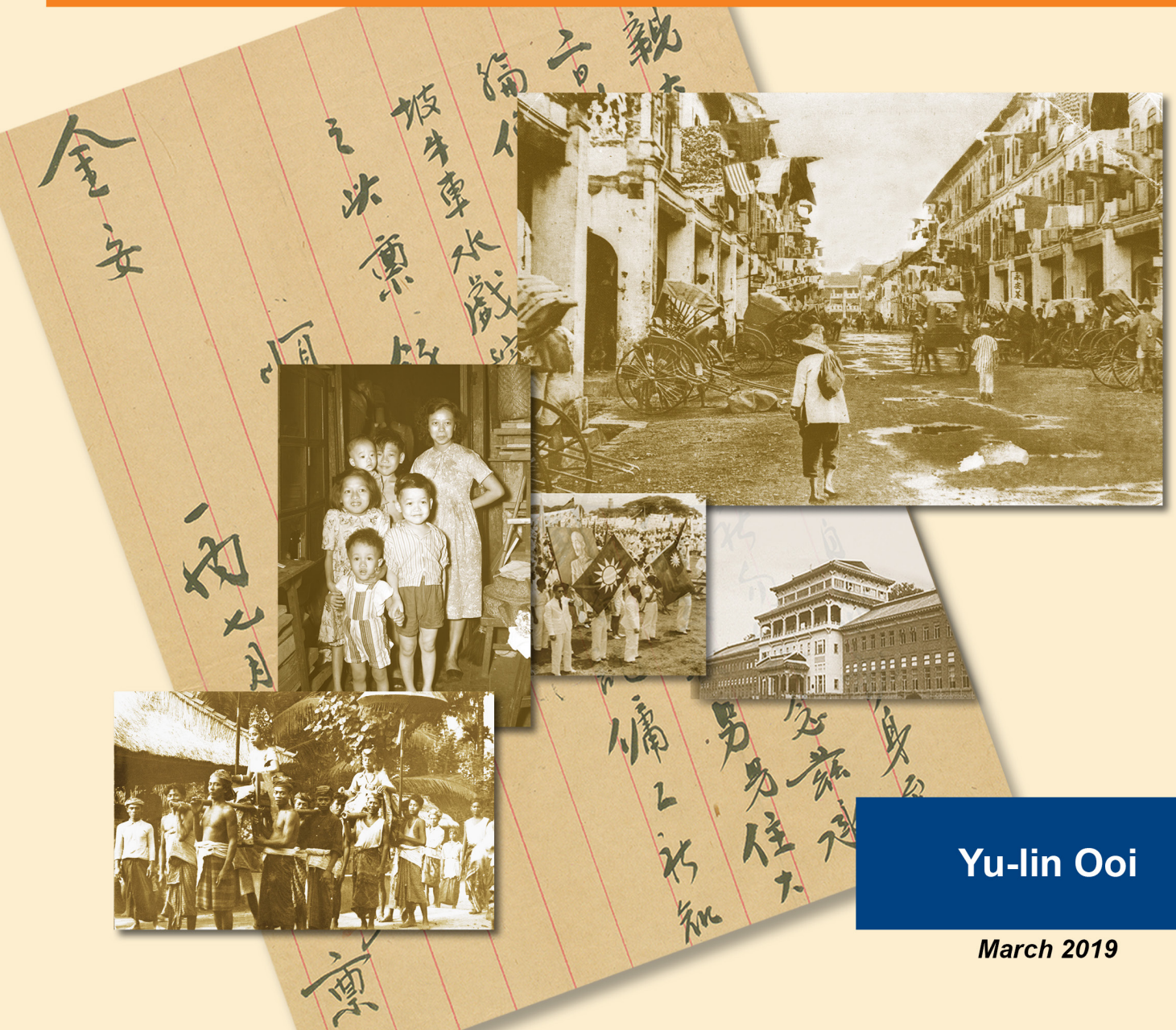
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Grassroots Giving, Philanthropy, and Identity, Singapore 1919-1959

Philanthropy in Asia: Working Paper No. 6



Yu-lin Ooi

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Yu-lin Ooi is Senior Research Consultant with the Asia Centre for Social Entrepreneurship and Philanthropy (ACSEP), documenting the journey of philanthropy in Singapore's social history.

In this paper she examines the evolution of giving in the grassroots community of Singapore in three consecutive periods in Singapore social history. These are firstly, the prewar era, when many in Singapore practiced giving in traditional ways (1919-1942), the second period is the Japanese Occupation of Singapore (1942-1945), and the final period is the era leading to nationhood (1945-1959). This paper was largely written using primary data from new interviews and translations of previously unexamined sources, such as remittance letters and oral histories.

Yu-lin has a multi-disciplinary background, and works with written, visual, verbal and spatial data. Past work includes documentaries, exhibitions, and publications on Peranakan life. She studied History at the National University of Singapore, Social Anthropology at the University of Cambridge, and Media at Boston and Stanford Universities.

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Executive Summary

Aims of this Study

This paper is a first study of giving by ordinary people or the grassroots community in Singapore from 1919-1959. As there is a big gap in knowledge about the lives of most people during this period, we set out to find answers to these questions:

- Who were some of Singapore's grassroots givers?
- How did they give? Was it in money, or in kind?
- What were their motivations for giving?

Challenges

The subjects of this study left behind few records. Data from the prewar era is particularly lacking as the population was mobile, transient, and often illiterate. However we can still find their footprints in caches of remittance letters, oral histories and news reports of the day.

Our main challenge 100 years later is to understand Singapore between 1919-1959 – not just to reconstruct literal living conditions, but also to learn more about these early settlers; most of whom were new to the colony and brought with them different world views. Thus we tried to identify what influenced them most, what were their obligations, and what value they placed on giving.

The result is a reconstruction of just some of the better-remembered expressions of giving. While this is only a partial retelling of the story, we hope it can pave the way to further studies.

Understanding the Context: Three Major Factors Influenced Giving Between 1919 And 1959

1. **Giving was highly varied, mirroring the immense cultural and ethnic diversity of the population.**
   Unlike the people in today's Singapore, the population during our study period was fragmented and made up of a multiplicity of ethnic groups, just arriving from their original homelands and bringing with them their discrete cultures, world views, languages and beliefs. Thus there were highly varied expressions of giving in Singapore throughout this period.

2. **The period studied encompasses three distinct, highly formative eras in Singapore's social history; each recorded progress in the journey of giving.**
   The three periods are:

   1. **1919-1942: The prewar years.**
      This was when migrants arrived in the largest numbers and remained ethnically divided. As they settled down, they occasionally extended help across ethnic boundaries in response to major local disasters. Social obligations dominated giving in kind and remittances, with traditional practices and mindsets prevalent.

   2. **1942-1945: The Japanese Occupation.**
      This saw giving *in extremis.* Giving now crossed ethnic boundaries, with actions ranging from providing a cup of water to the endangering of oneself for others.

   3. **1945-1959: Postwar reconstruction and the birth of nationhood.**
      This period was a time of choice, when those who survived the war decided to leave or stay on in Singapore. The latter pulled together to rebuild the little island they now called "home." The sense of "us" that emerged during the Japanese Occupation was beginning to crystallise into a national identity.

3. **Giving over these three periods underwent continual transformation and iteration.**
   Giving in money or kind by these early settlers often followed the traditional forms they knew, but as they put down roots, the population settled, and families were born,

we see adaptations creeping in - through life in modernity, urban living, proximity to other giving models. All pervasive was the influence of the British - from school syllabuses to the right to advocacy and the concept of each person having rights.

Key Findings

1. **Giving was a major part of life in Singapore's grassroots community before the Japanese Occupation. This was based on traditional Asian giving constructs, with philanthropy a subset of this.**
   A key finding of this data search over fifty years has uncovered the fact that giving was a dominant feature of life in prewar Singapore, but it was not philanthropic, but obligatory. As such we suggest that in the big picture, giving has always been present in traditional Asian society, while philanthropy would come later, as those with less income gained more savings.

2. **Giving and obligation were intertwined in prewar Asian grassroots society, with "*socially-obligated giving*" dominating. This occurred when kinship was the primary relational framework of life.**
   Socially obligated giving occurred when kinship was the relational framework within which one lived. In many cases, although giving went to support large extended families, we cannot consider such giving to be philanthropic. However such giving was so dominant it has to be considered to gain the big picture of the landscape of giving in the grassroots community, and in order to interpret where the place of philanthropy lay.

   Examples of such giving are:

   - Remittances – personal giving (this carried on for years, and is still practised today).
   - Social systems which were de facto community welfare and support constructs, whereby everyone had a role to play and an obligation to sustain the entire group's well-being. This allowed the cycle of life to carry on.

   Examples of such systems recreated with non-kin in Singapore include:

   - Patriarchal-lineage derived systems like clans, guilds, and associations
   - Community collaboration via codes such as *Gotong Royong*
   - *Baweanese Pondok*, a construct of fictive kinship based in common housing.

3. **Giving was inextricably linked with a person's *identity,* interpreted through a framework of relationships.**
   Using Marcel Mauss' (1925) definition, we suggest most of Singapore's first migrants considered their primary identity to be *"social persons."* This meant they had an inalienable position and identity determined by the kinship system to which they belonged. One would hold this identity from birth to death and it was one's position within the whole kinship group e.g., "eldest son." Implicit as responsibilities in these roles were codified obligations to give and receive towards others in the kinship group. Such obligations were extended outward toward local communities considered fictive kin.

4. **Through changes in giving patterns we see gradual transformation of grassroots identity from being *Social Persons* to becoming *Independent Persons.***
   Once the obligation to give back to their families at home was completed, we observe that as people settled into Singapore migrants began to add new facets to their identities. Whilst maintaining one facet as a social person, in some cases we suggest that identity became enlarged to include giving based on one's personal conviction, without reference to kin. Choices were made to give to causes in Singapore, such as supporting a neighbour or funding a clinic. Through such examples of giving, we see the rise of the *Independent Person.*

5. **Giving mirrored major social transformations including the development of bifocality and nascent national identity.**
   As migrants established themselves in Singapore, how they gave reflected the development of bifocality, which occurred with transnational living, i.e., a resident in Singapore kept strong ties with his family in the homeland, but now was also keenly invested in his own family in Singapore, and his new host country.

   A second, vital change was that the Japanese Occupation tore down ethnic barriers and brought about a sense of "us" among survivors, which gave rise to a nascent national identity. This eventually took the form of identification with Singapore, expressed through taking up citizenship when Singapore became a nation.

6. **To understand the place of philanthropy in Singapore and societies underpinned by traditional values, we must broaden our concepts of giving.**
   A key interpretive challenge in sorting out the data in our findings was that the traditional, socially-obligated form of giving codified in ancient Asian social mores fell outside the remit of western definitions of philanthropy. Yet it was where the most money went out of tiny pay packets. It remains so today, as Singapore hosts foreign workers who still remit money to families back home, for example those from Thailand, Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh and many other countries where ancient values still govern giving.

   Given the complexities of interpretation when western definitions are challenged by traditional constructs, we suggest that in order to fully understand the place of giving in Asia, new definitions can be offered in today's studies of giving and philanthropy.

Conclusion

This study of giving in Singapore between 1919 and 1959 is a first record of giving among the grassroots community. It interprets giving as reflecting its identities, loyalties, challenges and hopes. It also suggests a way of tracing, via actions of giving, a transformation of the population from migrants to settlers, to war survivors, then to citizens.

In studying what people gave to, our main finding is that for many in the prewar grassroots community, traditional needs were the norm, where the upkeep of the family at home was primary, and giving towards that and the community were obligatory. As time passed, we observe an expansion of priorities and new loyalties which now included giving to causes in Singapore as it became "home." This growth of identity is mirrored in what people gave to.

Such giving would be tested in extremis by the Japanese Occupation of Singapore, and out of that crucible many in Singapore would emerge with a new sense of national identity, adding that to their social identities as kinsmen, and newer identities as worker, parent, and community member forged in Singapore.

In the early years, giving was generally for the survival of others, such as the building of homes or the provision of food. Such giving only petered out as the first generation of migrants died out. From the size of their gifts, generously given out of meagre pay packets, we also gain a glimpse of the hard life journeys and sacrifices made by Singapore's "pioneer generation" as they provided for families in two lands.

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1. Background

ACSEP Working Papers on Philanthropy in Singapore over 200 Years

This study is a part of the series of ACSEP working papers aimed at chronicling, for the first time, key aspects in the journey of giving and philanthropy in Singapore. Given Singapore's history as a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural nation with a British colonial past, it is not surprising that this narrative is a complex story with many facets.

All of the papers in the series have been exploratory in nature, focusing on creating a foundation for future studies. In extant data, there is a distinct knowledge gap about both the practices and actions of giving among the population in the past 200 years, apart from accounts of the activities of the rich and famous. These papers hope to address that gap in a preliminary way.

The main focuses have been to collect and examine data on forms and examples of giving, focusing first on accounts in the main people groups of Singapore today – the Chinese, the Malay-Muslims, and the Indians (or more accurately, the South Asians).

The Study of Grassroots Giving and its Relationship to Philanthropy

Records on giving by the ordinary man-in-the street especially in the era before the Japanese Occupation are especially sparse. In Singapore today, this, the largest part of the population, has come to be called the "grassroots" community – a term that we also adopt in this paper to denote our subjects of study. The term, "grassroots", with its connotations of being tough, hardy and close to the ground, aptly describes the hardscrabble lives of the majority population of Singapore during our period of study, which is from 1919 to 1959.

This was a period of upheaval, settlement, and frequent relocation for new migrants to Singapore, as loosening of restrictions in China and India allowed the travel of women from their homelands to the colony in larger numbers. This created a more balanced population on the island, the start of families among most ethnic groups, and the development of villages (or "kampongs"[1]) and communities. With these new families, new needs such as medical care, housing, and schooling now began to surface.

The general mobility and illiteracy of this group meant that few kept records of their lives, and private giving in particular went undocumented. It is among these everyday lives that we began our search.

Scope of Research

Given that we were starting with little coherent data, the scope of research was therefore defined first by time frame, followed by community and ethnic group, with the key objective being the recovery of information on giving patterns and philanthropic acts among the ordinary citizens of Singapore.

Time Frame

This paper looks at giving during a critical confluence of events in Singapore's history: the periods before and after the Japanese Occupation of Singapore (1942-1945) with the crisis of Occupation itself being a pivot point of change. This was mirrored in how people gave. This change is examined at both the personal and community levels in the chapters of this paper.

The period under research covers three key consecutive periods:

[1] This term is taken from the Malay word for "village" and is used throughout the paper to denote the little villages comprising small houses on stilts or wood and cement that were part of the landscape of Singapore life until public housing was started. The term is part of the lingua franca of Singapore even now.

1. The prewar era of migration and settlement (1919-1942);
2. The Japanese Occupation of Singapore (1942-1945);
3. The postwar era of reconstruction (1945-1959).

N.B. 1919 was chosen as the starting point of research for two reasons.
The first is that it marks a century of Singapore as British colony. The second is that this was when two scholarly publications on life in Singapore ended their discourse. These were Sir Song Ong Siang's "One Hundred Years' History of the Chinese in Singapore" (1920) and Walter Makepeace et al.'s "One Hundred Years of Singapore" (1921).[2] Data after that is particularly sparse, so we have picked up the thread of documentation from that juncture.

Communities under Study

The grassroots communities studied were some of the ethnic groups that were original components of Singapore's main race groups today – the Chinese, Malay-Muslims, and the Indians.

Although these groups in the prewar era held themselves as distinct from others of the same ethnicity, there were overarching commonalities in social protocols, obligations and expectations about giving that revealed some common practices for all except the Indians, of whom we confined research to those with English records. This exception was due to the difficulty of discovery and analysis of documents recorded in the vernacular. We hope that more can be done in this area in the future.

Identifying Acts of Philanthropy and Giving

While the focus of discovery was initially to recover accounts of philanthropy in the different communities, it quickly became evident that in the prewar era, the modern or Western concept of philanthropy – the voluntary giving of money or in kind for the public good – was only a *subset* of a greater arena of traditional giving practices in Asia. Giving was frequent and as generous as penurious living would allow, but it was not how one expected philanthropy might be enacted. Forms of giving were couched in traditional terms, ancient, hidden, nuanced, and implicit.

As such, rather than assume that philanthropists were few among the grassroots communities just because giving looked different, we have documented and examined these traditional Asian forms to examine their role in the overall journey of philanthropy in Singapore as a whole.

N.B. Compared to the prewar era, the Japanese Occupation and the postwar eras offer many more records for analysis. As such there has been less focus on data gathering here.

Research Aims

The basic goals of this and continuing working papers on the history of Singapore and philanthropy are to:

1. Collect primary data on giving and philanthropy in Singapore to fill a current knowledge gap.

2. Identify and record examples of
    - Who gave;
    - Forms of giving (whether in cash or in kind);
    - Recipients of giving; and
    - Where possible, discuss Motivation.

3. Analyse data on giving for transition and iteration over time, and identify underlying patterns or causes for change.

4. Increase our understanding of the journey and place of philanthropy and giving in Singapore's social history.

Methodology

We have used the historical method as the primary data gathering tool and borrowed some processes from social anthropology to interpret the place of the gift, giving and identity.

[2] Song, Ong Siang. (1923). One Hundred Years' History of the Chinese in Singapore. (Reprinted Chinese Materials Center, Inc. San Francisco, 1975)

Sources

Reconstructions of acts of traditional and personal giving during the prewar era were extracted from primary data in interviews conducted in 2017, and through translating original remittance letters written in the Teochew dialect from the National Library of Singapore, and oral histories recorded in Bahasa Melayu from the National Archives of Singapore. There was also an extensive search of newspapers of the era for accounts of the times.

Giving during the Japanese Occupation and the postwar period was parsed selectively from interviews conducted in 2017, oral history transcripts in the National Archives of Singapore, and from accounts in secondary sources.

2. The Role of Giving in Traditional Asian Societies

Maintaining a Consciousness of Historical Perspective

As we embark on this study, it is crucial that we frame the period and the people we are examining within an historical era that was vastly different from that of the Singapore of today.

Singapore is a first-world nation that has risen to prominence with meteoric speed. It is extremely modern in terms of infrastructure, architecture and communication, with its people groups neatly compartmentalised into four racial constructs of Malay, Indian, Chinese, and the rather ambiguous 'Others'. This is a far cry from the Singapore of our period of study, when the colony was still a third-world settlement, a port city of importance but still in its early years of development.

As such we must consciously reframe our perspective of Singapore's people and the place it was – change gears, as it were - in order to understand social life then, and appreciate the place of giving in the lives of Singapore's earlier, "pioneer" generations.

The Singapore we are examining was in a new period of development, with the largest number of low income migrants ever beginning to take up residence in the colony. Stepping back to 1920, we find a lively but squalid city with only the most basic infrastructure, heaving with a population of incredible diversity – fragments of other communities arriving fresh from ancient civilisations not yet deconstructed by nationalism and modernity.

We encounter people groups proud of their diverse heritages. Still culturally distinct, with myriad dialects and languages oftentimes mutually unintelligible, we do however find one strong commonality among them – a strong sense of family obligation.

This obligation stretched across thousands of miles and was venerated. Many migrants came to Singapore just to make money so that families across the oceans could survive.

The majority of these new migrants formed the grassroots community of our study – individuals on the lower income scale, willing to work hard for a pittance so as to send precious money home. They created the vast pool of faceless labourers and service providers who ran the machinery of the island in the background as Singapore the port surged forward into the 20th century.

The Many Civilisations within Singapore's 1920s Grassroots Community

Those who came to Singapore were far from homogenous. They came from close by, still informed by the world views of millenia, often from rural areas. The various empires of their varied origins were huge, cumbersome, and indifferent to the survival of the ordinary man.

But we find the ordinary grassroots man *did* survive. Survival of the race was achieved through structures undergirded by belief systems and world views that created social norms that ensured that the people, and the civilization, would continue.

As our grassroots migrants made their way to Singapore, they transposed to their new local communities these essential social constructs that had ensured survival. While migrants were in Singapore to earn money, it can be argued that hard currency was still peripheral to the survival of many Asian societies, where other intangibles were used to ensure the perpetuation of life. Rites of passage from birth to death were enabled through the exchange of non-monetary currencies such as custom, obligation, giving in kind, and the support of trusted others.

Traditional Asian norms allotted everyone a place and role in life, and through codified systems of responsibility and interdependence, needs and welfare had always been met. Within these codes, giving too had its place. These codes and forms of giving made their way to Singapore with migrants as they created new social groups on the island.



The Singapore River, c. 2018,
Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



The Singapore River, c. 1948,
Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

2.1 A Key Difference between Giving and Philanthropy in Traditional Asian Cultures

A key finding of this paper is that, as we examined giving in Singapore's traditional, prewar grassroots community, it became evident that while giving dominated life, it was not the kind of giving to outside others which defines philanthropy.

Prewar Asians by and large practiced traditional giving, but it is hard to categorise these forms as *philanthropic* giving, although much of it was personally sacrificial.

This kind of giving instead appears to have been the practice of Asian social mores evolved around social survival. These were entrenched in overarching mindsets and traditional social constructs within

the community. Giving here (whether in money or in kind) went always towards first supporting the family. It was the primary duty of almost every Asian migrant. Giving went to "family," but this was not the nuclear family but very often the extended family. Giving also went towards the survival of those related by blood or marriage to oneself. There were unspoken, implicit rules of reciprocity between the giver and the recipient.

We suggest this practice was based on *social obligation*, and, as we will discuss below, was characteristic of civilisations where kinship systems were the basis of society and one's position was defined by kin.

In this way in prewar Singapore, "giving" towards survival out of obligation was a first responsibility and where much hard-earned money went first. We suggest that philanthropy – giving to outside others without expectation of return – was a *subset* of such giving, and a came *after* migrants had fulfilled their primary obligations of giving.

Our data below supports this finding. People sent vast sums to their families at home, and *later*, as they settled and their Singapore villages became home, we find people beginning to give to friends, neighbours, and towards the occasional local cause.

Of note is that giving to the family in the prewar years was of profound personal and social significance, and played a key role in a person's sense of identity. This is only an observation arising from our small data set and more can be done to prove this proposal.

2.2 The Emergence of Philanthropy in Singapore

Based on this, our data suggests that traditional giving was part of a larger social discourse that informed the lives of prewar migrants, and a *precursor* to philanthropy in the grassroots community of Singapore in the years before the Japanese Occupation. With settlement in Singapore, there was a gradual expansion of mindset to include giving to those outside the family, but this thesis can be further developed.

However there is a clearer demarcation between giving to the family and philanthropy to outside others as a new generation emerged after the Japanese Occupation. This generation was born in Singapore and thus more distanced from the homeland family than their parents. Their ties were now in the local community. This new generation tended to leave the support of the homeland family to their parents, and looked to giving towards improving life in the new land of their birth.

2.3 The Significance of Giving in Traditional Asian Societies

Here we note key points of interest that emerged as we observed how giving began to change from the prewar years through the Japanese Occupation and into the post-war years.

1. Firstly, giving was both first priority and a deeply venerated part of life for early migrants, while philanthropy, in the sense of giving money to outside others could not be immediately demonstrated in many cases in the lives of poor migrants until much later, if at all.

   Such giving to the family was often through remittances to China and India sent through complex systems. The literal value of such giving can actually be roughly quantified – it is recorded that, at one time, remittances equaled the trade deficit of China.[3] As such we see that providing for survival was a deeply *valued* part of traditional Asian life, and the intangible significance of giving by individuals cannot be underestimated. This obligation dominated the lives of many prewar migrants to Singapore and was the key feature of the giving landscape in the grassroots community.

2. Secondly and related to the first point, when looking at traditional Asian giving, we must reframe our concept of "family" to define a broader sphere of influence beyond the nuclear.

[3] Harris, 2015

In many Asian civilisations, "family" was (and still is) often *extended*. As such, in this paper, we were interpretively challenged many times, for example, as to when a remittance stopped being support for one's own family and when it morphed into being diaspora philanthropy because it bought something that a whole village benefitted from, for example providing a telephone.

Money sent from Singapore to the homeland paid for food, jobs and education, financed rites of passage, provided for weddings, and were essential funds for funerals and death rites. It is anecdotally known that one's remittance money might even go towards digging a well or paving a road through which the whole village benefited. Such giving appears to fall into the category of diaspora philanthropy because the result is public benefit, but what if the "public" all comprised one's kin? As such we must consider what terminology is appropriate when looking at the role of the gift in the traditional Asian context.

3. Thirdly, our examination of the grassroots communities showed that in Asian civilisations, *giving in kind* was a dominant form of welfare, with needs met by others sharing the load. This was a social construct, a survival mechanism and a currency in itself, with strong intangible value.

   Codified into society was the sharing out of responsibilities, with each person having a defined obligation to provide help, and reciprocity being expected. This was a key form of support. Complex social structures with organised hierarchies, roles and behaviours associated with such roles ensured that a community could function as a unit in any circumstance. In our data for example, we found that births, weddings and funerals in Malay-Muslim society were the responsibility of the village, rather than of any individual or family.

   These traditional, interlocking forms of mutual interdependence were called upon time and again, even more so as communities transferred themselves to Singapore.

4. A fourth point to bear in mind is the highly diverse nature of Singapore's population throughout the period of study. This is important in that our data is reflective of only a part of a society with multiple giving practices. Each ethnic group brought to Singapore its own beliefs and world views with evolved concepts of the place of giving, both in a personal capacity, and within the community. This paper has only managed to isolate some of the best remembered examples of giving among a plethora of practices, so we must note with apology that many other expressions of giving have not been examined as yet.

   As a final note we ask the audience to consider how philanthropy, as it emerges later, was only a *subset* of a larger scenario of traditional Asian giving.

In the overall story among the grassroots community, giving was first about giving back, with great responsibility taken on and expected towards one's family first, the community next, and unknown others last, if at all.

As our findings journey beyond the prewar period, we begin to see how philanthropy – where one could use one's money *independently* of these first obligations – begins to find its place as an extension of the traditional, as time, modernity, and changing circumstances began to impact the life of former migrants.

3. Giving in Prewar Singapore (1919-1942)



Life in Sago Lane, Chinatown, Singapore 1920
Lim Choo Sye Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

This chapter covers the period that is the least well documented of our three eras due to the mobility and general illiteracy of the community. As such the focus here was first to gather primary data, and then analyse it for examples of philanthropy. What we found was unexpected.

The key finding from this period is that while there are few examples of personal philanthropy, giving was, nonetheless, the *primary* concern of most migrants. It was the reason many were in Singapore in the first place – to earn money to send home.

While such giving was gladly done, a later analysis of motivations suggests that much of such giving was *obligatory*. There was, of course, a personal and passionate need to help one's immediate family, but many also took on the responsibility of supporting their extended family as part of their burden too.

Duty to help each other in many ethnic groups by giving in kind was also a cornerstone of much giving in kind reproduced in Singapore where Asian traditions called on all members to play a part to form a safety net for the group.

We suggest this kind of giving – personal and to the community – can be termed "socially obligated giving," with the givers acting in their capacity as "social persons" as defined by Mauss (1925) (see "The Social Person" and socially obligated giving later in this chapter).

3.1 The Grassroots Community in Prewar Singapore

The term "grassroots" has become an accepted part of Singapore terminology today, often used to describe the majority population who are also frequently referred to as the nation's "heartlanders."[4] The use

[4] Peculiar to Singapore is that leaders of these said heartlanders are actually termed "grassroots leaders" and can be found in the current Government Directory.

of such terminology while deliberately emotive is in this instance quite apt, connoting people "... both anchored and anchoring ... rugged [and] frequently trampled over ..." (Ruesga, 2015).

"Hardy" is a good description for the many migrants who converged on Singapore to work in the early to mid-20th Century. It is remembered today that this "pioneer generation"[5] – the grandparents of the citizens of Singapore today – were willing to work in dire conditions for very little, living sometimes 10 to a room, without running water, electricity or a sewage system. They came largely from China, British India (the "Raj"), the Dutch East Indies, and as far off as Baghdad, Yemen, North Asia and Europe.

Providing labour and trade at every level in a still third-world city, they were the invisible backbone that literally built much of what is Singapore today. This migrant/settler population trebled in our period of study from under half a million to one-and-a-half million people by the time of self-government in 1959.

Year	Chinese	Malays	Indians	Others	Total
1901	164,041	35,988	17,047	9,768	226,842
1911	219,577	41,806	27,755	14,183	303,321
1921	315,151	53,595	32,314	17,298	418,358
1931	418,640	65,014	50,811	23,280	557,745
1947	729,473	113,803	71,927	22,941	938,144
1957	1,090,596	197,059	129,510	28,764	1,445,929

Source: Saw, 1970, p. 29

Table 1. Distribution of Singapore's Resident Municipal Population by Race, 1901-1957

Ethnic Diversity and the Start of Families

Singapore's growing prewar population was majority Chinese but was by no means homogenous as was explained earlier.

The main racial groups still distinguished themselves as geo-topographically, linguistically, or religiously separate groups. This was noted in the 1931 Census of the Straits Settlements. The Chinese comprised five main "tribes"; the Malay-Muslims had 17 different groupings, and those from South Asia were sorted into at least 11 discrete communities (Vlieland, 1932).

Diversity was apparent in every corner of the island. Communities still proudly retained their nuanced ethnic distinctions. For example, one might hear among the Malay-Muslims: "I'm Javanese from Central Java" or "I'm from Bali, but my father was Dayak". Only those from Peninsular Malaya would call themselves "Malay".

With the inflow of women due to loosening migration laws in China and India,[6] Singapore changed from a mainly bachelor group from the 1920s onwards to a more stable community with families and children.

British Colonial Policy and Enclave Living

The colonial policy of Divide and Rule encouraged living in ethnically divided enclaves, made evident in early town planning by Stamford Raffles and perpetuated by later civil servants through the years.

This policy encouraged migrants to group together in ethnically and linguistically similar settlements all over the island, although the tiny space that is Singapore meant that no ethnic group could remain completely isolated, and much fraternizing on an informal and superficial level occurred. Employees met Europeans at work, housewives met each other at the market, service needs brought all people together for repairs, goods, trade, and exchange. At this time the lingua franca was a patois remembered as "Bazaar Malay" used to communicate among the many people groups.

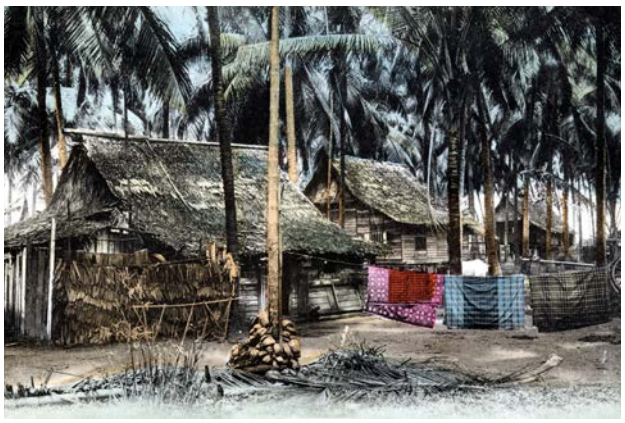
[5] Again, the cohort of now elderly folk who came to Singapore in our period of study have their own social classification; they are called the "pioneer generation" of Singapore and are provided with benefits by the government in acknowledgement of their hard work in building Singapore as a young nation.

[6] The colonial Government began to put quotas to favour the immigration of women to Singapore to balance the gender ratio. Examples include the Immigration Restriction Ordinance, 1928, and the Aliens Ordinance, 1933.

Year	Total	Chinese	Malays	Indians
1901	2,938	3,871	1,279	4,129
1911	2,453	2,790	1,172	4,914
1921	2,044	2,123	1,230	5,021
1931	1,713	1,656	1,161	5,189
1947	1,217	1,132	1,208	2,903
1957	1,117	1,039	1,101	2,001

**Per 1,000 females, Resident Population Only*
Source: Saw, 1970, p. 32

Table 2. Population of Singapore Sex Ratio by Race, 1901-1957



Kampong in Singapore, c. 1910
Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (This image is reproduced from a postcard).

The racially segregated enclaves had long ago overflowed into villages known throughout Singapore as "kampongs" (Malay for village) and patchy communities were scattered along the main arterial roads, including Serangoon, Bukit Timah Road, and the East Coast, radiating outward from the General Post Office (GPO) which marked the centre of Singapore life.

Settlement Patterns

People went where work could be found and lodged where they could. The Chinese congregated in Chinatown as merchants, labourers, and factory workers and in other vocations providing the myriad services needed in the growing port city. They later moved out to the new factory areas where pineapple canning and leather tanning needed workers. Domestic workers – cooks, nannies, slave girls and maids – might stay in houses owned by the wealthy all over the island. The Chinese could also be found in rural pepper and rubber plantations in scattered kampongs, rearing livestock and growing vegetables alongside neighbours as varied as Malay-Muslim fishermen and Indian dairymen.

Tamil workers brought in a century ago as convicts, and colonial support staff ended up in multiple self-demarcating enclaves in South Bridge Road and Serangoon Road, with tea sellers, washermen, small merchants and money lenders living cheek by jowl. Meanwhile bankers, financiers and traders rubbed shoulders with the land-wealthy Arabs and Jews in the city areas. The wealthiest often had several abodes, one near the seething Singapore River, with others on the sea coast alongside the long-established Straits Chinese from Malacca and Penang.

British civil servants including English-speaking communities from the British Raj – for example the Sepoys and the military crew, Sikhs, Malayalees and Ceylonese – were housed in civil service bases, near docks, military bases, railways, shipping and in Sepoy Lines.

Malay-Muslims settled all over the island depending on ethnicity and occupation. Fishermen were found in Kranji and the islands south of Singapore. The Baweanese (Boyanese) from the horse-rearing island of Bawean grouped in Kampong Kapor to service the many horse-associated trades, while the Javanese, including printers, teachers and scholars, could be found in Kampong Java and Arab Street. The wealthy Arabs resided with other Malay-Muslims in Geylang, but often also had holiday houses along the coast, while the Bugis operated out of nearby Kampong Bugis.

The Need for Self-Reliance

British colonial policy was deliberately hands-off with regard to the hordes of migrants who surged down the gangplanks in search of work every day. The policy of non-intervention translated to "You're on your own, chaps", and a social welfare policy only appeared after World War II in 1946.

This lack of provision for the growing local population meant that for support migrants naturally fell back on their traditional community social systems. Such

systems were especially valuable as new families created new new needs for schools, clinics, rites, employment and basic living support, especially during the years of the Great Depression.

Common Occupations

In terms of finances, most in the prewar grassroots community were just getting by. They took work where they could find it, often without plans to stay longer than they had to. Many had set out from desperate circumstances at home to send a wage home. Some were sojourners, like those intending one day to save enough money in Singapore to make the pilgrimage to Mecca. For many, Singapore was a way station towards wealth, in the island, or "up country" in the hinterland of the Federated Malay States.

Our grassroots community were thus the large, hidden labour force that built roads and served the city, port and outlying plantations. Among them you would find domestic workers including the *amahs*, labourers like the *Samsui* women, coolies and road layers, police, washermen (*dhobis*), clerks, *syces* (horse groomers who became cart drivers then car drivers) , *doodhwallahs* (dairymen), farmers, fishermen, cattle herders, housewives, simple traders, small merchants, *mamak* shopholders (corner shops tucked into niches) and the myriad others who provided services and food. They made clogs, sewed clothes, cooked along the roadside, trudged the streets hawking food, or offered tinkering and repairs.

Ultimately Singapore's prewar grassroots community was a collection of migrants from everywhere trying to build their lives in shacks, huts, quarters or crowded shophouses across the island. Life was very hard.

Many appeared to have had every intention of making their fortunes in Singapore and then going home to retire with wealth. Such dreams were threatened by major wars and national upheavals, but throughout these years the new migrants kept up ties with their families at home. As such, many prewar migrants did not so much settle as keep one foot in Singapore and the other in their homelands.

The average labourer, like the well-remembered *Samsui* women, might earn 50 to 60 cents a day, consistent with news reports on the earnings of Tamil road workers of the same time (Gee, 2008). One Straits Dollar in 1906 was worth 28 pence in the United Kingdom at that time, so using this as a standard, a general worker earned 14 pence a day.

Referring to Tables 3 and 4 below, one can see that in real terms, life was very hard for the grassroots community when you see how much a labourer spent on basic necessities out of how much he earned each day.

Table 3. Real Per Capita Private Consumption Expenditure by Standard in Singapore (Selected Years)

(A) 1899-1939 (1914 Prices)

Consumption Standard / Major Object of Consumption	European Standard (1930) $	Eurasian Standard (1930) $	Asiatic Clerical Standard (1930) $	Malay Labour Standard (1936) $	Chinese Labour Standard (1936) $	Indian Labour Standard (1933) $
Food and Groceries	434.85	141.39	133.49	91.68	95.45	96.88
Beverages and Tobacco	100.82	5.08	5.08	6.95	5.55	10.55
Clothing	206.01	22.32	22.32	10.61	10.47	8.80
Rent	112.68	28.17	28.17	3.50	4.42	5.97
Domestic Servants	428.52	15.70	15.70	Not applicable	Not applicable	Not applicable
Transport (Other than Railway)	225.12	30.99	30.99	Not applicable	Not applicable	Not applicable
Clubs	140.48	Not applicable	Not applicable	Not applicable	Not applicable	Not applicable

(B) 1947-60 (1914 Prices)

Consumption Standard / Major Object of Consumption	European Standard (1948) $	Malay Clerical Standard (1948) $	Chinese Indian and Eurasian Clerical Standard (1948) $	Malay Labour Standard (1949) $	Chinese Labour Standard (1949) $	Indian Labour Standard (1949) $
Food and Groceries	344.90	124.95	116.12	89.20	105.71	121.07
Beverages and Tobacco	175.21	5.12	5.12	9.56	8.70	9.29
Clothing	246.65	14.96	14.11	12.39	13.92	8.08
Rent	145.99	13.13	13.13	4.49	6.46	5.67
Domestic Servants	442.68	35.24	35.24	Not applicable	Not applicable	Not applicable
Transport (Other than Railway)	309.60	53.38	47.46	Not applicable	Not applicable	Not applicable
Clubs	102.68	Not applicable	Not applicable	Not applicable	Not applicable	Not applicable

Estimated as Expenditure in Straits Dollars per year

Source: Sugimoto, I (2011), Economic Growth of Singapore in the Twentieth Century: Historical GDP Estimates and Empirical Investigations, Singapore: World Scientific. P.62

Table 4. A Labourer's Specimen Monthly Budget (1933)

Items		Amount	Unit of Quantity	Price in Cents per Gantang, Chupak or Kati	Cost (Straits $)
Food					**3.855**
	Rice	6	Gantang	20	1,200
	Salt	1.5	Chupak	3	0.045
	Chillies	0.5	Kati	17	0.085
	Coriander	0.75	Chupak	6	0.045
	Tamarind	1.5	Kati	7	0.105
	Dhal	1.5	Chupak	12	0.180
	Green peas	1	Chupak	8	0.080
	White beans	0.5	Chupak	10	0.050
	Onions	1	Kati	6	0.060
	Garlic	0.5	Kati	8	0.040
	Thalippu	0.5	Chupak	24	0.120
	Pepper	1.25	Chupak	5	0.060
	Turmeric	1.25	Chupak	16	0.040
	Curry masala				0.040
	Coconut oil	1	Bottle	10	0.100
	Salted fish	1	Bottle	19	0.190
	Mutton	1	Kati	48	0.480
	Vegetables				0.400
	Potatoes	1	Kati	5	0.050
	Coffee	1	Tin	12	0.120
	Sugar	1	Kati	4.5	0.045
	Tin milk	1	Tin	18	0.180
	Gingelly oil	0.5	Bottle	28	0.140
Tobacco					**0.420**
	Betel nut and tobacco				0.420
Clothing					**0.250**
	Clothing				0.250
Per-capita Adult Consumption					**4.525**

Source: Annual Report, Johore (1933), Labourer's Specimen Monthly Budget (1933), p.27.

The Two Foci of Giving in Singapore's Prewar Grassroots Community

Our findings show migrant giving efforts had two key foci: sending money to families through remittances; and supporting each other through ancient systems of giving in kind.

But was this kind of giving philanthropy?

Albert Ruesga defines "grassroots philanthropy" in the Western world thus:

> "... the giving of time, money, and other forms of support by ordinary citizens to one another and the collective activities of their own communities, defined either by geography, identity, or interest" (Ruesga, 2012).

Superficially, this definition perfectly describes how traditional Asian support systems worked. Associations in Singapore across ethnicities indeed defined membership by geography, identity and trade; furthermore giving, whether in money or in kind, was self-limited to one's own people group.

There is, however, a crucial difference between Ruesga's definition and giving in traditional Asian support systems. This is that in the former, giving is presumed to be voluntary. In the latter, we posit that giving was *obligatory.*

We thus propose that prewar giving which was largely obligatory, and falls *outside* the definition of philanthropy. It was part of a greater schema of constructs evolved over millennia to ensure the survival of the race.

3.2 Identity as a "Social Person," and Socially-Obligated Giving

The Social Person as the Primary Identity of Many Traditional Asians

In this paper, it is proposed that such giving was due to many Asians having an inalienable, primary identity as a *social person*, defined by kinship relations.

Marcel Maus (1925, in Carrier, 1991), who made this identification, explains how this was especially so for those in …

> "…**societies dominated by kinship relations and groups**, which define transactors[7] and their relations and obligations to each other. In gift transactions [the giving of items of value in that community], *objects are inalienably associated with the giver, the recipient, and the relationship that binds them…*
>
> "Denying these obligations denies the existence of a social relationship with the other party and hence violate public expectation and private belief." (Emphases by author. Carrier, 1991)

Many of our migrants came from exactly such societies. In China's traditional Confucian society, an entire village was a large patriarchal kinship group proud of its ancestry. Everyone had his place and one's fate from birth to death was to walk the path determined by one's birth.

Thus *one's identity was who you were in the kinship system.*

This place was defined by birth position, gender, lineage and marriage, and codified in kinship terminology.[8] Starting from X, every person connected to X had a defined place and kinship tie and an associated honorific, such that one could tell exactly how others were related to X. This was codified to such an extent that people in Chinese families were seldom called by their first names but by their connection to X, for example "Da Ee" defined one as being the oldest sister of one's mother. Across China these same identifying honorifics had been used for millennia.

Based on this definition, we suggest that many of Singapore's early migrants were in their own minds firstly such *social persons* with an inalienable identity as circumscribed by kinship ties.

Social Obligation in Asian Societies

Each such inalienable identity came with a positional relationship to kin that *bound* them. Every position (eldest to youngest, by gender or generation) came with implicit and nuanced obligations as to how and what one should give and receive as was appropriate for that position.

One example that resonates across Asia even today is the social person that is the eldest son. The eldest son's obligation to support his parents and all his siblings (especially if his mother were a widow), whether at home or abroad, was and remains today an ingrained responsibility not to be cast aside lightly.[9]

Mauss's definition describes the obligation of child to parent as being *inalienable*, which is still respected in Asia today. Even more onerous, the obligation to give from child to parent was reinforced by "public expectation and private belief" and to *fail* to give was a shocking show of disrespect tantamount to denying a sacred tie.

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[7] Transactors are all parties in the relationship group who are bound by obligation to both give and receive from each other. For example, in a Chinese family a child is obligated to support his parents and a parent is obligated to receive money from the child.

[8] The Chinese naming system, also typed anthropologically as Sudanese, is one of the most complex and definitive in the world. In this system every person is assigned a term that identifies one by gender, birth position, generation and lineage (either paternal or maternal); the honorific changes depending on who is using it within the kinship group.

[9] The position of the eldest son and his obligation to his parents, especially his mother, was the source of a multitude of teachings and moralising in many Asian cultures. The position of his wife as a grievously ill-treated daughter-in-law was a particularly popular topic for heart-rending tales from ancient Chinese literature to Bollywood today. Another popular theme is the life of a mother as either cruel or excluded by a new daughter-in-law.

The key purpose of migrants being in Singapore was to fulfil their obligations as *transactors*, to be able to give toward the survival of the family. Among Malay-Muslims, one might even add honour to obligation as one was also shaped and tied to the social group or ethnic community by intense pride and religious belief.

The obligation to support the bloodline is derived from Asia's ancient civilisations and belief systems. Giving, its meaning, the obligations involved, and how it was expressed evolved out of necessary self-reliance, reinforced by beliefs, values, world views and customs through the centuries.

In traditional Confucian China, such obligation was based on the Confucian Code of Ethics and the cult of ancestor worship going back two millennia. These created a patrilineal society with two key obligations set in stone:

- Filial piety (the obligation of son to father), and
- Mutual aid (help between brothers) (Tai Landa, 2015).

Our research identified such mutual aid and lateral support in formal and informal social support systems that wove in and out of many ethnic groups, with each generation and gender in an ethnic group knowing its responsibilities. Transplanted to Singapore, the rules were changed as people regrouped into associations that approximated social systems from home with new members assuming the role of fictive kin.

The resulting matrix of dependable obligatory mutual help created a safety net that ensured that most in the community could live with dignity, even without much money, as the group carried the load and everyone's small contributions together allowed life, rites, weddings, births and deaths to be appropriately celebrated.[10]

The Traditional Asian Family Versus the Modern Nuclear Family

Here we highlight again a key difference in how the concept of family is perceived today especially in modern Western society versus what family meant (and often still means) in traditional Asian society. For Asian migrants, "family" frequently meant the extended family.

Giving would flow outward from immediate kin then to paternal and maternal kin and very often relations by marriage as well. The responsibility to one's father's parents and his relations were particularly important. Thus the recipients in traditional Asian families were a far bigger group than that of the nuclear family of the West.

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[10] **Giving to the dearly departed – when generosity extends to those who have passed on.**

Story recounted courtesy of June Hoo.

There was no thinking twice for the late Hoo Yong Chuan when it came to giving to family, kin and the people around him.

To those who knew him, Mr. Hoo was generous to a fault. He had made his way from Shanghai to Hong Kong to Singapore, leaving China when Mao Zedong drove out the Kuomintang in 1949. With one year of studies left at university, he still made a successful career as a builder. He was married to Lily, a Singaporean.

Mr. Hoo gave unstintingly to his parents and siblings throughout his life. How he gave shows the depth of both his attachment to his family, and his deep sense of responsibility towards them. He was the first-born son. He gave his mother a diamond choker he received as payment for a home he built. He bought his parents a new flat in Hong Kong to live closer to a daughter. He sponsored the studies of his two youngest siblings; one became a nurse in Canada and the youngest earned his bachelor's, master's and PhD in chemistry from American universities. When asked, Mr. Hoo never failed to open his wallet. Employees and friends asked him for help to pay for the university education of their children, which he always did.

Mr. Hoo was not a religious man. He never participated in any form of ancestor worship nor burnt any hell notes during the seventh month of the "hungry ghosts".

Despite this, he acted immediately when called upon by a relative in a dream.

One night in the 1980s, Mr. Hoo dreamt about a relative who had died in China and was now apparently in dire straits and suffering in the afterlife. The next morning, Mr. Hoo dispatched his equally secular wife to Waterloo Street in downtown Singapore to purchase the necessary offerings which they burnt in Chinese rites to send to the deceased.

Even though Mr. Hoo had left China in 1949, he still felt obligated to give to a departed relative in Shanghai, who appeared in his dream more than 30 years later asking for help.

Complicating this further in terms of definition, help to the "family" could even overflow to benefit the entire village who might all be considered blood kin; in China, villages were patrilineal or defined by descent from a common ancestor.[11] Anecdotally, migrants might often find themselves paying for the well-being of unknown others – a wedding for a niece, the birth of a cousin's child, or the medical bills of one's father's great-uncle. Some even paid for wells or televisions, which were enjoyed by everybody in the village.

This type of giving obviously cannot be considered to be philanthropy. But the question arises as to when such giving moves into the realm of *diaspora* philanthropy. Discussion is invited to provide more clarity in this area which is beyond the scope of this paper.

3.3 Dominant Giving Practices in Prewar Singapore

In terms of the common focuses of giving in prewar Singapore, our data suggests that such *socially obligated* giving took place at two levels:

1. At the **personal level** through remittances; and
2. At the **community level** where people came together to provide support primarily through giving in kind.

   In these traditional community welfare, support, or mutual aid systems we have identified two systems:

   1. **Formal systems** in which one paid a fee to gain acceptance; and
   2. **Informal systems** where giving was obligatory and reciprocated, but where no fee was required to belong to the group.

3.3.1 Personal Giving: Remittances

Remittances were the major form of personal giving in prewar Singapore – the first obligation that must be fulfilled by one whose primary identity was a child in a family. It was a proud thing to be able to send money home, and it was also often out of necessity to earn such money that a person was in Singapore in the first place. It was such a major part of society that newspapers carried articles on the latest and fastest ways of remitting money, and cheating of hard-earned wages by local companies drew the ire of occasional outraged editorials.

Remittances cannot be ignored in our discussion of giving practices given the sheer amount of funds allocated by many to this form of support and for the priority placed upon it. The remittance system was a transnational social support system created by migrants, which kept them connected to their homeland via complex networks, and the funds were vital to the survival of family at homes far away in China and across the Indian subcontinent.

The remittance business was supported by immense networks and entire communities. Remittance networks could be as humble as a group of sworn sisters who sent money home via each other, to giant international business chains, employing currency brokers, agents and banks, and served by letter writers and carriers. By the 1920s, each community and ethnic group had developed its own remittance systems and migration journeys were often tied to the networks remittance businesses as migrants followed known paths to new lands.

Remittances from the Indian (South Asian) Community

The high fragmentation of the South Asian community in 1920s Singapore has made gathering data on remittances difficult.

What we do know is South Asian labour systems were well established by the 20th Century and might be the informal *Hawala* system or the *Hundhi* system of exchange, which was less likely in the case of poorer workers. It was common practice by this time for South Asian communities to send just the men out to work for a few years on rotation while their wives and families stayed at home. Some had

[11] Even in post-Mao China, it has been anecdotally recounted that children who work in cities still send money back to villages to provide for their families. Proud parents have been known to display banners from the village head praising such children who have sent money to repair a road or other infrastructure.

workers sign on for a set number of years and it was agreed at the start that half their pay would be automatically docked and sent back to their families. This left workers in Singapore with just a few cents on which to get by.

This characteristic of male dominance remained a feature of life in Singapore's South Asian community until well after World War II. Statistics show an unbalanced male to female ratio among the South Asian population even up till the 1950s as the preference remained for women to stay at home with the family.

The remittances sent home were vital and considerable. We have not found exact data on remittance monies sent from Singapore by South Asians during this period, but occasional news articles of the day mentioned vast sums of money remitted. In 1929, the Malaya Tribune reported that a small group of 6,633 labourers alone remitted an astounding 3,761,538 rupees.[12] This is a tremendous amount of money, given that the standard minimum wage for one labourer in the same year was the 50 Straits cents a day mentioned above.[13]

Unfortunately, data at the time of writing is still fragmented and in the vernacular, so we turn to the Chinese community for a better understanding of remittances.

Remittances from the Chinese Community

Remittances were and still are known to be the lifeblood of many traditional economies. In prewar Singapore, the Chinese faithfully sent back staggering amounts of money from meagre pay packets, living a frugal life themselves in the colony in order to provide for aging parents and growing children at home. Many continued to do so well up to the Cultural Revolution in China, sending clothes and food along with money.

The Vital Role of Remittances to China

The money sent to China reached a peak in the prewar decades and almost balanced China's trade deficit in 1920 (Harris, 2015). The following decade saw much money sent for pure survival as Japan invaded China and many families were in grim circumstances. Vast sums were sent for war relief during the second Sino-Japanese War in 1937. When the Japanese invaded Singapore on February 15, 1942, all remittances were stopped, and it was a dreadful three years before they could resume. It is known that at least one family in China starved to death when vital funds from Singapore dried up in those years (Singh, 2012).

Table 5. Chinese Remittances from Singapore to China, 1928-1939

Year	Month	Remittance Amount in Chinese Yuan
1928	June	728,000 (worth approximately USD $101,920 in 1928)
	November	1,300,000
1929	November	113,165
1931	August	10,000
1937	September	820,000
1939	January	2,000,000
	March	3,650,000

Source: Collated from articles in the *Singapore Free Press and Merchandising Advertiser,* 1928-1939.

Remittances resumed as early as November 1945 as families tried desperately to reconnect[14] after the war, but the amounts sent back would never again reach such intense levels as those before the war. Both the Japanese Occupation and the ensuing civil war in China had devastated families in both lands such that any money one had went to buying food and for immediate needs at home. There just was not that much money to send.

[12] Malaya Tribune. (1929, December 9). *Indians in Malaya*, p. 2. The closest known conversion rate of the INR to the gold standard in 1947, when 1 sterling £ was equivalent to 13.3 INR. Using a very loose estimate of how much was sent back (and giving much latitude for inflation and rates of exchange) we know that if 3,761,538 had been sent back in 1947 it would have been worth £282,185.90

[13] Ibid.

[14] The Straits Times. (1945, November 17).

Table 6. Chinese Remittances from Singapore to China, 1946-1960

Year	Month	Remittance Amount in Malayan Dollars
1946	August & September	11,471,516 (worth approximately £1,338,343.53 in 1939)
	December	1,891,584
1947	January-December	16,988,059
1948	January	2,690,344
	March	1,000,000
	August	300,000
	October	961,399
1949	May	90,906
1950	March	500,000
1951	June	1,977,308
	July	2,229,440
	August	1,235,122
1953	June	1,090,720
	July	1,328,585
1960	May	709,243
	June	743,538

Source: Collated from articles in the *Singapore Free Press and Merchandising Advertiser,* 1946-1960.

The Chinese Remittance System

The Chinese remittance system was a highly evolved one whereby one could send money home. This is summarised here but for greater detail please see **Appendix B**.

The remittance process in China was a thriving business by the 20th Century, and migrants had many options from which to choose. One could entrust it to friends, but more often corner shops or restaurants could remit money as well. The most formal option was the *Qiapiju*, or overseas letter offices, of which there were 280 in Singapore. These offered highly efficient services that included the telegraphic transfer of money, services such as letter writing, delivery and reading letters to families, and the offer of a letter by return mail (Harris, 2015).[15]

Money in hand, many illiterate migrants would pay for the services of a letter writer who would write a formal and florid letter to accompany one's money. These were always the same – formally addressed, always stating the amount of money enclosed, and the name of the recipients.



A traditional letter writer, Chinatown, Singapore, c. 1950
David Ng Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

[15] A comprehensive examination of the evolution of the *Qiapiju* is presented in Harris, L. J. 2015. Overseas Chinese remittance firms, the limits of state sovereignty, and transnational capitalism in East and Southeast Asia, 1850s–1930s. The Journal of Asian Studies, 74(1), p. 129-151.

Businesses overseas cannily learnt to transfer money telegraphically, and use the cash locally for their own purposes. The sender however would remain ignorant and trusted that his money would be reunited with his letter in China by branch offices there. Once in China, the local delivery service would read one's letter to the recipient and disburse the money as instructed, typically to parents with some for siblings and other relations. Although some services might have been efficient, remitting money was still a chancy affair given the chaotic currency exchange system across Asia in the 1930s.

There were many unlicensed operators who incited outrage for their ruthless cheating of honest workers. In 1939 several articles in Singapore newspapers, citing the plight of an *amah* who was cheated of half a lifetime of savings, appealed to the government to intervene in the matter of the exchange rate of rupees and "Chinese dollars". "The greed of unscrupulous merchants … Can nothing be done?" was the outcry from the public.[16] Extraordinarily, to this day families in China are anecdotally known to make demands of kin in Singapore (usually very elderly men), who still feel obliged to respond with appropriate gifts of money to even unknown kinsfolk or children of long-dead relations.[17]

3.3.1.1 The Remittance Letters of Liu Shi Zhao[18]

What was it like to live in those times? What was the life of a migrant labourer like in prewar Singapore?

Through the translations of one set of remittance letters sent from 1936 to 1972, we can now "hear" first-hand the voice of Mr. Liu Shi Zhao, and sit vicariously next to his mother as she opened each letter to hear from her son in Singapore.

Through these letters we are able to reconstruct Mr. Liu's life below. A complete summary of the contents of Mr. Liu's letters can be found in **Appendix C,** while key letters are translated in **Appendix D.**

Translation of the first letter sent by Liu Shi Zhao, 1936[19]

Date of issue: 24th day of the 7th lunar month of Bingzi year (September 9, 1936)

Dearest Mother, I kneel before you with all respect and humbly report on the following:

I arrived in Singapore (Silat) on the 22nd day of the month. It was a safe journey so do not worry. Attached I remit four national currency dollars to you and do check the amount when the remittance arrives. I am now staying at Liu Fuji Workers Squatter (sic) in Temple Street, China Town.

For your information, please. I will report more in my next letter.

With best regards

24th day of the 7th lunar month of Bingzi year

Your son, Shi Zhao

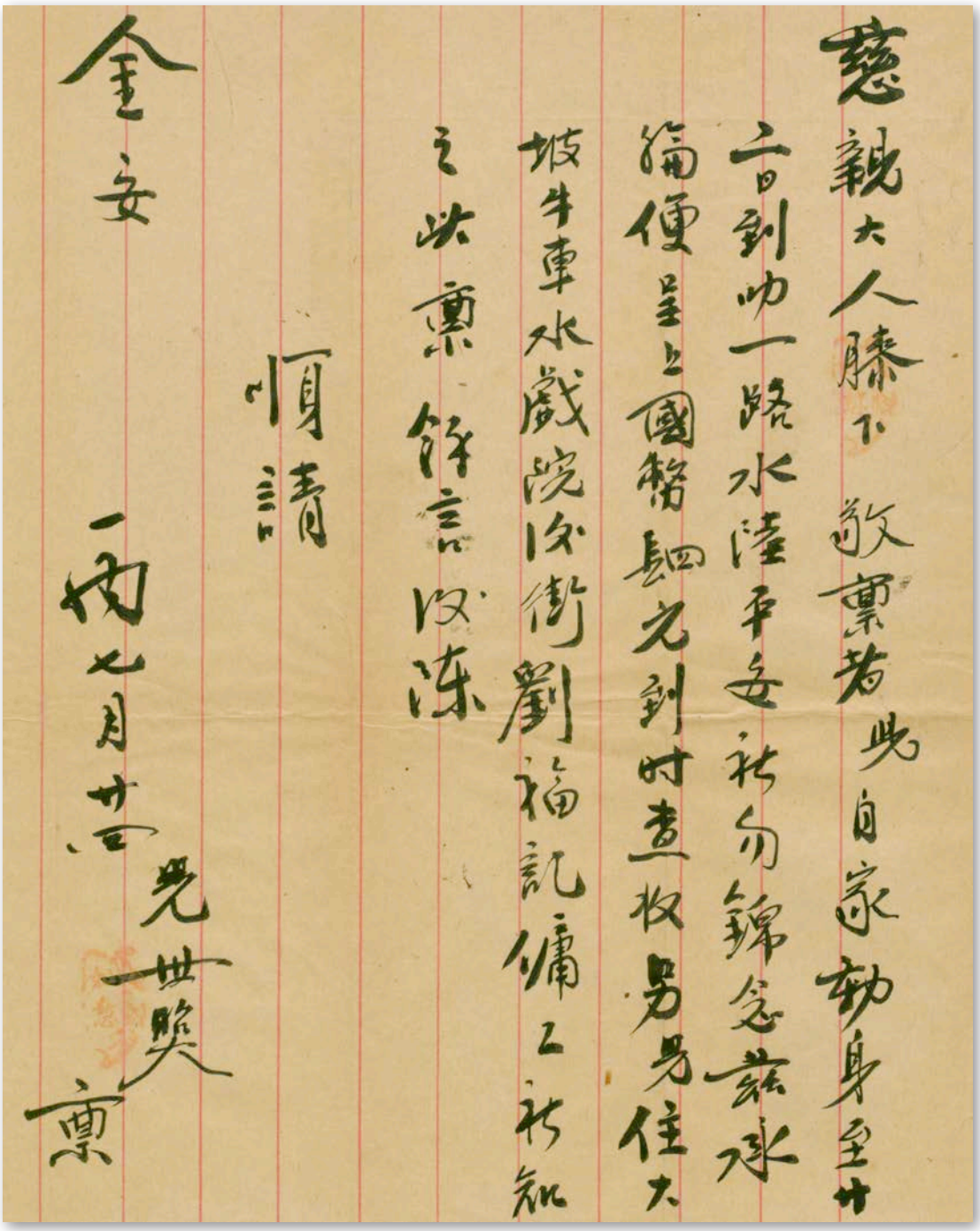
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[16] The Straits Times. (1939, August 28). *Chinese dollars in Singapore. An amah cheated over the rate of exchange*, p. 17.

[17] As recounted by Carol Liew, whose elderly father still receives demands of money from unknown relations in China.

[18] Forty-seven letters from Liu Shi Zhao sent between 1936 and 1972 from Singapore were translated and interpreted by Ng Sin Yue from the original letters and envelopes. They are from the Koh Seow Chuan Collection – a collection of letters sent by Teochew men from Singapore – in the National Library of Singapore.

[19] National Library of Singapore Reference number: 040002230, KSC Collection



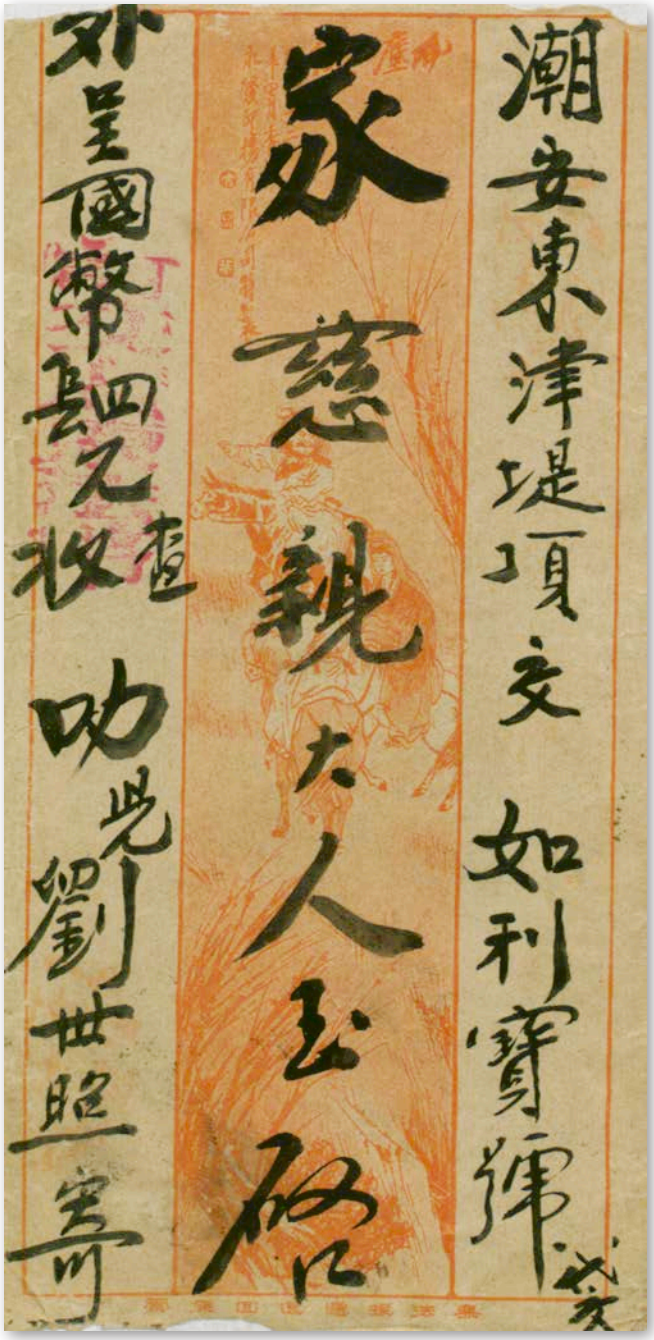
First remittance Letter from Liu Shi Zhao
Koh Seow Chuan Collection, National Library of Singapore, (Ref no 040002230).

2) Written on the envelope:

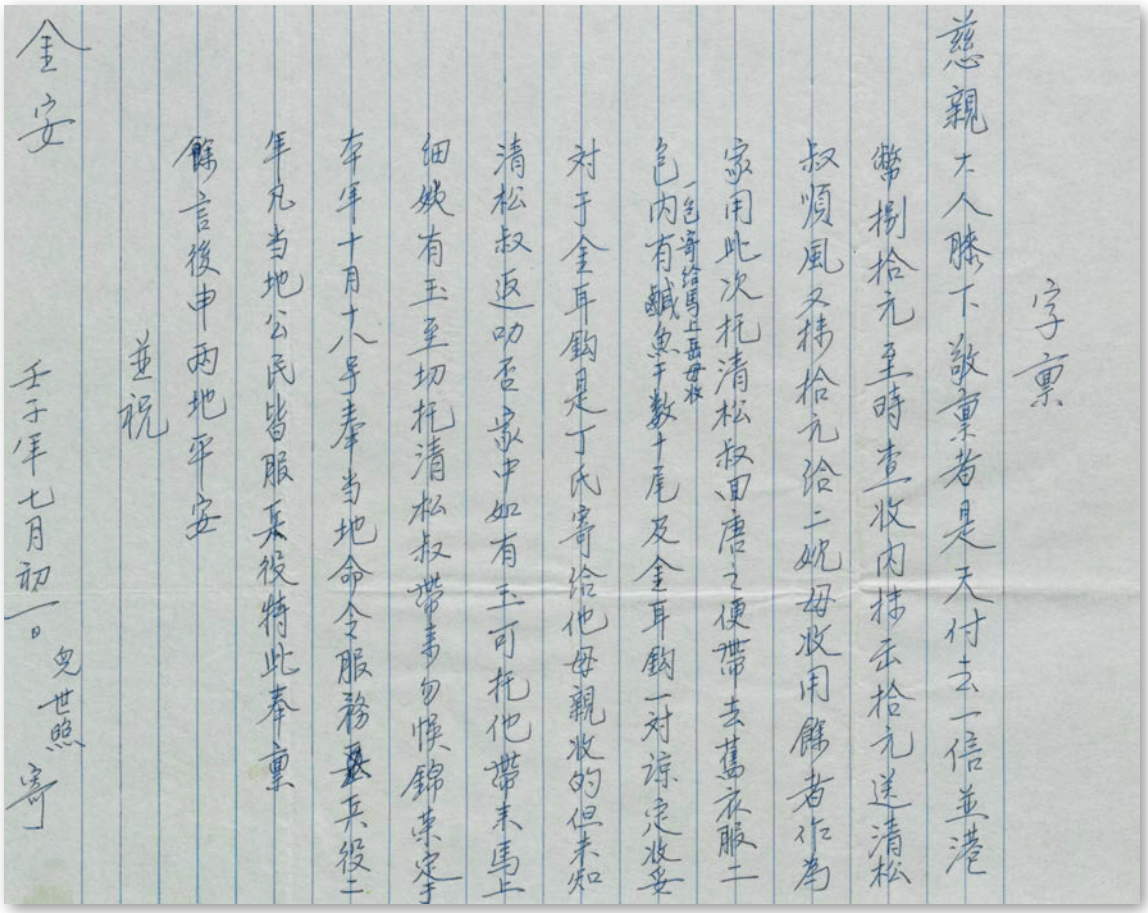
To:
My Dearest Mother
c/o Ru Li Bao Hao, Dong Jin Di Ding, Chao An
(Enclosed national currency four dollars as remittance)

From:
Son Liu Shi Zhao, Silat (Singapore)

3) Postal stamps: (Not clear)



Envelope enclosing first letter of Liu Shi Zhao
Koh Seow Chuan Collection, National Library of Singapore.



Remittance Letter from Liu Shi Zhao
Koh Seow Chuan Collection, National Library of Singapore, (Ref no 40002191).

Translation of the 46th (last) letter sent by Liu Shi Zhao, 1972[20]

Date of issue: 1st day of the 7th lunar month, Yinzi year (August 9, 1972)

My Dearest Mother, I kneel before you with all respect and humbly report on the following:

Today I wrote you a letter and enclosed eighty Hong Kong dollars. Please check. Please give ten dollars to Uncle Qing Song as a token for his safe journey and ten dollars to 2nd Aunt. The rest will be for home expenses. I've asked Uncle Qing Song to bring two bags of old clothes with him to China: one bag is to send to my mother-in-law in Ma Shang Village. There are also dozens of salted fish and a pair of gold ear hooks. The gold ear hooks are a gift from my wife Ding Shu Duan to her mother. I wonder when Uncle Qing Song is returning to Singapore. If there is any jade at home, ask him to take them to my younger sister-in-law in Ma Shang Village. She has some jade too. Do ask Uncle Qing Song to bring all of them to me in Singapore.

Jin Rong [Mr. Liu's eldest son] is enlisting for National Service for two years from 18th October this year. In Singapore, it is mandatory for every [male] citizen to serve military service.

For your information, please. I will report more in my next letter.

I hope peace is with you in China and my family in Singapore.

With best wishes

Your son Shi Zhao on the 1st day of the 7th lunar month, Yinzi year

[20] National Library of Singapore Reference number: 40002191, KSC Collection

2) Written on the envelope:

To:
My Dearest Mother
3rd family unit in Jue Wei Gou, Dong Jin Xiang, Chao An
(Enclosed eighty Hong Kong dollars as remittance)

From:
Liu Shi Zhao, Silat (Singapore)

3) Stamp:

Yao Hua Cheng Remittance Company, Singapore



Envelope enclosing last known letter of Liu Shi Zhao
Koh Seow Chuan Collection, National Library of Singapore.

---------- Box 1 ----------

Box 1: The first and last letters of Mr Liu Shi Zhao

Transcript of the first letter Liu Shi Zhao to his mother

第一封
发信日期：丙子年七月廿四日(1936年9月9日)

家书内容：

慈亲大人膝下。敬禀者。儿自家动身至廿二日到叻。一路水陆平安。祈勿锦念。兹承轮便呈上国币肆元。到时查收。另儿住大坡牛车水戏院后街刘福记傭工。祈知之。此禀。余言后陈。

顺请

金安

丙七月廿四
儿世照禀

信封：

潮安东津堤顶交如利宝号代交
家慈亲大人玉启
外呈国币肆元查收

叻儿刘世照寄

邮戳：

(年代久远，模糊不清)

Transcript of last known letter of Liu Shi Zhao (1972)

_发信日期：壬子年七月初一（1972年8月9日）

1）家书内容：

字禀
慈亲大人膝下。敬禀者。是天付去一信并港币捌拾元。至时查收。内抹出拾元送清松叔顺风。又抹拾元给二婶母收用。余者作为家用。此次托清松叔回唐之便带去旧衣服二包。一包寄给马上（马上村？）岳母收。内有咸鱼干数十尾及金耳钩一对。谅定收妥。对于金耳钩是丁氏寄给她母亲的。但未知清松叔返叻否。家中如有玉。可托他带来马上（马上村？）细姨有玉。至切托清松叔带来无误。锦荣定于本年十月十八号奉当地命令服务兵役二年。凡当地公民皆服役。特此奉禀。余言后申。两地平安。并祝

金安

壬子年七月初一日
儿世照寄

2）信封：

潮安东津乡堀尾沟三房投交
家慈亲大人玉展
外付港币捌拾元　查收

由星加坡刘世照寄

3）邮截：

实叻耀华成朝发批局

These letters were sent with remittances and are the first and last known from a set written by Mr. Liu Shi Zhao, a Teochew who came to Singapore in 1936. We do not know if these are all of what he wrote as there are gaps in the timeline, but there is enough in his correspondence for us to reconstruct the story of his life in Singapore.

N.B. The letters themselves reflect a journey; the first were written with a brush the middle letters with fountain pen, and the last few with a ballpoint pen.

---------- End Box 1 ----------

The Life of Mr Liu Shi Zhao Interpreted through Remittance Letters Written to his Mother in China Between 1936 to 1972.[21]

Liu Shi Zhao was born in a village in Chao An, Guangdong. When he first set foot in Singapore (which he called *Silat*) in 1936, he was probably in his 30s. In his first letter when he sent $4 in national currency to his mother, he reported that he was staying in Chinatown.

At some time in 1937, he left to work in his uncle's shop in Penang when he sent home 10 silver dollars, of which only $2 were designated for his father with the rest going to his mother. Mr. Liu continued to remit silver dollars, once sending $80. We only hear that "life is hard here."

There was absolute silence from Mr Liu during the Japanese Occupation. In 1946, his mother heard that he was safe and sound in Singapore. At some point he must have returned to China to marry again although when this occurred was not mentioned. We first hear of it when, upon his return to Singapore in 1949, he told his mother that he was applying for his new wife and son to emigrate to Singapore. He was eager to start a family, reminding her that his first wife of 10 years died without bearing him any children (cause and date of death are not clear). He begged for her understanding.

Mr. Liu then applied for his wife and son to join him in Singapore as his new wife Ding Shu Duan had borne him a son, Jin Rong. To raise funds for their fare, he participated in a *tontine* (会).[22] His letters now included an allowance for Jin Rong too, whom Mr Liu was happy to hear was lively and adorable. Even better, he had received 12 photographs of Jin Rong from his wife.

In 1955, after a long wait of 16 months, Mr Liu's wife and son finally arrived and they all sent greetings to Mother. They lived at 141A, 10th Mile[23] Ponggol Road, off Upper Serangoon Road, along with a "sworn bother". Complex instructions followed regarding the buying of clog-making tools. Mr Liu was making clogs.

In 1955, Jin Rong started school and Mother heard the Lius had a daughter Jin Zhen. The colonial authorities were not permitting the migration of elderly people (here we assume that Mother would now not be able to join the Lius in Singapore). However good cheer came in the form of news that his younger sister had received a marriage proposal. Mr Liu assured his sister that even if she were not to marry, he would always provide for her and Mother.

In 1957 a second son Jin Cheng was born. In the 1960s, Mr. Liu started raising chickens and pigs for a living. In 1964, he reported the family owned 1,000 chickens, 100 ducks and two pigs.

In the last letter in the collection, Mr Lius reported that Jin Rong was enlisting for national service. He pointed out it was mandatory for every young male Singapore citizen to do so.

Observations on Giving from the Remittance Letters of Liu Shi Zhao

Mr. Liu's letters give us a glimpse into what must have been similar letters written by thousands of other migrants as they sent money back to their homes, with hope and hard work hidden behind the confining formality of the letter writer's flowery language.

Included in the 23 letters Mr Liu sent an amount totaling $333,028 in national currency, $114 in silver dollars, and $1,710 in Hong Kong dollars over the years – a very large sum of money from a man who started out by making clogs.

The letters note carefully how much was sent, and exactly what each member of the family should receive. The obligation to his family at home, care for different members of the extended family, and

[21] Forty-seven letters from Liu Shi Zhao, sent between 1936 and 1972 from Singapore, were translated and interpreted by Ng Sin Yue from the original letters and envelopes. They are from the National Library of Singapore's Koh Seow Chuan Collection, of letters sent by Teochew men from Singapore.

[22] This is possibly a reference to *tontines*, the rather insecure mutual aid form of pooling funds by a group of associates, which could be taken as a loan at inexact interest rates upon need.

[23] The General Post Office in colonial Singapore (now the Fullerton Hotel) used mile markers on key roads radiating away from it. One such road was Ponggol Road (now Punggol); the other was Bukit Timah Road.

Mr Liu's anxiety for them shine through the stilted words.

Mr Liu's story is significant in several ways. Firstly, the letters themselves tell the unvarnished story of how remittances were a critical obligation to migrants. Through these letters we see that money was sent faithfully home for *decades*. They also unfold for us the journey of a how one man managed to do this from a humble start, ending with his owning a farm with a wife and children. We read between the lines the hard work and dogged determination of migrant life.

Secondly, it is clear that even as a clog maker Mr Liu shouldered the responsibility of supporting not only his mother, but six other people as well. Even after marriage he assured his mother and sister he would always provide for them, and helped further by sending used clothes during the Cultural Revolution. This implies a deep sense of willing obligation towards their well-being.

Thirdly, with the passage of time, we see a change in Mr Liu's sense of self and a growing sense of independence. His identity expanded as he was no longer just "your son", but was now provider as a brother, nephew, husband and father, sworn brother and farmer, and finally, a citizen of Singapore. A pivotal moment of decision is captured when he stated he wanted to relocate his family to Singapore. His allegiance to Singapore as his new home was also made explicit when he reported that Jin Rong was enlisting for National Service, the duty of all Singapore citizens. It is implied that this is where his allegiance too now lay.

Despite the revelation of new facets of independence to his personhood, Mr Liu's reassurances to his family in China still underline the reliability of his *social* personhood, and that his position within the kinship system remained the same.

A full accounting of the contents of each of Mr. Liu's 47 letters could be found in **Appendix C**, while two more letters translated from the original could be found in **Appendix D**.

N.B. A peculiarity of the formal letter writing and envelope address system is that at the end of 47 letters, we are no wiser as to the name of Mr. Liu's mother. She was always just "Dearest Mother," or "the Benevolent One."

3.3.2 Traditional Community Social Support Systems

Having fulfilled obligations at the personal level, most migrants joined groups that provided one with the community of home, which became de facto family. There were many iterations of fictive kin in Singapore, from "sworn" brothers and sisters, all the way up to membership in common lineage, language, caste, religion and trade associations. Giving within such groups was often in kind, with recipients being other members of the group who were looked on as kin.

As was noted earlier, Singapore's population was without official welfare provision till 1946. An increasing need for healthcare, schools and general welfare were gamely filled by missionaries and local philanthropists of every nationality on an ad hoc basis. But these efforts were sporadic and could not fill the vacuum of welfare care needed by the growing population.

Therefore, in the end, most in the grassroots communities fell back on their ancient, traditional community support structures to see them through. Well up till self-government, the communities of Singapore were led by various organisations such as clans, *Persatuan* and other groups who met a host of needs, creating every kind of support society across the island.

Such systems, formal or informal, were not philanthropic groups, but mutual aid or insurance systems, but their *social* value was not cold monetary insurance but that of intangible *relational* value. They provided fictive kin for one – with or without a fee – allowing one to find a surrogate kinship or relational group based on trust in an alien land. Given that one originated from a framework of kinship relationships, this allowed one the safe support of a familiar social system from home.

Once admitted as a member of such a group, one received the protection, acceptance and security of help from the group as if it were one's own family. These groups generally reproduced familiar protocols of behaviour, obligation and reciprocity such that everyone knew his/her place and could rely on each other to give and receive help when needed.

Belonging to the group also gave members the ability to give to large causes as a collective. In doing so, we note that members, like Mr. Liu, gradually began to make independent choices in how they might use their money.

The Impact of the Great Depression

Originally starting as self-limiting groups with an inward focus, our research shows a change in focus occurred after the Great Depression (1929-1933). The poorer members of society suffered badly, so associations now added departments to help with the fallout such as finding jobs, paying for funerals, and offering repatriation, picking up ideas as to how to do so from other ethnic groups and the media.

We also note an evolution in the function of many groups to include ideals like members' rights, encouraged by the British right to advocacy, the leadership of English-educated local-born activists, and calls for change from the new nationalists focused on China and India.

The 1930s saw more engagement in helping local society outside the ethnic group, for example, helping those who lived in the same kampong after a fire, while unions of all kinds brought together workers not by ethnicity but occupation. These petitioned for such things as better work conditions and days off and reached a peak of activity in 1940, before the Japanese Occupation abruptly curtailed everything.

In the following section we note examples of common social support groups depending on where data could be found. Each example is only representative of a type.

Although we have separated them into formal and informal groups, the only difference in reality was that in the former, one paid a fee to belong. Otherwise both systems provided the same outcome – a group which became de facto kin away from home. Some of these groups are forgotten in modern Singapore today.

3.3.2.1 Formal Associations

Examples of some formal communities were:

1. Chinese clans and associations;
2. Funeral Associations and Benevolent Funds;
3. Baweanese Pondoks; and
4. Unions

3.3.2.1.1 Chinese Clans, *Huiguan*, and Associations

Much has been written about the histories and the contributions of the Chinese clans in Singapore which we will not reproduce in this paper. What is pertinent to our study is to make explicit the structures and codes that shaped giving and the place of the clan member as a socially obligated part of this formal system.

Tai Landa (2016) draws a relationship between the clans that overseas Chinese formed in host countries and the patrilineal, lineage-based village social structures that made up 80 percent of the community in China at the time of our study. These villages were organised economic structures based on two major belief systems – the Confucian Code of Ethics and ancestor worship – and clans in host countries were organised in the same way.

Three key principles upheld Chinese patriarchal society – first and of greatest importance was filial piety, which is the obligation of the son to the parent (generational or vertical obligation). Second came the obligation to help one's brother (lateral obligation). Third was the principle of reciprocity (互惠).

Clans and *Huiguan* in Singapore

The clan group, it must be explained, were lineage-based groups connected by common ancestry (local-lineage), or loosely connected over time through ancestry back in China. These groups shared the same surname, or came from the same locale, and spoke the same dialect.

In Singapore, clans were started as early as 1820, and were among the first groups to form as migrants came from around the region after the founding of Singapore. As such groups grew larger, the various clans came together under powerful umbrella organisations called *Huiguan.* These were aligned by dialect, and as their common goal was mutual aid and reciprocity, they were known as *pang* (帮), or "helps".

In Singapore there were *Wu Pang* (five "helps") associated with the five main dialect groups of Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese, Hakka and Hainanese.

The role of clans and similar associations was to promote good feelings (*ganching*) among members, provide mutual help and social welfare services, and support the maintenance of identity through the celebration of worship and rites. At this point, it must be noted that such *benevolent* societies had co-existed with the infamous secret societies of Singapore from the 19th Century. Early members often belonged to both.

Each clan or association used the ingrained organisational structure of China's patrilineal village system with the leader or apex member being a person of standing and wealth in the Singapore community. This apex member would be affiliated to other Chinese by virtue of social position.

While one tends to see *Huiguan* as separated by dialect and geography, research reveals that in tiny Singapore apex members met and mingled in high society, transcending traditional boundaries as members of the colonial elite. For example, the same member might be in the business community, the Legislative Council, and the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce as well. He might meet men of other dialects at dinner with the Governor and mingle with wealthy members of society outside his ethnic circle at drinks or at entertainments.

This produced a "system of interlocking mutual aid associations" that together produced cohesion in the Chinese community across dialects (Tai Landa, 2016).[24]

The Power of the *Huiguan* to Mobilise Help for the Poor

The Plight of the Hawkers

An example of these interlocking systems at work is found in 1930 when the Great Depression forced many coolies into becoming hawkers as their employers themselves fell into unemployment. These hawkers were moved along or fined the shocking amount of $10 by the police. As a group the hawkers made a representation of their grievances to the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce whose ranks included some of the most influential Chinese in Singapore.

A mass emergency meeting was called on their behalf by Mr. Lim Kim Theng J. P. who represented the lightermen[25] of Singapore. Some 120 representatives of other occupations attended this meeting and voted not only to create a guild for hawkers, but also to petition the government on their behalf for leniency.[26]

Here we note that as migrants settled into the Singapore environment, they found that under the British even the poorest had a *voice*. Here rich and poor could meet unhindered by ancient class differences, united in the drive for fair treatment and free commerce. As we see here in the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce, differences in dialects were set aside, permitting a newfound sense of cohesion among the various Chinese groups who had historically fought Singapore to a standstill in the century before.

Helping Victims of a Great Fire

The cohesion and power of the Chinese associations to provide aid as a body was shown in their response to "a great fire" in 1934.

In this instance, they leapt to the aid of nearly a thousand victims, with the Singapore Hokkien Huay Kuan (*Huiguan*) demonstrating the power of its connections. Overnight it rallied help from the Great World Amusement Park Management and the Singapore Improvement Trust to shelter the victims, and mobilised the colonial Child Welfare Society[27] to help children involved. It then followed up by hosting a charity show at Great World hoping

[24] In 19th Century Singapore, clan membership appeared to overlap with participation in secret societies (also known by the term *huay*); some well known persons were members of both. Their association with *samseng,* vice, prostitution and gambling were eventually shut down by the passing of the Societies Ordinance in 1890, but it has been noted that this might merely have led to the reorganisation of members into other associations.

[25] *Tongkang* drivers or boatmen

[26] Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser. (1930, August 18). *Lightermen and hawkers' difficulties*, p. 12.

[27] The Child Welfare Society was one of the few independent, locally run children's charities in Singapore.



Hawker selling noodles
Singapore Federation of Chinese Clan Associations Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

"... that enough funds [would] be collected to solve permanently ... the housing, vocational, education, and social problems of the fire refugees."[28] The local community could all give a few cents to attend such charity shows, which provided them a vehicle to donate collectively to big causes.

By 1959, there were some 900 clans, associations and guilds in Singapore, of which the Singapore Hokkien Huay Kuan was the most powerful.

Not all members of the poor found help though and there were those who fell through the cracks. At the height of the Great Depression, it was reported that at least one man, in despair because his family had starved to death, committed suicide by self-immolation. The coroner was reported to have been shocked that such deaths could still occur in *modern Singapore*, which went to show how out of touch the colonial government was with the grassroots. Meanwhile, the associations themselves admitted

[28] The Straits Times. (1934, August 20). *Charity show for fire victims,* p. 18.

they were limited in their abilities and the public of Singapore was chastised for their lack of charity in numerous local editorials.[29]

Providing Leadership, Opportunities and Fictive Kin

Membership in the growing number of such groups gave the poorest in the grassroots community the opportunity to be a part of collective giving to help others in need. The associations in turn provided leadership and structure to their giving. At the same time such groups helped migrants maintain their identity as social persons with fictive kin in social institutions marking their place in society.

What is notable is that by the 1930s, there was a growing sense of responsibility to society in general and the great fire showed that many across the board were willing to help unknown victims.

3.3.2.1.2 Funeral Associations and Benevolent Funds

Of the many kinds of associations that grew out of the needs of society, one stood out as being very active across all race groups in the post-Depression era – that of the Funeral Association or Benevolent Funds/Department.

Possibly started first by the Chinese clans as departments within themselves, they provided a role model to other communities, with the Muslim community following suit in forming the *Perhimponan Khairatul Islam* (Muslim Benevolent Union) in 1930. The group was created so that those "who died by the roadside" might be buried with dignity.

In 1934 it was reported that many Malayan social clubs (Singapore was then a part of Malaya) had started such departments, much sobered by the fallout of the Great Depression.

Chinese Funeral Associations

Others joined such groups to defray the costs of burying their relatives. Bound by the Confucian Code of Ethics and the ties of ancestor worship, almost all Chinese understood that no expense should be spared for the provision of funeral arrangements for one's elders .

Traditionally, Chinese funerals must be as elaborate as possible, with the immediate family dressed in sack cloth, grief stricken and wailing, and the body attended day and night for at least three days. There must be a good showing at funeral parlour, where mahjong was played all night and food provided for everyone.

It was an enormous undertaking as a massive show of attendees might reflect better on the deceased in the afterlife. The coffin was a vast affair and very costly, and should be carried in procession with many paper effigies to be burnt as offerings. As the Sunday Tribune reported,

> "How is it possible for the average clerk to afford it if a senior relative in his household passes away? The only recourse is to go to the Benevolent Society of which he is a member. The other members subscribe a fixed sum towards the cost of his relative's funeral, and he is saved from a very embarrassing situation … Such activities … go to show how well the Chinese have learnt the advantages of cooperation and mutual assistance.[30]"

The article goes on to add that the Chinese have funerals down to a science and, for a small fee, a member will find that all has been arranged for him. He only need grieve appropriately even if the arrangements for food and encoffining might be ghastly. One might even pay more for a band.

Arrangements for deaths revolved around one's role as a social person who, in the identity of primary kin, *must* fulfil the obligations for the proper worship of the soul of the departed one. It an essential responsibility to ensure that all the rites that were needed were performed so that the deceased would not starve in hell. (See the story of Mr Hoo, footnote 10).

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[29] Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser. (1933, September 4). Local Chinese are starving, p. 1.

[30] The Sunday Tribune. (1934, April 22). , p. 16.



An all-night mahjong game in Sago Lane held to keep the bereaved company during the long hours of Chinese funeral wake.
Singapore Federation of Chinese Clan Associations Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

An interesting social aside is that it was compulsory for all members of the same Benevolent Association to attend the funeral in the event of death in another member's family. In a most Chinese fashion, this obligation was underlined in that members would have to pay a fine if they failed to attend.

This was not a bad thing because the *families* of members all attended these all-night wakes as well, and housewives looked forward to the society, while young men could take the measure of eligible young ladies and vice versa at a time when marriage for love (as seen in the movies) was starting to overtake matchmaking.

The Malay-Muslim Benevolent Union

In the Malay-Muslim community, the Muslim Benevolent Union or *Perhimponan Khairatul Islam* established in 1930 was run very much along the lines of the Chinese funeral associations. Members might join for a small fee and all would attend the burials of members' kin.

It was reported that the union saw a good sign-up of 75 members in its first year. This was firstly to ensure that there would be enough people to carry the body to the burial site – as was the custom of the day – as well as ensure sufficient funds for a decent send off. But it was also hoped that this provision would ameliorate growing social pressure upon ordinary people to throw lavish parties at rites of passage – circumcisions, weddings and deaths – as was happening more frequently among the very wealthy local Malay-Muslim families many of whom were at the height of their wealth in the 1930s.

While the Chinese clans are still known today, we have discovered other quite obscure social systems among the Malay-Muslims and the South Asians also made their way to Singapore and were well established for as long as there were kampongs.

3.3.2.1.3 Baweanese *Pondoks*



A group of Baweanese, c. 1910
Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Here we document one community system among the Malay-Muslims that has been almost forgotten, but for which oral accounts still exist.[31] This highly developed Malay-Muslim social construct was the Baweanese *pondok.*

The Baweanese *pondok* was both a physical house and a social system providing community, help, instruction, mediation and leadership. It was reproduced almost in its entirety with migration to Singapore and proudly upheld as a microcosmic world of accountability and interdependence until the 1960s when Singapore's national agenda disrupted kampong life and moved everyone into flats. At that point, the common *pondok* was literally deconstructed.

The word *pondok* means *house*, while *Baweanese* is the correct name for those from the island of Bawean, north of the Indonesian Archipelago; the British in their census reports corrupted the name to *Boyanese*. These were a horse-riding people who came early to Singapore to manage the many horses used in transport and racing at the Turf Club, and to escape Dutch assessment of their properties.

They settled in Kampong Kapor, previously known as Kampong *Boyan*, where they built the first known *pondok* in 1849.[32] The Baweanese were well known in the Malay-Muslim community for their strong *gotong royong* ethic, (cooperation in a community, see below) with each *pondok* taking responsibility for itself and considering its members as that of a clan.

[31] The oral accounts of Baweanese life in a *pondok* were translated for the purposes of this paper from recordings in the National Archives of Singapore by Muhmmad Firdaus B. M. Saharudin.

[32] Haji Mohamad Sadli bin Mohamad, Oral History recording, National Archives of Singapore.

A *pondok* was a communal house and was a household cum association that one paid to join. Paying a bit more towards rent allowed one to live in the *pondok* as well. The resulting tight-knit group of unrelated Baweanese was now accountable to their headman; one knew one's place and lived in an ordered, structured fashion.

The fee one paid to join the association bought de facto kinship. A *pondok* gave one a surrogate family as in the Chinese clan system. The fee also bought belonging, which came with the obligation to give and receive help in money or in kind. Within a *pondok*, one was also a social person, with a place in a hierarchy and an assured identity.

Life in a *Pondok*

By all accounts *pondoks* were an efficient affair – one could rent living quarters and technically manage one's own food. Married couples with young children stayed upstairs, separated by curtains, and paid $2.50 a month, of which $1 was for joining the *pondok* association.

Singles stayed downstairs, were never allowed upstairs, and young men were strictly abjured from consorting with the ladies. Those who broke this rule would be beaten and shown the door in no uncertain terms. Even meals were kept separate for married and singles (although the mothers upstairs were known to cook a little extra for the singles downstairs) or one could buy a meal from the headman. Single women were given a room to themselves.

According to Haji Mohamad Sadli bin Mohamad,[33] the early Baweanese did not join the kampongs of the early Javanese or Malays "as they did not know them". In fact they did not intend to assimilate at all as their whole purpose for being in Singapore was to save enough money to buy land back in Bawean.

Thus the community tended to be frugal, pooled their money towards food, seldom ate out, and sent as much money home as possible. And it was cheaper to stay in a *pondok* than in a kampong. Some early *pondok*s in Singapore were Kampong Kapur, *pondok* Pangga, *pondok* Daun, and *pondok* Kapal Longan.

The Role of the Headman

In 1947, the *Persatuan Bawean Singapura* (Singapore Baweanese Association) was formed for the regulation and oversight of the 60-odd *pondoks* in Singapore. Each *pondok* had a strict administrative structure and it was the headman who took responsibility for his community with absolute authority, fully expected to manage the welfare of his own *pondok*.

It is rather disarming that a headman was selected "based on his wife."[34] The logic was that if a man's wife was well taken care of, people could presume they would be taken care of just as well. The candidate was also required to be reasonably well off, own his own property, have religious knowledge, and be literate. Before 1947, he would must also have the support of his people back in Pulau Bawean in order to qualify for the post. It was the norm that his son would inherit his job one day, so the quality of the family must therefore be vouched for to members.

Headmen collected rent, paid fines, financed burials, settled debts in the community, helped those in need, and found jobs for the unemployed. Those in a *pondok* were accountable through their headman to society in the homeland and thus a strong transnational tie remained.

Ensuring a Spirit of Obligation and Sense of Belonging among Members

The headman had a trusted committee; together they dealt with deaths, weddings and interaction with the authorities. They mediated disputes and – anecdotally – meted out justice to those who had infringed the law. It was known among the police that if a *pondok* member was caught stealing, taking drugs, or "disturbing"[35] a lady, the *pondok* would deal with their own. Flirting was a particularly serious offence. The police left the headman and his committee to decide on a just punishment – perhaps a beating or, at worst, expulsion from the group.

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[33] As translated from an oral account in the National Archives of Singapore

[34] Haji Badron bin Sainullah (b. 1925)

[35] This is the colloquial Singapore term for *flirting with* or imposing upon a woman.

The strong spirit of belonging in the *pondoks* forged close bonds among members and between *pondoks.* One *pondok* might borrow from another when in need, and *pondoks* met each year during the fasting month for the pleasant duty of deciding what colour *baju* (clothing) each group would wear when they visited each other on *Hari Raya* (New Year).

The Baweanese considered themselves a tolerant people, less focused on *adat* (custom) than others, and more open to compromise in a situation before demanding that their own version of *adat* be followed. This open-mindedness finally led to many intermarriages between the Baweanese and other Malay-Muslims, especially with ethnic Malays with whom relations were cordial.

The Baweanese today still retain close transnational ties, but the strong social persona defined by one's place in a *pondok* has gone, deconstructed by the removal of the house itself, and also replaced in the last 50 years with the new identity of a being a Singaporean Malay.

3.3.2.1.4 Unions

Although unions are not related at all to philanthropy, we mention them here because in many accounts, the union for Asian workers in Singapore then was an extension of the community help concept, albeit now around labour rights. It has even been mooted that the Chinese took readily to unions as they understood the concept already from working together in their trade and guild associations.

Unions are also significant in this study in that through their coming together as groups and championing their rights, the ordinary person in Singapore found that under British law he (and she) had another, *civilian* identity – that of an individual who under common law, had rights. This was a totally alien concept to many who had come from the old civilisations where rank and caste designated one's ability to be heard and or protected from those above oneself.

The concept of unions began to gain traction across Singapore in the late 1930s. In 1940 it was reported that modern employees were banding together to protect their interests and fight for employee rights, including privileges like a day off.[36] From coffee shop employees to clerks and rickshaw pullers, they were grouping themselves into "associations, societies or guilds."

Examples of some unions from those times include those for stone cutters and sailmakers; the Cantonese Pork Butchers' Guild; the Ellenborough Fish Market Dealers' Guild; the Foochow Coffee Shop Employees and Owners' Association; and the Fukien Barbers' Guild. The best represented were the drivers who had Associations for "Chinese, Mohammedan and Indian" Drivers. One hundred Chinese women organised themselves into the Singapore Building Workers' Association; even the Singapore *amahs* formed a union.

Through the strength of mutual support, it was reported that:

> "... even the humblest of workers do not have to go far to find a mutual help society they could join," and "... the average city worker has attained a voice that is now being heard with increasing strength." [37]

While that voice might be that of a rickshaw puller with his identity as a social person and his union playing the role of kin, it also spoke to the growing extension of migrants' identities – to that of individual with personal rights honoured under British common law. Through unions, the population gained protection under civil law, rather than being mere dependants upon the help of ethnic associations.

3.3.2.2 Informal Systems

As many in the grassroots communities drew small wages, people turned to their communities and giving in kind to help them through the big events in life.

Here we look at two informal systems that did just that. One was an honour code deeply rooted across the Malay Archipelago; the other sprang up out of need with migration to Singapore. They are:

1. *Gotong royong;* and
2. The ad hoc Malayalee associations of prewar Singapore.

[36] Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser. (1940, April 15). *City workers band themselves into societies*, p. 5.

[37] Singapore Free Press, 1940, April 15

3.3.2.2.1 *Gotong Royong*

Table 7. The "Malaysian" Community in the Crown Colony of Singapore

Malaysians in Singapore	Total	Males	Females
	71,177	**37,991**	**33,186**
Malays	43,301	21,874	21,427
Javanese	16,063	9,379	6,684
Menangkabau	100	76	24
Korinchi	4	4	-
Jambi	13	8	5
Banjarese	443	262	181
Bugis	802	453	349
Boyanese (Baweanese)	9,413	5,338	4,075
Achinese	39	26	13
Batak	25	22	3
Palembang	87	55	32
Other Sumatrans	136	97	39
Riau Lingga	221	91	130
Other Dutch Borneo	32	18	14
Other Netherlands East Indies	197	118	79
Dayak	50	25	25
Others (Sakai race excluded due to lack of data.)	251	145	106

Source: Vlieland, C. A. (1932). *A report on the 1931 census.* Singapore.

The Honour Code of *Gotong Royong*

While the multiple ethnicities listed in the census of the *"Malaysians"* above might not have practised the same religions and had dissimilar cultures, many shared a lingua franca of *Bahasa Melayu*. And across the many islands making up the Malay Archipelago there was a common, recognised practice of collaborative *gotong royong*, translated roughly as "*cooperation in a community*". This was a spirit of mutual help based on trust, obligation and reciprocity. As long as one was a part of the community, one was expected to respect the code.

The reason we have classified *gotong royong* here as informal is that no fee was paid to be part of the code group, just as one paid no fees to be a part of a Chinese village. If one lived in the community, one was implicitly a member, knew one's role, and was expected to behave according to received behaviours of a member of the group.

As a member, the expectation was that one would give help when called upon, with the understanding that others would reciprocate in the same way in due course. It was the way it had always been.[38]

[38] As recounted by Warsiyah Sumaryo from Central Java, gotong royong is still the way to roof a house, prepare a wedding, or celebrate the seventh month of pregnancy. Even roads around one's kampong are maintained through gotong royong.

Haji Aliman bin Hassan,[39] in recalling this spirit of mutual help, pointed out that *gotong royong* arose from the fact that members of kampongs had a close bond (created by proximity and familiarity) such that even while they might have been from different ethnic groups, villagers saw each other not as friends but as s*audara* or family. The formation of such fictive kin forged ties among strangers that were greatly valued in the migrant experience.

This ancient practice of collaborative, unpaid communal help was part of kampong life. *Gotong royong* was called upon when people needed support for large occasions beyond their means. Not every event called for *gotong royong*, but if help was requested, it should be gladly given. Money was rarely involved; rather it was many helping hands that took on duties and the responsibility to do whatever was needed.

Gotong royong was an honour system and degrees of help might encompass helping those in one's community to an entire *kampong* helping another. It was very dependent on goodwill and respect, and worked well in small communities where members were accountable to each other.

Gotong Royong and Rites of Passage

As kampongs sprang up across Singapore, *gotong royong* was how many ordinary people managed many events. It was even recorded that a very early mosque was built through *gotong royong* in Kampong Siglap in the 1890s by the local Malay-Muslim community.[40]

Villagers would come together to ensure that key rites like weddings and burials were performed with dignity, or seven months of pregnancy celebrated with joy.[41] The intent was to allow the celebrant or mourner the right to immerse himself fully in the moment, while others took care of everything else.

A Gotong Royong Wedding

Weddings in the 1920s and 1930s were a fine example of *gotong royong.*

As described by some interviewees who had themselves been participants, the general practice was for the wedding couple themselves to literally turn up on the day and enjoy it. The wedding was treated as the villagers' affair and not that of the couple. Ms. May-Moona bte Haji Ali @ Maimunah bte Mohd Ali recalled that a date would be set for preparation and everyone knew their roles and responsibilities according to age and gender.

Before the wedding, the young men would build the wedding tent (*kemah)*, while family and friends made the bridal bed. The ladies sewed the bride her dresses (*baju*). The whole village then pooled their utensils, silverware and furnishings to present a proper setting to their many guests. Then there were those whose role was in the kitchen (usually the matrons) and those who welcomed visitors. The young people were usually given this task and that of arranging furniture and serving others for it was hoped that these young folks could also "meet and find love"[42] during this rare social occasion when they were permitted to mingle.

There is a strong parallel here with the Chinese funeral experience when key rites of passage in prewar Singapore also provided social opportunities in societies still bound by tradition to keep girls secluded after puberty.

Invitations to the wedding went out by word of mouth to other kampongs, Chinese and Indian friends, and even European bosses, who sometimes brought food themselves or gave a little money to defray the costs. But friends from other kampongs just came to enjoy the day without having to pay towards the wedding.

The elders would conduct rites and prayers, and all would enjoy entertainments including *kompang* (drumming)*, silat* (ceremonial martial arts)*,* and recitations of the Quran – *berzanji* and *mawlid* – while various ceremonies were carried out by the bride and groom such as *berinai* (henna painted on the bride's hands), *bersanding* (the couple sitting on the wedding dais), and *mandi-mandi,* a communal bath taken by the bride and the groom.

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[39] Haji Aliman bin Hassan, Oral History recording, National Archives of Singapore.

[40] Mohd Anis bin Jairan Oral History recording, National Archives of Singapore

[41] From Oral History recollections by Haji Mohamed Sidek bin Siraj, Abdul Latiff bin Ahmad, Abu Samah bin Awang, and Ahmad bin Ismail, retrieved from the National Archives of Singapore and translated by Muhmmad Firdaus B. M. Saharudin.

[42] Ibid.



The wedding party being carried by the villagers. c.1930
Mrs. J. A. Bennett Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



A Malay wedding with the bride and bridegroom in traditional Malay costume, c. 1938
The Hebblewhite Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

In the same way, when someone died and a family asked for help, burials would be a communal affair. Men dug the grave and prepared the body, religious elders said the prayers, women prepared the food, and the young people would again serve. The bereaved were allowed to simply grieve.

Reciprocity, obligation, taking responsibility, collaboration, and a strong community spirit were the hallmarks of the code of *gotong royong.*

Haji Aliman remembered that:

> "... the responsibilities of the community were happily done by the people from that community, from the young to the old ... [but] the concept of *gotong royong* has changed today. It used to be giving your time, effort, energy, or food, but now it's your monetary contribution ... They [used] to believe in the concept of reciprocation whereby you help someone today, someone else will help you the next time when you need help. The form of contribution is not that important as long as the concept ... is still preserved."[43]

3.3.2.2.2 The ad hoc Groups of the Malayalee Community

While there were many formal and informal South Asian communities in Singapore during the prewar years, we have chosen one community to represent the tight-knit camaraderie of the largely bachelor populations that lived in the colony. These are the Malayalees from Kerala.

The Malayalee community in Singapore is a small but influential component of Singapore's South Asian community, comprising just 6.4 percent of the 2,725,917 people who came to Singapore from the British Raj between 1844 and 1941.[44] This was a largely male community and highly transient, with many coming just to work before returning to India to marry and settle.

There were few records of the passage of these migrants as no passports were needed for travel. However a new set of over 100 recollections from the local Malayalee community[45] gives us a glimpse into the resourceful way this group looked out for each other before and after the Japanese Occupation.

Unemployment in the British Raj in the early 20th Century brought university-educated men from Kerala to Singapore where they competed with Ceylonese for jobs in the civil service, in plantations and as clerks in European firms. They found a particular niche in the Air Force, and *mini* Keralas of up to a thousand men sprang up in the Royal Air Force bases of Changi, Seletar and Tengah. Life there was remembered as idyllic, with all needs taken care of, buses laid on, a huge library, and quarters with electricity and running water provided. Other Malayalees found work in the Public Works Department or the Civil Service and were often provided quarters as well.

Ad hoc and Formal Associations

Many associations formed within the community. The Kerala Association founded in 1917 was called a home away from home for new migrants, providing support like clans and kampongs, community and news from home. Other Malayalee groups of that time included the Travancore Muslim Association founded in 1934, the Singapore Malabar Muslim Jama-ath founded in 1927, and the International Bible Students' Association of Kottayam.

The Malayalees were also inclined to organise themselves on an ad hoc basis. This gave rise to a support network from the point of one's arrival in Singapore to the unfortunate event of death. Many other occasions of spontaneous help have been recorded as well – from offering housing to complete strangers to buying a lamb joint for Deepavali celebrations for everyone in one's group at work.

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[43] Ibid.

[44] Anitha Devi Pillai & Puba Arumugam. (2016). From Kerala to Singapore: Voices from the Singapore Malayalee community. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Editions.

[45] Ibid.

Welcoming Strangers to Singapore

The community had a unique way of connecting with and caring for new migrants. All who came from Kerala sailed on the S. S. Rajula, whose docking times were published in the papers. Letters might be sent ahead by relatives and various associations would sift through these letters searching for news of migrants. The community would then mobilise itself to meet new arrivals.

Viswa Sadasivan recalled:

> "My dad must have been only 17 years old when he landed in Singapore … on the S. S. Rajula. He paid for his passage by working on board … As soon as he arrived amidst the hustle and bustle of the Singapore dock he heard his name being called out. 'Sadasivan, Sadasivan … alle? Kadakkavoor-nu?' (Are you Sadasivan from Kadakkavoor?)"

The person shouting was a complete stranger, but he knew Sadasivan's name and where he was from. This man took Viswa's dad to his home and helped him find his first job in Singapore four months later. For a man who had arrived with five rupees in his pocket, the kindness of this stranger was a godsend. Not long after, it was Sadasivan's turn to wait at the dock to receive and help men from Kerala arriving in Singapore. There was a clear sense of community.[46]

As with all Asians, funerals too were important. Should someone die, the Malayalees would turn up in droves, paying towards the expenses out of their own pockets and attending the funerals of unknown others to make sure everyone was given a respectable send-off. This helped to assure families that their loved ones were treated with dignity and respect, and all rites for the afterlife taken care of even so far from home.



Group photograph of Royal Air Force (RAF) Seletar Engine Repair Section with a Supermarine Walrus seaplane in the background.

The Indians and Malays standing behind are the civilian personnel, c. 1940
RAFSA Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

[46] Anitha Devi Pillai & Puba Arumugam. (2016). *From Kerala to Singapore: Voices from the Singapore Malayalee community*. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Editions.

Viswa Sadasivan continued:

> "No one was left to fend for himself. The community looked out for one another. News of major events such as deaths travelled quickly through the community's network. Those who arrived first at the funeral home took care of the arrangements. Often a handkerchief would be passed around to collect donations. Any shortfall would be topped up by the wealthier Malayalees, many of whom were contractors."

With the fall of the British Raj and the arrival of more women in Singapore, families began to grow, but it was recalled that there was no sense of caste divisions within the air force and civil service communities. In the various quarters there was a comfortable inter-mingling among the Chinese, Indians, Eurasians, Malays and Punjabis.

Disasters at home or crises in Singapore brought all together to raise funds for aid, using the charity bazaar method used by the British, which by now was familiar throughout the Empire

4. The Rise of Independent Giving

Even as waves of migration into Singapore continued, data shows that those who had settled longer were beginning to give independently to local causes out of the little money they had to spare.

While keeping a close eye on events in the homeland, some in the grassroots community were now taking an interest in their welfare in Singapore, actively engaged in donating a few cents here and there, or providing resources to worthy causes across the island.

It is at this point where we see the erratic emergence of independent philanthropic giving, separated from obligatory giving, which carried on in parallel with philanthropy. We posit that this was due to migrants gaining a sense of plural identity.

4.1 Increasing Plural Identity or Bifocality

As migrants began to give on their own terms, we see a feature emerge similar to those in other countries with a migrant narrative; those who had settled here developed what has been termed *bifocality* (Vertovec, 2004) or *plural identity*.

This means that our early migrants lived their lives with one foot in the homeland or community of origin, and the other foot in the new host country of Singapore. Modes of giving followed and expressed this complex identity issue. Some money went to support one's parents at home, perhaps a wedding for one's sister there, while the rest went to one's business and children in Singapore (see the remittance letters of Mr. Liu Shi Zhao in the previous chapter).

This plurality became evident when many Chinese and South Asians became passionately caught up in events in their homelands. In China, the fall of the Qing and the call to new nationalism were interrupted by the invasion of China by the Japanese. The Sino-Japanese war brought disparate dialect groups together as *Chinese*. In the British Raj, South Asians closely followed news of Mahatma Gandhi and his hopes for a free India. These reaffirmed loyalty to home countries although we are not sure if this meant residents had developed a new sense of *national* identity or now saw themselves as citizens of their homelands. What we can confirm is that national identification was already on the rise before the settlers' homelands became nations.

Plurality was also expressed as the population began, at the same time that they were involved in events in their lands of origin, to give to causes in Singapore. As settlements grew, a sense of ownership developed. Common needs and interests brought out a new sense of community where they had settled. These settlers joined labour unions in the 1930s, while enclaves and kampungs became close–knit groups across ethnicities often communicating in the lingua franca of "bazaar Malay". They had a new common locale, and new interests to share.

These kampongs became "home". There were many mentions in local news of complete strangers giving generously to rebuilding and rehousing of villagers following a kampong fire in their vicinity. Such help took various forms – from passing the hat around in the local coffee shop to the powerful Hokkien Huay Kuan calling in favours from the Salvation Army and the Singapore Improvement Trust.

Plurality was also evident among those who had become acculturated by years under British rule. There was a strong sense of being *British* among certain communities, particularly the Straits Chinese or Peranakan. This group identified strongly with the ideals, laws and values of the British, calling themselves *The King's Chinese* during World War I. The sense of belonging to the British Empire was reinforced by the growing presence of mission schools and the use of English as the lingua franca among the professionals and civil servants, and the inclusion of local residents in positions of honour, if not power, such as the Legislative Council or the Municipal Commission.

This evolving bifocality or plural identity would become even stronger as a new generation of children was born to these migrants who only knew Singapore as their home. By the 1930s, there were children of all

races attending school together, removed one step from the obligation to grandparents in the homeland and who now bonded as alumni of particular schools. These were reinforced as activities like sports meets created rivalry and a new identification as school alumni, while clubs and groups like Scouts and Girl Guides forged bonds among school children across the island.

The Japanese Occupation forced a convergence of these multiple identities and forged these many identities into a sense of ***us*** (Tajfel, 1979), which is discussed later in the paper.

4.2. Types of Independent Giving

On this road to convergence, there were many small steps taken away towards independence from socially obligated giving. Here are some trends that emerged in the 1930s:

1. Community Giving;
2. Giving by School Children; and
3. Individual, Independent Giving.

4.2.1 Community Giving

As members of an association, the grassroots community had a voice. Always private, many individuals giving a few cents helped to aid a vast array of causes.

Box 2 is a compilation of such cash donations across the various ethnic communities from which one gains a sense of the complex beginnings of philanthropy in Singapore.

Even as these early migrants started to open their wallets to local causes, the period bore witness to a growing chorus of dissatisfaction with society, with the local community lamenting its own lack of charity and civic consciousness toward each other. The editors of local newspapers were the recipients of some highly vituperative letters while local correspondents cited examples in scathing reports on the state of society.

This is noteworthy as showing a growing sense of civic consciousness, arguably a result of English education, and the view that the focus of welfare should be local, were traits less evident in the homelands of the migrants.

For example, an Indian correspondent of the Malaya Tribune wrote in 1928 that local Indians were pouring money into causes in India while nothing was being done in Malaya (which included Singapore). He pointed out that as a …

> "… domiciled community, [we] owe our first duty to this land where we get our bread and butter. Our position … is no better than that of wandering gypsies. We have to consolidate ourselves … Has any Indian raised a hospital for their own poor brethren? Has an Indian built a school, an orphanage, or any institution to which the helpless and illiterate could wend their way?"[47]

In 1929, a Malay correspondent chastised the local Malay-Muslim community for extravagant displays of wealth at celebrations, calling for reform as others in the community felt obliged to add fireworks and music to such parties when "… the poor can't afford it at all."[48]

The Christian community in turn was lambasted by a Mr. Lembruggan, who asked why they did not …

> "… choke on your food while there are so many starving people in the streets?"[49]

4.2.2 Giving by Schoolchildren

Even as the older migrants were being chastised, the growing opportunity for education in the 1920s and 1930s would influence the transformation of social identity in a new generation of Singapore-born children with the inculcation of values outside those brought from the homelands.

[47] Malaya Tribune. (1928, August 7). *Charity begins at home: Protest against appeals from India*, p. 3.

[48] Malaya Tribune. (1929, March 22). *The changing face of Islam*: *Muslim social customs*, p. 12.

[49] Malaya Tribune. (1935, September 6). *Charity comes first*, p. 16.

---------- Box 2 ----------

Box 2: Community giving to various causes (1920-1941)

(Compiled from news reports; please see References)

Year	Cause	Initiating Community
1921	Sick and Destitute Indian Coolies At a meeting of Indians held in the Chetty Temple grounds, public subscriptions were called to create a fund to help Indian coolies.	Indians
1924	Madras Central Flood Relief The Indian Association collected Rs 1405 through the Bengal Gymkhana and a charity concert.	South Asians
1924	Help for Kampong Towgay in Rangoon Road The Malay newspapers praised the Chinese community who were " forking out money" amounting to $12,106.95 to help the villagers of Kampong Towgay which burnt down.	Chinese and Malay-Muslims
1925	Muslim Students' Aid Society Started *Enthusiastic young Muslims*, led by Mr Shaik Yahha Afifi, formed a committee to fund the education of poor Muslim children and paid a few dollars out of their own pockets to start scholarships. This fund was later taken on by wealthier men.	Malay-Muslims
1926	A Malay woman donated scholarships to Malay boys to study English.	Malay-Muslims
1926	A Scholarship for Boys Mr Ally Ahmad Khan Surratee, president of the Moslem Association and Indian Association, and vice president of the Muslim Students' Aid Society donated a scholarship in memory of his father.	Malay-Muslims
1928	Muslim Trust Fund Association Formed This is started to provide charitable help for an orphanage, burials and welfare.	Malay-Muslims
1929	The Agent of the Government of India and the Singapore Indian Association kept an eye on the well-being of Indians in Singapore, hoping to help "... the masses."	Indians
1929	An Indian Gentleman Gave a Scholarship An anonymous man gave a scholarship to Singapore boys as a way of returning "much human kindness" shown him in England when he was a student.	Indians
1930	The hawkers of Singapore were aided by members of the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce regarding being moved on by the police.	Chinese
1930	The *Perhimponan Khairatul Islam* (Muslim Benevolent Union) was with members to carry the bier of the dead and attend funerals.	Malay-Muslims

Year	Cause	Initiating Community
1932	Unemployed Fund Started for Indians Funds return passages and did "a good deal of relief work" (unspecified) following the Great Depression.	Indians
1932	Government Takes Over The Asiatic Unemployment Fund Formerly ran on goodwill by local Chinese, Eurasians and Indians to help those affected by the Great Depression, the fund was taken over by the government.	All ethnic groups
1932	Contributions to the Child Welfare Society Encouraged.	Malay Muslims
1933	Protest against Rise in School Fees for Children A private gathering of individuals across ethnicities protested the hike of school fees by 50 cents as it made school unaffordable for most children.	All communities
1934	Rise of Benevolent Societies Noted in Singapore.	Chinese
1934	The Singapore Hokkien Huay Kuan thanks all, including the Great World Amusement Park Management, the Child Welfare Society, and The Singapore Improvement Trust, for their donations to help victims of a great fire.	All communities
1934	The Kwong Wai Siu Hospital thanked representatives of the Cantonese society for their help in its work for the poor.	Chinese
1934	The Merrilads Musical Party Raised Funds A local troupe raised funds for the Opium Society and other good causes.	Straits Chinese
1934	The Child Welfare Society called for Donations.	All communities
1935	Bihar and Orissa Earthquake Charity Show.	All communities
1935	The Malaria Relief Fund for Ceylon called for Donations.	All communities
1935	The Lotus Club (Indian ladies) raised funds for the relief of victims of the Quetta earthquake.	All communities
1935	St Peter's Church for poor workers called for donations for it to continue funding a bed at the St Andrew's Hospital for children.	Christian Community
1935	Yangtse Flood Victims Donation Drive started.	Chinese
1935	Building of Wen Chung People's School by donations.	Chinese
1940	Donations to Help the Silat Road Kampong Fire.	All communities
1941	Society for the Protection of Hindu Children started and called for donations.	All communities

---------- **End Box 2** ----------

Such values were implicit in British school syllabus as well as in new Chinese schools with a nationalist agenda. It could be argued that British values, which underpin the British philanthropic ideal, helped to shape the world views of students and introduced the new concepts of civic consciousness and responsibility to one's country.

Literacy, a New Lingua Franca and Exposure to New Curricula

A host of new schools offering Chinese education sprang up in support of the new nationalist agenda in China, and Chinese girls found places in the new Nanyang Girls' School while schools like the Chinese High School catered to boys. Meanwhile madrasahs provided education for Muslim children. The larger, more established schools built by the government and missionaries all offered British curricula.[50]

All brought literacy and a new social environment that exposed children of all races to arenas outside their traditional cultural and kinship spheres. The opportunity for inter-racial interaction – with English as the lingua franca – facilitated fluent communication among the races.

Schoolchildren were also exposed to a new dimension of identity – the school code. Common values in school mottos, school songs and pledges and a strong sense of *us* versus rival schools fostered bonds across ethnic groups.

Philanthropy in Schools

News reports of the day show that schoolchildren were aware of philanthropy from an early age, carrying collection tins into public spaces on flag days to raise funds for various charities. Meanwhile charity bazaars offering home-made goods became a familiar exercise. As one child from CEZMS wrote in 1924 to the newspapers:

> "… We do hope lots of people will come, the money is such a help to us. … some of us have no parents and many of us cannot afford to pay much so we depend on this once a year sale to keep us going … We really have been busy getting ready … after housework and lessons … we have been making dresses, tray cloths, pillow cases, stuffing toys …"[51]

The Baden-Powell Scouts Movement

The Baden-Powell Boy Scouts Movement epitomised the new ideals of helping others outside one's kinship group and ethnicity. With girls also showing interest in scouting, the Girl Guides and Brownies were started. The aim of these "packs" was to:

> "… try to form girls' characters so that they may be capable of shouldering responsibilities when they go out into the world. They are taught to be honest, upright, cheerful … obey orders … *help other people … become capable before they can help others*. Badges [are given for] cooking, sewing, looking after house, children, first aid."[52] (italics added by the author)

Baden-Powell's doctrine was particularly influential in fostering a sense of neighbourliness, personal independence, and loyalty to one's nation. In 1931 Baden-Powell himself wrote to the Malayan branch of Scouts:

> "What makes a real scout? … [One who wants] … to help [others], no matter what class or country they belong to … because I have love for my neighbour … If you can answer [similarly] you are well on the road to be a true scout and a 'GOOD CITIZEN'. God has given us a body, mind and a spirit to see what we can make of them … Therefore it is up to you personally … to make your … body, mind and spirit … one who not only thinks of the good of his own nation but who can give a friendly hand to other nations as well."[53]

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[50] Mission schools included the Methodist Anglo-Chinese School for boys, the Methodist Girls' School, the Anglican St Andrew's School, the Church of England Zenana Mission School for Girls (CEZMS, which later became St Margaret's School), and Catholic schools such as the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus and St Joseph's Institution. These were strongly Christian, championing a philanthropic ideal of public charity. Others such as the Singapore Chinese Girls' School were also started with a strongly British ethos.

[51] Malaya Tribune. (1924, October 29). *Zenana Mission*, p. 8.

[52] The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser (1924, May 28). *The girl guides*, p. 13.

[53] Malayan Saturday Post. (1931, August 22). *The chief scout talks*, p. 4.

This movement bore fruit when Singapore went to war. Girl Guides and Brownies were deployed in military barracks across the island. One company was made up entirely of Malay girls while another was Dutch. They worked together to aid blood transfusions and the Child Welfare Society. Schooled in home nursing, midwifery and first aid, they braced for the worst. Such extraordinary courage in the face of oncoming slaughter heralded the start of a very individual personhood in each child that we would see blossoming after the war.

4.2.3 Individual, Independent Giving

An example of growing plural identity and independent personhood can be seen in the life of Mr. Chen Ying Jong, a Cantonese born in China in the city of scholars in Foshan, Guangdong. Here we reconstruct his story from an interview in 2017 with his son, Mr. Chan Peng Kwong.

4.2.3.1 Mr. Chen Ying Jong and Life in Sago Lane

Mr. Chen came to Singapore via Hong Kong in search of work in the mid-1930s. He kept his ties with his family, but much of his own family was born in Chinatown. His wife, Yao Xing Qin, joined him via Hong Kong, and our interviewee, Chan Peng Kwong, was their first child born in Singapore.

Mr. Chen held many identities in his lifetime; he was son, husband, father and hawker, and also took very seriously his responsibility of principal tenant (*Bao Jo Gong/Er Fang Dong*) of one floor of rooms in Chinatown's Sago Lane where he and his wife showed a matter-of-fact kindness to their tenants.



Mr. Chen Ying Jong and his wife, Madam Yao Xing Qin.
Source: Mr. Chan Peng Kwong

Life at 57 Sago Lane

The Chens lived in 57 Sago Lane, which backed onto the "death houses" (*Say Yan Kai* in Cantonese) of Sago Street at the end of a squalid and crowded Chinatown, but theirs was a happy household of five.

As principal tenant, the Chens paid their Arab landlord $2 rent for one room, the airwell and kitchen. They also oversaw the renting of other rooms. Each of these had five beds, rented at $1 to $2 a bed.

Mr. Chan Peng Kwong recalled that most of their tenants were elderly *Samsui*[54] women who might have left their sisterhood after quarrels, and *Amahs,* domestics and construction workers. The men's room went to equally elderly men, perhaps retired coolies or rickshaw pullers.[55] They had come to Singapore at the end of the 19th Century for work and had no money to make the journey back home.

The Chens sold chicken and raw fish porridge from a cart and the whole family spent the day preparing ingredients in the airwell kitchen, with firewood as kindling. The children chopped endless piles of ginger, onions, garlic and scallions, and would serve when the stall opened at 6 p.m. as well as wash the dishes in between scurrying to deliver bowls of boiling porridge to customers. This dawn-to-dusk work ethic was typical of many migrants in prewar Singapore.

Looking after their Fellow Tenants

Mr. Chen laid down the rules for his fellow tenants – no drinking or gambling on the premises – and mediated when quarrels broke out. Once a year, he and his wife would cook everyone dinner on Chinese New Year.

Having lived next to a medical hall in China, Mrs. Chen drew on the Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) remedies she had learnt to help the tenants when needed. The young Peng Kwong, in school and already literate, was often roped in to write out prescriptions. He and Mrs. Chen helped an old *Samsui* woman through stomach cramps in such a way. He wrote out the prescription on his mother's instructions, and the old lady bought a TCM remedy for 20 cents. If a tenant could not be helped, Mr. Chen ferried them to the Thong Chai Free Medical Hall in Chin Swee Road (Note: this building still exists today).

As we have observed in all early migrant communities, a good and respectable funeral was deeply valued. When an ageing tenant died without family, the older Mr. Chen would take it upon himself to fulfil the obligations of an eldest son – that deepest and most treasured tie in Confucian ethics. He would pay for the funeral and make the necessary arrangements to ensure that the tenant would pass on to the afterlife with dignity.

If the tenant had left some money, professional mourners might even be hired to cry when appropriate and perhaps carry a photograph of the deceased in front of the cortege. By default, the little shophouse group had become Mr. Chen's fictive kin.

After the funeral, Mr. Chen would clean the bed and rent it out again.

When asked why his father did this and more for his tenants, Mr. Chan Peng Kwong seemed puzzled. It was just the right thing to do, he said.

4.3 Summary & Observations of Giving in Prewar Singapore

This brief look at the varied giving practices of migrants in Singapore in the prewar years shows the strong obligations that shaped the world views of first-generation migrants. In sending vast sums in remittances to family and kin in their homeland, they retained their primary identities as social persons even with their relocation to Singapore.

The study also shows that having fulfilled these obligations at the personal and group levels, some of these migrants developed a sense of independence regarding their own money in later years, and gave generously in cash and kind to many causes.

[54] Samsui women and amahs were Cantonese women in sisterhoods who came from China. They were the earliest known financially independent women in China.

[55] These tenants would have come to Singapore from China in the 1880s or 1890s.

Encouraged by the lack of alternative support systems in prewar colonial Singapore, the re-creation of social systems where identities were defined by position, tradition and surrogate kin helped migrants find their place in an alien world. We see this in the creation of formal and informal associations for mutual help, which created de facto family for members with all its associations of belonging, responsibility, obligation and reciprocity.

The growth of *plural* identities in those who had settled longer grew as the lack of basic welfare infrastructure in Singapore encouraged activism, ownership, initiative and the organic creation of support groups to meet the need for medical aid, schooling and employment.

Living in cramped proximity to others in a British colony where common law was enacted gave previously cloistered ethnicities yet another facet of identity beyond the social person – that of the independent individual with rights and the ability to decide what to do with his money. The remittance letters of Mr. Liu reflect this growing sense of self.

The ordinary people found that even hawkers and coolies, who occupied the lowest rung in the economy, might still be accorded a hearing under the colonial administration. In Singapore, the merchant class, the lowest in China, now had a voice.

While it is not discussed in this paper, the British underscored this right by banning slavery and rescuing orphans and slave girls who were traditionally abused in Chinese society.

The British also inadvertently encouraged advocacy in the local community who, with English as its lingua franca, was able to exhort others via newspapers, societies and ad hoc meetings to do better, point out corruption, and celebrate small good deeds such as the Scouts helping an accident victim.

The passage of time began to separate migrants from their home countries as their children went to school and learnt new charitable values as shown by the sample of causes in Box 2. This embryonic independence would be put to the ultimate test when Singapore surrendered to the Japanese.

5. Giving During The Japanese Occupation (1942-1945)

This brutal period in Singapore's history represents a pivotal point of transition in identity among Singapore's many different ethnic groups. Enforced proximity and the desperate need to survive heralded a sea of change in some – if not all. This was reflected in people's actions. Helping another person was often the decision of a moment, made at the point of a bayonet, and a highly personal one.

During the Japanese Occupation, everyone was reduced to the same level of penury, and the entire population became a vast community of poor and poorer overnight, literally living off the soil. Vegetables (previously the preserve of ducks and pigs) were grown everywhere and the most prized possession became an egg. Ethnic and religious barriers were cast aside as one's immediate neighbour of whatever ethnicity became the one whom you could choose in an instant to save, ignore or betray.

There is a great deal of primary and secondary data on the Japanese Occupation so we have sifted through these for accounts of giving. Setting aside accounts of collaboration and collusion, we focus on tracing the story of that nascent philanthropy emerging in Singapore in the decade before.

Key findings for this period regarding giving are as follows. Firstly, communities broke through prior ethnic barriers as individuals or families; stepping forward to help people across the ethnic divide. Secondly, how some gave of themselves goes far beyond classifications like charity or philanthropy such that categorisation became completely irrelevant. Here we simply call these "acts of kindness." Thirdly, we find that in this crucible, the fragmented communities of Singapore coalesced against a common enemy to become, for the first time, "us".

Life in Occupied Singapore

It is well known that the Japanese Occupation both polarised ethnic communities as well as broke barriers as individuals crossed communal lines to help each other survive. The Japanese incarcerated the British, all Europeans and Eurasians; brutalised the Chinese; but attempted to align the South Asians and Malay-Muslims with their plans for Asia by fanning anti-British sentiment. The unpredictability of the Japanese overlords forced people to make instantaneous, sometimes grievous choices to help others or to save oneself. Pieris (2016) describes this well:

> "Each of Singapore's ethnic communities struggled … with its particular narratives of collaboration, resistance and victimhood, and with the contradictory loyalties caused by anti-Japanese or anti-colonial resistance and nationalist sympathies."

Enforced Communal Identities

World War II and Singapore's fall to the Japanese on February 15, 1941, under the most ignominious of circumstances forced a traumatic realisation upon the battered civilian population. The British had lost Singapore to the Japanese.

As Churchill himself said, having decided to fight the Japanese to the bitter end:

> "There must at this stage be no thought of saving the troops or sparing the population. The battle must be fought to the bitter end at all costs."[56]

And by many accounts the population was not spared – not just the crossfire from battle that Churchill had vowed, but also the extreme brutality inflicted by the incoming occupying force. Over the next three-and-a-half years, the old way of life was completely dismantled, replaced by the brutal sword-wielding

[56] Leasor. (2001).

regime of the *Kempeitai*. The Japanese viewed the communities wholesale – perhaps this was when the concept of *race* overtook ethnic differences.

The Chinese suffered the most, enduring vicious reprisals as a group for their support of the Kuomintang during the Second Sino-Japanese War of 1937. This culminated in what is now commonly called the Sook Ching,[57] a massacre of an unknown number of randomly chosen Chinese boys and men rounded up in February and March of 1942.

After that the Chinese generally kept a low profile, but were still targets for rape and bullying. Nonetheless several went on to join resistance groups that people of other ethnic groups also joined quietly, and created a black market as well.

The South Asian community became deeply divided. The creation of the anti-colonial Indian National Army (INA) supported by the Japanese offered many the hope of independence. Many joined the INA while others stood by friends of other races in Singapore. For some, the INA gave people a sense of dignity they had never experienced before (Damodaran, 1981). Even girls found a new place as *Ranis* of Jhansi Regiment.

As one Mr. Shanmugasiv explained:

> "That was a day Singapore became for people a place for birds of passage ... Those days I never heard people saying 'It's my Singapore.' So they had a gravitational pull [to] their own mother country." (Shanmugasiv, 1983)



Training as part of the Indian National Army, c. 1943
From Shashin Shuho, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

[57] In a series of roundups in February and March 1942, Chinese boys and men were told to gather in compounds and schoolyards. They did not know why. They were then taken away, never to be seen again. Years later, bodies of people shot dead were found in mass graves around the island. The Japanese claimed to have killed 5,000 people; local historians estimated the number to be closer to 70,000 Chinese. The term "Sook Ching" or "purge through cleansing" remains a repugnant term to local Chinese today.

The occupying force largely ignored the Malay-Muslims who were not considered a threat, allowing them to harbour and hide some Chinese friends. The community nonetheless walked a difficult line; some Malays took a stand with Malay forces fighting for the British and enduring some of the most brutal deaths at the hands of the Japanese. One officer who would not recant being a British soldier even after the fighting was done was taken away with the Chinese and was never seen again. (Zamroude, 1983). Another from a British Malay regiment was betrayed, tortured in the dreaded *Kempeitei* Headquarters at the YMCA, and never recovered after his release (Abu Bakar Ali, 1996).

The Malay-Muslims were initially promised independence in the new Southeast Asia Co-prosperity Sphere, but after many promises that bore little fruit, the sheen began to wear off somewhat. In the end, the sheer brutality of the regime might have changed many minds and turned this group against the Japanese (Wok, 1982).

A large contingent of local Europeans, Eurasians, Jews and POWs were herded into the infamous Changi prison. Incarcerated for days in the Masonic Lodge in Coleman Street, they were then force-marched from the city along the coastal road all the way to Changi in the blazing sun. Lining the road were Chinese with buckets and ladles, who kept handing out drinks despite being beaten back by Japanese soldiers. Their kindness was not forgotten, as David Marshall, a local-born Jew and Singapore's first Chief Minister, remembered in a note in today's Changi Museum, which is on view to the public.

The POWs determinedly kept up a spirited and united front – falling back on sports to keep their spirits up, starting a university, continually plotting escapes, and playing rugby and cricket in the face of their captors. This bravado continued until their transfer to Burma to build the *"death railway"* broke even the most hardened of men.

Across these divides, people and families reached out to help each other. The world shrank down to who was with you when the Occupation started. Out of the myriad examples in our data, we highlight two dominant ways that people helped each other.

They are:

1. The Creation of New "Families" across Ethnic Boundaries; and
2. Acts of Kindness.

5.1 The Creation of New "Families" across Ethnic Boundaries

For the ordinary person buffeted by adversity, one's field of vision narrowed to the immediate vicinity of oneself, one's family, and one's immediate neighbours. As Pieris (2016) succinctly describes, it was a time when everyone struggled at a very personal level with instant decisions: "Do I hide these strangers? Do I betray this friend? Do I ignore the rape next door?" Heroism struggled with cowardice as the Japanese went house-to-house looting, killing and raping in the first terrible months.

There were many times when people were forced to make those instant decisions. One Indian family in Highland Road raced over to his Chinese neighbours and insisted their daughters stay with his family at night. He saved them from many a raid by Japanese soldiers and they lived gratefully to tell the tale (Chiu, 2016).

One Chinese family took cover with their Malay neighbours as rumours spread of an impending slaughter of the Chinese. The Malay family hastily dressed them as Malays and the Chinese family was ignored by the Japanese. A Mr. Tan, who recounted this story, said the Malay family even managed to get them identity papers saying they were Malays. Just to be sure, the little girls were shaved bald and dressed as boys. (Tan, 1984).

Even a Eurasian boy was disguised successfully as a Malay boy and lived through the war that way. He said:

> "... They will have a house-to-house search for the white men. My brother ... had to wear a Malay *songkok* (hat) ... and admit he's Malay ... There [were] a lot of Malays who [were] neighbours to the Chinese, they [would] help the Chinese, even ... make their girls wear ... *baju* (Malay dress) ... and tell the Japanese they were Malay people – they [didn't] harm them."(Hardie, 1985).

5.1.1 Mr. Govindasamy Takes a Stand

A man known only as Govindasamy was sheltered by a Chinese family in their provision shop after the fall of Singapore. He was greatly touched by the kindness of this family and deeply shocked on hearing the atrocities perpetrated by the Japanese upon the local community.

As a former member of the British army, he decided not to join the INA, but instead worked for the resistance – the Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA) who were operating out of the jungles of Malaya.

In doing so he became an outcast among his own and was also viewed with much suspicion by the mainly Chinese MPAJA, but they did admit he made a usefully bland and unsuspicious courier. He worked for them until he was badly wounded from a foray in the jungle and returned to Singapore. He recalled:

> "When I returned to the shop house [the Chinese provision shop], I received treatment only fit for a hero. The people's joy in welcoming me back put me out of all my sorrows … the pride that I felt that day still lives with me. The main reason for my decision to stay on in Singapore was my witnessing of Japanese rule's harshness on … society. The suffering of the people instigated me to do something to improve their conditions." (Blackburn, 2009)

5.2 Acts of Kindness

Then there was the kind of giving that transcended categorisation. Here are just a few examples of the many acts of kindness that went unheralded during this bleak time. One of the first and most memorable acts of kindness that the inhabitants of Singapore displayed was towards the Allied soldiers as they were herded along the East Coast towards their internment in Changi prison. It was a long nine-mile hike in the roasting sun.

Many soldiers recall the streets being lined with Chinese carrying buckets of water to ladle drinks to the passing prisoners of war. Despite being beaten back by Japanese guards, the people refused to stop handing out drinks to their erstwhile masters.



British prisoners-of-war being force-marched to Changi Prison, c.1942
David Ng Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

In the first months of the Occupation, locals were shocked again to see Allied soldiers deployed as manual labourers in the city. Before their eyes, soldiers shrivelled from strapping young men to bags of bones. Some people began to quietly put plates of food near water standpipes for anyone to take, keeping a careful eye out for any watching Japanese soldiers. Just as quietly, the food would gratefully disappear (Chng, 1989). Strong young men from Bawean were shipped in by the Japanese as labourers and later abandoned on the streets. Starving residents watched the Baweanese labourers dwindle to walking skeletons before dying on the road. With so little food to go around, many could only watch. But one Chinese family helped as they could. They took in some younger Baweanese who then remained a part of the family.

Food was found by stealing, sharing and smuggling. The Chinese, ever resourceful, created a black market, somehow sneaking food off convoys and off the coast in sampans. People lived from day to day.

Some who managed to get jobs in the civil service or in restaurants hid food and took as much as they could home for family and friends. One cook fed his local waiters in the toilet. Others had no choice but to man the docks, the railways and general infrastructure. Here at least there was food, even if it had maggots in it. Everyone grew vegetables and sometimes shared them.

One family sheltered 50 people under their stilted house (Lau, 2001). Sheltering strangers was common and hiding girls was the norm. One man remembered the relentless search for girls ending in screams and blood, so his family hid their neighbour's young daughters in their ceiling among the rafters.

> "Everybody has got a good human feeling towards humans, our human race.
> [People] gave support. Some of them even … open their houses to let … poor refugees in". (Ng, 1983)

But there were others who went further. An entire Sikh family in Coronation Road died hiding their Chinese neighbours (Singh, 1985). Their baby was eventually found under all the bodies and someone somehow got him home to his grandparents on the subcontinent.

One Chinese farmer stood out among the many recollections. He had discovered some Malay forces led by Bangs Mohamed Yusuf who recalled they had crept out of Changi prison plotting escape but also starving. The Chinese farmer found them contemplating the food for his pigs. Horrified, he gave them some vegetables. Thus began a chain of sporadic visits. During one such visit, the farmer learnt they were trying to break a high-ranking officer out of Changi. To their astonishment, he ran home and produced a little bamboo box, pressing his life savings upon them. Despite many refusals, he insisted they take the money.

When the war was over, Bangs Mohamed Yusuf, laden with money and gifts, returned to the farm only to find the farmer had been killed by the Japanese. He said there was some small consolation in returning the money he had been given so heartily to the farmer's sons (Bangs, 1981).

It is at this point that our study of philanthropy becomes irrelevant. How does one put a price on the gift of a life?

As Albert Ruesga soberly observed of the poor helping those even poorer:

> "We're on hallowed ground here."[58]

5.3 Summary of Giving during the Japanese Occupation

These are just some of the many recorded instances of giving of every kind that brought out the best and sterner stuff in people across Singapore. It is obvious from even our bare bones narrative that it was a deeply transformative time.

[58] Ruesga, A. (2006). Charity vs philanthropy. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. Stanford. Retrieved from https://ssir.org/articles/entry/charity_versus_philanthropy

The Japanese Occupation broke down much that was traditional in prewar Singapore – ethnic enclaves, power structures, kinship obligations and caring only for one's own. People weighed the choices they should not have had to make as myriad historically separate ethnicities were corralled into reluctant captivity together.

As stated above, two outcomes related to giving were evident: the first was that faced with the immediacy of death, people acted to preserve other humans, no matter the colour of their skin and sometimes paying the ultimate price themselves. The social person was thrown aside – the independent person came forward.

The second was that, as Mr. Govindasamy said above, the brutality of the Japanese made him determined to stay and help those who had helped him. The willingness to work across ethnic boundaries that emerged before the Occupation began to take on form.

Despite defections, collaboration, betrayal, grief and savagery, the war brought together survivors who had depended on each other and found each other to be true. Courage, valour, and simple kindnesses bore fruit. These were what helped many former migrants decide that Singapore could be home.

6. Grassroots Philanthropy in Postwar Singapore (1945-1959)

There is a lot of documentation on the postwar era leading up to self-government with the key finding being a transition of identity occurring among the people who remained in Singapore. Abandoned by the colonial government to live or die when Singapore fell to the Japanese, the unfortunate attitude of the incoming British Military Administration (BMA) further strengthened the conviction that many had discovered when fending for themselves. They could look after themselves and would continue to do so.

It is not surprising therefore that the main characteristic of giving as Singapore rebuilt itself was one of proactive, individual, *independent* participation. While still faithful to their social obligations to kin abroad, many focused on giving to improve the welfare of local society. The social person was more and more just one facet of the emerging independent giver. A common enemy had coalesced the many ethnic groups and forged a new sense of "us" (Rajfel, 2012).

Prakash & Tan (2015) corroborate this account, adding that "... the shared experience of having survived the war together had engendered an increased sense of belonging across racial and ethnic lines. This was no longer a community of transient immigrants and people now took a greater interest in the way the country was being run." Prakash & Tan (2015) offer this quote attributed to Tan Lark Sye which they say articulated the shift well.

> "... I wanted to make a lot of money then triumphantly return home to the fatherland ... I don't think like that anymore. Since the end of World War II, I have come to think of Malaya as my home."[59]

6.1 Nascent National Identity

When the British retook Singapore on September 12, 1945, they met a deeply changed population. These were now fellow survivors, Singapore was *home*, and the residents had become "us". The British were met with several determined interest groups who had many suggestions for the rebuilding of Singapore. They were not the quiescent and inward-looking people of before.

When Singapore was separated from Malaya as an independent Crown Colony on April 1, 1946, the island took on even greater meaning as a viable, albeit uncertain, alternative to the homeland, or as Tan Lark Sye called it, "the fatherland".[60]

Mao Zedong's declaration of the People's Republic of China on October 1, 1949, effectively closed the doors of the homeland to many overseas Chinese, forcing the hand of many to decide on where to live.

In 1957 the British offered citizenship to all who had lived in Singapore for more than two years, and many of the local Chinese population seized this chance for a fresh start. They could now vote for how *they* wanted to live in upcoming elections for an independent Singapore in 1959. Forcibly separated from traditional and now disappearing kinship social structures, the people of Singapore were given new, individual social identities and could claim citizenship, rights, and a passport to prove it. They were now citizens.

Not everyone stayed. In the political upheavals following World War II new horizons opened. The partition of India in 1947 recalled many South Asians, and Ceylon beckoned; many survivors of Changi prison went thankfully back to their countries of origin.

[59] Tan Lark Sye quoted in Prakash and Tan (2015)

[60] Ibid



The BMA was met by many interest groups upon its return to Singapore, 1945.
David Ng Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Meanwhile British Singapore faced political turmoil again when a state of emergency was declared on June 24, 1948. The country was at war again, this time in vicious jungle fighting against the Malayan Communist Party. At the same time, the people of Singapore threw themselves into rebuilding the devastated colony. This time, many led the way.

From our data on this period, we highlight five prominent forms of philanthropy and activism:

6.2 Forms of Grassroots Philanthropy in Postwar Singapore

1. Community Philanthropy;
2. Kampong Charity;
3. The Work of Women;
4. Spontaneous Independent Giving; and
5. Collective Giving and the Role of the Grassroots Community in Building Nanyang University.

6.2.1. Community Philanthropy

ACSEP's working paper, *Philanthropy on the road to nationhood*, by Prakash & Tan (2015) thoroughly documents the rise of charitable works and philanthropy as Singapore rebuilt itself, so we will not repeat their findings here. Instead, we continue to follow the thread of the grassroots community on their journey of identity transformation and giving.

The postwar period was characterised by an immense groundswell of self-starting welfare initiatives undertaken by the richest to the poorest in the fold. The incoming British Military Administration sent to rebuild Singapore met head on with a party of local representatives from clans, associations, women and the press, all ready with a plan for nine relief centres for the colony. A multiracial group would deploy to start these centres. The BMA came and went (much excoriated),[61] but the residents continued to work with the returning colonial administration.

[61] The BMA was a bitter disappointment for residents of Singapore. Made up of military personnel, they were known to take the best for themselves in their short time in the colony, which led to even further disillusionment with the British (Prakash & Tan, 2015).

This willingness to work with the government or initiate solutions would characterise the next phase of philanthropy both at grassroots level all the way to the highest echelons of society. Voluntary Welfare Organisations (VWOs) sprang up from kampong to corporation, and people came forward to help in dollars and in kind, donating to build schools or helping with buckets of water to fight fires. Where there was an unmet need, people now found solutions.

And there were many needs. Working with a new colonial Department of Social Welfare (DSW), the wealthy, corporations, clans and big associations (led by apex leaders who had those interlocking networks for help across the country) took on issues such as lack of housing, infrastructure, sanitation, the economy, healthcare, schools and education. [For a full exploration of these initiatives, please refer to Prakash and Tan (2015).]

6.2.2 Kampong Charity

The grassroots community didn't leave it to the rich to solve their problems. Kampongs were "hotbeds of philanthropic activity" (Prakash & Tan, 2015). Creative initiatives appeared in all shapes and forms. (It must be noted here that by now the term "kampong" had transcended the Malay-Muslim village and denoted all villages across Singapore, regardless of ethnicity).

Several Chinese headmen started donation drives for kampong welfare using volunteers from every walk of life from opera troupes to secret society gang members. Clinics, tuition for children, and keeping kampongs safe from fire were high on their agenda for restoration and improvement.

Young people also leapt into the fray. In 1954, Potong Pasir Kampong and the former students of St. Andrew's School started a clinic with volunteer alumni that attended to 20,000 patients. The success of this venture led to plans for another clinic.[62] Charities, donation drives, associations and ad hoc groups gained traction and have a respected place in Singapore's recent history with many postwar initiatives remaining as the foundation of expanded initiatives today. Again for further details on these, see Prakash and Tan (2015).

6.2.3 The Work of Women

Our data also shows that women now stepped forward to deal with family issues. For immediate attention were the needs of children and how to help families with an immense number of them. There were many mouths to feed with war orphans on the streets, baby boom babies, and families with wives bearing up to 16 children – family planning was unknown to the grassroots community. Chinese custom allowed a man innumerable concubines up till the signing of the Women's Charter in 1961, and Islam allowed the same but also provided for instant divorce leaving many very young brides literally left holding the baby.

Helping women cope found advocates in other women from many strata of society. These advocates were the girls who had gone to school before the war. They had now come of age, had never met an economic ceiling in Singapore, and like their hardy migrant mothers considered themselves quite equal to any task. In taking on roles of activists and philanthropists, these women also enlarged their identities, moving from their traditional social personas as wives and daughters, and adding roles such as leader, changemaker, interventionist, teacher and protector as they tackled the daunting task of family problems in postwar Singapore.

Below we list just some of the many initiatives our research uncovered pertaining to the roles of women in philanthropy and the rebuilding of Singapore. Some were group efforts, some high level interventions, and others took place right inside one's home. These included:

1. Children's Centre Clubs and Singapore's Community Centres
2. Family Planning and Mrs. Constance Goh
3. The Syariah Court and Mrs. Mohamed Siraj
4. Ensuring a Better Life for Girls : The Legacy of Rose Chan and the "Ticket and Dancing Girls"
5. Adoptions : The Story of "Mrs. Chan"

[62] Singapore Free Press. (1954, May 18). *The Singapore free student club to build clinic*, p. 5.



Women queuing to have their children registered for the new ant-polio vaccine at Lim Ah Pin Road clinic, c. 1958.
Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

6.2.3.1 Children's Centre Clubs and Singapore's Community Centres

One initiative that was the foundation of today's community centres in Singapore was a local volunteer feeding initiative called the People's Restaurants and the Communal Feeding Programme.

Spearheaded by Lady Gimson, the wife of the Governor, and volunteer ladies, the programme included child feeding centres which were then known as Children's Centre Clubs.

Apart from feeding, the enormous baby boom after the war years brought to light a desperate need for child welfare and help for mothers struggling with as many as 19 children. These problems were met by some of the solutions discussed in the following pages.

6.2.3.2 Family Planning and Mrs. Constance Goh

Mrs. Constance Goh Kok Kee, the wife of a local doctor, tackled the lack of family planning in Singapore. Horrified by the hordes of children that one poor mother brought into her husband's clinic, she decided to start an underground movement for birth control, which was still frowned upon. In 1949 Mrs. Goh founded the Singapore Family Planning Association (SFPA), covertly handing out cervical caps so that women's husbands need not know they were using birth control (Huston, 1992).

Eventually Mrs. Goh went to the manufacturers of cervical caps herself and struck a deal for a good price. In doing so, she changed the lives of many burdened mothers and dramatically reduced the birth rates in Singapore (Frost and Balasingamchow, 2013).



A typical family in postwar Singapore
Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Mrs. Goh was honoured for her work in family planning advocacy in 1951 and was made a Member of the British Empire.

6.2.3.3 The Syariah Court and Mrs. Mohamed Siraj

Mrs. Mohamed Siraj, Singapore's first female social worker with the Syariah Court, is best remembered for bringing the plight of Muslim women and divorce to the attention of the Court.

An advocate for the rights of married and abandoned Muslim women, she recalled a time when countless Malay-Muslim wives – girls as young as teenagers – were left in shock and without a penny to their names after their husbands divorced them by simply saying "I divorce you" three times. Meanwhile, their husbands went merrily on to the next wife (Frost and Balasingamchow, 2013). In 1952 Mrs. Mohamed Siraj started the Young Women's Muslim Association. She recalled:

> "Women then were afraid of their husbands, and some were told by their husbands that if they joined us, they would divorce them. … Some of the women … said that even if they were thrown out of their homes, they would still fight. We met the legislators and we brought forward issues like the divorce and polygamy laws. Eventually they brought in better laws. We also told them that Muslims needed a place where women could go and bring up their issues and achieve more rights, and that ended up being the Syariah Court."[63]

[63] Mrs. Mohamed Siraj's Memories. Singapore Memory Project. Retrieved from https://www.singaporememory.sg/contents/SMA-9c08353c-921d-47d8-9b4b-e1667d8f0a21

One of the best results for wives carelessly cast aside was the forcing of alimony payments on their erstwhile husbands.

Divorce rates plummeted suddenly after this was enforced (Frost & Balasingamchow, 2013).

6.2.3.4 A Better Life for Girls – Rose Chan and the "Ticket and Dancing Girls"

One group of women in the grassroots community were determined that others would not have to follow in their footsteps. These were the dance hostesses and cabaret girls in 1950s Singapore.

Forced into the entertainment industry by the poor circumstances of their birth or lack of education in the 1940s and 1950s, many of these ladies quietly donated generously to philanthropic work to give other poor girls a better chance in the world.

Dance girls were called "ticket girls" as they could be bought for a dance with a ticket (and if agreeable could also be paid for other services). These girls not only gave to help young girls out of poverty or to go to school, they also came together in the 1950s to dance for free to raise funds for the building of Nanyang University, collecting $13,000 so that other girls could have a chance at education.

One lady who rose astonishingly above her circumstances and who became known as the "Charity Queen" was the infamous Rose Chan, the pioneer of brow-raising striptease acts in Malaya and Singapore in the 1950s (Rajendra, 2013).

A very good dancer herself, she found her revue was lacklustre until her bra strap snapped one day. Always the showman, she carried on. The thunderous applause that followed this accident led her to reconsider her act to include other even more daring ones, most famously a dance with a python that is still spoken of in hushed tones.

Rose Chan, however, had another side to her. She gave generously to children, old people, the blind and the sick. Like the other cabaret entertainers of her time, it was said that she did not want other girls to go through a life like hers (Rajendra, 2013).

6.2.3.5 Adoptions: The Story of Mrs "Chan"

One solution to the baby boom was informal adoptions between relatives, friends, and sometimes complete strangers and people of different races. This was easily done in a country still under-regulated in many areas. It is well known today that the postwar era saw many inter-ethnic adoptions as Indians and Malay-Muslims took in Chinese children (usually unwanted girls) and raised them in their own enclaves without prejudice and with pride.

The Chinese tended to adopt the progeny of their kinsfolk, but one lady with a very big heart adopted seven children! "Mrs. Chan"[64] took babies in one by one desperate mother after another came to her for help. She was just a housewife in Chinatown, and her husband of equal generosity was a foreman. Still they kept taking in babies and gave all a stable family life.

While all the children know their birth parents, they still regard Mrs. Chan, who was 95 years old in 2017, as their mother and are fiercely protective of her. Here we tell her extraordinary story.

6.2.3.5.1 "Mrs. Chan", Adoptive Mother of Seven[65]

> "All hearts are made of flesh."

– Mrs. Chan (the name of this interviewee remains anonymous at her request)

In 1940, in a quiet corner of Chinatown, a young lady of just 18 was offered a slave girl (*mui tsai* in Cantonese)[66] of just 10 years old by her doting grandmother. The young lady, whom we have called "Mrs. Chan", refused, already showing at a young age the value and dignity she believes a person should have in life. It presaged her future course in life. Soon after that a friend who just could not manage her shrieking baby of a few months begged Mrs. Chan's help. And so Mrs. Chan adopted her first child.

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[64] We use a pseudonym here at the family's request.

[65] Interview with Mrs. Chan conducted on March 5, 2017, by Ooi Yu-lin and Ng Sin Yue, translated from Cantonese.

[66] *Mui Tsai* were still common in Singapore, being a normal practice in China. Most were kidnapped off the boat and, while slavery was outlawed by the British, for many years one could still buy a *Mui Tsai* through connections up and down Malaya.



Photo of Mrs. Chan (age unknown) taken at the studio a day after she got lost.
Source: "Mrs. Chan"

Mrs. Chan's Background

Mrs. Chan grew up in unusual circumstances. She herself was adopted, and her adoptive mother and grandmother appear to have been strong-minded, economically independent women without kin. Perhaps detachment from the obligations of foreign relations and a strong sense of self-reliance in the household made Mrs. Chan an independent rather than a socially obligated person from the start.

Mrs. Chan's mother earned her own wages teaching children in their house in Eu Tong Sen Street in Chinatown, charging $1 a child. Mrs. Chan learnt a very pure form of Cantonese from her and, following her lead, began to work in coffee shops in 1937 at the age of 15. It appears that Mrs. Chan had a strong sense of self and self-worth even from her youth, perhaps due to the love shown by her adoptive grandmother.

During the war, she found a good husband – a foreman who had skills and could earn a decent living. He would also protect her during the Japanese Occupation, qualities that Mrs. Chan carefully considered before accepting his proposal. He was a deeply generous man who somehow found enough food for them to give away to neighbours during the difficult war years.

How the Adoptions Continued

Mrs. Chan adopted a boy in 1948, making the decision on her own. He was still in the womb when Mrs. Chan chanced upon his mother, a poor seamstress, who was sobbing on the stairs after having pawned the very clothes she was sewing for a customer to make ends meet.

Mrs. Chan redeemed the pawned clothes and decided to care for the seamstress, sending her to stay with a midwife as "there was just no help for it." When the child was born, Mrs. Chan took him in and hired a nursemaid.

And so it went on.

Another baby fell into Mrs. Chan's arms in 1952. "Tiny as a kitten", the baby was to be sent to a convent. But the child's mother pleaded with Mrs. Chan to adopt her which again she did.

Next came a boy and a girl – siblings who were children of her husband's kin. Mrs. Chan's gentle touch calmed the boy who stopped crying in her arms. If a child responded to her in such a manner, she took it as a sign that she was destined to care for the child.

In 1965, Mrs. Chan, then 45 years old, took in a sixth child, the offspring of a dispensary caretaker whose entire family lived in one room behind the clinic. In 1966, she adopted the 12th child of a painter. He went on to father yet another child and again pressed Mrs. Chan to take in this new baby. But with a house full of children, Mrs. Chan finally had to say "no".

During this time, Mr. Chan continued to provide for and feed his growing family. He referred to his wife as a "mini social welfare" but gave her a generous portion of his salary to care for the children. He himself was known for helping the workers under

him with pay advances out of his own pocket after they had spent their money before pay-day or struggled to feed their own large households. Mr. Chan somehow made sure all his own adopted children received a good education.

The children were never kept in the dark about their birth parents. Mrs. Chan made them pay their respects during Chinese New Year to their blood kin, and kept open the offer for them to return to their real parents at any time should they want to go.

But the children clung to her. When they were naughty, she would make them kneel on the hard floor before the altar in the house for an hour, but one daughter recalled, "Even before the hour was up, mother was already making sweet bean soup as a treat for us and [to relieve] our sore knees."

Throughout this time, as with other Chinese ladies of her generation, Mrs. Chan showed absolutely no outward displays of affection. Yet the children knew they were safe and loved in her household.

A Kindly Nature

Others too received kindnesses from Mrs. Chan. Her door was always open to friends in need during difficult times. A neighbour – an amputee – and other friends in a government-built apartment complex off Alexandra Road still receive small packets of money or food sent by Mrs. Chan, aged 96 years old in 2018.

We were interrupted several times during our interview with Mrs. Chan in 2017. An Indian gentleman on his way home from the market stopped by with a packet of noodles for her. A couple living in a unit above brought tonics to keep her strength up. One adopted daughter remained close by while we spoke, giving her the occasional hug to encourage her to tell her story.

"All hearts are flesh. We must have compassion."

When asked why she did what she did, the stolid Mrs. Chan seemed surprised by our question. "All hearts are made of flesh," she said.

To her it is all about compassion, fate and destiny. If the baby she held in her arms stopped crying, she saw it as a calling to adopt and care for the child.

"It's all the same whether one has or doesn't have money," she told us. Whenever she's had some in her pocket she hasn't hesitated to help others.

There is also the teaching from her grandmother. She was fierce and undemonstrative but held strong beliefs that she passed on to her grandchild. Grandma taught her:

> "We must have compassion. Don't be greedy. Return everything you borrow. If you're given $10, only keep $5. When you see others in trouble, try your best to help if you can."

Mrs. Chan ended the interview with a recollection that sums up the steady, undemonstrative ethos of her mother's family. When she was just a child, she lost her way and walked all the way to Hill Street Police Station crying. The police offered to take her home but she pointed out that they were strangers. They then pointed out that *they* were the police. So she went home in a police car and found her mother waiting with a cane to spank her.

But the next day, mother took her to a studio to have her photograph taken. She said it was to show the police, just in case she wandered off again. She was too precious to lose.

6.2.4 Spontaneous Independent Giving

As Singapore was being rebuilt, many in the grassroots community remained in the background during all the activism and new initiatives. This is typical of the nature of Asians who give quietly when asked or continually, quite unknown to others.

Independent giving was on the rise even if it was only a dollar here or a few cents there, but here we can identify philanthropy – the voluntary giving towards public causes out of concern for the well-being of others. Below we highlight one such example.

6.2.4.1 Mr. Chan Peng Kwong, Retired Barber and Tai Chi Master [67]



Mr. Chan Peng Kwong during an interview in 2017

"Do good works and you will be rewarded with good works." – Mr. Chan Peng Kwong

Mr. Chan Peng Kwong is one such person with a strong sense of independence and obligation to help others.

He was born in 57 Sago Lane, the son of Mr. Chen Ying Jong whom we profiled earlier in this paper. Mr. Chan is active and generous in his own ways. He said he learnt to give from his father, mother and teachers, who told him that one must do good works. He became a barber and had a decent income. Married with children, he would read the newspapers intently (usually *Sin Chew Jit Poh*) and scour them for reports about needs in the community.

If there were calls for help after a fire, a donation drive going on, or simply someone suffering some hardship, he would hop on his bicycle and ride to the newspaper office where he would donate a few dollars to the cause. He gave $3-$5 a month out of his earnings, but seldom told his family about this.

Today, at 80 years of age, Mr. Chan continues to give steadily. He earns from charging some a fee for Tai Chi lessons, so he can give a free lesson to others. He used to visit elderly shut-ins, giving them free haircuts. He still donates at least $1,000 a year to medical causes close to his heart, such as the Kwong Wai Shiu Hospital, the Chung Hwa Medical Institution (a traditional Chinese medical clinic and training school) as well as the old Thong Chai Medical Institution that his own father took tenants to in his youth.

[67] Interview conducted on April 10, 2017, in Cantonese by Ng Sin Yue and Ooi Yu-lin.



Mr. Chan Peng Kwong and family, c. 1950, 57 Sago Lane



Mr. Chan Peng Kwong on his bicycle, c. 1950

Giving is an intensely private affair for Mr. Chan. He said it is entirely his own business. He does not know if his children give like he does. It's a matter of personal conviction. He also believes in the saying 善有善报 (do good works and you will be rewarded with good works).

6.2.5 Collective Giving and the Role of the Grassroots Community in building Nanyang University

As Singapore society worked to rebuild itself, the Chinese population received a major setback. Mao Zedong closed China off from the world in 1949, cutting off hundreds of overseas Chinese schoolchildren from a university education.[68] The only options for a tertiary education now were to go to Taiwan or switch to English education as there was no Chinese Department in the newly minted University of Malaya.

Headed by the leader of the Singapore Hokkien Huay Kuan Tan Lark Sye, the Chinese in Singapore decided they would solve the problem themselves by building a private university. Despite colonial opposition, he said:

> "We cannot allow the culture of the Chinese in Malaya to disappear … the only way to get into university … in order to preserve Chinese culture, is … to set up a [Chinese] university."[69]

The groundswell of support was unprecedented.

It was the biggest postwar fund raising effort among overseas Chinese in history, with the grassroots showing overwhelming support. Thus Nanyang University (or Nantah) was fondly referred to as the People's University (人民大学).



Nanyang University
Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

[68] In 1950 Singapore had 301 Chinese schools with 74,053 students and 1,949 teachers.

[69] Nan Yang Da Xue Chuang Xiao Shi (Nanyang University Founding History). (1956). Singapore: Nan Yang Wen Hua Chu Ban She (Nanyang Cultural Publishing House).

> "Everyone gave money; the millionaires some millions, the peddlers of Singapore food market a week's earnings every month. How many oyster omelettes, sliced crab, noodles of all kinds went into Nanyang University? The trishaw peddlers of Singapore and Malaya pedalled for three days and turned in all they earned for Nanyang University, and theirs was the greatest sacrifice, for they were so very poor. Rubber tappers flocked to give; they knew that their children would never have a chance to go to university; but it was a gesture of cultural identity. It was incredible and magnificent, and it must be remembered."
>
> – Han Suyin (Rosalie Matilda Chou), 1980)[70]

The scale of the initiative was enormous, involving hundreds of Chinese companies, clans, unions, Chinese schools, clubs, societies, Buddhist and Taoist temples, and various artistic groups.[71] Funds raised by wealthy Chinese included a donation of $5 million from Tan Lark Sye himself, while the Singapore Hokkien Huay Kuan donated a parcel of land in Jurong in the west of Singapore for the campus.

Various luminaries of the Chinese community earmarked funds for different buildings; the Aw brothers (of Tiger Balm fame) gave $225,000 for a 98-room student hostel, while Loke Wan Tho who started Cathay Cinema donated $295,000 for the Science building. Banks and corporations all gave generously.

Grassroots donations and support were astounding. There was fierce belief in the need for a place for their children to study and so move up in life. Grassroots donations to the building of Nanyang University are described below.

Grassroots Donations to Nanyang University ("Nantah")

There were myriad donors to Nanyang University, of which we highlight just some here.

- **Trishaw Pullers**

  On April 20, 1954, 1,577 trishaw pullers participated in a one-day voluntary ride to raise funds for Nantah. A total of $ 21,660 was raised. On that day, Chen Wen Zhi, a nine-year-old girl from the Singapore School for the Deaf, took her daily trishaw ride. She did not go to school but to the trishaw pullers association, where she handed over her piggybank to the association chairman.

- An Indian drinks vendor near Owen Road decided to support the cause of his regular customers. He happily donated $6 to the first trishaw that passed by his stall and $5 to the second. And he put five cents into the donation box of each and every trishaw that rode by after that.

- **Taxi and Lorry Drivers**

  On August 7, 1954, 1,999 taxi drivers donated their day's earnings to the Nantah effort. They managed to raise $30,000. Meanwhile 300 lorry drivers ran a 10-day fundraiser, garnering $8,528 for the fund.

- **Cabaret Dancers** (dance hall hostesses)

  On May 4, 1953, the Singapore Cabaret Dancers Association launched a five-day dance-for-a-cause event in five top dance halls. This raised $11,960. They were supported by other hostesses in Perak and Penang in Malaya.

- **Barbers and Hairdressers**

  Between 1953 and 1954, there were no fewer than 20 barber shops and hairdressers who participated in hair-cut and hair-perm fundraising activities. The popular ones raised more than $10,000 each.

[70] Han Suyin. (1980). *My house has two doors*. London, Jonathan Cape, p. 85.

[71] Zhou Wei Jie. *Cheng Chang Feng Yi Ju Gong Xing Xue – 1953-1955 nian, Nan Yang Da Xue Mu Kuan Bi Ji (*Notes on the Nanyang University fundraising activities, 1953-1955), *Yi He Shi Ji (Yi He Journal)*, 2015 Feb-May issue, No. 25, p. 36-48.

- **Performing Groups and Local Song and Dance Troupes**

  Arts, performing and cultural groups in both Singapore and Malaya organised large-scale fundraising activities in the form of concerts, dramas, magic shows, musicals, variety shows, lion dances, traditional operas and other entertainments. There were at least a few hundred such performances, raising thousands of dollars for Nantah.

  Records show that song and dance troupes popular with the masses like *Double Happiness Song and Dance Troupe*, *Feng Feng Song and Dance Troupe*, and *Ouyang Hong Song and Dance Troupe* in Singapore raised between $7,000 and $8,000 each.

- **Sports Competitions**

  Sports was a popular way of raising funds. Thousands of athletes, including players of volleyball, badminton, basketball, bodybuilding and football, organised tournaments and competitions for the cause.

Donations came from all over Malaya and Singapore. Others in the grassroots communities who gave generously were hawkers, factory and shop workers, construction workers, fishermen, rubber tappers, teachers and even storytellers, amongst many others.

Note: The importance of the media

The local Chinese media showed its full support for the cause. The two major Chinese newspapers, Nanyang Siang Pau and Sin Chew Jit Poh, played a key role in keeping the community up to date with the progress of donations, while encouraging active participation, running editorials, updates, and providing suggestions.

Following the British tradition of subscriptions in print, newspaper Nanyang Siang Pau set up the "*Chuan Fang Lu*" (spread the good name or list of good names) section in its paper and they themselves were the collection point for small donations from the general public on behalf of Nanyang University with a special desk set aside for just this purpose. People like Mr. Chan Kwong Peng would have ridden on his bicycle and deposited his few dollars on such a newspaper desk.

These brought in subscriptions of just a dollar, 50 cents or even 10 cents from the grassroots, hard earned money readily contributed for the sake of Chinese children in Singapore. Ultimately, *Chuan Fang Lu* collected more than Straits $300,000.[72]

Yao Souchou, an Australian historian, said:

> "With its overwhelming community involvement, the building of *Nantah* [Nanyang University] spoke of a solidarity and cultural unity not often seen among the usual contentions and differences in wealth and social position among the Chinese of Malaya and Singapore."[73]

[72] Zhou Wei Jie. Cheng Chang Feng Yi Ju Gong Xing Xue – 1953-1955 nian, Nan Yang Da Xue Mu Kuan Bi Ji (Notes on the Nanyang University fundraising activities, 1953-1955). *Yi He Shi Ji (Yi He Journal)*, 2015 Feb-May issue, No. 25, p. 36-48.

[73] Yao, S. C. (2008). All quiet on Jurong Road: Nanyang University and radical vision in Singapore. In Michael D. Barr and Carl A. Trocki (eds.). *Paths not taken: Political pluralism in poswawar Singapore*. Singapore: NUS Press.

7. Key Findings & Conclusion

While this is a working paper, even at this exploratory stage we can suggest these key findings:

7.1 Giving was a major part of life in Singapore's grassroots community before the Japanese Occupation. Giving was based on traditional Asian social constructs, with philanthropy a subset of this.

A key finding of this data search over fifty years has uncovered the fact that giving was a dominant feature of life in prewar Singapore, and, while such giving would carry on through the years until the first "pioneer" generation died out it was not philanthropic, but obligatory. This obligation was both necessary and undertaken with a strong sense of care and responsibility in most cases. We do *not* imply that it was involuntary.

There being so little money to give in the first place often meant that no money was available to give to outside causes. It was only as years passed and income became greater and the giver more independent that we see the grassroots community able to give to causes in Singapore that they personally believed in.

As such we suggest that in the big picture, giving has always been present in Asian society, while philanthropy would come later, as those with less income gained more savings.

7.2 Giving and obligation were intertwined in prewar Asian grassroots society, with "*socially-obligated giving*" dominating where kinship was the primary relational framework of life.

Examples of socially obligated giving included:

- Remittances to families in home countries (this carried on for years and is still practised today).
- Social systems which provided de facto kin and fulfilled community welfare and support needs, whereby everyone had a role to play and an obligation to sustain the entire group's well-being. This allowed the cycle of life to carry on. In such systems, with the relocation to Singapore, one's obligation to blood kin might be replaced by that of fictive kinship.

Examples of such systems recreated with non-kin in Singapore included:

- Patriarchal-lineage derived systems like clans, *huiguan,* and trade guilds
- Community collaboration via *Gotong Royong*
- Baweanese Pondoks

Our data shows that giving was the focus for much of life in prewar Singapore, but it was not what we would immediately identify as philanthropic giving based on current parameters. Giving was premised on social survival, going beyond the survival of the nuclear family to include the extended family. Thus the line between when giving to home became diaspora philanthropy in Asian communities is blurred.

By deconstructing the place of a person in traditional kinship dominated societies, we define such traditional giving as "socially obligated."

7.3 Giving was linked to a person's identity, interpreted through a framework of relationships.

This is posited based on Mauss (1925) who attributes the behaviour described in the finding above to the individual having a primary identity as a social person. He observes such identities in:

> "... societies dominated by kinship relations and groups, which define transactors and their relations and obligations to each other. In gift transactions [the giving of items of value in that community], objects are inalienably associated with the giver, the recipient, and the relationship that binds them ...

> "Denying these obligations denies the existence of a social relationship with the other party and hence violate public expectation and private belief."
> (Italics inserted by author. Carrier, 1991, in Mauss.)

Many of our migrants came from exactly such societies. In China, an entire village was one large kinship group proud of its ancestry and were all tied by blood obligations. Everyone had his place in the social hierarchy and defined responsibilities to give and receive according to one's social person position.

Mauss further describes such a social identity as being inalienable, reinforced by "public expectation and private belief." To deny the obligation was to deny the kinship that ties its relationships. Thus one must always first support one's kin, which migrants did through faithful remittances continuing over decades.

Migrants also built lateral ties with people of the same language and belief in Singapore, creating fictive kin. Such lateral ties also brought obligations with them. The obligation to help one's brother and the code of reciprocity were deeply upheld throughout China. Likewise in Malay-Muslim society, the honour code of mutual cooperation was also enshrined in social protocols transcending language and culture across the Malay Archipelago. South Asians also had ancient nuanced constructs where giving to others came with implicit expectations of reciprocity.

In Singapore, vehicles of such interdependence were reproduced or iterated as formal, informal and ad hoc constructs, such as clans (*pang*), guilds, associations and pondoks, with the code of *gotong royong* an example of cooperation in rural society among the Malay-Muslims.

With no coherent welfare system in place in colonial Singapore, migrants naturally reproduced these community help systems in their new host country. Up till the Japanese Occupation, such systems were the major fallback for welfare from shophouse to kampong across the island.

7.4 A gradual evolution of identity from Social Person to Independent Person was reflected over time seen in changes in giving patterns and growing bifocality.

Given our assumption of prewar migrants as having social persons as their primary identity as defined by their traditional kinship framework, we thus see how they gave as reflective of the obligations associated with that identity.

Over time, our data shows these migrants began to add new facets to this identity, ultimately becoming independent persons, making individual decisions as to how they would give.

Mr. Liu's remittance letters show this slow detachment and evolution. Starting as a son, we see new dimensions added to his person, finally resulting in the creation of a new relational framework for himself in Singapore as he relocated his family from China to Singapore where new obligations as a citizen called his son. Throughout Mr. Liu's journey, however, within the circle of obligation his mother always retained her identity as "the great mother" and he was always "your son."

Interviews we conducted provide us with the sense that among the children of migrants there was a lessening of social obligation, and the passage of time allowed one to control one's own purse and decide therefore how to give. At the same time the older generation, having settled into Singapore gained a sense of bifocality, keeping one foot in Singapore and one in their homelands. At this point we begin to identify examples of philanthropy becoming activism and engagement in welfare after the Japanese Occupation.

The intervention of the Japanese Occupation ruptured even further the original sense of primary identity as being framed by kin. The urgency of survival created new inter-ethnic bonds and spontaneous relational frameworks among strangers. More importantly, it created what Tajfel (1979) calls the sense of "them" against "us", giving rise to a never before experienced sense of unity among the local inhabitants of Singapore.

7.5 Giving provides us with a mirror of societal transformation.

We found that giving provided an unexpected mirror of societal change. As we have seen from tracing giving across three time periods – prewar Singapore, the Japanese Occupation, and reconstruction – changing practices of giving can be markers of both personal evolution and societal transformation. This social transformation also includes the development of plural and national identities and reflects the evolving face of giving in Singapore's journey of philanthropy.

We have marked how migrants added dimensions and new facets to their identities as the passage of time and life in modern Singapore wrought change and increased the roles of a person in society, both in their private capacities and in their public associations.

At the same time these also reflect stages of evolution in Singapore's social history. Key social transitions were reflected in changes in giving patterns. The policy of Divide and Rule encouraged the perpetuation of socially defined giving through the recreation of ethnic enclaves structured on ancient constructs. The Japanese Occupation saw giving transcend such boundaries to introduce the greater narrative of love for humanity in painfully real actions of sacrifice and sharing. Finally the choice to make Singapore a home for many in the grassroots community is reflected in the myriad initiatives of giving towards welfare and reconstruction of local society at all levels after the Japanese Occupation. This active investment towards building a new society for themselves would form the basis for the move to nationhood that would soon follow.

7.6 To understand the place of philanthropy in Singapore and societies underpinned by traditional values, we must broaden our concepts of giving.

The greatest challenge in interpreting the data uncovered for this paper was how to define the kind of giving that dominated prewar life in Singapore. Within current parameters one could decide that remittances and mutual support systems are outside the remit of philanthropy, but this would sidestep the differences now apparent between concepts and the enactment of giving valued in traditional Asian societies and definitions of philanthropy derived from Western norms.

We have isolated a key characteristic of giving in Asian societies, which is the role of *obligation* between the giver and the recipient, in both vertical and lateral transactions at the personal and community levels.

Another challenge in interpretation is the relationship between *identity* and such obligations, with the giver having a primary identity defined by his place within an established framework of relationships. We have called this the "Social Person" after Mauss' definition of an inalienable identity created by kinship belonging. That identity in our findings carried with it codified obligations to both give and receive, implicitly understood within the whole group and was a deeply venerated role, being the primary identity of most migrants, who came from kinship systems.

The fulfillment of these obligations was the first responsibility of most of Singapore's prewar grassroots community. In fulfilling such duties, the welfare of one's family and the community were technically taken care of. This is at odds with the Western concept of giving which separates family from recipients of charity and public goods.

Another challenge to terminology noted earlier is that "family" in Asia often encompasses the extended kin group, and giving occasionally benefited a village of kinsman. Thus we find that in Asian giving, the line between personal giving and diaspora philanthropy, especially in informal situations, becomes definitively blurred.

These are just initial complexities that become less obvious as time passed and became less relevant as a migrant's identity broadened from that of the social person to gain new facets, that moved one towards that of the independent person. This person, could give to causes *outside* the obligatory having discharged his first duty. This independent person could give as he pleased, within the limits of his personal income.

However, even until now, in Asia, the obligation to family exists. We see it still in Confucian and Muslim societies, and across the South Asian continent in informal systems and implicit expectation. The remittance community in Singapore today – used by Filipino, Bangladeshi Thai, and Indonesian foreign workers, still have a primary obligation to send money home to equally complex, interdependent family constructs.

These new migrant workers in Singapore both reinforce the findings of this paper and introduce new questions for research about how these newer additions to the evolving population of the island now express traditional giving as they are transplanted to modern, 21st Century Singapore, and how current Western-based terminology can be broadened to include these forms of giving, where ancient values are still honoured in modern cultures.

Conclusion

This chapter ends our study of giving by the grassroots community from their journey as social persons, giving first to fulfil their primary obligations, to their evolution into independent individuals with an extended personhood.

Over fifty years, we see this personhood expanding to include extra facets that reflected not only a place in the kinship structure and the nuclear family, but also new identities – as perhaps members of local occupation and interest groups, as members of larger fictive kin groups, as representatives of ethnic groups, as individuals such as a student or parent, and finally, through the hardship of war, as members of a multiracial Singapore society and citizens of a nascent nation.

We further suggest that migration to Singapore not only allowed the inclusion of new dimensions to the primary social identity of settlers, but also created a growing bifocality, allowing migrants to embrace belonging to two homes at once, with responsibility expanding to encompass giving to both. While the first generations have died out, later generations in Singapore still show bifocality with some showing considerable engagement and philanthropy towards their parents' lands of origin.

Appendices

APPENDIX A: Population Diversity in Singapore 1931

Adapted from Vlieland, 1932

Table A1: Population Statistics by Race in Singapore, 1921-1931

YEAR	TOTAL POPULATION & BREAKDOWN BY RACE						
	TOTAL	Malaysians*	Chinese	Indians	Europeans	Eurasians	Others
1921	**425,912**	58,520	317,491	32,456	6,231	5,451	5,763
1931	**567,453**	71,177	421,821	51,019	8,147	6,937	8,352

Source: Vlieland, C. A. (1932), adapted from Table 13, p. 131 and Table 8, p. 126

* The term "Malaysians" appears to have been used by Vlieland to describe all persons from the Malay Archipelago, be they ethnically Malay or not.

Table A2: Race Composition (adapted from Vlieland, Number 134, p.36)

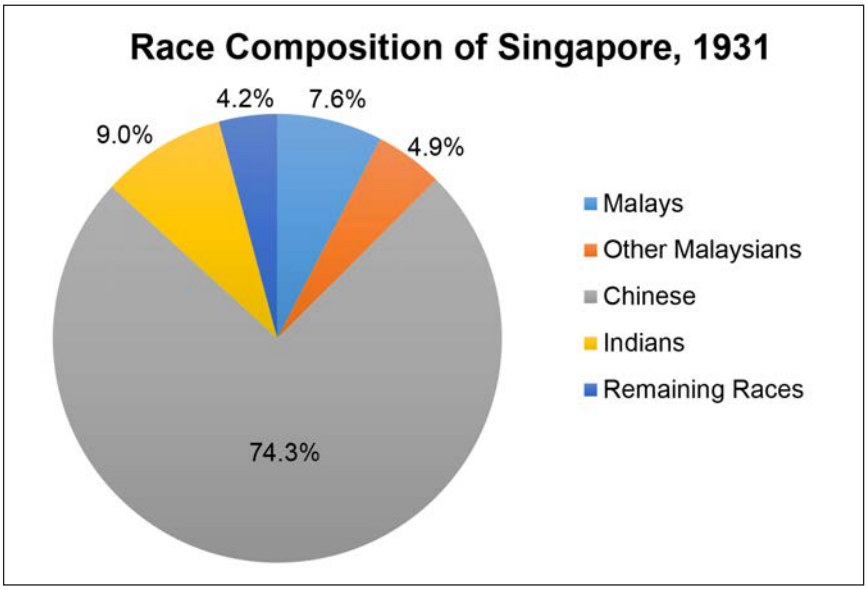


Table A3: Race Breakdown for Settlement of Singapore 1931 (adapted from Vlieland, 1932. p. 17A)

Total All Races			Europeans			Eurasians			Malays		
Persons	Males	Females	Persons	Males	Females	Persons	Males	Females	Persons	Males	Females
567,453	357,691	209,762	8,147	5,378	2,769	6,937	3,338	3,599	43,055	21,874	21,181
Other Malaysians			**Chinese**			**Indians**			**Others**		
Persons	**Males**	**Females**	**Persons**	**Males**	**Females**	**Persons**	**Males**	**Females**	**Persons**	**Males**	**Females**
28,122	16,117	12,005	421,821	263,191	128,630	51,019	42,998	8,021	8,352	4,795	3,557

Table A4: Population Breakdown of Malaysians* by Race and Sex Singapore 1931 (adapted from Vlieland, Table 38, p. 23A)

Total Malaysians			Malays			Javanese			Boyanese			Achinese			Batak		
Persons	Males	Females	Persons	Males	Females	Persons	Males	Females	Persons	Males	Females	Persons	Males	Females	Persons	Males	Females
71,177	37,991	33,186	43,301	21,874	21,427	16,063	9,379	6,684	9,413	5,338	4,075	39	26	13	25	22	3
Menangkabau			**Korinchi**			**Jambi**			**Palembang**			**Other Sumatra**			**Riau Lingga**		
Persons	**Males**	**Females**	**Persons**	**Males**	**Females**	**Persons**	**Males**	**Females**	**Persons**	**Males**	**Females**	**Persons**	**Males**	**Females**	**Persons**	**Males**	**Females**
100	76	24	4	4	-	13	8	5	87	55	32	136	97	39	221	91	130
Banjarese			**Other Dutch Borneo**			**Bugis**			**Other N.E.I.**			**Dayak**			**Others**		
Persons	**Males**	**Females**	**Persons**	**Males**	**Females**	**Persons**	**Males**	**Females**	**Persons**	**Males**	**Females**	**Persons**	**Males**	**Females**	**Persons**	**Males**	**Females**
443	262	181	32	18	14	802	453	349	197	118	79	50	25	25	251	145	106

*Sakai race excluded due to lack of data.

Table A5: Population Breakdown of Europeans by Race and Sex Singapore 1931 (adapted from Vlieland, Table 34, p. 165)

Race	Persons	Males	Females
English	5,177	3,604	1,573
Irish	311	193	118
Scottish	725	497	228
Welsh	75	60	15
Australian	210	105	105
New Zealander	31	19	12
Canadian	17	13	4
Other British	94	58	36
British Unspecified	11	10	1
American	183	104	79
Belgian	7	5	2
Danish	42	29	13
Dutch	648	356	292
French	175	70	105
German	110	81	29
Greek	10	2	8
Italian	38	16	22
Norwegian	16	9	7
Portuguese	75	44	31
Russian	58	22	36
Spanish	19	5	14
Swedish	7	5	2
Swiss	40	32	8
Other European	68	39	29
Total	**8,147**	**5,378**	**2,769**

Observation: Male population is more than double that of female population.

Table A6: Population Breakdown of Chinese by Tribe and Sex Singapore 1931 (adapted from Vlieland, Tables 49-50, p. 180-181)

TOTAL CHINESE								
Persons			Males			Females		
421,821			263,191			158,630		
Hokkien			Tiu Chiu			Hakka (Kheh)		
Persons	Males	Females	Persons	Males	Females	Persons	Males	Females
181,287	109,417	71,870	82,516	53,470	29,046	19,716	12,908	6,808
Hok Chhia			Cantonese			Hailam		
Persons	Males	Females	Persons	Males	Females	Persons	Males	Females
8,842	6,998	1,844	95,114	52,762	42,352	20,040	17,197	2,843
Hok Chiu			Kwongsai			Other and Indeterminate		
Persons	Males	Females	Persons	Males	Females	Persons	Males	Females
6,548	5,115	1,433	949	731	218	6,809	4,593	2,216

Table A7: Population Breakdown of Indians by Race and Sex Singapore 1931 (adapted from Vlieland, Table 62, p. 193)

Total Indians			Tamils			Telegu			Malayalam		
Persons	Males	Females	Persons	Males	Females	Persons	Males	Females	Persons	Males	Females
51,019	42,998	8,021	37,293	31,012	6,281	125	70	55	4,390	4,144	246
Punjabi, etc.			United Provinces			Burmese			Bengal, etc.		
Persons	Males	Females	Persons	Males	Females	Persons	Males	Females	Persons	Males	Females
5,283	4,373	910	1,103	1,074	29	2	-	2	898	869	29
Bombay, etc.			Bihar and Orissa			Nepal			Other and Unidentified		
Persons	Males	Females	Persons	Males	Females	Persons	Males	Females	Persons	Males	Females
623	494	129	23	23	-	22	21	1	1,257	918	339

APPENDIX B: The Chinese Remittance Process

From the 1800s, the Chinese diaspora comprising migrant workers searching for work from America to Australia gave rise to the development of systems to send money earned home to families in China. Initially using networks of trusted friends returning home, it was not long before the Chinese saw a good business opportunity and turned remittance-sending into an efficient system which encompassed every stage of the transfer of money from an overseas worker until it was placed in the hands of his mother thousands of miles away.

By the 20th Century, migrants in Singapore had a range of ways to send money home. They could tap informal systems like networks of friends or local restaurants and shops. They could also use the vast connections of *Qiapiju*, overseas letter offices, of which there were 280 in Singapore. These *Qiapiju* offered highly efficient services that included the telegraphic transfer of money accompanied by letter writing, delivery and reading of the letters to families in China, and the service of a letter by return mail (Harris, 2015).[74]

The process was rather simple – one would go to a professional letter writer who typically could be found seated at a desk on the pavement near the remittance houses. One could count on him to produce the letter bearing greetings and news for family back home. In addition to florid felicitations, this letter would, most importantly, include an exact description of the money being sent with the letter. The money would either be enclosed or given to the remittance company to collect in "clubbed packets."

Very early on remittance companies learnt to telegraphically transfer the money to their affiliates in China to dispatch to families. The money handed over by those sending remittances was kept locally in local currency and used for loans or foreign exchange.

The letters meanwhile would be reunited with real money disbursed by local affiliates of remittance companies in China and sent on their way via couriers who likely knew the names on the envelopes so there was no need for addresses. These couriers could help with writing a return letter, and so the cycle continued. Box 3 features a letter from Mr. Liu Shi Zhao who often sent money home via the Ding Sheng Remittance Company in Singapore. It is an example of how such letters were usually addressed.

[74] A comprehensive examination of the evolution of the *Qiapiju* is presented in Lane J. Harris (2015).

APPENDIX C: Contents of the Letters Of Mr. Liu Shi Zhao

Letter No.	Year	Year/date in Lunar/ Republic of China Calendar	Recipient	Amount remitted	Distribution of moneys	Contents of letters	Background information
1	**1936**	丙子年 七月廿四日	Mother	National Currency $4	Mother $4	• Arrived in Silat safely. • Staying at Liu Fu Ji Workers Quarters, Temple Street, Chinatown	
2	**1936**	民国二十五年八月廿二日	Mother	Silver Dollars $10	• Father $2 • Mother $8/ Household expenses	• Arrived in Penang from Silat • Started work at Uncle Shao Zhao's shop • Have sent $4 to Mother last month	
5	**1937**	十一月十三日	Mother	Silver Dollars $16	• Uncle ("Uncle Qing Song" relationship unknown) $4 • Aunt Shao Chuan $1 • Wife $1 • Mother $10/ Household expenses	Sends remittance and greetings; reports he is safe and sound in Penang. Letter sent from Penang.	The Marco Polo Bridge incident (7 Jul 1937), the Sino-Japanese war erupts
3	**1937**	1936 (unclear) 四月初二	Mother	Silver Dollars $80	• Uncle (perhaps Uncle Qing Song again) $35 • Mother $45/ Household expenses	• Sends remittance and greetings to Mother • Now stays in Liu Fu Ji, Chinatown, Singapore (新加坡大坡牛车水刘福记)	
4	**1937**	五月廿一日	Mother	Central currency $24	• Uncle (unclear as to whom) $8 • Mother $16/ Household expenses	• Still in Penang • Life is getting harder by the day	

Letter No.	Year	Year/date in Lunar/ Republic of China Calendar	Recipient	Amount remitted	Distribution of moneys	Contents of letters	Background information
6	**1938**	丁丑年 二月廿九日	Mother	Silver Dollars $80	Mother $8/ Household expenses	• Sends remittance and greetings to Mother • Letter sent from Penang • Life is hard here	8 Dec 1941, Japan bombs Pearl Harbour, the Pacific War breaks out. Overseas remittance activities come to a halt.
7	**1946**	民国三十五年七月八日	Mother	National currency $30,000	• 2nd Aunt $15,000 • Mother $15,000/ Household expenses	• Sends remittance and greetings to Mother • Reports he is safe and sound in Singapore	World War II ends, overseas remittances have not fully recovered, money is scarce, people in Singapore don't have enough for themselves, let alone sending remittances to their families in China
8	**1947**	民国卅六年九月十九日	Mother	National currency $300,000	• 2nd Aunt $100,000 • Mother $200,000/ Household expenses	• Arrived in Singapore safely	Chinese Civil War between the KMT and CCP begins and the national currency is devalued further. Relatives and families in China are in need. The number and amount of remittances and letters increase.
10	**1949**	二月初六日	Mother	National currency $3,000,000	• 2nd Aunt $500,000 • Mother $2,500,000	• Decides to apply for his new wife and son to migrate to Singapore • Reason is first wife of more than 10 years died without bearing any children. Liu is already 30+ and is eager to start family with second wife in Singapore • Begs for Mother's understanding and approval	

Letter No.	Year	Year/date in Lunar/ Republic of China Calendar	Recipient	Amount remitted	Distribution of moneys	Contents of letters	Background information
9	**1949**	1949 元月三日 /1952? (unclear)	Brother-in-law (Ding Han)	HK $50	Unclear as to whether Mr Liu has returned to China at some point before this.	• letter（1949) the letter is sent by Luan, friend of Shi Zhao, apologising that he did not send Shi Zhao off when the latter returned to China • envelope (1952) recipient is Ding Han Qiang , sent to Ma Shang Village	Civil war in China intensifies, overseas Chinese remittance is billowing into hometowns. The Malayan Emergency starts in 1948. On 1 October 1949, the People's Republic of China is established.
11	**1950**	三月初二	Mother	HK$50	• 2nd aunt $10 • Mother $40/ Household expenses	Sends remittance and greetings, reports he is safe and sound in Singapore	
13	**1951**	辛卯年 元月初八	Mother	HK $40	• 2nd aunt $10 • Mother $ 40/ Household expenses	Sends remittance and greetings, all safe and sound in Singapore	
15	**1951**	11月1号	Mother	HK$75	• 2nd aunt $5 • Son (Jin Rong) $5 • Mother $65/ Household expenses	• Sends remittance and greetings to Mother • All are safe and sound in Singapore	
16	**1951**	1951 (unclear)	Mother	HK $75	Not mentioned	Envelope only	

Letter No.	Year	Year/date in Lunar/ Republic of China Calendar	Recipient	Amount remitted	Distribution of moneys	Contents of letters	Background information
12	**1951**	元月初四	Mother	HK$75	• 2nd aunt $10 • Wife $5 • Mother $60/ Household expenses	• Sends remittance and greetings to Mother • Learns that the grain at home was seized by the government. Such a situation has been caused by the change of policy which affects not only their family but everyone in the village. Begs Mother not to be worried and distressed. • Name of new-born son is Jin Rong (锦荣) • Will invest in tontines ("hui", 会) to raise fund	The wave of migration from China begins to stop. Some Chinese students return to China to participate in the "construction of our new motherland." The rise of nationalist movements in *Southeast* Asia, and colonies gradually gain independence.
14	**1951**	3月15日	Mother	HK $60	2nd aunt $10 Son Jin Rong $5 Mother $45/ Household expenses	Sends remittances and greetings, reporting all are safe in Singapore	
17	**1952**	元月初五	Mother	HK $20 (HK$1= RMB$3,880)	Mother $20/ Household expenses	• Sends remittance and greetings to Mother • Reports family is safe and sound in Singapore	
18	**1952**	4月12日	Mother	HK $75	Unknown	Envelope only	
19	**1952**	4月12日	Mother	Unknown	Unknown	Unclear as to whether this letter is the same as previous.	
20	**1953**	1月20日	Mother	HK $40	Mother $40/ Household expenses	• Sends remittance and greetings to Mother • Will try to apply entry permit for mother	

Letter No.	Year	Year/date in Lunar/ Republic of China Calendar	Recipient	Amount remitted	Distribution of moneys	Contents of letters	Background information
23	**1954**	11月17日	wife (Ding Shu Duan)	HK $50	• Son $5 • Mother $45/ Household expenses	• Sends remittance and greetings to Mother • Has applied for wife and son to join him in Singapore. • After 16 months still waiting for approval	
21	**1954**	8月6日	wife (Ding Shu Duan)	HK $50	• Son $5 • Mother $45/ Household expenses	• As is short of money, wonders if wife can raise her own funds to get to Singapore • Ask wife to purchase clogs materials and tools	In protest against the colonial army conscription, more Chinese school students return to China.
24	**1954**	12月15日	wife (Ding Shu Duan)	HK $50	• Son $5 • Mother $45/ Household expenses	• Sends remittance and greetings to Mother • Happy to hear that son (Jin Rong) is lively and adorable	
22	**1954**	10月13日	wife (Ding Shu Duan)	HK $50	• Son $5 • Mother $45/ Household expenses	• Has received 12 photos sent by wife. • Will send travel expenses with entry permit	
25	**1955**	乙未年 正月十六日	wife (Ding Shu Duan)	HK$60	• Mother-in-law • 2nd aunt $10 • Older sister $5 • Son $5 • Mother $30/ Household expenses	• Sends remittance and greetings • There are direct ferry services from Guangdong to Shantou. • He has already applied for entry permits for wife and their son to Singapore	Industrial disputes break out in Singapore including the Hock Lee Bus riot. Zhou Enlai calls on overseas Chinese to sink roots in their respective residential countries.

Letter No.	Year	Year/date in Lunar/ Republic of China Calendar	Recipient	Amount remitted	Distribution of moneys	Contents of letters	Background information
27	**1955**	3月15日	Mother	HK $40	Mother $40/ Household expenses	• Sends remittance and greetings to Mother • Asks about this year's harvest of wheat and sweet potato back home • Now living at 141A, 10th mile, Ponggol Road, Upper Serangoon with sworn brother and sister-in-law • If someone is coming to Silat (Singapore) , please ask them to bring some wood clog materials (different sizes of chisels) : 20 ”zhongchou ” and five ”chouzai”	
26	**1955**	2月16日	Mother	HK $20	Mother $20	• With his wife sends remittance and greetings to Mother • Wife and son arrived in Singapore safely on the 11th of 2nd month	
31	**1955**	九月初四	Mother	HK $40	Mother $40/ Household expenses	• Sends remittancse and greetings to Mother • The local (colonial) government stipulates that older people are not allowed to apply for entry permit. • Inquire about younger sister’s marriage proposal	
29	**1955**	四月初四	Mother	HK $40	Mother $40/ Household expenses	• Sends remittance and greetings to Mother • Has received clog-making materials and a pack of dried vegetables Aunt Wudi brought from China • Asks if the farm tenant has paid off the loan of cattle and farm tools • Asks mother to send photos to apply for entry permit	

Letter No.	Year	Year/date in Lunar/ Republic of China Calendar	Recipient	Amount remitted	Distribution of moneys	Contents of letters	Background information
28	**1955**	三月廿八日	Mother	HK $40	Mother $40/ Household expenses	• Sends remittance and greetings to Mother • Asks if mother is willing to come to Singapore to live with them • Not easy for younger sister to come to Singapore • Works at sworn brother's place	
30	**1955**	七月初七	mother and sister Bi Xia （碧霞）	HK $40	Mother $40	• Sends remittance and greetings to Mother • Son Jin Rong has made friends in Singapore. They come over to play with him every day. • Still make a living by making clogs • Tells sister that if she decides not to marry, he will leave the land as well as property in their hometown to her so that she can be financially independent • Will also send her remittance monthly	
32	**1955**	十月初三	Mother	HK $40	Mother $40/ Household expenses	• Sends remittance and greetings to Mother • If mother is serious about coming to Singapore, will definitely apply for her • Asks for some TCM medicine and snake wine • Wife is going to give birth this month	
33	**1955**	十一月八日	Mother	HK $40	Mother $40/ Household expenses	• Sends remittances and greetings to Mother • Jin Rong is going to school next year • Wife has yet to give birth	

Letter No.	Year	Year/date in Lunar/ Republic of China Calendar	Recipient	Amount remitted	Distribution of moneys	Contents of letters	Background information
34	**1956**	乙未年 十二月十三日(1956年一月) (Unclear)	Mother	HK $50	• Mother-in-law $10 • 2nd aunt $5 • Mother $10 (ang pao from sworn brother and sister-in-law) • Mother $25/ Household expenses	• Sends remittance and greetings to Mother • Wife gave birth to a baby girl at 4 a.m. on the 8th day of the 11th month in the lunar calendar (early 1956) • Name of daughter: Jin Zhen (锦珍)	Workers and students go on strikes in Singapore
35	**1956**	5月16日	Mother	HK $30	Mother $30/ Household expenses	• Sends remittance and greetings to Mother • Baby daughter is lively and lovely • Received parcel sent by Aunt Bing Guang	
36	**1956**	丙申年 十一月十一日	Mother	HK$40	Mother $40/ Household expenses	• Sends remittance and greetings, reports family's safe and sound in Singapore • Experiencing financial difficulties, can only send money early next year	
37	**1957**	丁酉年 元月初七	Mother	HK $30	Mother $30/ Household expenses	• Sends remittance and greetings to Mother • Wife gave birth to second son on 30th day of 12th month (January 1957); both mother and baby are safe. • The delivery fees are more than 100 Singapore dollars	The British colonial government issues Singapore citizenship to migrants, many Chinese migrants became Singapore citizens. The Chinese in Singapore started to consider their place of residence as home. Second-generation ethnic Chinese immigrants take over the responsibility of writing letters to China.

Letter No.	Year	Year/date in Lunar/ Republic of China Calendar	Recipient	Amount remitted	Distribution of moneys	Contents of letters	Background information
38	**1964**	五月初八	Mother	HK $60	Mother $60/ Household expenses	• Sends remittance and greetings to Mother • Reports family is safe and sound in Singapore • Rears about 1,000 chickens (of which about 600 are hens), more than 100 ducks and only two pigs. Due to capital shortage, only buys a few hundred chickens at a time.	The Great Leap Forward begins (1958-1960) in China followed by natural disasters and famines (1959-1961) in China. Besides sending money Singaporeans also send dried food, medicines, necessities and clothes. Singapore attains autonomy in 1959. The road to independence is rocky. **The Remittance business declines**. Only 60 remittance companies remain in the 1970s (In 1987, only 30 remain) 1963 – Merger of Singapore in Malaysia 1965 -- Singapore becomes an independent state The start of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1975in China
41	**1970**	庚戌年 六月十三日	Mother	HK $80	Mother $80/ Household expenses	• Sends remittance and greetings to Mother • Ask the actual death month and date of first wife (Ding Qiao Luan 巧銮丁氏) • Asks mother to send her photo to him	
40	**1970**	庚戌年 四月十六日	Mother	HK$80	• Younger brother Shi Zhong $10 • Mother $60/ Household expenses	• Sends remittance and greetings to Mother • Reports family is safe and sound in Singapore	

Letter No.	Year	Year/date in Lunar/ Republic of China Calendar	Recipient	Amount remitted	Distribution of moneys	Contents of letters	Background information
39	**1970**	己酉年 十一月卅日	Mother	HK$80	• 2nd aunt $20 • Mother $60/ Household expenses/ ang pao (yaojin 腰金)	• Chinese New Year is coming • Sends remittance and greetings to Mother • Reports family is safe and sound in Singapore	
43	**1970**	庚戌年 十月初五	Mother	HK$80	• 2nd aunt $10 • Mother $70/ Household expenses	• Sends remittance and greetings to Mother • Reports family is safe and sound in Singapore • Sends regards to mother about flood washing away the embankment of the house. Mother has suffered heavy losses and was injured in the flood.	
42	**1970**	庚戌年 八月廿九日	Mother	HK$80	• Younger brother Shi Zhong $5 • Mother $75/ Household expenses	• Sends remittance and greetings to Mother • Reports family is safe and sound in Singapore	
44	**1971**	辛亥年 元月廿九日	Mother	HK$80	• 2nd aunt $10 • Mother $70/ Household expenses	• Sends remittance and greetings to Mother • Reports family is safe and sound in Singapore • Wants to know what happened to the opening of the river back home	
45	**1972**	壬子年 四月十二日	Mother	HK $80	• 2nd aunt $5 • Mother $75/ Household expenses	• Sends remittance and greetings to Mother • Attaches photo of younger son Jin Cheng (锦成) for mother	

Letter No.	Year	Year/date in Lunar/ Republic of China Calendar	Recipient	Amount remitted	Distribution of moneys	Contents of letters	Background information
46	**1972**	壬子年 七月初一	Mother	HK$80	• Uncle Qing Song HK$10 • 2nd aunt $10 • Mother $60/ Household expenses	• Sends remittance and greetings to Mother • Reports family is safe and sound in Singapore • Son Jin Rong is going for National Service • Asks Uncle Qing Song to bring to China two packs of old clothes (one for mother-in-law), dozens of salted fish, a pair of gold ear hooks (from wife to her mother), then asks him (Qing Song) to bring jade from home or from sister-in-law to Singapore	Singapore government introduces National Service in 1967 In 1976, all overseas remittance business, personnel and assets in China are incorporated into the Bank of China (the People Bank of China)

APPENDIX D: Key Remittance Letters From Mr. Liu Shi Zhao With Translations Into English

第二十一封
发信日期：1954年8月6日

1）家书内容:

慈亲大人万福。
淑端吾妻如见。兹付去一信并港币伍拾元。至时查收。抹出五元与小儿费用。余者交与吾母作为家用。此次因等候入口字以致慢寄。祈勿远挂。前信言及家中所存之款实是不足。未知吾妻身边岂有余蓄。以备旅费之用。至切回文来知。将来买物之事。屐抽切勿买多。中抽（大庄）二十支。抽仔十支。以备自己之用。买来大铢二付（副？）。可托绍奎叔购买。但铜器是禁止出口之物。宜欲小心。祈知之。余言后叙。两地平安。并询

近好

愚夫世照寄
1954年8月6日

- 屐抽买得利号为好
- 另者。该入口字在此不久定可领取。祈知之

2）信封:

潮安东津乡堀尾沟三房投交
丁淑端吾妻收拆
外付港币伍拾元
由叻刘世照寄

3）邮戳:

新嘉坡鼎盛信局
1954．8．11 汕头

Translation:

The 21st letter
Date of issue：August 6, 1954

1) Letter content:
Million blessings to my dearest Mother.

My dear wife Shu Duan,

I've remitted 50 Hong Kong dollars with this letter. Please check the amount when it arrives. Please set aside five dollars for my son's expenses. The remaining will go to mother for household expenses. This letter is late as I was waiting for the approval of the entry permit. Do not worry. You mentioned in your last letter that there was not sufficient money at home to pay for the journey. I wonder whether you have some savings for that. Please let me know. As for the wooden clog chisels (屐抽 the word likely means different sizes of knives or chisels to cut and shape wooden clogs) I requested, do not buy too many: 20 large-size chisels and 10 small-size will be enough for my use. Also, buy two sets of dazhu (大铢 – meaning unclear) and ask Uncle Shao Kui to buy for you. Do take note that it is forbidden to bring metal (bronze) out of China. So do be careful. I will write more in my next letter. Hope peace be with us on both sides (China and Singapore).

With best regards

Your husband
August 6, 1954

PS

- Buy chisels from the De Li Hao (De Li Store).
- The entry permit will soon be available. Please be patient.

2) Written on the envelope:

To:
My wife Ding Shu Duan
3rd family unit in Jue Wei Gou, Dong Jin Xiang,
Chao An
(Enclosed 50 Hong Kong dollars as remittance)

From:
Liu Shi Zhao, Silat (Singapore)

3) Postal stamps:
Ding Sheng Remittance Company, Singapore
1954.8.11 Shantou

第三十八封
发信日期：1964年五月初八(1964年6月17日)

1）家书内容:

字奉
慈亲大人膝下。敬禀者。今天寄去一信并港币陆拾元。至时查收。以作家用。近维大人福体康强。起居迪吉。为祝为慰。儿合家大小亦略安好。免介。现儿家中饲有大小鸡共有成千只之数。计蛋鸡约有六百只。又有鸭百余只及猪二只。特此奉告。但因资本无力。不能饲多。每次所入之鸡数百只而已。专此告禀。余言后陈。并祝

金安

五月初八日
儿世照寄

2）信封:

潮安东津乡堀尾沟三房投交
家慈亲大人安展
外付港币陆拾元
叻刘世照寄

3）邮截:

口实叻耀华成朝发批局

Translation:

The 38th letter
Date of issue: 8th day of the 5th lunar month, 1964 (June 17, 1964)

1) Letter content:
Dearest Mother, I kneel before you with all respect and humbly report on the following:

Today I sent you a letter with 60 Hong Kong dollars for home expenses. Please check. Hope this letter finds Mother in good health. We are good in Singapore. Please do not worry. Now there are about 1,000 chicken in our farm; 600 of them are chickens for eggs (蛋鸡). We also have more than 100 ducks and two pigs. But because of lack of capital, we can't buy more. Each time we can only afford to buy a few hundred chickens.

For your information, please. I will report more in my next letter.

With best wishes

Your son Shi Zhao
On the 8th day of the 5th lunar month of 1964

2) Written on the envelope:

To:
My dearest Mother
3rd family unit in Jue Wei Gou, Dong Jin Xiang,
Chao An
(Enclosed 60 Hong Kong dollars as remittance)

From:
Liu Shi Zhao, Silat (Singapore)

3) Postal stamp:
Yao Hua Cheng Remittance Company, Singapore

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Ng Sin Yue (Mandarin, Teochew)
Chan Jia Hao
Choo Su Leng Bella
Faris Tan
Muhammad Firdaus B M Saharudin (Bahasa Melayu)
Yap Bei Yi Bernice
Ang Ing Ing

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Anonymous 4 (b. 1911)
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