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An album of rare photos: From Chinese coolies to Singaporeans

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By Hsu Chung-mao (/hsuchungmao)

Historical photo collector, author



Translated by Candice Chan

From the 19th century to the 1920s and 1930s, ships transporting hundreds of Chinese coolies ready to work hard and make their "fortune" in Nanyang often docked at Kallang River. Historical photo collector Hsu Chung-mao recently obtained an album with rare photographs of such a ship bringing coolies from Xiamen in Fujian, China, to Singapore in the early 20th century. They are an authentic visual record of Chinese coolies in Singapore a century ago and a powerful throwback to that period.



A boat arriving in Singapore with coolies, circa 1900. The coolies step out of the hold and stand on deck for a photograph taken by the German boat owner. This is a rare and valuable image because there are generally no photographs of early Chinese coolies. Coloured using modern image-processing technology, the photograph takes us right back to that boat deck a century ago, giving us a hint of how these coolies must have looked and felt upon arriving at their destination.

(All photographs courtesy of Hsu Chung-mao.)

In 1978, Singapore's then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew told visiting Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping, the driver of China's reform and opening up, that if the descendants of unlettered, landless farmers who came to Nanyang from Fujian and Guangdong could succeed, there was no reason China, with its intellectuals, scholars, and nobles who stayed behind, would not succeed.

Based on Singapore's experience, Lee was encouraging China to boldly stride towards reform and opening up. However, his remarks also showed another layer of self-awareness: Chinese Singaporeans are not shy about their ancestors' humble background. On the contrary, looking at how they have progressed and what they have achieved today, those humble beginnings bring out the triumph of changing one's destiny through unceasing effort. Yesterday's poverty has become today's pride.

...out of this agricultural society grew the Chinese philosophy of life — hard work, conservatism, and an emphasis on discipline and order.



On 13 November 1978, Deng Xiaoping toured the Housing & Development Board, where then HDB Chairman Michael Yam Seng-tat gave him an overview of Singapore's housing situation. Singapore's development left a deep impression on Deng. Subsequently, the Chinese government sent many officials to Singapore to learn how to plan and develop a modern city.

Chinese coolies coming to Nanyang is an important marker in modern Chinese history. Historically, China was built on agriculture; the people were attached to the land and were reluctant to move around, and out of this agricultural society grew the Chinese philosophy of life — hard work, conservatism, and an emphasis on discipline and order.

With the Yuan dynasty came maritime trade in China's southern and eastern coastal provinces. Merchants organised shipping expeditions seeking trade opportunities, and developed a national fleet of armed boats. However, it did not last long. During the Qing dynasty, the one in charge was Emperor Kangxi, a Manchu nomad who did not give much attention to maritime activities, but who saw the sea as a place where enemies and criminals escaped and took cover, and so he banned people from going to sea.

At that time, the Chinese who came to Nanyang were generally part of a minority of merchants who travelled regularly, or nobles and soldiers who fled southward with the changing of dynasties, as well as some commoners who followed them.



A coolie ship arriving at the Kallang River in Singapore. This is a rare photo of a coolie ship, which also shows what the Kallang River used to look like. The ship is not a large one, and might have been transporting cargo as well as the coolies. Some of the cargo might have been transported directly to the Kallang River and not any of the quays, possibly because there were also cargo points at the Kallang River. However, there were no large wharf facilities at the Kallang River, and the ship had to be anchored in the river itself, with people and goods moved via floating bridges formed by smaller boats.



View from a coolie boat looking across to the Kallang riverbank, with large wooden sheds filled with goods. The Kallang River is over 10 kilometres long, making it Singapore's longest river. Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles built a trading centre at its lower course, and these wooden sheds were to store goods moving in and out. The photograph also shows a thick primary forest, Singapore's greenery in its early days.



The goods distribution centre near the mouth of the Kallang River. The Kallang River used to be much wider than it is today. In the 1930s, the river was filled in and roads were built, so that the river became narrower. This photograph shows the wide Kallang River as it used to be.



A nice shot of the Kallang River taken from a coolie boat. For a long time, this river was an important place for the import and export trade. Ming dynasty Chinese porcelain has been found in it, showing its long history as a channel of international trade.



One of many kampungs beside the Kallang River. The people engaged in small-scale fishing with small boats, and the market places also provided some job opportunities.



Another perspective of the Kallang River. The old photos of the Kallang River that exist today are almost all from the 1930s onwards, and a complete scene of the river from the late 19th century to the early 20th century is a treasure among the historical photographs of Singapore.



An Indian family living in a straw house beside the Kallang River. Apart from Chinese coolies, there were also Indian coolies who came to Singapore, who worked in plantations, factories, and trading ports.

Nanyang — land of opportunity and hardship

After the mid-18th century, the Western powers gradually established colonies in Southeast Asia, which attracted some Chinese to move south to seek a living. One century later, Britain opened up tin mines in the Straits Settlements, and planted rubber and sugar cane to develop the economies of its colonies. It systematically recruited large numbers of Chinese and Indian workers to settle in the region. At the same time, China entered a period of unrest — villages declined and people were forced to cross the sea to make a living. The California gold rush and the Pacific Railroad in the US also attracted many Chinese workers, but before long, the US closed its doors to Chinese with the Chinese Exclusion Act. Given the international situation and geographical convenience, most Chinese workers headed to Southeast Asia. So began the difficult story of Chinese coolies seeking a new life in Nanyang.



A valuable image of early Singapore showing a Eurasian family, with a Caucasian man who married a local Malay woman. Their children show both Western and Malay characteristics as early Eurasians, one of the minority groups in Singapore. While they do not live in a Western house made of bricks, their living conditions are definitely better than most local Malays. The children are barefoot, but there are servants in the house, which is rare for locals.



English ladies and gentlemen at Adelphi Hotel on Coleman Street in the late 19th century. This hotel closed on 25 June 1973, and was later demolished. In the colonial society of Singapore, the English community was made up of wealthy and highly educated civil servants, businessmen, and intellectuals.

From the 19th century to the 1920s and 1930s, most of the Chinese who migrated to the Straits Settlements were from Fujian and Guangdong, with those from Fujian putting to sea from Xiamen. And although they were technically “contract workers”, they bore the humiliating tag of “piglets” (猪仔), while the trade in Chinese labourers was known as “selling piglets” (卖猪仔), meaning that these workers were there to be sold and “slaughtered” like pigs. A glance into the coolie trade explains these labels.

“Agencies” rented boats and sent “agents” into the villages of Fujian and Guangdong to recruit workers. The impoverished villagers could not afford the tickets and agent’s fees, and had to sign indentures or contracts, where they would make repayment with one or two years’ worth of their wages. Under the rules of the colonial governments, the agencies would make a generous profit and pass on any surplus to the boat companies and agents. The agents would charge the workers costly advances on the boat fees, and charge interest according to the period of repayment. When the workers landed, the colonial governments or the agencies sold them to tin mining companies, rubber plantation owners, or other production companies that needed labour. Simply put, from the colonial governments to the agencies, from the boat companies to the agents, each of these entities earned a lot of money. And at the bottom of this “food chain” were the coolies — the “piglets”.



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A Chinese "agent" on board a coolie boat. His job was to recruit villagers back home to cross the sea to work. He also managed them and even travelled with them to make sure everything went smoothly. The Western bosses who brought in the coolies also needed the Chinese agents to pass on

instructions. Written records say little about the agents; they are generally thought to be akin to foremen. But this photograph shows that some agents were quite well to do, almost like Chinese merchants. Some successful agents even rose to become international traders.



The wife of a coolie agent in the cabin. The photograph shows that the agent was not only a labour leader in his hometown in China, but may also have engaged in international trading, with trading posts in Fujian and Singapore, which is why he was able to bring his wife with him to Singapore. Furthermore, their status was different from the average coolie, having their own private space and being accorded the same treatment as a boss.



The German owner and crew of the coolie boat playing bridge in the cabin to pass the time over the long voyage. Most owners of the boats plying between Xiamen and Singapore were British and Americans. There were few German boat owners.



The German crew on the coolie boat on security detail with rifles. Chinese coolies were usually quite compliant and seldom caused trouble even in adverse conditions, and there were few incidents on

coolie ships. A bigger problem was hygiene in the hold — one sick person could cause a mass infection, and coolies were known to die of illness.

Imagine: indentured workers crammed in the hold of a coolie ship, having to endure a long journey with only basic provisions and poor sanitation with no doctor if they fell ill. No wonder many died on board and never got to their destination. Even if they did, they were immediately put to overly long work hours, with their already meagre wages even more depleted to repay their debts. They worked hard every day for that moment of freedom when they could seek new opportunities. In fact, coolies were slaves, and coolies heading to Nanyang were fundamentally victims of human trafficking. And in the century or so where this trade took place, the colonial governments, boat companies, labour agencies, tin mining companies, rubber plantation owners, sugar cane plantation owners, banks — all of them grew rich and amassed significant wealth, while the economy of the colony prospered.



Chinese immigrant workers at a rubber plantation. In the 19th century, British colonialists recruited labourers from the coastal Chinese provinces of Fujian and Guangdong to start rubber plantations. The early wave of Chinese immigrants to Singapore and the Malay Peninsula mainly comprised uneducated coolies.



A Western-style compound beside the Kallang River, with Chinese servants. There were many plantations and processing plants around the Kallang River; common economic produce included sugar cane, pepper, and cotton. These were all run by Western colonists, who lived in large Western-style houses with servants from China to wait on them and do odd jobs. These servants were usually more experienced coolies, and took on these roles as another route for them to improve their circumstances.



A German manager with Malay workers. The German security personnel with guns have come off a boat. The large straw building in the photograph is mainly used for storage and work lodgings. One can see the relationship between Western traders and coolie employers.

For the workers who made it through the do-or-die repayment period, they scrimped and saved, and started sending money back to their families in China. In a few years, perhaps they would head back home with armloads of gifts, then get married to a girl introduced by their elders, and bring her back to Nanyang. Their next generation would get a better education; the more capable ones would run a shop, restaurant, or a company. They would congregate and build thriving Chinatowns, including in Singapore.

Newfound confidence

Thriving commerce, development of light industry, finance, tourism and so on, attracted relatives of these early pioneers to join them in Nanyang. One generation later, their young people would go even further in their education; some got degrees in law, medicine, and business from prestigious universities in Britain, becoming the intellectual matches of the best elites in the West. It brought newfound confidence. The people felt that they did not need colonial governance — they were perfectly capable of deciding their own destiny and creating their own progress. And all this began in the distant past, the moment when those ragged, lost coolies got off the boat and set eyes on this new land.



Indians with sarongs wrapped around their waists and hawkers balancing their wares on poles stand outside the tailor shops at the juncture of Cross Street and South Bridge Road in the late 19th century. This is a vivid portrait of those who were at the lowest rung of society then.



As Singapore, Hong Kong and the British concession in Shanghai were all part of the British empire, British firms set up branch offices in these places and had active exchange of goods and people across these territories in the late 19th century. Rickshaws were imported from Shanghai, and their numbers grew rapidly in the 20 years since, topping 20,000.



The bustling streets of Kreta Ayer in the 1920s. Many Chinese became involved in consumer-oriented light industries and commerce, creating a vibrant, prosperous colonial economy. Kreta Ayer became a lively commercial and residential area.



A street with shops run by Singapore's early Chinese immigrants in the 1920s. When Sir Raffles conceived Singapore's city masterplan, he designated Kreta Ayer (also known as Chinatown) as the living area for the Chinese. These Chinese neighbourhoods looked more unkempt than the British areas as the two communities belong to different economic and social classes.

For China, this is a painful memory of how its people crossed the sea to eke out a living amid domestic and external troubles; for Chinese Singaporeans, the bitter process aside, it also marked a fresh start, a new environment and a new destiny. And, after generations of struggle and change, there emerged new objectives and a new sense of belonging.

Of course, walking around and looking at the modern tall buildings and wide streets of Singapore's Chinatown today, the traces of the past have long faded, and it is hard to imagine the influx of Chinese workers and crowded streets of a century ago; all of that seems to have happened in a foreign land in a movie, and it is difficult to connect it with what one sees now.



Children in a Singapore orphanage in the late 19th century. The many different races seen here hints at the eventual multiracial structure of Singapore society.



A street fair outside a Chinese temple in the 1950s. In Chinese neighbourhoods, events that offered thanks to deities were often held outside temples. During such occasions, many vendors would come to sell their wares to the gathered crowds, creating a lively atmosphere.



A reunion meal on the eve of the Chinese New Year in the late 1970s with family members wearing new clothes to celebrate the occasion. The festive mood reflects the growing affluence in Singapore society.



Primary school pupils having fun in the 1980s. A new generation of Singaporean children grew up enjoying a peaceful and stable life, unlike the poverty experienced by their older generations. They began to create the future of Singapore in this new environment.

Having said that, while the physical bodies and the facades of buildings are no more, the hard work and grit of those workers a century ago, and their refusal to bow to their fate, have lasted through the ages and been passed down unceasingly through generations. In each chapter of Singapore's history, its people have shown their great strength in not fearing hardship and overcoming adversity.

While there are many historical written records of Chinese coolies' life and times in Nanyang, there are few visual records. In its early days, photography was costly, and photography studios mostly took photographs of individuals and families as mementoes, or of buildings or nature to sell souvenir tourist albums; there was no incentive to take photographs of scruffy Chinese workers. Recently, I obtained an album with photographs of a ship transporting Chinese coolies from Xiamen in Fujian, China, to Singapore in the early 20th century. The photographs include impoverished Chinese workers on deck, the German shipowner and crew, the agent in charge of the Chinese workers as well as the women on board, the Western-owned compound the workers saw when they landed in Singapore, and the simple kampungs here. They are an authentic visual record of Chinese coolies in Singapore a century ago, a powerful throwback to that period.



The album from which the photographs for this article were taken.









Digital colouring: Chen Yijing, Feng Yuanshen, Xu Danyu, Xu Danhan

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