

Destination - Nanyang

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Events & Eras



Coolies who arrived in Singapore in the 1800s were impoverished, unskilled Chinese male immigrants who had come to Singapore to seek their fortunes, but ended up as contracted labourers who worked in industries such as construction, agriculture, shipping, mining and rickshaw-pulling.



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The coolies often did not have money and relied on secret societies to pay for their passage. They would be sold to a *towkay* who spoke their dialect when they arrived. However, their relationship with the secret societies did not end here. The coolies would have to pay a fee to the secret societies – a form of insurance that a brotherhood would support them financially in times of illness, ensure their employment, and take care of their last rites.

Two developments took place in 1933 which saw Chinese female immigrants coming to Singapore. Firstly, the British colonial authorities started limiting the number of male immigrants allowed into Singapore. Secondly, the impact of the Great Depression was felt globally. These events contributed to a wave of about 200,000 Chinese female immigrants to arrive in Singapore between 1934 and 1938.

Women from southern China travelled by boats to Nanyang, or the Southern Seas. Just like the men had done a century before, these women were in search of work and a new life. Many of them chose to “*sor hei*” – ceremonially combing their hair into buns to set themselves apart. Some even took a vow of celibacy. They formed sisterhoods, or surrogate families loosely based on clan association structure.



Majie's comb, mid-20th century. Collection of National Museum of Singapore.

Those from Shan Shui, a district in the Canton province, became fearless builders in the construction industry. Called the hong tou jin (or samsui women), they were easily distinguished by their red head scarves, black samfu and sandals fashioned from old rubber tyres.



'Samsui' women working at a construction yard, 1938-1938. Collection of National Museum of Singapore.

Those from Shunde district became *majie*, loyal and reliable nannies who brought up a whole generation of children across Malaya.

Rags to Riches

Many of Singapore's roads and places are named after influential 19th century Chinese towkays who also served as community leaders. Due to their influence, the colonial government often appointed them as municipal commissioners to settle disputes and take care of the welfare of their community.

Tan Tock Seng was one such example. His life story is a classic rags-to-riches tale. He was a Malacca-born vegetable seller who successfully speculated in land and used his wealth to start a pauper's hospital, which is now named after him.



Tan Tock Seng Hospital, c. 1876. Collection of National Museum of Singapore.

Chia Ann Siang was a Hokkien merchant who traded in spices, coconut, tobacco, tin, tea and silk. Gemmill's Hill was renamed to Ann Siang Hill after he acquired it.

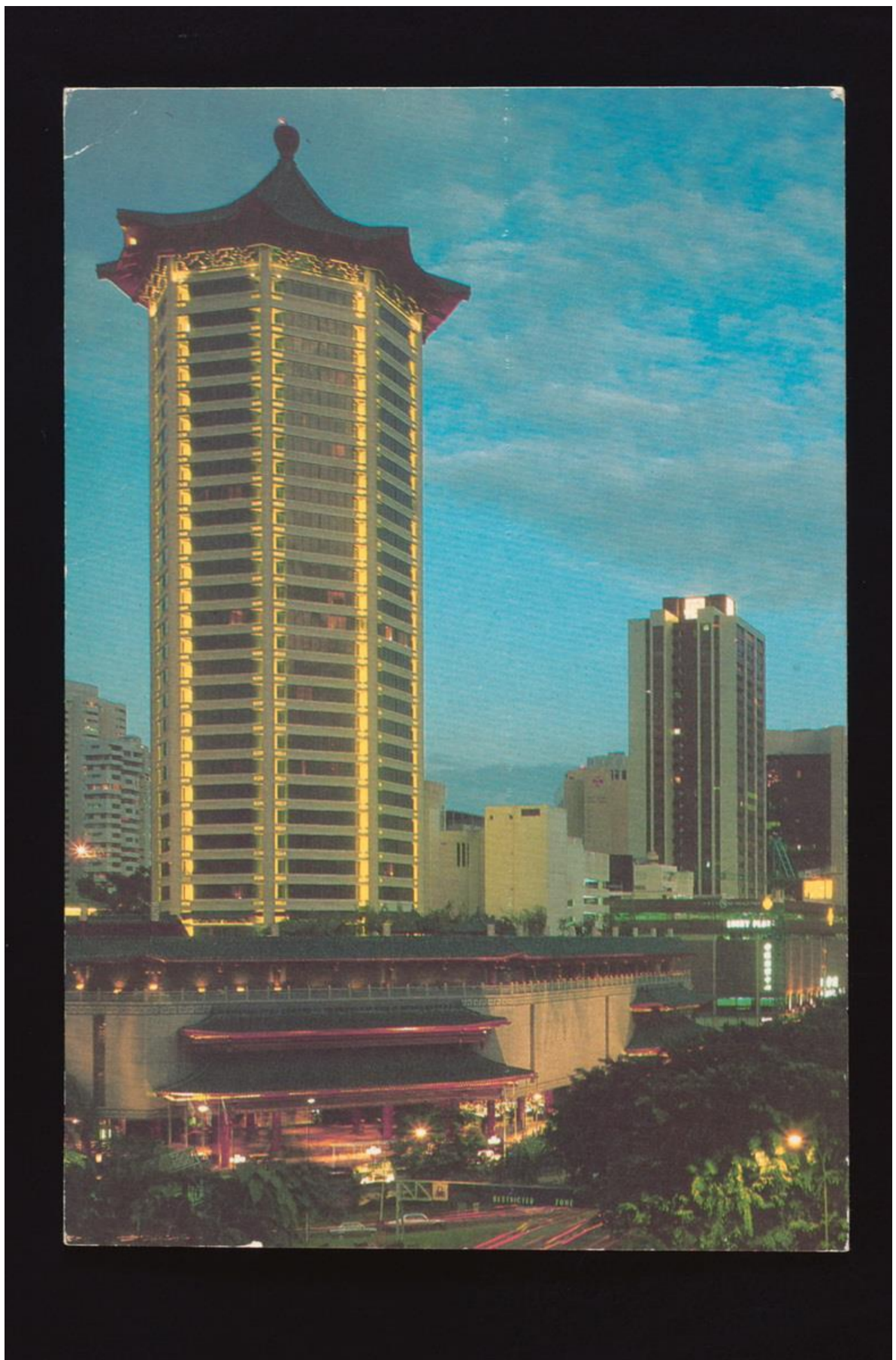
Ship chandler and one-time ice merchant Whampoa Hoo Ah Kay was not only wealthy, but also an accomplished diplomat with a superb mastery of English.

Peranakan tycoon Tan Kim Seng was a philanthropist who donated generously to water works. A fountain in Esplanade Park is a commemoration of his contribution.



The Tan Kim Seng fountain, 1950s - 1960s. Collection of National Museum of Singapore.

Did you know that some of Singapore's favourite brands were established by early immigrants, too? Tangs was founded by Teochew immigrant C.K. Tang, who established his department store after a decade of peddling Swatow lace and embroidery from a tin trunk. Coffee and kaya toast cafe chain Ya Kun was founded by Loi Ah Koon, a Hainanese coffee stall assistant who eventually became his own boss.



The Dynasty Hotel and Tangs Department Store at Orchard Road, mid-late 1980s. Collection of National Museum of Singapore.

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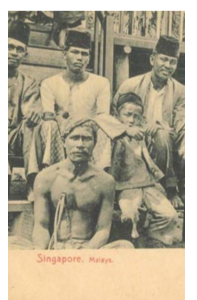


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