



COMMUNITY HERITAGE SERIES I:  
**TRADITIONAL  
PROVISION SHOPS**

Book 1 of National Heritage Board's E-Books Collection

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# TRADITIONAL PROVISION SHOPS

## COMMUNITY HERITAGE SERIES I

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## FOREWORD

The National Heritage Board (NHB) is proud to further grow its community heritage series with the launch of the new e-books to promote Singapore's heartland heritage. E-books allow us to do this in an accessible and reader-friendly manner.

Traditional provision shops occupy a special place in the hearts of Singaporeans who grew up in the 1960s to the mid 1980s. Many Singaporeans will remember how a trip to the provision shop was a fun event because of the wide range of goods we could buy – from sweets to cold drinks, from sundry items to canned food, from newspapers to even toys.

I would marvel at the ability of the shop owner who knew the price of each item by heart and could mentally calculate the total costs of a family's purchases. Children would imagine themselves sitting behind the counter and fiddling with the abacus or playing with the pulley tin can where the daily takings were kept.

Today, there are fewer and fewer traditional provision shops as they are replaced by modern supermarkets and minimarts reflecting changing consumer preferences of Singaporeans, and as more shop owners are unable to find successors for their businesses.

It is therefore important that NHB documents the history of traditional provision shops and their unique characteristics, and share our findings through a travelling exhibition entitled "Traditional Provision Shops: A Thriving Past & An Uncertain Future."

I am glad to also note that NHB has incorporated new content for this e-book by featuring the unique histories of selected traditional provision shops which is made available to the public for the first time.

I would like to congratulate the NHB team for the successful launch of its new e-books and I hope that you will enjoy reading about traditional provision shops in Singapore.



▲  
Mr Ong Yew Huat  
Chairman  
National Heritage Board



▲ A provision shop in a rural area in 1950.

*Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore*

# A BRIEF HISTORY OF TRADITIONAL PROVISION SHOPS



▲ A bustling provision shop in a village circa 1960. Photo from Primary Production Department Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Provision shops in Singapore were set up as communities started to congregate together and there was a need for easy access to daily supplies. With limited disposable incomes and the relatively high cost of public transportation in the past, Singaporeans generally avoided the inconvenience and/or the cost incurred to travel further to procure their daily provisions.

In particular, farmers in the rural communities required supplies such as animal feed for their poultry, and provision shops were established to cater to this demand. The shops gradually evolved to sell dried goods and other essential produces. In the days when electricity was not readily available, these provision shops would start their business at the break of dawn when there was sufficient daylight and ceased operations when it got dark.

In the past, provision shops often functioned as “hubs” of community living as they would often be one of the few houses in the village that had an official address, a telephone and electricity. In fact, many villagers would direct and collect their mail from the provision shop, or stand by the shop’s telephone to wait for a call. They would gather around the shop to listen to the transistor radio for entertainment, or simply congregate to chit-chat with their neighbours.



▲ A shopkeeper weighing his goods with a “dae” in his shop in 1950.

*Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore*



▲ Hock Lam Aik Provision Shop in the 1980s.  
Courtesy of Mr. Tan Teng Kian

## THE EARLY DAYS OF BRISK BUSINESS



▲ Tee Seng Leong Liquor Store in the 1970s.  
Courtesy of Tee Seng Leong Liquor Store

When Singapore's economy grew by leaps and bounds in the 1960s, provision shops experienced brisk business which continued into the 1970s. Almost all provision shops offered customized services to residents in their immediate neighbourhoods as they operated on a business model based on relationship and mutual trust.

Customers could buy cigarettes by the stick and arrangements could be made for purchases (especially those involving heavy goods) to be delivered to one's doorstep. In addition, provision shops also operated a credit-based transactional system where

customers were able to purchase goods on interest-free credit. Once a month, typically when they receive their pay, customers would duly turn up in person to settle the payments.

Some shops even functioned as informal banks with customers handing over their savings for safekeeping with provision shop owners. It is a well-known fact that many provision shop owners even operated as "bookies" for illegal betting syndicates. With so much interest-free credit extended indefinitely, collecting illegal bets was their way of balancing the books.



▲ An impressive range of fresh spices at ARV Stores (2011).  
 Courtesy of Alex Yuen Gui Ping

# TRADITIONAL PROVISION SHOPS AND THEIR UNIQUE CHARACTERISTICS

In its earlier years, the provision shop business was one of the simplest business ventures for aspiring entrepreneurs with low start-up capital as well as little education and experience. Armed with limited capital and some credit, a provision shop owner could stock and sell non-perishable goods and/or goods with longer shelf life such as dried, canned and bottled goods. To keep the business going and to earn a profit, these provision shop owners just needed to keep the shop open for as long as possible in a day and for as many days as possible.

One of the key characteristics of traditional provision shops is that they tend to be family-owned and operate on a smaller scale with lesser administrative burden than larger businesses. To keep operating costs low, provision shop owners often manage and oversee the shops themselves, and family members are often roped in to help when extra pairs of hands are needed.

Traditional provision shops generally operate with minimal use of transactional technology. While the newer provision shops do use cashier machines and calculators, the older ones have continued to use abaci and pulley tin cans where daily takings are stored. With limited capital, it is not surprising that infrastructural and facility “upgrades” would only be introduced if the shops had to relocate or if a successor to the business decides to update the “look” of the shop to be more in keeping with the times.



▲ Bags of dried goods on display at Kian Seng San Kee (2011).  
 Courtesy of Ong Eng Huat



▲ The traditional pulley tin can is still in use at Ng Lian Huat (2011).  
 Courtesy of Alex Yuen Gui Ping



▲ The abacus which is still used by the shop owner at Hiong Kee (2011).  
 Courtesy of Darren Goh Yong Hua



▲ A picture of a roadside provision shop at Kampong Heng Mui Keng in 1986.  
*Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore*

## THE BEGINNING OF A DECLINE



◀ Pictures of Guan Hin in the 1980s.  
*Courtesy of Guan Hin*



By the 1980s, due in part to the rapid pace of development in Singapore, provision shops saw their business suffer and this might be attributed to increased competition and the changing profile of their customers. The relative prosperity of the provision shop business had attracted many people to start their own provision shops. With increased competition, profit margins declined and individual businesses became less and less profitable.

More importantly, the traditional provision shops found themselves confronted with increased competition from modern supermarkets and minimarts which offered a more conducive shopping experience amidst air-conditioned comfort. These

supermarkets and minimart chains also offered a greater diversity and range of products as well as promotional discounts.

Increased car ownership and improved public transportation also meant that Singaporeans were no longer restricted to purchasing their provisions from their neighbourhood provision shops. As disposable income grew, Singaporeans also began to patronize restaurants and food courts, and as a result, started to buy and stock less uncooked foodstuff.



▲ The shop front of Chop Koon Guan (2011).  
 Courtesy of Nixon Tang Kwang Lee

## A FAMILY AFFAIR



▲ The shop front of Tian Kee & Co (2011).  
 Courtesy of Tan Teng Teng



▲ An interior shot of K Ismail Zeenath  
 Provision Supplier (2011).  
 Courtesy of Ben Tham Yong Wei

The demise of the provision shops was ironically precipitated by the well-meaning intentions of the shop owners themselves. Most provision shop owners interviewed said that they considered education for their children to be of paramount importance, and strove to give them the best education possible.

With better education and more employment choices, most children of provision shop owners often turned down the offer to take over the family's provision shop business citing long hours, low profit margins and the lack of career prospects.

Even those who were willing to take over their parents' business would seek to upgrade their shops to be more in keeping with modern minimarts.

As a result, many of the traditional provision shops still in existence today are managed by owners who are advanced in age but remain committed towards keeping the shops in operation for as long as their health permits. These owners regard their shops as a significant part of their lives and are unwilling to face the prospect of winding down a business which they have painstakingly built up over the years.





▲ The shop front of Hiong Kee (2011).  
Courtesy of Darren Goh Yong Hua

# THE STATE OF PROVISION SHOPS TODAY



◀ The shop front of Ng Lian Huat (2011).  
Courtesy of Nixon Tang Kwang Lee

During the 1970s, the Singapore Provision Shop Friendly Association had 1,262 registered members and this number excluded provision shops which did not sign up as members. The total number of provision shops continued to grow during the 1980s and it was estimated that there were once about 3,000 provision shops operating in Singapore.

Today, the Singapore Provision Shop Friendly Association counts as its members less than 200 provision shop owners, a far cry from its membership during the boom period for provision shops in the 1960s and 1970s.

According to the Singapore Provision Shop Friendly Association, the future of traditional provision shops will depend on factors such as the location of the

shops, access to a wide range of goods, the availability of affordable rental, the provision of personalised services such as door-to-door delivery etc. Otherwise, the association acknowledged that it would be an uphill task for traditional provision shops to continue to survive and thrive.



▲ The shop front of Seng Guan (2011).  
Courtesy of Nixon Tang Kwang Lee



▲ The shop front of Guan Hin (2011).  
Courtesy of Lester Lai

# GUAN HIN

ESTABLISHED IN **1955**

*No longer in operation.*

Guan Hin was established in 1955 by Mr. Ng Heng Lin. Mr. Ng was born in China in 1930 and came to Singapore in 1948. Mr. Ng started Guan Hin with his second elder brother. They obtained the necessary start-up funds through the tontine system and took an interest-free loan from a relative.

The initial years of the business were rather quiet, and the shop would be opened for business from 7am to 10pm daily. In fact, the shop would be closed only once a year - on the first day of Chinese New Year. It was not until the enactment of the Employment Act during Mr. Lim Yew Hock's term as Chief Minister of Singapore (1956-1959) that Mr. Ng was able to rest for a day every week.

In 1962, Mr. Ng married Mdm Tan Koy Eng who is eight years his junior. Mdm Tan has been her husband's indispensable assistant. During the mid 1960s, business at the shop started to pick up. Besides selling dried, canned, packed and bottled goods, Mr. Ng went out on his bicycle and procured supplies of fresh fruits.

Staff from the former Ministry of Health Department located nearby would arrive in trishaws to buy freshly cut fruits by Mdm Tan. Mdm Tan would also offer sliced bread loaves which proved to be so popular that they would "fly off the shelves". The shop also sold dried shrimps, *ikan bilis* and ground nuts by weight, and between the period 1967-1968, the Ngs started to sell durians.

The Ngs have three children, a son and two daughters with the eldest being 50 years old and the youngest 40 years old. The entire family used to stay behind the shop before they moved to a flat. Through the earnings of the shop, the Ngs were able to put all three children through university. As their children have their own careers and are not keen to take over the business, the Ngs hope to be able to operate their shop for as long as they can.

It is noteworthy to point out that the interiors of Guan Hin remained unchanged since it first opened for business. The shop featured floor-to-ceiling wall shelves with sliding glass doors, an art décor writing desk, a vintage Smith electric clock and even a non-working rotary Bakelite telephone.

According to the Ngs, only the ceiling fan and the refrigerator had been replaced simply because the earlier ones had fallen into disrepair. The shop's original "door" comprising wooden planks had also been replaced by a set of metal louvers.



▲ An interior shot of Guan Hin (2011).  
Courtesy of Lester Lai



▲ The shop front of ARV Stores (2011).  
Courtesy of Nixon Tang Kwang Lee

# ARV STORES PTE LTD

ESTABLISHED IN 1958

- 292, Changi Road, Singapore 419770  
Opens daily  
Operating hours: 5.00 am – 7.00 pm and  
5.00 am – 12 noon on Sundays

ARV Stores was established in 1958 by Mr. R. Vadivelu who was born in the Triruvor district in Tamil Nadu, India. He came to Singapore in November 1952. Although Mr. Vadivelu is a permanent resident, his family does not reside in Singapore. He got married in 1990 to V. Thanalethimi, 40, and they have two children.

ARV Stores first started in Changi Market off Joo Chiat Road and has been at this present location since 1981. Mr. Vadivelu is the owner and has been working there since the age of 16. Mr. Vadivelu operates the shop with the help of five people – two of whom are relatives and the other three are hired help.

Since the day the provision shop started business, Mr. Vadivelu has not changed his original operating hours, the range of products sold and the services offered. He believes that his regular customers trust him and are comfortable with his style of running the shop. As a result, Mr. Vadivelu continues to provide delivery services and extends purchase on credit to all his customers.

In fact, ARV Stores' traditional shop front and décor have proven to be a hit with tourists who chanced upon the shop. The shop was also featured in the papers in 2009 for its range of spice powders. Mr. Vadivelu shared that such attention has always brought him a great sense of pride.

According to Mr. Vadivelu, peak periods occur during Chinese New Year and

Ramadan. During these periods, sale of spice powders would be brisk although he added that staple products like rice, cooking oil and other household products continue to enjoy good sales on a day-to-day basis.

Mr. Vadivelu observed that customers these days prefer pre-packed goods and are usually in a rush. They do not linger to interact, and are more conscious of the expiry dates of the products. Mr. Vadivelu also said that the emergence of supermarkets and a slowdown in the economy are factors contributing to the decline in business for traditional provision shops such as his.

Having said that, Mr. Vadivelu continues to maintain a positive outlook and expects his son to take over his provision shop business when he retires. Mr. Vadivelu also plans to continue running ARV Stores in the same way but would like to expand the shop space and offer more products such as fresh produce and fruits.



▲ The goods available at ARV Stores (2011).  
Courtesy of Nixon Tang Kwang Lee



▲ The shop front of Hock Lam Aik Kee (2011).  
Courtesy of Darren Goh Yong Hua

# HOCK LAM AIK KEE PROVISION SHOP

ESTABLISHED IN **1930s**

- Blk 532, #01-2497, Ang Mo Kio Ave 10, Singapore 560532  
Opens daily except for Mondays  
Operating hours: 7.00 am – 9.00 pm

Hock Lam Aik Kee was started by the late Mr. Tan Bok Swee in the 1930s in a village in Jalan Kayu. The provision shop was then sited near the Telecoms building on Seletar Road. In the early 1970s, Mr. Tan Bok Swee suffered a stroke and handed the business over to his two sons, Mr. Tan Chuan Seng and Mr. Tan Chuan Aik.

In the mid 1900s, Mr. Tan Chuan Seng, the elder of the two brothers, likewise suffered a stroke and handed his share of the business over to his son, Mr. Tan Teng Kian. Mr. Tan Chuan Seng passed away a few years ago. His younger brother, Mr. Tan Chuan Aik, now 76 years old, refuses to retire and continues to work as a delivery man for the provision shop.

Mr. Tan Teng Kian has been helping out with the family business since the early 1970s. After he completed his secondary school education, he began to work full-time at the shop. In the 1980s, as part of a resettlement programme, the provision shop was relocated from Jalan Kayu to Ang Mo Kio Ave 10 where it remains today.

According to Mr. Tan, most of the villagers in Jalan Kayu were farmers who planted vegetables and reared fish, pig and poultry. During the 1930s, Hock Lam Aik Kee sold mainly dried goods and animal feed, and purchase on credit was extended to farmers with no interest charged.

In its early days of operations, the provision shop did not have electricity and it would open for business when there was enough light (about 7.30am) and

close when it got dark (about 8pm). When electricity was available, the provision shop extended its operating hours to 11pm at night.

Mr. Tan also recalled that the pace of life was slower back then and that customers had more time to chit-chat and interact. Mr. Tan added that both his late grandfather and father would organise tea-tasting sessions with suppliers and customers.

By the 1990s, Mr. Tan observed that business was declining and decided to adopt a different strategy. As the provision shop was surrounded by coffee shops, Mr. Tan decided to become a wholesale supplier to the stalls in these coffee shops as well as restaurants in the area. This has proven to be a good business decision and business for the shop has been so brisk that Mr. Tan commented that he does not have time to close the shop for renovations.

Although Mr. Tan knows that his provision shop is doing well presently, he has accepted the fact that he will not have a successor to take over the business and that he will have to wind up his family business when he retires.

▶ The products on sale at Hock Lam Aik Kee (2011).  
Courtesy of Alex Yuen Gui Ping





▲ The shop front of Tee Seng Store (2011).  
Courtesy of Darren Goh Yong Hua

# TEE SENG STORE

ESTABLISHED IN **1950s**

- 31, Rosyth Road, Singapore 546191

Opens daily

Operating hours: 8.00 am – 8.00 pm

Tee Seng Store is currently the only landed house on mainland Singapore that also functions as a provision shop. Mr. Ang Lu Heng, 71, the owner of Tee Seng Store, started working at the store when he was 15 years old. The shop was then owned by his boss at that time.

In 1960, he was given an opportunity to take over the business and he has not looked back since. After he became the owner of the provision shop, Mr. Ang's father would sometimes help him look after the shop. When Mr. Ang was much younger, he used to deliver goods on a bicycle. Now that he is advanced in age, he makes his deliveries by car.

Like most provision shops in the past, Tee Seng Store closes only once a year on the first day of Chinese New Year and stays open everyday for at least 12 hours. Now, Mr. Ang gives himself an extra day off a year. Mr. Ang's wife, a year younger than

him, assists him in the day-to-day running of the shop.

While Tee Seng Store is the only provision shop in the immediate area, business remains slow because most residents own cars and often prefer to drive out of the estate and shop for their provisions at supermarkets. Still, Mr. Ang remains thankful that the neighbourhood is safe and that he still has a loyal base of old customers although many of his customers have relocated or passed on.

According to Mr. Ang, his children will not be taking over the provision shop business and he is resigned to the fact that he will not have a successor. Nevertheless, he intends to keep on operating the provision shop for as long as he can because he cannot bear to part with a business in which he has invested almost his entire life.



◀ Mr. Ang serving his customers (2011).  
Courtesy of  
Alex Yuen Gui Ping

# K ISMAIL ZEENATH PROVISION SUPPLIER

ESTABLISHED IN **1980s**

- Blk 10, #01-369, Haig Road, Singapore 430010

Opens daily

Operating hours: 7.00 am – 10.00 pm



▲ The shop front of K Ismail Zeenath Provision Supplier (2011).  
Courtesy of Nixon Tang Kwang Lee

Although K Ismail Zeenath Provision Supplier was established at its current location only in the 1980s, the family business history goes way back to the late 1940s. In 1943, the late Mr. Aboo Bakker left Kerala, India for Singapore at the age of 13. Some years later, he started a provision shop.

At the peak of his business, Mr. Aboo had five to six shops, mostly in the west side of Singapore, and one in Bedok. They opened from 6.00 am to 10.00 pm except for Fridays when they opened at 2.30 pm after prayer.

Over the years, Mr. Aboo started to let go of his businesses as he found it increasingly difficult to find reliable workers to help out at his various provision shops. In the 1970s, Mr. Aboo passed his provision business to his brother, who later passed the business to one of Mr. Aboo's son, Mr. Abdul Kalam.

According to Mr. Abdul, he was initially reluctant to take over his father's business because he wanted to try other things in life. However, he soon relented because of family pressure and in the 1990s, he quit his job as an air steward and took over the business. He was then 24 years old.

Now, at 42, Mr. Abdul runs the shop mainly by himself and his wife will stand in for him whenever he needs to leave the shop. He works almost as hard as his father, opening his shop only one hour less than the operational hours kept by his father. During festive seasons, it is common for his shop to remain open until the wee hours in the morning. He would also provide delivery service.

K Ismail Zeenath Provision Supplier is operated in a traditional manner, and only stopped using the pulley tin can to store loose change five years ago. Other than that, nothing else has changed and the shop still does not have a cashier machine, a surveillance system nor air-conditioning. Mr. Abdul considers himself as the "price

scanner" because he knows all the prices of his goods by heart. Even though he feels that his business would improve if he renovates the shop, he does not feel a pressing need to do.

Having helped out at his father's provision shop as a young boy, Mr. Abdul has witnessed the business boom in the 1970s. According to him, everything was selling well because of the lack of competition from supermarkets. Today, business at the provision shop is no longer the same as it was in the 1970s and the better selling items are drinks, cigarettes, newspapers and phone cards. He stopped selling milk powder because there are too many varieties and he cannot afford to stock all the different brands.

In the past, Mr. Abdul used to know all the customers who patronised the shop. Now, except for a small pool of regular customers, most of his customers are passers-by. He shared that the rise of supermarkets has hurt his business. He added that there used to be five provision shops at his block alone, but they have closed down one by one.

Although he is saddened by the decline of traditional provision shops, Mr. Abdul continues to hold the fort, for a very simple reason – to honour the memory of his father. Mr. Abdul shared that his father had been adamant about appointing him as his successor and even insisted that he studied Mandarin as his second language so that he would be able to do business with the Chinese community. In a more subdued tone, Mr. Abdul shared that it is unlikely that his children would be interested in taking over the provision shop.



▲ The shop front of Kian Seng San Kee (2011).  
Courtesy of Ben Tham Yong Wei

# KIAN SENG SAN KEE

ESTABLISHED IN **1968**

- #01-361, Blk 49, Tanglin Halt Road, Singapore 142049

Opens daily

Operating hours: 8.00 am – 6.00 pm  
and half-day on weekends

Kian Seng San Kee was started by the late Mr. Ong Keng San in 1968 and currently managed by his son, Mr. Ong Eng Huat. The Ong family used to rent the shop and the residential space above it for \$400.

As a boy, Mr. Ong would help out at the provision shop and he only took over the shop's operations in the 1980s after completing his National Service. Currently, his mother assists him with the running of the shop.

In line with the practices of traditional provision shops, Mr. Ong has continued to provide many of the services that the shop has provided in the past. For instance, he still delivers goods to his customers in a van and provides purchase on credit but only to regular customers.

Although Mr. Ong has stopped using a pulley tin can to store his daily takings, he explained that the shop's business volume does not justify the purchase and use of a cashier machine. He also does not require a scanner because he has committed to memory the prices of all the merchandise in the shop.

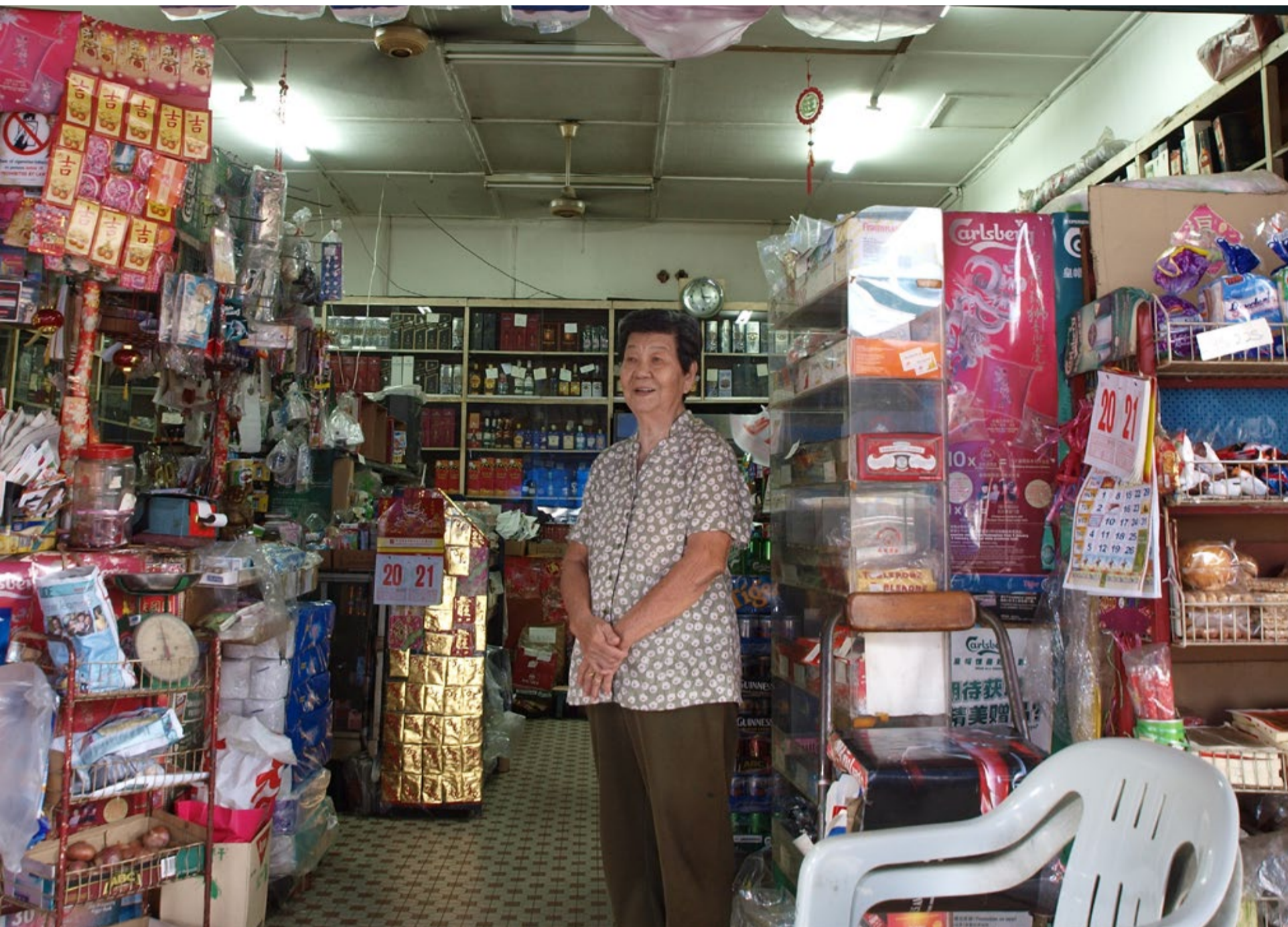
For Mr. Ong, the provision shop business has always been competitive and he is aware that the business is on the decline. He said that he stopped selling milk powder and diapers because of stiff competition from neighbouring medical halls selling similar items. Today, his best-selling items are biscuits and snacks.

Mr. Ong acknowledged that the decline of traditional provision shops is inevitable because of changing times. He is committed to keep his provision shop open and running because he believes he lacks alternative employment choices. Like many traditional provision shops, Mr. Ong has also accepted the fact that he does not have a successor to take over the business when he retires.

Having said that, Mr. Ong is particularly proud of the locally made glass jars in his provision shop which are used to display a wide variety of biscuits for sale. He shared that he made the metal display trolleys himself and that he would not sell any of the jars because they are no longer made in the same manner.



◀ The locally made glass jars at Kian Seng San Kee (2011).  
Courtesy of Alex Yuen Gui Ping



▲ The shop front of Tee Seng Leong Liquor Store (2011).  
Courtesy of Ben Tham Yong Wei

# TEE SENG LEONG LIQUOR STORE

ESTABLISHED IN **1930s**

- 425, Changi Road, Singapore 419868  
Opens daily except for Sundays  
Operating hours: 9.00 am – 10.00 pm

Mdm Chew has been running provision shops since she was 16 years old and she is now 85. Her late husband started Tee Seng Leong Liquor Store in Havelock Road in the 1930s before relocating the shop to Changi Road more than thirty years ago. Mdm Chew is assisted by her daughter, Mdm Tee, for the past twenty years.

Both mother and daughter recalled that their shop in Havelock Road used to be the target of thugs who extorted protection money from them. On many occasions, the thugs would smash their glass panels and damage their goods. Today, both women laugh at the memory of how the coffee powder supplier had to keep replacing the coffee powder jars whenever the thugs paid the provision shop a visit.

In the 1960s, the Tees' provision shop business was brisk and they had to hire additional help. Even when the shop relocated from Havelock Road to Changi

Road, business was still good as there was a large customer base in the Changi area.

However, since the residential area became crowded with private and commercial properties, the Tees' provision shop business has taken a hit and they shared that their business has been slowing down with each passing year. The Tees' customers now consist mainly of passers-by, foreign workers and patrons of the coffee shop next door who buy drinks, cigarettes and phone cards.

Mdm Chew shared that it is very difficult to improve their business because customers today tend to compare the goods offered by provision shops with supermarkets. Mdm Tee, added that she would not give up the business and would continue to keep her mother company and operate the provision shop together.



◀ The interior of Tee Seng Leong Liquor Store (2011).  
Courtesy of Nixon Tang Kwang Lee





Along Joo Chiat Road, there are a few traditional shops still in operation despite the influx of trendy restaurants and bars and one of them is Sin Hoe Tien provision shop which is manned by Mr. Ng Teong Thoon. The shop belongs to his father who is 78 years old and the shop is run by Mr. Ng as well as his elderly parents. The family presently lives above the shop.

Mr. Ng shared that his late grandfather started the business in the late 1920s at the same site and said that in less than twenty years' time, the business would have been in operation for an estimated 100 years.

Mr. Ng said that Sin Hoe Tien had seen better times. As with other traditional provision shops in Singapore, business was brisk in the 1960s and the best selling items were basic necessities such as rice, oil, etc. The shop used to provide delivery service by bicycle or car to customers living in nearby areas. The shop ceased credit purchase in the 1980s when they began to experience delays in payment.

However, with the passing of years, many of Sin Hoe Tien's customers moved out of the Joo Chiat area although the provision shop remained very much the same. More interestingly, they continue to use a pulley tin can and the shop has retained its floor-to-ceiling wall shelves built of solid teak.

The Ngs added that the shop's low business volume simply could not justify the introduction of modern amenities such as air-conditioning. Moreover, they shared that their business had been slowing down over the years. Today, their main customers are passers-by and the better selling merchandise would include cigarettes and drinks.

Still, the Ngs will hold on to the shop and continue with the business as this is the most viable option given their age and qualifications. Having said that, if given a choice, they would want to refurbish their shop and focus on selling items that would earn them better profit margins.

▲ The shop front of Sin Hoe Tien (2011).  
Courtesy of Ben Tham Yong Wei

# SIN HOE TIEN

ESTABLISHED IN **1920s**

- 440, Joo Chiat Road, Singapore 427653  
Opens daily except for Sundays  
Operating hours: 9.15 am – 7.30 pm



◀ The floor-to-ceiling wall shelves at Sin Hoe Tien (2011).  
Courtesy of Nixon Tang Kwang Lee



▲ The shop front of Hup Seng (2011).  
Courtesy of Lester Lai

# HUP SENG

ESTABLISHED IN 1961

- Blk 55, #01-02, Tiong Bahru Road, Singapore 160055  
Opens daily except for Sundays  
Operating hours: 8.00 am – 8.00 pm

Hup Seng (established in 1955) is one of the two traditional provision shops in the Tiong Bahru Estate. It is owned by a husband and wife team – Mr. Goh Chwee, 74 years old, and Mdm Ong Lee, 73 years old.

Mr. Goh used to help out at his father's provision shop at Tanjong Pagar but he set up his own shop in Tiong Bahru in 1955 when he was 18 years old. He remembers paying a rent of \$41.85 per month until he bought over the shop in 1965. Through the years, Mr. Goh and Mdm Ong ran the shop mostly by themselves.

In the past, they used to open from 8am to 8pm and the shop would be closed on Fridays. Today, the shop still operates from 8am to 8pm on weekdays, closes earlier on Saturdays and is closed on Sundays and on selected public holidays. They would also close the shop whenever they have errands to run or when they have appointments with friends.



▲ The interior of Hup Seng (2011).  
Courtesy of Lester Lai

The Gohs have never found the need for a cashier machine, surveillance cameras or any form of modern technology to run their shop. Air-conditioning is out of the question as the shop's current monthly utility bill is about \$400.

Business in the past was good. They used to sell a lot more items than they do today. Like all other provision shops in Singapore at that time, they allowed purchase on credit and Mr. Goh delivered goods to his customers on his bicycle. These days, while he still provides purchase on credit to regular customers, he does not deliver goods anymore.

While the Tiong Bahru Estate has changed little in the eyes of the Gohs, they think their business has changed tremendously since the appearance of supermarkets. They used to sell items mostly to residents but they now sell mostly to passers-by.

Even though business is slowing by the year and they have no successor for their business, the Gohs maintain a cheerful spirit. Their children are all grown up and they are financially independent. Thus, they keep the shop just to pass their days, which they take, one day at a time.



▲ The expansion of business to include a seafood restaurant by Tan Chee Liang provision shop (2011).  
*Courtesy of Benson Lim Peng Song*

# TRADITIONAL PROVISION SHOPS IN PULAU UBIN

Pulau Ubin's provision shops were established in the 1930s and 1940s mainly to serve the needs of the 5,000 to 6,000 residents, as well as the foreign workers who worked in the quarry. The shops would sell fresh goods such as vegetables, and also animal feed required by the farmers on the island.

In the earlier years, shop owners travelled to the mainland to purchase supplies personally and had to ferry their supplies over to the island by themselves because no supplier would deliver to the island. In the 1980s, while business for the provision shops on the mainland was affected by competition from supermarkets, provision shops on Pulau Ubin remained relatively unaffected because of the island's isolated location.

One of the interesting facts about the provision shops on Pulau Ubin lies in the fact that the owners of the provision shops have been neighbours for decades and their shops have remained at the same locations for at least 70 years. Another interesting fact about the provision shops on Pulau Ubin arises from the shared understanding and arrangement between the shop owners that no two shops would be closed at the same time.

All the shops open for business on weekends when business is most brisk due to the weekend holiday makers and tourists who visit the island. On week days, customer volume shrinks substantially, and the shops take turns to rest.



▶ From left to right: Mdm Chew York Kuan of Chew Teck Seng provision shop and Mdm Ng Ngak Heng of Yak Hong provision shop (2011).  
 ◀ *Courtesy of Benson Lim Peng Song*





The variety of goods on display at Chew Teck Seng provision shop (2011).

*Courtesy of Benson Lim Peng Song*

## Characteristics and Evolution of Provision Shops in Pulau Ubin

Like the traditional provision shops in mainland Singapore, all three shop owners in Pulau Ubin shared that the predominant reason for them to keep the business going stemmed from familial obligation to a business that was handed down to them by their late parents.

Each of three provision shops has two generators working alternately to supply

electricity for their business needs and daily use. Fresh water is drawn from wells, although their supply of ice comes from the mainland. For practical reasons, tins of canned food are wrapped with plastic bags to prevent dust from setting in.

Business was severely affected when the quarry closed down in the 1990s, and after most residents moved to the mainland. Today, there remains only about forty residents on the island. Naturally, the sale of daily necessities started to drop drastically and their main customers these days are tourists visiting the island.

The canned products wrapped in plastic bags to prevent dust and rust at Chew Teck Seng provision shop (2011).

*Courtesy of Benson Lim Peng Song*



Diversification of goods sold to include fresh coconuts at Yak Hong provision shop (2011).

*Courtesy of Benson Lim Peng Song*

The three remaining provision shops on Pulau Ubin have, however, adapted to the changing times and adopted new business initiatives. For instance, they started selling coconut juice a few years ago to appeal to tourists. Two of the three remaining provision shops have also ventured into the seafood restaurant business and are doing well.

Mr Tan Hai Lian who operates Tan Chee Liang provision shop in Pulau Ubin which does not have a signboard (2011).

*Courtesy of Benson Lim Peng Song*



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