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Philanthropy in Transition:

An Exploratory Study of Asian Women and Philanthropy in Singapore, 1900-1945

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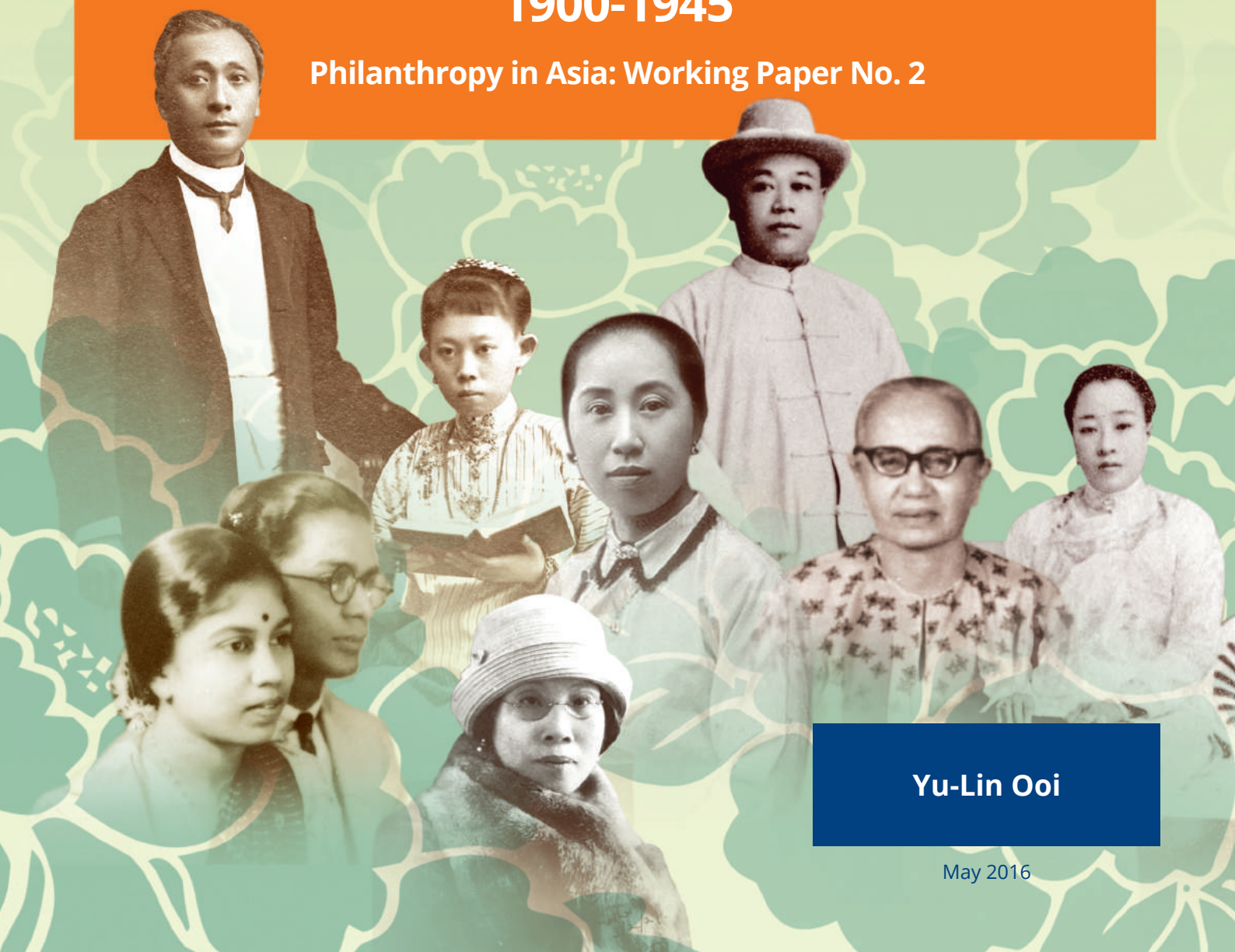

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acsep: knowledge for good

Abstract

This is a first exploratory study of the contributions of Asian women to the story of philanthropy in Singapore. While many Asian men are known to be philanthropists in Singapore's history, there is a deafening silence when it comes to the contributions of women.

This paper attempts to find out why this is so. Effort was directed to identifying who our early Asian women philanthropists were and documenting the manner in which they contributed to the wellbeing of society. A very sparse attempt is also made to map their motivations against those of modern-day philanthropists.

The paper examines the major people groups in Singapore's population categorised today as "Chinese, Malays, Indians and Others" which we have deconstructed here as (i) the Immigrant Chinese and the Straits Chinese, (ii) Malay-Muslims and Arabs, (iii) the Indians and Ceylonese, and (iv) the Jews. The period covered by the research is from 1900 to 1945 in the liminal years of the early 20th century when Singapore was a British colony, and modernisation and political upheavals around the world would irrevocably alter traditional life in many societies. These massive changes would also affect the role and power of women in the realm of personal giving.

Three major influences emerged that impacted the ability of women to give across all ethnicities – the constraints of tradition upon women's roles; the issues of gender and economic power; and the effect of outside forces upon previously set norms. The interplay of these three influences is traced through each community as traditions were affected by modernity and new world views offered alternatives to ancient giving mechanisms. Through the stories of individuals in each community, we attempt to document some of the very personal choices that women made in how they gave – sliding on a continuum from traditional ways to the very "Western and modern" ways of public giving, to a melange of both. Each story is different, just as every migrant's journey was her own.

Our starting data was very shallow as few women of that time had either the luxury or literacy to record their giving, and by tradition the giving that were hidden gestures were regarded as most valuable. Thus our findings are initial and broad.

However we hope that we have made a start here to celebrate the surprising number of Asian women whose contributions, in so many more ways than just through the giving of money, helped make Singapore society what it is today.

About the Author

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Yu-lin Ooi is a consultant with ACSEP. She has a multidisciplinary background and has worked on a wide variety of projects requiring research and interpretation of written, visual, verbal and spatial data. Her degrees are in Social History from the National University of Singapore, Social Anthropology from the University of Cambridge, and Media from Boston and Stanford Universities. Most recently she has combined ethnography and design through studying Design in Chelsea, London.

Yu-lin has a particular interest in the social history of Singapore's women and has chronicled the story of Singapore's only school founded by Peranakans in *Pieces of Jade and Gold, An Anecdotal History of the Singapore Chinese Girls' School 1899-1999*. She has tracked social change in Singapore women's lives in two theses – *Changes in Courtship and Marriage in 20th Century Peranakan Society*, and *The Changing Status of Chinese Women in Singapore 1819 -1961*. With this paper she continues to investigate the daily lives of ordinary women in colonial Singapore, this time in the previously hidden area of private giving.

Combining ethnography and design, she has worked on documentaries, exhibitions and Peranakan building conservation. Yu-lin's current focus is on interpreting the needs of Singapore's elderly through combining ethnographic data with design. She has also worked with the Centre for Creative Aging (Architecture & Sustainable Design Pillar) at the Singapore University of Technology and Design to map and interpret the spontaneous use of space by the elderly.

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ACSEP aims to advance understanding and the impactful practice of social entrepreneurship and philanthropy in Asia through research and education. Its working papers are authored by academia and in-house researchers, providing thought leadership and offering insights into key issues and concerns confronting socially driven organisations.

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Introduction

Background

This study is a first exploratory attempt to document the role Asian women played in Singapore's colonial philanthropic landscape.

We look at women during the liminal years of the early 20th century, between 1900 and 1945, when Singapore was still a Crown Colony in the British Empire. This period saw the great civilisations of the world in transition when modernisation and wars were beginning to change the ancient social structures of Asia.

While many Asian men – Tan Kah Kee, Lee Kong Chian, Sir Manasseh Meyer, Lien Ying Chow, P. Govindasamy Pillai, Syed Sharif Omar al-Junied, Tan Tock Seng, and the list goes on – are remembered today for their contributions to the growth of Singapore, there is a deafening silence when it comes to the work of women in that same era.

Who were the early Asian *women* philanthropists in Singapore and what did they do? Why is so little recorded in Singapore's history about women's roles in philanthropy in general? This research attempts to find some answers to these questions. In so doing, we hope to add some previously unacknowledged women to Singapore's philanthropic historiography, and perhaps also uncover more about the idioms and patterns of women's giving at a time when migrant social structures were in flux with relocation to Singapore.

Scope of Research

Our research covers the main groups that make up Singapore's key communities today – the "Chinese, Indians and Malays and Others". These categories – constructs of expediency created for demographic purposes – did not accurately describe the loose confederation of multiple migrant ethnicities which made up Singapore's Asian population in the early 20th century. During the period covered by this research, the three large "communities" were still not homogenous and were made up of discrete ethnic groups; each with strong civilisational identities for men and women, cultures, beliefs and social structures which were transferred in some form during migration to Singapore.

Ladies of Singapore c1940
Courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore

In an attempt to parse out the contributions of women to the early philanthropic effort in Singapore, we have deconstructed these groups into component communities which share major commonalities. This is to gain a more accurate understanding of the main influences that informed patterns of private giving during that time. Thus the people groups under research are:

- the Arabs and the Malay-Muslims;
- the South Asians and the Ceylonese;
- the Chinese;
- the Straits Chinese; and
- the Jews.

We are aware that many ethnic groups have been subsumed into these large categories and that significant women in smaller communities may have been left out. However, we have found that within the constraints of this exploratory paper and the necessarily shallow search, there is still enough data to present some initial hypotheses and generate a broad understanding of how philanthropy was expressed in the lives of women across the races in Singapore a century ago.

Aims of This Paper

This paper aims to answer these key questions. Firstly, who were our early Asian women philanthropists? Secondly, what contributions did they make? Thirdly, how were their contributions expressed? And finally, were there any key factors that either hindered or enabled women in the practice of philanthropy?

An Initial Discussion on Motivations

It is our hope that through this paper, we might gain a clearer understanding as to why early Asian women were motivated to give. We are also looking to compare the findings from this paper with a set of quantified motivators known to be common to Western philanthropists today. The framework for this discussion was identified in a 2011 study by Lam, Jacob and Seah titled *Framing the Roots of Philanthropy*.

The quantified motivators shared by philanthropists are:

1. Values;
2. Economic resources;
3. Inter-generational role modelling;
4. Social networks; and
5. Affiliations.

We will map how early Asian women compare against this framework at a time when they were not homogenised or just integrating into Singapore society, and to discover if there were significantly different motivators that informed women at the time, be they gender, belief or culture.

Challenges

While this paper presented an exciting opportunity to fill a knowledge gap in Singapore's social history, the reality of tracking something as private and ephemeral as personal giving, especially among Singapore's early migrant female population, proved to be unexpectedly challenging.

Lack of Primary Data

The most obvious roadblock was a critical lack of primary data due to high migrant mobility, very varied ethnic practices, and incomplete records. Despite the best efforts of colonial administrators, information about women in the early Straits Settlements records is particularly sparse. Women were seldom mentioned in official documents except in records on birth, gender, mortality and prostitution. As our research cohort was a poor and mainly illiterate generation, they left behind few memories except oral accounts.

Local association records have slightly more information, but recorded male contributions rather than those of women. Therefore, we have had to rely mostly on third-party accounts to develop an understanding of what life was like for women then. Among our subjects, there are unfortunately few family records accessible to our research that reveal personal motivations for giving.

Pre-existing Interpretations of Philanthropy and the Role of Women

A second major hurdle was that each migrant ethnic group had its own ancient interpretation of what philanthropy meant and was informed by its own world views. We were therefore dealing with multiple concepts of the value and meaning of giving. To discern what were acts of philanthropy in each community first required an understanding of these world views which profoundly influenced all actions in the group. Through these interpretive lenses, we were able to suggest the roles each community had traditionally assigned to men and women in the area of personal giving, and the mechanisms used.

This prior analysis of traditional social systems proved to be necessary to understand where women stood in each of Singapore's early communities. The analysis included how each community defined its women, their social and political values, the power assigned to them, and their subsequent roles in economic structures; all of which impacted how giving by women was eventually expressed – formally or informally, in cash or in kind, and the idioms and mechanisms used.

Juxtaposing these known world views with the universal understanding of philanthropy as being the giving of time or money for the welfare of others, we were then able to piece together (albeit tentatively) how women in each community gave within the cultural milieu of these early years.

The Impact of the 20th Century

A third challenge presented itself in the timeframe under research. The early 20th century was a period of such enormous international flux that it is impossible to expect homogeneity in any of the communities of Singapore. Every person journeying to Singapore was moving along a continuum from migrant to settler; each with his/her set of experiences entirely personal to his/her individual circumstances. The influence of the British, dislocation from home, and life in a colony would all go towards making every story researched markedly different from the others.

It was a time of extraordinary transition – the sequestered Chinese woman with bound feet living at the same time as another Chinese women who was driving a car and dancing the Charleston. One Ceylonese girl was playing the piano to academy standard while another was illiterate and tapping rubber.

With such great juxtapositions in play, our findings are therefore partial, exploratory pictures of women which suggest some of their relationships to giving in their own communities and in civil society.

We hope, however, that this paper's findings will be useful as an impetus for more in-depth research initiatives into this previously under researched segment of Singapore's social history, and will provide greater understanding of Singapore's complex philanthropic roots.

Methodology

Recreating Retrospective Ethnographic Fields Using Multiple Research Methods

Because of the retrospective and exploratory nature of the material, a multidisciplinary research approach has been used to create an initial, contextual picture of what British colonial Singapore would have been like for migrant women, and what Asian women would have experienced coming to a complex, British, richly multiracial society completely unlike that of their own home countries.

A loose grounded theory methodology was used to reconstruct this picture using a necessarily shallow data pool.

The historical method is first used to understand the context in which the colony of Singapore came about and to document the circumstances under which women in the different communities came to Singapore.

Next social anthropological methods are used to create retrospective ethnographies; we first recreate "the fields" or the communities in which each woman lived, then follow these with an ethnographic exploration of each field by looking at the social systems, and economic and power structures of women in those communities with particular focus on the relationship between women and philanthropy. Finally we draw on oral and anecdotal accounts to craft third-person studies; in the case of Mrs G. Thevathasan we are very fortunate in having been able to conduct in-person interviews with the subject herself.

Chapter 1

Asian Women and Traditional Philanthropy in Colonial Singapore

It is a little-remembered fact of Singapore's social history that in 1900 women made up only 23.3 per-cent of the population which numbered 226,842 residents all told. The population had grown remarkably from the meagre 150 people on the island at the time of Sir Stamford Raffles' founding in 1819. Yet, despite the rapid commercial success of the port, the colony was still largely a bachelor community and only saw gender parity after World War II. Thus women made up only a small group during 1900-1945, the period covered by this research.

From various reports – census reports, Rai (2014) and Saw (1970) – we can estimate that Singapore's resident Municipal female population numbered approximately 52,975 in 1901. Making up the total female population were 15,820 Malay-Muslims, 33,462 Chinese (including the Straits Chinese), 3,478 South Asians (including about 300 Ceylonese women), and 215 Jewish women.

Distribution of Resident Municipal Population by Race in Singapore, 1901-1957

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.

Gender Imbalance in Singapore's Early Asian Communities

Several factors accounted for the slow appearance of women in the colony. In its early years, Singapore was a rough pioneer town and certainly no place for respectable women. Upon Raffles' departure, the colony was indifferently administered by the Bengal Presidency in British India. The raison d'être of the colony was trade and as long as that flourished everything else was moot. Thus the various migrant communities thronging the unexpectedly successful port of Singapore were left to fend for themselves.

An undesirable state of affairs took hold with Chinese secret societies fighting for dominance[1] while prostitution and opium dens rather than housing and sanitation flourished. This situation slowly improved after Singapore became a Crown Colony in 1867 with its own Governor appointed by the Queen, a Constitution, and Executive and Legislative councils. However it would take a few more decades before women and families ventured to settle on the island.

The practices of the migrant population were also reasons that slowed the inflow of women into Singapore. It was the 19th century and Asia's women were still living in centuries-old societies, untouched by industrialisation and modernisation. Women from China to the Middle East were confined to the home. Once married, they were veiled from the view of men and were responsible for bearing children and tending to the extended family.

Sex Ratio by Race in Singapore, 1891-1957*

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

[1] *The colony was brought to a standstill in 1854 by a legendary riot between Hokkien and Teochew secret societies. Troops had to be brought in to stem the bloodshed. The secret society problem would be among the first to be dealt with by the incoming Governor.*

This attitude towards women informed the actions of migrant men who arrived in droves from all over Asia to earn good wages in Singapore, while women were left behind in their customary places at home. Men remitted money to support their families, providing an income stream from abroad. This is a practice still ongoing in Singapore's migrant worker community today.[2]

Chinese women were further impeded by a travel ban instituted by the Qing authorities in China who held them as collateral to ensure the return of their menfolk and the inflow of remittances. This pattern changed only in the early 1900s when the instability in China's political system and desperate poverty made it possible for women to leave the country to search for work for themselves. A similar situation existed in South Asia where it was taboo for women to leave the home.

A Samsui Woman and Majie in Conversation
Kouo Shang Wei Collection
Courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore

Chinese women finally began to enter Singapore in larger numbers after 1911 when the Qing Dynasty fell. The floodgates opened when the British in Singapore passed the Aliens Ordinance Act in 1933 to encourage the inflow of Chinese women. The objective was to create gender balance among the Chinese migrant population; this was achieved by the time of the onset of World War II.

Small minority communities began to emerge as the Crown Colony began to take on the aspect of a decent town. These included the Straits Chinese (now called Peranakan) from the nearby multiracial port of Malacca, an enclave of Jews from Baghdad who came via Calcutta, and Ceylonese who came to serve the colonial administration. Women in these communities remained connected to their homelands – familial ties and relational support were merely extended to include communities in the new port. Thus we find these women were among the earliest to integrate into Singapore's nascent multiracial society.

Another community that moved fluidly into Singapore was what is now called the Malay-Muslims. This was made up of a mix of ethnic Malays and islanders from across the Indonesian Archipelago. Some had intermarried with Arabs already established in the region and there was great mobility within the region. The women of this community appeared not to have integrated so easily into colonial society, but kept a traditional profile while their menfolk interacted with the other races. The community flourished quietly, becoming the centre of Islamic travel and thought in the region in the early 20th century.

Understanding Philanthropy in Traditional Asian Societies and How that Informed the Role of Women

Data on personal giving by this cohort of early migrant women is scarce. In Asian societies, giving by women is a private part of life, seldom mentioned and even more seldom recorded. What stories can be found of early giving are told in later chapters, but here we will mention some broad patterns emerging from our initial explorations.

The first is that it cannot be taken as a given that each community interpreted philanthropy in the same ways, and we find that how men and women participated differed from group to group. Although the population of Asian migrant women was small, they represented a vast array of ethnicities; each with its own deeply evolved perceptions of giving.

Each community had its own religion, philosophy and customs that informed its world view from which it

[2] *A touching and unexpected example of this reliance upon Singapore for steady work became apparent at the time of Mr Lee Kuan Yew's passing in March 2015. Numerous posts appeared on social media expressing gratitude to the late statesman for having enabled villagers in Tamil Nadu to now live in concrete houses instead of huts.*

Amah with baby, c. 1926
Courtesy of Mrs Ivy Kwa

derived the rationale for giving, the understanding of philanthropy, and the responsibilities of the individual toward society. These included what giving meant, why and how it should be done, by whom it should or could be done, and what was considered a gift. The arenas and parameters of giving, formal and informal mechanisms of expression, idioms and their implicit meanings were all finely developed in the many ancient cultures brought by migrants who came to Singapore.

The first migrants transferred these complex systems to Singapore, reproducing them in the fabric of daily life in their new communities. With the entry of women into colonial society, a more complete reproduction of ancient social structures became possible. Customs, behaviours, languages, key rites of passage of birth, marriage and death, as well as attendant faiths and rituals still extant in the migrants' homelands all made the journey with women to Singapore.

Most pertinent to our findings is that in every ethnicity, there were established roles for both men and women in philanthropic expression which were also carried over with migration to the colony.

The Informal Role of Women in Traditional Asian Philanthropic Systems

Our first observations indicate that in most Asian communities, the traditional role of women in philanthropy was codified as "women's work" – *informal and indirect.*[3]

It was "women's work" to ensure the continuation of the family, faith and culture, and thereby the survival of the race. Such contributions by women were seldom acknowledged in Asian societies by men except in gratitude shown towards their mothers. The essential role wives and unwed daughters performed – looking after parents and the sick, and finding ways to feed children – was expected but unrecognised. This was a distressing result of the subjugated position of women and, in China, an extension of the cult of ancestor worship which venerated the male bloodline.

In expression this meant that a woman's realm of giving and her accepted role were acted out in private while men were the formal, public face of contribution in greater society. In short, women had a duty of care and men a duty to provide.

Economic Dependence and the Reinforcement of the Informal Role of Women

The second pattern follows from the first. Most traditional Asian societies kept women economically dependent upon men, thus reinforcing the informal role of women in traditional philanthropy by leaving them without the means for giving in any way except in kind.

In many cases women in the poorest families – many of whom sent men out as migrant workers – often had no money to give away. It fell to these women to somehow make ends meet which they did by sharing resources and wisdom amongst themselves in limited giving circles, learning from each other about the way things had always been done. Thus idioms of giving by women were often laden with implicit meaning stemming from past practice and which took the form of giving in kind. Large philanthropic gestures were few.

[3] *There were of course exceptions to this as in the matriarchal societies of Indonesia which are covered in later chapters.*

Giving among the poor was often limited to the narrow confines of the family. Familiar idioms in Chinese families included showing a boy favour by giving him the only piece of meat at a meal while a girl might receive a precious comb upon marriage. At a Chinese funeral one gives *Pek Kim* or "white gold" to the family in mourning to help defray funerary costs. Malay-Muslims follow a similar practice although the bringing of food to the funeral is also customary to share the burden of hosting a large gathering.

Food was thus a way that women could help others through key passages in life. Women in the social circle would come together to share food and make a celebration possible – perhaps for a baby's first month in life, a child's initiation into adulthood, and to mark sacred days and festivals. A particularly lovely example is how women in Singapore's very poor Jewish quarters would meet on *Hoshana Rabbah* to make tiny dough grains together for a communal feast the following day, a now forgotten tradition from Baghdad (Bieder, 2007, p. 182).

Women thus shared resources, helped others mark key rites of passage, and passed on culture, beliefs and faith. In so doing they transferred a context of life to the next generation. Care of the extended family and domestics also fell upon the shoulders of women, be it as migrants in Singapore or in their homelands. We find this pattern replicated across Asia in Chinese, Straits Chinese, Malay-Muslim and South Asian and Ceylonese households.

The Absence of Formal Mechanisms for Giving by Women in Traditional Philanthropy

A third pattern can be observed as following from the first two. Where tradition kept the role of women in giving informal and in kind, we observe that traditional society, as transplanted to Singapore, had no apparent mechanisms for women to give to others, nor could they be publicly *recognised* for doing so. Thus even if a woman had personal means, her contributions would find no formal route of recognition.

This observation is borne out through anecdotal evidence in our research among the Chinese. When Singapore Chinese established clan and dialect associations that cared for the welfare of migrant Chinese, all the power in such groupings was vested in men. In searching for women donors in early clan records, none could be found in the early 20th century although it was remembered that women had been donors to various clan causes. Instead of being formally recorded in clan history, women's names "*might* be hung on a tablet on some wall, somewhere" in recognition, if one knew how to find them and if they had been hung up at all (Fan, 2004, p. 1-18).

The Provision of Formal Giving Mechanisms for Women in Islam

The one exception to this observation is found in the Muslim community. The Muslims represented a vast array of ethnicities, languages and cultures, but among all of those who practised Islam, there was a formal route whereby women could endow their families and communities with funds for welfare for as many years as the endowment could grant. The proviso was that a woman must not only have personal means, but she must also own land to generate income to sustain the endowment. This mechanism is called a *Wakaf* and is discussed in the chapter on the Malay-Muslims. This opportunity led to the establishment of several important endowments by women in Singapore's Malay-Muslim community that still go towards caring for the local community today.

SUMMARY

Thus we suggest that in the early 20th century, most Asian women in colonial Singapore were unfamiliar with both the concept of public giving and personal giving with money, as tradition had negated their participation in formal philanthropy. Women in the Muslim community however had access to the same formal endowment structures as men, and continued to use these with migration to Singapore.

While the idea of giving of *themselves* in sacrificial living was heavily reinforced by customs, world views and social structures, without economic means or the existence of accepted giving mechanisms within traditional philanthropic systems, the first migrant Asian women in Singapore were still confined in their own communities to an informal role, played out in private and limited to a personal giving circle of relations and friends.

Chapter 2

A Different Status: Asian Women Under British Rule

Local shipping in Singapore Harbour c.1920
Courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore

Following migration to Singapore, Asian women in the 20th century would emerge from their traditional ways as the influence of British rule, modernisation and massive international political upheavals swept through society.

But while the new century would bring enormous change to women's lives the world over, it was the move away from their homelands and being subsumed under British authority that would gradually elevate the status of Asian women – from being economic chattels in traditional social structures to legal entities in the new colony.

Here we try to map some key circumstances that occurred under British rule that would change the social, economic and legal positions of Asian women. These are: the British philanthropic ideal with its moral imperative to protect the weak; access by Asians to a new colonial class system and their consequent rise to positions of influence; the introduction of a new, recognised way for women to give to society; and the work of European women in the colony.

Women as Recipients of the British Philanthropic Ideal

As colonial masters, the British initially had no intention of interfering with the personal matters of its migrant subjects. British foreign policy in fact advised that a colony should be governed by the strategy of *Divide and Rule* which deliberately kept communities apart to prevent political aspirations from fomenting. British interaction with the growing local community was kept at such distance that Governor William Jervois drily observed in 1875:

> *"the government knows little or nothing of the Chinese, who are the industrial backbone of these Settlements; and the immense majority of them know still less of the government" (Turnbull, 2009, p. 83).*

Britain's main focus was on Singapore's economic development, and any improvement of the lot of those who lived under its rule was almost accidental. This disengagement inevitably had to change as the colony grew beyond all expectation into a thriving entrepôt – one requiring all the infrastructure of a city with the attendant management of hordes of migrant workers and tonnes of shipping passing through the port every day. Singapore, fast becoming a port of world-class status and a great asset in the 19th century European race for trade dominance, therefore must be managed to advantage.

In this colonial race Southeast Asia was divided among the French, Dutch, British, Spanish and the Portuguese through duress or dominion, and it is an unfortunate fact that much of Southeast Asia suffered greatly at the hands of these colonising powers. Singapore, however, was a peculiarity in that

no subjugation of any inhabiting race with its own social system was required in its establishment. It was entirely a creation of the British and the random forces of migration. In hindsight, this was to prove very fortunate for the people of Singapore as the first rule of law introduced to the colony was that of the British who saw good governance as axiomatic to foreign policy.

This strong moral imperative was entrenched in British consciousness by the 19th century, argues Halstead (1983). The British as a society had developed a philanthropic world view peculiar unto themselves that permeated every tier of public and private society. This was the result of a deep conviction of "evangelical humanitarianism" rooted in the philosophies of the Enlightenment. Such a world view gave rise to a strong sense of duty to improve the welfare of others and the outward display of charity which was much applauded. As colonial masters, it was one's responsibility as a true Englishman to act for the welfare of weaker and unenlightened races since one had both superior knowledge and the power to do good.

> *"It was clear that in the interest of trade, protection, and good government, the British had the capacity to do the job and therefore should" (Halstead, 1983, p. 30).*

The outcome of this mindset was that once Singapore was made a Crown Colony in 1867, its masses of blissfully ignorant migrants now fell under the aegis of a power that felt it was its responsibility to deliver good government as an auxiliary of imperialism. This meant eventually engaging with local community issues, no matter how repugnant.

Thus when circumstances abhorrent to the British sense of justice and fair play arose – for example, the kidnapping and enslavement of women, or the abandonment of dying prostitutes and sick orphans on the streets – the colonial government found itself bound to intervene, supported vociferously by private citizens who shared the same views and by English-educated local citizens.

Such interventions took place only when deemed necessary. As Lord Palmerston, in his capacity as Foreign Secretary, wrote to Lord Clarendon, "we mean to do what may seem to be best upon each occasion as it arises, making the interests of our country one's guiding principle" (Halstead, 1983, p. 6).

These ad hoc interventions (see Box 1 for a fuller list of legal interventions and precedents) had the unexpected consequence of gradually giving Asian women previously unheard of legal protection against abuse, servitude and exploitation. These took various forms – from physical intervention to the passing of Acts and Ordinances that became a body of law. Thus, rescued women and children experienced first-hand British philanthropy in action, an attitude that by now was simply accepted as being "charitable" in British life (Elliott, 2002, p. 29).

A hard life for early migrant women
Courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore

One such important intervention was the passing of the Women and Girls Protection Ordinances (in 1887 and 1888).These allowed the authorities to inspect brothels for health reasons and, under that pretext, give women there a ticket they could use at any time to claim the protection of the government.[1] It was reported that women carefully kept these precious tickets and found any manner of ways that they could to escape the brothels (Jackson, 1965, p. 97).
As such Acts and Ordinances became written into law, along with the creation of institutions such as

[1] *The licensing of brothels was vigorously opposed by many but was allowed to continue under pressure of circumstance.*

rescue homes and child welfare. The groundwork was thus laid for later generations of Asian women in Singapore to enjoy greater protection sanctioned by law, perhaps for the first time.[2]

Despite this somewhat haphazard oversight, the British world view and philanthropic obligation would profoundly improve the overall status of women, and ultimately lead to the passing of the Women's Charter in 1961 that protected the rights of women and guaranteed greater legal equality.[3]

The advantages gained from living under this new legal and social system would be seized upon by women after World War II as Singapore moved towards nationhood. However even in the early 20th century, an elite few Asian women were already considerably empowered through the advantage of an early education, interaction with other race groups, and the positions of their husbands in colonial society.

The Creation of a New Colonial Class System

This brings us to another key circumstance that benefitted Asian migrants (not just women) that arose out of life in colonial society. This was access to a new class structure for a select few with entry entirely predicated upon leadership, wealth or education.

This new social order arose from the *Divide and Rule* policy. As a Crown Colony, Singapore gained not only a Governor and Constitution, but an Executive Council and a Legislative Council as well. Appointments to the Legislative Council were deliberately given out as rewards to prominent, successful men from the various Asian communities. These were both a status symbol for the recipient and a way for the British to gain the loyalty of the best and brightest across the land. This brought men of standing and influence from all races into the highest government circles.

Council seats were given to Chinese, Straits Chinese, Malay, Arab, Jewish, Indian, Sikh, Ceylonese and Eurasian leaders across the Straits Settlements of Singapore, Malacca and Penang, but it was the Singapore leaders who dominated. Both the British authorities and the recipients consciously cultivated this system to the benefit of both sides, and relations in this multiracial top tier of society were cordial.

Such an opportunity to gain a position of power through wealth or education was absolutely unheard of in both India and China where caste and class systems rigidly dictated one's status throughout life and were well nigh impossible to breach. In this new Singapore social system, men – and by association their wives and families – could now achieve status and recognition previously undreamt of. Southern Chinese men such as Tan Kah Kee (who came from a rice merchant's family and would theoretically be in the lowest of positions in China) now rose to dizzying heights in the colony, gaining the respect of fellow Chinese as well as that of all local society. Seniority was not the new plumbline, success was.

Some examples of men from other communities who rose to influence in similar ways include Syed Omar Alsagoff from the Arab community, Sir Manasseh Meyer from the Jewish community, and Dr Lim Boon Keng from the Straits Chinese group.

The negative outcome of this was the inevitable creation of a colonial caste system, but from a big picture standpoint, migrants could now break through the limitations previously imposed upon them by traditional class systems. All who had determination could gain from this new system which is based on personal merit and open competition – a forerunner of Lee Kuan Yew's policy of meritocracy.

The Introduction of a New Way of Giving

The immediate benefit to women as consorts of influential husbands was auxiliary but critical; the wives and daughters of prominent men now also became a part of the elite early 20th century colonial social circle at a time when other Asian women were by tradition still kept from public view. Now these privileged few mingled with women from other Asian communities and prominent Europeans. From being thus included, they were exposed to new values, ideas, and new social practices, including that of very public giving.

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[2] *It is disconcerting to realise that girl slaves or Mui Tsai were very much a part of life in wealthy local households even up till the 1960s. Some were treated well and husbands found for them, others lived dreadful lives. See Sold for Silver (1958).*
[3] *The Women's Charter (Ordinance No. 18) was passed as an Act of Parliament in Singapore in 1961.*

As an example, a key focus of the wives of 20th century Governors was the improvement of local welfare, especially for women and children. The wives of prominent Asian men were now called upon to represent their various communities in such efforts and were given responsibilities in many charitable events to raise funds for countless good causes.

This introduced local women to the Western fundraising model – sometimes called the *Charity Bazaar Model* after the British church bazaars and funfairs from where such fundraising originated. It was considered the model of choice for charitable women in Britain as it was simple to understand and operate, and allowed them to show their womanly skills of sewing and handicraft to advantage.[4]

In the first decades of the 20th century the presence of luminaries such as Mrs Lee Choon Guan, Lady Helen Song, Mrs Grace Lim, Mrs S. K. Wong, Mrs Tay Lian Teck, and Mrs Mozelle Nissim at such fundraisers was much reported and praised in the local news.

This introduced both the women themselves, and the public, to a new, acceptable way through which all might help others. It also showed through practice the concept of responsibility to civil society, and birthed an understanding of civic consciousness that was now not limited to one's bloodline, religion or race.

The Charity Bazaar Model was enthusiastically copied; everyone from church groups to cabaret girls followed the example of local High Society women in using this simple, effective mechanism to raise funds for all sorts of needs in the years that followed (Frost & Balasingamchow, 2009).

The "Philanthropic Woman" – a New Role Model for Asian Women

Another great influence for advancement, though sadly forgotten now, was the many colonial women who were active role models for Asian women emerging from traditional society. They led by example and provided much encouragement for the tentative Asian woman newly introduced to Western ways.

Particular to the late Victorian and Edwardian eras of British society was the emergence of what has been called the *Philanthropic Woman*, famously exemplified in the person of Florence Nightingale (Elliott, 2002, p. 27). Her example of nursing the Crimean War wounded despite the prejudice of male doctors heralded a rising consciousness among British women that philanthropy (at that time interchangeably used with the term *charity*) was the best version of "women's work" and a high calling (Elliott, 2002, p. 29). The rise of literature extolling these virtues coincided with the rise of the economically independent woman in the industrial period.[5]

Independent women, with a strong sense of duty to "civilise the heathen," began to venture out via the new and convenient steamship, bringing their ideals, education, religion and a great willingness to better the lives of the illiterate poor in all corners of the vast British Empire.

While the heathens were generally oblivious, Singapore society does in hindsight owe a great debt to the work of many intrepid women who often worked very hard to improve life for the locals in the face of prejudice and ingratitude. They sought out areas of need – the lack of proper welfare, sanitation, childcare, education and medical aid, and the rescue and rehabilitation of women – and went about trying to do something about them.

Asian Women become part of colonial High Society c.1930
Courtesy of Mr Allan Chua

[4] The somewhat patronising acceptance by men of women going out to do "good works" was the result of the exaltation of women in the Victorian era as being fragile and sensitive, a view vigorously opposed by the Arts and Crafts Movement which encouraged women to express their full potential in all matters.

[5] The "Philanthropic Woman" was both idealised and parodied in popular Western literature. Louisa May Alcott's "Little Women" is probably the most famous example of the independent philanthropic woman, while Charles Dickens created caricatures of such women as being far too overbearing for one's good. Books like Elizabeth Gaskell's "North and South" further encouraged the ideal of the economically independent woman who had control of her own resources.

Miss Sophia Blackmore (seated centre) with students of the Methodist Girls' School c.1915
Lee Brothers Studio Collection, courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore

The Work of Women in Public Service

In the public sphere, wives of Governors, such as Lady Evelyn Young, Lady Ellen Guillemard, Lady Josephine Clifford and Lady Marie Clementi, vigorously led local High Society by example, tirelessly raising funds, chairing endless committees including those on war relief and child welfare, and helping to steer the boards of rescue homes, new maternity hospitals and schools. They called upon local ladies to help in committees, and couched fund-raisers in balls and socials, making philanthropy a way of life where all could give, and enjoy themselves too.

They were also invaluable in establishing informal social networks across the colony, bringing together women of different races and accomplishments at social gatherings, dinners and balls, and calling upon them all equally to participate in improving the standard of living for the rest of the local population.[6]

A Legacy of Missions Work, Educa tion and Medical Care

A regular guest at the Governor's table in the 1920s was Dr Charlotte Ferguson-Davie, a medical doctor and the missionary wife of the first Bishop of the Anglican Diocese. She had started clinics for children in Malacca and, when posted to Singapore, began St Andrew's Medical Mission and a clinic in Bencoolen Street before finally founding St Andrew's Mission Hospital (for Women and Children) in 1923.

Many Asian ladies were called on to raise funds for this hospital – one of the first causes to bring women of different races together for the welfare of the colony's women and children (Ferguson-Davie, 1921, p. 68-69). Mrs Lee Choon Guan, a prominent Straits Chinese woman, was invited to lay the foundation stone of the hospital – a most unusual occurrence for that time. The work of Dr Ferguson-Davie later led to the founding of Singapore's first orthopaedic hospital in 1939.

The welfare of Singapore's children and the growth of schools for girls were also the fruit of hard work by missionaries like Miss Sophia Blackmore, a Methodist. Soon after her arrival in Singapore, she tirelessly tramped the streets, visiting 800 homes in 1888 alone to persuade mothers to educate their daughters (Lau, 2008, p. 15-16). She was strongly supported by a small group of forward-thinking Straits Chinese men who seized the opportunity to educate their own children. She was rewarded by the

[6] *The work by Governors' wives was covered extensively in news articles in The Straits Times and Singapore Free Press between 1900-1941. See References for the full list of news articles.*

The Singapore Chinese Girls' School in Hill Street c.1900
Courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore

eventual establishment of Fairfield Methodist Girls' School, the Methodist Girls' School, and a boarding school for girls called Nind Home.

Preceding her was the London Missionary Society's Maria Dyer who started Singapore's first girls' school in 1841, later known as St Margaret's Girls' School. The government also gave aid to many girls' schools, including St Anthony's Girls' School in 1842 and Raffles Girls' School, well before Asian society considered it worthwhile educating a girl. Unfortunately Raffles Girls' was not open to *heathens*.

To redress the situation, the Singapore Chinese Girls' School was founded by a group of the aforementioned Straits Chinese gentlemen in 1899. Sophia Cooke, another Anglican missionary, founded a Singapore branch of the Young Women's Christian Association in 1875 which was to lead the way in providing improving lectures, entertainment and a safe place for single women to board in Singapore.

SUMMARY

The ideals of the British, with their strong conviction of the need to govern well, as well as the British philanthropic ideal that suffused both private and public citizens with a zeal to help the unfortunate did result in a rather uneven but well-meant improvement in the social, legal, and eventual economic status of women.

These early efforts gradually opened the minds of local women to the possibilities of education. As modernisation took hold in Singapore in the 1920s, schools were already established to take in an increasing number of pupils. The growth of English schools was paralleled by a growing number of Chinese schools that exploded onto the scene with the fall of the Qing, teaching new, nationalist curricula for both boys and girls. Graduates from these schools began to enter society in the late 1930s.

With education, young women of every race were able to go out to work. In the 1920s, Singapore had a woman doctor, nurses, training midwives, lawyers, some teachers, and clerks. Such women now had disposable income which empowered them to donate to causes they personally supported as well as gave them the courage to initiate causes themselves.

The generation of girls who were the first scholars of the 1930s went on to contribute significantly to Singapore after World War II in arenas from politics to social work.

Box 1 : A New Legal and Social Status for Women under British Law

A great benefit for Asian women entering British Singapore was that upon becoming British subjects, they became legal entities in the eyes of the law, with certain rights under British civil and criminal law. Muslim women were the exception, falling under Islamic Law in the sphere of personal law.

While this legal change did not immediately impact the practice of philanthropy, it is relevant in that women were now removed from the shadowy world of the informal, recognised as valid and equal entities to men, and ultimately gained the right to give in public with their own money.

In Chinese society, women had been *non*-entities for centuries – mere chattels traded for procreation and service. A women was, as defined by Confucius, "under the authority first of her father, then her husband, and upon his death, under that of her son" (Ooi, 1981, p. 3). Women were valued only when they bore sons to carry on a husband's family name. They had no recourse to any kind of help when abused or rejected, but there were many punishments for women caught in adultery or who tried to escape[7] (Ooi, 1981, p. 39-40). If a girl found herself seized as a secondary wife or a concubine, her children were the least important in the family. All property devolved through men such that a Chinese woman never owned land herself.

South Asian women were similarly without recourse to protection if they were found to be unsatisfactory wives or daughters-in-law. The obligation for a girl to bring a rich dowry into marriage was an onerous burden on parents and anecdotally a cause for abuse, and there is much anecdotal evidence of the mistreatment of wives who were deemed unsatisfactory by their new families.

The first generations of migrants to Singapore carried these ancient views of women with them into the colony, but were headed on a collision course with the British.

As the colony grew, the colonial administration was unwillingly confronted with an increasing number of unsavoury situations with regard to the ill-treatment of women, outrageous to English sensibilities and the new understanding of liberty, equality and human rights. Thus began the series of ad hoc interventions mentioned above and the formation of appropriate bodies to deal with situations as they arose.

We record here some examples of interventions that improved the lives of the Chinese migrant population; as the majority race, more material on them exists:

- In 1870 the controversial ***Contagious Diseases Act*** was passed which legalised prostitution with a proviso that allowed women to seek medical aid, thus creating a way for doctors to rescue women in desperate straits. The continued allowance of brothels was hotly debated, but with the ratio of males to females in the colony generally at 6:1, many felt that allowing prostitution was a necessary evil although slave trafficking and the ugly fates of prostitutes later proved too much for the authorities to stomach.[8]

- In 1878 a ***Chinese Protector*** was created to deal with the many complex issues among the migrant Chinese. Pickering, Singapore's first Protector who spoke several Chinese dialects, proved himself an able mediator and a huge success in mediating among the Chinese, especially when it was found that he could tell perfectly well when he was being called a "red-haired devil!"

- In 1881, the ***Po Leung Kuk*** or *Office to Protect Virtue* was set up. It was a home for rescued slaves, prostitutes and kidnapped women, run by charitable donations. Women were rehabilitated, taught a trade, and good husbands found for them should they want that (Lim, 1958). This was a landmark in the social history of Chinese women as previously, both in China and the colony, women did not have any recourse to protection from abuse, nor was any provision made for women to escape slavery.

- In 1882 an amendment was made to the Penal Code of the Colony which made it an offence to bring girls into Singapore for immoral purposes, and to buy and sell girls for prostitution.

- A ***Societies Ordinance*** was passed in 1889 which shut down the Secret Societies, curtailing the lucrative trade in trafficked women.

- The ***Women and Girls Protection Ordinance*** was passed in 1887, replacing the Contagious Diseases Act. It gave women the right to appeal to leave a brothel, a right that was gratefully exercised many times.

(continued on next page)

[7] *In traditional Chinese law, a man could unilaterally divorce his wife on one of seven grounds – barrenness, lasciviousness, talkativeness, disregard of his parents, thieving, envy and suspicion, and having an infirmity. A woman had no such rights and was only protected if she proved filial to her husband's parents.*

[8] *Taken from evidence found in the Straits Settlements Annual Reports (SSAR) 1861-1941 and Certificate of Coroners Views, Singapore, 1906-1940.*

- In 1902 a significant Act for Singapore Chinese wives occurred with the passing of the ***Married Women's Property Ordinance.***[9] This dealt with the inheritance by wives of property owned by husbands who died intestate. The Chinese had a complex system of polygamy with wives and their offspring having different statuses which determined their inheritance upon the death of their husband or father. The British had no time for these niceties and frowned on polygamy. Should a Chinese man die intestate, the new Act allowed colonial law to summarily divide his property equally among *all* his wives (provided there was proof of marriage in accordance with Chinese customary law) and that was the end of the matter.

  Many secondary wives who would not have inherited anything previously suddenly found themselves economically independent and owners of property through such interventions.[10] In 1908, Chief Justice Hyndman Jones declared that the legal position of secondary wives in English law should be the same as that of a principal wife.[11]

- In 1932, the ***Mui Tsai Ordinance*** was passed to bring slave girls under the care of the civil courts although many *Mui Tsai* carried on working as household help well into the 1950s.

Box 2 : British Foreign Policy and the Philanthropic Ideal

Throughout the 19th century a succession of British foreign secretaries made it clear that imperialism, the threat of force, the use of it, and the ultimate dominion of uncooperative parties were necessary tools in an arsenal to achieve the Empire's goal of annexing the greatest portion of the world's wealth. They were used at discretion to wrest as much trade as possible from Asia and Africa against vicious competition from the Dutch, the Spinish and the French. By the 1870s British naval power and colonial reach were such that the British Empire ruled a quarter of the world.

Paradoxically, while the British were quite prepared to resort to force to bend non-Europeans to their will, it was not their first weapon of choice. Axiomatic to British Foreign Policy was the conviction that:

> *Good government and the salutary conditions that stemmed from it provided the best possible climate for the conduct of foreign trade and that peaceful commercial relations conducted in an atmosphere of freedom and justice offered the best prospect for human happiness the world over ... [and that] the surest preventative of war and revolution was constitutional government (Halstead, 1983, p. 14).*

Foreign secretaries from Castlereagh to Palmerston, Pitt and Gladstone pursued this ideal of peace for trade so vigorously throughout the 19th century that the resulting success would be called the *Pax Britannica*. Peaceful conditions were enforced if necessary by duress or dominion or, as in the case of Singapore, through the eventual establishment of constitutional government with the subsequent adoption of British law.

While the British did not care to change the beliefs of those they colonised or dominated into submission, oftentimes many practices of the civilisations under their rule were in direct opposition to British sensibilities and considered distressingly unenlightened. Inherent with dominion came the aforementioned peculiarly British duty to do the right thing. This sensibility was expressed in a strong public interest in alleviating the subjugation of women and addressing the lack of welfare in civil society.

This sense of responsibility to lighten the suffering of others was borne out in the long, grueling battle by individuals in Parliament against slavery in the colonies,[12] gaining momentum in the 1800s with a series of laws that incrementally improved life for the poor in England and covering housing, education, public health, and even a reform of the Criminal Code.

This cohort that was so politically active and determined to bring about change in English society was the same cohort that now administered the Straits Settlements.

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[9] *Married Women's Property Ordinance No. 11 of 1902.*
[10] *Ibid.*
[11] *Choo Eng Choon v. Neo Chan Neo, 12 Straits Settlements Law Review, 148 (1908).*
[12] *William Wilberforce, who steadfastly campaigned against slavery and won in 1789, was a good friend of Raffles. He in fact had been Raffles' first choice to helm Singapore's first educational institution had there been the chance to build one.*

Chapter 3
The Arabs and Malay-Muslims

Javanese Lady c.1900
Royal Tropical Institute Collection, courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore

Singapore's Malay community today derives from many topo-ethnographically varied groups from the Malay Peninsula and the Indonesian Archipelago. Reports tell of some 30 ethnic Malays on the island at the time Raffles founded Singapore. They would be supplemented soon by more Peninsular Malays and many other ethnicities from the Indonesian Archipelago including the Javanese, Minangs, Bugis, Baweanese, Riau Islanders, Boyanese, Ambonese, Acehnese, Banjarese and Balinese. The 1901 Census also reported the presence of 1,000 Arabs in this community along with some 600 Jawi Peranakans (Indian Muslims who had married Malays) (Zuraidah, 1994).

Islam is the binding factor across this diverse group. While there were small pockets of other faiths, the majority of these ethnic groups had practised Islam for centuries and it is in Islamic records where we have found the only extant data on the philanthropic contributions of women. Thus we have confined our research to the Malay-Muslim community in particular, and those married into the Arab community. These intermarriages brought considerable wealth to certain sectors of the Malay-Muslim group and produced several prominent philanthropists.

Migration, Settlement and the Status of Women

Migration of the Malay-Muslims to Singapore was fragmented and individualistic; some came to work in new opportunities offered by the colony while others used Singapore as a springboard to making the *Haj* since travelling from Singapore was less restrictive than from the Dutch East Indies[1] (Zuraidah, 1994, p. 20).

Malay Population by Gender in the Colony of Singapore, 1900 - 1947

Year	Total Population	Total Malay Population	Number of Malay Females	Number of Malay Males
1901	226,842	36,080	15,820	20,260
1911	303,321	27,902*	12,858*	14,864*
1921	418,358	58,520	15,520	19,084
1931	557,745	71,177	33,186	49,996
1947	938,144	115,735	52,487	63,248

** 1911 Only municipal population statistics available*
Source: Census Reports

The proximity of the Malay Peninsula and Indonesian Archipelago made movement of families within the region reasonably easy with whole families settling in Singapore as opportunities for work arose. In this way a network of ties grew across the islands, and social systems were transferred to Singapore with little apparent distortion as entire communities moved into the colony. Of interest are reports that single Malay-Muslim women also began to migrate to Singapore in the early 1900s. It was speculated that they were likely widows or divorcees escaping small towns, hoping to start a new life as domestic servants

[1] *It was reported that as many as 14,000 pilgrims left for Mecca from Singapore in 1900.*

since housing for domestics was often provided in Singapore and the city allowed for anonymity (Li, 1989).

By the 20th century the Malay-Muslim population of Singapore had grown to 35,988 people, comprising some six percent of Singapore's total resident population. It would continue to be a minority group, growing to just 10 percent of the population before World War II. Of relevance to this study are the ethnic Malays, the Bugis, and the Arab community. While one South Indian Muslim woman made a considerable contribution, her story is discussed in the next chapter.

The initial findings of this paper indicate that ethnic Malay women were less able to make philanthropic contributions and were likely to have practised giving by *Hibah*, a traditional gifting mechanism explained on p. 27. This is because the ethnic Malays traditionally regarded men as the breadwinners with women tasked with the care of the family. Anecdotal evidence suggests most women were housewives with a few intrepid women working as petty merchants or domestics. It is a myth that Singapore's Malays lived in old kampongs and farmed the land. The Malay population on the whole was actually urban and drew a wage.

Malay family at home c. 1900
Courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore

Most men earned a salary in colonial service as builders, police and military men, religious teachers, drivers, gardeners, mosque officials, fishermen and occasional farmers. They also worked as journalists and editors in the nascent publishing industry alongside the Javanese. They did not establish family enterprises and entered into few capitalist ventures. As such there was little disposable income for the women of the community to indulge in large philanthropic gestures.

The Bugis community, on the other hand, were famous traders from Macassar (now Sulawesi) with an enviable reputation as seafaring merchants (see Box 3). They decided early on to make Singapore one of their ports of call which meant they were based on the island for the duration of the monsoon. This enabled a community to develop with vested interests. The Bugis were numerate and literate, and we can surmise that Bugis women had social status and economic power. It is from the intermarriage of Bugis women and Arab men that one of the most famous philanthropic dynasties came about.

Islam, Philanthropy and the Malay-Muslim Community

> *Philanthropy binds Muslims to each other. In Muslim conceptions of faith and community, humans are linked to each other through their obligation of God. A charitable act is therefore neither merely an act of faith nor merely an act of community. It is the building of community through faith, and the building of faith through the deepening of community (Alterman, Hunter, & Philips, 2005).*

Islam is not indigenous to Southeast Asia. Brought first by Arab traders, it became the region's principal religion in the 14th century, superseding the Buddhism of the Srivijaya Empire and the Hinduism of the Majapahit Kingdom.[2] It was recorded that Iskandar Shah or Parameswara, the last king of Singapura, fled from the Majapahit Kingdom and founded what became Malacca. His conversion to Islam in order to marry a Muslim lady is well known and the new Malacca Sultanate took Islam as its state religion during the reign of Sultan Mansur Shah (1459-1477).

Alatas (2010) wrote that between the 14th and 16th centuries, Arab traders and possibly Sufi missionaries caused Islam to spread across Malaya and the Indonesian Archipelago "with great vigour."

[2] *The Srivijaya Kingdom was based in Sumatra from the eighth century to the 11th century. The Majapahit Kingdom was based in Java, the last Indianised empire on the island. It is speculated that Borobudur was built during the decline of the Majapahit and it was Stamford Raffles who first made mention of its spectacular architecture.*

According to Koh and Ho (2009), Islam then came to inform much of the social systems and values of the people of the many ethnic groups included as "Malays" by the colonial administration.

Traditional Islamic Philanthropic Practices

Charity is highly valued in the Muslim world and is in fact codified as the "Third Pillar" of Islam. Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (MUIS), also known as the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore, offers this explanation:

> *Central to Islamic teachings and way of life are various obligatory acts of worship (Ibadah) referred to as the "Five Pillars of Islam." These are:*
>
> 1. *The testimony of faith called Syahadat in Malay;*
> 2. *Prayer, which is done five times a day, facing Mecca;*
> 3. *Zakat which is the giving of 2.5 percent of one's earnings to help "the poor and needy, captives, new converts, debtors, those who are stranded" (Koh & Ho, 2009);*
> 4. *Fasting or Puasa done in the ninth month of the Islamic calendar for spiritual cleansing; and*
> 5. *Fulfilling the Haj or pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in one's lifetime, if possible."*

As Islam spread across the archipelago, these Five Pillars undergirded the value systems of those who embraced the religion and were integrated into pre-existing social structures.

After arriving in Singapore, Malay-Muslim women continued to use Islamic forms of giving which were already a part of their social system and tradition. Wealthier women like the Bugis were able to give via an endowment system while the majority who were much poorer may have practised the "giving of gifts during their lifetime," called *Hibah*. Arab men, who became part of colonial High Society, gave generously towards the welfare of the community and also in the Western model of direct donations to colonial causes, but we cannot find any similar donations by Arab women or Malay women during the period covered by our research.

Malay-Muslim Women and *Hibah* and *Wakaf*

In the Malay-Muslim community, the first way of giving is through *Hibah* – an Islamic practice of informal but recognised giving of property or personal wealth *directly* to others whilst the giver is still alive.

> *Hibah is an Arabic term, derived from the word 'Habubah,' which literally means 'passing' or 'blowing.' In the religious sense it means giving one's wealth to others without the expectation of any replacement or exchange with the transferring effect on the ownership. Thus once a Hibah is executed, the giver cannot take it back. It is the transfer of property from the giver to the recipient during his lifetime. However Hibah in the general sense may include Ibra', sadaqa and hadiyah which respectively mean release from; releasing one's wealth from his ownership, alms giving; and giving part of his wealth to needy, and reward which needs an exchange ("Hibah, a Gift of Love," in alhudacibe.com).*

Very occasionally such giving might take the form of a direct donation towards a socially beneficial cause like the building of a mosque, but more often women might give objects of personal value to those whom they loved. Such giving is still practised today, and both the giver and recipient understand the implicit value behind the action of gifting, but the action goes unrecorded. As such, such acts of personal generosity have remained out of public record and have largely become lost to us.

The second mechanism of Islamic giving was available to both men and women of some means. This was through an Islamic endowment instrument called a *Wakaf*. MUIS explains that:

> *In Shariah, a Wakaf (plural: Awqaf) is a Sadaqah Jariyah (recurring/ongoing charity or ceaseless giving), a voluntary charitable endowment from one's personal belongings or wealth in the form of cash or property for Shariah-compliant causes.*
>
> *Islamic endowment is a form of charity. The intention of creating Wakaf should be permanent and irrevocable, and its objectives should be for pious, charitable and religious purposes (MUIS on Wakaf: Perpetual Giving).*

There are two types of *Wakaf*:

1. ***Wakaf Al-Ahli* (*Wakaf Khas / Family Wakaf*)**
   - The beneficiaries of this *Wakaf* would technically be members of the family who are provided for in perpetuity.
   - The objective would be to benefit the family of the *Wakaf* (male) or *Wakif* (female).

2. ***Wakaf Al-Khairi* (*Wakaf Am / Public Wakaf*)**
   - The beneficiaries of this *Wakaf* would be members of the public, e.g., the poor, the needy, a school, or a clinic, as specified in the will of the *Wakaf* or *Wakif*.
   - The objective was therefore charitable (Sadaqah Jariyah).

A *Wakaf* would be created by the endowment of a portion of one's personal estate (literally, land) upon one's death to be administered by trustees for public and/or family benefit, technically for all time. This giving away of one's earthly possessions and the creation of perpetual endowments were both to look after one's descendants and to please God based on this ideal:

> *"The Prophet said: When a person dies, his deeds die with him, except for three: charitable endowments, beneficial knowledge, and righteous children who supplicate on his behalf."* [3]

In practical terms philanthropists who built mosques were usually able to buy rentable properties to provide a revenue stream to maintain the mosque or school and its religious activities. Islam being an ancient religion, a practical socio-religious model had grown up around the endowment practice to ensure the viability of such *Wakafs*.

The 1930s saw the creation of the greatest number of *Wakafs*. This might be due to the enormous amount of wealth amassed by certain trading families before the destruction wrought by World War II. The *Wakaf* practice petered out in the 1970s, possibly due to the high cost of land and the consequent difficulty today of dividing a single valuable property into the appropriate shares specified in *Wakaf* rules. Some *Wakafs* still being administered are the Angullia *Wakaf*, Ghaffor Wakaf, Bamadhaj *Wakaf* and Alsagoff *Wakaf*.

Of the 132 *Wakafs* recorded, it is heartening to note that 33 were created by women who are thus known as *Wakifs*. Unfortunately most detailed records of these *Wakifs* are lost, but we include here some examples still extant.

AN INTERGENERATIONAL STORY - THE *WAKAFS* OF HAJJAH FATIMAH BTE INCHE KAMIS SULAIMAN AND HER DESCENDANTS

Despite increasing modernity and greater interaction between the race groups as the 20th century roared on, Malay-Muslim women continued to give in the traditional idioms of Islam. While this paper technically examines women philanthropists from 1900 to 1945, we have made an exception to include mention of one family – an extraordinary group of women philanthropists who gave across four generations.

This is the family of Hajjah Fatimah bte Inche Kamis Sulaiman who lived from 1767 to 1865. Hajjah Fatimah, as she was more fondly called, was probably Singapore's earliest woman philanthropist. She was an aristocratic Bugis lady from Malacca who married into Bugis royalty; her husband was the Sultan of Gowa in Sulawesi (the Celebes) called Kubang Kerayang Janda Puli. Upon his death at an early age, she became the Sultana of Gowa. Hajjah Fatimah took over her husband's business and became a well-known businesswoman, owning many sailing ships and prahus that traded extensively in the region. In 1830, she built a residence in Kampong Java Road in the new settlement of Singapore.

The story is told that Hajjah Fatimah's house was attacked by thieves and set on fire twice, but miraculously her life was spared. In gratitude to God, she donated the land upon which her house was built and provided sufficient funds for a mosque to be built on it. The mosque was completed in 1845 and is known for its minaret that lists slightly by six degrees. Hajjah Fatimah also built houses for the poor on an adjoining plot (Khoo et al., 2006, p. 106).

Hajjah Fatimah died at the ripe old age of 98 and was buried in private grounds in the mosque named after her. Her legacy of giving was passed on to her only

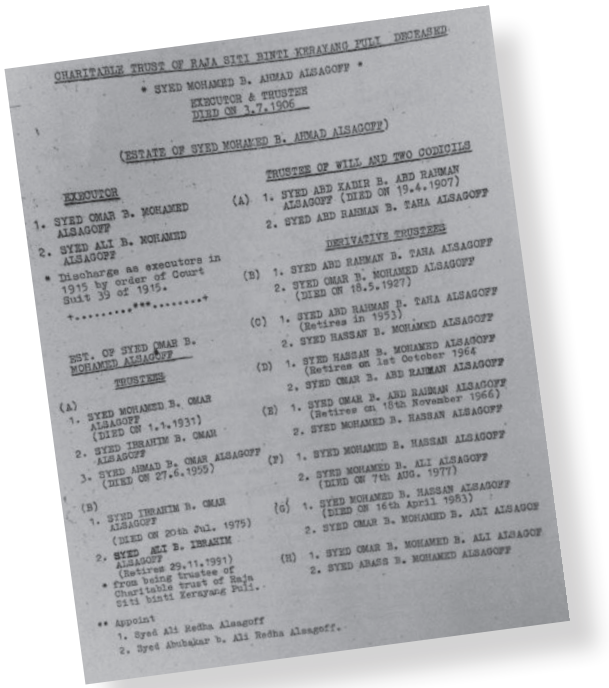
[3] *MUIS' definition of "Islamic Endowment" as narrated by Imam Muslim in "Wakaf: Perpetual Giving."*

daughter, Raja Siti binti Kerayang Puli, who was born in 1800. Raja Siti married into the Arab family of Syed Ahmad bin Abdulrahman Alsagoff who had arrived in Singapore in 1823. According to MUIS, she often held large feasts to feed the poor to commemorate her mother's death anniversary.

Raja Siti, in turn, created a will in 1883, specifying a *Wakaf* and its disbursements. She died in Mecca in 1891 and these were her directions:

> *The Charitable trust was created by the Will of the late Raja Siti binti Kerayang Puli dated 30th Muuharram 1301 @ 29th November 1883:*
>
> *She directs her executors to collect rent from houses belonging to her and those given to her by her mother, the late Hajjah Fatimah. The income, after deducting all expenses, are [sic] to be divided into two parts. One part is to be distributed among her kins [sic] in accordance with the Islamic law of inheritance. The second part is to be distributed as charity in accordance with her wishes. (Charitable Trust of Raja Siti binti Kerayang Puli, 1883, made available by MUIS).*

The administration of this *Wakaf* highlights the challenges of endowment in perpetuity, evidenced in a complex series of re-appointments of executors of Raja Siti's will over the next century as executors died or became incapable of carrying out their tasks.



CHARITABLE TRUST OF RAJA SITI BINTI KERAYANG PULI DECEASED

* SYED MOHAMED B. AHMAD ALSAGOFF *
EXECUTOR & TRUSTEE
DIED ON 3.7.1906

(ESTATE OF SYED MOHAMED B. AHMAD ALSAGOFF)

EXECUTOR
1. SYED OMAR B. MOHAMED ALSAGOFF
2. SYED ALI B. MOHAMED ALSAGOFF
* Discharge as executors in 1915 by order of Court Suit 39 of 1915.

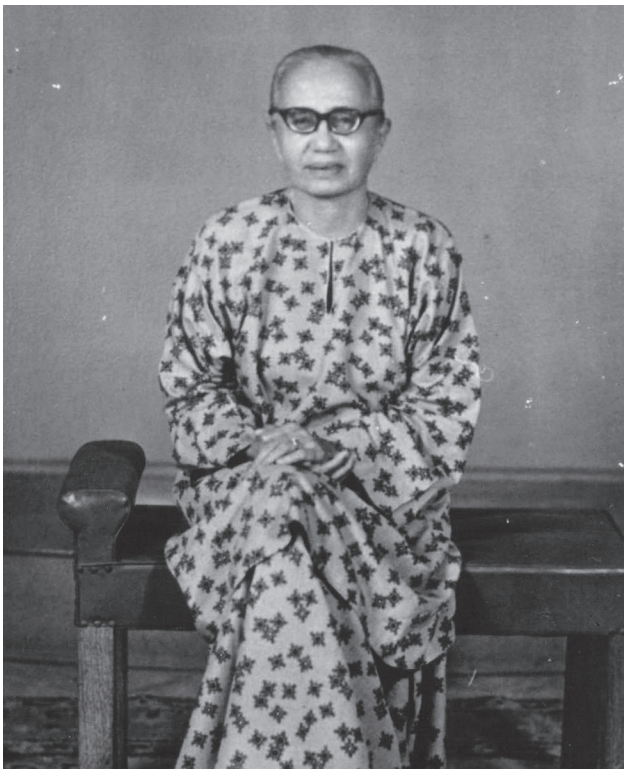
TRUSTEE OF WILL AND TWO CODICILS
(A) 1. SYED ABD KADIR B. ABD RAHMAN ALSAGOFF (DIED ON 19.4.1907)
2. SYED ABD RAHMAN B. TAHA ALSAGOFF

DERIVATIVE TRUSTEES
(B) 1. SYED ABD RAHMAN B. TAHA ALSAGOFF
2. SYED OMAR B. MOHAMED ALSAGOFF (DIED ON 18.5.1927)
(C) 1. SYED ABD RAHMAN B. TAHA ALSAGOFF (Retires in 1953)
2. SYED HASSAN B. MOHAMED ALSAGOFF
(D) 1. SYED HASSAN B. MOHAMED ALSAGOFF (Retires on 1st October 1964
2. SYED OMAR B. ABD RAHMAN ALSAGOFF
(E) 1. SYED OMAR B. ABD RAHMAN ALSAGOFF (Retires on 15th November 1966)
2. SYED MOHAMED B. HASSAN ALSAGOFF
(F) 1. SYED MOHAMED B. HASSAN ALSAGOFF
2. SYED MOHAMED B. ALI ALSAGOFF (DIED ON 7th AUG. 1977)
(G) 1. SYED MOHAMED B. HASSAN ALSAGOFF (DIED ON 16th April 1983)
2. SYED OMAR B. MOHAMED B. ALI ALSAGOF
(H) 1. SYED OMAR B. MOHAMED B. ALI ALSAGOF
2. SYED ABASS B. MOHAMED ALSAGOFF

EST. OF SYED OMAR B. MOHAMED ALSAGOFF
TRUSTEES
(A)
1. SYED MOHAMED B. OMAR ALSAGOFF (DIED ON 1.1.1931)
2. SYED IBRAHIM B. OMAR ALSAGOFF
3. SYED AHMAD B. OMAR ALSAGOFF (DIED ON 27.6.1959)
(B)
1. SYED IBRAHIM B. OMAR ALSAGOFF (DIED ON 20th Jul. 1975)
2. SYED ALI B. IBRAHIM ALSAGOFF (Retires 29.11.1991)
* from being trustee of Charitable trust of Raja Siti binti Kerayang Puli.

** Appoint
1. Syed Ali Redha Alsagoff
2. Syed Abubakar b. Ali Redha Alsagoff.

A copy of the Charitable Trust of Raja Siti as held by MUIS.
Courtesy of Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (MUIS)



Sheriffa Zain Alsharoff bte Mohamed Alsagoff
Courtesy of Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (MUIS)

Many years after the death of Raja Siti, the various properties were finally sold and the funds distributed as per her instructions, with the amount meant for charitable use put aside for investment. In the end, the *Wakaf* has been handed over to be administered by MUIS.

Raja Siti's son, Syed Mohamed bin Ahmad Alsagoff, also became a famous philanthropist. Known by his initials, S. M. A., or the more affectionate "Nongchik," he left behind the "SMA Alsagoff *Wakaf* Fund" that is still administered in North Bridge Road.

Hajjah Fatimah's great-granddaughter by Nongchik was a lady called Sheriffa Zain Alsharoff bte Mohamed Alsagoff. She continued in the footsteps of her great-grandmother, grandmother and parents. When her father Nongchik passed away, she and her husband invested her inheritance by buying shophouses along East Coast Road including the famous "Red House Bakery." They also bought other properties in North Bridge Road, Upper Dickson Road, and in Chinatown.

Madam Sheriffa's husband, Syed Abdul Rahman Taha Alsagoff ("Engku Aman"), took on the responsibility for the family *Wakaf*, reconstructing Hajjah Fatimah's mosque in 1920 and disbursing the funds endowed by his father-in-law Nongchik. These went towards

the maintenance of the Alsagoff School for Islamic Education, a dispensary, and orphanages for boys and girls, among other things.

True to her roots, Madam Sheriffa based her will on the Islamic pattern of two-fold giving in a *Wakaf*, providing a portion to educate her grandchildren and another portion to create a free dispensary for all races to be called the Al-Taha Dispensary. Today this endowment is being developed to generate further income by expanding the use of the properties into housing.

THE *WAKAF* OF HAJAH DAING TAHIRA BTE DAENG TADALEH

The *Wakaf* of Hajah Daing Tahira is one of the few other *Wakafs* that this study has been able to find. The term "Daing" in the name of the *Wakif* is a Bugis title.

Information about this generous lady is sparse.
Her *Wakaf* instructions, recorded when she made awill on August 12, 1937, were honoured upon her death in July 1940. She instructed that:

Income from [her] properties be applied to any or all of the following charitable purposes:

1. *Maintenance and support of any mosque;*
2. *Maintenance of any madrasah in Singapore;*
3. *Burial for poor Muslims;*
4. *Maintenance and support of any outdoor dispensary in Singapore for sick Muslims;*
5. *Contribution to the needy and distressed Muslims who suffered loss due to fire, earthquake or other inevitable accidents;*
6. *To provide an annual feast for poor Muslims on the death anniversaries in memory of the Wakif, her parents and her sisters; and*
7. *At the end of Ramadhan to distribute by way of charity as trustees think fit (Wakaf of W8A Hajah Daing Tahira bte Daeng Tadaleh, 1937, made available by MUIS).*

The execution of these wishes has fallen to MUIS.
It is a great pity that no other records can be found to tell us about Daing Tahira's life. We can only surmise from these instructions that she was generous, of means, loved her family, and was deeply committed to the charitable ideals of Islam.

Box 3 : The Bugis

Singapore's earliest women philanthropists were Bugis – a powerful seafaring people from South Sulawesi which was originally a part of the Macassar Empire.

Long before the arrival of the Europeans, the Bugis were established as the dominant players of the eastern island trade routes across the archipelago right up to China. They had an enviable "tight commercial community linked to international trade routes via various harbours." They made a spectacular sight when their fleet of over 100 vessels hove into view on Singapore waters during the Southeast monsoon. It was considered a great coup for the British to have captured the interest of the "prized Bugis trade" (Khoo, Abdullah, & Wan, 2006, p. 94).

It is said that the Bugis thought long and hard as to whether committing to Singapore would be of advantage to them. In the end it was decided that this new free port would be an ideal point for the exchange of the many exotic goods they brought from across Southeast Asia and China for products from Europe and India. They established headquarters in Singapore and a famous trader, Haji Embok Suloh, built a mansion in what became known as Bugis Street.

Since the monsoon lasted from July to November, the Bugis were very much a presence in Singapore's Malay-Muslim community (Khoo et al., 2006, p. 85-87).

With Singapore becoming a major port of call for the Bugis, they and the local Malay-Muslim community – in particular the local Arab families – began to intermarry. After the Arabs, the Bugis were probably the wealthiest Malay-Muslim community in colonial Singapore with vast trading empires in gold, opium, textiles, mother of pearl, birds' nests, aloes, and slaves.

An advanced people group with their own writing, calendar and crop systems, the Bugis were recorded as having converted to Islam in 1605. While the position of their women is under-researched, it appears they too were numerate, literate and enterprising, and had power in the community. We can gather this from the fact that Hajjah Fatimah (discussed in this chapter) inherited her husband's position of power as Sultana of Gowa upon his death. Having only one child, their daughter Siti took the title of Raja (Prince). Religion probably influenced women such as Hajjah Fatimah to endow their families and community in perpetuity through the Islamic instrument called the *Wakaf*.

Box 4 : The Arabs

The Arabs who came were linked to prominent endowments in the Islamic tradition in Singapore, oversaw the endowments of their local wives, and at the same time practised a form of "diaspora philanthropy," specifying bequests to good causes in the Hadhramaut, their land of origin.

Immediately after the founding of Singapore, Raffles provided quarters for the Arabs in the colony in the "Arab Campong [sic]" (Alatas, 2010, p. 26) and personally welcomed the formidable Arab trader Syed Sharif Omar al-Junied to the settlement.

The Arabs were no strangers to Southeast Asia. They had traded in the region for over a thousand years and had established lucrative trade links between the Far East and the known world. Syed Omar and those who followed in the 1800s came mainly from the Hadhramaut, now in the Republic of Yemen, and the Hadhramis were notable among other Arabs for their contributions to Singapore society.

Arab emigrants generally came alone or with male relatives. Few women migrated, possibly due to restrictions by the Hadhramaut Governate. However, the Hadhramis took new wives from the local Malay-Muslim community (Freitag & Clarence-Smith, 1997, p. 162) and started new families, thus integrating comfortably into the existing Muslim community and going on to become leaders not only of Muslim society but in colonial society as well.

To the Malay-Muslims, the Arabs were "the true Muslim elite." They were seen as "the inheritors of the wisdom of Islam and examplars of religious piety … held in high esteem by other Muslims" (Zuraidah, 1994, p. 20). Syed Omar, friend of Raffles, was revered for his direct descent from the Prophet Mohammed which made him a *Pengeran Sherif* or Prince within the Muslim community. His presence in Singapore was regarded with awe.

Arab men who took the lead in religious matters were the first to endow *Wakafs* in Singapore. At the same time, many Arabs selected for attention by the colonial administration also gave direct donations in the style of Western philanthropists, answering petitions from the Governor and his cohort to help in the building of infrastructure for the improvement of the city.

One example is Syed Mohammed bin Harun's son, Syed Ali, who gave a large piece of land for the building of what became Tan Tock Seng Hospital, a pauper hospital for poor Chinese. He also generously funded the building of the Town Hall (now Victoria Memorial Hall) and donated to the building of the first public wells in the municipality (Zuraidah, 1994, p. 54).

The wealth behind Arab philanthropy came largely from property, trade and shipping. They were economically superior on the seas – owning steamships and sailing vessels – and were prominent traders, dominating the lucrative pilgrim trade. They brokered the recruitment of the faithful from the islands, arranged passage to Saudi Arabia, and handed them on to Meccan *shaykhs* who would then escort the Malay-Muslim pilgrims through the rest of the *Haj*.

Three families were prominent in Singapore history. As mentioned before, the Aljunieds were likely the first migrants to British Singapore. Following soon in 1852 were the Alkaffs (al-Kaffs) who became landowners of vast swathes of land in Singapore and built the Arcade.

The third family of note were the Alsagoffs (al-Sagoffs) who were spice traders. They acquired many properties in the city centre, including Raffles Hotel, and what is now the heart of the Malay-Muslim community in Singapore. One prominent member, Syed Mohamed bin Ahmad Alsagoff, founded and endowed the Alsagoff *Wakaf* in 1904 which provided money to support orphanages, mosques and Islamic education.

Other Arabs continued to arrive in Singapore during the 1900s and took jobs as money lenders, workers in the pilgrim trade, shopkeepers, and religious teachers. However, the number of Arabs never grew to very many as ties to the Hadhramaut homeland remained strong and it was preferred that sons return to the homeland to be educated and to find wives.

The esteem the local Malay-Muslim community accorded the Arab merchants was echoed in colonial society where the Arabs were prominent in High Society and consulted on municipal matters from the earliest days. One member of the Aljunieds was appointed to the Chamber of Commerce as early as 1837 while Syed Mohamed bin Ahmed Alsagoff and Syed Mohammed bin Syed Omar Alsagoff served as Municipal Commissioners from 1872-1898 and 1928-1933 respectively (Khoo et al., 2006, p. 102-105).

Aside from their great wealth and dominance in society, the Arabs were also great builders with a love for beautiful architecture. Kota Alsagoff mansion, built by Syed A. Alsagoff, was a revolutionary bungalow built right on the ground instead of on stilts in the Malay colonial style. Syed Mohammed Alsagoff's Green Hill bungalow in Dunearn Road was famed as an ideal setting for lavish functions by moonlight. Even more romantic was Alkaff Lake Garden off Macpherson Road which had a Japanese Garden, rowing boats, and a race track that made motorcycle racing all the rage in the 1930s.

The Arabs, like the wealthy Chinese and Europeans of the same era, also had "country retreats" near the seaside where there were *ronggeng* (dance) parties, *bangsawan* with dancers and clowns, and cricket and billiard matches.

SUMMARY

We can make a few broad observations from this discussion on Singapore's Malay-Muslim women philanthropists in the early 20th century.

The first is that despite the move to an increasingly modern and Westernised multiracial and urban environment, the Malay-Muslims chose to continue using traditional social structures when it came to private giving.

Singapore's Malay-Muslim women who had the means to give used the traditional Islamic idiom of the *Wakaf* which was already highly evolved in structure and execution, and was the acceptable giving mechanism in Islamic society. Women could use it and it satisfied the charitable intentions of the *Wakifs* towards their beneficiaries. This underlines a strong bond with the values and systems of Islam which remained the main social influence in the Malay-Muslim community and was reproduced within the new milieu of British Singapore.

Secondly, giving by Malay-Muslim women appears to have been made more possible in particular ethnic groups. Most of the known women philanthropists appear to be from people groups whose economic and political systems traditionally vested power in women, giving them the ability to create personal wealth and make economic contributions on their own.

Two ethnic groups in particular stand out. The Bugis provided the examples of Hajjah Fatimah and her family, and Daing Tahira bte Daeng Tadaleh, and others were those who married into Arab families, such as Madam Sheriffa. All of these women had both economic and social authority, and were able to give from their own business earnings.

By contrast, women from other ethnic groups including the ethnic Malays were culturally dependent upon their husbands for money and did not appear to have been entrepreneurial. Being urban and relying on a wage, ethnic Malay women would have had limited access to both money and land, and thus did not use the *Wakaf* system of giving.

These are only exploratory findings. More detailed research into other *Wakifs* is needed to confirm the extent to which culture, ethnicity and economic power played a role in the endowment decisions of early Malay-Muslim women.

Chapter 4
The Indians and the Ceylonese

A Tamil Lady c. 1900
Courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore

Glimpses of Giving

> *Philanthropy is ingrained in Indian society. It's just that it was considered wrong to talk about one's charity. Even an organisation like [the] Ramakrishna Mission hesitated to give figures about the number of educational institutions they ran and the number of people who benefited from their charitable institutions, because they felt it was improper to talk of one's giving (Krishnamachari, 2014).*

The community of what are now grouped as "Indians" in Singapore encompasses ethnic groups from South Asia and Ceylon is known for its practice of remitting money home, with diaspora philanthropy is common even today. There are well known contributions by men to the building of temples, schools and welfare associations in India and Singapore from the colony's earliest years, although much giving has also taken place through the temple platform that was not recorded.

However, in this exploratory look at the practice of philanthropy by *women* in the community, data for the period 1900 up till World War II has been very hard to come by. The 1901 Census Report recorded only 3,478 Indian women and the number had risen to only 8,021 in 1931 – the year the last census was taken before World War II.

Indian Population by Gender in the Colony of Singapore, 1901-1947

Year	Total Population	Total Indian Population	Number of Indian Females	Number of Indian Males
1901	226,842	17,823	3,478	14,345
1911	303,321	24,494	4,336	20,158
1921	418,358	32,456	5,398	27,058
1931	557,745	51,019	8,021	42,908
1947	938,144	68,978	17,254	51,724

Source: Reports on the Census of Population of the Straits Settlements for the years 1901, 1911, 1921 and 1931, and Report on the Census of Population of the Colony of Singapore for the year 1947.

We have therefore only been able to construct a partial picture of women's actions, but early findings suggest that women were constrained and/or limited in their ability to give to civil society during this time. Further study is needed for a more definite understanding of the situation.

This fragmented picture is due to a combination of factors. Firstly, most women in the community were poor and illiterate. Thus formal contributions outside the family were a luxury few could afford. There was just no money to spare. Secondly, giving itself is considered an intensely private affair with its very value in the hidden gesture. Giving in cash or in kind was just not spoken about, much less recorded – especially gestures made by women. During this period women were also still much sequestered within a strongly patriarchal social system such that the outward face of all philanthropy was that of the men in the community.

Finally, the Indian migrant community of women was so small yet encompassed so many different ethnicities of different religions, dialects, castes and cultures that it has not been possible to identify within this short study more than the most obvious philanthropic gestures by those in the larger communities of Hindus, Indian Muslims, and Christians. It is entirely possible that there were women in the smaller ethnic groups whose contributions have been missed simply because they left no obvious traces behind. Again, further research might redress this lack.

What has definitely been observed though is that while the majority of women could not afford to give money for charitable causes, Indian and Ceylonese women had a strong, evolved and accepted *informal* role in the provision of welfare for not only their immediate families, but for their kin as well. This heavy duty of care is so ingrained in their society that it has literally gone unnoticed until parsed out of the routines of daily life.

Box 5 : Indian Migration and Settlement in Singapore

The South Asian community in Singapore, grouped as "Indians" in the census reports, originally came to Singapore from the British Raj – the countries now called India, Bangladesh and Pakistan. They have always been a minority, but a significant one, producing men and later women of influence in Singapore over the years. Despite generations away from India, those who emigrated kept close ties to their home societies, earning them the name of the "Indian Diaspora."

The Singapore Indian community was, and is still, characterised by great ethnic diversity, mobility, compartmentalisation and gender imbalance. Up to World War II, it was described as "male pioneer" in character (Huff, 1994, p. 160-161). In the 1830s Singapore's first Indians were already a mixed group that included convicts, who built much infrastructure, along with Chuliahs from Madras, Bengali labourers, and a large number of boatmen. They settled along High Street, Arab Street and around Bras Basah Gaol. Many early migrants were laundrymen (*dhobis*).

A number of these stayed on and married locally if they could. As the tin, rubber and pineapple industries boomed, thousands of migrant workers came to Singapore either to work in the colony or en route to the Federated Malay States. It is estimated that between 1862 and 1957, over two million Indians went to Malaya for work in plantations and mines (Cantegreil, Chanana, & Kattumuri, 2013). Others provided crucial infrastructure support – both in Malaya and in the Straits Settlements of Singapore, Malacca and Penang – working in the military, municipal services, construction sector, public works, domestic support, police force, and in the port.

Ethnic groups from all over the Raj provided myriad urban services as Singapore grew into a bustling city, creating an enormous diversity within a small community. Tamils and South Indian Chettiars were financiers, money changers, shopkeepers, dhobis (laundrymen) and herdsmen; Sindhis, Gujeratis and Sikhs cloth merchants and jewellers; while Malayalis worked in the railways (Sandhu & Mani, 1993). Others came as teachers and clerics of the different faiths, and still others provided the teaching force throughout Malaya as well as Singapore.

The many places of worship built by the various ethnic groups underscore the lack of homogeneity in the community. There were Indian Muslim mosques, such as the Al Abrar Mosque, with Hindu temples such as the Sri Mariamman temple close by. In general one might say many North Indians were Muslims while the South Indians were Hindus, joined later by North Indian Hindus. There were also a growing number of Anglicans, Roman Catholics and Methodists.

Indian launderers or "dhobis" washing clothes at Dhoby Ghaut Stamford Canal c. 1910

Lee Kip Lin Collection, Courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore

South Asian migrant workers, a bachelor community c. 1910
Courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore

Gender Imbalance – A Characteristic of the Indian Community

The Indian migrant workers who played such a significant role in the building of Singapore were mainly men. Sharp demarcations of language, religion, culture and the requirements of caste had a self-limiting effect of making suitable brides hard to find in Singapore; one had to return to one's home to find an appropriately matched wife.

Finding a wife in Singapore was made even more difficult by the creation of a second, colonial caste structure among Singapore's Indian community. This had four classes – the elite were educated, professionals and the wealthy; the mercantile group was next, comprising traders and business proprietors; the middle class were white collar service workers including teachers, the police, clerks and junior ranked civil servants; and finally the working class who did the difficult work of hard labour (Lal, Reeves, & Rai, 2006).

All these complexities so exacerbated the hunt for suitable brides that most men went home to marry and left their wives there on their return to Singapore. At home there was a whole civilisation whereas Singapore was only a place of employment. It was not home.

It is noted that up to the 1920s at least 80 percent of migrant men returned to the homeland to marry (Rai, 2014) with most rotating back into Singapore to work and finally retiring in India. Between 1921 and 1931 the gender imbalance became even more pronounced, increasing from 3,727 males per 1,000 females to 5,369 (Huff, 1994). Gender imbalance would characterise the Singapore Indian population right up to 2015 (Saw, 1970).[1]

Singapore's Indian Population between 1901 and 1990

Year	Total	Indians*	Sex Ratio (Male To Female)
1901	226,842	17,047	416:100
1911	303,321	27,755	491:100
1921	418,358	32,314	498:100
1931	557,745	50,811	535:100
1947	938,144	71,927	200:100

** Resident population only*
Source: Saw, 1970, p. 32 and Rai, 2015, p. 111-114.

Impediments to the Migration of Indian Women

The small population of Indian women in Singapore before World War II was also a result of other circumstances. Firstly, traditional taboos in India greatly impeded women from travelling.

Women were socially constrained within a limited, defined realm and role. These were to look after the home, ensure the well-being of children, and tend to the family – both immediate and extended.

[1] *In 2015, the Indian population in Singapore had 1,075 males for every 1,000 females.*

Traffic Policeman outside the Singapore Cricket Club c.1930
Courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore

Women were protected (some say subjugated) within the universally practised, strongly patriarchal social framework, with women's movements defined by caste, class, language and religious boundaries. Women were also the focus of complex dowry issues, sometimes having to work hard as new wives to justify bringing a small dowry into a household. These implicit social obligations further tied women to the homeland.

Secondly, as migrant work systems evolved, it actually became the norm in some communities and entire villages to send their men out to work – often for years at a time – to provide a steady income stream for those at home. Women then became the foundation of village society. These first migrant men then introduced new workers from their villages and built a network of support for those taking their turn at work in Southeast Asia. These structured rota systems provided employers with continual labour and workers with steady employment.

Thirdly, various immigration schemes further skewed the structure of the Singapore Indian community. In the 1870s, the British Raj held back Muslim workers in preference for Hindus who were considered a cheaper labour alternative (Sandhu & Mani, 1993). Immigration laws such as the Indian Emigration Act of 1922 also made it more advantageous for single rather than married men to travel (Rai, 2014).[2]

Against the tide however, a steady trickle of professionals – doctors, lawyers, teachers, educators, draughtsmen, interpreters and overseers – began to make their way to the colony, maintaining close ties with home, but willing to try for new opportunities in Singapore. Many were familiar with the British Raj and were confident in bringing their wives and children out with them. These early Indian children were educated in Singapore's new missionary schools. The small number of girls in this cohort would marry, and quite a number of these children would rise to social prominence and make their mark after World War II in Singapore.

Thus women in Singapore's Indian community between 1900 and 1945 were a scarce commodity. At one end of the continuum were the very few early generations of local born women – children of intermarriages between the earliest Indian migrants and local women. Indian Muslims who married local Muslims became known as Jawi Peranakan. At the other end of the social spectrum were wives of a tiny number of educated and wealthier migrant families. For the small, fragmented middle classes however, local marriages were so rare that in 1931 the Colonial Office noted "there were public celebrations in [the city] because one prominent member of the Chettiar community brought his wife to Singapore!" (Rai, 2014, p. 111-114)

The Ceylonese – "Holding Their Own"[3]

The Ceylonese community in Singapore (also confusingly termed "Indians" in census reports) comprised Jaffna Tamils, Sinhalese, Dutch Burghers and some Moors. Broadly speaking their migration story is somewhat different from those of the many transient Indian migrants.

The British had seized Ceylon from the Dutch in 1795. So by the mid-19th century several generations of Ceylonese had been educated in English and had the advantage of good missionary teaching, educational institutions, and medical welfare in Jaffna. Their familiarity with European ways, the English language, and colonial machinery made them an asset in Singapore.

[2] *To gain assisted migration status, two out of every five assisted migrants must be married.*
[3] *Despite being a minority within a minority in Singapore, the contribution of the Sri Lankan was described by Lee Kuan Yew in https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sri Lankans_in_Singapore as being of great value.*

A family photo c. 1940
Courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore

In the late 19th century, Ceylonese men, mainly Jaffna Tamils, were encouraged to move to Singapore with their families. They served in the colonial bureaucracy, joined public works, taught in schools across Singapore and Malaya, or were employed in the railways, ports and transport. It was the Ceylon Pioneer Corps who built the first Malayan railway.

Professionals – physicians, surgeons, dentists, doctors, nurses, pharmacists along with bankers, financiers, and plantation and estate overseers – also came from Ceylon. While many Ceylonese were Hindu, there was a small but significant group of Ceylonese clergy from Methodist, Anglican and Catholic churches who played key roles in staffing boys' schools and medical missions.

What is significant is that during this time, few Indian or Ceylonese women held jobs of note. There is little hard data on the occupations of women in these communities before World War II, but anecdotal evidence points to women being mainly mothers and housewives while those holding jobs were washerwomen, petty merchants, domestics, seamstresses and cooks.

Women who married men going to the Federated Malay States fared better economically in that they could find work alongside their husbands in rubber and palm oil plantations, while urban Singapore provided fewer opportunities for women. There is recollection of a handful of women starting in conservative jobs in the 1920s as teachers, nurses and midwives, and Checha Davies, a respected Christian woman, became an inspirational speaker. These were the children of professional families who had gained an education. At the other end of the spectrum the majority of women had little disposable income and were traditional, conservative and dependent on men.

The Many Informal Roles of Women in Traditional Philanthropy

The practice of philanthropy in both Indian and Ceylonese women's lives is so pervasive in daily life and undergirds so many social systems that it appears to have been subsumed into the fabric of Indian society itself. Whether it evolved out of Hinduism, local social mores, or was a cultural expression has not been researched here.

What we have found is that it is in this cultural fabric of unconscious social systems that the highly evolved, traditional philanthropic role of Indian and Ceylonese women can be identified. It is a private, informal role with heavy responsibilities, characterised by duty to the family and, if and when practised outside, expressed through the mechanism of volunteering.

The Role of Caregiver and Custodian of the Faith for Family

Thus women then – and now – gave by being responsible for the welfare of both immediate and extended families, doing "women's work" of ensuring children were fed and clothed, deities worshipped, obligations fulfilled, and culture and social norms passed on.

In the small communities of Singapore, those who had money lent it – often without thought of repayment. If a loan was not repaid, it was considered a donation (Cantegreil, Chanana, & Kattumuri, 2013). For Singapore's early women, this practice was a safety net in a close giving circle of friends where help could be found when money was lacking, a child taken ill, or a husband abusive. Anecdotal accounts point to some such circles as being defined also by caste.[4]

The Role of Caretaker for Dependents

A key form of giving upheld by women is in the way a family that hires domestic or other help automatically assumes the care of that person's whole family as well. This mechanism is in fact recognised as the de facto social welfare system of India today (Cantegreil, Chanana, & Kattumuri, 2013).

In colonial Singapore this practice could be seen in the example of hiring a cook and finding her whole household had come to stay in the servants' quarters. One would then automatically become responsible for providing for the needs of the cook's family – perhaps paying for education, clothing or medical necessities. The cook's family, who would have gained free board and lodging, would gladly become your unpaid driver, errand boy or laundress. The provision of board and lodging would be enough for a tie of obligation to begin.

Such an arrangement of explicit material help and implicit repayment is a mutually understood idiom of giving and repayment that might continue through several generations between the same families, creating a strong bond between employers and employees.

The arrangements for these systems usually fell to the women of the family although the husband, in the role of the patron, would provide the money.

A modern iteration of this structure in Singapore today is in the hiring of helpers or maids. While land-scarce Singapore no longer has the luxury of servants' quarters, anecdotal accounts tell of a Singaporean of Ceylonese descent today who still hires her helpers from a village in Sri Lanka. As one helper goes home, another member of her family or village rotates in to take her place with each helper passing on to the other the knowledge of the household's preferred foods and habits. This is rather like the male Kangani system, but structured for women. The evolution of this arrangement to suit modern Singapore was confirmed by another Singaporean Indian of Tamil descent who noted that the same charitable practice still takes place among her relatives here and in India today.[5]

This last form of giving can be seen as a permutation of "diaspora philanthropy," evolving from the movement of Indian women abroad whose support of domestics has become integrated with the giving back to the homeland through complex networks of obligation and community. While it is known that men remitted money back to India in the colonial period to support their immediate families and the welfare of their communities, we do not know if the same was done by women. However the support of the domestic servant and her kin in Singapore bears further study as a new permutation of diaspora giving by women of means in Singapore.

Women and Hindu Philanthropy through the Platform of the Temple

All migrant communities – at least within the first few generations – tend to treasure and reproduce their cultures, traditions, beliefs and heritage in foreign lands. Many choose to do so through a shared

[4] *For example, Malayalee Brahmin women had a network which was different from that of Tamil Brahmin women.*
[5] *Based on anecdotal evidence and interviews.*

Sri Mariamman Temple with electric tram passing by c.1925
Lim Kheng Chye Collection,
Courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore

physical platform such as a place of worship. These provide a focal point, shelter and the comfort of a shared faith and languages, a network as good as family, and sometimes the luxury of a meal just like one from home (Iswaran, 2010).

The Hindu Tamil community in Singapore used the temple as the platform from which to do this. Tamils from India and Jaffna Tamils from Ceylon built new temples in Singapore and Malaya which became such centres of community. The men provided the wealth and means towards the building of temples, such as the Sri Mariamman Temple (built in 1827 by Naraina Pillai who came from Penang with Raffles), the Sri Veeramakaliamman Temple for migrant workers, and the Sri Senpaga Vinayagar Temple, and also administered the rites and prayers.

Women helped keep the place running, donated supplies for the temples to prepare meals for bachelor migrants, brought children to be educated in rituals and faith, and passed on music and dance worship forms through teaching and example (Singam, 1968).

As was mentioned earlier, many of the contributions of women have gone unrecorded and unrecognised although it is acknowledged in hindsight that their contributions in the background have kept the remembrance of cultural practices alive and provided the backbone of charity and shelter for the needy for years.

Before World War II, funds were scarce for many Hindu women who were only housewives. It is noted, however, that there were some who could be relied on to help out at a moment's notice. The Singapore Ceylon Tamils' Association remembers women who were:

> *[A] silent devoted workforce that the Temple could lean on for help with the mundane yet complex preparations of food for the devotees … at the expense of sacrificing housework, time with their families, could cook lunch for 1,000 persons … [they were] devoted and passionate … [they were also] ready to perform any task, cleaning, decorating, organising, all it takes [sic] is for the lady committee member to be told of an impending task by the chairman (Iswaran, 2010, p. 65).*

The faithful care of many poor devotees many of whom were migrant men, can be explained by the devotion of these women to these Hindu virtues:

- ***Dharma***: sacred duty expressed in right behaviour
- ***Karma***: the law of moral and physical cause and effect which brought the good and bad results of behaviour
- **Karuna**/Compassion: a virtue
- Discharging of debts to the gods called ***Deva Rina***, undertaken by service to humans (Sundar, 1996)

Another form of temple giving was entrusting the temples with donations of cash or jewelry for the care of the needs of the poor in the community.

SOUTH INDIAN MUSLIM WOMEN : THE *WAKAF OF KHATIJAH MOHAMED*

While women in the majority Indian and Ceylonese community were still integrating into Singapore civil society, and only just venturing out from seclusion, one South Indian Muslim lady stood out from the crowd. She was a businesswoman named Hajjah Khatijah Mohamed.

Very little is known about Hajjah Khatijah except that she was, most unusually, a successful trader and philanthropist in her own right and chose to endow the community with a *Wakaf*.

In 1915 she drew up a will with instructions to use $54,521 to buy land, and build a mosque and two shophouses as part of her endowment to the Muslim community. Two of her relatives carried out her will after her passing in 1916. Khadijah Mosque was built in 1920 along with two shophouses next door on a 1,735-square-metre plot, making the Khadijah Mosque at 583 Geylang Road one of Singapore's oldest mosques.

A Straits Times article by Zachariah (2015) quoted Kelvin Ang, director of conservation management at the Urban Redevelopment Authority, as saying, "That the mosque was built in the South Indian style is very rare. And that a women's will was carried out at that time was even more of a rare occurrence."

The mosque was described as incorporating styles from India with European swags and cornices, and Palladian columns. The design was said to be influenced by the Nagore Shrine in Ajmer, the fifth largest city in Rajasthan, India, where Madam Khatijah Mohamed's relatives who oversaw the construction were from. It was only in 2003 that a minaret in the Middle Eastern style was added and the mosque reopened in 2015 after considerable renovations.

Today, Khadijah Mosque is considered an architectural rarity and Hajjah Khatijah's generosity continues to benefit many in the Muslim community with the mosque drawing an 800-strong congregation.

Ceylonese Women in Singapore: Bearers of Values and Tradition

Unlike the unusual Hajjah Khatijah, the Ceylonese community appeared to have been as cautious as their Indian counterparts in sending womenfolk away from home or into the workplace. Up till the 20th century, the Ceylonese remained a largely bachelor community, but by 1909 there were actually some 300 families recorded in Singapore who formed the Singapore Ceylon Tamils' Association (SCTA) (Ceylon Tamils' Association, 2010). In 1923, the Sinhalese community registered its own association – the Singapore Sinhala Association – and as early as 1918 staged a drama to raise funds for victims of the First World War (Reeves, 2013). We do not know if women participated in this charity drive.

The Ceylonese community is described as being matriarchal, with women holding a strong, unofficial, social position as a result of an ancient matrilineal system fused with Thesavamalai laws (Iswaran, 2010). This law conserves women's rights and property devolves through the female line. Some argue that this might be diluted by the fact that women must also provide a dowry at marriage, but others point out that this gives women more bargaining power in their new homes. Dowries used to be given in the form of property, but in land-scarce Singapore, a good education began to be acceptable in lieu of land.

Ceylonese Ladies
Courtesy of Mrs G. Thevathasan

In migrant communities it was the women who instilled the values and beliefs of their homeland in the generations that followed. As such grew the reputation of Ceylonese women as powerful matriarchal figures, fiercely protective of the education of their children in traditional culture as well as in advantageous Western accomplishments.

In the early 20th century, Ceylonese women were known to gather in their quarters to enjoy tea together, share recipes, help each other get on in the strange new land, and create a sense of community. They were the keepers of the faith, and conduits of culture and tradition from home. Taking their children with them on their visits and chores, they forged a community bond and a social network of support and help that stretched through contact with relations from Singapore, up to Malaya, and back to Ceylon (Iswaran, 2010). They also became stalwarts

of support in their places of worship – be these churches, mosques or temples.

MRS APPIAH "APPIAH MAMI"

One such lady was Mrs Appiah who was "immersed in service to Sri Senpaga Vinayagar Temple," maintained and managed by the Singapore Ceylon Tamils' Association. Mrs Appiah was a faithful devotee at the temple and supplied sweetmeats daily to temple deities. She also presided over a committee of ladies who could be counted on to help provide food for temple celebrations when bachelors in the community could count on a good home cooked meal. Mrs Appiah served in other temples besides Sri Senpaga Vinayagar and was of such renown in the community that she was later called "the Doyenne of the Ceylon Tamil community (Ceylon Tamils' Association, 2010).

The Ceylonese Christians and Philanthropy

While the majority of local Indian and Ceylonese women were involved in temple work, there was a small but significant community of Christian women who also practised the more public charity of raising funds for welfare using the Charity Bazaar Model learnt from Christian missionary ladies. Such women could be relied on to provide cakes for after-church services, adorn the sanctuary with flowers, sing in the choir, and make donations as tithes in public.

These women were members of the Protestant Christian (Methodist and Anglican) and Catholic communities who began to move from Ceylon just before World War II. In the 1920s, Christian families such as those of Samuel Thevathasan, a teacher at the Anglo-Chinese School on weekdays and Methodist pastor on weekends, were involved in church fundraising entertainment and war relief efforts alongside other Anglicans, Catholics and fellow Methodists. We were most fortunate to be able to speak to his daughter-in-law, Mrs Gnana Thevathasan about life in the Ceylonese community just before the Second World War.

Dr and Mrs Arthur Thevathasan c.1939
Courtesy of Mrs G. Thevathasan

MRS ANNA GNANASUNDRAM THEVATHASAN nee COOKE

Mrs Anna Gnanasundram (Gnana) Thevathasan is a warm, cheerful and sprightly lady and at 97 years of age is Singapore's oldest Justice of the Peace and a beloved mother with a brood of grand- and great-grandchildren scattered across the globe.

Well up till the past few years Mrs Thevathasan was still busy with work in her much-loved Wesley Methodist Church's Flower Fellowship, and is still warmly remembered at the YWCA where she was very involved with its welfare work in post-war Singapore. Now slightly more housebound, she pores over tomes of gardening books, bakes delicious cakes, and keeps up correspondence with friends and family around the world during the few pauses she has between house guests.

She kindly gives us time to interview her about life as a girl in Ceylon in the early 20th century and how she was married and moved to Singapore. Although she came to Singapore only in 1939 her observations give us greater insight into the lives of women in the complex community of the Ceylonese, and how Singapore was already becoming a multiracial society.

One of three children, Mrs Thevathasan was born Anna Gnanasundram Cooke in Colombo, British Ceylon, in 1918. She lived there until the death of her father whereupon she and her mother went "up north" to Jaffna. She stayed with her mother's family and studied in Uduvil Girls' School, an old mission

school founded in 1820. There the young Gnana Cooke, now a committed Christian, became a scholar, and a very good musician. She placed so highly in the Higher Local Exam of Trinity College in all Ceylon that her teachers had hopes she might take the Associate of Trinity College of London (ATCL) exam in piano.

She does not remember being sequestered in Jaffna society as a young girl, only that as a girl one had to "be a bit careful." She attributes this to the benefits of education in Ceylonese society. The Cooke family like other Ceylonese had been educated in English for several generations. Her grandfather was a Christian and then a lay preacher. He and his wife were accomplished and cultured. As Gnana Thevathasan explains, the Ceylonese placed great value on a good education, treasured artistic accomplishment, and strove for employment with the government because that entailed a secure pension! In the early 20th century while Singapore men were still just establishing themselves in English professions, her father was in business, one uncle was already a lawyer, and her aunt had married a doctor (Pitt, 1983, p. 14).

Such equality and achievement had not come easily. Mrs Thevathasan recalls that Ceylonese girls belonging to her parents' generation were known to have challenged their parents to keep their dowry money and allow them to be educated instead. Parents began to see that a little education would indeed help their girls supplement a poor marital income, and could be a means of support if one's husband should die. As education increased both status and opportunity in society, by the 1900s Ceylonese girls were often to be found in school alongside the boys.

To place things in context, at the time Gnana Cooke was born in Colombo, Ceylon, the little Ceylonese community of Singapore with its 300 families was a tiny outpost that represented an established community with a rich culture and well known English schools of high calibre. Like all the communities under research here, educational opportunities might not have been open except to the more fortunate girls in the community, but as in all colonies, it was an aspiration for many to attain such accomplishments.

The number of suitable Ceylonese girls in Singapore posed a problem for a young doctor in the colony who had reached marriageable age. Dr Arthur Thevathasan was a Christian with high expectations of a wife – she should share his beliefs, love music, and not be constrained by the dowry system which he disliked intensely. No such person could be found in Singapore or Malaya. The story was told that his mother, Mrs Samuel Thevathasan, said she must therefore "return to the motherland" to find him such a wife, whereupon Arthur handed her a list of 12 attributes he was looking for in a wife. The list prompted his mother to tell him darkly that Moses himself had only been given 10 commandments while he had given her 12!

Miss Gnana Cooke in a Jaffna-style saree c. 1934
Courtesy of Mrs G. Thevathasan

Mrs Samuel Thevathasan scoured Ceylon to no avail and on her very last day there confided in an old family friend in Jaffna about her lack of success. This friend directed her to his niece, Gnana Cooke. The next day an unsuspecting Gnana found herself showing an old girl of Uduvil around the school – her name was Mrs Samuel Thevathasan. They got on very well indeed to the great dismay of Gnana Cooke's music teacher whose high hopes for her pupil were dashed forever.

In the practice for that period, Gnana Cooke and Arthur Thevathasan exchanged letters and photographs, and Arthur travelled to Ceylon. As Gnana describes, "We met, liked each other, and, with both of us being independently convinced that this was God's plan for our lives, were engaged and married within a week!" (Wesley Methodist Church, 2005, p. 3)

Wedding of Gnana Cooke to Dr Arthur Thevathasan, September 1, 1939
Courtesy of Mrs G. Thevathasan

That day was a fateful one – it was September 1, 1939, and Germany had just taken Poland. Arthur, working for the British in Singapore's Medical College, had to rush back to the colony and the young Mrs Thevathasan went with him without a second look back.

A marriage announcement in Singapore's Straits Times marked the occasion:

> *THEVATHASAN-COOKE, ON Sept. 1st at Uduvil Church Jaffna, Dr A. W. S. Thevathasan, eldest son of Rev. and Mrs S. M. Thevathasan, of Singapore, to Miss Anna Gnanasundram, daughter of the late J. W. S. Cooke and Mrs Cooke of Colombo, and grand-daughter of Mr Chelliah H. Cooke, J. P. veteran educationalist of North Ceylon ("Marriage Thevathasan-Cooke," 1939, p. 2).*

On arriving in Singapore, the very young Mrs Gnana Thevathasan found herself with a Chinese cook and a Malay houseboy – neither of whom spoke English – on the eve of war. Everything was completely alien. They didn't even have quarters yet, but the first thing Arthur did was to buy his wife a piano.

Mrs Thevathasan remembers that the local Ceylonese community was very small with the main gathering points being the Ceylon Sports Club, the Tamil Methodist Church, and around Kampong Bahru where the Ceylonese whose men were the backbone of the railways in the Straits Settlements lived. Women, both Indian and Ceylonese who were not Christian, were much more sheltered and led less exposed lives in the general community. Mrs Thevathasan does not recall any significant public charitable work done by the small number of women out in society then.

Like other women philanthropists we have identified in that era, Gnana Thevathasan found her way into charity work through her guide and ally, husband Arthur, who helped her step out into Singapore society. His family surrounded her, her husband's friends who were Chinese, Indians and Malays welcomed her, and she soon became a part of the close, multiracial community of Wesley Church.

When asked directly about personal giving and her many contributions, Mrs Thevathasan shook her head. These were private matters and should not be spoken of.

The Thevathasans (second and third from left) with friends in Singapore
Courtesy of Mrs G. Thevathasan

However, much charitable work was to be found at hand. With her father-in-law being a Methodist pastor, she remembers her mother-in-law always quietly helping in the background. Wesley Church had a congregation of many races including American missionaries and ran Charity Bazaars in the Western style. Mrs Thevathasan remembers that the waffles stall was already a fixture, along with the sale of handicrafts, and Western and Eastern goodies. The waffles stall was to return again after World War II, but the small funfair had now become a large bazaar.

The whole Thevathasan family contributed to the church both in tithes and talent, as musicians and choristers. Eventually Gnana Thevathasan found her special gift was arranging the church flowers. Apparently her husband was the one who first suggested it as she adorned their house beautifully. He was the one with "the artistic eye," helping her finish her now famous floral decorations with a judicious suggestion of a few more leaves here, or an extra bloom there. Gnana went on to play a happy role in Wesley's Flower Fellowship, gifting the church with flowers every week for six more decades.

Meanwhile her husband had left his job when the Medical College was taken over by the Japanese, and unexpected avenues for welfare opened up. Arthur Thevathasan started a private practice named after their first son, Gunam. When the family moved to Tiong Bahru, Dr Arthur was frequently called upon at all odd hours by his new neighbours who were mostly Teochew. They now became a part of the Tiong Bahru community with its many races.

Dr Thevathasan also happened to be the doctor to the Swiss company Diethelm during the Japanese Occupation. Their manager Mr Schweitzer, being Swiss (and therefore neutral), was able to visit Changi Prison and supply medicines to the Prisoners of War. This experience encouraged Dr Thevathasan to join the British Red Cross Society, Singapore Branch where he served as president of the Red Cross until his early death in 1967.

Like all other women in Singapore at the time, Gnana Thevathasan remembers the main feature of the war period being trying to find food to feed her family. Yet it was also the start of a lifelong devotion to helping others. The war wrought horrors on many children in Singapore so members of the colony's fledgling Social Welfare Services started small schools in Maxwell Road market to give the children some lessons and a decent meal (Wesley Methodist Church, 2005, p. 5). Gnana was asked to teach Arithmetic. She remembers:

> *I could not speak a word of Chinese nor could these children speak English, so it was like running a dumb show with a blackboard. I would give them penicillin bottles and lids (collected from my husband's clinic) to count … They were real rowdies so it was very encouraging to see them become intelligent, honest, and obedient children after we showed them love and care (Wesley Methodist Church, 2005, p. 7).*

After the war, Mrs Thevathasan continued her support of Wesley Church and became a steadfast help to the YWCA, helping it with renovations and expansion. Her husband's sudden death was a terrible shock to her, and she tells us honestly that it took quite some time before she regained her faith and found her footing again.

Then she was back to her flower arranging, and became a key figure in the YWCA's bid to add a hostel to its premises - a "home away from home" for young girls. Mrs Thevathasan marshalled church ladies and recruited friends from other communities. They held "Bring and Buy" sales and fundraising concerts of Indian dance and fashion and after many such efforts the cost of the hostel was raised amid much rejoicing. Mrs Thevathasan remembers those days as a blessing and a great time of camaraderie.

She says, "I was able to do all these things because of my husband. He was a compassionate man, very concerned about human beings and their welfare." Her husband was her role model and her guide.

However, as this interviewer has experienced, Mrs Thevathasan underestimates her own special gifts of hospitality and a profound steadfastness. While the benefits of a loving family, good education, and a supportive husband would have given her many advantages in Singapore society, her life has not been an easy one. Yet she exudes kindness and warmth, quiet determination, and a deep faith that are very much her own, giving us a glimpse into the secret behind her generous, sturdy spirit.

Life Under British Rule

Life in Singapore would open new doors for both Indian and Ceylonese women as the colony entered the 20th century. Inter-racial life – even at the most superficial level of daily coming and going – and the opportunity for schooling all introduced influences for change. As women became distanced from their immediate relations in India and Ceylon, some became more empowered as heads of nuclear families, carving out their own lives in Singapore albeit within the confines of their own strict social systems. One thing that did not change however was loyalty to the Crown and the aspiration towards things British.

During World War I, Ceylonese women, like their counterparts in the Arab and Chinese communities, contributed to the Malayan Aircraft Fund and proudly raised enough to present the British Malayan Authorities with a fighter plane named "The Jaffna" (Reeves, 2013).

As the colony began to enjoy the fruit of modernisation modern communication, views changed and new ideas entered society. It became more acceptable for girls to learn English, with a premium placed on good English education by parents. Girls attended the Anglo Tamil Girls' School (later the Methodist Girls' School) started by Sophia Blackmore or the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus.

The communities started their own elite clubs and associations after the fashion of the British for social, cultural, sporting and welfare needs. The local community, always interlinked with home, also followed the rise of nationalism in India and the new women's movements. Religion and politics were now debated.

A young generation speaking English emerged as part of Singapore's cosmopolitan scene, adopting Western models of philanthropy in schools and clubs with public fundraising through flag days, funfairs and entertainment, and the giving of direct donations to support the work of country-wide charities such as the Red Cross and child welfare.

The Indian and Ceylonese Communities Unite for War Relief

The onset of the Second World War brought the communities out in force to support war relief. Women, now much more comfortable appearing in public, banded together to do "war work." Press clippings of 1939-1940 recounted how Ceylon Tamil women organised themselves into a Ceylon women war workers party to stitch and supply pillow cases and handkerchiefs, and roll bandages for the Front ("Ceylonese women to help war work," 1939).

On December 23, 1940, the Singapore Ceylon Tamils' Association held a War Fund Concert at Victoria Memorial Hall which featured "The Association's All Female Orchestra led by Mrs A. Rajah (Ceylon Tamils' Association, 2010). Performing in public was now a most acceptable way for women in the community to behave. The entire collection of $1,498 was donated to the Malayan Patriotic Fund, and in 1941, the Ceylonese started the All-Malayan Ceylon Tamils' Fighter Plane Fund, and Indians and Ceylonese joined all the other ethnic groups in collecting money for use in war relief by the Red Cross Society.

World War II ended all such activities and the local Indian community with all of Singapore suffered greatly under the incoming Japanese army.[9] Disillusionment with the British set in and after the War, the community – along with every other community that had been abandoned on the little colony in 1941 – entered a new era seeking a different way.

[9] *It is seldom remembered that Indians were among the prisoners of war taken with British troops from Changi Prison to build the infamous "Death Railway" in Burma.*

SUMMARY

This study was unable to find any significant accounts of large monetary donations by individual women in the early 20th century due to the small, fragmented nature of the communities of women in Singapore, and the private nature of giving. The complexities of multiple ethnic groups with different religions, castes, culture and social mores also limited the re-creation of a clearer picture of women's private giving patterns during the early 20th century.

However several assumptions can be made from our findings. We can posit that, given the intense connection to their homelands, migrant Indian and Ceylonese women in Singapore continued to practise philanthropy in their codified, centuries-old informal roles. They replicated their traditional duties of care and given the narrow exposure of these first migrant women to local society, contributions were likely confined to private giving in tight circles within prescribed parameters. These defined the scope and mechanisms of contribution through most of the colonial years.

Women gave in three key areas, of which only one was public - towards the sustenance of their own family; the support of unrelated dependents such as domestics; and occasionally, by volunteerism at places of worship.

There were great disparities of income in the communities, which affected access to funds. Most women had little disposable income and daily life was hard with their hands full with children and household responsibilities. While religion, temple worship, and rituals were e, most women were probably unable to give to the temple beyond some small offerings in gratitude for answered prayer or favours asked. Donations would have been placed in an offering box near one's personal deity.

Volunteerism was something that only the middle class or wealthy had the luxury of doing, whilst women generally helped each other as and when they could, their influence confined to circles of friends and neighbours, and further limited by caste, religion and language.

While Indians and Ceylonese women deeply valued the civilisations of their homelands, living in Singapore progressively effected a change in their lives.

Very gradual integration into civil society also exposed women to new opportunities and possibilities. While the first women migrants from India and Ceylon would likely have remained within their own communities, the *next* generation had greater exposure to new choices and influences such as education, modernisation and the media craze that swept through the colony as the 20th century progressed. The influence of women in India who stepped out in national movements for the betterment of their lot also significantly expanded women's understanding of new possibilities that could be achieved in life. This next generation of girls educated in the 1920s and 1930s would only come into their full potential after World War II.

The one exception within the timeframe of our research was Hajjah Khatijah. Her life and circumstances bear further research as she was an unusual example of independence and economic success during her time, apparently not held back from being a businesswoman of influence when other Indian women led circumscribed lives.

Of particular interest is how the role of care for domestics and dependents evolved with migration. Our exploration here is too shallow to confirm if this is an iteration of diaspora philanthropy pertaining only to Singapore, but it definitely falls into the realm of one of the traditional informal responsibilities still held by women today and bears further research.

As a community, Indian and Ceylonese women appear not to have changed their giving patterns with migration, but in fact added new mechanisms rom local colonial society which they then made their own. One might suggest that giving did not so much undergo transition as become enlarged with migration.

One example is that of Mrs G. Thevathasan, who gave much in the Western way, while still carrying out her traditional duties of care as wife, mother, grandmother, and employer to several dependants.

Chapter 5
Forces for Change in the Twentieth Century

Sitting on the crossroads between East and West, and tightly connected to Europe, India and China, Singapore was soon caught up in much of the tide of modernisation and political disruption of the 20th century that would irrevocably alter life as it had been known for centuries.

Residents in Singapore found themselves thrust from their predictable traditional spheres of life into a dynamic era of change. The consequent effect upon women in some sectors was to galvanise them into new economic roles, change their perception both of themselves and their capabilities, and open their minds to the startling new concept of nationalism and all that it entailed, including loyalty and pride in belonging to an empire – be it the British Empire or the new Republic of China.

Here we take a quick look at some of the major disruptions that changed the traditional lives of Asian women, not just in Singapore but in many migrant communities around the world.

Major Political Disruptions Affecting the Position of Women

Asian women in Singapore in the early 20th century were exposed to enormous upheavals from both East and West, but of note is how their personal circumstances determined how they would be affected.

If one were an English-educated British subject like the Straits Chinese or Ceylonese, the terrible events played out in Europe during World War I would become a major influence for change. If, on the other hand, one were part of the majority migrant Chinese population, events in China would shake all that had previously been the bedrock of Chinese life. At the same time, the rise of nationalism in India would reverberate throughout the Indian community.

These massive transitions called forth a visceral response in both men and women in Singapore and would usher them into a completely new realm of social responsibility.

Bicycles come to Singapore!
Courtesy of Mrs Ivy Kwa

The "Great War" Unites the Women of Singapore and Malaya

World War I, played out on the periphery of consciousness of most of Singapore's migrant Asian population was keenly felt by colonial society and communities allied to British interests and loyal to the Crown. The "Great War" had a devastating social impact on Great Britain itself. The previously entrenched class structure was significantly altered with the loss of large numbers of the aristocracy in the trenches, while women across Europe were forced into jobs and thence became a part of the workforce, making great gains towards economic independence.

In Singapore, the Straits Chinese – the small but powerful English-educated Anglophone community that dominated the Legislative Council – wanted to represent the colony in the fighting forces but were refused. They demonstrated their loyalty instead by raising funds for war relief and donating large sums of money to buy a good number of war planes for Britain[1] ("Craft presented to date," 1915).

The same impetus brought their wives to public notice when they too banded together to pay for the gift of their own fighter plane – "Malaya No. 27 (Fighter) The Women of Malaya" – for the troops in

[1] *The men of the Straits Settlements together bought fighters and seven scout planes, including Malaya No. 4 Craft (Scout), for Britain under the Malayan Air Squadron Appeal. Other local men who bought planes were Sir Manasseh Meyer and Mr Lee Choon Guan.*

Europe. This initiative was led by Mrs Helen Song, wife of prominent Straits Chinese lawyer Song Ong Siang, who was asked by a Mrs Nicole Walker to help with the cause. Only managing to raise $1,000 herself, she approached other ladies in her social circle who gathered the then enormous sum of $6,000 required to buy their warplane for Britain[2] ("Malaya women's aircraft fund," 1916).[3]

The war also encouraged local women to appear in public for the first time to actively raise more funds for war relief and the work of the Red Cross and St John's Ambulance ("Our day, appointment of the Singapore committees," 1916). Led by the Governor's wife, Lady Evelyn Young, women of all races began to gather donations and subscriptions using the British Charity Bazaar Model of raising funds through the sale of handmade goods and subscriptions to entertainments.

The war thus introduced and made acceptable the raising of funds by Asian women in public for worthy causes. The Charity Bazaar Model was a simple mechanism for women of all races and not objected to by conservative men. After its introduction it was used often during World War I. Such activities were much reported by the press which accorded recognition and praise to the donors and recorded the last cent in print for all to admire. This model thus became part of the philanthropic landscape of early Singapore. It was replicated many times after that by people of all communities – from school events to fundraising for war relief in China.

The Key Role of Women in Political and Social Change in China

While colonial society was looking westward, the first decades of the 20th century saw the majority of Singapore Chinese migrants looking east towards great tumult in their homeland where family and loyalty remained. Reformist ideas, nascent nationalism and Western intellectualism had been gaining traction at the end of the 19th century and the resulting political schisms now riveted overseas Chinese who followed unfolding events with intense interest.

Women began to emerge as key players in the revolutionary idealism that now swept China. The losses suffered by the Qing in wars with the British and Japanese brought disillusionment and questioning of the old order, and many Chinese readily embraced the new Western concepts of freedom and equality. The "new woman" (新女性) also gladly seized upon these radical ideas, opposing foot binding and arranged marriages, and even going abroad to be educated ("Women's roles in politics in the early 20th century" from www.edb.gov.hk).

Women now became partners in the anti-Qing revolutionary movement, boldly supporting their male counterparts in startling new ways. They involved themselves in advocacy, education, fundraising, administration, logistics, spying and even assassinations. Some, like the famous Qiu Jin (秋瑾), were martyred for the cause. When the Qing dynasty finally fell in 1911 and Sun Yat-Sen's republic was established in 1912, he paid tribute to this new breed of Chinese women:

> *These ladies are competent and talented. They throw themselves into the … work and are most persevering. They are as competent as any comrades from all provinces. Whether boldly enlisting in the army or joining the Red Cross, they are fearless and unbeatable. No matter [if] raising funds, educating the public, or arousing the revolutionary spirit, they always stand out and shine ("A reply to the letter from the Republic Women's Relief Association," 1912).*

Sun Yat-Sen considered the Chinese abroad to be an extension of China, and urged them to change and modernise, keeping in step with events on the mainland. In Singapore, new schools with new curricula for both boys and girls sprang up across the colony.[4] These schools flourished and by the 1920s offered both a primary and secondary education for girls. The Chinese population, previously so reluctant to allow girls to study, now began to see its first graduates who went on to enter the workforce and earn their own wages.

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[2] *Other women from all over the Straits Settlements contributed what they could to buy planes as well, including "The Malacca Chinese No. 2" and "The Anzac."*
[3] *The list of donors mentions 34 ladies as contributors to this cause starting with "Mesdames Song Ong Siang, Lim Boon Keng, Lee Choon Guan … and ending with Miss Lee Choo Neo," who apparently donated money as a single lady (Song, 2009, p. 534).*
[4] *Some of the new schools for girls were Chung Hwa (established in 1911), Chung-Fu (set up in 1915), and Nan-Hua and Nanyang Girls' schools (opened in 1917).*

The battlefield in China now moved to politics and women there, having tasted freedom, began to agitate for suffrage. It became fashionable to consciously cultivate individualism and participate in movements for social and cultural change such as that of the May 4th Movement. This saw the rise of the new feminist Chinese woman, personified by Soong Ching Ling, the glamorous American-educated wife of Sun Yat-Sen. In 1936 the Chinese consul in Singapore himself drew attention to the new right of Chinese women to vote, although it was also noted that Chinese women in Singapore and Malaya were a trifle less militant than their counterparts on the mainland ("Chinese feminists," 1936).

A less controversial cause that decidedly united Chinese abroad was the Sino-Japanese War. Overseas Chinese women across the world joined together to do what they could to oust the Japanese from their homeland, spurred on by the new sense of nationalism and outraged by atrocities in Shanghai and Nanking (Nanjing).

In Singapore and Malaya, Chinese women from all sectors and different dialect groups raised funds for war relief in support of the Nationalists. Feelings ran very high and young men even returned to fight in China. In 1937, 600 domestic servants (*Majie*) raised money for the cause, using the Charity Bazaar Model to great success. Singapore women who led the anti-Japanese movement would later suffer at the hands of the Japanese, a story told in Chapter 6.

The Rise of Women's Movements in India

Feminism in India had been on the rise since the mid-19th century with men leading the way against the practice of Suttee (wife immolation) and child marriages, but women found a greater voice under Mahatma Gandhi who legitimised the role of women in civil disobedience. Gandhi elevated the previously unrecognised and informal role of Indian women, celebrating the traditional "women's work" of caring and self sacrifice for the good of the family.

Under Gandhi and later Nehru, India would see the rise of women's only movements in both rural and urban areas. As the nationalist ideal gained ground, nationwide movements, such as the All India Women's Conference, mobilised women across the continent in support of anti-colonial sentiment.

As in China, Indian women responded to these calls for greater freedom, but the struggle for equality was a battle, given the deep belief that Indian women should be protected as the weaker sex, entrenched in the complex social systems that defined all of Indian life. Nonetheless the consciousness of women had been awakened and there began to be calls for welfare for themselves and their children as well as equal pay.

In Singapore, the fragmented South Asian community found some common ground in the Indian independence movement, but divisions in language, caste and class would continue to discourage unity until after World War II (Sandhu & Mani, 1993). A small number of women in Singapore's Indian community began to respond to calls for change in roles in society, but we have been unable to find any immediate correlation between rising feminist consciousness and giving patterns by Indian women in Singapore.

Modern dress and Western ways
Courtesy of Mrs Ivy Kwa

Modernisation and the Influence of the Media

While political change unevenly affected Singapore's Asian women, women of all races would be changed by the global forces of modernisation, with Singapore ideally placed to hear the latest news and ideas from around the world.

Fashionable Chinese ladies at the races at Farrer Park c. 1920,
Courtesy of Mrs Ivy Kwa

The first decades of the 20th century brought the outside world into the consciousness of traditional Asians in ways never seen before with a consequent trickle-down effect on social norms. Industrialisation brought factories, mechanisation, electricity, motor cars, buses and trams, which now began to outpace pony gharries (taxis).

The most far-reaching and influential inventions would be those in media, travel and increased communication. The telegraph, telephone, phonograph, newspapers and magazines brought the world to one's doorstep while world travel via steamship and, later, the aeroplane, would take Asian women outward to experience for themselves different countries and cultures. Radios began to broadcast day and night from Chinatown to the farthest kampongs,[5] bringing news, music, drama and advertisements right into the homes of housebound women. Newspapers in all the main languages went to print and young journalists reported not just world news, but trendsetting fashions and local events.
The camera now captured breathtaking pictures of local balls, the visit of the Prince of Wales, and the clothes that the most fashionable ladies in colonial High Society were wearing.

Moving pictures – the cinematograph – came to Singapore in 1910, and was such a success that the per capita rate of film attendance in 1930s Malaya was probably the highest in the world (Stevenson, 1924). Cinema halls and travelling booths introduced an enraptured audience to the universally understood capers of Steamboat Willie, and Charlie Chaplin, and brought song and dance in "Broadway Melody" and other showstoppers to an amazed audience.

[5] *Radio Singapura, Singapore's first local mass market station, began to broadcast in 1923.*

The Introduction of New Social Norms

Women watched and learnt from Myrna Loy and Joan Crawford, and sighed over Gary Cooper. By 1928, Singapore had permanent "cinema palaces" which averaged 48 performances a month (Stevenson, 1924). Entertainment venues drew crowds of delighted families. "The New World," a family-friendly amusement park which opened in August 1923, featured not only moving pictures, but a merry-go-round and a boxing ring ("New entertainment centre, The New World," 1923). Families began to go out together although the men and women might have kept apart as some of the new shows were very daring indeed. This new behaviour of familial social outings were among the first times that children and parents spent time together outside proscribed family gatherings and were remembered with great nostalgia by early generations of Singaporeans.

The influence of the West affected everything. Hemlines rose and it became the norm for Asians to wear both traditional and Western dress. Hairstyles changed; women of all races could be seen with bobbed and then permed hair. Indian girls even hiked up the hems of their saris in a daring show of ankle. Everywhere in the 1920s young women wore the white stockings and strapped shoes of the 1920s flapper. Men dressed up too and many a dapper young man was seen complete with suit, tie and even waistcoats, although staid colonial servants could still be seen in the white *Baju Tutup* worn by civil servants.

Most influential (but generally unacknowledged) was the introduction of new Western world views transmitted via cinema. Traditional Asians learnt of the new concept of romantic love. Screen heroines spoke out and acted freely.

Women's expectations of marriage, men and themselves changed. From being closeted at home, girls now saw how life could be lived as idealised in many American films, soaking up ideas from interior decor to Western music, and learning the Charleston and the waltz. Men meanwhile learnt of bold heroics from Zorro and Rhett Butler, and how to pomade their hair.

A young couple dressed for dinner c. 1915
The Peranakan Association, courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore

Entertainment in Chinese and from South Asia had not yet caught up with Hollywood with just a few films trickling in from Hong Kong, so the vast majority of movies that everyone saw in Singapore were Western. Colonial society was not particularly thrilled with the prevalence of American films; the British were mortified that staged versions of "their" lives were laid bare for all to see and received with catcalls by the coolies in the cheap seats (Stevenson, 1924).[6] Live entertainment – such as Chinese *wayang* (opera), Malay *bangsawan* (opera), and *sandiwara* (theatre) – along with dance and drama in Indian temples all still had their places, but were gradually losing their hold on the young.

Apart from the most obvious outward show of influence in Western dress and décor and the imitation of Western manners, it is hard to quantify to what extent media changed migrant mindsets.

It has been noted that romantic love and individual choice definitely began to alter social norms even

[6] *Early cinema halls had partitioned seating. The gallery was for those who paid more and Europeans were seated separately as were unmarried Chinese and Straits Chinese women. The cheap seats were benches below, from which the Western audience had to endure chatter from an audience used to attending wayang with its free and easy behaviour and loud conversation.*

as the old civilisations in China and India were becoming conscious of individualism and equality (Ooi, 1991). One such departure was that some of the young generation in the 1920s began to expect "walk out" together before marriage, demanding the right to decide if their parents' choices for them were unacceptable and hoping to find love as it was portrayed on the big screen. It is not surprising that many chose to promenade in the new amusement parks.

This drift from the ancient structure of marriage as a construct of economics alone signifies a key shift in mores among the Asians of Singapore, hastened by economic independence for women and the growing right to choose how they used their resources.

SUMMARY

This swift look at disrupting influences in the 20th century gives us just a glimpse into the plethora of changes occurring at many levels and bombarding the consciousness of women in Singapore society before the start of World War II. The outer turbulence of wars and revolutions were matched by the introduction of equally startling new ideas from the East and West and rising nationalistic fervour in China and India.

Such was the background in which modernising Chinese, Straits Chinese and Jewish women in Singapore would evolve their roles as contributors to society, which are described in the following chapters.

Bright Young Things out for a ride c.1930
The Peranakan Association, courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore

Chapter 6
The Chinese

A Chinese family c. 1920
Lee Brothers Studio, courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore

The Migration of Chinese Men to Colonial Singapore

The Chinese have always had a presence in Southeast Asia. In the 1400s the great Admiral Cheng Ho travelled from China all the way to Africa via the Straits of Malacca; his men were the forebears of the powerful hybrid community of Malacca Chinese known as the Straits Chinese or Peranakan today. Their story will be discussed in the following chapter.

While the Chinese always maintained trade relations with the region, great numbers of its people only made the move to Southeast Asia in the 19th century, forced by desperate circumstances to seek livelihoods outside their homeland.

The greatest number of economic migrants came from Southern China. The Hokkien from Fujian came first, followed by the Cantonese, Hakkas and Teochews. With overpopulation and the division of land among sons being the traditional system of inheritance, tiny parcels of land were being subdivided into impossibly smaller ones, turning the south into "an agrarian hell of hopeless sharecropping" by the 19th century (Tan, 1986, p. 43). Floods and famines compounded the distress. China was also in political turmoil, embroiled in rebellions and battered by wars (Lee, 1988).[1]

A bright light on the horizon was the brand new port of Singapore where anyone who wanted to work was welcome. The British were known to respect private property, minded their own business, and actually had a system of law and order (Tan, 1986).

Within three decades of its founding, the Chinese population in Singapore had outstripped the resident Malays, numbering 25,000 by 1849 (Tan, 1986). These first Chinese were the poorest, taking on hard labour as coolies, rickshaw pullers and dockworkers – a difficult life but one that earned them some money to remit to their families in China. With the tin and

Chinese Female Population in Singapore, 1881-1947

Year	Total Population	Total Chinese Population	Number Of Chinese Females	Ratio Of Chinese Males Per 1,000 Chinese Females
1881	137,722	86,766	14,195	5,112
1891	181,602	121,098	21,462	4,680
1901	226,842	164,041	33,649	3,871
1911	303,321	219,577	57,929	2,790
1921	418,358	315,151	100,918	2,123
1931	557,745	418,640	157,637	1,656
1947	938,144	729,473	342,100	1,132

Sources: Reports on the Census of Population of the Straits Settlements for the years 1881, 1891, 1901, 1911, 1921 and 1931, and Report on the Census of Population of the Colony of Singapore for the year 1947

[1] *The Taiping Rebellion (1850-1864), and the First and Second Opium Wars brought the Qing Dynasty to its knees; the latter two conflicts resulted in China cedingcontrol of Hong Kong and Shanghai to the British. The unceasing chaos sent Southern Chinese to new lands in search of work to keep their families alive.*

rubber booms in the Federated Malay States in the second half of the century and a need for rice farmers in Malaya, thousands more southern Chinese poured overseas to earn a meagre wage.

As with the other communities, the Chinese were largely a bachelor community with all the attendant ills of gang fights, vice and gambling, exacerbated by violent turf wars among formidable secret societies that came wholesale from China with their own thugs (*samsengs*).[2] All these made the colony a rough place well into the late 19th century. The establishment of constitutional law and the consequent – albeit difficult – enforcement of order under Crown Colony status in 1867 was needed to create a safer environment that encouraged some Chinese women of "respectable classes" to migrate to the colony. However, the increase in the number of women before 1900 was by just a few thousand (Tan, 1986).

The Tie of Chinese Women to Ancestral Lands

The gender imbalance in Singapore was common to other 19th century Chinese migrant communities from Australia to California. While thousands left the shores of China, very few were women as the Qing Dynasty forbade their migration. Moreover, millenia of tradition had forced Chinese women into a life cycle of servitude to men. They were further tied down to the land itself by the cult of ancestor worship which required them to look after their ancestors spirits, preferably where they were buried.

Chinese women lived Confucius' words in real terms. "A woman was born subservient to her father, then her husband, and finally to her sons" (Ooi, 1981, p. 4). If she did not have sons, she would be doomed to an afterlife without their redemptive prayers to help her in hell. If she did marry, she must worship her husband's ancestral bloodline and literally provide for them in the afterlife with food offerings and burnt sacrifices, or else they would starve in the void. The lot of women in Chinese society was entombed by the words of Confucius below which were followed for 2,000 years.

> *"Women indeed are human beings, but they are of a lower state than men and can never attain to full equality with them" (Croll, 1978).*

Once past puberty, Chinese women were confined to the household and lived out their lives among other female relatives. Their greatest hope was to outlive everyone else and finally wield power as the matriarch. Even then, such power was not assured as women had to suffer the indignity of being taken on as secondary wives – or worse, concubines – unable to choose their position except by manipulation or favour.

Women in China had little legal and even less social status, but they were still disallowed from travelling. As such those women who found their way to 19th century Singapore were only the very poorest who had nothing to lose – the desperate or the kidnapped.

The Impetus for Women's Immigration to Southeast Asia

The real increase in the number of Chinese women in Singapore only came in the 20th century when the marked gender imbalance in what was now the majority migrant community in Singapore forced the Colonial Administration into action. In order to bring some semblance of normalcy to Chinese society, the attempt was made to balance the male to female ratio with the passing of the Aliens Ordinance Act. This throttled Chinese male migrant numbers, but allowed unlimited entry to Chinese women.

The result was successful as it coincided with the collapse of the Qing Dynasty and the rise of economically independent women in China looking for jobs. They were led by the Cantonese, notably those from the provinces of *Shun Tak* and *Shan Sui*.

Traditional Chinese Philanthropy in Singapore

> *Philanthropy, as defined and practised by the Chinese, is mainly giving on an individual basis, which includes charity, mutual aid, and giving to one's family and community … [it] has strong connotations of helping trusted others in one's inner circle in the form of giving goods, time, skills and money (Menkhoff, 2009).*

[2] *By the 1870s the November junk season was guaranteed to bring some 30,000 Chinese with "large numbers of samsengs or professional fighting men" to meet demand in the new tin mines in Perak and "other troubled areas." local Chinese like Whampoa petitioned for supervision of immigrants (Turnbull, 2009, p. 79-82).*

Chinese Female Immigration into Singapore, 1880-1949

Year	Total Number of Immigrants to Singapore	Number of Chinese Female Immigrants	% Chinese Female Immigrants
1880	70,790	1,897	2.67
1890	127,936	3,820	2.98
1900	200,947	8,482	4.22
1910	173,423	11,652	6.71
1920	126,077	22,382	17.75
1930	242,139	42,896	17.72
1933	The Aliens Ordinance Act was passed, limiting the number of Chinese males entering Singapore but giving Chinese females unrestricted entry.		
1935	143,331	38,621	26.95
1937	228,669	94,548	41.35
1949	96,449	16,029	16.62

Sources:
1.Lim, 1959-1960.
2.Saw, 1970.
3. Annual department reports of the Straits Settlements for the years 1916,1920, 1925 and 1949.

Philanthropy as practised in traditional Chinese society derived from the virtues of compassion and benevolence in ancient teachings. In practice, it had evolved to match the harsh realities of Chinese life and reflected the Chinese world view. The best form of philanthropy was in being able to give for the betterment of the family first, then the clan, and finally the larger community. This "larger community" must not be mistaken for civil society, but usually meant members of the clan. The recipients of one's charity were also those with whom one had *guanxi* or personal connections (Menkhoff, 2009), and the focus of the Chinese was not on the individual but always on the survival of the bloodline.

Southern Chinese who made their way to Singapore therefore looked to protect their own first, setting up clan associations or *kongsis* that functioned as a support system away from home. Clans were highly evolved mutual-aid constructs, self-supporting by buying land, and every migrant who shared the clan surname was welcome. They were closed groups, providing protection, society and the celebration of key rites. Clans also helped one find a job, gave aid when one was sick, and provided for widows upon one's death. Clan houses were places where common deities were worshipped and, throughout the Chinese diaspora, where one could find comfort in the same language, food, worship, recreation and celebrations. Clans provided medical aid, invested in cemeteries, and were great supporters of education.[3]

The most powerful clans in Singapore were Hokkien, Teochew, Hakka and Cantonese.

The focus of clans tended to be inward and it was characteristic of Chinese migrants to keep to themselves, showing little interest in the doings of the colony and much less civil society. Hence the global creation of "Chinatowns" – small worlds for the Chinese themselves within the larger communities that had become their new home. Chinese insularity overseas was so notable that it had been observed that:

> *Indifference is bred into the Chinese character … which often manifests itself as a lack of social consciousness … Man's social obligations to the stranger, or what is called 'samaritan virtue', is not unknown but practically discouraged because one's duty is first and foremost to the family and fellow kinsmen (Tan, 1986, p. 43).*

Wives and children were anecdotally known to have attended clan functions but if women contributed we have not yet found these records. It was within clan power to formalise marriages so women must have had some presence there. In Singapore Chinese men of high profile such as Lee Kong Chian led and donated to clan associations while simultaneously contributing in the Western manner to the growth of Singapore in colonial circles. In keeping with Singapore's new meritocratic social system, leadership now went to the wealthiest and most influential in the group whereas previously it would have gone to the clan elders.

[3] *Tao Nan School is one example of a school built by the Hokkien Huay Kuan in 1906.*

It is noted that in Singapore, as in the world over, all the power of the clans was vested in men (Fan, 2004). However, despite these strictly structured self-help systems, women who had no voice were about to bring change by creating their own parallel associations.

Industrialisation in China and the Rise of a New Class of Economically Independent Women

With the industrialisation of Southern China in the mid-19th century, women there experienced economic independence for the first time. Silk-spinning, previously done by hand, was now mechanised. Factories employing rural women sprang up and a new class of Chinese woman was born. Drawing a wage, they were liberated from penury and the traditional dependence on men to earn money to put food on the table.

The impact on women was revolutionary. Having experienced financial independence, they would not go back so easily to the way things were. Whereas women once hoped to secure their futures by being match-made, they now wanted a say in their own marriages. If that was not possible, some decided it was better to be economically free than enslaved to a man.

However the ancient Chinese social system had no mechanism to cope with this new group of women. There was no class to which they belonged in the established four classes of life – aristocrat/scholar, peasant farmer, artisan or merchant. So such women created a new niche for themselves, using established Chinese social idioms to redefine themselves.

A Parallel Social Class for Women Only – the Sisterhoods of the *Sor Hei* and *M Lok Ka*

To cement their new status as working women with their own money, women marked themselves as "married." They ceremonially combed their hair into buns (*Sor Hei* in Cantonese) – the hallmark of those who were married or about to marry. This was an outward show that they were already taken – unmarried but set apart. Some even took a vow of celibacy to complete their drastic step towards freedom.

As *Sor Hei*, society could not allow them to stay in their mothers' homes or depend on their families either, so these women formed new social support systems called "Sisterhoods" – surrogate families loosely based on the clan association structure that would take care of them through life, till death and into the afterlife.

Others went even further – they married but refused to enter into conjugal relations. Such women were called *M Lok Ka*. Some women even paid another woman to be a surrogate wife, contracted to bear children for her who would then call her "mother." Such arrangements also included the essential care of their souls in the afterlife such that children born of surrogates would also worship their non-birth mothers as ancestors. The *M Lok Ka* therefore also had the right to a place for their tablets on the ancestral altar.

Economic independence thus brought some women the power that traditionally went to Chinese men and upended the traditional order of Chinese society.

These new sisters built safety nets approximating those of traditional family/village/clan systems. They created homes by pooling wages to rent or build *Ku Por Uk* (Cantonese for "Great Aunts' Homes") where they now lived and celebrated festivals and feasts together. The title *Ku* is the honorific used for a woman in the favoured and dominant position of "father's sister." Their combined funds took care of illness or job loss, and ensured a place to stay in anticipation of old age without children.

By the early 1900s the sisterhood system had evolved to include a network of sisters across Southeast Asia made up of intrepid women intent on economic independence who dared the crossing to strange shores in Singapore and Hong Kong in search of work. When the silk industry crashed with the Great Depression, it was coincident with the welcoming new Aliens Ordinance Act in Singapore. The Qing Dynasty had fallen, times had changed, and thousands of women now left China and crossed the seas together in search of a better future.

Some came from *Shan Sui* province; the "Samsui Women" of Singapore's construction industry - fearless builders in black *samfoo*, red head scarves, and slippers fashioned from used rubber tyres.

Others left *Shun Tak* province to become *Majie* – the now iconic domestics of the colonial era distinguished by their black silk pants and white *samfoo* with their hair neatly in those buns. Fiercely loyal and reliable, they brought up whole generations of children across Malaya and Singapore. It is this latter group of women whom we will now explore as an example of poor Chinese women who created an entirely new kind of philanthropic mechanism out of need.

An Amah with her charge c.1930
Mrs J.A. Bennett Collection, courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore

A NEW MODEL OF CHINESE PHILANTHROPY – THE *MAJIE* OF SINGAPORE

The Journey from China

The early migrant women who came to Singapore from 1930s China occupied a very low position in the colony's Chinese social order and had few entry points into the organised self-help associations of the clans and guilds. Being extremely poor and mostly illiterate, migrant women had little social mobility. But they were hard workers and gradually became integrated into the local community, taking jobs not just as domestics and builders, but on plantations and farms and in factories, retail, tailoring and a multitude of urban services. Like male migrants, women remitted money to their families in China, maintaining ties and hoping to return even as many married other migrants and started families of their own in Singapore.

The *Sor Hei's* journey to Singapore was slightly different. The sisterhoods first served to bring prospective *Sor Hei* safely to Singapore. They had "agents" in various villages, generally other women who had been to Southeast Asia and so could recruit others through the example of their own experience. One way of doing so would be to return to their villages and treat the whole community to a lavish feast – paid for with their own money! This made a huge impression upon their former neighbours and friends who then began to consider working in Southeast Asia as a real possibility for themselves.[4]

The agents from the home village would arrange passage and fare services to Hong Kong and Singapore, and the new migrants would be met by other agents in these ports who would then house them and match them with suitable employers. Oral accounts suggest migrant women came out in groups of relatives or friends, and these would then form the basis of a sisterhood in their new places of work.

On arriving in Singapore, the various groups of *Sor Hei* extended the sisterhood support network to the colony, replicating the functions and structure of the clans in which they were now technically unable to participate. The *Majie* also had variations of these social support networks.

Coolie Fong and Life in Singapore

The *Majie* went on to become the domestic housekeepers and childminders known as *amahs* in Singapore and *amah-che* in Hong Kong. The following generalised account of *Majie* life is taken from several oral accounts, personal recollections by *Majie* who came to Singapore in the 1930s, and various publications.[5]

In Singapore *Majie* were housed and fed by their employers, who were often European colonial families, but also included Chinese, Straits Chinese, Indian, Eurasian and Jewish families. They lived with them, and apparently never took any days off. From

[4] *As recounted to the author by her own amah, Majie Madam Tan Ah Kng.*
[5] *Interviews and oral histories by Ng Sin Yue, Ooi Yu-lin, Fan Ruo Lan, and Lee Kok Leong (2015).*

Houses in Chinatown, including "Coolie Fong" c.1920
Courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore

all accounts, *amahs* such as the author's own *amah* Madam Tan Ah Kng, learnt the languages of their employers, how to cook for them, clean house, lay tables, and even mix drinks for parties. Madam Tan, after working for a Straits Chinese family all her life, by the age of 90 could speak Penang Hokkien, Bazaar Malay, English, Mandarin (to follow television dramas) and some Teochew. She had an impressive repertoire of Peranakan, English, and Hokkien dishes and could make Nyonya cakes to the strictest standards of the author's great grandmother. She only reverted to her native Cantonese dialect and food when meeting her sisterhood on days off. She wore her hair in a bun until the 1970s, when it became fashionable for her peers to have a perm and bob their hair.

In Singapore and Hong Kong, *Majie* were housed and fed by their employers, but they would still pool their money and rent a place to call home where they could gather for community, go to if they lost their jobs, or fell ill. In Singapore these came to be called *coolie keng* or *coolie fong*, meaning "coolie house" because these were where the *coolies* lived and the quarters were really very poor.[6] Such a place was generally a rented room in a shophouse in Chinatown with bunk beds put up and where personal possessions could be kept.[7]

The *coolie fong* were meeting places where *Majie* gathered on their days off and when they celebrated major festivals like Chinese New Year and those occasions dear to their hearts such as the feast days of *Kuan Yin* (the Chinese goddess of mercy), Mooncake Festival, *Cheng Beng* when the dead are remembered, and the women's festival of *Chat Jeh* celebrated on the seventh day of the seventh month with offerings such as powder and rouge.

Majie also gave money to temples and on occasion would volunteer in these places of worship in a very low-key fashion. They brought food as deity offerings which they then shared. On special days vegetarian dishes were prepared in honour of their chosen deity, *Kuan Yin*, and the *Majie*, other *Sor Hei*, and others from their provinces would enjoy the day together.

Majie Madam Tan Ah Kng from Canton c.1946
Taken in a photo studio in Pasir Panjang, Singapore

[6] *The term "coolie" is derived from the Hindu word for "baggage handler" and came to be a part of Singapore patois for "labourer."*
[7] *The author has visited such a room in Temple Street in Chinatown as the lucky guest of her own amah, a Majie named Ah Kng Che; "che" being the Peranakan honorific for "older sister." The other Majie in the sisterhood were hospitable and generous and pressed sweets upon their little guest. Their room was simply furnished with bunk beds of planking and bamboo sleeping mats, and was accessed by a steep staircase in a narrow shophouse.*

The Happy Lotus Tsai Tong, Martaban Road, 2016

Ensuring Care in Life and in Death

As the *Majie* became established in Singapore society, they not only remitted money to their families in China, they also started *Tsai Tong*, loosely translated as "vegetarian halls" where *tsai ku* or "vegetarian aunts" lived. These were the most senior of the sisterhood who could read and write, and who the *Sor Hei* could go to as trusted friends for help and to write letters home to go with the money they were sending. These *Tsai Tong* also became centres for *Sor Hei* from as far off as Hong Kong and Malaya. All came together for company, building up a considerable network of sisterhoods as they did.

Another mutual aid focus was sharing in building *Ku Por Uk* retirement homes for themselves. While some sent money for buildings in China, quite a few were built in Singapore with two still existing today – the *Fei Xia Jing She* Old Folks Home and temple in Jalan Kemaman off Balestier Road, and another in Jalan Ampas in Katong. These homes were paid for out of savings and donations to provide for the childless *Sor Hei* so that they might have somewhere safe to live in their old age. Today some very elderly residents can still be found in these homes.

One very important aspect of Chinese life is the care of one's soul after death. Ancestor worship decrees that the ideal caregivers should be one's own progeny who would offer food and make sacrifices for your well-being after death in ancestral halls built for the purpose. The *Sor Hei*, having no genealogical clans, created their own associations to fulfil these duties, basing them on various criteria such as common birthplaces. One such example is the *Shun Tak* Clan Association in Duxton Hill which was started in 1948. It was great comfort to many to have a place upon death to hang their tablet stating their name and birthplace, and know that others in the community would perform the needed rituals for them on auspicious days so they would not go hungry in the after world.

Although the *Majie* led a low-key life, they remained connected and informed of events in China, and were by no means idle when China was under threat. When the Sino-Japanese War erupted in 1937, Chinese migrants around the world rallied to send support to the new Kuomintang Government in China. Among them were the *Majie* of Singapore.

In October 1937, in a most unusual public display, 600 Cantonese *Majie* organised a fundraiser for war relief and sent their contributions as part of the overall funding from Southeast Asia. A month later, the *Majie* organised yet another event; this time paying for a *wayang* (traditional opera) to gather funds, donating their own jewelry and selling bonds to raise relief funds (Lee, 2015).

Although the *Majie* were a fixture of colonial life for a span of only a few decades, they nevertheless had a significant impact on Singapore's social history. They were a necessity for many households. Utterly dependable, they became trusted friends to generations of children of every race.

These were women who broke from family and tradition to see the world and attain economic freedom. In doing so they created a very particular philanthropic structure, peculiar to their time and outside Chinese tradition that provided shelter and care to many.

Entryway of the Happy Lotus Tsai Tong, Martaban Road with auspicious inscriptions and joss stick holder

MRS KWAN SEEN CHOR nee WONG BEE HO (1875 - 1942)

Mdm Wong Bee Ho c.1927
Reproduced by permission of Dr Gabriel Oon

"Wong Bee Ho was an amazing woman; she was 'the Heroine of Nanyang' … the best person in Nanyang" ("Rise of the Cantonese elites in Johor Bahru," 2012).

At the other end of Chinese migrant society and far removed from the *Majie* and "*Samsui* Women" in their *coolie fong* were a significant group of extremely wealthy Chinese of migrant origins. These were the merchants, traders and service providers who had come from China in the mid-19th century. Some were highly successful, often in association with the Malacca Chinese. By the 20th century, these migrants had built empires in trade, shipping, banking, manufacturing, tin mining, rubber, gambier and opium.

Among these was an enterprising builder named Wong Ah Fook from Taishan in Canton (now Guangdong). He had a humble start as a carpenter, but became the foremost construction expert in Johor and Singapore by the end of the century. He was entrusted with the building of the palace for the Sultan of Johor. From his interactions with the British, the Straits Chinese, Arabs and other wealthy Chinese migrants, we can surmise that he was much exposed to ideas from other communities. Building for the most fashionable and well-informed in society, he too would have remained abreast of current world trends.

Wong was generous and gave back to society by becoming a philanthropist and providing for other migrant Chinese. He started the Guang Zhao Clan Association in Johor and Singapore, the Kuan Rou School in Johor, and the Yang Zheng School in Singapore. There being very few medical facilities for the migrants, he founded the Kwong Wai Shiu Hospital in Singapore which still stands today and has served the Cantonese community for a century. His children followed in his footsteps and went on to become philanthropists as well, passionate about various causes.

Wong was a strong supporter of education and gave his nine children, both sons and daughters, the best there was. His oldest son Wong Siew Nam received a traditional education in China and was an ardent reformist, founding the first school for girls in Guangzhou with his wife as its principal. A younger son Wong Siew Qui studied law at the University of Cambridge, practised in Johor, and was appointed to the Johor Legislative Council. From the early 20th century up to World War II, he represented the Chinese in negotiations on legal matters with the government.

Wong Ah Fook
Reproduced by permission of Dr Gabriel Oon

Wong's third child, a daughter named Bee Ho, became the first and most influential woman philanthropist in Singapore's Chinese-speaking community. She was a woman of such wide-reaching influence that she became colloquially known as "the Heroine of Nanyang." It was said that "at the top of the pyramid of economically independent working women with their own wealth and investments, [those] in management and entrepreneurs, there were NO Chinese women except Wong Bee Ho" (Fan, 2004, p.1).

Wong Bee Ho received a traditional Chinese education and was well-versed in the Confucian Classics. However another source says "she was one of the few Chinese women in Singapore to have been educated in English, and she taught in many schools" (Chinese Women's Association, 2015, p.58). Considering that she was a founder of the Chinese Ladies' Association, along with her English-educated sisters-in-law and High Society anglicised Straits Chinese ladies, we assume she was bilingual at the very least.

Wong Bee Ho married Kwan Seen Chor who ran a traditional Chinese medicine business. She had two sons, Ying Xiang (关应湘) and Ying Hong (关应鸿), and two daughters. Ying Xiang studied economics abroad and worked in the family business while Ying Hong went to medical school in Scotland and joined the Kwong Wai Shiu Hospital as a doctor.

Wong Bee Ho's grandson, Gabriel Oon Chong Jin, writing in his autobiography, says his great-grandfather Wong Ah Fook was very different from other heads of traditional Chinese families at the turn of the century. Before World War II, the Chinese community in Singapore and Malaya was known to be very conservative and had little regard for women who occupied a low social status. Wealth, business and community leadership were controlled by men. Wong Ah Fook not only gave his daughters a good education, he also provided them (along with his sons) a most unusual headstart in the form of their own finances.[8] Instead of willing all his wealth, business, properties and assets to his sons, he divided them among all his nine children.

Equipped with her own finances, Wong Bee Ho became patron to many causes. Where she saw a need and there was no precedent, she would just pioneer a venture to meet that need. As an example, it is known – although she was not acknowledged on paper – that she assisted her father and the Cantonese in setting up the Kwong Wai Shiu Hospital; which was founded for the poor in 1910 (Chinese Women's Association, 2015). Her name is not found in any of the hospital records perhaps because as a woman she was not allowed to hold any leadership post in the hospital; in fact before World War II, all directors of Kwong Wai Shiu were men. Lady directors only appeared in their records in the 1950s.

Kwong Wai Shiu Hospital, 2016

Believing in the advantages of education, Wong Bee Ho single-handedly established a Chinese school for girls in 1905. Hua Qiao Nu Xiao (华侨女校) in New Bridge Road was the second Chinese girls' school outside China after the Singapore Chinese Girls' School. Bee Ho was the headmistress for more than 10 years, drafted the curriculum for hundreds of her students, and roped in her sister to serve as art and craft teacher.

The school was built two years before the Qing Government lifted its ban on women attending public schools in 1907. It shows both Wong Bee Ho's foresight and courage in flying in the face of convention. Her grandson says in his autobiography that her dedication to the school as well as her modesty of dress and serious demeanour left a great impression upon her students.

This effort [of building a girls' school] from beginning to end with more than 10 years of investment in money, show a great spirit of perseverance. It was a task that was unprecedented, that even men were not able to achieve (*Nanyang Ming Ren Ji Zhuan*).

[8] *Fan (2004) points out in her paper that this was a highly unusual state of affairs at the time.*

Wong Bee Ho, along with Straits Chinese friends like Mrs Lee Choon Guan and many other ladies of High Society, went on to establish the Chinese Ladies' Association in 1915. Also involved in the association were Bee Ho's sisters-in-law, Mrs Siew Yuen Wong and Mrs Siew Qui Wong, and her sister Bee Soo. The intent of the association was to improve the social status of women by providing opportunities for their self-improvement, promoting exchanges among them, and supporting charitable work. The association has since been renamed the Chinese Women's Association (CWA) and just recently celebrated its centenary.

Wong Bee Ho also tried her hand at business, again a most unusual activity for a Chinese lady in those times. In 1923, she started a rubber plantation in Mersing, Johor. In 1924, she visited Hong Kong and Shanghai and invested there although the nature of her investments was not known. In 1926 she went to Europe to explore the possibility of doing business in Britain and France. In the same year, she started tin mining in Ipoh, Perak. Unfortunately none of these ventures bore much fruit, but it says a lot that her family was apparently most accepting of her various forays into the business world.

A devout Buddhist, it is very possible that Wong Bee Ho's strong beliefs directed many of her actions. Responding to the appeals of Buddhist monk Master Tai Xu and with the support of other Buddhist devotees, she founded the Singapore Chinese Buddhist Association in 1927. Its objectives were to promote Buddhism, Buddhist education, and philanthropy and social welfare. Among its supporters was the Association President Venerable Pu Liang (普亮法师) who was greatly involved in the movement to recruit lorry drivers and mechanics in Singapore to fight the Japanese in China during the Sino-Japanese War. He was later killed by the Japanese in the Occupation of Singapore. The Buddhist Association however still exists at 23 Kreta Ayer Road and celebrated its 85th anniversary in 2012.

Wong Bee Ho also became associated with the improvement of women's rights in China, hosting many Chinese feminist leaders such as Lu Bi Cheng (吕碧城) and Buddhist monks including Master Tai Xu in the 1930s and early 1940s. Through her hospitality and support of those working to improve the lives of Chinese women, Bee Ho's sphere of influence reached far beyond Singapore. She was known in Malaya and the rest of Southeast Asia, and her fame spread to China as well.

Wong Bee Ho became an ardent fundraiser during the Sino-Japanese War which started in 1937. Spurred by the horrors of the Marco Polo Bridge Incident that year, she worked tirelessly with other women such as 黄素云 and 殷碧霞 to raise funds in support of the Anti-Japanese Relief Movement. She served as treasurer of its women's wing and it is said that she not only lent her car to the movement's activists, but also paid the petrol fees. After the fall of Singapore, she was arrested by the Japanese Army for her participation in the movement. She died shortly after her release in 1942.

MRS LIM BOON KENG nee GRACE YIN PEK HA (1884-1941)

Mrs Lim Boon Keng c. 1920
Lee Brothers Studio Collection, Courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore

In 1908, a glorious wedding was reported on the island of Kulangsu between Miss Grace Yin Pek Ha and Dr Lim Boon Keng "of Singapore and Amoy" ("Marriage of Dr Lim Boon Keng," 1908). It was celebrated in the English Presbyterian Douglas Memorial Church and was attended by a large international crowd of well-wishers. This wedding introduced into Singapore colonial High Society another lady of power and influence – a passionate reformist with a love for China and the improvement of women's lives.

Grace Yin was by all accounts an extraordinary lady who was active and independent even before she was married. She was one of seven children whose reformist parents in Amoy campaigned vociferously against foot binding and slavery. Grace graduated from Foochow Conference Seminary and had started a school on the international settlement island of Gulangyu (Kulangsu, now Xiamen) before she married Dr Lim.

She met him while visiting her third brother Dr Yin Suat Chuan (S. C.) in Singapore. Dr Lim had been recently widowed and the two made a good match, but Grace's formidable mother demanded that Dr Lim wait the requisite three years of mourning. She also laid down conditions for the marriage of her daughter; all her children must be born in China and any property owned in China must belong to Grace. Grace Yin, now Grace Lim, unsurprisingly, went on to become an equally formidable force for change both in Singapore and later in China.[9]

Dr Lim was himself a thought leader in Singapore, unusual in being influential in both the Straits Chinese and Chinese-speaking communities. He won Singapore's first Queen's Scholarship in 1887[10] and studied at Edinburgh and later at Cambridge. Returning to Singapore in 1893 he established himself as a reformist for Straits Chinese society with a deep and passionate understanding of both Western and Chinese philosophies. His zeal for change is often mentioned in association with Sir Song Ong Siang, another progressive thinker with whom he founded the Singapore Chinese Girls' School. The school was established – in the face of loud diatribes by Straits Chinese mothers – to give Straits Chinese girls a place to study. He and Song also published the Straits Chinese Magazine and established the Straits Chinese British Association – platforms for debate and discussion on all matters social and political with regard to Singapore society, its government, and the improvement of local traditional communities.

Dr Lim was also recorded as leaning towards Confucianism, developing close ties to China and starting the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce in 1906. He went on to form strong links with the highest government circles in China and was appointed Inspector of Government Hospitals in Peking. With the fall of the Qing, he became confidante and personal physician to Dr Sun Yat-Sen. By this time he had married Grace who travelled with him constantly.

In Singapore, the new Mrs Lim was well accepted into colonial High Society and appeared often in news reports as an organiser and fundraiser in the Western style of Charity Bazaars and subscriptions to charitable causes. She and Dr Lim were often featured on the guest list of social and government events. Her fluency in English and cosmopolitan background would have held her in good stead in the multiracial milieu of Singapore society.

Some examples of the causes she was involved in included donating (as an individual, not a spouse) towards the building of a new wing for St Andrew's School in 1915,[11] and being on the Chinese Ladies' Committee of Singapore's first fundraiser to feature Chinese women out in public – a children's fete that was a great success.[12]

In 1915 while the Lims were living in Singapore, Mrs Lim, with Mrs Lee Choon Guan (see the next chapter) and other prominent friends, established the Chinese Ladies' Association along with Wong Bee Ho, mentioned earlier on. This was Singapore's first local ladies' society, created so that sequestered Chinese girls could interact and learn from each other in a safe and acceptable environment of ladies.

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[9] A detailed account of Grace Yin's life and marriage can be found in "Chinese Women's Association, 100 fabulous years," 2015, p. 64-67.
[10] Technically speaking Dr Lim wrested the scholarship from the original winner, Song Ong Siang, who was held back a year from receiving it as he was then only 16 years old.
[11] Mrs Lim was reported by The Straits Times as having donated $20 on her own.
[12] This was the "Our Day" fundraiser for the work of the Red Cross and St John's Ambulance Association, held under the auspices of the Straits Chinese British Association and reported in The Straits Times on September 13, 1916.

Grace Lim and the other glamorous members were much admired and provided CLA members a new awareness of other cultures.

The Chinese Ladies' Association held its own Show and Sale of Work in August 1917 with the proceeds going to St Andrew's Medical Mission Hospital in Singapore and a Home for Aged Widows in Amoy ("The Chinese Ladies' Association show and sale of work," 1917). This connection to Amoy was likely to have come from Mrs Lim, who went on to live there with Dr Lim in 1921 when he was made president of the new Amoy University founded by Singapore Chinese migrant Tan Kah Kee. As could be expected, during her time in Amoy, Mrs Lim started a *Po Leung Kuk* in the fashion of Singapore's own rescue home for girls, "working tirelessly for the Amoy Community ("Chinese Women's Association, 100 fabulous years," 2015, p. 67).

On her return to Singapore in 1927, Mrs Lim helped create awareness of the plight of China at the hands of the Japanese by starting a meal programme at Great World Amusement Park with a Vegetarian Society with proceeds going to the Shantung Relief Fund after that province was occupied by the Japanese. Just before World War II, she helped to organise many donation drives for the China Relief Fund ("Chinese women help soldiers at front," 1939). When Singapore fell to the Japanese occupying forces in 1942, Mrs Lim was seized and tortured for her passionate support of China, and to force Dr Lim's cooperation in fundraising for the Japanese. Dr Lim, then 73, was thus coerced to start the Overseas Chinese Association.

Having survived the war, the indomitable Grace Lim went on to be made a Justice of the Peace in 1948 and lived for many more years in Singapore.

SUMMARY

Our research into the Chinese community, while narrow, still highlights the early 20th century as being a watershed of unimaginable proportions for Chinese women. The events that converged at this time catapulted women from traditional, subjugated and tightly circumscribed informal positions in society to that of much greater economic, social and political power in all Chinese society, both on the mainland and overseas.

Prior to events in the 20th century, Chinese women lived traditional lives, preferably unseen by men after puberty and limited in society to their own families and relatives unless forced by circumstance to work in public. Unless they seized economic independence for themselves as did the *Sor Hei,* all power was vested in men. Even clan associations and their welfare structures were controlled by men.

A few key factors led to massive transition for women in China: industrialisation which gave women that first taste of economic independence – an opportunity of such value that women like the *Sor Hei* were willing to break with family and society in order to keep it; nationalism and the fall of the Qing Dynasty which recognised women as important players in the new era; a new view of women as being worthy to be educated alongside men; and the rise of the feminist, liberal and educated women as a role model and inspiration towards suffrage.

In Singapore, these changes had a profound impact upon migrant Chinese women who were affected variously depending upon personal circumstance.

At the forefront of change were the early proponents of feminism and education for girls such as Wong Bee Ho who was positioned to benefit ahead of the curve through her father's foresight and unusual provision of education and an inheritance. While Wong Bee Ho's position was exceptional, she was the first of many girls who were eventually allowed to attend the new schools springing up across Singapore. For most girls that opportunity to study was limited to primary education, but it was still a great step forward in social mores.[13] Boys were

[13] *Most schools for girls only offered education up to Standard 7. Secondary education was unusual and only a handful of intrepid girls went on to gain the "School Certificate," equivalent to the Cambridge "O" level certification. This was more than enough for a girl to get a good job as a teacher or a nurse.*

Samsui Woman from Shan Sui Province
Kouo Shang Wei Collection, Courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore

allowed to study for more years, an attitude that only began to change in the 1950s.

Living in Singapore also changed women in that they were removed from the old social structures and placed in emerging colonial society where wealth and merit alone were the new arbiters of position for both men and women. The British welcome to all who wanted to work, bolstered by the woman-friendly Aliens Ordinance Act, provided Chinese women with a great opportunity to earn their own money, unfettered by the expectations of greater society. Everyone in Singapore was there to work. This gave women the power to decide for themselves how their resources could be allocated.

We can also posit that to retain that economic power before the old order in China had fallen, women like the *Sor Hei* had to literally break with tradition and create a new social class for themselves, living in a parallel world to that of the rest of traditional society. In exchange for the right to control their own lives, they had to give up family and marriage.

This brings us to a another suggestion – that traditional Chinese society had so negated women as valid participants in society that no formal channels had been developed for women to participate in the realms of economic power and the control of wealth. Therefore newly independent women used traditional Chinese structures as their role models until all was upended by the rise of the new feminist. *Sor Hei* worked like Chinese men, so they also gave like Chinese men, using the same mechanisms of direct donations and endowments that Chinese men were using. This seizing of traditional systems for themselves allowed women to contribute money – both for the welfare of their own and others – and give freely to causes that they supported as and how they liked.

Thus in the early 20th century, Chinese women and their relationship to all things – including that of philanthropy – were in a state of great flux. World views and attitudes were all changing and would continue to do so well up to the end of the 20th century.

The transitional state of affairs can be seen in educated women such as Wong Bee Ho co-existing with slave girls (*Mui Tsai*) and *Sor Hei* in the same colony, in the same place and at the same time. Chinese women in Singapore, depending on their ages and individual lives, were at different stages of transition in terms of social and economic power.

In the realm of personal giving, every Chinese woman would have been at a different stage of transition:

The *Sor Hei* as we know had to break with tradition in order to retain and control their new economic resources and so be allowed to decide how they would use them.

In the case of Wong Bee Ho, a far-sighted father and his provision of education and financial independence gave her the means to forge her own way. Her contributions to philanthropy and the advancement of women were made possible by the removal of the impediment of traditional Chinese norms, first with her access to English, inclusion in British colonial High Society, and then with the fall of the Qing and the rise of feminism in China. She must also have had a pioneering and adventurous spirit to embark on the many ventures that she did, making a way for herself and women to follow, and showing a fearless spirit when faced with the Japanese.

Like Wong Bee Ho, Grace Lim was the beneficiary of unusually far-sighted parents who not only gave her an education, but also set an example for her in helping others through charitable donations and active political engagement. Grace Lim with her unusual, cosmopolitan upbringing and passionate convictions would have been an inspiration to the previously sheltered ladies who were members of the Chinese Ladies' Association. Her presence in Singapore at this crucial time of transition can only be considered a fortunate advantage in the historiography of Singapore's women. Her marriage to Dr Lim Boon Keng and subsequent move to Singapore gave her a greater voice for her various causes and serendipitously placed her in a social order which provided the mechanisms for women to help civil society, actively encouraged their participation, and gave recognition to their efforts in many fields.

With regard to civic consciousness, however, Chinese society was still inward-looking, and concepts of charity in civil society were still a long way off. This would only grow as Singapore became an independent nation and migrants became stakeholders in Singapore as a sovereign entity.

Remitting money home through a formal letter writer c.1934
Lim Kheng Chye Collection, Courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore

Chapter 7
The Straits Chinese

A Straits Chinese family at home in Panglima Prang, River Valley Road c. 1920
Courtesy of Ms Marian Tay

While other migrant communities in Singapore were still establishing themselves in the early 20th century, the small syncretised community of migrants called the Straits Chinese had by contrast reached its zenith. Under the British, the elite in the Straits Chinese community attained the most powerful positions in Singapore, lived lives of extraordinary luxury and wealth, and established themselves as the cream of English-educated colonial High Society. In 1900, the community numbered 15,000 (Yong, 1992) and a first generation of Singapore-born Straits Chinese had come into its own.

It is a sad fact of history that Straits Chinese society reached full flower in this first half of the 20th century, then disappeared entirely as a people group after World War II, forever subsumed into Singapore's vast post-war Chinese population. However we record here some of their legacy to Singapore's civil society.

Migration, Settlement and Integration into Colonial Society

The Straits Chinese were among the first to settle in the colony established by Raffles, arriving from centuries-old trading communities in nearby Malacca and settlements in Indonesia. They were an adaptable and multilingual people, having lived under Portuguese, Dutch, then British rule. They moved readily into the emerging sectors of banking, shipping, tin and rubber that boomed as Singapore became a Crown Colony.

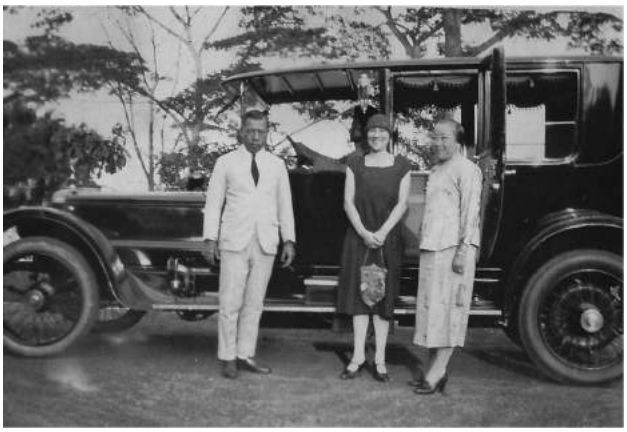
The British relied on them to be the interface between themselves and the large migrant Chinese community. With strong vested interests in Singapore and an even stronger loyalty to the Crown, the Straits Chinese developed a symbiotic relationship with the colonial administration that was consciously cultivated by both sides to mutual advantage.

By the 20th century, the Straits Chinese were preferred over other communities and were trusted servants of the Crown. They now sent their sons to England for education and culture, and were loyal to the British Empire to the extent that they formed a regiment in Singapore's Volunteer Infantry in 1901 to be a part of the defence of British interests. In return the most influential in the community were rewarded with titles and elite non-governmental

positions in the colonial Municipal Commission, Legislative Council or Chinese Advisory Board – appointments which would keep rotating among the same select group of men for several decades.

In 1900 a formidable group of well-educated, resourceful men of substantial means formed the Straits Chinese British Association (SCBA). Leading the association were several prominent young men in the community, most notably Song Ong Siang (later Sir Song, K.B.E.),[1] Dr Lim Boon Keng, Mr Lee Choon Guan, Seah Liang Seah, Tan Jiak Kim and some 10 others. They also started numerous clubs and societies for debate, recreation and social networking. The SCBA worked in counterpoint to the newly emerging Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce, a Chinese migrant group whose loyalty was first to China. The SCBA provided most of the de facto local representation in Singapore before World War II,[2] agitating for social reform – the banning of opium, education for girls, and better infrastructure in the municipality – among the Chinese in the Legislature and their own community.

Queen's Scholars 1888-89, including Song Ong Siang and Lim Boon Keng, future founders of the SCBA
Courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore



Straits Chinese women travel in the new style c.1920
Courtesy of the Mrs Ivy Kwa

Straits Chinese Women – Breaking New Ground for Asian Women

The majority of the Straits Chinese were not wealthy; most were middle class merchants, clerks and traders, but pertinent to this study were women of means and charity such as the wives of the men in the Straits Chinese British Association. These included Mrs Lee Choon Guan, Lady Helen Song and others in their elite social network like Wong Bee Ho (mentioned earlier in the chapter on The Chinese) and her sisters-in-law; two of whom came from China. These ladies, like their husbands, took to British ways and melded them with new ideas from travel and interaction in the cosmopolitan group in which they moved at the apex of colonial society. Some of these fortunate women had been the beneficiaries of unusually early education – thanks to enlightened parents and encouraging spouses.

Around 1915, Straits Chinese women began to appear in public alongside their husbands, presented as partners and allies, a circumstance previously unheard of in both Straits Chinese and traditional Chinese society. Together they formed the Chinese Ladies' Association (now called the Chinese Women's Association)[3] in 1915, with Mrs Lee Choon Guan as its president. The association's purpose to provide local women a platform for interaction outside their homes was needed as both Chinese and Straits Chinese women of the day remained cloistered at

[1] In 1936 Song Ong Siang was honoured with the title of Knight Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (K.B.E.) for his contributions as a legislator, leader, church elder and scholar.
[2] In 1934, non-Europeans were finally allowed entry to a new Straits Settlements Civil Service, but only low positions were offered.
[3] For purposes of historical accuracy we will refer to this association by its then name of the Chinese Ladies' Association (CLA).

home upon marriage with no recourse to society outside their circle of relatives.

This cohort of ladies began to break many conventions and introduce a daring new way of life and world view to tradition-bound women in Singapore who followed their activities with great curiosity in the local news. They were the first Asian women to do many things – drive a car, hold a ball (to which the Governor and his wife were often invited), become a barrister, study medicine[4] and practise philanthropy in the Western way.

The CLA became involved in philanthropy using Western philanthropic mechanisms learnt through its position in colonial society and close association with colonial wives, especially those of the various Governors. These ladies in particular encouraged Asian women to come alongside them in their many charitable efforts for local welfare. Lady Evelyn Young, Lady Ella Guillemard and Lady Clementi in particular were among those who invited Straits Chinese ladies' participation in many fundraising efforts for charities ranging from war relief to children's welfare and medical improvement.

The British model of philanthropy introduced was of course the Charity Bazaar Model which by then had become a most acceptable way for European women to do good work during the Victorian era. No such model existed for women to help civil society in any of the Asian traditions, but colonial women were quite unaware of either this or how revolutionary this instrument was to Asian society. For the first time Asian women were not only given a formal way to help others, but their contributions were both recognised and applauded. Mrs Lee Choon Guan would in fact be honoured by His Majesty King George V with a medal for her contributions to the colonial war effort.

Box 6 : The Position of Women in Straits Chinese Society

It is hard today to reconstruct just how syncretised the Straits Chinese community was and how porous the community was in terms of ideas and cultures. Evolved over centuries through intermarriage between Chinese traders and women of Malayan, Indonesian, Indian and Portuguese origins, the Straits Chinese retained strong Chinese beliefs regarding family, rituals and faith although the emotional position of women had gradually changed from that of the mainland Chinese.[5]

Straits Chinese women were still held to strict standards of behaviour and accomplishment, and were restricted in movement after puberty and marriage. But unlike their counterparts in China, they were not cut off from their maternal line after marriage. Instead they were kept close by their parents, developing strong relational networks that grew to span Southeast Asia and South China. This far-flung network of relations also included Indians and Eurasians intermarried into the community who shared the same unique cuisine, elaborate Dutch-Malay dress, and patois of Baba Malay.

Girls were valued in Straits Chinese families although, in the Chinese way, parents were not demonstrative and begrudged any show of favour. Anecdotal evidence, however, points to great care being taken to marry one's daughters well. The arrival of Chinese migrant men during Singapore's explosive start provided a new source of good husbands. Chinese men, called *sinkek* (new guests) in Straits Chinese parlance, found themselves inspected carefully. A few having passed muster were invited to "marry in" to local families.

This practice of men marrying into a family rather than removing a daughter is a complete reversal of Chinese tradition, but was welcomed by both *sinkek*, who found themselves suddenly elevated to sons-in-law, and parents who would not lose sight of their daughters. While girls marrying into another Straits Chinese family technically said "goodbye" to their mothers during the all-important hair combing ceremony, they were not sent miles away afterwards, but might just move a few doors down the road.

The practice of foot binding was also discarded; among the Straits Chinese women's greatest accomplishment was the beading of elaborate slippers in a perfectly ordinary human size.

[4] *Mrs Lee Choon Guan was the first lady to get her driver's licence, Dr Lee Choo Neo was Singapore's first Chinese lady doctor, and Mrs B.H. Oon was Singapore's first barrister.*

[5] *Here we are referring to those majority Straits Chinese who were Chinese in orientation. There were other smaller communities of Peranakan: "Chitty Peranakan" who were Indian Hindu and Eurasians who were Catholic.*

Straits Chinese ladies, encouraged by their husbands, cautiously entered this new realm of community aid, causing a sensation by being seen *in public* raising funds for many charitable causes – both in defence of the Empire and for the well-being of others in the Singapore community, particularly women and children.

This simple means of raising funds through subscriptions, donations and the sale of goods (often handmade) proved very acceptable to all sectors of Singapore society and was enthusiastically adopted by many, including the illiterate *Majie* in 1937 to fund relief during the Sino-Japanese War.

Straits Chinese women thus led the way for other Asian women to become involved in civil society – by raising awareness of the need for involvement and introducing a means by which women could express that interest.

The Growing Acceptance of Education for Straits Chinese Girls

Life for the average Straits Chinese woman as noted was less harsh than that of her Chinese counterpart in the late 18th century as Straits Chinese girls retained close ties with their own families (See Box 6). This did not, however, make them more advanced in thinking, nor were their lives less sequestered for living in urban Singapore. Missionary Sophia Blackmore wrote that Straits Chinese mothers in Singapore in the 1880s initially regarded education for girls as "strange and threatening" (Lau, 2008, p. 15-16). She writes:

> *It was most difficult … to persuade parents to send their girls to school, for there was but little interest in female education. Part of our work … has been to create this interest. One mother would say, "We don't want our children to makan gaji (earn their own livelihood). Another mother told me that if her daughter studied from the same book as her son, the girl would get all the learning out of it … and he would be bodoh (stupid) (Blackmore, 1918, p. 139).*

Dr Lee Choo Neo, Singapore's first lady doctor and aunt to Mr Lee Kuan Yew, wrote this scathing 1913 account of the limited life of girls in her own generation:

> *The Chinese girl's life in the Straits Settlements … is not an enviable one … is indeed lonely and dull … She is never permitted to venture outside the doors of her abode, unless it be to pay occasional visits to her closest connections. When she does go out it is only in conveyances which are entirely covered up. She lives in a sphere of her own, quite out of touch with the society of men (Dr Lee as cited in "Chinese Women's Association, 100 fabulous years," 2015, p. 17-19).*

By the 1910s, however, views began to change as reform in Straits Chinese society paralleled that in China which was beginning to bring radical new views to Singapore's shores. The far-sighted group of young Straits Chinese men of the Straits Chinese British Association began to marry girls educated in the new schools and bring their wives out into High Society. Dr Lee elaborated:

> *The number of educated girls is a very small one indeed, and those few hold a high place in the opinion of their ignorant sisters. A well-educated girl is regarded with profound respect, and every word of her concerning the outer world is taken as gospel truth because she is supposed to be endowed with every branch of knowledge (Dr Lee as cited in "Chinese Women's Association, 100 fabulous years," 2015, p. 17-19).*

As education in the new Singapore Chinese Girls' School, Raffles Girls' School, and the various mission schools became more acceptable, the new Straits Chinese wife became role models for generations of young girls who followed. We highlight here three ladies whose lives were both modern and philanthropic: Singapore's very first recorded Straits Chinese lady philanthropist Mrs Tan Tock Seng; the astonishing Mrs Lee Choon Guan who lived to be 100 years old and whose generosity is perhaps still unparalleled in Singapore society; and Lady Helen Song, a lady of great influence by example in the Christian sphere.

MRS TAN TOCK SENG nee LEE SEO NEO

Madam Lee Seo Neo is Singapore's earliest recorded Straits Chinese woman philanthropist. Little is known about her except that she was the wife of businessman Tan Tock Seng who came to Singapore as a vegetable seller when Raffles founded the settlement in 1819. Tan rose to become highly influential in the colony, owning vast tracts of land, plantations and shophouses. He was generous and paid the funeral expenses of many poor migrants.

In 1844 Tan was persuaded to start a pauper's hospital which is now named after him. Madam Lee, his wife, was as generous as her husband had been. Upon inheriting his wealth following his early death in 1850, she donated a large sum of money to the hospital for a woman's ward bearing the names of her sons, Kim Ching, Swee Lim and Teck Guan. Tan Tock Seng was also most unusual for his time in that he bequeathed large sums of money to his daughters as well.

A traditional Straits Chinese wedding c.1925
Courtesy of Mrs Ivy Kwa

MRS LEE CHOON GUAN nee TAN TECK NEO, M.B.E.[6] (1877-1978)

Mr and Mrs Lee Choon Guan M.B.E. c.1923
Courtesy of Mrs Ivy Kwa

Wherever there is useful social work and it can be performed by ladies, you will find Mrs Lee Choon Guan well to the fore. She … has played an important role in all the recent developments which have as their aim the emancipation and education of Chinese women in Singapore … Mrs Lee Choon Guan herself is an accomplished English scholar, and a great lover of Western music … and has travelled much in Europe.

She was the first president of the Chinese Ladies' Association which had as its main object the cultural development of its members. Medical missions for Chinese women and children have been a special interest of hers, and she was the first woman to encourage women to train as midwives for the benefit of the poorer classes of Chinese women here ("Personalities of Singapore," 1934, p. 8).[7]

Mrs Lee Choon Guan was just 55 years old in 1934 when she became the first woman to be featured in the "Personalities of Singapore" series in the Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser from which the above quotes were taken. But by then she was already one of the most sought-after, written about, and celebrated Straits Chinese women of the day. Her every move fascinated an adoring local press, from her presence at the Governor's latest dinner (one of a select few local women to be invited)

[6] *Mrs Lee Choon Guan was made a member of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire by His Majesty King George V on March 21, 1921, for her charity work during World War I.*
[7] *This article is prefaced, "So far this series of sketches of Personalities of Singapore has been confined to leading men. In introducing the first woman to figure in the series, Mrs Lee Choon Guan, M.B.E., it is interesting to note that she is the only Chinese woman in Malaya who so far has been honoured by His Majesty the King."*

to her new fundraiser for Child Aid to the fact that she had worn navy crêpe de chine and danced till dawn at a ball at her fabled house in Mandalay Villa in Katong.

At a time when information on other women was scarce and local women were barely seen in public – much less in the company of local colonial luminaries – Mrs Lee was referred to an astounding 2,400 times at least in the local newspapers, allowing us to follow a life both inspiring and almost bewildering in its breadth of influence, range of interests, and social engagement.

Early Years and Education

Mrs Lee was born Tan Teck Neo, the third daughter of the influential Malacca Chinese businessman Tan Keong Saik who has a very special place in Singapore's history. It was through his interest that the Anglo-Chinese School (ACS) that has now educated generations of Singaporeans came about. He was a far-sighted man who believed not only that an English education would benefit his sons, but should also be given to his daughters.

The means to do so presented itself in three persons of the Methodist Mission who in 1885 had just landed in Singapore. The story was told by Bishop William Fitzjames Oldham that, wandering the Singapore streets, he stumbled upon the "Celestial Reasoning Society" and introduced himself. This group, a forerunner of the SCBA, just happened to include the most important Straits Chinese men of the day who delightedly asked Oldham back to speak so that they might practise their English. Tan Keong Saik took a special interest in the opportunity Oldham presented. Oldham wrote:

> *The next morning I received a letter from the last evening's company asking whether I would become his [Tan Keong Saik's] tutor in the English, he wished instruction three times a week … it gave me instant entry into much of the Chinese life of the city. My pupil was a member of the Legislative Council of Singapore and as such was much in the eye of the local press. … he began making fine English speeches … it resulted finally in my undertaking to open a school for the teaching of English, the Chinese merchants undertaking to pay all current expenses, the missionary not charging for his time and labour (Oldham, 1918, p. 35).*

That school was to become ACS and started with Tan Keong Saik's sons as boarders. What is more important to our understanding of Mrs Lee Choon Guan is that lodging with the Oldhams was a young Australian missionary named Sophia Blackmore. She was asked by Tan Keong Saik to home-school his daughters. Blackmore wrote:

> *One or two of the influential families had asked us to put a teacher in their homes. One of the first to do so was Mr Tan Keong Saik whose daughter, now Mrs Lee Choon Guan (she became a well known philanthropist as was her famous husband), and her sisters were our first Chinese pupils (Doraisamy, 1987, p. 22).*

Home schooling in a Straits Chinese house c. 1900
Courtesy of Mrs Ivy Kwa

Miss Blackmore went on to establish the Methodist Girls' School, but as far as can be told Mrs Lee Choon Guan was tutored only at home in English, Mathematics and History, and was known to be fluent in English and an intelligent conversationalist "on all matters of interest" (Song, 1975, p. 542).

Mr Tan Keong Saik, an Unusual Father

The above account demonstrates the value Tan Keong Saik attached to his daughters. From the speed with which he placed his sons into the Oldhams' care, we also learn that he was modern-minded and ready for his boys to be brought up in Western ways. One can imagine then that the young Teck Neo was not brought up in a traditional Straits Chinese household where women were expected to only cook, gamble and bear children.

There is some speculation that Tan Keong Saik was an early advocate of women's rights (Tan, 1978), perhaps due to his work with the *Po Leung Kuk*, the home established for the Protection, Rescue,

and Rehabilitation of Chinese women and girls. From his actions one might guess that Tan Keong Saik's household might have been an unusual one. As Oldham observed, not everyone was as open-minded as he was:

> *Song Ong Siang observes that while influential Chinese merchants … were … to the fore in responding to the appeal made on behalf of [ACS] … leaders in the cause of female education for the Straits Chinese were like the voice of him that crieth in the wilderness (Oldham, 1918, p. 34).*

Mr Lee Choon Guan – Role Model and Example

In 1900 the young Tan Teck Neo wed Mr Lee Choon Guan, a wealthy widower in the inner circle of the Straits Chinese. He had been educated privately and was an established businessman, owning half of the Straits Steamship Company, with rubber and mining interests, and later becoming a founder of the Oversea-Chinese Bank.

Like his father Lee Cheng Yan, Lee Choon Guan took a great interest in public affairs and supported the building of schools, generously donating particularly towards children's aid and education. An example of his commitment and resources was his contribution of $60,000 to the building of Raffles College, the forerunner of the National University of Singapore. By then, he was already a figure about town, comfortable in Western and Eastern societies. He was presented (in full Chinese dress) to the Duke and Duchess of York in 1903, and was known as a sportsman, sociable and of lavish hospitality.

On the occasion of his untimely death in 1924, the Straits Times cogently summarised Mr Lee's qualities thus:

> *His views … were always listened to with respect and sympathy … it speaks well for his tact and other qualities that he was able to command the hearing of the Government and confidence of his countrymen during the period that he sat at the Council table. [Mr Lee Choon Guan] … displayed those qualities which belong to a man who was born to riches, had travelled extensively in Europe, and was imbued with European taste, though it could never be said of him that what he had borrowed from the West … in any way alienated his sympathies for things Eastern ("Death of Mr Lee Choon Guan," 1924, p. 9).*

The couple appeared together constantly, a thing becoming more common among the younger set. Mrs Lee first appeared in the public eye in 1914 as she started her travels with her husband and family – a lifelong passion of experiencing the world on long sea voyages that would take her around the world twice.

A Lady of Many "Firsts"

In March 1916, Mrs Lee became the first Chinese lady to present the prizes at St Andrew's School. This was to be the start of many firsts for Mrs Lee who from then went on to take many pioneering steps on the Singapore social stage. Here are just a few of Mrs Lee's "firsts."

She led other Chinese ladies in attending a public lecture at the local YMCA in 1916; she helped compatriot Mrs Song Ong Siang and other women raise funds "by subscription" to buy the previously mentioned fighter plane "Women of Malaya No. 27" which cost the vast sum of $6,000. In September 1916 she raised funds in public by selling things (she had a tea stall), introducing the Charity Bazaar Model by example. This fundraiser was under the auspices of the SCBA to help the work of the Red Cross and St John's Ambulance. The Straits Times reported, "this was the first time that Chinese ladies have come forward to assist in a public charity or other function of the kind" ("Our Day," 1916, p. 10).

Mrs Lee Choon Guan at a school function c.1930
Courtesy of Mrs Ivy Kwa

Mrs Lee was also to become closely acquainted with a succession of Governors' wives and was constantly included in reports of key ladies' events steered by Governor's wives. For example, she represented Singapore ladies in the consultation with Lady Evelyn Young on the form of gift women of Singapore should give Queen Mary on the occasion of her birthday. Also present at that meeting were Mrs Mozelle Nissim and Mrs Marie Clumeck who were notable philanthropists in Singapore's Jewish community (see next chapter).

Mrs Lee had a heart for women's causes. In July 1922, she laid the foundation stone for St Andrew's Hospital for Women and Children, and continued to donate money and raise funds towards its completion. She was also the only lady from Singapore whose birthday balls on December 19 were a must on everyone's social calendar.

In March 1918, Mrs Lee became the first Chinese lady in Singapore to be made a Member of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (M.B.E.) by King George V. In August 1920 she and Mr Lee Choon Guan were commanded to meet King George and Queen Mary at Buckingham Palace where her silk Chinese attire was much admired by the King himself.

Mr & Mrs Lee Choon Guan commanded to meet King George V and Queen Mary, August 1920. *Courtesy of Mrs Alice Chua*

The Powerful Peer Network of the Chinese Ladies' Association

Founder members of the Chinese Ladies' Association Mrs S.Y Wong, Mrs Lee Choon Guan & Mrs S.K.Wong & friend c. 1930. *Courtesy of Mrs Ivy Kwa*

In 1916, as was noted above, the Chinese Ladies' Association with Mrs Lee at the helm burst into public consciousness and provided an avenue for Straits Chinese girls to converse in English, meet women outside their families, and learn from each other and the prominent, cosmopolitan women who were its members.

The Chinese Ladies' Association was to become one of the most powerful informal social networks of its day. It provided invaluable connections at the highest levels of colonial society across race groups and was relied on by many of its members over the years as a source of support for charitable causes; some far beyond Singapore's shores. Mrs Lim Boon Keng (nee Grace Yin), for example, would use the Chinese Ladies' Association as a platform to raise funds for war relief in China in the 1920s. The extraordinary work of the women of the Chinese Ladies' Association has been completely recorded in "The Chinese Women's Association, 100 Fabulous Years."

Philanthropic Work

Over the next decades, the Lees were to give generously to countless eclectic needy causes, such as the King Albert's Civilian Hospital Fund, the Red Cross, Tienstin Relief with Tan Kah Kee at the helm, the Children's Aid Society, the YWCA Building Fund, the Child Welfare Association, the building of St Andrew's Hospital, and the Women's Christian Temperance Union.

The Halifax Relief Fund, under the patronage of His Excellency the Governor and the Chinese Consul General, was just another successful fundraiser where Mrs Lee's "now well known tea stall" was now a fixture. The Chinese Ladies' Association also continued to run its own fundraisers under the auspices of the Straits Chinese British Association.

The Lees and colonial High Society c. 1920
Courtesy of Mrs Ivy Kwa

After the sudden death of Mr Lee in 1924, Mrs Lee fell absent from the social scene, returning only a year later accompanied by faithful friends. Her charitable efforts now focused on women's and children's causes. She became involved in the workings of the Women and Children's Protection Ordinance, and had oversight of maternity care at Kandang Kerbau (now KK Women's and Children's Hospital) and at Sepoy Lines (now the Singapore General Hospital).
An inimitable hostess, Mrs Lee also hosted innumerable creative entertainments such as a "Bohemian Night" ball and the "Terror Ball" where thousands of dollars were collected for her favourite causes.[8]

Mrs Lee also followed in her father's footsteps, taking an active interest in the *Po Leung Kuk*. She not only funded its activities but also invited girls from the home to visit Mandalay Villa, her beautiful seaside home. These "At Homes" were very successful and money was raised while patrons played bridge or mahjong and the children enjoyed treats and the beach. She remained on the boards of both for many years.

The support of private philanthropists such as the Lees provided for the running of essential services directed at the care of Singapore's needy. Social welfare in civil society was still a nascent idea and the work of institutions such as the Child Welfare Society was lauded for critical intervention in the lives of at-risk children at a time when there was no formal social welfare service for local children. The Straits Times described the work of the Child Welfare Society as such:

> *During the past year, 39,783 houses were visited [by the Child Welfare Society] … the society has been in existence only nine years … [and] performs functions which in many countries are discharged by public administrative bodies. I cannot think of any charity which fulfils a more important purpose than looking after young children … [it] relies almost entirely upon the generosity of citizens of Singapore for funds … the number of cases coming under our care has increased ("Malaya's growing social consciousness. Portrayed in Child Welfare Society's Work," 1934, p. 7).*

During World War II, Mrs Lee and her family made a difficult escape to India where her grand-daughter Alice continued in her grandmother's footsteps, joining the War Service Volunteer Corps. On their return to Singapore, colonial society had been decimated and the Lees' home mostly looted, but Mrs Lee would continue to be a prominent and respected member of the local charity scene for decades more.

However the power and lustre of the British Empire was destroyed forever, and the Straits Chinese moved forward to carve out a new niche in Singapore, most ably led by Mr Lee Kuan Yew.

[8] *The June 1935 Terror Ball was so-called after HMS Terror whose crew were present at the function.*

Song Ong Siang with wife Helen c. 1912
Courtesy of Ms Marian Tay

LADY HELEN SONG ONG SIANG nee HELEN YEO HEE NEO (1886-1951)

Lady Song is very widely known and liked in Singapore. Her friendships know no barriers. As one of her friends remarked to the writer [of this article], "There is no 'side' to her. She is approachable by one and all. We admire her very much for her sincerity" ("Lady Helen Song. Influence in an eminent career," 1936, p. 1).

Helen Song, the quiet wife of Sir Song Ong Siang, was a Christian girl who studied in the Singapore Chinese Girls' School (SCGS),[9] the new school started by her future husband. Anecdotal accounts and family recollections described her as a very kind lady, a devoted wife, a gracious hostess and a modern-minded Straits Chinese woman who was known to be a great support to her husband – a lawyer and one of the foremost reformist thinkers of the day.

Lady Song was born Yeo Hee Neo in 1886 to sawmiller Yeo Poon Seng in Singapore and was the second of five girls and one boy. Educated in English, she was also a devout Christian and an accomplished musician who played the organ at services at Prinsep Street Presbyterian Church.

We do not know how she met her husband, but might guess that it was at the Singapore Chinese Girls' School which Lady Song attended. After marriage, she whole-heartedly joined her husband in volunteering at the Prinsep Street Presbyterian Church where they shared many interests: helping teach members, mentoring the girls' Friendly Band, and participating in the music ministry.

By all accounts they had a fairy tale wedding in 1907 which was considered a landmark affair in the colony.

> *In September 1907 Helen Yeo and Capt. Song Ong Siang were married at the Presbyterian Church. Lt E. A. Brown, the senior subaltern of the Chinese Co, acted as the best man. Members of the Co, all in white uniforms, not only lined the entrance to the church, officers of the Singapore Volunteer Company formed an arch of steel with their swords to pass under. They also paid the couple a unique honour by pulling their carriage by means of drag ropes all the way to "Hollandia" in Lloyd Road, where the reception was held. It was the first … military wedding of a Chinese Volunteer officer (Chinese Women's Association, 100 fabulous years, 2015, p. 49).*

The new couple lived in a house called Downing Lodge in Orchard Road and adopted four of Helen's nieces – Mabel, Lily, Katherine and Darling. They also spent a year on honeymoon living in Europe where the couple were apparently greatly inspired by the atmosphere of social change and the many cultures they encountered, and where Lady Song learnt to love dance and riding.

Lady Song was quietly active in many volunteer capacities in Singapore's young colonial society, moving in the highest social circles including that of the Governor's wives and the Chinese Ladies' Association of which she was a founding member. It was Helen Song who was first asked by Mrs Nicola Walker to raise funds for a warplane in 1915 and it was through her that many Straits Chinese women gave funds to buy the "Women of Malaya."

After marriage, Lady Song, a committed advocate of education for girls, became a director of SCGS and

[9] *The Singapore Chinese Girls' School was started by a group of far-sighted Straits Chinese men in 1899 with the purpose of educating girls so that their highly educated sons might find wives who were their equals.*

volunteered at Kok Chuan School. At some point she also helped the Salvation Army with secretarial work and served for many years on the committees of the Free Maternity Hospital at Kandang Kerbau and *Po Leung Kuk* while remaining active in church activities.

Quiet by nature, it was revealed only in 2015 that Lady Song had left a bequest of over a million dollars to Prinsep Street Presbyterian Church.

Lady Song was conservative, never dressed in the Western style, and was known to avoid the limelight although many news reports of the fundraisers that Mrs Lee Choon Guan attended also listed the presence and contributions of Lady Song – from the very first public fundraiser for the Red Cross and St John's Ambulance, hosted by Lady Evelyn Young under the auspices of the Straits Chinese British Association of which her husband was a founding member.

One incident recounted by author William Gwee is very revealing of Lady Song's kindness and her standing in society, even during the Japanese Occupation. Gwee told of the time his father was interned by the Japanese and his family's only recourse was the Song Ong Siang family. Sir Song had been a mentor and English teacher to Gwee's father, but had died in 1941. Mrs Gwee gathered all her courage to speak to Lady Song although she was deeply intimidated by the English-speaking High Society lady the newspapers presented and felt herself an illiterate nobody in comparison.

On being greeted by Lady Song, Mrs Gwee (who had taken her young son along, perhaps for moral support) found a gentle lady who spoke fluent Baba Malay. Lady Song not only listened sympathetically to her, but also offered to write a character recommendation of her husband for Mrs Gwee to take to the Japanese in the hope it might be of some help. An air raid interrupted their conversation, but even in the air raid shelter, they found themselves surrounded by calm and hope.

The letter proved a blessing and Mr Gwee was subsequently released by the Japanese (Gwee, 2013, p. 107-111).

Lady Helen's Role Model – Husband Sir Song Ong Siang

Song Ong Siang, Lady Helen's husband, was a most unusual man. A brilliant student, he won the Guthrie Scholarship at 12 years of age and then the Queen's Scholarship in 1888 at the age of 16, but had to give it up to Lim Boon Keng because he was too young.

Song Ong Siang studied eventually at Cambridge on the Queen's Scholarship and was called to the Bar in 1893 which heralded the start of an illustrious career as a reformist and leader in the Straits Chinese community. Already well thought of by the colonial government, Governor Sir Cecil Clementi told him,

> *"Do not seek pastures new, but go back to Singapore and try to do the best you can for the Colony which has enabled you to get such a good start in life, and especially for your own countrymen" (Chinese Women's Association, 100 fabulous years, 2015, p. 51).*

The young Song Ong Siang did indeed do much for his own countrymen. On his return he started a law firm and was appointed a legislative councillor. He was also president of the Chinese Christian Association and assistant editor of the Straits Settlements Law Reports from 1894 to1899. In his capacity as a lawyer, Song Ong Siang played a key role in the enactment of the Civil Marriage Ordinance in 1941, imposing monogamy on non-Muslim civil marriages (Clammer, 1980).

A tireless advocate, Song Ong Siang founded several societies to discuss the improvement of local society, including the Chinese Philomathic Society and the Straits Chinese British Association. He also co-edited the influential Straits Chinese magazine, "A Quarterly on Occidental and Oriental Culture," with Dr Lim Boon Keng. The magazine was a platform for extraordinary and perceptive notes of the conditions of life in Singapore, and the need for reform in Chinese and Straits Chinese society. In 1923 Song Ong Siang published the invaluable work, "One Hundred Years' History of the Chinese in Singapore," detailing the evolution of local Chinese society decade by decade. This is still being used as reference today.

Song Ong Siang was also an ardent member of the Chinese Volunteer Company, and represented the colony at the Coronation of King Edward VII in 1902.

Helen Song is acknowledged as having played a great part in supporting her husband in his extraordinary career. While they have left no public written records of their life together, we cannot but infer that together they were a formidable team, known to be generous, kind and inspiring.

> *[Song Ong Siang's] wife was the inspiring influence in his career of public service which culminated in the Knighthood (K.B.E.) … January 1936 … And she justly deserved to share in all the congratulations that were showered on them as a consequence (Chinese Women's Association, 100 fabulous years, 2015, p. 51).*

SUMMARY

Mrs Lee Choon Guan and Lady Helen Song were only two representatives of an extraordinary cohort of women who emerged out of seclusion from 1915 onwards to open many doors by example and set precedents for other Asian women in Singapore society. While our study examines the contributions of only two women in the Straits Chinese community, they represented an entire people group that was socially distinct from the migrant Chinese and looked to the British for leadership and culture rather than towards China.

These characteristics went far towards enabling women to step out into colonial society and participate fully in the many charitable, social and feminist causes championed not only by European women, but also those of other races and creeds in the same social circle. In examining the subscription lists[10] for many fundraisers reported in the decades preceding World War II, we find that Straits Chinese women were the most prominent of all Asian women on the list of donors.[10]

We suggest here several factors that enabled such strong social engagement and generous contributions by Straits Chinese women.

The first was that these women were shepherded by a new generation of men actively engaged with and influenced by British values and ideals. Mrs Lee Choon Guan's father and husband, and Lady Helen's husband were part of the highly influential Straits Chinese men who debated matters of political and social interest through many platforms.[11] Their agitation for a role in civil society was not an attitude that arose from Chinese tradition but through acceptance of the Western philanthropic ideal. They were strong voices in the Legislative Council, and deeply interested in shaping the emerging local community. They believed in the need for reform in local Chinese society and pushed for women to be educated such that girls could become equal partners to their English-educated husbands in society; again this belief was highly contrary to traditional Chinese values.

Given this mindset, these first few Straits Chinese women were positioned as daughters then wives to participate fully in British colonial society, guided by their husbands. Their education and ability to speak English fluently were essential qualities for interaction among the many races of colonial High Society; their participation here helped to further broaden their horizons. Straits Chinese wives and families in this fortunate group led cosmopolitan lives, enjoyed travel, and heard the latest news, ideas and fashions.

Secondly, these women had access to funds that they could give away. While this study has not been able to determine the exact nature of that access – be it via an inheritance, allowance or gift – it is a matter of public record that both Mrs Lee and Lady Helen were able to give donations to many charitable causes in a personal capacity, and not just as a spouse.

A third factor encouraging women to engage in philanthropy were the connections established with other women in thesocial networks of colonial society, the Chinese Ladies' Association, the church, the Straits Chinese British Association, and myriad relational connections. These networks were active and influential, encouraging women to support causes far beyond Singapore's shores. Strong women like Mrs Lim Boon Keng and Dr Charlotte Ferguson-Davie championed needs and inspired support in others; Mrs Lim was pro-reform and anti-Japanese while Dr Ferguson-Davie was passionately devoted to bringing medical care to Singapore women.

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[10] *For a comprehensive list of articles on charitable events and fundraisers between 1915 and 1941, please see References*

[11] *Examples of platforms for debate were the "Celestial Reasoning Society," the "Chinese Philomathic Society," the Straits Chinese British Association, and the Straits Chinese Magazine.*

The family of Tan Soo Bin, with Mrs Nancy Tan, youngest sister of Lady Helen seated on the left, c.1930
Courtesy of Ms Marian Tay, in memory of the late Mrs Mary Tan

We cannot guess as to the motivation for the participation of the many Straits Chinese women in such events. News accounts showed charitable events were often couched as enjoyable social occasions which were not onerous to attend and which allowed wives to represent their husbands in society. Women who were comfortable in this cosmopolitan milieu came to be regulars on guest lists, relied on to give generously and to participate cheerfully. Such women gave their husbands a distinct advantage in colonial eyes and helped them maintain a high profile in local society. Being feted by the press and being recognised by colonial authority were also rewards in themselves.

Personality and personal conviction also seem to have played a key role in shaping the actions of these early philanthropic women. Anecdotal evidence described Lady Helen as being a kind and generous person with high Christian ideals and a great ally to her husband. She volunteered in many capacities – giving both time and money to help where there was a need.

Mrs Lee is remembered as a disciplined person of strict routine who always got up at seven in the morning despite her many social activities and famous parties. She was very organised about her day (Herbie Lim as cited in Chinese Women's Association, 2015, p. 32-38), managing to juggle many commitments with finesse. She continued to be involved in society well into her 90s, and still maintained an attitude of discipline to the last.

The most apparent enabling factor that allowed Straits Chinese women to participate so fully in philanthropy was a predisposition to disconnect with Chinese tradition, and a willingness to embrace British philanthropic values, try Western ways, and evolve with the times. While most of Straits Chinese society trailed well behind the glamorous women of the Chinese Ladies' Association, the community as a whole shared this adaptability and considered themselves modern British subjects. By the 1930s it had become the norm for Straits Chinese girls to be educated and go into society to earn a living,

Straits Chinese women would continue to be at the forefront of change when Singapore later became a sovereign state. Its most well-known example was Madam Kwa Geok Choo, wife of Mr Lee Kuan Yew, who in her capacity as a lawyer helped draft the Women's Charter of 1961 that codified the legal rights of Singapore women.

Chapter 8
The Jews

In 1900, the Jewish population of Singapore numbered only 467 people all told, of whom 215 were women (Lim & Kho, 2005, p. 19). Yet this tiny community had a powerful presence in the colony, owning half of the rented buildings in Singapore town by 1930 (Lim & Kho, 2005, p. 9). By 1939 the Jewish community had grown to nearly 1,500 but would unfortunately be much reduced in number by the end of the Second World War. Throughout Singapore's history the local Jewish community continued to be influential, producing significant philanthropists, lawyers, property owners, doctors, brokers and merchants with networks to other Jewish communities in Shanghai, India and the Dutch East Indies. They would later be proudly represented by David Marshall, Singapore's first Chief Minister.

The Singapore Jewish community was as ethnically diverse as the other communities in our study, with a small mix of Europeans (Ashkenazim) and a majority of orthodox Baghdadi Jews (Sephardim). From the start, the community was family-oriented and women travelled to Singapore to keep house and bring up families over the second half of the 19th century. By the start of the 20th century, women were already notable within the community and are remembered as strong role models, charitable in both the traditional and Western idioms of giving.

Migration and Settlement

The Jews were a presence in Singapore from very early in the colony's history. The first wave of migrants were part of what is called the Baghdadi Trade Diaspora who came to Singapore via Calcutta where they had settled for some time under the East India Company. Bieder (2007) tells of a letter sent to the colonial office in 1840 by six men requesting permission to build a synagogue. Thus the community was founded, growing from a small enclave of devout men to 30 men and 27 women by 1871 (Lim, 2007, p. 17). They prospered, owning six of the 43 merchant houses in the 1840s, trading in coffee, timber, spices and cotton. In 1875 entrepreneurial Jews traded in property when the British passed a law allowing aliens the same rights as British subjects to own land. This resulted in their ownership of iconic buildings such as the Grand Hotel de l'Europe, the Adelphi, and the Seaview Hotel (Bieder, 2007, p. 87-39).

By 1900, a marked division in the Singapore Jewish community had arisen. At one end were the extremely wealthy European Ashkenazi who had arrived from as far away as Russia and Germany from the 1870s to escape persecution in Europe. This small group adopted British ways of dress, culture and European languages, lived like the British in bungalows, and sent their children to English schools. They were loyal to the Crown and, with their wealth and standing, were accepted into colonial High Society. Meanwhile a middle class was growing that also aspired to British acceptance, adopting British culture and speaking English.

At the other end were the majority of Jews – poor Baghdadi Sephardim who had settled around Waterloo Street where they could walk to the *Maghain Aboth* Synagogue built in 1878. This group called the area around the synagogue *mahallah* or home. The Baghdadi Jews were a tight-knit community, "devout and homesick," and lived as if they were still in Iraq which they had left many generations ago after coming via India (Bieder, 2007, p. 41-61). They were merchants, servants or hawkers, and extremely orthodox. Baghdadi Jewish women could be seen in the flowing robes of Baghdad called *rhappah* with yards of fabric and lace.

The British themselves considered the Jews to be of two "races".

> *The British considered themselves and Europeans superior and anyone Asian inferior, and they granted anyone labelled "Asian" few rights or privileges. They decided that rich, successful Jews were "European" and entitled to some privilege, while poor Jews were regarded as "Asian" and treated accordingly (Bieder 2007, p.43).*

Jewish Women and Philanthropy in Singapore

This sharp division is pertinent to our study in that two kinds of philanthropy, as practised by

the women of the Jewish community in the early 20th century, can be clearly identified. The wealthy European-influenced community – both men and women – donated money for the needs of both their own community and Singapore society, giving in the Western idiom of direct donations and raising funds in the Charity Bazaar Model. They joined with colonial society in group charities for common causes; wives of prominent Jews like Mrs Mozelle Nissim and Mrs Marie Clumeck (nee Frankel) were frequently called upon, along with Straits Chinese women like Mrs Lee Choon Guan and Mrs Song Ong Siang, to help in ladies' committees led by various Governors' wives for causes such as war relief and children's aid.

On the other hand, the women of the *mahallah*, such as Mrs Moselle "Ma" Cohen and Mrs Mooha Jonah, are remembered for their devotion in their practice of *Tzedakah*, rather inadequately translated as "charity" (explained further below). This is a profoundly fundamental informal duty of care for family and others. In the case of the poor Baghdadis, this was done far less with money than in kind. The *mahallah* mothers were like their Indian counterparts as observed in an earlier chapter. They were fierce guardians of the faith, taking care of their own, and ensuring kosher was kept and precious Jewish traditions passed on to the next generation.

The Concept of *Tzedakah* in Jewish Giving

> *Tzedakah is the responsibility to give aid, assistance and money to the poor and needy, or to worthwhile causes. Tzedakah means being good stewards of and planning to give a portion of one's personal substance for the common good. Although it is related to charity, the translation of tzedakah is broader than the definition of charity. Charity suggests benevolence and generosity, an act of the powerful and wealthy for the benefit of the poor and needy. Tzedakah is derived from the Hebrew language and means righteousness, fairness or justice. In Judaism, giving to the poor is not viewed as a generous act; it is simply an act of justice, the performance of a duty, giving the poor their due. It is the right thing to do … Done properly, tzedakah requires the donor to share his or her compassion and empathy along with the money (DeGroot in http://www.learningtogive.org/resources/jewish-philanthropy-concept-tzedakah, paragraphs 1 & 11).*

The Jewish tradition of giving is very strong, codified in Judaism through centuries of teaching and reinforced by the need to preserve faith and keep the community intact through years of displacement and persecution. Throughout the Jewish diaspora, the tradition of giving – both to their own community and for the improvement of welfare in larger civil society, depending on the country of settlement – has been inculcated through teaching and example in temple and at home. The reasons, methods and scope of one's giving are defined in great detail in the Torah (also known as the Pentateuch or the first five books of the Bible); the objects of one's charity being widows, the poor, orphans, outsiders as well as one's own community. The objective of giving is entirely to please God. It does not buy one merit, but is the right thing to do. Thus, the practice of *Tzedakah* is ideally outward-looking, representing a duty of care with a spirit of generosity that is reward in itself.

Jewish Philanthropy in Colonial Singapore

The Jewish community in Singapore, like all the other communities in the colony, was left by the British to fend for themselves. Being a tiny group with sharp divisions, welfare was ad hoc and unsatisfactory, as Israel Cohen, a European visitor to Singapore in 1921, recounted:

> *[Cohen] was dismayed to find no charitable structure to provide for needy Jews. He wrote, 'there was no committee or society to discharge that essential function of a community, and the poor went from house to house and from office to office, seeking alms where they could and free from inquiry that might check their pauperisation.'*
> *At holiday and festival times, the poor lined up at the homes of the wealthy Jews – the Eliases, the Meyers and others – and waited to receive a few dollars (Bieder, 2007, p. 67).*

Private Jewish citizens – led by the Baghdadi Jews with the notable participation of women – started initiatives to alleviate this situation. Mrs Mozelle Nissim founded the Singapore Jewish Women's League in 1929, the first local Jewish organisation concerned solely with the welfare of the poor, providing cash and aid during the Great Depression to needy Jews (Lim et al., 2005, p. 82-83).

In the 1920s, Mrs Aaron (Serena) Elias left a bequest of $15,000 to found the Amber Trust and Scholarship to help young Jews pay for schooling. Eminent local lawyer Mr Harry Elias was one such beneficiary of the Amber Trust. In 1937, Mrs Rosa Frankel, an Ashkenazi from Russia, joined with local-born Mrs Rebecca Davie (nee Meyer) to start the Jewish Cemetary Trust Fund to pay for the funerary and burial expenses of poor members of the community so that they might be buried with dignity (Bieder, 2007, p. 184).

MOZELLE NISSIM nee MEYER (1883-1975)

Mrs Mozelle Nissim is probably the most well known woman philanthropist in the 20th century Singapore Jewish community. She was the daughter of Sir Manasseh Meyer, one of the first and most prominent philanthropists in the local community who came from Baghdad via Calcutta in 1873. Meyer was spectacularly successful in property and business. He rose quickly to prominence in colonial society and was made a Municipal Commissioner in 1893. He eventually owned a good portion of the colony's real estate, including a large house in Killiney Road called Belle Vue. Meyer donated towards the building of the ladies' gallery in Maghain Aboth Synagogue. He also built a synagogue on his own estate called Chesed-El so his family could walk to it on Shabbat.

Manasseh Meyer had seven children – three sons and four daughters. His second daughter, Mozelle, took on responsibility early, helping to bring up her siblings when her mother died. Meyer, like Mr Tan Keong Saik, believed in education for his daughters, and they attended the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus where the sisters could keep kosher tradition by eating in a separate room. The young Mozelle grew up fluent in French and English. The children also travelled extensively and experienced many cultures with their father, visiting far flung places from Egypt to Japan by steamship.

In 1921, the Jewish community played host to a young Albert Einstein who was raising funds for the Zionist cause. Einstein was invited to an "At Home" at Belle Vue where he was quite overwhelmed by Singapore's highly multiracial society. Over 200 people "of every race and creed" had gladly accepted Mozelle Meyer's invitation to tea, and Einstein (who could not speak English) found himself surrounded by "a calamity of languages and good-tasting cake" (Bieder, 2007, p. 61). Despite the disconcerting circumstances, he was greatly struck by his hostess whom he described as "one of the finest Jewish women that I have met" (Lim et al., 2005, p. 33).

Mozelle Meyer married Sassoon Nissim, a Sephardi born in Bombay. Despite adopting three children, she found time to continue in her father's footsteps as de facto leader of the Jewish community. She was greatly beloved for her generous hospitality and many remembered her open house Friday night suppers with delicious food at Belle Vue, where she presided as a gracious and warm hostess, and where children enjoyed parties on feast days (Lim et al., 2005, p. 81).

Mrs Nissim's particular interests were the poor and needy, and providing the community with the means to gain a good religious education. She became a member of the Board of the Talmud Torah, the religious school started by her father, and visited it regularly to check on not just the welfare of the students, but also of the teachers.

In 1929, in answer to urgent community needs brought on by the Great Depression, Mrs Nissim founded the Singapore Jewish Women's League to "give practical assistance and help to the Jewish poor" (Lim et al., 2005, p. 82-83). The League was structured in the Western way with "subscriptions" from wealthy local donors and well-wishers to fund it. She was president and her father, patron. Mrs Rosa Frankel (who was Ashkenazi) was vice president; it appeared that Mrs Nissim was the one who was able to bridge the divide between the Ashkenazim and the Sephardim.

More than 50 women, from both Sephardic and Ashkenazi communities, helped raise funds, providing food, shelter and healthcare for 25 families within a year. The women were especially concerned about the poor diet of many families and provided staples like rice and potatoes, and dried drinks of Horlicks and Milo. Over the next 10 years, the League helped the Jewish community in immensely practical ways – providing food and rent for the destitute, paying for large medical expenses, and buying textbooks and paying school fees for needy children.

Over 40 families benefitted from the League's care. The League often ran out of money, especially in the Depression years, yet somehow managed to scrape together enough through "continual strenuous efforts" to pay for essential bills, rent and food (Bieder, 2007, p. 183). The work of the League was abruptly curtailed by the War when many Jews fled or were interned.

The League was also an early political platform, assisting the Women's International Zionist Organisation (WIZO) and helping refugees from Europe and Asia along their way. Mrs Nissim often raised funds for her various causes using the popular Charity Bazaar Model, with garage sales held at the Menorah Club on Oxley Rise, within walking distance of the *Chesed-El*. After the War, the League's work with the poor was taken over by a new Jewish Welfare Board.

Mrs Nissim was also a familiar face in colonial society and gave generously to causes outside the Jewish community. Along with other Jewish women such as Mrs Serena Elias, Mrs Rosa Frankel and Mrs Marie Clumeck as well as prominent local ladies like Mrs Lee Choon Guan, she helped to raise funds for St Andrew's Mission Hospital.

Oral accounts of Mozelle Nissim's life tell of how people from other ethnic groups were not afraid to approach her for help, and she gladly gave where she could. Others remember that she was very open minded and was willing to listen to ideas and suggestions on anything that would improve the Jewish community (Lim et al., 2005, p. 81-83).

Upon her death in 1975 at the great age of 92, she was greatly mourned and the community acknowledged the passing of a lady with a "kind, gentle and noble heart" ("*GOL of Jewish community dies, 92,*" 1975, p. 9).

MARIE CLUMECK nee FRANKEL, O.B.E.

A prominent daughter of the Ashkenazi Frankel family, Mrs Marie Clumeck was a generous supporter of many causes for welfare and relief proposed by the Governors' wives and was frequently included in their guest lists. In particular, her name was mentioned on subscription lists for war relief. She, along with Mrs Lee Choon Guan, was recognised for her work in the Red Cross during World War II by the King, with membership into the Order of the British Empire (Bieder, 2007, p. 183).

"MOOHA" SOPHIE JONAH G'LOOMI (1898-1953)

On the other side of town were the Baghdadi Jews living in the *mahallah* around Waterloo Street, Wilkie Road, Middle Road and Selegie Road. Here women in Iraqi robes carried on life in the traditions of Baghdad, helping each other despite their straitened circumstances, with food always cooking on someone's stove and their children dressed in gunny sacks playing in the street (Bieder, 2007, p. 182).

Although hardly wealthy, they had a close and rich social life, sharing burdens and coming together to cook traditional Baghdadi treats at festivals at the *Maghain Aboth* Synagogue, recreating traditional Iraqi dishes from flour blessed in Calcutta, and cooking favourite Middle Eastern dishes on Friday nights. Women would lead the cherished Friday night prayers and the lighting of seven candles, carrying on family rituals millenia old, even in far away Singapore.

Mr Harry Elias remembers his mother, Mrs Sophie Jonah G'loomi, known to all as "Mooha," as the heart of the family. Somehow, she managed to look after her many children on a shoestring with time still for others in the community. She was of such stature that her husband had this inscribed on his tombstone:

"Elias Jonah, the husband of Mooha."

In the traditional role of Jewish women throughout the diaspora, and like our Indian women in Chapter 4, Mooha was the custodian of the faith, making sure the children were grounded in the beliefs and rituals of Judaism. Her son, a husband and father today, still keeps a precious photo of her with him. As he says,

"The men? They went out and did what men do.
But the women? The women were the ones who kept the faith alive." [1]

[1] *Interview with Mr Harry Elias on September 3, 2015.*

MOSELLE "MA" COHEN

Like Mooha, another beloved member of the community who walked the way of traditional giving was Moselle "Ma" Cohen, born in Singapore to Baghdadi parents in the early 20th century.

Although her marriage to merchant Menachem Cohen took her away to Sandakan in British North Borneo, the Singapore Jewish community still considered her as one of their own. Her hospitality and soft heart were widely known and she had a profound impact on the people around her, even in Sandakan. Author Agnes Keith was quoted in Bieder (2007) as saying all races "came to her for help, Eurasians, Chinese, Malay housekeepers, nurses, coolies, myself … Her pocketbook was under the pillow and she had constant recourse to it. No one ever asked her for anything and was refused, time, sympathy, money, or help."

"Ma" Cohen continued to help through the arrival of World War II, providing supplies including illegal radio parts and messages to interned Australian prisoners-of-war. She was arrested twice and then disappeared. Her son, Singapore surgeon Yahya Cohen on investigating his parents' disappearance heard that Ma Cohen and her husband had been put on a prison ship to Kuching.

It was bombed by the Japanese, and all were lost at sea.

SUMMARY

By tradition Jewish women are given power and influence by their community, and Tzedakah is part of being Jewish and a responsibility placed on both men and women. Women's philanthropic choices in Singapore thus appear to have been limited only by their financial situation and their personal social circumstances.

A major factor influencing choice was the sharp division by class and ethnicity that had arisen among Singapore's migrant Jews. The deep divide between Ashkenazim and Sephardim was heightened by the choices they made in language, culture, education and society, apparently encouraged by the British themselves.

We might posit that depending on where one fell in the divide, women chose different mechanisms through which to express *Tzedakah* outside of private religious giving. The expression of these choices might have depended on whether one was influenced by "modern," British and/or Western thinking or if one fell into the "traditional" and/or "Asian" sphere.

In Singapore "traditional" meant traditionally Baghdadi, but in diasporas around the world this might mean traditionally Greek, Russian, Polish, German and so forth. However this partition was not set in stone and there were women of influence such as Mrs Mozelle Nissim and Mrs Rosa Frankel who bridged the divide and were able to involve both sides when needed in charitable works and the care of the whole community.

For the wealthy Jews who embraced British ways and were received into colonial High Society, the mechanisms they used to help others were not surprisingly Western models; a clear example being how the Singapore Jewish Women's League was set up and raised its funds.

By contrast, women in the poorer Sephardic *mahallah* continued the traditional charitable giving defined in Judaism interpreted through the lens of Baghdadi custom. Under the circumstances this ultimately meant giving practical care rather than financial aid, seen in the sharing of food, society, mutual responsibility, and the teaching of faith so essential to keeping Jewish society and the race alive. Some women of extraordinary generosity like "Ma" Cohen, with her purse under her pillow, would continue to be outstanding philanthropists to all races in spite of war, poverty and dreadful circumstance.

In either case, Jewish women, like migrant women of all the ethnicities we have examined, would have continued unasked with their traditional responsibilities of caring for their families, sustaining them however they could, and passing on to their children the traditions and beliefs of their people, to create a context for their lives in this strange new land.

Despite the decimation during World War II, significant numbers of local-born Jews have returned to Singapore and the local-born Jewish community has rebuilt itself, contributing again to the welfare of Singapore society while still caring for their own.

Chapter 9
Major Findings, Motivators and Some Conclusions

Major Findings

The material from this initial study has produced a very broad set of qualitative findings that are exploratory, open-ended, and call for further research into an exciting time in the history of the growth of Singapore's women. Each community, because of its multiple component ethnicities, still has many more unrecorded accounts of the lives of its womenfolk, how they gave, and how they grew in Singapore's rich and changing social environment.

Here we present some of the most pertinent findings derived from both historical and anthropological analyses of the material:

1. **Traditional Chinese and South Asian societies confined women to a codified, informal role in philanthropy, which meant contributions by women were formally unacknowledged.**

   Thus early migrant women from these communities seldom appear in Singapore's historiography.

   Both Chinese and South Asian cultures and some Ceylonese cultures had historically negated women in society to the extent that they were not a part of formal society, had no economic power, and therefore had few resources for giving. Traditional philanthropic structures that evolved in these societies were oriented towards men and the formal control of wealth, mechanisms of giving, and recognition for charitable deeds were therefore also vested in men.

   Women, on the other hand, were understood to hold a powerful *informal* role in philanthropy which was the duty of care and giving in kind. It was their responsibility to find food, sustain the family, and pass on the identity of the community – their faith, culture, beliefs and key systems of power. Even on moving to Singapore, these roles held true for the majority of Asian women and their manner of giving was seldom acknowledged until the 20th century, when the contributions of women to society's continuance were recognised in the approbation of Sun Yat-Sen and Mahatma Gandhi.

   This finding however does not hold true for the Muslim communities in Singapore, where the *Wakaf* system of endowment gave women a formal evolved mechanism to express charity to others as well as gain recognition for doing so.

2. **Asian women were able to enter the philanthropic arena when they were disconnected from traditional social systems and when they had their own economic resources.**

   The informal role of women in philanthropy in traditional society had been reinforced by their inability to earn money and therefore use it as they wished. However, once disconnected from traditional strictures and given a way to gain economic power, women were able to participate as they wished in personal giving.

   The most extreme example of this can be seen in the newly economically independent *Sor Hei*, who by creating an extra-traditional class for themselves in China, also gave themselves the power to choose how they would use their new resources.

   We also found that those who physically left their homelands and relocated to Singapore now entered a new social system where money was the new creator of class and where earning power was actively encouraged. However early migrant working women would still have been considered very low on the social scale before the 20th century's social upheavals.

   Again this finding does not seem to have applied to certain ethnic groups in the Muslim community, for example, Bugis women and Indian Muslim

businesswomen like Hajjah Khadijah who appeared to have retained economic power despite migration to Singapore.

The greatest disconnect for Chinese women would have been the breakdown of traditional social structures in China which freed them to be educated, to work alongside men, to be feminist, and to help build the new Nationalist China.

This watershed separation from the traditional social system was probably the most powerful factor in raising the status of women in all areas of life – social, legal and economic.

Finally, in the case of the Straits Chinese, their very loose affiliation to traditional Chinese structures allowed them to disengage ad libitum from old ways that restricted personal advancement and fluidly embrace British ideals, mores and their philanthropic viewpoint while retaining chosen Chinese customs and social structures.

As Straits Chinese men detached themselves from traditional ways, they enabled Straits Chinese women to step out into society as well. In terms of philanthropy this introduced women to Western philanthropic models that European women practised. With the support of their families Straits Chinese women were thus enabled to give openly in public.

3. **The move to Singapore did not mean that women discarded their traditional role as caregivers, even as alternative means of giving opened up.**
   In many cases traditional support systems were strengthened and relied upon as a safety net in a strange land.

   Despite dislocation from home and new opportunities in the modernising colony, the move to Singapore among those in our small research pool does not appear to have forced a change upon women and their profound sense of responsibility towards the family, nor altered the value they attached to their identity as the informal family caregiver.

   In all communities migrant women continued to carry out their traditional role of care – even in Singapore – which sometimes was made even more urgent in a new land of multiple alien social systems and without the luxury of an extended family to fall back on. Sustaining the family, transferring language, teaching precious beliefs and customs, and ensuring the preservation of ethnic identity among the new generation in Singapore were now even more vital, and migrant mothers moved to safeguard their families in this new social milieu.

4. **In a world of more giving options, not all women chose to leave the traditional ways of giving.**

   Muslim women continued to choose Islamic mechanisms for charity, while South Asian and Ceylonese, Chinese and Straits Chinese women appeared to have added new Western giving options to their traditional arsenal of welfare mechanisms rather than discarding the old.

   Although migrant women in Singapore were gradually gained more *choices* as to how they expressed their duty of care – in kind or now possibly with money – it is interesting to note that the old mechanisms of welfare were not discarded, but were in fact the new were *added to* the traditional ways.

   We suggest that many a migrant woman's identity and personal value in her community were still defined by how well she carried out her obligations of care. Thus when it came to being able to give in new, Western idioms, women appeared to have chosen to merely add new mechanisms to the old, giving themselves more personal options whereby they might extend care beyond the traditional realm.

5. **The move to British Singapore altered the legal, social and economic status of Asian women, provided them with norms, and introduced a new understanding of civil society to all communities.**

   While it would take several generations of life in Singapore for the majority of Asian women to fully

realise it, the move to Singapore brought women out of economic servitude, gave them more legal rights, introduced literacy, and rewarded the educated, both men and women, as the sovereign state of Singapore emerged after World War II.

At the same time, a novel new concept emerged – that of belonging to a nation which gave one identity and where personal contributions were valued. Pride as a British subject coincided with national pride in China, bringing about a first-time sense of national identity and subsequent willingness to invest in the improvement of life for others in the same nation. The concept of caring for one's fellow citizens was a very new idea to most Asians and a sense of civic consciousness had to be cultivated when Singapore became independent.

However we do suggest here that the idea of giving to civil society was born first among Singapore's Asian women in the early 20th century.

6. **The role of women in public philanthropy and private giving occurred on a continually moving, entirely personal continuum of change as women transitioned from migrant to settler.**

   How much one was exposed to non-traditional ways was a function of time – *when* a new migrant entered the flow of Singapore's evolving society would determine the choices of personal participation opened to her.

   In tracing these journeys of Asian women from old homeland to new Singapore, we find that, typical of migrant stories, each woman's experience was entirely personal. How much a woman was exposed to new influences – be they colonial society, British philanthropy, the actions of other communities, education or nationalism – was entirely a function of time.

   The impact on a woman and the choices she could make therefore depended very much on *when* she entered Singapore society.

   In hindsight women entering Singapore in the early 20th century were far less likely to have been exposed to the influences of change compared to those who arrived or were born in the 1930s.

   Thus the stories of women in these four decades and their options for personal giving would all differ according to the timing of their entry into Singapore colonial society.

Motivators and Enabling Influences

Now that the questions of *who* our early women philanthropists were, and *how* they contributed have been answered, we take a brief look at the "*why*" women gave during that period.

What enabled these early Asian women to give, considering the constraints under which they lived? How much were they a product of the times? Were there other factors in play which made them more inclined towards becoming philanthropists?

To create a starting place for discourse we will examine our early Asian migrant women against five quantified motivators posited in "Framing the Roots of Philanthropy," a working paper by Lam et al. (2011).

These five motivators (in order of influence) have been identified as being present in modern Western philanthropists:

1. Strong personal beliefs or values – both "this worldly" social missions and/or "an other- worldly pursuit of God or a better afterlife" (Lam et al., 2011, p. 12);
2. Having economic resources;
3. Inter-generational role modelling or inter-generational "root learning";
4. Being connected to a social network; and
5. Being affiliated to other parties, religious or otherwise, who might ask for a donation or encourage donation toward a group cause.

We look at our early Asian women against these motivators in the simple table in the pages following.

Table: A Comparison of Early Asian Women Against Five Modern Motivators

Posited by Lam et al

Early Asian Subjects	Modern Western Motivators					
	Beliefs	**Economic Resources**	**Inter-generational Role Modelling**	**Social Networking**	**Affiliation**	**Other Motivators**
Hajjah Fatimah (1767-1865)	Strong Islamic beliefs and gratitude to God	Was economically independent; earned money and owned land wealth	Unknown. We can speculate that the *Wakaf* system was a familiar idiom to all Muslims	Unknown. We speculate that: • a Bugis/ Muslim community existed that would honour her will • the network extended from Malacca to Sulawesi	Unknown. Possibly the Bugis community and Muslim community at large	• Personal conviction
Raja Siti bte Kerayang Puli (d. 1906)	Muslim	Assume inherited family funds and/or increased them herself	Mother was strong role model as a *Wakif*	Unknown. Presume local Arab, Bugis and Malay-Muslim communities and same network as her mother's with the inclusion of her husband's Arab connections	Unknown. Assume local Muslim community now intermarried with Arab	• Unknown
Sheriffa Zain Alsharoff bte Syed Mohamed Alsagoff (d. 1968)	Muslim	Assume inherited family funds; husband invested it on her behalf	Strong maternal role models of *Wakifs* in grandmother Hajjah Fatimah and mother Raja Siti	Unknown. Presume the local Malay-Muslim/Arab community	Unknown. Presume local mosque community	• Peer modelling; depended upon her husband Syed Abdul Rahman Taha Alsagoff to administer family endowments and her own
Anna Gnanasun-dram Thevathasan (b. 1918)	Devout Christian with a strong, actionable personal faith	Economically dependent wife but partnered husband in the new way	• Familial empowerment through education and oversight • Strong role model in -in-law and local church ladies	• In Singapore a close relational network through husband's relations and friends • Wesley Methodist Church community • Strong relational network maintained with Ceylonese community	• Long affiliation with Wesley Methodist Church and groups there • YWCA; involvement in many activities	• Peer modelling; guidance and encourage-ment of husband seemed the strongest motivator • Influence of British and Christians • Friends of other races • Personal conviction

Table: A Comparison of Early Asian Women Against Five Modern Motivators

Posited by Lam et al

Early Asian Subjects	Modern Western Motivators					
	Beliefs	**Economic Resources**	**Inter-generational Role Modelling**	**Social Networking**	**Affiliation**	**Other Motivators**
Majie **e.g. Madam Tan Ah Kng** (1920-2012)	Christian in later life. Originally ancestor worshipper with belief in the lifetime and afterlife support provided by deities	Wage earner as an *Amah*	• Successful older sisterhood leader played a part in encouraging her • Employer "*towkay*" and "*towkay neo*" led by example	• Sisterhoods; networks of *Sor Hei* were essential to the ability of the *Majie* to survive in a foreign country who provided for them in old age • Church friends in old age	• Previously *Tsai Tong* (vegetarian halls) • Later Anglican Church	• Peer modelling by successful returning *Majie*; the desire for social and economic independence outweighed the cost of leaving society • Peer models were European and Chinese Christians who employed her
Mrs Kwan Seen Chor nee Wong Bee Ho (1875-1942)	Devout Buddhist	Economically independent due to provision by her father; could control her own resources	• Enabled by unusual father with far-sighted ideas • Siblings were high achievers in colonial and Chinese society	• Strong networks in Chinese Ladies' Association • International Buddhist networks • Mainland Anti-Japanese movements	• Affiliations with feminists across Southeast Asia	• Peer modeling; sisters-in-law, Chinese Ladies' Association members, Chinese feminists, and Buddhist abbots • Personal convictions
Mrs Lim Boon Keng nee Grace Yin Pek Ha (1884-1941)	Christian	Resources unknown; educated at Foochow seminary	Very strong reformist role model in parents	• Chinese Ladies' Association • Other personal family networks in Amoy, China • Colonial High Society	• Strong personal ties with Chinese Nationalists (Kuomintang) • Anti-Japanese movements • Straits Chinese British Association	• Peer modelling; husband Lim Boon Keng was a very able leader • Peer influence also came from the liberated women in Singapore and China • Personal convictions

Table: A Comparison of Early Asian Women Against Five Modern Motivators

Posited by Lam et al

Early Asian Subjects	Modern Western Motivators					
	Beliefs	**Economic Resources**	**Inter-generational Role Modelling**	**Social Networking**	**Affiliation**	**Other Motivators**
Mrs Lee Choon Guan (1877-1978)	Unknown. Became a Christian at 98 years of age	Personal wealth through father and husband, but degree of personal control and how wealth was received unknown	Good start by her father Tan Keong Saik who gave her an English education	• Chinese Ladies' Association • Colonial High Society of all races • Personal connections with many Governors and their families	• *Po Leung Kuk* • Straits Chinese British Association • Child Welfare Society • Many local societies like YMCA, YWCA, etc.	• Peer modelling; example of husband Lee Choon Guan • Friendships within Chinese Ladies' Association • Friendships with many Europeans • Cosmopolitan friends including the Sultan of Johore
Lady Helen Song Ong Siang nee Yeo Hee Neo (1886-1951)	Devout Christian and highly involved in church work	Unknown. Educated, but presumably dependent upon her husband	Unknown, but attended the Singapore Chinese Girls' School	• Prinsep Street Presbyterian Church • Chinese Ladies' Association	• Straits Chinese British Association; she supported her husband's work here • The Salvation Army	• Peer modelling; guidance and companion-ship of husband Church network Chinese Ladies' Association • Personal convictions
Mrs Mozelle Nissim (1883-1975)	A strong Jew	Unknown, but of means to give and to start welfare causes, host others, and welcome the poor	Her father Sir Manasseh Meyer was a leader in the community; she "inherited his mantle"	• Local Ashkenazi and Sephardic communities; she was a bridge between the two communities • International Zionist network	• Colonial High Society • Community of the Talmud Torah	• Personal convictions

Looking at the table above, one might venture to say that a person of philanthropic bent and great personal conviction – even Asian women with traditional society against them – will still find a way to give. We can even suggest that philanthropists today, Western or Asian, do in fact share many of the same qualities.

The Role of Values

Among all our subjects – the exception being Mrs Lee Choon Guan who only became a Christian at 98 years of age, her earlier beliefs are unknown – a strong faith and value system undergirded all that they did. Grace Lim and Wong Bee Ho were even willing to put themselves in harm's way to preserve the welfare of the Chinese when the Japanese overran and occupied China.

The Role of Access to Economic Resources

What is different about the situation of Singapore's early Asian women to those of modern philanthropists is that economic independence was not always a given. Giving in kind was often the only way they could express care for others. And while money was a boon and achieved a great deal, we see from the examples of our subjects that in Asian society the informal role codified for them was both influential and valued within the community. There was great intrinsic value and even identity in the role of the caregiver, both in the intimate confines of a family and also in the larger sphere of the continuation of a society.

Key Role Models were Both Inter-generational and Peer-to-peer; Husbands Played a Major Role with the Exception of the *Sor Hei*

Of interest is that our subjects' role models were not just inter-generational, but strongly peer-to-peer. Far-sighted fathers played a vital role in equipping their daughters with education and funds, thereby allowing them to contribute, but husbands seemed to have been the key to guiding women into the world of giving.

In most of our examples from Madam Sheriffa Zain to Mrs G. Thevathasan and the Chinese and Straits Chinese women, husbands were strongly present in the realisation of their wives' charitable efforts. They partnered with their wives and included them in their plans, thus introducing them to guiding them out of the traditional and supporting them in the new Western charitable giving models.

The *Sor Hei* of course had no spouses, but anecdotally they modelled themselves on successful members of the sisterhood, and it is known that they learnt new norms from their employers of all races.

Social Networks and Affiliations

In terms of social networking, the encouragement and leadership of other women in social networks of the same cohort – be it the Chinese Ladies' Association or a sisterhood – also appeared to have been a strong source of guidance and inspiration, support and mentoring.

It is interesting to note that as the 1930s progressed, Singapore women also became a part of international groups of feminists, anti-Japanese, and nationwide women's movements such as those in India; women were now in a position to gain membership and be active in such networks.

Concluding with Some Questions

In conclusion, however, one could say that many other women had the same opportunities as these few we have researched. Does that mean therefore that there are more such women still hidden in Singapore's social history? Or do philanthropists march to a different drummer?

An examination of opportunity and the suggestion that a serendipitous confluence of circumstances brought forth generosity do not answer the question as to why women like "Ma Cohen" kept giving, even under the most dire of circumstances. What makes one act so? Since we were able to speak directly to only one of our subjects, we can only suggest here that from observing their actions, these ladies shared a particular aspect of character and a personal fortitude that refuses to be quantified, but which made them among the foremost of Singapore's early Asian women philanthropists.

In memory of Mum
Mrs Ooi Jin Bee nee Chiu Hui Pin
1928-2015

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