

CHINESE BUSINESS PIONEERS

In Southeast Asia, Dr. Sun Yat Sen depended on the support of local Chinese businessmen for his revolutionary activities. In Singapore, these businessmen were often influential Chinese leaders and highly regarded by both the British colonial and Chinese governments.

By the time Dr. Sun arrived in Singapore, businessmen had led the Chinese community for almost a century. They were at the top of the social hierarchy and were involved in commercial activities that boosted Singapore's economy. With their wealth and influence, they were instrumental in shaping the three pillars of the Chinese community: Chinese schools, community organisations and newspapers.

The establishment of the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce (today the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce & Industry) in 1906 marked a new phase in the community's history and instilled a sense of unity across different dialect groups. The Chamber encouraged the local Chinese community to stay connected with their homeland, and led them through times of crisis.

As Singapore moved towards self-government and eventual independence from the 1950s to 1965, the Chamber actively lobbied for the rights of Chinese residents to be recognized as the citizens of this new multicultural and multiracial nation.

CHINESE ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES IN THE 19TH CENTURY

After establishing Singapore as a trading post in 1819, Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles' vision of the island as a commercial emporium attracted traders from far and wide. These traders included Chinese businessmen from Malacca and China, who engaged in a wide range of businesses such as trading, shipping, revenue farming, planting, tin mining and real estate. They also functioned as middlemen in the booming entrepôt to facilitate the exchange of goods and labour from China, manufactured products from Europe and local produce from Southeast Asia.

Hokkien Businessmen from Malacca

Many Hokkien businessmen from Malacca arrived and settled in Singapore between 1824 and 1827, and soon established themselves as a powerful economic force. Most of them hailed from the prefectures of Zhangzhou and Quanzhou in Fujian Province, but had lived and built their businesses in Malacca for generations. Drawn to Singapore by Raffles' business-oriented policies, they were highly regarded by the British and swiftly became leaders of the local Hokkien community and the Chinese community in general.

Businessmen from Southern China

During the early days of Singapore's founding, migrants from Southern China included Hokkiens, Teochews, Cantonese, Hakkas, Hainanese and Hock Chews. While some also became wealthy businessmen, their overall economic power and social influence still paled in comparison to their counterparts from Malacca.

Gambier and Pepper Cultivation

When the British arrived in Singapore in 1819, there were about 20 gambier plantations which were managed by the Chinese and Malays. Typically grown together with pepper, gambier waste provided an essential fertiliser for pepper plants and offered protection for their roots. Gambier was used in the tanning and dyeing industries and became a major cash crop exported to Britain in the 1830s. Gambier and pepper grown in Johore and Riau were transported to Singapore and exported to other countries. However, as growing gambier rapidly depleted the soil of nutrients, plantation owners found it increasingly unsustainable to cultivate the cash crop especially with plummeting gambier and pepper prices as well as labour shortages at the turn of the 20th century.

Tin Mining

The tin mining industry was one of Malaya's most important economic pillars from the late 19th to early 20th centuries. Malaya's tin mines were mainly found in the Malay Peninsula's west coast states of Perak and Selangor, and the industry's growth brought wealth to many Chinese businessmen and also spurred the influx of Chinese migrant labour to Malaya.

CHINESE ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES IN THE 20TH CENTURY

In the 20th century, the surge in production and prices of commodities such as rubber and tin contributed to Singapore's phenomenal growth as a trading port. The volatile political and economic situation in China also drove huge numbers of Chinese immigrants to Singapore in search of a living. At the same time, the growing Chinese mercantile class was engaging in an ever increasing range of economic activities. Apart from maintaining their traditional advantage in the import and export as well as retail sectors, they were actively building new businesses which included the cultivation and processing of emerging cash crops such as rubber and pineapple, while those with ample financial resources were also making forays into the banking sector.

Rubber and Pineapple Industries

The invention of the pneumatic rubber tyre in the 19th century led to a dramatic increase in the global demand for rubber. Gambier and pepper, which were Singapore's principal cash crops at the time, were eventually replaced by rubber and pineapple. Pineapple cultivation sustained the plantation owners financially during the initial years of their investments, as rubber trees took at least five years to mature, while pineapples could be harvested slightly more than a year after planting. Apart from the cultivation of these cash crops, Chinese planters also ventured into the processing of rubber and the manufacturing of rubber products. In addition, they also dominated the pineapple canning industry.

Mangle machine used for making rubber sheets (date unknown)

Collection of Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall



The Rubber and Pineapple Kings

Chinese industrialists such as Teo Eng Hock, Tan Chor Lam, Lim Nee Soon, Tan Kah Kee and Lee Kong Chian were some of the local businessmen who ventured into rubber and pineapple cultivation. Besides planting these cash crops, they also built factories to process them. Some of these Chinese industrialists were so successful that they established massive business empires and were touted as the “Rubber and Pineapple Kings” of their time.

A Tropical Delight

The pineapple was once an important cash crop in Singapore and pineapple plantations could be found in various parts of Singapore including Yishun, Sembawang and Jurong from the late 1800s to the 1960s. These pineapples were harvested, processed and canned, and by 1930, Singapore was exporting over 1.5 million cases of canned pineapples annually. During this period, Malaya became the second most important producer of canned pineapples in the world after Hawaii.

BANKING

At the end of the 19th century, the banking and finance industry in Singapore was mainly dominated by Western banks. However, as Chinese businessmen became increasingly affluent due to their involvement in the booming tin mining and rubber industries, some of them decided to establish their own banks. In 1903, the first Chinese bank, Kwong Yik Bank, was founded to provide loans to Chinese businesses. Thereafter, others such as the Sze Hai Tong Banking & Insurance Company, the Chinese Commercial Bank, the Ho Hong Bank and the Oversea-Chinese Bank were established in succession. After the Great Depression of the late 1920s, the latter three were amalgamated in 1932 to form Oversea-Chinese Banking Corporation, now commonly known as OCBC Bank.

CHINESE EDUCATION

As the British colonial government was unconcerned about the education of the local Chinese, the first Chinese schools were established and operated exclusively by the community. These schools initially emerged in the form of free schools set up by the various dialect clans with their respective dialects as the medium of instruction. They were poorly funded and managed, with less than ideal teaching staff and equipment.

During the 20th century, local Chinese education entered a new phase of development as Chinese community leaders established new-style schools under the influence of reformist and revolutionary forces from China. The more progressive-minded community leaders also heeded calls for female education and founded schools exclusively for girls.

Traditional Private Schools

Towards the end of the 19th century, Chinese education was provided mainly by traditional private schools known as *sishu*, and the education curriculum centred on the teaching of Confucian texts and classics. The classes were conducted by scholars from China and held in venues such as clan associations, ancestral halls and temples.

New-Style Schools

Since the late 19th century, the Qing government had been establishing consulates and sending officials to support and promote Chinese education in Nanyang (Southeast Asia). These officials were later joined by Chinese reformists and revolutionaries at the turn of the century. In the early 1900s, new-style schools which differed from traditional private schools began to appear in Singapore and Malaya. These schools adopted China's education system and policies, and used textbooks imported from China.

Bilingual Education

Apart from schools set up by the Chinese community, some Chinese children living in late 19th century to early 20th century Singapore chose to enrol in schools established by the British colonial government and missionaries. Although English was the main medium of instruction in these schools, some of them also offered Chinese lessons and advocated a bilingual education.

Female Education

In early Singapore Chinese society, women were accorded a lowly status and Chinese schools in Singapore catered exclusively to male students. It was only in the late 19th century that some notable individuals began to champion education for women, influenced by female emancipation movements in the West as well as reformist and revolutionary ideas from China. During this period, a number of girls' schools were established as there was increased awareness of the importance of female education.

Nanyang University: The first Chinese university in Southeast Asia

In the early 1950s, many Chinese-educated students in Singapore and the rest of Southeast Asia found it difficult to further their studies in China due to changes in the political environment. With support from the Chinese community, Nanyang University (or Nantah for short), the first and only Chinese tertiary institute in Southeast Asia, was established in 1953 in Singapore.

Apart from enabling Chinese-educated students from the region to pursue tertiary education, the university's establishment meant that the local Chinese education system now spanned primary to tertiary levels. Prior to its merger with University of Singapore in 1980 to form National University of Singapore, Nantah produced nearly 20,000 graduates, some of whom have made substantial contributions to Singapore and Southeast Asia across different fields.

THE TIME CAPSULE: SCHOOLING IN THE 20TH CENTURY

What was school like in the past? What were some of the objects that were most associated with student life then? This display draws inspiration from time capsules to present vignettes of school life in the 20th century and invites you to think about the objects that best represent your cherished memories of school.

Brown leather suitcase used as a schoolbag (mid-20th century)

During the 1950s, students did not carry backpacks to school but instead, their schoolbags resembled tiny suitcases.

Collection of the National Museum of Singapore



FROM CLASSICAL CHINESE TO VERNACULAR CHINESE

The New Culture Movement which swept across China in the early 20th century had a profound impact on local Chinese education. During that period, the literary revolution advocated by leading intellectuals such as Hu Shi and Chen Du Xiu effected a shift from using classical Chinese to vernacular Chinese as the written language. In 1920, the Beijing government ordered the use of vernacular Chinese in all levels of textbooks. In Singapore, many schools likewise switched to using vernacular Chinese as the medium of instruction, and newspaper editorials and commentaries actively promoted its learning and usage.

The Rise of Vernacular Chinese

For the Chinese community, the greatest impediment to literacy before the rise of vernacular Chinese was that the written word bore no resemblance to the spoken word. Classical Chinese, the language of classic literature which was used for nearly all formal communication, restricted literacy and learning to an elite class.

In 1917, Hu Shi started a revolutionary movement to replace classical Chinese with vernacular Chinese or *baihua* (literally, "plain speech") as China's standard written language so that ordinary Chinese could become literate. From the 1930s to 1960s, classical Chinese was all but completely replaced by written vernacular Chinese and this facilitated the spread of literacy amongst ordinary people.

CHINESE PUBLISHING

During the colonial period, Singapore was an important hub of publishing in Southeast Asia. During the 19th century, Western missionaries established printing presses in Singapore and produced religious tracts for distribution in China, where they were banned from proselytising. By the 20th century, Chinese newspapers and textbooks published in Singapore were also widely distributed in Southeast Asia.

EARLY CHINESE NEWSPAPERS AND PUBLICATIONS

Singapore's earliest Chinese daily *Lat Pau* was published in 1881, and since then, it was estimated that there were 20 Chinese newspapers that emerged before World War II in 1942. They included *Thien Nam Sin Pao*, *The Union Times*, *Chong Shing Yit Pao*, *Kok Min Yit Poh*, *Nanyang Siang Pau* and *Sin Chew Jit Poh*. The proprietors of these papers were mostly businessmen, who founded them for various social, political and/or commercial reasons.

RISE OF COMMERCIAL NEWSPAPERS

Prior to the 1920s, most Chinese newspapers in Singapore were established by middle-class businessmen with limited resources. These newspapers had low readership and incurred losses. This situation changed when commercial newspapers such as *Nanyang Siang Pau* and *Sin Chew Jit Poh* emerged in the 1920s. With strong financial backing, these Chinese commercial newspapers were able to hire the brightest talents in the industry and introduce various innovative practices to the newspaper business. The intense competition between these commercial newspapers also helped raise the standards of local Chinese newspapers.

THE ERA OF TYPESET PRINTING

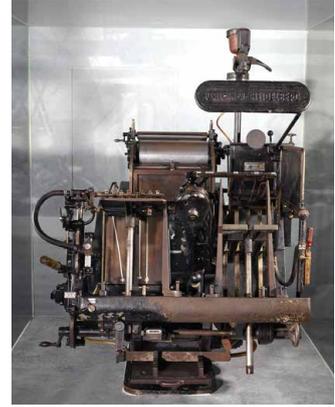
Before newsrooms became fully computerised in 1991, local Chinese newspapers were produced using the typesetting method. In other words, the editorial staff would write their articles by hand and then hand them over to typesetters who would manually select individual types to reproduce the articles. A proof was then made by placing a sheet of paper over the inked type, which would be proofread for errors before mass printing.

Heidelberg “windmill” letterpress (1950s)

This Heidelberg “windmill” letterpress machine was previously used by Kuon Ying Press, a printing shop based in Kampar, Perak, Malaysia. Kuon Ying Press started operations in the 1920s and ceased operations in 2016. With the machine, Kuon Ying Press printed a wide variety of materials ranging from cinema posters to wedding invitation cards and name cards.

Produced in Germany, this model was one of the fastest platen printers produced for letterpress printing. This particular model had two arms, one feeding the paper and the other delivering the paper, thus making it twice as fast. The movement of the arms moving the paper led to its nickname, the “windmill”.

Collection of Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall



NEWSPAPER LITERARY SUPPLEMENTS AND THE BIRTH OF NEW MALAYAN LITERATURE

The beginnings of new Chinese literature with a Malayan focus (including Singapore and Borneo), and which expressed new ideas with a modern spirit, can be traced to the publication of *Sin Kok Min Jit Pao's* literary supplement, “New People’s Magazine”, in 1919. Its emergence was spurred by local demand as well as the May Fourth literary movement in China.

With the general public as its target audience, this new form of Malayan literature was written in vernacular Chinese from its inception, and featured modern punctuation and paragraphing to facilitate reading. In order to achieve its objective of educating the public, the supplement’s writers took pains to ensure that their articles were written in a simple manner and easy to understand.

Growth and Development

It was after 1925 that there were organised efforts to develop the new Chinese literary scene in Singapore and Malaya. Many noteworthy works appeared during this period in newspaper literary supplements such as “Yelin” (Coconut Grove) and “Xingguang” (Starlight) in *Lat Pau*, as well as “Nanfeng” (South Wind) in *Sin Kok Min Jit Pao*. After 1927, literary movements emerged to promote new genres of writing focusing on local narratives and the plight of the lower classes.

CHINESE TEXTBOOKS

In the decades following the establishment of new-style Chinese schools, almost all textbooks used by such schools throughout Southeast Asia were published by China-based publishers such as the Commercial Press and Chung Hwa Book Company. It was only in the 1930s that local publishers founded by Chinese businessmen, such as World Book Company and Nanyang Book Company, began publishing localised textbooks, thereby breaking the monopoly of China-produced textbooks for the Southeast Asian market.

CHINESE TEXTBOOK PUBLISHERS

Although there were more than 20 major Chinese bookstores in pre-war Singapore, the Chinese textbook publishing scene was dominated by the “Big Five”, namely the Commercial Press, Chung Hwa Book Company, World Book Company, Shanghai Book Company and Nanyang Book Company. Apart from publishing and selling Chinese books and textbooks, they also sold stationery and provided other services such as supplying Chinese schools in Singapore, Malaya and the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia) with teaching staff from China.

CHINESE COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS

The most pressing concerns for Chinese migrant workers arriving in 19th century Singapore were to find work and shelter. In order to survive and thrive in a foreign land, immigrants who hailed from the same locality, spoke the same dialect and/or worked in the same trade, tended to band together for mutual support. These support networks evolved into community organisations established based on locality, kinship (family name) and trade (occupation).

Apart from helping new arrivals with lodging and employment, they also helped clansmen perform customary duties such as ancestral and deity worship, festive celebrations and death rituals. As these community organisations grew and prospered, their work expanded to include the establishment of schools and hospitals, and the organisation of charitable efforts.

Locality-Based Organisations

Many locality-based organisations started as groups managing burial and temple grounds for their respective communities. Heng San Teng Temple and Tian Hock Keng Temple, established respectively in 1828 and 1840, were the earliest examples of community organisations established to serve the Hokkien community before a formal clan association was formed in the premises of Tian Hock Keng Temple in 1860.

Chung Shan Association

Established in 1821, Chung Shan Association was one of the earliest Chinese clan associations to emerge in Singapore. It was established by early immigrants from Xiangshan (now known as Zhongshan County), China which was also Dr. Sun Yat Sen's hometown. It changed its name from Xiang Shan Hui Guan (Xiang Shan Association) to Chung Shan Association in 1937 to underscore the historical significance of Dr. Sun's role in establishing the Chinese Republic, as Dr. Sun was more commonly known by his alias Chung Shan (Zhong Shan).



Wooden plaque bearing the Chinese characters "Xiang Yi Guan", which was the former name of Chung Shan Association (1845)

Collection of Chung Shan Association, Singapore

Kinship-Based Organisations

Kinship-based organisations in the 19th century accepted members with the same family name and who speak the same dialect, and such organisations included societies, ancestral halls and guilds, etc. Some of the earliest kinship-based organisations included Tsao Clan Association or Cho Kah Koon (established around 1819), Chan Si Wui Kun (established in 1848) and Toi Shan Wong Kar Koon (established in 1854). In general, such organisations had fewer members and were less wealthy than locality-based organisations.

Trade-Based Organisations

Trade-based organisations emerged in the 19th century when those working in the same trade began to organise themselves for mutual help and benefit. Examples included Lai Yuen Tong (established in 1857 and predecessor of Part Woh Woi Koon), an association for Cantonese opera performers; Pak Seng Hong (founded in 1868), a guild for Cantonese bricklayers; and Lo Pak Hong (founded in 1890), a guild for Cantonese carpenters. These organisations flourished during the 20th century and numbered close to a hundred, which reflected the diversity of Chinese trades and occupations at the time.

CHINESE **LEISURE CLUBS**

For the Chinese community, leisure clubs were more than spaces for recreation – they were also networking platforms for their members, many of whom were affluent businessmen of a particular social standing. More often than not, it was at these informal gathering places where community leaders met to discuss economic, social, cultural and political issues affecting the local Chinese and to galvanise the Chinese community to contribute to society.

Ee Hoe Hean Club

Ee Hoe Hean Club was established in 1895 as a recreational club for wealthy Chinese businessmen. It did not restrict its membership to any particular dialect group although the majority of its members were Hokkien. In pre-independence Singapore, the club played an important role in the social and political history of the Singapore Chinese community. It led the Chinese communities in Southeast Asia to support the 1911 Revolution in China and served as the headquarters of the anti-Japanese South East Asia Federation of China Relief Funds during China's war of resistance against Japan. After World War II, the club became a focal point for the anti-colonialism movement. In the 1950s, it played a part in encouraging non-naturalised Chinese to pursue Singapore citizenship and supported the establishment of Nanyang University.

Goh Loo Club

Goh Loo Club was founded in 1905 by then Consul General of China in Singapore Sun Shih Ting, Tan Tok Lian and other Hokkien businessmen. It was initially known as “Gu Ji Le” but was subsequently renamed Goh Loo Club in 1908. It was located on Club Street next to Singapore Chinese Weekly Entertainment Club. It was one of the most influential Chinese clubs in pre-war Singapore, and counted among its member some of the most well-known Chinese pioneers, such as Lim Boon Keng, Tan Ean Kiam, Tay Koh Yat, Tan Lark Sye, Lee Kong Chian and Ko Teck Kin. It was also dubbed the “Bankers’ Institute” as most of the directors of all the Chinese banks (including the Ho Hong Bank, the Oversea-Chinese Bank and the Chinese Commercial Bank) in Singapore were its members.

Singapore Chinese Weekly Entertainment Club

Singapore Chinese Weekly Entertainment Club was founded in 1889 by Peranakan Chinese businessmen such as Lee Choon Guan and Tan Chow Kim. It was then the only club for local-born businessmen. The club’s management and members were all fluent in English and highly regarded by British officials. The club later accepted rich Chinese businessmen who were not locally-born such as Aw Boon Haw, who was once president of the club.

Hoi Thin Amateur Dramatic Association

Hoi Thin Amateur Dramatic Association was established in 1913 by Cantonese community leaders such as Wong Ah Fook, Yow Ngan Pan, Ng Seng Pang, Lu Mun Sek and Fong Chong Cheng for leisure and social activities. It was originally known as Qi Ying Shan She and located at Pagoda Street. It was subsequently renamed Hoi Thin Club and eventually Hoi Thin Amateur Dramatic Association in 1918.

After World War II, the association purchased a building in Neil Road to serve as its clubhouse but had to relocate due to redevelopment works in the area. During the 1960s, it relocated to its current premises at No. 2 Lim Teck Kim Road.

Chui Huay Lim Club

Chui Huay Lim Club was founded in 1845 by Teochew businessman Tan Seng Poh and is one of the oldest Chinese clubs in Singapore. Tan had originally used his family property at Keng Lee Road to serve as the clubhouse. Upon his death, members donated money to purchase the land from the Tan family and turned it into the permanent premises of the club. The club served as a venue for Teochews to engage in leisure, social and business activities and was a meeting place for rich and powerful Teochew leaders. Its board directors and members generously supported welfare and educational projects and the club also participated in fundraising efforts for China's war relief.

POST-WAR DEVELOPMENTS

The number of newly-registered Chinese community organisations continued to grow from the post-war period right up to the 1970s. By this time, many such organisations no longer play the role of initiating new immigrants into local society, but retained customary functions such the organisation of ancestral and deity worship, festive celebrations, as well as marriage and death rituals.

From the 1970s, the relevance of local Chinese community organisations started to diminish. This prompted the organisation of a national seminar of Chinese clan associations on 2 December 1984, which led to the formation of Singapore Federation of Chinese Clan Associations (SFCCA) on 27 January 1986 under the joint sponsorship of seven leading clan associations.

SFCCA was tasked to strengthen cooperation among the clan associations, organise and support educational, cultural and community activities, and promote understanding and appreciation of Chinese language, culture and values.

BADGES OF CLAN ASSOCIATIONS AND COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS

During the years immediately before and after World War II, the local Chinese community remained deeply connected to their birthplace and politically oriented towards China. This was reflected in the badges of local Chinese clan associations and community organisations, which commonly used designs incorporating the "White Sun in Blue Sky" or plum blossom motifs which were the national symbols of Republican China.

SINGAPORE CHINESE CHAMBER OF COMMERCE & INDUSTRY

Early History

Established in 1906, the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce & Industry (then known as General Chinese Trade Affairs Association) was one of Southeast Asia's earliest Chinese chambers of commerce. It was established with the support of the Qing government and accepted members from all dialect groups. It merged with Chinese Merchants General Chamber of Commerce in 1914 and was renamed Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce. It subsequently changed its name to the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce & Industry in 1977 to reflect its involvement in both trade and industry.

- **No. 47 Hill Street**

The Chamber first set up its office in Thong Chai Medical Institution. Shortly after, it leased the building at No. 49 Hill Street (now No. 47 Hill Street), then the house of wealthy Teochew merchant Wee Ah Hood, for use as its premises. In 1911, the Chamber acquired the building for \$55,000 and remained at this location right up to the present day.

Leading the Chinese Community

During the colonial period, both the British and Chinese governments recognised the Chamber as the leading organisation of the Singapore Chinese community, responsible for ensuring the welfare and order of that community. In this capacity, the Chamber mediated intra-community disputes and rallied the local Chinese to raise funds for disaster relief as well as support the revolution and the anti-Japanese resistance in China. As Singapore progressed towards self-governance and independence, the Chamber fought for the political rights of the Chinese and encouraged the local Chinese community to regard Singapore as their home.

- **Leadership in Times of Need**

After the Second Sino-Japanese War broke out in 1937, Singapore became the epicentre of fundraising efforts for China's war relief by Chinese communities across Southeast Asia. On 15 August 1937, a public rally involving some 700 representatives from 118 Chinese organisations was held at the Chamber's premises. This rally resulted in the formation of Singapore China Relief Fund Committee headed by Tan Kah Kee. The Chamber and its leaders actively participated in this committee as well as South East Asia Federation of China Relief Funds, which Tan Kah Kee later founded on 10 October 1938 to coordinate fundraising efforts in Southeast Asia.

- **Nanyang Drivers and Mechanics**

The fall of China's major coastal cities during the Second Sino-Japanese War effectively severed its sea lines of communication. The 1,146 km Yunnan-Burma (Myanmar) Highway became its crucial link to the outside world, but it lacked experienced truck mechanics and drivers to traverse the route. In response to an appeal by Tan Kah Kee, close to 3,200 youths from Southeast Asia travelled to China and served as volunteer drivers and mechanics. The first batch of 80 men from Singapore and Batu Pahat left for China on 18 February 1939.

These volunteers played a crucial role in transporting war supplies as well as 100,000 soldiers from China to Burma (Myanmar) to fight the Japanese. It was estimated that more than 3,000 transportation vehicles plied the route, of which over a third were driven by volunteer drivers and mechanics from Singapore and Malaya. However, conditions in the frontlines were harsh and dangerous, and up to a third of them died in the line of duty.

- **The Dark Years**

On 15 February 1942, the British surrendered unconditionally to the Japanese, who occupied Singapore and renamed it Syonan-to. Shortly after, they launched the month-long Daikensho (meaning “great inspection”) or Sook Ching operation to root out anti-Japanese elements. Among those on their list were Chinese community leaders who were actively involved in the anti-Japanese movement.

A number of them, such as Tan Kah Kee, then Chamber president Lien Ying Chow, Tan Lark Sye and Lee Kong Chian, managed to escape the invading Japanese in time, while others who remained in Singapore were coerced into forming Overseas Chinese Association and raising \$50 million for the Japanese to protect the properties and lives of the local Chinese community.

- **Victims of Operation Sook Ching**

Soon after the British surrendered, the Japanese army conducted massive rounds of inspections that lasted for about a month. Chinese males between the ages of 18 and 50 were ordered to report at island-wide screening centres for interrogation and screening, and those who failed the screening were summarily executed. Victims included not only guerrilla fighters, armed Chinese, voluntary soldiers and Chinese community leaders who supported the anti-Japanese movement, but also many ordinary civilians such as teachers, lawyers and students.

- **Seeking Justice for Victims of the Japanese Occupation**

In early 1962, the remains of civilian victims of the Japanese Occupation were discovered in many parts of Singapore including Siglap, Changi and Bukit Timah. The Chamber undertook the grim task of recovering the remains and according them a proper burial. Founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew set aside a 4.5-acre piece of land at Beach Road to construct a park and memorial in remembrance of the victims.

The Chamber then established a committee to raise funds and oversee the project. In August 1963, it held a mass rally at City Hall which was attended by over 100,000 people of all races seeking war reparation from Japan. The memorial was partly funded by compensation given by the Japanese government in 1966.

Built at a cost of \$300,000, the Memorial to the Civilian Victims of the Japanese Occupation (Civilian War Memorial) was officially unveiled by Founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew on 15 February 1967, the 25th anniversary of the Japanese Occupation. The Chamber continues to hold a memorial service at the site on the same day every year, which is designated as Total Defence Day in Singapore.

Nation-Building

During the post-war years, Singapore went through a process of decolonisation, self-governance and merger with Malaysia, before gaining independence in 1965. The Chamber contributed to Singapore's nation-building process by actively involving the business community in trade promotion and encouraging the Chinese community to register for citizenship and contribute to the defence of Singapore.

- **Celebrating Self-Government**

During the colonial period, both the British and Chinese governments recognised the Chamber as the leading organisation of the Singapore Chinese community, responsible for ensuring the welfare and order of that community. In this capacity, the Chamber mediated intra-community disputes and rallied the local Chinese to raise funds for disaster relief as well as support the revolution and the anti-Japanese resistance in China. As Singapore progressed towards self-governance and independence, the Chamber fought for the political rights of the Chinese and encouraged the local Chinese community to regard Singapore as their home.

Honouring the Past

This plaque, with the Chinese characters “zong feng yuan chang” (meaning “to keep the spirit of our forefathers strong even as we travel far and wide”) was presented by Xu Shi Chang, then President of the Chinese Republic, to the Chamber in 1920. It was once prominently displayed at the Chamber's premises at Hill Street and served as a reminder of the contributions made by Chinese pioneers, as well as the importance of preserving their legacies. Over the years, the Chamber's leaders have fulfilled this mission by giving back to society and promoting local Chinese heritage and culture.



Plaque presented by then President Xu Chi Chang of the Chinese Republic to the Chamber (1920)

Collection of the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce & Industry

- **Preserving Wan Qing Yuan**

Wan Qing Yuan, or Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall as it is known today, is an example of the Chamber's efforts to preserve the Singapore Chinese community's heritage. Gazetted as a National Monument by the Singapore government in 1994, it was initially saved from demolition by six Chinese business pioneers in 1937 and preserved as a memorial dedicated to Dr. Sun Yat Sen in 1940.

The Memorial was subsequently owned and managed by the Chamber from 1951, and refurbished in 1966 to commemorate the centennial of Dr. Sun's birthday. In 2009, the Memorial entered a new chapter when the Chamber signed a Memorandum of Understanding with National Heritage Board, which took over its management and designated it as a community heritage institution. This reaffirmed its position as an important part of Singapore's history and the Chinese community's heritage.

- **The Six Men Who Saved Wan Qing Yuan**

According to a newspaper interview with Chew Hean Swee published on 12 November 1947, the story of Wan Qing Yuan's acquisition is as follows:

One day before the Second Sino-Japanese War, Yeo Kiat Tiow hosted a banquet for then Consul General in Singapore, Kao Ling Pai, which Chew Hean Swee was also invited to attend. During the banquet, the subject of acquiring Wan Qing Yuan arose. Upon hearing this, Chew, who fully supported the idea, immediately left to look for Lee Choon Seng, Lee Kong Chian and Tan Ean Kiam, who agreed to donate one thousand dollars each. In addition to Chew Hean Swee's contribution of one thousand dollars and five hundred dollars each from Yeo Kiat Tiow and Lee Chin Tian, the six men managed to raise enough funds to purchase Wan Qing Yuan. They approached the owner, only to find out that someone else had already offered to buy and demolish the villa. After several rounds of negotiations, the six men managed to purchase the villa for \$5,200.

Shaping the Future

In 1961, the former Chamber premises at Hill Street were demolished to make way for a new building. This new building, completed in 1964, was nine storeys high and integrated both Chinese and Western architectural styles in its design. The building underwent its most recent renovation in 2017 and reopened in August 2019.