The iconography of the *makara* is

**Figure 11**

*Naga-makara* balustrades, Wat Buppharam, Chiang Mai. Courtesy of Samak Kosem.

**Figure 12**

*Naga-makara* balustrades, Wat Buppharam, Chiang Mai. Courtesy of Samak Kosem.



steeped in ambivalence. As a liminal and amphibious creature, as a divine go-between, the *makara* wavers between parturition and destruction, it engenders and dissolves life, emblematic of the symbolic ambivalence of waters in Hinduism.<sup>47</sup> To return to the etymology of the Sanskrit word “*makara*,” the creature is quite explicitly a crocodile and as noted above shares the terrifying designation of “*sumsumāra*” in the Buddhist

**Figure 13**

Balustrade with *makara* extruding another *makara* and *mon*, Wat Buppharam, Chiang Mai. The caption says: "Time always devours all creatures along with itself." Courtesy of Malcolm Tattersall.



*jātaka*, meaning the “baby-killer.”<sup>48</sup> Moreover, the *makara*’s natural affinity with the Hindu god of desire, Kāmadeva, is attributed to the appetite of a crocodile, and its upturned snout is compared to the enlarged proboscis of a male gharial, harvested by local communities for its aphrodisiac properties.<sup>49</sup> Having life-giving and life-threatening potency, the figure of the crocodile already allegorizes the ambivalence of the life cycle, a symbolic element that is to permeate the iconography of the *makara*.

In the unremitting unfolding of the life cycle, the iconography has not survived unscathed. As the *makara* extrudes and extends without reserve its creative and destructive power, it likewise dissolves into abstract foliage. Such metamorphosis occurs in greater likelihood at the extremities of the *makara*. Its trunk, tail, and paws, as tentacular statements of potency, are more susceptible to distortion, foliation, and parturition (Figure 14).<sup>50</sup> In Southeast Asia, foliated scrollwork amounting to an aggressive encroachment of tendrils is typically chiseled on *makara* heads located at the edges of religious monuments (Figure 15).<sup>51</sup> The tendrils envelop the familiar curvature of the *makara*, whose “body has usually disappeared by transformation, and the paws have disappeared... often the *makara* has left only [a] trace,” as R. Morton Smith observes.<sup>52</sup> This is the trace of a rhizome—the distinctive extrusion, the spiraling outward movement that results in the flux of becoming—intrinsic to the genesis of the *makara*. The decorative foliation into which *makaras* disappear is commonly known in Indonesia as *pilin tegar*, which translates as “recalcitrant spiral.”<sup>53</sup> As a motif, recalcitrant spirals

**Figure 14**

*Makara* with lion in its mouth,  
800–925, bronze, Java.  
Rijksmuseum/Vereniging van  
Vrienden der Aziatische Kunst.



capture the energetic and rhizomatic elements of life, according to artists and craftsmen fertile grounds for creative indulgence.<sup>54</sup> As a connecting device, the spiraling movement brings about tendrils that engender evermore tendrils and connections, mirroring the successive extrusion of life forms springing from a *makara*. Each foliation is an issuance of life and a connection to come.

There exists another factor as to why the *makara* succumbs to the lush of vegetation. In the Malay Archipelago, abstract foliation could index the Islamic injunction against figurative representation, and as a result, “the *makara* has evolved into the leaf.”<sup>55</sup> But it could also be read contrariwise as an illustration of the deepening of spirituality central to esoteric Islam.<sup>56</sup> The *klewang* sword, familiar to the Muslim communities in Sumatra and Lombok, often presents a *makara* head on its hilt completely covered with delicate filigree (Figure 16). While its face is abstracted beyond recognition, the head as a whole remains generally intact, the trunk is still visible amidst heavy rinceaux that form the pommel. At the center of the grip are two small round protrusions resembling the eyes, retaining the zoomorphic qualities of the *makara*. Zoomorphism may lend a talismanic quality to traditional weapons in the region, which is believed to render the user invulnerable (*kebal*).<sup>57</sup> The blade of a *klewang* may in some cases be engraved with an Islamic inscription to further amplify this purpose. But aside from being an instrument of power, the appearance of a *makara* on the hilts of swords or daggers signals the intrinsic ability of weaponry: it brings one into closer proximity to matters of life and death.<sup>58</sup>

In its lush of vegetation, the *makara* has morphed into life forms beyond itself, leaving only a trace. A vegetated *makara* is a microcosm of connections, where every recalcitrant spiral marks, in miniature,

**Figure 15**

*Makara* water spout, tenth century, andesite, Java. The Metropolitan Museum of Art/Gift of Cynthia Hazen Polsky.



several other *makaras*, several folds to infinity. Spirals beget spirals; spirals efface spirals. It is in this sense that the *makara* iconography is inherently “unstable and in perpetual becoming,” to reiterate Viennot’s remark.<sup>59</sup> Bosch further recognizes that it is the *makara*’s implicit identification with the lotus rhizome that enables the motif’s transformative potential. “For in consequence of this identification,” Bosch continues, “on the one hand the *makara*-figure was subjected to strong influences on the part of the parvan [nodes of the lotus rhizome] resulting in the former assuming, wholly or partly, vegetable forms, whereas on the other hand the parvan-figure was influenced by the monster-motif producing parvan-forms with distinct *makara*-character.”<sup>60</sup> A leitmotif comes to the fore among the connections ensuing from the chimeric trace of the *makara*. What remains perspicuous is the ambivalent trace of life unfolding in a rhizomatic fashion. By and large, it is this ambivalence that guarantees the *makara*’s perduring legacy of transculturation. Through the constant extrusion and dissolution of life, the *makara* offers

**Figure 16**

*Klewang* sword with abstracted *makara* hilt, nineteenth century, pattern welded iron, buffalo horn, silver, and wood, Indonesia. Mandarin Mansion. Courtesy of Peter Dekker.



a visual foundation upon which translation and localization take place, from the Kathmandu Valley to the Malay Archipelago and others, often at odds with the presupposed fixity of culture.

### **Chimeric Affinities: Between the *Makara* and the Merlion**

The discussion thus far gives an impression that the *makara* iconography is confined to antiquity, but exemplary of the *longue durée* framework, the chimeric trace has a far wider temporal expanse, extending even to modern national imagination such as the Merlion.

In the modern city-state of Singapore, a towering statue of a half-lion and half-fish chimera called the Merlion stands facing the Marina Bay (Figure 17). The original design of the Merlion symbol is credited to Alec Fraser-Brunner, the curator of the Van Kleef Aquarium. Intended to be the logo of the Singapore Tourist Promotion Board (STPB, currently known as the Singapore Tourism Board) in 1964, the Merlion was devised to market Singapore abroad. Its resemblance to the legendary sea-lions in European heraldry is evident, so much so that the STPB had to remark parenthetically that “the Merlion [is] (not a sea-lion)” to refute its colonial imprint.<sup>61</sup> In spite of STPB’s change of logo in 1997, it has become a national mascot indelibly etched in the minds of citizens and international tourists as the “symbol of Singapore.”<sup>62</sup> Beyond the purpose of tourism, the artificiality of the symbol has spurred public debates and a spectrum of literary riposte: the Merlion is lambasted by Singaporean poets as a “grotesque” and “limbless” monstrosity of “some post-Chernobyl nightmare,” yet, it is “a face poets love to woo,” and for reasons both positive and contentious, it has retained an uncanny position in Singapore’s cultural milieu.<sup>63</sup>

**Figure 17**

Merlion statue, 1972, cement reinforced with steel frame, Merlion Park, Singapore. Author's photo.



The Merlion has crossed path with the *makara* in a peculiar manner. In a reader's letter published in *The Straits Times* in 1999, the author Wilfred Hamilton-Shimmen<sup>64</sup> claimed that "the myth of the Merlion... had been based on and adapted from an existing mythological fable. This myth, in fact, is based on the *makara*, a fabulous half-fish, half-elephant creature."<sup>65</sup> Perhaps, as the "half-fish, half-elephant" *makara* ventures into Singapore, it reinvents itself as the half-fish, half-lion Merlion. The amalgamation of a fish's tail and lion's head is not by random chance but is deliberately chosen to expound a chimeric idea integral to the imagining of Singapore as a modern nation-state. The lion head represents Singapore's epithet, the "Lion City." The epithet harks back to the sixteenth- or seventeenth-century Malay manuscript *Sejarah Melayu* or the Malay Annals, which chronicles the founding of Singapore by the Sumatran prince Sri Tri Buana. Upon seeing a lion (*singa*) on the Temasek island, Sri Tri Buana decided to rename the place as "Singapura."<sup>66</sup> The fish body that completes the Merlion, on the other hand, points to the former name "Temasek," meaning a lake or sea in Javanese. "In view of the change of name from Temasek to Singapura in ancient times," a STPB spokesperson reportedly stated in 1964, "the emblem of a lion with a fish tail emerging from the sea would not be an inappropriate emblem with which to perpetuate the Malay legend concerning the foundation of Singapore."<sup>67</sup> With the lion and fish compressed into one, the Merlion unreservedly conflates the old and new appellations of the island, re-appropriating the Malay foundational myth for a national purpose.<sup>68</sup> But this compression invariably comes with a developmentalist tinge, for the Merlion is also an oblique reference to the progressive outlook of Singapore that has purportedly metamorphosed from a "fishing village" to a "roaring lion city."<sup>69</sup> It is not a

stretch to assert that the Merlion mirrors Augustus's Capricorn that signifies the Roman Empire's universal domination over space, namely, over land and sea. Except, it is time rather than space that the Merlion encapsulates. The amphibious Merlion provides a template upon which multiple chronotopes or time-space configurations could be melded to form a singular whole. Miraculously coalescing into its chimeric figuration are the chronotopes of Temasek and Singapura, of a village and a city, of the bygone and the future. Taken together, they add to the image of modern Singapore, then a newly independent nation, a thin veneer of historical legitimacy.

The Merlion is touched by the *makara* in more concrete terms that attest to the various crossings and connections laid out so far. This comes through clearly in Hamilton-Shimmen's remark on the Merlion. To return to his letter: "If my memory does not fail me, it was a 'Mr Kwok' (originally from Malacca)<sup>70</sup> who conceptualised the myth of the Merlion ... based on the *makara* ... found in Malacca and believed to be a relic of Hinduism."<sup>71</sup> Diverging from the official account that regards Alec Fraser-Brunner as the designer of the Merlion, Hamilton-Shimmen's hunch is suggestive of an alternative genealogy, centered on transcultural routes rather than national roots. The conjecture was soon followed up in another reader's letter by Gan Yung Chyan, who deduced that Mr Kwok was "a Malaysian Chinese working in Singapore."<sup>72</sup> Cementing the relation between the two amphibious chimeras is Gan's compelling headline "Merlion and *Makara* Symbolise Protection."<sup>73</sup> He surmised that "the Merlion is a clever adaptation from the Malacca *makara*. Both mythical creatures depict a search for a social philosophy and symbolise protection."<sup>74</sup> Gan's postulation was more a matter of judgment than research, but his analogy was not entirely inapt.

Who exactly is "Mr Kwok"? In 1981, *The Straits Times* published a news article bemoaning the lack of recognition for "the man behind the Merlion."<sup>75</sup> Headlined "Merlion Design Based on Piece of Work by Sai Kheong," the article paid tribute to a polymath who had recently passed away and whose contribution to Singapore was immense but little known. The polymath's full name is Kwan Sai Kheong. As a bureaucrat, Kwan held multiple portfolios from Permanent Secretary and Director of Education in the Ministry of Education to Ambassador to the Philippines. Kwan also dabbled in the arts, he majored in painting at the Royal College of Art in London and had produced political cartoons for the local press.<sup>76</sup> Upon his passing, his daughter Margaret Kwan lamented: "one of my father's pieces of art was used as the design for the Merlion ... There has been no publicity about this because my father didn't want it."<sup>77</sup> One may hazard a guess that Hamilton-Shimmen's "Mr Kwok" is in fact "Mr Kwan," for it was Kwan Sai Kheong who finalized the design of the Merlion statue with sculptor Lim Nang Seng between 1971 and 1972.<sup>78</sup> An oral interview with a sixty-eight-year-old

Lim in 1984 reveals further clues: “The Merlion originates from a collage of cut-out pictures, it is not designed. Lately a gentleman has passed away, he was a painter, in the Ministry of Education, he was also an artist, but I can’t remember his name, he designed the logo for the Singapore Tourism Board, I have forgotten [his name].”<sup>79</sup> Not by coincidence, Kwan, like “Mr Kwok,” was born in Melaka.

There exists a *makara* stone in Melaka (Figure 18), as already noted by Hamilton-Shimmen in his letter. “In 1959,” he recalled, “it was still in full view at the Malacca River bank, near the ‘Red Stadthuys’.” He further elaborated that “the Malacca *makara* is considered to be allied more closely to the Sumatran type.”<sup>80</sup> Hamilton-Shimmen was no historian but was well informed as an author known for his “habitual excursions into history.”<sup>81</sup> The provenance of this relic remains enigmatic and has fallen under occasional spotlight among archaeologists. Dated to the eleventh century, the *makara* fragment is reminiscent of the Javanese and Sumatran *makaras* examined above. It belongs to a balustrade of a ruin now lost, and since nothing else accompanies its discovery, it is regarded as a “solitary clue to a vanished chapter of Malacca history.”<sup>82</sup> Given its isolated discovery, archaeologist John N. Miksic is suspicious of the putative origin, suggesting that the *makara* in Melaka was “probably made elsewhere,”<sup>83</sup> most likely in Java or Sumatra where similar *makara* fragments are found. Not without irony, he further conjectures that the *makara* “may have been brought from Singapore” only to be “brought to Melaka” at a later date.<sup>84</sup> Following the trajectory of these various crossings, the imagery of *makara* appears to have traveled from present-day Indonesia to Singapore, and to Malaysia, before returning to Singapore, to be reinvented as the Merlion. The chimeric trace of the *makara*, laid bare by Hamilton-Shimmen’s conjectures and many more to follow, unfolds like a rhizome. The Merlion monument is a result of ambiguous itineraries detached from hegemonic national narratives. Can there be a *longue durée* of the Merlion? What if the Merlion has a history that precedes the very genesis of Singapore, preceding even Sri Tri Buana’s sighting of an unusual beast? The upright posture of the Merlion statue today, originally seated at the mouth of the Singapore River, is perhaps a nod to the *makara* stone then seated on the bank of the Melaka River, bracing the wind as it gazes upon the horizon with resolute poise, inspiring a “Mr Kwok” who would live a life envisioning chimeras yet to be named.

### The Chimeric Trace

Using a selection of monuments and objects as waypoints, this essay has sought to demonstrate how the *makara* has undergone a protracted series of translation and localization. The chimeric trace is a matter of routes rather than roots.<sup>85</sup> In tracing the transcultural resonance across the various manifestations of the *makara*, certain themes have become

**Figure 18**

*Makara* stone, granite, Melaka, photo by G.P. Rouffaer. Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde.



more notable. As a *vāhana* for deities, as a guardian figure of gateways, the *makara* is an apotropaic boundary object, it demarcates and regiments the boundaries between the sacred and profane, between life and death. Its amphibious composition makes it a bridging device, connecting and extending multiple life forms in a rhizomatic fashion analogous to the lotus rhizome in Indian iconography. The rhizomatic routes of the *makara* is testimony to the pliability of the iconography. Found bedecking the entrances of Hindu-Buddhist edifices, and yet, carved in vegetated abstraction on the hilts of Islamic weaponry, the *makara* transcends rigid cultural and religious categories in unpredictable ways.

Approaching the *makara* from a *longue durée* perspective, this essay has stressed the inflection of form that have come to discern the chimeric trace of the *makara*, specifically across South and Southeast Asia, so as to scrutinize the hegemonic assumptions on the fixity of culture. Postulations of historical links, of bridging narratives, reveal certain connections to come. From the *makara* to the Merlion, the migration of ideas offers an imaginative field that defies methodological nationalism. Comparative research through the *longue durée* framework becomes imperative to permit a broader historical inspection of the protean transformation of an iconography. In viewing the migration of ideas as a trace, this essay calls for a more nuanced and polyvalent reading of iconography, for the Derridean trace occupies a presence that “dislocates, displaces, and refers beyond itself,” and yet, it is “still readable, and remains read.”<sup>86</sup> In the process of perpetual becoming, it has become improbable to pinpoint exactly where the *makara* ceases being itself and mutates instead into vegetation, into the Merlion, or into

other kindred chimeras. But the very trace of the *makara*, and its chimeric and amphibious quality, is still readable and remains read.

### Notes

1. Monier Monier-Williams, "Makara," in *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary: Etymologically and Philologically Arranged with Special Reference to Greek, Latin, Gothic, German, Anglo-Saxon, and Other Cognate Indo-European Languages* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1872): 727; Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, "An Indian Crocodile," *Bulletin of the Museum of Fine Arts* 34, no. 202 (1936): 26–8; Albert Grünwedel, *Buddhist Art in India*, ed. Jas Burgess; trans. Agnes C. Gibson (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1901), 57; Henry Cousens, "The Makara in Hindu Ornament," *Archaeological Survey of India: Annual Report (1903–4)*: 228–9.
2. Manmatha Nath Dutt, trans., *A Prose English Translation of the Mahabharata*, 18 books. (Calcutta: Elysium Press, 1895–1905), book 3, chapter 169, verse no. 4, and book 7, chapter 101, verse no. 9.
3. J. Ph. Vogel, "Errors in Sanskrit Dictionaries," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 20, no. 1/3 (1957): 562.
4. In East Asia, there are *makaras* of other kith and kin, such as the *chiwen*, *yulong*, *mojie*, and *shachihoko*. For more in-depth discussions on their relations with the *makara*, see Filippo Salviati, "The 'Fishdragon': The Makara Motif in Chinese Art and Architectural Decoration," *Environmental Design: Journal of the Islamic Environmental Design Research Centre* 1–2 (1997–9): 238–51; Hsueh-man Shen, "Indian Makara or Chinese Dragon-Fish? Textual Translation and Visual Transformation of Makara in China," *Art in Translation* 5, no. 2 (2013): 273–96.
5. David Ludden, "History Outside Civilisation and the Mobility of South Asia," *South Asia* 17, no. 1 (1994): 3.
6. "New prior texts are created in two ways, not always distinct: (1) the reformulation of old texts; and (2) the creation of new ones, often through translation." Ronit Ricci, *Islam Translated: Literature, Conversion, and the Arabic Cosmopolis of South and Southeast Asia* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 246. See also A.L. Becker, *Beyond Translation: Essays Toward a Modern Philology* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1995), 43–8.
7. Sheldon Pollock, "The Sanskrit Cosmopolis, 300–1300 CE: Transculturation, Vernacularization, and the Question of Ideology," in *Ideology and Status of Sanskrit: Contributions to the History of the Sanskrit Language*, ed. Jan E.M. Houben (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996), 246.

8. Translation mine. “Mal déterminé dès son origine, ce léviathan indien conserve à travers toute son évolution plastique un aspect instable et en perpétuel devenir.” Odette Viennot, “Typologie du makara et essai de chronologie,” *Arts Asiatiques* 1, no. 3 (1954): 189.
9. Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena: And Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 156.
10. J. Ph. Vogel, “The Relation between the Art of India and Java,” in *The Influences of Indian Art: Six Papers Written for the Society*, by Josef Strzygowski, J. Ph. Vogel, H.F.E. Visser, Victor Goloubeff, Joseph Hackin, and Andreas Nell (London: The India Society, 1925), 61.
11. Steven Darian, “The Other Face of the Makara,” *Artibus Asiae* 30, no. 1 (1976): 29; Asko Parpola, “Crocodile in the Indus Civilization and Later South Asian Traditions,” in *Linguistics, Archaeology and the Human Past*, ed. Toshiki Osada and Hitoshi Endo (Kyoto: Indus Project, Research Institute for Humanity and Nature, 2011), 1–57.
12. Translation mine. “L’animal a perdu dans cette affaire sa queue à crête et ses deux pattes de derrière, et c’est ainsi que par la force des circonstances il se trouve à moitié métamorphosé en poisson.” J. Ph. Vogel, “Le Makara dans la sculpture de l’Inde,” *Revue des Arts Asiatiques* 6, no. 3 (1930): 139, Pl. XXXIII c. The design of rounded corners gained prominence in Mathura stonework from around 100 BCE to 100 CE, where curved shapes and coiling tails embellish *makaras*, *nagas*, and other composite creatures. Figures and animals depicted on architraves of this period have a “fleshly quality,” exuding a “sense of softness and organic vitality.” Sonya Rhie Quintanilla, *History of Early Stone Sculpture at Mathura, ca. 150 BCE–100CE* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2007), 145–6.
13. In *Sonaka-Jātaka* (no. 529), the short-sightedness of those who indulge in worldly matters is compared to a crow that blindly feeds on a floating carrion amidst the river of Ganges inhabited by *makaras*. When the food is finally exhausted, the crow attempts to flee, but the stream has wafted it to the midst of the ocean where danger lurks: “For crocodiles [*kumbhīlā*] and monster fish [*makarā*], where our poor flutterer lay, came ravening all around and quick devoured their quivering prey.” English translation from Edward B. Cowell, ed., *The Jātaka, or Stories of the Buddha's Former Births, Translated from the Pāli by Various Hands*, 6 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1895–1907), vol. 5, no. 529, 131. Originally in Pāli: “Tañ ca sāmuddikā macchā kumbhīlā makarā susū pasayhakārā khādīmsu phandamānaṃ vipakkhinaṃ.” Romanized Pāli from *The Jātaka, Together with Its Commentary Being Tales of the Anterior Births of Gotama Buddha, for the*

- First Time Edited in the Original Pāli*, ed. V. Fausbøll, 6 vols. (London: Kegan Paul Trench Trübner and Co., 1877–96), vol. 5, no. 529, 255.
14. Hindu divinities most commonly paired with *makaras* include Varuṇa, Gaṅgā, and Kāmadeva. See Darian, “The Other Face of the Makara,” 29–36; Catherine Benton, *God of Desire: Tales of Kāmadeva in Sanskrit Story Literature* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2006), 142–54.
  15. Anna L. Dallapiccola, “Vāhanas,” in *Brill’s Encyclopedia of Hinduism Online*, ed. Knut A. Jacobsen, Helene Basu, Angelika Malinar, and Vasudha Narayanan (Leiden: Brill, 2018), [http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2212-5019\\_beh\\_COM\\_000348](http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2212-5019_beh_COM_000348).
  16. Joanne Punzo Waghorne, “Vahanas: Conveyers of the Gods,” in *Living Wood: Sculptural Traditions of Southern India*, ed. George Michell (Bombay: Marg Publications, 1992), 26.
  17. The goat-fish was an attribute of Ea (Enki), the God of water and wisdom, frequently depicted with streams of fish emerging from his shoulders. Jeremy Black and Anthony Green, eds., *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia: An Illustrated Dictionary* (London: The British Museum Press, 1992), 93. See also John H. Rogers, “Origins of the Ancient Constellations: I. The Mesopotamian Traditions,” *Journal of the British Astronomical Association* 108 (1998): 11, 15, 26–8.
  18. Elena Semeka-Pankratov, “The Meaning of the Term *Makara* in Light of Comparative Mythology,” *Semiotica* 49, no. 3/4 (1984): 203–4.
  19. Black and Green, *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia*, 93. Augustus’s horoscope has been a point of contention. See Tamsyn Barton, “Augustus and Capricorn: Astrological Polyvalency and Imperial Rhetoric,” *The Journal of Roman Studies* 85 (1995): 33–51.
  20. Steven J. Green, *Disclosure and Discretion in Roman Astrology: Manilius and His Augustan Contemporaries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 98.
  21. *Ibid.*, 99.
  22. Darcy Krasne, “Succeeding Succession: Cosmic and Earthly Succession in the *Fasti* and *Metamorphoses*,” in *Repeat Performances: Ovidian Repetition and the Metamorphoses*, ed. Laurel Fulkerson and Tim Stover (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2016), 136. See also Emma Gee, *Ovid, Aratus and Augustus: Astronomy in Ovid’s Fasti* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 133–42.
  23. Parul Pandya Dhar, *The Torāṇa in Indian and Southeast Asian Architecture* (New Delhi: D. K. Printworld, 2010), 1.
  24. John N. Miksic, *Borobudur: Golden Tales of the Buddha* (Singapore: Periplus Editions, 1990), 44, 51. Elsewhere, the *kāla-*

- makara toraṇa* has been identified as the “Gate of Heaven.” Lakshman Ranasinghe, “The Evolution and Significance of the Makara Torana,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Sri Lanka* 36 (1991/92): 133–4.
25. The Indian *torana* with *makaras* provides only “an inspirational basis and a broad formalistic framework” to the Javanese sculptors. It is not “a case of the former being an original and the latter a copy/translation/imitation.” Parul Pandya Dhar, “*Kāla-Makara-Toraṇas*: Javanese Expressions of a Shared Motif,” in *Sacred Landscapes in Asia: Shared Traditions, Multiple Histories*, ed. Himanshu Prabha Ray (New Delhi: Manohar, 2007), 260–1. See also F.D.K. Bosch, *The Golden Germ: An Introduction to Indian Symbolism* (s-Gravenhage: Mouton and Co., 1960), 36–9.
  26. Vogel, “Le Makara dans la sculpture de l’Inde,” 145; Dhar, “*Kāla-Makara-Toraṇas*,” 274.
  27. The Ratu Boko inscription of 792 CE recounted: “This Abhayagiri Vihāra here of the Sinhalese ascetics, trained in the sayings of the discipline of the Best of the Jinas, was established.” J.G. de Casparis, “New Evidence on Cultural Relations between Java and Ceylon in Ancient Times,” *Artibus Asiae* 24, no. 3/4 (1961): 245. For a discussion on the transcultural exchange between Javanese and Sinhalese cultures around the eighth century, see John N. Miksic, “Double Meditation Platforms at Anuradhapura and the Pendopo of Ratu Boko,” *Saraswati Esai-Esai Arkeologi, Kalpataru Majalah Arkeologi* 10 (1993–94): 23–31.
  28. Senake Bandaranayake, *Sinhalese Monastic Architecture: The Vihāras of Anurādhapura* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1974), 332–41.
  29. A.D.T.E. Perera, “Unique Carvings on a Makara Wingstone from an Ancient Shrine at Anuradhapura,” *Journal of the Sri Lanka Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 17 (1973): 29–31.
  30. Louis Malleret, *L’archéologie du Delta du Mékong*, 6 vols. (Paris: Ecole française d’Extrême-Orient, 1959–63), vol. 2, 216–7; Le Thi Lien, “Hindu Deities in Southern Vietnam: Images on Small Archaeological Artefacts,” in *Early Interactions between South and Southeast Asia: Reflections on Cross-Cultural Exchange*, ed. Pierre-Yves Manguin, A. Mani, and Geoff Wade (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2011), 423, 425–6, 428; John N. Miksic and Geok Yian Goh, *Ancient Southeast Asia* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), 197, 200.
  31. James M. Allan, *The Art and Architecture of Twelver Shi’ism: Iraq, Iran and the Indian Sub-Continent* (London: Azimuth Editions, 2012), 129–33; Navina Najat Haidar and Marika Sardar, eds., *Sultans of Deccan India, 1500–1700: Opulence and Fantasy* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2015), 214–7.

32. Christiane Gruber, "Nazr Necessities: Votive Practices and Objects in Iranian Muharram Ceremonies," in *Ex Voto: Votive Offerings Across Cultures*, ed. Ittai Weinryb (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 259.
33. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *Yaksas*, 2 vols. (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1928–31), vol. 2, 58.
34. Bosch, *The Golden Germ*, 32.
35. The rhizome "has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*" and is always governed by a "logic of the AND." Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 25.
36. Construction of water spouts in Nepal, from the Lichchavi to the Shah period of the nineteenth century, was considered to be a matter of merits. In the Kathmandu Valley alone, there remain "literally thousands upon thousands of carved stone *makara* spouts." Mary Shepherd Slusser, *Nepal Mandala: A Cultural Study of the Kathmandu Valley*, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), vol. 1, 154–7; Riddhi Pradhan, "Dhunge Dhara: A Case Study of the Three Cities of Kathmandu Valley," *Ancient Nepal: Journal of the Department of Archaeology* 116 (1990): 10–11.
37. Raimund O.A. Becker-Ritterspach, *Water Conduits in the Kathmandu Valley* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1994), 42–5, 49–59.
38. Mughal art exerted some influence over Nepali art in the seventeenth century, particularly through the courts of Agra and Delhi. According to the tellings of traditional chronicles, the sixteenth-century Kathmandu ruler Mahendra Malla once forged coins with permission from the celebrated Mughal emperor Akbar. Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, a seventeenth-century French traveler, reported that the ruler of Nepal delivered an elephant to the Mughal court as an annual tribute. Tavernier's inference of a direct suzerain-vassal relation between the Malla and Mughal courts begs further verification, but his statement is suggestive of the power dynamics between the two. See Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, *Travels in India*, trans. Valentine Ball, 2 vols. (London: Macmillan and Co., 1889), vol. 2, 263; Pratapaditya Pal, *The Arts of Nepal*, 2 vols. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1978), vol. 2, 138–41.
39. For a discussion on composite imagery in Mughal paintings, see Robert J. Del Bonta, "Reinventing Nature: Mughal Composite Animal Paintings," in *Flora and Fauna in Mughal Art*, ed. Som Prakash Verma (Mumbai: Marg Publications, 1999), 69–82.
40. Commenting on a very similar ivory powder flask in the collection of the National Museum of Scotland (formerly National Museum

- of Antiquities), Wolfgang Born writes: “The whole object is a ‘composite animal’; the outline of a fish is filled with animals of different species.” Wolfgang Born, “Ivory Powder Flasks from the Mughal Period,” *Ars Islamica* 9 (1942): 97.
41. “WW.65.2006 Powder Flask: Gilt Polychrome Zoomorphic Powder Flask,” *Museum of Islamic Art*, <https://mia.org.qa/en/689-object2256> (accessed November 2021).
  42. The animal represented on the cannon is a lion instead of a *makara*, but it should be noted that *makaras* devouring elephants are equally ubiquitous in South Asia. See S. Paranavitana, “The Significance of Sinhalese ‘Moonstones’,” *Artibus Asiae* 17, no. 3/4 (1954): 229. Based on an inscription, the cannon was cast by an immigrant Ottoman gun-founder at Ahmadnagar in 1549. Haidar and Sardar, *Sultans of Deccan India, 1500–1700*, 18. See also Gijs Kruijtzter, “Identifying Animals in the Applied Arts of India’s Deccan Plateau,” *Aziatische Kunst* 38, no. 4 (2008): 100–1; Pushkar Sohoni, “Old Fights, New Meanings: Lions and Elephants in Combat,” *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 67/68 (2016/17): 230.
  43. Born, “Ivory Powder Flasks from the Mughal Period,” 99–100; Sohoni, “Old Fights, New Meanings,” 230.
  44. Carol Stratton, *Buddhist Sculpture of Northern Thailand* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2004), 344–6.
  45. Translation provided by Judha Su and Thiti Jamkajornkeiat. In *Mūla-Pariyāya-Jātaka* (no. 245): “Time all consumes, even time itself as well.” English translation from Edward B. Cowell, ed., *The Jātaka, or Stories of the Buddha’s Former Births, Translated from the Pāli by Various Hands*, 6 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1895–1907), vol. 2, no. 245, 181. Originally in Pāli: “Kālo ghasati bhūtāni sabbān’ eva sah’ attanā.” Romanized Pāli from *The Jātaka, Together with Its Commentary Being Tales of the Anterior Births of Gotama Buddha, for the First Time Edited in the Original Pāli*, ed. V. Fausbøll, 6 vols. (London: Kegan Paul Trench Trübner and Co., 1877–96), vol. 2, no. 245, 260. On the relation between the verse and the *kāla-makara* dyad, see S. Paranavitana, “The Significance of Sinhalese ‘Moonstones’,” 228–9.
  46. Based on Stratton’s personal communication with Pon Sin in 1997. Stratton, *Buddhist Sculpture of Northern Thailand*, 350.
  47. Darian, “The Other Face of the Makara,” 32.
  48. Vogel, “Errors in Sanskrit Dictionaries,” 562.
  49. Benton, *God of Desire*, 152.
  50. Henry Cousens avers that “the glory of the beast is in its tail,” where the *makara* dissolves into “a magnificent multiplicity of elaborate flourishes and whorls, forming a fan-like display of intricate and interlacing arabesques.” Henry Cousens, “The Makara in Hindu Ornament,” *Archaeological Survey of India, Annual Report* (1903–4): 227.

51. R. Morton Smith, "Using Makaras," in *Studies in Orientology: Essays in Memory of Prof. A.L. Basham*, ed. S.K. Maity, Upendra Thakur, and A.K. Narain (Agra: Yogendra Kumar Jain, 1988), 150–1; Bosch, *The Golden Germ*, 23–39; Dhar, "Kāla-Makara-Toraṇas," 262.
52. Smith, "Using Makaras," 150–1.
53. This generally S-shaped floral motif is vividly described by Bosch as "a spiral curving downwards while gradually swelling and finally merging into a claviform extremity representing a secondary node from which issues fanwise a broad receding ('recalcitrating') bundle of leaves and sprouts stylized into arabesques." Bosch, *The Golden Germ*, 20.
54. B.N. Goswamy, *Essence of Indian Art* (San Francisco: Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, 1986), 243.
55. Farish A. Noor and Eddin Khoo, *Spirit of Wood: The Art of Malay Woodcarving* (Singapore: Periplus Editions, 2003), 92. The perception that Islam is aniconic and iconoclastic has elicited an ongoing debate and has been vehemently challenged in recent scholarship on Islamic art. See Christiane Gruber, "Between Logos (*Kalima*) and Light (*Nūr*): Representations of the Prophet Muhammad in Islamic Painting," *Muqarnas* 26 (2009): 229–62; Finbarr B. Flood, "Animal, Vegetal, and Mineral: Ambiguity and Efficacy in the Nishapur Wall Paintings," *Representations* 133 (2016): 20–58.
56. James Bennett, "Talismanic Seeing: The Induction of Power in Indonesian Zoomorphic Art," in *Nazar: Vision, Belief, and Perception in Islamic Cultures*, ed. Samer Akkach (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 190–241.
57. On the practice of invulnerability with regards to Malay weaponry, see G.B. Gardner, *Keris and Other Malay Weapons* (Singapore: Progressive Publishing Company, 1936), 128–31.
58. Commenting on the Malay *keris*, a traditional dagger widespread throughout the Malay Archipelago, Farish A. Noor reminds that it "performs two acts of 'penetration', when the blade 'penetrates' the sheath (*sarong*) and when the tang of the blade (*paksi*) penetrates its hilt (*hulu*). Both these acts of penetration once again reactivate the symbolic penetration of Siva's lingam into the feminine yonin, signaling the moment of copulation, birth, death, and rebirth." Farish A. Noor, "From Majapahit to Putrajaya: The *Kris* as a Symptom of Civilizational Development and Decline," *South East Asia Research* 8, no. 3 (2000): 247–8, n. 16.
59. Viennot, "Typologie du makara et essai de chronologie," 189.
60. Bosch, *The Golden Germ*, 34.
61. "Use of Merlion Emblem: Warning by the Tourist Board." *The Straits Times*, January 27, 1967.
62. "Merlion Is Fact and Legend, Not a Fishy Tale." *The Straits Times*, April 9, 1999.

63. Alfian Sa'at, "The Merlion," in *One Fierce Hour* (Singapore: Landmark Books, 1998), 21–2; Alvin Pang, "Merlign." *The Straits Times*, August 12, 2000. See also Brenda S.A. Yeoh and T.C. Chang, "The Rise of the Merlion: Monument and Myth in the Making of the Singapore Story," in *Theorizing the Southeast Asian City as Text: Urban Landscapes, Cultural Document, and Interpretive Experiences*, ed. Robbie B.H. Goh and Brenda S.A. Yeoh (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing, 2003), 29–50; Edwin Thumboo and Yeow Kai Chai, eds., *Reflecting on the Merlion: An Anthology of Poems* (Singapore: National Arts Council, 2009); Eddie Tay, *Colony, Nation, and Globalisation: Not at Home in Singaporean and Malaysian Literature* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011), 80–4; Ian Chung, "This Image of Themselves': (Re)Discovering the Merlion's Liminality," *Asiatic* 7, no. 2 (2013): 245–63.
64. Wilfred Hamilton-Shimmen is a Eurasian author who wrote *Seasons of Darkness*. According to the biography at the back of his book, he "has worked as a showbiz journalist, a reporter and sub-editor for a newspaper, and as a foreign correspondent." Wilfred Hamilton-Shimmen, *Seasons of Darkness* (Selangor: Wilfred-Hamilton Shimmen, 1993).
65. Wilfred Hamilton-Shimmen, "How Merlion Legend Came about Omitted." *The Straits Times*, April 6, 1999. In 1999, a number of public commentaries were published in *The Straits Times* debating over the symbolic significance of the Merlion in Singapore.
66. The sighting of a lion may have been a case of mistaken identity, since it is not indigenous to Southeast Asia. The *Sejarah Melayu* describes the "strange animal" as one that "seemed to move with great speed; it had a red body and a black head; its breast was white; it was strong and active in build, and in size was rather bigger than a he-goat." The curious prince Sri Tri Buana inquired about the beast and received a reply from his minister: "I have heard it said that in ancient times it was a lion that had that appearance. I think that what we saw must have been a lion." C.C. Brown, trans., "The Malay Annals," *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 25, no. 2/3 (1952): 30–1. Originally in Malay: "Maka dilihat oleh segala mereka itu seekor binatang maha tangkas lakunya, merah warnanya tubuhnya, hitam kepalanya, dan putih dadanya; sikapnya terlalu pantas dan perkasa; besarnya besar sedikit daripada kambing randuk; setelah ia melihat orang banyak, maka ia berjalan, lalu lenyap. Maka Seri Teri Buana pun bertanya pada segala orang yang sertanya, maka seorang pun tiada tahu. Maka sembah Demang Lebar Daun, 'Tuanku, ada patik menengar dahulu kala, singa juga yang demikian itu sifatnya; pada bicara patik, singalah gerangan itu.'" Abdul Rahman Haji Ismail, *Sejarah Melayu: The Malay Annals*

- (Selangor: The Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, 1998), 91.
67. “Lion with Fish Tail Is Tourist Board’s New Emblem.” *The Straits Times*, April 25, 1964.
  68. The juxtaposition of the lion’s head and the sea was intended to demonstrate “how deeply rooted in the past is the present character of Singapore’s cosmopolitan population.” “The Story Behind the ‘Merlion’ Emblem.” *The Straits Times*, May 20, 1964.
  69. Oversimplified as they are, “fishing village” and “roaring lion city” are familiar descriptors of Singapore in the tourism industry. Highly critical of the Merlion, Stephan Ortmann views the imagery as “not only meant to create a common past, but it was also about the future.” Stephan Ortmann, “Singapore: The Politics of Inventing National Identity,” *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 28, no. 4 (2009): 30. See also Yeoh and Chang, “‘The Rise of the Merlion,’” 36–9.
  70. “Malacca” is the Anglicized spelling for what is more commonly known as “Melaka” in Malaysia. The latter will be used in subsequent passages unless it is from a quotation where the original spelling is “Malacca.”
  71. Hamilton-Shimmen, “How Merlion Legend Came about Omitted.”
  72. Gan Yung Chyan, “Merlion and Makara Symbolise Protection.” *The Straits Times*, April 8, 1999.
  73. Ibid.
  74. Ibid.
  75. Hedwig Alfred, “Merlion Design Based on Piece of Work by Sai Kheong.” *The Straits Times*, November 28, 1981.
  76. Tan Guan Heng, “The Westernised Oriental Gentleman: Kwan Sai Kheong,” in *100 Inspiring Rafflesians 1823–2003* (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing, 2008), 93–4; Lim Cheng Tju, “Start of a New Series,” *Singapore Comix*, April 27, 2010, <http://singaporecomix.blogspot.com/2010/04/start-of-new-series.html> (accessed June 2020).
  77. Alfred, “Merlion Design Based on Piece of Work by Sai Kheong.”
  78. Yeoh and Chang, “‘The Rise of the Merlion,’” 34.
  79. Originally in Cantonese: “鱼尾狮, 根据其起源来说是剪图剪起来的, 不是设计的, 最近一位某先生去世了, 是一个画家, 在教育部, 他也是一个美术家, 他的名我不记得了, 他替新加坡旅游局画一个商标, 不知道是某先生。” Lim Nang Seng, interview by Pitt Kuan Wah, May 24, 1984, reel/disc 27 of 40, transcript, Oral History Center, National Archives of Singapore, Singapore, 310.
  80. Hamilton-Shimmen, “How Merlion Legend Came about Omitted.”
  81. Leong Liew Geok, “Making and Unmaking: Diaspora, Hybridity and Identity in Seasons of Darkness: A Story of Singapore” (paper presented at Asian Diasporas and Cultures: Globalisation,

- Hybridity, Intertextuality, National University of Singapore, September 5–7, 2001).
82. Piriya Krairiksh, "A Note on the *Makara* Balustrade at Malacca," *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 47, no. 1 (1974): 103.
  83. John N. Miksic, *Singapore and the Silk Road of the Sea, 1300–1800* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2013), 401.
  84. *Ibid.*, 400–1.
  85. James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997). See also Finbarr B. Flood, *Objects of Translation: Material Culture and Medieval "Hindu-Muslim" Encounter* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009).
  86. Derrida, *Speech and Phenomenon*, 156.

### ORCID

Tan Zi Hao  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0071-0956>