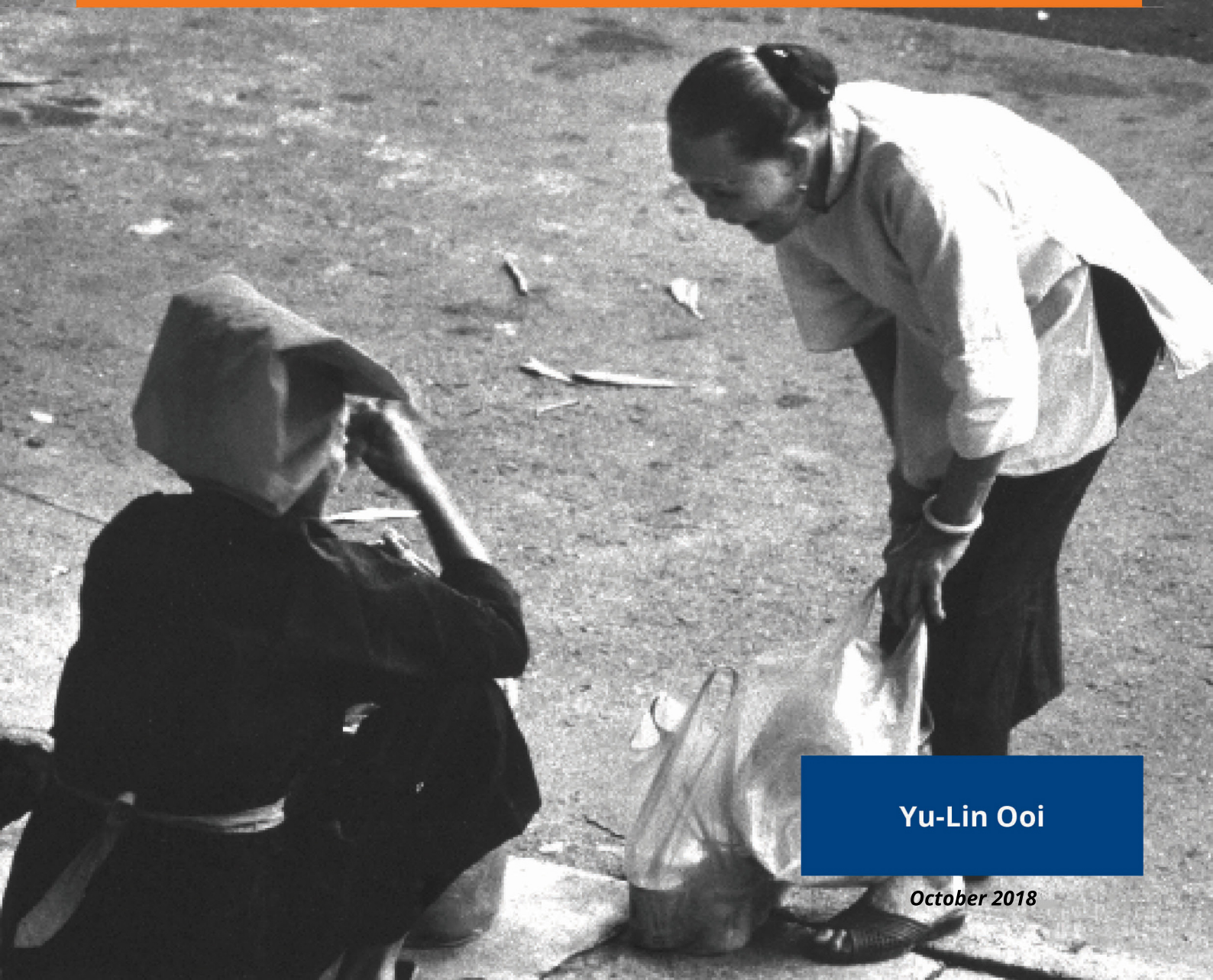


**"The Emergence of Chinese Women
Philanthropists in Singapore, 1900 - 1945:
The Sisterhoods of the Sor Hei (梳起)"**

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Yu-Lin Ooi

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ACSEP

The Asia Centre for Social Entrepreneurship and Philanthropy (ACSEP) is an academic research centre at the National University of Singapore (NUS) Business School, staffed by an international multi-disciplinary research team. Formally established in April 2011, the Centre has embraced a geographic focus spanning 34 nations and special administrative regions across Asia.

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Yu-lin Ooi is Senior Research Consultant with the Asia Centre for Social Entrepreneurship and Philanthropy (ACSEP), documenting the journey of philanthropy in Singapore's social history. In this paper she examines the little-known acts of giving and social constructs in the world of the Cantonese *Sor Hei*, or the women "who bun up their hair." The *Sor Hei* are better known in Singapore as the *Samsui* women and the *Amahs*.

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Executive Summary

In the late 19th century, an extraordinary cohort of unmarried women left their native Chinese shores in groups called sisterhoods, to boldly carve out a life for themselves in distant lands. They did this to earn their own money and be mistresses of their own fates.

Many of these brave women were determined not to be forced into marriage and while remaining celibate became *Sor Hei*, meaning “those who bun up their hair” (the hallmark of married women). In sworn sisterhoods, the *Sor Hei* found work in the British colonies of Singapore and Hong Kong, and became icons in Singapore social history as *Samsui por* (construction workers) and *Amahs* (domestic helpers).

This paper briefly examines how these humble women broke new economic and social ground for Chinese women. It explains why they left Canton to live in the British colonies, and how they survived in these alien lands. It also examines the social constructs and networks that they evolved for their own community, as single women living within larger overseas Chinese migrant groups. We also trace how their financial independence enabled them to become among the first Chinese women diaspora philanthropists.

This study is divided into three parts:

1. The emergence of the *Sor Hei*

This explains how the *Sor Hei* arose out of industrialization in Canton in the late 19th century, when rural Cantonese women first discovered financial independence as silk spinners. Now with earning power, some women then refused their traditional place in society, which was to rely on the provision of a husband. Instead they swore themselves into celibacy and “sisterhoods,” combing their hair into buns, which meant they had seized the status of married women. This technically cast them out of their families as they had broken the conventions of Confucian society. Thus they left for the British colonies of Singapore and Hong Kong, where anyone who wanted to work was welcome.

2. The support systems and social constructs of the *Sor Hei*

This section looks at the ad hoc social networks and constructs the *Sor Hei* created in Singapore to keep their all-important economic independence and that allowed them to live with dignity. We examine their lives as construction workers and *Amahs* and how they became an indispensable part of Singapore’s urban life. We also look at the various communities they created, such as gathering halls and *ku por uk* (retirement homes). Their halls were poignantly, the only place where single women could hang their death-name tablets, and where they knew they would be honoured in the afterlife even though they had not borne children.

3. The *Sor Hei* and philanthropy

The greatest achievement for many *Sor Hei* was the ability to remit money home just like Chinese men, providing not just for the needs of their family but eventually that of their villages. This made them among the first Chinese women diaspora philanthropists. They also gave in kind to others, welcoming widows, disabled children and other single or dislocated women to celebrate festivals in their halls. In the 1930s, the *Sor Hei* supported war relief in China, and in 1940 made headlines by forming an *Amah's* Union, providing employment and protection for the 80,000 other domestics who now worked in Singapore.

Observation

This humble and illiterate group broke new ground for other Chinese women in terms of identity and economic status. Although the extreme measures the *Sor Hei* took to keep their financial independence have since become irrelevant in modern society, their courage and determination have won them a place of pride in Singapore's social history. Today they are remembered as icons of a particular era, representing a tremendous work ethic and unflinching courage in the face of enormous odds.



***Amahs Madam Tan Ah Kng and Madam Tan Ah Say
in retirement, Singapore, c. 1995***

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The Emergence of Chinese Women Philanthropists in Singapore, 1900-1945

Singapore - A city of migrants

Founded in 1819 by the British and swiftly becoming a busy trading centre, Singapore remained largely a bachelor community of many races well up till the end of the late 19th century. It was only after Singapore attained Crown Colony status in 1867² that the number of female migrants slowly increased, encouraged by a more stable living environment created by the introduction of a Governor, laws, a judiciary, and police.

Chinese women formed the majority of these female migrants. In 1901, 33,649 of the 53,000 women in Singapore were Chinese, with the number of Chinese women eventually making up one third of the population in the last census before World War II (Vlieland, 1932).

The Position of Chinese Women in Traditional Philanthropy

With regard to philanthropic activity, data is very sparse on the contributions of these early migrant women. This is in stark contrast to the wealth of information available on the charitable contributions of migrant Chinese men in the same era.

Our study concluded that this lack resulted from the fact that Chinese women had, over the centuries, become negated in the realm of traditional Confucian philanthropy, with their role in giving codified as informal and indirect. As men either earned or owned wealth, they became the formal face of public philanthropy. Mechanisms, forms of giving and recognition for contributing, consequently evolved around them.

Chinese Female Population In Singapore, 1891-1947

Year	Total Population	Total Chinese Population	Total Number Of Chinese Females	Ratio Of Chinese Males Per 1,000 Chinese Females
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. Singapore.

Nathan, JE, (1922), Vlieland (1932), Del Tufo (1948), Arumainathan, P, (1973).

² In its first years, Singapore was rather indifferently administered by the Presidency of Bengal in British India. Agitation by the growing body of merchants for better oversight eventually led to Crown Colony status for Singapore, under direct administration by Whitehall, London, in 1867.

This world view was carried over with migration to Singapore, where most Chinese women continued to live circumscribed lives, separated from society and restricted to family and home, some even up till the 1930s. The contributions they made, and help they gave quietly to others went unnoticed and undocumented. It was simply “women’s work” to ensure the survival of the family, just as it had always been.

Emerging from Invisibility

The negation of women’s contributions would gradually alter of course. The early 20th century – with its wars, political upheavals, media, and the education of women – would radically change the status and recognition of women in society. Chinese women would soon surge to prominence with the struggle for Nationalism in China, while in Singapore, a small group of educated, wealthy Chinese women became daring early adopters of mainly British philanthropic causes, opening the way for other Asian women to play a role in public giving³.

But pre-dating these 20th century ladies in philanthropy were the intrepid, poor women called *Sor Hei*. This group emerged in China in the late 19th century, even while their society was still defined by Confucianism.

The *Sor Hei* were women who seized financial independence when a woman working for a wage was still a social aberration. This humble and illiterate group not only broke new ground for other Chinese women in terms of identity and economic status, they were also among the first Chinese women to send money home in support of their families, remitting money to China like thousands of overseas Chinese men and sending money to aid Chinese who fell victim to the Sino-Japanese War. They are thus among the first documented women philanthropists in the Chinese diaspora.

³ These were mainly Chinese women educated at home, or Straits Chinese women, whose husbands advocated change and English education for women, they being themselves graduates of British universities.

The Evolution of the *Sor Hei* (Those who comb up their hair)

The sisterhoods of the *Sor Hei* were an unexpected outcome of the rise of industrialization in late 19th century China. Modernised sericulture brought employment to poor women in the Pearl River Delta north of Hong Kong (Addison, 2016). For the first time in millennia, Chinese women earned real wages. A new class of financially independent women was born.

The ancient Confucian social order had no category for such women, and society at large could not comprehend how they who had previously been economic chattels had suddenly transmogrified into those who now wielded economic power.⁴ For two thousand years, a woman had been valued solely for her ability to bear sons - a consequence of the cult of ancestor worship where a soul's survival in the afterlife depended on continual offerings by descendants of the male bloodline. Confucius had further entombed women in this lowly position when he said:

"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).

Having tasted the liberty that earning power gave them, more than a few Cantonese women refused to return to their former station in

life, one that dictated that women must rely on marriage and the provision of men for survival.

Sor Hei - Symbolising the Power to Choose

To keep this newfound freedom, these women defiantly set themselves apart from all that was known, and, having no alternative cultural or linguistic definition for their new status, took on the class and rank of a married woman, without actually entering into marriage themselves, many taking vows of celibacy as well.

Ceremonially combing their hair into buns (*Sor Hei*) the symbol of those married, as society at that time dictated, they had to leave their families.⁵ It is anecdotally recounted that the combing of hair took place not in the company of one's mother and one's sisters as was customarily done, but instead in the presence of others who had also taken the step to become *Sor Hei*.⁶ These were often women of the same village, who now called themselves "sworn sisters," or *Jin Lan Jie Mei* (金兰姐妹 Golden Orchid Sisters). Together they now formed a sisterhood.

In actuality a few *Sor Hei* did go on with previously arranged marriages, but refused to enter into conjugal relations, or *M Lok Ka*⁷ (不落家). It is

⁴ The Confucian social order had four classes - at the top were the gentry/scholars, then peasants (who provided food), then artisans (who made goods), and lastly the merchants, who dealt in the greedy and immoral realm of profit-making from others' hard work. Women did not enter into this classification - they were recognised in the Confucian social hierarchy as wives, but were otherwise legal & economic nonentities. (Ooi, 1981)

⁵ Girls were often match-made to boys from other villages, and once married, had to leave home to live in a village with another surname & lineage. Their own parents became the "outside family" and they might never see them again.

⁶ As with daughters leaving the house, blessings such as these would be called out at each stroke of the comb: First for blessing (good fortune), second for longevity, third for peace, fourth for calm, fifth for freedom, sixth for golden sisters love, seventh for good luck, eighth for being free from disasters (一梳福, 二梳寿, 三梳平安, 四梳静心, 五梳自在, 六梳金兰姐妹相爱, 七梳大吉大利, 八梳无灾).

⁷ Loosely translated from Cantonese as refusing to settle in a husband's house - a euphemism for refusing to enter the marriage bed.

again anecdotally told that some even bought another woman to take their place as a surrogate wife, specifying that any children born would call the *Sor Hei* “mother”⁸.

A wage in some instances therefore became a much more potent symbol than that of economic exchange - it gave a woman the ability to enforce incremental social changes within her purview, and even the facility to buy the safety of her soul in the afterlife. Through this wage a woman could now legitimately place her spirit tablet on a husband’s ancestral altar, and be assured that she too would receive honour and care by his descendants in the future.

The Support Systems of the Sisterhoods

There was a high personal price to pay for these freedoms. Society dictated that married women could not reside with their parents. Wrenched from their traditional place in society and the support of kin, the *Sor Hei* turned to the sisterhoods to fill the void.

The sisterhoods were therefore social constructs created out of determination and need, without the formal structure or continuity of the clan or guild systems already embedded in Chinese society. They were instead an iteration of these mutual aid groups, offering the most important aspects of survival to these dislocated women – shelter, help in need, community, spiritual solace, cultural continuity, and - most crucially - an environment that allowed one to carry on working.

Sisterhoods provided material and social safety nets, surrogate family, and the solace of a com-

munity where one belonged. It was here also that one could continue the key rites of passage essential to maintaining one’s ethnic and dialect group identity, even when transplanted to a new social milieu. Below are some of the known ways in which the sisterhood system created its own society and gave support to the *Sor Hei*.

1. An Introduction to Work Beyond China

By the early 20th century, the sisterhoods had developed a business network flung across South-east Asia, anchored by bold women who had crossed the seas to British Singapore and Hong Kong⁹. Some would return to their home villages and treat the whole community to a lavish feast – paid for with their own money.

This made a huge impression on their former neighbours, who then began to consider working in Southeast Asia as a real possibility for themselves¹⁰. In the British colonies anyone who wanted to work – man or woman - was welcome. As such, when the silk industry crashed, scores of women left China together in search of a better future in these alien worlds.

Despite the rarity of Chinese women travelling overseas,¹¹ a reasonably efficient agency system evolved through which a *Sor Hei* could sail to Malaya, Singapore, or Hong Kong and find herself a job. The system was very much like that which took coolies across the world, and brought money back home to China. The journey was made with the help of women from one’s own district experienced in travel, called *Suay Hak* (水客 water workers.) These women arranged passage and met one upon arrival, suggested lodgings with

⁸ The practice of buying women as slaves (妹仔 Mui Tsai) was endemic in Chinese society, and was practised in Singapore migrant society as well. This so appalled the British that an Ordinance forbidding it in the colony was passed in 1933, although the actual practice of slavery did not peter out until after World War II.

⁹ At the presentation of this paper in Taipei, the Taiwanese audience noted that *Sor Hei* were unknown in Taiwan. It was suggested that these early Chinese women would not have chosen to work in Taiwan as the world view there would have been the same as they had faced at home, whereas the British colonies had no pre-existing gender bar to those wanting to work there.

¹⁰ As recounted to the author by her own Amah, Madam Tan Ah Kng, who thus decided herself to go the Straits Settlements to find work.

¹¹ Emigration by Chinese women was forbidden under the Qing Dynasty. Men could find work overseas but their womenfolk were held as collateral and to ensure that remittances brought money back into China.

others of the same districts, and then passed one on to professional local job agents called *Jin Yan Kun* (荐人馆) the houses of recommendation.

2. Encouraging New Economic Identities: *Samsui* Women and *Amahs*

The *Jin Yan Kun* sent women on to every kind of trade up and down British Malaya – from farming, plantation work, and the booming tin mining industry in Perak; to domestic and construction work in Singapore. It was common practice to place women from the same districts together, and certain occupations became the preserve of particular groups.¹²

Hardy women from the farmlands of *Shan Sui* (三水) district were preferred as labourers and washerwomen in Singapore, where they came to be called “*Samsui Women*” (红头巾) – instantly recognisable in their complex red head scarves and blue tunics, wearing makeshift shoes from rubber tyres, scrubbing clothes, or carrying enormous loads of bricks and lumber.¹³ Anecdotally the *Samsui* were tough, strong minded, and without self-pity, working long hours into their old age. They helped build Singapore’s tallest building in 1954 and even the Mandarin Hotel, accepted as part of the construction industry right up till the 1970s. As a group, the *Samsui* kept to themselves, and were seen less in society than those who had become domestics.

Those who became domestic workers were considered more “urban,” and usually came from *Shun Tak* (顺德) and *Dong Kun* (东莞) districts. They were identified by their plain black silk pants and *white samfoo* (衫裤) as they clattered about the streets of Singapore wearing red clogs with their hair pinned tightly in those buns.

This group developed their own internal hierarchy of kitchen and house maids, cooks, housekeepers, and nannies. The latter were considered the top rank and were called *Amahs* (阿妈) by members of every race, and became so much a fixture of local society that they were featured in newspapers and in publications.¹⁴ *Amah* is a peculiarly British colonial term for nursemaid,¹⁵ and was proudly accepted by the *Sor Hei* domestics as their new honorific.¹⁶ Famously loyal and reliable, they soon became a common sight in Singapore, going about the streets with heavy baskets of groceries, or pushing very English prams in the evenings. *Amahs* lived with their employers and were known to never take days off, except to celebrate rites and festivals perhaps once or twice a year.



Amah with baby c.1935

Mrs J. A. Bennett Collection, Courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore

¹² See Appendix A.

¹³ A member of Singapore’s Eurasian community, Mark V. Rankine, recalls that as a child, he had a *Samsui* washerwoman who greeted him in English, addressing him as “Master Mark.” She had a strongly protective air about her, and gold teeth.

¹⁴ See *Amahs raise \$5000 for China Relief* (1937, 9 October). *The Straits Times*, Page 12. The writer Somerset Maugham, who stayed in Singapore, refers to *Amahs* frequently, particularly in his novel *East of Suez*.

¹⁵ It is thought that the term derives from Anglo-Indian society and was used throughout the colonial era.

¹⁶ In Mandarin, the idea of the *Amah* is now loosely personified in the term *Majie* (妈姐) although the domestic and caregiving nature of their work does not translate clearly with this terminology.



Coolie Houses in Chinatown, Singapore c.1920

Courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore

3. Providing Shelter and Cultural Continuity

a. *Coolie Fong - Surrogate Families*

While some domestics found lodgings with their employers, other *Sor Hei* had to find an assured place to live in these new lands teeming with strangers. Sisterhoods would therefore pool their wages for a rented room in streets around Chinatown. These were colloquially called *Coolie Fong* (估俚房 coolie house), and the quarters were really very poor.¹⁷ Such a place was generally a shop house room with as many as nine wooden bunk beds hammered into the walls where one could keep one's things.¹⁸ Each such bed had its own address, to which letters from home could be sent.

The *Coolie Fong* were more than just a place to stay - they were also where women could go if they had lost their jobs, were taken ill, or had fallen on hard times. It was here that they could taste some home cooking, speak their own dialect, seek advice, and enjoy the community of sworn sisters. One sister would be unofficially chosen as head of the sisterhood, and she would decide when the women would meet, gather the rent for their room, and look to the general well-being of the group.

While Samsui women might go home to these bunks each night, for most *Amahs*, the *Coolie Fong* were off-duty venues to transact business, such as visiting professional letter writers who would send greetings to one's family, along with hard-earned money. How remittances got back to one's home varied greatly - some might be sent with trusted friends; others through remittance houses, agents in well-known restaurants or provision stores with contacts in one's home

¹⁷ The term "coolie" is derived from the Hindi word for "baggage handler" and came to be a part of Singapore patois for "labourer."

¹⁸ The author visited such a room in Temple Street in Chinatown as the lucky guest of her Amah Madam Tan, politely called Ah Kng Che; "che" being the Hokkien dialect honorific for "older sister." The other Amahs in the sisterhood were hospitable and generous and pressed sweets upon their little guest and tried to put jade bangles on her wrists - a show of great affection. Their room was simply furnished with bunk beds of planking and bamboo sleeping mats, bamboo hand fans, calendars with auspicious dates, all accessed by a steep staircase.

town; yet others went through a postal system that had dedicated delivery men.

Coolie Fong were also places to gather for key celebrations like Chinese New Year and festivals special to women, like the feast days of *Kuan Yin* (观音 the Chinese goddess of mercy), and the private women's festival of *Chat Jeh* (七姐), celebrated on the seventh day of the seventh month to the Seven Fairies, where offerings included powder and rouge. Yet another feast day that was always honoured was *Cheng Beng* (清明), the day when the dead are remembered.

b. Ku Por Uk (姑婆屋) - Retirement Homes

Technically still outcast from their families, the pragmatic *Sor Hei* also put away funds towards building retirement houses or *Ku Por Uk* (*Great-aunt's homes*) for their old age. While some *Sor Hei* sent money to build such homes in China, a number were built in Singapore. Two were still known to be in use at the time of writing with some very elderly ladies in residence – the *Fei Xia Jing She* (飞霞精舍) Old Folks Home and Temple, and another in the area of Katong.

Ku Por Uk were places of safety for one's old age and many elderly *Sor Hei* appreciated the shelter these homes provided them when they stopped working. Other early Chinese migrant women without community in Singapore were not so lucky. When they became too old to work, some had no choice but to see out their lives in dreaded rented spaces above coffin makers - sad hospice-like places colloquially called "death parlours," on a street called Sago Road in Chinatown.

The hardy old ladies faced these grim circumstances with gallows humour. A favourite joke among



Samsui Woman, c. 1970

Kouo Shang Wei Collection, Courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore

them was "You can steal everything, but leave my coffin money;" and that death was merely "... a change of address from upstairs to downstairs."¹⁹

c. Geo-Topographical Associations Replacing Clan (lineage) Halls (祠堂) for Community and Rites of Passage

Although the *Sor Hei* became an integral part of colonial life, multi-racial Singapore was ultimately still not home, and the sisterhood structures

¹⁹ Ms Ng Sin Yue in conversation with Mr Tan Peng Kwong, who lived in Sago Lane.

created a welcome facsimile of Chinese society for them when they emerged from the world of the “*Mems*,” “*Towkays*,” and “*Tuans*.”²⁰ Living in a sisterhood allowed one to recall one’s identity as a Chinese woman, and advance through life with dignity, acknowledging the key Chinese rites of passage – “*Sheng Lao Bing Si*” (生老病死 birth, aging, sickness, death), without the need for family²¹.

Perhaps the most important rite of passage was the last in life. An honourable burial and decent send-off, and the ritual care of one’s soul in the years following remaining a precious hope that many migrant Chinese clung tenaciously to.²² To die unknown and unmourned was a hideous fate – it would doom one to become a hungry ghost, lost to drift unprovided for in the spirit realm.

Ancestor worship decreed that the ideal caregivers of one’s spirit should be one’s own progeny, who should offer food and make sacrifices for one’s wellbeing at home altars, or in purpose-built ancestral²³ or clan halls. In China and in Singapore however, women were generally unseen in such halls, which remained the domain of men,²⁴ and the single woman who died childless was an object of pity.

In Singapore, the sisters therefore once again broke with tradition and created their own women’s associations. Membership was not based on lineage, but on criteria such as a common language, district, or birthplace. One such example is the *Shun Tak* Association in Duxton Hill, which was started in 1948. It welcomed all from *Shun Tak* district, and fulfilled the same functions as the clan halls,

providing the celebration of rites and festivals, community, deity worship, and most significantly, a safe place to hang the precious wooden tablet carved with one’s name. This was said to enclose a part of one’s spirit upon death.

To have one’s name thus remembered became a privilege that poor unmarried women could now enjoy. It was a great comfort to know that after death, there would be people who would perform the needed rites on auspicious days, such that one would not go hungry in the after world.

4. Providing Basic Financial Systems: Tontines

The sisters are also known to have adopted a rather vaguely structured arrangement of funding for emergencies called a *tontine*, popular among women in Singapore of all races in the days before the Japanese Occupation. There were few banks available to them and this was a banking and insurance system combined.

Money was pooled at intervals, and anyone could borrow from that fund at need. The system was somewhat flawed in that the interest rate for repayment was randomly picked by a different person each time money was borrowed, and it was not unknown for the holder of funds to disappear altogether with everyone’s money. Despite these vagaries, this simple lending system became so popular in Singapore that neighbours and housewives in the vicinity would also take part in it until proper savings banks for residents were established.

²⁰ “Mem” was the Malay word for Madam, while “towkay” and “Tuan” were Hokkien and Malay for “Sir” or “Boss,” terms used generally in Singapore across the race groups in colonial society.

²¹ Reconstructed from interviews with Amahs over the course of several years by Ng Sin Yue, Ooi Yu-lin and as recounted in *Sisters of Silk*. Addison (2015).

²² In 1934, various news articles noted that the Chinese placed such value on death rites such that many “funeral associations” had sprung up to help finance the enormous amounts spent on giving the dead a grand burial.

²³ Ancestral Halls in China were the abode of men. Women were never seen there except to be judged for adultery or some other crime. Families without male progeny or single women could not hang their spirit tablets in these halls (Ng S.Y. 2017)

²⁴ The large clan halls in Singapore did of course have women present, as clan halls were where marriages took place. The contributions of women, however, were never recognised or recorded until the 1950s (Fan, 2004).

Philanthropy and the *Sor Hei* in Colonial Singapore

In traditional Chinese society, the structure and validity of philanthropy was in giving first for the survival of one's kin and clan, only after which would aid flow outward to others (Menkoff, 2009). Giving in public was always done by men, and helping in greater causes such as famine relief was very much the domain of the gentry, who had wealth to spare.²⁵

In British Singapore however, it was decided by foreign policy that the colonial government should deliberately encourage successful men of all races to give generously and publicly towards improving Singapore's infrastructure, rewarding them in return with power in society and positions in government. The elite were called on to donate towards the building of bridges, roads, schools, clinics and charitable causes, for the improvement of civil society and the well-being of all.

That everyone could play a part in building up a society and have a responsibility towards others outside the family was a completely new concept to many migrants. It introduced the British philanthropic ideal²⁶ in very real terms to new settlers in Singapore.

All parties gained from participating in these causes. The government identified the richest and most forward-thinking men in each ethnic group as suitable de facto leaders. Such men in turn gained recognition and tacit leadership of

their own communities – a position that they might otherwise not have gained, given that in most Asian cultures leadership traditionally defaulted to the most senior in the group, not the most dynamic.

An unexpected result of this policy was that the wives of these successful men began to visibly emerge to support their husbands at dinners, balls, and charitable fundraisers. The very sight of Asian women appearing in public caused a great stir in local society in 1915, and put new ideas in the heads of the masses.²⁷

The majority of migrant women however, were still to remain invisible in the arena of public giving for a few decades more. But at quite the other end of the economic scale, unnoticed by the public, the *Sor Hei* were determined to do their own part in helping others.

1. Diaspora Philanthropy

Even far overseas, the obligation of the individual to provide for the family was deeply felt by all migrant Chinese, and the *Sor Hei* took this responsibility seriously. They made it their duty to remit money to families regularly, who suddenly found them to be the most acceptable of daughters even after having technically cast them out forever.

²⁵ Peterson, G. (2005) *Merchant philanthropy was, until the late 19th century, hardly acknowledged in status-bound China, such that merchants would often give towards the education of their sons, so at least the next generation could progress up the social ladder. It was not until the Opium Wars that the Chinese realised that merchants, with their knowledge of the West, might be of value to society and began to give them recognition and honour.*

²⁶ The "British Philanthropic Ideal" has been described as a peculiarly British world view that the Englishman's right and duty was to improve the lot of others less fortunate than himself, a conviction arising from values gained from the Reformation through to the Period of Enlightenment (Halstead 1983).

²⁷ In a shocking display of independence and patriotism, wives of prominent local men raised funds for the gift of a War Plane for the British war effort in 1916. The plane was called "Women of Malaya No.27" and not only brought local women into the public eye, but highlighted a new consciousness of citizenship and loyalty to the British nation and the need to a participate as a body politic. "Malayan aircraft fund gift from Chinese ladies." (1916, April 22). *The Straits Times*, p. 10.

Month by month, *Sor Hei* would send as much as Straits \$2 home - half or more of the small wage they earned²⁸ - with remittances continuing steadily for decades. These tiny amounts were as nothing compared to the thousands sent by migrant men-turned-wealthy as merchants or compradors, but it was legally earned and each cent was counted out with pride. The *Sor Hei* are thus among Singapore's earliest known Chinese women diaspora philanthropists (Peterson, 2005). These wages were sent home accompanied by letters written in grandiose terms by professional letter writers.²⁹

Diaspora remittances in Asia can be considered philanthropy, as they provided for the needs not just of one's immediate family, but flowed out to support unknown relatives, their spouses, their children and even to buy essential infrastructure for the village.

Sor Hei sent back enough money to build houses for themselves and others, repair wells and roads, pay for weddings, fund schooling, buy farmland and stock, and later radios, televisions, and even jewellery for unseen babies of distant relatives who now laid claim to kinship. In the terrible years of the Sino-Japanese war, remittances were a desperate source of support and when the Japanese Occupation of Singapore halted the flow of money, recent interviews reveal that families in China actually starved to death for lack of the precious funds from Southeast Asia.³⁰

It is a sad truth that despite years of servitude and provision, some old *Sor Hei* received brutal



Sending news home with the help of a professional letter writer, c.1934

Courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore

receptions upon their return to the very families they had been supporting for years. One old *Amah* had to give up the home she had slaved towards, as there was no room left for her in it. Another *Amah* was made destitute by her nephew, who stole all her savings on her return. She tried to end her life but was rescued, and lived to warn her sworn sisters still in Singapore.³¹

²⁸ It is estimated that *Amahs* earned Straits \$2-\$4 a month, while *Samsui* women earned even less. The price of a bowl of noodles then was 3 Straits cents. The cost of meals and living expenses is documented in "Ten thousand Indians down tools in Singapore." (1936, 1 December). Singapore: *Malaya Tribune*, pg 12

²⁹ An elaborate and well-defined system existed for the remitting of money from migrants to China. The money sent home would not actually be enclosed in one's letters, but would be held in trust by a remittance agency, friend, bank, or famous shop who would actually use the money as investments. In China, a branch of that facility would disburse the funds, which would then be delivered with one's letters to one's family. The postal service used men dressed in distinctive clothing and armed with an umbrella. It was a matter of honour among thieves that such mailmen remain unharmed, as they were the life blood of China. (Taken from an anecdotal account by Miss Ng Sin Yue).

³⁰ Singh (1984) pg 4.

³¹ Taken from the recollections of *Amah* Madam Tan Ah Kng and accounts of her sisterhood. It was such stories of ingratitude that prompted many local families to persuade their beloved *Amahs* to stay in Singapore and not return to the shock of post-Cultural Revolution China.

2. Giving in Kind

Apart from remittances, it is recounted that *Sor Hei* gave occasional small donations to temples and some clan halls in Singapore, but it is not known whether these donations were for temple upkeep or in gratitude for answered prayers.³² The matter of giving was also so private that an exact dollar amount of any donations would not be revealed to researchers during interviews.

Sor Hei would also give in time and in kind - volunteering on occasion in their own places of worship in a very low-key fashion; for example buying and cooking food for deity offerings, then sharing these as a meal with others in the temple. On special days, vegetarian dishes were prepared in honour of their chosen deity, *Kuan Yin*, and the *Sor Hei* would welcome others from their districts to enjoy the day together.

3. Providing Refuge and Community

Given their ambivalent position in traditional migrant society, the *Sor Hei* also started other places of community, in particular *Tsai Tong* (齋堂 vegetarian halls), where *Tsai Ku* (齋姑 vegetarian aunts) lived. These were associations as well as residence halls, where the most senior of the sisterhoods might live.³³

Other women were welcome - single women and widows found acceptance there. Young widows in particular were known to frequent these halls, as those whose husbands died young were considered outsiders and unlucky to his family. It is also known that at least one disabled child was cared for in a *Tsai Tong* before a social service system was established in Singapore.³⁴

4. Raising Funds for War Relief

The *Tsai Tong* also became centres for networking between sisterhoods across Asia. Women kept up-to-date with world events through flows of visitors who included Buddhist nuns and the new feminists, and when the Second Sino-Japanese War erupted in 1937, *Sor Hei* became passionately involved, rallying to raise war relief alongside migrant Chinese all over the world.

In 1937, in two most unusual public displays, *Amahs* came together to raise funds in public. 600 Cantonese *Amahs* first organised a fundraiser and sent their contributions as part of the overall funding from Southeast Asia, followed by a second



The Happy Lotus Tsai Tong (Vegetarian Hall) c.2016

³² When searching for the contributions of women to clan halls, it was found that clans had kept no records of the contributions of women before World War II. If there were any carved tablets commemorating women at all, researchers were told to go and hunt for them – as they might possibly be hung on “on some wall, somewhere.”

³³ Such halls were started in Qing-era China, as a place for pious Buddhist women to gather, they being excluded from Confucian activities in the larger halls.

³⁴ Anecdotal accounts confirm that the *Tsai Tong* were safety nets and refuges for those who were neglected by society. Some halls still provide this service in Singapore today.

event very much like a benefit concert. The *Amahs* paid for a *Wayang* (Malay for traditional opera), during which they donated their own jewellery, and each gave a personal gift of a costly Straits \$5 to the China Relief Fund. These efforts garnered an extraordinary sum of Straits \$5000.³⁵ The amount sent to China from Singapore Chinese between 1937 and 1939 would eventually surpass Straits \$4,569,742,³⁶ although the real amount sent through informal and other avenues remains unknown.

Support for what was now called the China Relief Fund was so strong that in 1940, two hundred *Amahs* formed a Cantonese Women's Mutual Help Society to organise their disparate war relief efforts. Ever practical, the "Amah's Union" also united the now 80,000 maidservants and *Amahs* working in Singapore, providing an employment service for those out of work. The Society's inauguration was celebrated with a grand dinner, reported in Singapore's largest newspaper.³⁷

In just a few decades, *Amahs* had gained recognition as valued entities in Singapore society and themselves a greater understanding of the world in multi-cultural colonial society. An account in 1938 of the celebration of Women's Day in Singapore illustrates how far the *Sor Hei* had come. The *Malaya Tribune* writes:

"A Chinese Amah, speaking extempore and without hesitation, delivered one of the many stirring speeches made at a meeting of Chinese women and girls held at the Palace Theatre Eu Tong Sen Street... to celebrate the International Woman's Day."³⁸

With the fall of the Qing, Chinese women across the world now had a very different idea of just how much they could contribute to society, and it is not surprising that the *Sor Hei* were a respected voice in the push towards female emancipation.

Discussion

Although the *Sor Hei* existed for an estimated six decades only, they were an extraordinary example of women who were willing to give up everything they knew of society and security for the right to decide their own fates.

The wage that they could now earn became a powerful symbol of so much more than financial exchange. It offered freedom to live without depending on a man to provide for one, and access to the power to earn and pay for life-sustaining food and shelter. This not only elevated the intrinsic value of a woman, it also gave her the gift of choice.

We do not know how well the *Sor Hei* would have fared left within the confines of Confucian China, but their recognition as wage-earners and contributors to the economy can definitely be attributed to their timely move to the British colonies. In Singapore they were accepted at face value and for the skills they provided. Here working women were not outcasts, but a welcome addition to the economy. The sisterhoods, so defiant in Chinese communities, were, to other strangers in the land, just another ethnic group with its own peculiarities, instantly absorbed without comment in the constantly shifting landscape of multi-racial Singapore.

In retrospect, the unique social construct of the *Sor Hei* sisterhoods was viable only in that era of history – a time while China was still ruled by the Confucian world view, and women had not yet burst the boundaries of millenia through the Chinese Revolution. In that particular age, the sisterhoods were an essential refuge, providing a parallel society allowing the *Sor Hei* to survive in a strange world and to retain their identities as Chinese women.

³⁵ *Amahs raise \$5000 for China relief (1937, 9 October). The Straits Times, Page 12.*

³⁶ *Malayan gifts to China acknowledged (1939, 26 May). The Straits Times, Page 13. The actual amount that overseas Chinese from Singapore sent to China is actually unknown - some accounts put the sum as high as Straits \$50,000,000.*

³⁷ *Singapore Amahs Form a Union.(1940, 11 February). The Straits Times, pg 7.*

³⁸ *Woman's Day in Singapore. Malaya Tribune, 9 March 1938, Page 12.*

Study: An Amah's Life³⁹



Amah Tan Ah Kng in Singapore c. 1946

Despite the separation from their families, the *Amahs* in our study recounted lives rich with experience, sometimes with the surprise of unlooked for affection by entire families of all races and several generations of children.

As was previously noted, *Amahs* lived with their employers, who might be European colonial families, or just as likely Chinese, Straits Chinese, Indian, Eurasian, Parsi, or Jewish. One household in colonial times sometimes even had one *Amah* for each child, who would protect her charge fiercely against others in the scrum for food at dinner.⁴⁰

Besides being nannies, *Amahs* rose up the ranks to run a whole household. Many became acculturated, learning how to cook foreign cui-

sines, from English roasts to keeping Kosher. They kept house according to different ethnic preferences, prepared festivals and food for religions not their own, and even mixed drinks for cocktail parties.

Amahs took their responsibilities as seriously as their vows, with a strict code of honour and service. The author's own *Amah* Tan Ah Kng (邓亚劲), while working in Malaya in the 1940s was babysitting when the Japanese bombed the city. She ran out of the house with the baby, losing everything as she did so, but saving that baby's life.

Madam Tan then moved on to be a nanny for a Straits Chinese Anglican pastor in Penang, and became a fixture in his extended family. On

(continued on next page)

³⁹ Reconstructed from interviews with Madam Tan Ah Kng, Madam Tan Ah Say, Madam Ah Yen, 1990-2008.

⁴⁰ As recounted by Mrs Alice Chua, who as a child in the 1930s, lived among many cousins, each with their own *Amah*.



***Mdm Tan Ah Kng in the background
with her "Towkay's" mother
at a prize giving, Singapore c. 1954***

his departure for Australia, Madam Tan looked after the children of two more of his sisters, eventually travelling to Singapore with them. She was delighted to see three generations of children grow up under her watchful eye.

By the age of 90, Madam Tan had acquired multiple languages - the Straits Chinese Hokkien patois, Bazaar Malay for marketing (an early Singapore lingua franca), some English for the tradesmen, Mandarin (to enjoy new television dramas), Teochew to chat with the washer-woman, and enough Tamil to instruct the gardener. The dogs, however, were scolded in her native Cantonese.

She wore her white silk samfoo until her tailor died, but could only be persuaded to exchange that for a "modern" blouse in muted colours. The infamous hair bun was eventually given up for a perm and a bob, but only because her other sisters had led by example.

Madam Tan became a protected member of the family she had served, and while family

members might travel the world, there was always a sense of safety in that she would always be there to come home to. As she grew older, she and other beloved *Amahs* in her sisterhood found themselves now provided with their own rooms in which to retire, persuaded by anxious employers to remain in Singapore rather than return to an unknown China and an unknown fate.

Despite a stoic outlook and absolutely no outward displays of physical affection, the unspoken devotion of these women was often recognised for what it was, and frequently reciprocated in the currency they understood - with money, shelter, food, care, and the assurance that they would be honoured in death.



***Madam Tan with bobbed hair,
and one of the third generation of children
she looked after, c.1988***

Conclusion

Most of Singapore's *Sor Hei* have now died, taking their unique lifestyle with them. The children they nurtured and the families they supported have all overtaken them as wage-earning men and women themselves. Their idiosyncratic lifestyle that defied a world view has become unnecessary today.

We were grateful to have been able to document the histories of just some of these women, although we know much has gone untold, regrets proudly unspoken, and hundreds have passed on without a trace. In spite of the circumstances that forced them to choose a separate path, the *Sor Hei* have become icons in Singapore's social history. The faithful *Amahs* and doughty *Samsui* are representative of old Singapore, with their strong work ethic and determination to succeed.

They were Chinese women who seized financial independence in the face of two thousand years of economic subjugation, creating a niche and valued identities for themselves, against the odds.⁴¹

⁴¹ In discussion at the presentation of this paper, it was noted that in Taiwan there is a new trend emerging of educated, wealthy single women choosing to become Buddhist nuns. Their story has some parallels to that of the *Sor Hei* in that the apparent explanation for this phenomena is that, as singles, women are considered the least in Taiwan's still Confucian families, whilst on becoming nuns, they immediately become a source of pride to their parents and are recognized as leaders by all. Some of them live in Tsai Tong.

Appendices

A. Chinese Female Immigration Into Singapore, 1890-1949

Year	Total Number Of Immigrants To Singapore	Number Of Chinese Female Immigrants	% Chinese Female Immigrants
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	17.7
1930	Immigration Restriction Act passed, limiting the number of Chinese male immigrants to Singapore but giving Chinese females unrestricted access.		
1930	242,139	42,896	17.72
1949	96,449	16,029	16.62

Sources:

Saw Swee Hock, *Annual Department Reports of the Straits Settlements for the years 1916, 1920, 1949*

B. Chinese Women In Singapore's Workforce, 1921-1980

Industry	Year 1921	Year 1931	Year 1947	Year 1957	Year 1970	Year 1980
Agriculture	2,220	1,462	3,026	13,534	4,679	2,923
Mining, Manufacture, Construction, Utilities	1,535	2,109	5,794	13,983	47,385	115,680
Transport & Communications	3	49	353	747	3,213	14,697
Commerce, Finance, Banking	1,089	1,125	5,200	11,074	41,704	81,301
Personal Services, Domestic	8,525	7,303	17,791	25,317	49,455	32,892
Government, Public Services, Defence	0	5	6	11,420		88,673
Professionals	609	921	3,051	6,248		
Administration, Clerical & Related	-	-	-	-		-
Others	59	932	7,004	142	53	40
Total	12,040	13,906	42,195	78,103	103,489	293,532
Percentage of Total Workforce	5%	4.8%	11.8%	16.3%	30.0%	27.2%
Percentage of Female Workforce	67.8%	77.1%	89.7%	90.3%	88.9%	79.2%

Sources:

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